

H-France Review Vol. 8 (September 2008), No. 122

John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008. xiv + 293 pp. Figures, footnotes, bibliography, and index. \$35.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8014-45620-0.

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At least since Carl Becker's *Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophes* (1932), intellectual historians have explored the counter-currents of modern French thought. Notions like secularization and cultural progress, for example, are not so straightforward. Their apparent contradictions were often celebrated in French philosophy and religion, of course, but also in scientific inquiry itself. A contrarian historiographical tendency is especially prominent in recent work on the French Enlightenment's promotion of empirical rationality in the face of traditionalist folkways and religious doctrine. Unlike the older generation of positivist historians, today's historians don't necessarily take the *lumières* at their word.

John Warne Monroe's monograph, *Laboratories of Faith*, is part of this on-going reappraisal of the Enlightenment project. It does so, however, by focusing on the way in which Mesmerists, Spiritists, and Occultists used scientific inquiry to their own ends. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, science had at last become the prevailing model for all disciplinary knowledge in the academy. Claude Bernard's advocacy of the experimental method influenced far more than his university peers; its reach extended to the likes of Camille Flammarion, Allan Kardec, Léon Denis, and Gérard Encausse, who earnestly sought to transform metaphysics "from a manner of philosophical speculation to one of experimental study" (p. 2). In attempting to create a "science of God"—Flammarion's term—these marginal figures thought they were laying the foundation of "a grand synthesis of faith and reason made possible by phenomena that seem to render the metaphysical concrete" (p. 262). They thus accepted the premises of empirical science in order to establish a new, more progressive faith and its concomitant regeneration of human consciousness.

These thinkers stood rather uneasily between the traditionalist, reactionary Catholic right, on the one hand, and the secular, republican left, on the other. Neither movement would have them as allies in the nearly century-long war for a secular French republic. Heterodoxy's idiosyncratic quest to create a new intellectual world, which was both traditionalist and modern, failed in changing historical circumstances. Monroe argues that these efforts deserve more attention if we are to understand the intersecting forces at work in the *fin-de-siècle*. And while he may exaggerate the influence that certain figures had—their publications circulated among a very small coterie of adepts—investigating them does help to complicate the oversimplified postivist account of modern French intellectual culture. As Monroe puts it, "religious innovators, then, were not mere eccentrics fulminating to an invisible audience; they were active participants in some of the period's most important debates" (pp. 11-12), such as the nature of faith, scientific knowledge, and social reform.

Despite the title, the bulk of Monroe's book is about Spiritism, beginning with its American Spiritualist origins and its borrowed Mesmerist heritage. The early 1850s witnessed a remarkable vogue for séances of "turning" or "speaking" tables, which served as the physical manifestations of the mediums' contact with the spirit world. The resulting commentary in the press from the church, the scientific community, and the revolutionary left says as much about the commentators as it does about the psychic phenomena

they were purporting to discuss. It is remarkable how well heterodox beliefs adapted to changing historical, social, and cultural circumstances. Whereas the spirits contacted by Spiritualism in the U.S. tended to be Swedenborgian abolitionists, the Spiritualist Mesmerists in France favored the utopian aspirations of the revolutionary left, which had been defeated in 1848. The spirit world reflected the concerns shared by its particular national audience.

The widespread middle-class fascination with Spiritism, the French adaptation of American Spiritualism, challenged the longstanding trend in heterodox ideas since Franz Anton Mesmer's salon demonstrations of *magnétisme animal*. The lingering legacy of mesmerism in the nineteenth century was attenuated by the competing approach to the spirit world systematically designed by Allan Kardec. Kardec's careful organization, including a well-defined doctrine and equally well-prescribed procedure for calling up the afterlife, led to a script, the automatic writing that expressed the departed spirits' sentiments to the medium during a séance. As Kardec outlined it in his influential *Le Livre des esprits* (1857), the afterworld embraced a strong proclivity for "a moral system based in charity and the importance of fellow-feeling" (p. 45), somewhat reminiscent of Charles Fourier's cosmology and Comtean Positivism (p. 106). Kardec evidently preferred the most Cartesian of spirits, whose clarity ensured their veracity. And he dealt equally summarily with any resistance to his organizational control, such as that posed by the remarkable medium Honorine Huet.

With Kardec's untimely death in 1864, the French Spiritist efforts to overcome the hostility of the Roman Catholic Church and its reactionary political allies faded rapidly. Kardec's successor, Pierre-Gaeton Leymarie, no longer sought "to elaborate points of doctrine but instead to provide further empirical evidence for the conception of otherworldly intervention," most often in support of the Republican left (p. 152). He and his fellow Spiritist enthusiasts, however, were disgraced when Leymarie, a medium, and a photographer were convicted of producing fraudulent photographic images purporting to "prove" the existence of spirits. Their increasingly activist, leftist, and anticlerical tendencies were clearly at odds with the early Third Republic's Moral Order, which prosecuted the Spiritists as "a matter of public hygiene" (p. 178). The press coverage of the trial was savage in its discussion of the Spiritists' credulity, notwithstanding the latter's sincere interest in laying the scientific foundations for communication with the dead.

The shift in heterodoxy's fortunes after 1875 coincided with "the disciplinary consolidation of scientific psychology, the rise of psychic research, the fragmentation of Spiritism, and the triumph of Occultism" (p. 203). Charles Richet, Pierre Janet, Léon Denis, and Gabriel Delanne each attempted to explain Spiritist phenomena in terms not of material reality but of human consciousness. Denis and Gabriel, especially, sought to promote the consoling features of Spiritist practice; but both of them were disconcerted by the very public defection of Camille Flammarion, who repudiated the scientific basis of heterodoxy in 1899. It just so happens that Gérard Encausse, better known as Papus, was using science on behalf of another movement, this time of Occultism. "The path to transcendence it introduced, with its stress on individual 'seekership' and the exploration of mental regions beyond the sphere of ordinary consciousness, would become an important element of twentieth- and twenty-first-century heterodoxy" (p. 235).

Papus appropriately concludes Monroe's volume because he represents the last substantial misuse of science by nineteenth-century cultists. The Occultists tried to provide an empirical basis for Madame Blavatsky's Theosophic efforts to find non-Western sources to regenerate Western society. Blavatsky's influence was particularly marked in the Occultists' use of hermetic analogies, that is, the metaphorical resemblances between dissimilar phenomena in science and religion. Much of this tenuous synthesis depended upon Papus's remarkable organizational skills and charismatic powers. So when he died in 1916, Occultism passed, much like Kardec's Spiritism before it, with the loss of its animating force. The scholarly discipline of psychology, the vogue of Freudian psychoanalysis, the horrors of world war, and the proliferation of other spiritualist cults undermined the attraction of heterodoxy's science-linked

promise to create a new spiritual age, even though more than 50 percent of the French still believe in the curative powers of Mesmerism (p. 9).

Monroe's exemplary monograph sheds valuable new light on yet another curious byway to French modernity. Clearly the path to secular republican institutions as well as the beliefs on which they rest was not a straight one; these institutions faced some notable resistance not just from the Roman Catholic Church, but also from many scientific leaders. There were some scientists who inquired into spiritualist phenomena in an effort to create a new role for religious feelings on behalf of social reform. The "crisis of factuality in religious life" meant a special accommodation, however brief and unsuccessful, of the contending forces of religion and secularism in modern France. Occultists now join the growing literature on the Enlightenment's many counter-currents since the eighteenth century.

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