CHAPTER THREE

Early Varieties of Alternative Spirituality in American Religious History

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, New Age channelers transmitted messages from "ascended masters," advanced beings in the spirit world willing to help humans, and contemporary Pagans called to ancient Egyptian spirits in their rituals. These and many other current religious practices have their origins in nineteenth-century religious movements that built on a stream of alternative beliefs present in North America since colonial times. This alternative tradition had no code of conduct, central doctrine, single sacred text, organized body, or central leadership. Instead, it was a loose network of overlapping beliefs and practices that scholars have variously dubbed "metaphysical religion," "the alternative reality tradition," "harmonial religion," and "shadow culture."[1] This stream of religious thought and practice became more popular and widespread in the mid-nineteenth century. Some expressions of it were fairly short-lived while others, like Christian Science and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), grew into major denominations, leaving behind their occult roots as they became institutionalized ("occult" refers to secret or hidden knowledge). Other movements, such as Spiritualism, updated their occult origins with Christian elements, but remained small and marginalized. The complex story of the many figures and movements that made up this alternative world of astrologers, psychics, mental healing, hypnotism, water cures, and the like shows that the "New Age" and "Neopaganism" are not as new as they might at first seem.

Characteristics of the New Age and Neopagan movements, such as salvation through the discovery and knowledge of a divine inner self and the

continuity rather than separation of matter and spirit, have been present for centuries in the occult tradition. These new movements self-consciously updated and synthesized older streams of religious thought and practice. The roots of both New Age and Neopagan religions reach back to early modern European occult traditions that took on new forms in the American context, even though the movements' direct origins were in the 1960s counterculture. This chapter will trace the ways in which a loose collection of beliefs and practices were shaped by social, religious, technological, and economic forces in the nineteenth century into diverse religious movements. Many of these movements and their teachings became permanently embedded in the American religious landscape and then later influenced the spiritual life of the 1960s counterculture.

Nineteenth-century occult religions built on popular beliefs and practices that had long existed on American shores. Practitioners of magic, astrology, and divination were found throughout England and Europe in the sixteenth century. According to historian Jon Butler, "The laity obtained magical charms and amulets from 'wise men' and 'wise women' to keep away disease. They patronized astrologers who predicted the future, explained the past, and cured illnesses. They accepted the existence of witches as a way to explain unexplainable things."[2] Christianity coexisted with these other belief systems in the lives of most laypeople in the American colonies. Colonial historian David Hall describes the overlapping beliefs and practices in the era's religious culture as "worlds of wonder" and argues that in the lived religion of ordinary people Christianity was not nearly as monolithic as many historians once assumed.[3] In the colonial period, occult practitioners included both educated members of the elite and illiterate healers who learned their lore through word of mouth and apprenticeship—a democratization of religious life that would also characterize nineteenth-century occultism. Some of the practices that were current in colonial times, such as astrology and divination, are common among New Agers and Neopagans today. Americans have always looked to the alignment of stars and planets to guide their lives, to read future events in this world as reflections of celestial realities, and to predict good days to harvest crops, sail, marry, and conceive.

Even though colonists brought along many traditions from their old to their new homes, the transmission of magic and the occult to America was made difficult by religious and political leaders' goal of creating a Christian country and the absence of the Old World's magical landscape. A sacred geography of shrines, enchanted woods, and magical springs was important to occult traditions in England and Europe, but similar sites were slow to

emerge in the newly settled land. Indigenous people of the Americas inhabited a land imbued with supernatural powers and marked by sacred places, but American Indian sacred sites only became important to New Age and Neopagan religious practice from the 1960s on.

Christian and occult practices were not always separated in the colonial period because most colonists moved through both worlds; nevertheless, they often came into conflict. Upper-class men, including ministers, looked to learned traditions such as Jewish mysticism and Renaissance alchemy to understand the world around them. But over time the disapproval of orthodox religion and the rise of rationalistic science resulted in declining interest in the occult among the educated. By 1680 a folklorization had taken place, by which astrology and divination survived among the poor but were abandoned by the elite. Skepticism about the efficacy of astrology and other magical practices increased, as did Christian criticism of them, but almanacs were still published and many people continued to consult astrologers and diviners.

Controversy surrounding practices that involved contact with supernatural powers characterized the relationship between Christianity and the occult tradition in every century of American history. Colonial critics disapproved of blending Christianity and astrology and saw magic as evil and demonic. Evidence from Salem's 1692 witch trials indicates that although occult practices were illegal and kept hidden in the colonies by the end of the seventeenth century, they were nevertheless widespread. Accused women were often fortune-tellers, astrologers, or "wise women" who were knowledgeable about herbs and other healing methods. Witch trials were an attempt by the elite to suppress such activity, but even after the trials were over, belief in witches and occult practices survived in large segments of the population. Controversy about the occult tradition is most clearly seen in the writings of the Mathers, a family of Puritan theologians and ministers. Increase Mather's *Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences*, written in 1684, focused on "wonders" that provided evidence of the hand of God in the world, but Mather took pains to distinguish them from suspicious miracles and magic.[4] Increase's son Cotton Mather (1663–1728) wrote several essays criticizing the resilience of occult practices that he thought to be dangerously blasphemous and the result of colonists' attempts to cure diseases through illegal means. In *Angel of Bethesda*, a medical essay, Mather complained that "the search for health turned New Englanders from a pursuit of wonders to an invocation of miracles and, hence, to the Devil and diabolism."[5] But the educated classes of the seventeenth century did not always side with critics of the occult. After 1720 more recent immigrants from

Europe to the colonies introduced new sources of occult practices into the population. Many educated people, including ministers, were widely read in magic and alchemy, and some blended Christianity and astrology.[6] But if they were interested in such subjects, they usually kept that interest to themselves. As a result, most occult practices disappeared from widespread public view and approval during the eighteenth century and resurfaced with a vengeance after the War of 1812. In a period when the new nation was undergoing cataclysmic changes, there was an outburst of interest in alternative traditions accompanied by new religious movements that are the most important antecedents of contemporary Neopagan and New Age religions.

The Nineteenth-Century Spiritual Hothouse

Scholars of the historical period roughly between the War of 1812 and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1860 typically describe these fifty years with inflated language: "a spiritual hothouse," " a seething cauldron," "a highly unstable atmosphere," "the storm center," "the antebellum American assault on limits," "religious enthusiasm," "freedom's ferment," and "religious anarchism."[7] In the decades that followed the War of 1812, communal experiments that rejected traditional marriage arrangements, séances in which spirits spoke through adolescent girls, hypnotic trance healings, cures using water baths, herbal healing, homeopathic medicine, interest in yoga and meditation, and many other new religious and health practices that built on the older occult tradition all had their day. Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), who participated in and observed many of the new movements of his era, wrote, "We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket."[8] This exciting period was brought about by a number of different forces that included economic, technological, social, and religious change.

Antebellum America, specifically the years from 1812 to 1860, provided a "hothouse" atmosphere for religious creativity and social experimentation. Social and economic forces contributed to the movement of people across the land and facilitated the spread of new religious ideas. In this tumultuous time experimental religious communities came and went and millenarian expectations (either of Christ's second coming or of cataclysmic change) permeated the air: "These were the peak years of the market revolution that took the country from the fringe of the world economy to the brink of commercial greatness. They were also (not coincidentally) years of intense religious ex-

citement and sectarian invention."[9] The growth of cities enabled crowds to gather around popular speakers and to attend demonstrations where religious and political ideas were exchanged. In unprecedented numbers that would not be matched again until the 1960s, middle-class Americans experimented with lifestyle changes that included shifting gender roles, changes in diet and clothing, and a wide variety of unusual religious practices.

Industrialization and urbanization greatly increased social mobility and at the same time generated uneasiness as old ways of being in family and community were called into question. New opportunities for women to work outside the home raised questions and concerns about gender roles in the new middle-class society. Debates over the proper constitution of the family, appropriate sexual mores, and the meaning of social class accompanied the rise of the market society and were played out at Spiritualist events and in other collective arenas of religious meaning making. New waves of immigrants from Europe challenged the dominance of a Protestant worldview and irrevocably changed the cultural landscape of nineteenth-century America. A burgeoning middle class that was a ready audience for the masses of printed material now available due to changes in printing used newsletters and journals to spread information and debate the relative merits of new healing techniques and religious ideas. The building of railroads and the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825 made travel easier across the Northeast and elsewhere, and the Gold Rush spurred westward movement.

All of these changes were powerfully felt in New York State, where some of the most significant new religious movements of the time had their start. A "psychic highway" followed the Erie Canal through New York west of the Catskills and the Adirondack Mountains.[10] Towns like Rochester and Utica became important urban and religious centers, especially as religious revivals spread like wildfire across the region, so that the area came to be known as the "Burned-over District." Radical publications and speaking circuits spread the news of innovative religious and healing techniques that were accessible to men and women, rich and poor. The Burned-over District provided fertile ground for prophets and visionaries. For instance, the region gave birth to early Mormonism and Spiritualism, which would eventually develop in completely different directions, one toward institutionalization and the other toward decentralization, one to eventually downplay its miraculous and visionary origins, the other to enshrine them. Mormonism became a large and politically powerful religion while Spiritualist practices dispersed into the culture at large and were not popularly manifested again until twentieth-century channeling.

The outbreak of Christian revivalism, or the Second Great Awakening (1800–1830), was responsible for the wildfire of spiritual enthusiasm that swept across the country and reached its highest point in the Burned-over District. Ironically, Christian revitalization helped to spur interest in the many alternatives to Christianity that followed in its wake. Revivals and revivalist rhetoric encouraged widespread optimism about human nature, belief in social progress, and expectations of the millennium, understood either literally as the thousand-year reign of Christ or more generally as a time of utopian peace and plenty. Religious excitement was tinged with urgency, and the proliferation of prophetic voices urging change in everything from exercise to the afterlife fed expectations of cataclysmic events.

Joseph Smith (1805–1844), the founder of Mormonism, was one of many prophets to appear in the excited religious climate of the Burned-over District. Smith's parents were interested in visions and dream interpretation, and one of the family's friends was a magician and fortune-teller.[11] Smith, like other New Yorkers of the time, was interested in treasure hunting—looking for buried gold. This was often done with a divining rod. Divining or "dowsing" is one example of the ways an alternative reality tradition was carried on in America across a landscape increasingly sacralized by European Americans. Smith also had a penchant for other occult practices and in 1821 had a vision of God's messenger, "Moroni." When he started proclaiming God's message given him by Moroni, he won over increasing numbers of believers, some of whom followed him westward. By that point he had also established himself as a successful healer, but in the midst of his success Smith was charged with fortune-telling and treasure seeking and found guilty of using a "seer stone" for fraudulent purposes.[12] Smith's run-in with the law suggests that many occult practices were still illegal in the mid-nineteenth century, even if they were widespread.

In the turbulent religious climate of the 1820s and 1830s Smith was one of many prophets and visionaries making end times predictions and forming new communities. Many Americans thought that the Second Coming of Christ was at hand, and by the 1840s some of these people gathered under the leadership of prophet and visionary William Miller (1782–1849), who set several dates for this event. Millerites were disappointed when Christ did not come, but later many of them joined a group that eventually became the Seventh-Day Adventists. Not everyone expected sudden and miraculous changes to bring on the millennium. Most revivalists did not take their expectations to the extreme of date-setting; rather, they focused on individual

transformation and social change as avenues through which to gradually usher in the millennium on earth.

Nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants also looked toward a new millennium, but for most of them it was to take place on earth through the perfection of human society and human religiosity. Revival preachers like Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875) created new expectations of salvation and provided the methods necessary to get there. Finney and other revivalists preached that human nature was basically good, not evil, and that all individuals were capable of spiritual transformation and eventual salvation. This optimism and emphasis on personal experience became a basic assumption underlying mid-nineteenth century alternative religious movements.

Social, political, and health reform movements flourished in the atmosphere of millennial expectation and interacted constantly with spiritual healing regimes and religious concerns. The reformist agenda was initiated by a transformed social and economic landscape and revivalism's emphasis on the ability of humans to direct their own lives and to perfect the world around them. Puritan and other brands of Calvinist teaching about predestination, the view that God's plan for every human was set in stone, were challenged by the emphatic belief of revivalist preachers that men and women could shape their own destinies. While many Americans joined evangelical revivals, others took this message of self-determination to heart and looked for redemption through social and personal reforms that were often at odds with Christian doctrine.

Occult beliefs that had gone underground resurfaced and were adopted by an emerging middle class looking for ways to exercise its newfound social power. In the nineteenth century, American occult religion became popular again and blended with European imports like Mesmerism and Swedenborgianism to flourish in movements such as Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, the Theosophical Society, and New Thought, all of which influenced and are reflected in New Age and Neopagan religions. The prevailing cultural mood made it possible for men and women of the most humble origins to become religious leaders and sought-after healers and speakers. The idea that humans could understand and manipulate supernatural forces through occult means had been manifested in colonial times in wise men and women and in the alchemical manipulations of the elite. But in the nineteenth century popular and elite religious agendas converged in the context of a middle class that was literate and willing to experiment with techniques that had become increasingly disreputable in the previous century. This emerging alternative

religious tradition taught that there was a correspondence between the natural and divine worlds and assumed that the self was sacred. Occult beliefs about correspondence and harmony between humans, the natural world, and the heavens existed from colonial times on. Historian Sydney Ahlstrom describes "harmonial religion" as a tradition that "encompasses those forms of piety and belief in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person's rapport with the cosmos."[13] This approach sought to connect humans with the world and the divine powers surrounding them. Harmonial religion is also the outlook that characterizes New Age and Neopaganism and is based on the understanding that harmony exists between human and cosmos, spirit and matter; that they are not separate or distinct.

Mesmerism was the first harmonial religious movement in North America, and it influenced most of the alternative religious and healing traditions that emerged in the nineteenth century. Mesmerism was wildly popular in the nineteenth century before it was recast into Spiritualism, hypnotism, New Thought, and other new religious and therapeutic forms. Mesmerists believed in a universal occult energy, an invisible magnetic fluid flowing between planets and other heavenly bodies, Earth, animals, plants, and humans. They taught that spirit and matter are not separate; humans, nature, and the divine are all connected. Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), the founder of this movement, was an Austrian physician and astrologer whose ideas were brought to America by several of his adherents and spread by traveling demonstrations that opened people's minds to the possibilities of mental healing. Mesmerist healers went into trance states from which they could diagnose and advise treatments for illness. Mesmer's teachings (particularly his 1779 dissertation on animal magnetism) led to the belief that healing could be accomplished by manipulating the fluid that permeated all things. This view influenced Spiritualists and other Americans who came to believe in the unity of all existence. It was the vehicle by which nineteenth-century men and women were introduced to and carried forward the occult tradition in America, transmuting it into a popular religious tradition that cut across gender and class lines. Interest in mesmerism and other trends of the day was spread by nineteenth-century mass media and speaking circuits.

Two important figures in the nineteenth-century alternative religious tradition encountered mesmerism in the turbulent 1830s and 1840s. Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866) was directly responsible for the lineage of mental healing that led to the formation of Christian Science and several other religious groups that have endured into the twenty-first century, while

Andrew Jackson Davis (1826–1910) is the one person most identifiably responsible for formulating and then publicizing the worldview of Spiritualism. In 1838 the famous mesmerist Charles Poyen stopped in Belfast, Maine to give a demonstration at the local lyceum (lecture hall). Quimby, a young clockmaker, was in the audience that day and was inspired to investigate mesmerism. He quit his job and followed Poyen from town to town, becoming adept at mesmerist demonstrations, putting his assistant into trances during which the assistant would read people's minds and prescribe treatments for illness. Newspapers followed Quimby's successful career and word spread of his abilities, ensuring that crowds would gather whenever he appeared.

Over time Quimby began to doubt the theory of animal magnetism and to suspect that cures were successful because patients believed they would be. This simple revision of mesmerism would have a significant impact on the metaphysical (meaning "mind-only," beyond the physical) tradition in America, which in turn would shape the New Age and Neopagan movements. Influenced by the ideas of Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg, Quimby eventually changed his practice to mental healing through visualization (using mental imagery to achieve a desired goal, such as healing). He quit the lyceum circuit, which demanded constant traveling and public demonstrations, and set up a healing practice in Portland, Maine. Like many other alternative healers of his time, he was suspicious of both orthodox medicine and established churches, yet often referred to Christianity in his teachings.

Quimby promoted the idea that humanity's natural state was health and that disease was caused by mental disturbance, an understanding widely shared by mesmerists and Spiritualists, among others. Quimby's healing methods were simple. He sat down with patients and sensed clairvoyantly what was wrong with them, after which he explained his theory on the origins of disease. Patients were sick, he told them, because they *believed* they were. Then he visualized the patients as healthy and encouraged them to see themselves that way. Quimby's work established psychic healing and visualization as key elements of the alternative religious tradition. Because of his focus on the powers of the mind, Quimby decided that visions at Spiritualist séances, which were common during the time he worked as a healer, came about because of participants' beliefs and not the actual presence of spirits. His theory of illness was founded on hopeful notions about human progress and belief in the possibility of harmony in both personal and social life in the present rather than in some future millennial period. Like other nineteenth-century healers, Quimby offered "a tool for healing and restoring sick societies as well as sick bodies."[14]

Along with Anton Mesmer, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) was an important correspondence theorist and exerted the most influence on Quimby and other healers and religious visionaries. Swedenborg was one of the "most widely read authors of the nineteenth century in American popular culture even though he attracted less attention during his lifetime."[15] His writings brought together liberal religion with scientific and social trends of the mid-nineteenth century, laying the groundwork for the rapid growth of Spiritualism. In his classic *Religious History of the American People*, historian Sydney Ahlstrom gives Swedenborg an important place in American religious history:

> Of all the unconventional currents streaming through the many levels of American religion during the antebellum half-century, none proved more attractive to more diverse types of dissenters from established denominations than those which stemmed from Emmanuel Swedenborg. His influence was seen everywhere: in Transcendentalism and at Brook Farm [one of many nineteenth century communal experiments], in spiritualism and the free love movement, in the craze for communal experiments, in faith healing, mesmerism, and a half-dozen medical cults; among great intellectuals, crude charlatans, and innumerable frontier quacks.[16]

Swedenborg was the son of a Swedish theologian who spent the earlier part of his life engaged in scientific research before he turned to religion. His father healed people with prayer, laying on of hands, and casting out spirits.[17] Swedenborg's own scientific investigations encompassed chemistry, astronomy, and anatomy before he gradually turned to explorations into his own consciousness. Around the year 1745, at the age of fifty-five, Swedenborg experienced a spiritual crisis during which he had nightmares and visions, culminating in a vision of God. According to poet William Butler Yeats's account, "he was sitting in an inn in London, where he had gone about the publication of a book, when a spirit appeared before him who was, he believed, Christ himself, and told him that henceforth he would commune with spirits and angels. From that moment he was a mysterious man describing distant events as if they were before his eyes, and knowing dead men's secrets."[18] Swedenborg believed that God had chosen him to interpret the Bible and, in order to facilitate his knowledge of Christian scripture, would allow him to travel through spirit worlds, heaven, and hell. Swedenborg then embarked on a spiritual quest and practiced clairvoyance and astral travel (trav-

eling in spirit to other planes of existence). He threatened and angered the church with the argument that God is immanent, not transcendent, and the scientific community with his belief that God exists. Swedenborg argued that the natural world was divine and that divine knowledge could be found within the self. His teachings influenced English poet and reformer William Blake and American Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson, and laid the theoretical groundwork for alternative healing practices such as homeopathy and osteopathy. Swedenborg was sure that "the Creator in his divine providence, while allowing sickness and the multitude of human ills, yet provided for their cure by concealing remedies within the world of nature."[19] His scientific background and religious experience came together in the belief that God communicated to humans through nature, a view later elaborated in the writings of Emerson and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). Swedenborg's writings affirmed the occult tradition's emphasis on correspondence between the human and divine worlds and between the self and God. He introduced many of the ideas that were disseminated through Spiritualism, Theosophy, and New Thought and shaped the New Age and Neopagan movements.

Swedenborg was also one of the first popular writers of the nineteenth century to self-consciously synthesize science and religion. Throughout the mid-nineteenth century, these writers overlapped and borrowed from each other, even while scientists tried to discredit many new religious movements. Alternative religious and healing traditions took root in America in an era when science, medicine, and religion were being loosely combined in some belief systems and rigidly separated in others. The New Age movement today likewise borrows the language of science and works to bring itself into alignment with scientific theories just as it tries to fit scientific discoveries into its own philosophical frameworks. Neopagans, who tend to reinvent ancient religions, are less concerned with scientific validation.

The New England Transcendentalists, and especially Ralph Waldo Emerson, further developed Swedenborg's theory of correspondence and the idea that all individual souls were part of a world soul, the "oversoul." Transcendentalists thought that individuals should look within for their salvation and should strive to understand the harmony existing between self and universe. Like contemporary New Agers and Neopagans, they gave the mind power to change the world. Emerson and other Transcendentalists drew from a wide range of philosophical and religious sources, including Asian religious teachings and Swedenborg's writings, and became involved with the popular psychology and alternative religious practices of their day.

Emerson was active on the lyceum circuit, where he encountered mesmerists, Spiritualists, abolitionists, and health reformers. Emerson's second wife was interested in alternative medicine; diet fads were part of life at Transcendentalist communities such as Brook Farm; Thoreau studied yoga and Native Americans; Margaret Fuller, editor of the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*, used a phrenological publisher; and Emerson and Fuller read the *Bhagavad Gita* and other Asian texts.[20] Transcendentalists spoke and wrote about inner experience and inner journeys, describing the inner world in topographical terms, thus anticipating twentieth-century New Age and Neopagan narratives of self-exploration. Emerson said that the inner self is an "unfathomed sea of thought and virtue," a depth to be plumbed, if never entirely known.[21] He wrote of the importance of self-knowledge and the futility of organized religion to help individuals to acquire it: "what good are religious dogma and the priestly caste if divinity truly lies within?"[22] Emerson and the Transcendentalists clearly expressed popular ideas in literary form. Among other views, they shared a suspicion of institutions and orthodox religion with Spiritualists, mesmerists, and alternative healers. After the Civil War, Transcendentalism declined as a movement in its own right, but its ideas became part of an alternative culture characterized by religious eclecticism and interest in correspondences between nature and the divine.

Mediums, Healers, and Radical Reformers Meet at the Lyceum

If Transcendentalists furthered Swedenborg's understanding of harmony between humans and the natural world in their writings, then Spiritualism put these ideas into a form of practice that is an important antecedent to New Age channeling and Neopagan spirit possession. Spiritualism, the most popular and widespread new religion of the mid-nineteenth century, came directly from Mesmer's and Swedenborg's teachings. Spiritualist mediums performed in private houses and on stage, contacting the spirits of deceased loved ones and other spirit guides who gave them messages for the living. Although examples of belief in spirits and spirit communication were already present in America, Spiritualism as a movement began in Hydesville, New York on March 31, 1848, when three young sisters in the Fox family heard rappings in a bedroom of their family's old farmhouse. The news media and word of mouth spread their story, and the Fox sisters began appearing publicly to transmit messages from the spirits. Their appearances initiated an era in which mediums, especially young women, were popular and common.

Five years after Phineas Quimby's encounter with mesmerism, another young man was well on his way to blending mesmerism and Swedenborgianism into a religious platform. In 1843 mesmerist J. Stanley Grimes passed through Poughkeepsie, New York, where he put a local cobbler, Andrew Jackson Davis, into a trance. While in trance, Davis received messages from Emmanuel Swedenborg and other spirits of the dead. He later believed that the truths he received were communicated by spirits, and he became Spiritualism's most important spokesman. Davis believed that spirits could take on temporary bodies that were like projections: "The images are made of a substance drawn from the medium who loses weight, and in a less degree from all present, and for this light must be extinguished or dimmed or shaded with red as in a photographer's room. The image will begin outside the medium's body as a luminous cloud, or in a sort of luminous mud forced from the body, out of the mouth it may be, from the side or from the lower parts of the body. . . . One may see a vague cloud condense and diminish into a head or arm or a whole figure of a man, or to some animal shape."[23] Like other nineteenth-century popularizers of new religious and health techniques, Davis traveled the lyceum circuit in order to win converts to his new faith. By 1849 Spiritualism had spread across the continent to major cities like New Orleans, Chicago, and Cincinnati, and west to California as well. It was a movement mostly composed of white, Anglo-Saxon, middle-class former Protestants, though numerous African Americans found an affinity for Spiritualism as well.[24] By 1851 more than 150 Spiritualist circles were active in New York State alone, and by 1854 at least ten Spiritualist publications were circulating nationally. At the movement's height in 1855, participants in some aspect of Spiritualist practice numbered one to two million in a population of twenty-five million. Many famous people attended Spiritualist demonstrations, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, James Fenimore Cooper, Abraham Lincoln, and Mary Todd Lincoln. Spiritualism fit the mood of the time with its democratic inclusiveness, the opportunities it offered women, the comfort it gave to people who had lost loved ones and could not find solace elsewhere, and the evidence it provided for the immortality of the soul.

As it became a national religious pastime, Spiritualism developed two modes of practice. The first was the home séance, often conducted by adolescent girls and young women, who were expected to maintain a certain amount of Victorian domesticity regardless of the women's rights ferment happening in public arenas. Professional mediums, on the other hand, traveled the countryside offering public séances and medical examinations. This was an important avenue by which middle-class women could venture

outside the home while remaining in a relatively passive, and thus somewhat acceptable, role as mediums who voiced messages from wiser beings.[25] Spiritualist practices included rapping, séances, levitation, displays of floating spirit bodies, trance writing, and table tipping. Many mediums used an object called a "planchette," a heart-shaped piece of wood that rolled across surfaces, similar to the device used with present-day Ouija boards. Practitioners believed the planchette responded to the presence of spirits through the body of the medium, who placed her fingers on it in order to transmit messages from the spirit world. In this and other ways, mediums' bodies provided evidence to support people's faith in the continuity of life and afterlife.

Spiritualists often attended funerals, where they comforted grieving family and friends by relaying messages from recently departed spirits telling those left behind that all was well in the afterlife. Spiritualists wore white at funerals to symbolize their hopefulness about life after death. Andrew Jackson Davis exhorted people to "robe yourselves with garments of light to honor the spirit's birth into a higher life!"[26] Spiritualist mediums also took from mesmerism the idea that a person in trance could heal disease, and they prescribed medicines and herbal concoctions.[27]

The eclecticism of mid-nineteenth century Spiritualist gatherings and publications is similar to that of New Age magazines today, with their variety of unorthodox religious and healing practices. Spiritualists participated in a network of loosely connected beliefs and practices that included social and political reform movements as well as dietary and other health fads. In fact, the spirits themselves preached a reformist agenda: "The spirits, it was thought, had rapped their approval of women's rights, abolition, labor reform, communitarianism, health reform, marriage law reform, and occasionally 'free love.'"[28] In the 1890s Spiritualist Lois Waisbrooker agitated for the reform of marriage and sexual mores and was called a "she Abraham Lincoln." Waisbrooker believed that Spiritualism allowed her to see beyond conventional morality because she was "no longer sitting in the shadow of reflected light, but clothed with the sun, with direct power."[29] She explained in her book, *The Occult Power of Sex*, "that the magnetic forces that made spirit communication possible also powered the sex drive that drew men and women together."[30] She linked sex and religion and viewed her "struggle to emancipate human beings from uncongenial marriages and sexual relations and her struggle to emancipate souls from the dogma of conventional religion as one and the same."[31] Other nineteenth-century men and women also invoked the messages of spirits to support marriage reform and free love and to agitate against social ills.

Spiritualist publications argued for better treatment of American Indians, abolition of capital punishment, prison reforms, and higher wages for workers.[32] The *Banner of Light*, a major Spiritualist publication that ran from 1857 to 1907, exhorted Spiritualists to attend to social ills and included directories that listed phrenologists (who interpreted the contours of the skull as indicators of mental faculties and character), magnetic healers, herbalists, aura readers, mediums, astrologers specializing in Egyptian religion, and doctors offering such treatments as massage, therapeutic baths, laying on of hands, and electrical therapy.[33] This exchange of ideas and practices was facilitated by large public gatherings like Spiritualist conventions and lyceums that featured antislavery and women's rights speakers, and visionary ideas and prophetic figures, allowing many nineteenth-century men and women to dabble in new faiths and fads. Spiritualism was a point of origin for other nineteenth-century movements that would affect the development of the New Age and Neopagan movements: New Thought through mental healer Phineas Quimby and the Theosophical Society through Madame Helena Blavatsky (discussed in the next section).

One of the most significant twentieth-century metaphysical religious traditions to influence New Age beliefs had its beginnings in the nineteenth century in the writings of Emerson, Mesmer, and Swedenborg and in the healing work of Phineas Quimby, and came to be known as New Thought. It also colors Neopagans' attitudes toward healing, though to a lesser extent. During the twentieth century Theosophy and Spiritualism became less prominent, but their metaphysical teachings dispersed throughout American religious culture and were carried on by New Thought.

New Thought emerged as an identifiable movement in the 1890s and described an attitude toward mind and body that would characterize the New Age movement to come; both put responsibility for health and illness on the individual. New Thought's main influence was through its publishing. Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite* (1897) sold over two million copies.[34] New Thought differed from Spiritualism and Theosophy in that it did not involve spirits or otherworldly masters. It also rejected occultism; Quimby taught that hidden secret knowledge was another illusion of the mind and an impediment to health. He encouraged his followers to pursue health and prosperity by taking a positive attitude toward life and dispelling negative thoughts and emotions. Visualization, usually accompanied by meditation and relaxation, was the most commonly used technique.[35] Quimby and his followers emphasized the impact of an individual's spiritual health and will power on their body. Mental healing practices were democratic and universal

in that they were available to everyone, and this democratization was an important part of New Thought's nineteenth-century legacy. Some healers and teachers felt they should help people harness their mental powers for the purpose of healing, while others used the power of the mind to move proactively through the world seeking financial success.[36] The tension between these different goals would later trouble New Agers and Neopagans as well.

One of the most important sites for disseminating new ideas was the lyceum, or lecture hall; the word was originally a Greek term for the grove or garden where a philosopher walked back and forth when he spoke to his students.[37] The American lyceum movement began with Josiah Holbrook's 1826 plan for an educational forum for sharing scientific and cultural knowledge.[38] By 1834 some three thousand lyceums were established across the country and featured many famous speakers, including abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, former slave and famous orator Frederick Douglass, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau. Speakers discussed women's rights, temperance, and slavery. Following the lyceum model, gatherings of other kinds also took place in socially and geographically mobile antebellum culture. Camp meetings and tent revivals were the Christian counterparts to Spiritualist conventions, and Theosophist salons were more selective, smaller gatherings for the exchange of ideas. Lyceums and Spiritualist conventions helped to spread the word about social problems and informed participants of the latest treatments for physical ailments. Lyceum speakers and audiences were usually involved with Spiritualism and other religious experiments of the time. Frederick W. Evans, an important Shaker elder from Mt. Lebanon, New York, traveled to some Spiritualist conventions; he was one of many examples of the overlap between Spiritualists and nineteenth-century communitarian groups.[39] The Shakers, also called the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, lived communally in "families" of celibates and shared all property in common, and were in the midst of "Spiritualistic revivals" around the time of Spiritualism's emergence on the alternative religious scene. The Shakers practiced ecstatic ritual dances and believed in male and female aspects of the divine, pacifism, and "the power of spirit over physical disease."[40] Young Shaker girls went into trances where they saw visions of angels and dead members of their natural and Shaker families.[41]

Health reform was also promoted on lyceum stages and in the pages of Spiritualist publications. New and radical hygiene practices spread rapidly during the 1830s and 1840s, carried along by optimism, a democratizing spirit, and a desire for reform of body and society. Health reformers borrowed from ancient traditions, such as the work of Galen (a second century

C.E. Greek physician), and incorporated Mesmer's and Swedenborg's understandings of health and illness. Like the flourishing of New Age religion alongside holistic healing, Spiritualism was often part of an entire regime of alternative strategies intended to shape the individual into a new kind of person and in this way contribute to social progress.

Dietary reform was also popular in the middle of the nineteenth century, and many Spiritualist gatherings included advocates of vegetarianism as well as abolitionists and temperance campaigners. One of the key figures in this reform movement was Sylvester Graham, a Christian who marketed a vegetarian, whole-grain diet to his contemporaries (graham crackers were named for him). Nineteenth-century middle-class men and women were optimistic about the power of human beings to shape their own destinies, and a healthy body was part of their agenda.

At lyceums and in Spiritualist publications, health and political reform agendas coexisted with healing practices also based on the idea of correspondence. Homeopathy and phrenology were two popular nineteenth-century healing methods debated at lyceums and featured in Spiritualist publications. Homeopathy, developed by Samuel Hahnemann (1755–1843) in Germany, was the first therapy regime to become part of America's alternative culture.[42] It involved administering minute doses of a remedy (that in healthy people would produce symptoms similar to the disease) in an effort to stimulate the body's natural defenses; by the end of the twentieth century, it had secured a place in the field of alternative healing. Phrenology, originally called craniognomy, was developed by Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828), a medical student in Vienna. Phrenologists diagnosed personalities based on the shape of the skull. For instance, they thought that the character trait of "ideality" was "situated nearly along the lower edge of the temporal ridge of the frontal bone. . . . It is essential to the poet, the painter, sculptor, and all who cultivate the fine arts. . . . A great deficiency of it leaves the mind in a state of homeliness or simplicity. . . . The organ is larger in civilized than in savage nations."[43] Phrenology's theory that bumps on the surface of the head could be used to read the essence of personality died out, but has parallels in New Age interests in reflexology and iridology, both of which similarly exemplify the theory of correspondence.

Chiropractic and osteopathic medicine also had their origins in mesmerism and Swedenborgianism. They developed out of the same optimism, democratization, and suspicion of the orthodox medical tradition, which critics aligned with orthodox religion. Alternative healers complained that orthodox or allopathic medicine saw the body as prone to disease and its

natural state something to fight against, while they believed the body's natural state was health. Samuel Thompson (1769–1843), one of the earliest promoters of a system of natural health treatments, developed an alternative medical practice that incorporated steam baths and herbs. D. D. Palmer (1845–1913), the founder of chiropractics, was a grocer in Iowa involved with mesmerism and Spiritualism before he developed his own healing system. Palmer opened a magnetic healing office in Burlington, Iowa. He held to mesmerism's belief in energy flowing through the body, but added his own insight that disease was caused by blockages of this energy along the spine. Andrew Taylor Still (1828–1917), the founder of osteopathy, which focuses on proper body alignment to prevent and cure disease, was also influenced by Spiritualism and advertised himself as a "magnetic healer" before developing his own system.[44]

From the nineteenth century on, American religious history included a stream of eclectic alternatives to institutionalized health care and religion. Spirit communication had become an important component of this tradition and featured a century-and-a-half-long lineage of psychics, healers, and channelers; some of the most recent wrote best-selling New Age books such as Jane Roberts's *Seth Speaks* (1972) and Helen Schucman's *A Course in Miracles* (1976).

Spiritual Masters and Asian Religions

As the alternative health tradition took shape, other new religions branched out from Spiritualism. Most important to the evolution of ideas that would become central to the New Age movement, such as spiritual masters and the astral plane, was the Theosophical Society, founded in New York in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). Like contemporary Neopagans and New Agers, Theosophists looked to the past and to ancient cultures for truth and wisdom, hoping that through their reinvention of those cultures and revival of ancient myths and rituals they would usher in a new age of enlightenment. Like Transcendentalists, Theosophists saw harmony between physical and spiritual realities and believed in the interconnectedness of humans, other living things, and the planets. In blending Asian and Christian religions, Theosophists established a model of American religiosity that was to become much more widespread when the New Age movement took off in the late 1960s and 1970s. Fascination with past and foreign cultures, including Asian religious teachings, would become an important characteristic of New Age

and Neopagan religions. Theosophists were responsible for spreading Hindu and Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation (rebirth—the continuity of the soul through many lives) and *karma* (the belief that the condition to which each soul is reborn is the result of good or bad actions performed in previous lives, and that actions now have consequences for future lives) among Americans. In *The Secret Doctrine* (1897) Blavatsky explained that,

> That which is part of our soul is eternal. . . . Those lives are countless, but the soul or spirit that animates us throughout these myriads of existences is the same; and though "the book and volume" of the physical brain may forget events within the scope of one terrestrial life, the bulk of collective recollections can never desert the divine soul within us. Its whispers may be too soft, the sound of its words too far off the plane perceived by our physical senses; yet the shadow of events that were, just as much as the shadow of events that are too come, is within its perceptive powers, and is ever present before its mind's eye.[45]

Theosophists also began a publishing enterprise and published a Theosophical translation of Indian philosopher Patanjali's yoga sutras that was the first mass-produced version available in the West.[46] Theosophists wrote and spoke about ancient wisdom, promoted Asian beliefs, and held rituals that challenged other religious communities.

In 1876 Theosophist Baron Joseph Henry Louis Charles de Palm's funeral made headlines for its "pagan" elements because it included an Egyptian dirge and affirmed the harmony between humans and the cosmos. De Palm had asked Colonel Henry Olcott, who was his executor and one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, to conduct the funeral "in a fashion that would illustrate the Eastern notions of death and immortality" and then to cremate his body.[47] Cremation was controversial at the time and De Palm's was the first in America to be publicized. Olcott spoke at the funeral that preceded it and clarified the intent of the Theosophical Society "to study the history of ancient myths and symbols, religions and science, the psychological powers of man, and his relations with all the laws of nature."[48] Like other nineteenth-century new religious movements, Theosophy supported a range of religious expression and lifestyles that included important rites of passage such as funerals as well as social reforms.

Olcott and Helena Blavatsky, the founding members of the Theosophical Society, first met through a Spiritualist family in New York State. In 1874

Olcott, a lawyer from New York City who was interested in many of the fads and trends of the mid-nineteenth century, read a newspaper story about spirit activity at the Eddy family's farm in Vermont. He went to the Eddy farmhouse to witness these supernatural events, then wrote them up in articles published in the *New York Sun* and the *New York Daily Graphic*. Helena Blavatsky, who was born in the Ukraine but emigrated to New York City, read Olcott's accounts of spirits from different cultures appearing at the Eddys' and decided to meet Olcott at the farm. Blavatsky and Olcott quickly discovered their common interests and began holding salons in New York City to discuss and practice their own esoteric brand of spirit communication.

Blavatsky and Olcott felt that their movement was superior to popular manifestations of occult religion, particularly Spiritualism. In a letter to Cornell professor and Spiritualist Hiram Corson, Blavatsky insisted that her interest in Spiritualism was "not through the agency of the ever lying, cheating mediums, miserable instruments of the undeveloped spirits of the lower sphere, the ancient Hades. My belief is based on something other than the Rochester knockings [of the Spiritualist founders, the Fox sisters], and springs out from the same source of information that was used by Raymond Lully, Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa, Robert Fludd, Henry More, etc., etc., all of whom have ever been searching for a system that should disclose to them the 'deepest depths' of divine nature and show them *the real tie which binds all things together*."[49] Blavatsky and Olcott's gatherings were self-consciously elitist and included New York gentry—lawyers and doctors, for example. Blavatsky believed that supernatural messages were from advanced beings that she called the "mahatmas" or "ascended masters," rather than spirits of the dead. These beings inhabited a spirit world where they evolved separately from humans. The idea of such spirits, who can be contacted through certain ritualized techniques and are available to help humans in their own spiritual journeys, became an important theme in the alternative tradition from Blavatsky through the New Age movement.

Like many of her contemporaries, Blavatsky encouraged self-exploration and self-improvement. She argued that an individual's life is a "grand cosmic drama in which one was working to uplift one's essence from body to astral body to soul to spirit—away from the groveling animals and up towards the 'Masters' who had united their spirits with the imperishable and indescribable Absolute."[50] Like her counterparts in Spiritualism and mental healing, Blavatsky believed in the ultimate harmony between human and divine rather than in a transcendent deity outside the world, and she promoted the idea that humans could, using the proper techniques, come to know the di-

vine. In its early years the Theosophical Society focused on explaining and critiquing Spiritualism, but later its focus shifted to Asia.[51] Theosophy's popularity grew slowly until Blavatsky incorporated Asian thought and religion in *Isis Unveiled* (1877). In her book she attempted to show that all western knowledge was originally derived from Asian wisdom. Theosophists' interest in Asia and teachings about ascended masters and other levels of reality like the "astral plane" were absorbed into the New Age and Neopagan movements.[52]

Theosophists borrowed from religious beliefs and practices current in the mid-nineteenth century, but some of them also addressed social problems of their day. While Blavatsky focused on the inner life, Olcott emphasized the ways in which the Theosophical Society would help to usher in utopian social reforms alongside personal transformation. Blavatsky's contributions to Theosophy have been the most influential on New Age and Neopagan spiritualities, especially the former, which borrowed the idea of ascended masters. For Neopagans the legacy of the Theosophical Society is the revival of European magical traditions. Many Neopagans incorporate in their belief system the elite tradition of European occult magic embodied by Renaissance figures such as Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, who blended Hermeticism and the kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), and the Rosicrucian movement that started in seventeenth-century Germany and later developed into Freemasonry. Ficino and Mirandola belong to what some scholars call Western Esotericism, a tradition that includes the gathering and transmission of knowledge about astrology, alchemy, hermeticism (based on texts thought to be of ancient Egyptian and Greek origin) and the kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). This tradition dates back to late fifteenth-century Europe and continues through the work of Eliphas Levi, a French occultist who lived in the mid-nineteenth century.[53]

Another English occult organization that was particularly important in the development of Neopaganism was the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a ritual magic group formed in England in the 1880s that drew on Levi's work. The Golden Dawn was a relatively small and elite group, including for a time the Irish poet William Butler Yeats and the controversial occultist Aleister Crowley, whose writings influenced many Neopagans. The Golden Dawn shared with Theosophy an emphasis on communication with advanced spirit beings and an interest in ancient Asian and Egyptian beliefs, the kabbalah (Jewish mysticism), and Renaissance alchemical writings.[54] The order's secret rituals were later made public by a former member, Israel Regardie, who published a thick book called *The Golden Dawn* that eventually

made its way into the homes and temples of many Neopagans. The Theosophical Society and the Golden Dawn helped transmit Western Esotericism to a new generation when they contributed to the emergence of the New Age and Neopagan movements.

In addition to the European alchemical traditions and the writings of Mesmer and Swedenborg, the Theosophical Society incorporated Asian religious traditions into its practices, especially the doctrines of karma and reincarnation. Like the Transcendentalists, Theosophists helped familiarize a broad range of people with Asian beliefs. The influence of Asian traditions in the United States became more widespread at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth because the American public was exposed to Asian religious teachers such as Swami Vivekananda (1862–1902) at the World's Parliament of Religions, a feature of the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893 that took place in a "White City" built expressly for the event. Cultures from around the world were displayed for crowds of European Americans who were fascinated with the exotic East. Up to this point only small groups of intellectuals had read Asian classics like the *Bhagavad Gita* or the works of Emerson and Blavatsky. The World's Parliament of Religions introduced a broader public to Asian religious thought. A few years afterward, in 1897, Vivekananda established an American Vedanta society that taught the unity of all religions and gained members from New Thought and Theosophy. Adherents spread a form of Hinduism that was palatable to westerners because it focused on cultivating inner divinity and taught that truth was universal. Traveling swamis began to give public talks on astrology and other subjects. Their legacy would be taken up by Asian religious teachers who came to the United States after President Lyndon Johnson lifted immigration bans in 1965.

By the end of the nineteenth century, religious excitement had died down as alternative religious practices were institutionalized or increasingly seen as private concerns. But beliefs and practices that would serve as the heart of the New Age movement were now part of American culture. Alternative healing methods and psychic mediums would continue, and prophets and visionaries, while no longer on the front pages, would continue to gather people around them to form new religions. Harmonial or metaphysical religion had a firm hold on the American imagination and continued to attract many Americans until its second burst of popularity in the second half of the twentieth century.

Since the nineteenth century, the alternative tradition has held an ambivalent position in relationship to Christianity. Many New Agers and Neo-

pagans today follow their nineteenth-century counterparts in valuing the historical figure of Jesus and Christian teachings, but criticizing institutionalized churches for being dogmatic and intolerant. Nineteenth-century Theosophists, for example, were anti-Christian, while later Theosophical organizations tried to link their teachings with Christianity. Even though harmonial traditions have their own specialists, they typically emphasize the ability of individuals to experience the divine without relying on the intervention of priests or ministers. For this reason, many people looked to Christian texts but not to established churches for guidance, even as they dabbled in mesmerism and mental healing.

At the end of the nineteenth century New Thought had established an informal network of healers. Quimby's success as a Swedenborgian teacher and healer led directly or indirectly to the formation of several new religions. Phineas Quimby healed Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), the founder of Christian Science, and she later borrowed many of her ideas about mental healing from him. Although Eddy herself was influenced by Spiritualism, participated in séances, and shared some basic assumptions with Spiritualism, such as the continuity of spirits after death, she rejected mediumship and the reality of the physical body, emphasizing spirit only. Quimby also healed Warren F. Evans (1817–1889), one of the founders of New Thought. New Thought and Christian Science gave rise to other religious traditions that overlapped with much of what is considered New Age today, especially faith in the power of the mind to heal illness. Eddy's student Emma Curtiss Hopkins (1853–1925) founded her own independent Christian Science seminary in 1886. Hopkins's students in turn founded the Church of Religious Science (in the 1920s) and the Unity School of Christianity (in 1889), both of which had branches across the United States by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Occultists and Psychics in the Early Twentieth Century

Astrology, psychics, channelers, and self-help literature were resources for healing and self-transformation that Americans turned to throughout the first half of the twentieth century.[55] Historians of religion do not discuss this period with the same inflated language and fascination as they do the mid-nineteenth century, and in many ways it was a quieter era for alternative religions. But several new and important trends appeared in the 1920s and 1930s—most notably, accounts of UFO sightings and interest in the lost

ancient civilizations of Atlantis and Lemuria—and converged with the nineteenth-century religious legacy. The period between the First and Second World Wars was particularly fruitful for new homegrown religions, in spite of or perhaps due in part to the Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s. By the beginning of the twentieth century, occult religious practices were no longer marketed by a public culture of prophets, visionaries, mediums, and unorthodox healers who made the news headlines. Smaller followings congregated around specific charismatic figures who drew inspiration from beliefs and practices made popular in the nineteenth century. Much of the information that was once spread through speakers' circuits and Spiritualist newsletters was disseminated by way of book publication. The Theosophical Press was particularly successful in spreading Asian religious teachings. In the early twentieth century the Theosophical Society became successfully institutionalized and continued to publish works devoted to promoting esoteric knowledge and Asian religious thought. Other teachers and writers who influenced alternative spirituality in the first half of the twentieth century and beyond were psychologist Carl G. Jung (1885–1961) and spiritual leader Gurdjieff (1866?–1949). Jung's theory of archetypes continues to influence New Agers and Neopagans today, as do the spiritual techniques that Gurdjieff taught could enable anyone to reach enlightenment.

After the Civil War, Spiritualism declined in numbers and significance, but Spiritualist churches nevertheless remained part of the American religious landscape into the twenty-first century. They experienced a temporary surge in membership immediately after World War I, as a nation of families mourned those lost in war and, like their nineteenth-century counterparts, turned to Spiritualism for comfort. With the exception of the Shakers, nineteenth-century communal experiments did not endure into the next century nor appear prominently until the new communal movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Mesmerism in its nineteenth-century form disappeared, but the practice of putting people into trances continued in modern hypnotherapy. The various health reforms and alternative healing practices, especially homeopathic and chiropractic medicine, continued to gain adherents in the twentieth century and then, like alternative religions, again experienced a boom in the 1960s. While the occult tradition was no longer in the public eye, many Americans still sought religious options outside of established churches and consulted unorthodox healers. Two prime examples of the turn to alternative religious and healing practices in the 1920s and 1930s were the teachings of psychic Edgar Cayce (1877–1945) and the I AM movement, a

synthesis of nineteenth-century alternative traditions founded by Guy Ballard (1878–1939).

At the same time that New Thought religions were forming in the opening decades of the twentieth century, individual psychics developed loosely organized followings of their own. These psychics anticipated New Age belief in spiritual healing and promoted self-transformation. Some, like Edgar Cayce, also combined metaphysical beliefs and Asian religious thought with Christianity. In his approach to healing Cayce picked up on many of the ideas developed by Theosophy and Spiritualism, especially the blending of Asian religious beliefs like reincarnation with Christian teachings. Cayce had a lasting impact on New Age religion, and his legacy continued in the form of the Association for Research and Enlightenment (ARE), based in Virginia Beach, Virginia and founded in 1931, which still disseminates his teachings. By 1970, ARE had grown to 12,000 members and by 1981, to 32,000.[56] Cayce's books gained considerable popularity through the 1960s and into the beginning of the twenty-first century. New Agers and other Americans were drawn to his writings on ancient civilizations, past lives, and remedies for a wide variety of physical and psychological afflictions.

Cayce was dubbed the "sleeping prophet" by journalists because he went into a deep trance and successfully diagnosed illnesses and prescribed healing remedies. Like many other religious figures in the alternative reality tradition, Cayce underwent a spiritual and healing crisis during which his clairvoyant gifts became apparent. He was at first reluctant to assume the role of healer and doubted his own abilities, but over time he came to believe his powers were a gift from God. At first Cayce gave "healing readings," but after an encounter with a Theosophist in 1923, he began giving "life readings" that included references to karma and reincarnation. His readings also mentioned other practices that would become central to the New Age movement from the 1960s on, such as crystals and the ancient civilization of Atlantis.[57] Accounts of such lost civilizations, usually provided by psychics and channelers, were widely circulated in American religious subcultures of the early twentieth century. For example, former Theosophist and founder of Anthroposophy Rudolph Steiner's book *The Submerged Continents of Atlantis and Lemuria* was published in the United States in 1911.[58] Steiner (1861–1925) defected from Theosophy with a majority of German Theosophists who joined his Anthroposophical movement (which blended Rosicrucian, Christian, Theosophical, and occult thought and stressed the natural accessibility of divine wisdom), but his books influenced American

Theosophists who read them in translation. Anthroposophy survived Hitler's attempts to disband it and became well established throughout Western Europe and in the United States through Waldorf schools (schools that integrate sensual experience of art and music with more traditional curricula to nourish children's bodies and minds), architecture, art theory, and biodynamic farming.

Like Cayce and Steiner, Alice Bailey (1880–1949), a psychic and founder of the Arcane School, was influenced by the Theosophical Society and adopted the Spiritualist practice of mediumship. Bailey established the Arcane School to promote the program set forth by beings she channeled called the "Great White Brotherhood," a group of spiritual masters that included a Tibetan teacher. In the tradition of Helena Blavatsky, she saw herself as a messenger who was directed to write down and spread the teachings of spiritual beings or "masters" who communicated with her while she was in a trance state. Bailey was responsible for popularizing the terms "New Age" and the "Age of Aquarius."[59] Like Cayce, she believed in karma and reincarnation as well as some aspects of Christianity. They set the standard for New Age channelers and described a world populated by disincarnate spirits, spirit guides, devas, and angels that continues to attract Neopagans and New Agers.

In the early decades of the twentieth century the center of new religious ferment shifted from Boston and New York to California.[60] Theosophy's American center was by that time on the West Coast, and many of the most widely publicized new religious movements had their start in the West. The "I AM" movement, an important example of early twentieth-century California eclecticism, was founder Guy Ballard's synthesis of nineteenth-century alternative traditions. Ballard, a former medium and hypnotist, was also an effective self-promoter who took advantage of new technologies, such as radio advertising, to spread his religion, which was founded in the 1930s. The "I AM" movement borrowed many Theosophical teachings; for instance, Ballard told of his encounter at Mount Shasta, California, with an "Ascended Master," Saint-Germain, an important figure in Helena Blavatsky's pantheon of advanced spirit beings. Ballard also borrowed from the Rosicrucians, Asian religions, Christianity, and the Spiritualist tradition of large public demonstrations during which spirits communicated with an audience. According to Ballard, Saint-Germain had chosen him as a mouthpiece through which to communicate with humanity. Ballard and his wife Edna emphasized healing, especially with the aid of cosmic beings that spoke and worked through them. Like nineteenth-century mediums before them

and New Age channelers to come, Cayce, Bailey, and Ballard all served as channels of communication between the human and spirit worlds.

Early twentieth-century channelers and psychics were antecedents of the New Age movement, but Neopaganism also descended directly from early twentieth-century esoteric phenomena, such as the Order of the Golden Dawn and the Rosicrucians. AMORC (Ancient and Mystical Order of the Rosae Crucis), one early Rosicrucian group, was founded in New York City in 1915 and moved to San Jose, California in 1928. Like early twentieth-century Theosophists and New Thought adherents, the Rosicrucians were numerous and loosely organized, and their beliefs overlapped with those of many of their contemporaries. AMORC claimed not to be a "religion" but assumed that the universe was created by a god that had a plan for humans; members taught techniques to bring into being mental images of health and happiness. Rosicrucian teachings built on the Renaissance occult tradition or Western Esotericism, as did the rituals of the Golden Dawn. One of the major organizations to carry on the teachings of Victorian occultist Aleister Crowley and the Golden Dawn in the United States was the Ordo Templi Orientis (OTO) lodge, founded in Los Angeles in the 1930s. When Neopagan groups emerged out of the religious ferment of the 1960s, they looked for inspiration from esoteric organizations like Theosophy and the OTO that were eclectic and interested in reviving ancient traditions.

Other isolated phenomena of the early twentieth century had an impact on the alternative religious tradition and would later shape New Age and Neopagan beliefs. During the 1930s popular tales of rural paganism and satanism circulated, an unfortunate pairing that has continued to confuse outside observers. UFO sightings occurred in the first half of the twentieth century but were not widely publicized or popularly believed until the late 1940s and 1950s. The late 1930s also saw the beginnings of the human potential movement, which flourished in the 1950s and helped direct the spiritual thrust of the 1960s counterculture. Norman Vincent Peale's first major book on this subject, *You Can Win*, was published in 1938. All of these elements would eventually burst on the popular religious scene in the 1960s when the alternative tradition again became the fodder of reporters and a target for critique by Christian churches.