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God's Last, Best Gift to Mankind: Gnostic Science and the Eschaton in the Vision of John Murray Spear

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Abstract

Le dernier, le meilleur, cadeau à l'humanité: Science Gnostique et Eschaton dans la vision de John Murray Spear

En 1853, John Murray Spear tenta de construire une machine en se servant de schémas reçus par communication spirite avec Benjamin Franklin. Les historiens se sont efforcés d'accorder cet épisode, connu comme 'l'Expérience du Nouveau Moteur', avec l'œuvre antérieure de Spear abolitionniste. On ne peut comprendre convenablement le Nouveau Moteur sans prendre en considération la place de la technologie dans le projet 'dispensationnaliste' de Spear. Si l'expérience avait réussi, les successeurs de Spear auraient cru qu'une source énergétique libre allait faciliter l'abolitionnisme ainsi qu'un paradis socialiste sur terre. Le Nouveau Moteur représente aussi une importante étude de cas en matière de théorisation des rapports entre ésotérisme et science. La vision qu'avait Spear d'un avenir utopique fonctionnant par la vertu d'une technologie spirituelle représente une forme de la 'science gnostique' qui s'est trouvée au carrefour des imaginations scientifique et religieuse.

Keywords

John Murray Spear; spiritualism; New Motor; gnosis; technology; abolition; millenarism; eschatology

In 1853, the Spiritualist John Murray Spear and his followers attempted to construct a technological device using schematics he received from several scientifically minded spirits, including Benjamin Franklin. This "New Motor" would provide an infinite supply of free energy and was to be "God's Last, Best Gift to Mankind". The experiment remains one of the strangest episodes in the annals of Spiritualism. Historians, unable to integrate it into larger narratives, have traditionally treated the New Motor as an anomaly. Ruth Brandon is typical in referring to it as 'the acme of strangeness', stating that

she has included it in her history of Spiritualism only as an example of ‘the kind of thing that went on and was more or less accepted, if with reservations’.¹ It has been especially difficult for historians to reconcile Spear’s early work as a Universalist minister and as an energetic advocate for abolition and prison reform with his later obsession with creating new technology as revealed to him through spirit communication. Several historians have implied that Spear simply abandoned social reform when he became a convert to Spiritualism.²

However, the significance of the New Motor cannot be properly understood without considering the place of technology within Spear’s own dispensational scheme. Had the New Motor worked, Spear’s followers believed that a free energy source would make slavery unnecessary and bring about a socialist paradise on earth.³ Thus, Spear was the prophet of a technological eschaton. Eric Voegelin as well as David F. Noble have both suggested that Western scientism and a ‘religion of technology’ have evolved alongside a Christian dispensationalist tradition. The idea that technology could be used to ‘immanentize the eschaton’ (to use Voegelin’s term) seems to have peaked in Antebellum America. The invention of the telegraph had contributed to a notion of the ‘technological sublime’ and the military innovations of the Civil War had not yet brought doubt to a narrative of technological progress. Viewed in light of this theory, it is easier to understand how Spear conceived of such a project and why he was able to find allies who would support and fund him.

Furthermore, the New Motor makes an important case study in theorizing the relationship between esotericism and science. Spear’s vision of a utopian future powered by spiritual technology is part of a larger phenomenon that straddles the scientific and religious imaginations; I will call this category “gnostic science”. The New Motor experiment was the forebear of the utopian technology that some new religious movements promise will be bestowed upon us by benevolent aliens or the free energy sources that fringe theorists attribute to Nikola Tesla and other charismatic scientists.⁴ These hypothetical technologies are the product of revelation rather than scientific methodology.

¹ Brandon, *The Spiritualists*, 8–9.

² Podmore, *Mediums*, 214–215; Brown, *Heyday*, 167; Braude *Radical Spirits*, 74; Deveney, *Randolph*, 15.

³ Newton, *The Educator*, 252.

⁴ Spear’s experiment remains significant to these groups. The New Motor has been described by Charles Fort (Fort, *Complete Books*, 1056) and also appears in a biography of ‘techno-occultist’ John Keely and his attempts to discover a source of free energy (Paijmans, *Free Energy*, 302–304).

As “Gnostic” science, these imagined technologies serve a pseudo-religious function as outlined by Voegelin and Noble: They offer a type of special knowledge that promises to bridge the gap between the human and the divine. In 1853, Spear became one of the first prophets of gnostic science.

The Story of John Murray Spear and The New Motor

John Murray Spear was born in Boston in 1804. He was both baptized by and named after John Murray, founder of the American Branch of the Universalist Church. Spear’s father died when he was only a child, leaving his upbringing to his mother and paternal grandparents. As a boy, Spear worked in a Boston cotton mill. This experience may have influenced his thinking and sparked his eventual interest in economic structure and labor saving technology. He later worked as a cobbler and bookbinder before becoming a minister. By the 1830s, Spear was a Universalist minister in Barnstable, Massachusetts, had married a woman above his station, and had several children.⁵

In 1836, he heard William Lloyd Garrison speak and became a convert to the abolitionist cause. As a result of his abolitionist fervor, by the 1840s he had been driven from his position at Barnstable, as well as subsequent positions in New Bedford and Weymouth. In 1844, he was beaten by an anti-abolitionist mob in Portland, Maine and nearly killed. Following the attack, he moved to Boston with his brother, Charles, where he started *The Prisoners Friend*, a weekly paper dedicated to prison reform. Despite the fact that he had a family to support, prison reform became the primary focus of his life for the next seven years.⁶

In 1851, Spear was exposed to the writings of Andrew Jackson Davis and became a convert to Spiritualism. The spirits gave him his first message on March 31, 1852, via automatic writing.⁷ Later that year he produced *Messages from the Superior State*, a series of writing received through spirit communication with John Murray. By 1853, Spear was producing thousands of pages of writing dictated to him by a group of spirits called “The Association of Beneficents”. The Association included such notables as Thomas Jefferson, Jean-Jacque Rousseau, Seneca, and John Adams. However, Benjamin Franklin appears to be the spirit that spoke to Spear the most. In the mid-1850s, Spear founded the “Harmonia community” near Kiantone, Creek in western New

⁵ Brandon, *The Spiritualists*, 8; Podmore, *Mediums*, 214.

⁶ Brandon, *The Spiritualists*, 8; Podmore, *Mediums*, 214.

⁷ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 47.

York. A community designed by the spirits, residents of Harmonia were to renounce property, live in octagonal houses, and drink water from a magnetic healing spring. It was while establishing Harmonia that Spear was commanded to create a living, electro-magnetic machine called the New Motor.⁸

The New Motor had been designed by “The Electricizers”, one of several committees of spirits within The Association of Beneficients (Benjamin Franklin was, naturally, the chief of The Electricizers). The device was referred to at various times as the Physical Savior, Heaven’s Last Gift to Man, the New Creation, the Great Spiritual Revelation of the Age, the Philosopher’s Stone, the Art of all Arts, the Science of all Sciences.⁹ Among other functions, the New Motor would be a perpetual motion machine. Once initiated, it would not require a power source because it would be able to, ‘draw upon the great reservoir of the magnetic life of Nature, and to be ‘self-generative’.¹⁰ For Spear, the New Motor was as much soteriological as it was technological. He is quoted in the Spiritualist publication *The New Era*, ‘And this new motive power is to lead the way in the great speedily-coming salvation. It is to be the physical Saviour of the race. The history of its inception, its various stages of progress, and its completion, will show the world a most beautiful and significant analogy to the advent of Jesus as the spiritual Saviour of the race’.¹¹

Spear chose High Rock Tower in Lynn, Massachusetts as the site for the machine’s construction. The property was owned by the Hutchinson family, who were friendly to the Spiritualist cause. Furthermore, Andrew Jackson Davis had experienced a vision of a ‘spiritual congress’ of angels from the observation tower. Spear concluded that the tower had a suitable electrical environment in which to animate the machine.

The New Motor was built in phases by Spear and his followers under the direction of The Electricizers. Construction took nine-months, which Spear likened to the gestation of an infant. Materials cost \$ 2000 and consisted primarily of zinc plates, copper wires, and magnetic spheres that hung from several appendages. No sketches of the machine have survived and historians are left to imagine it based on the writings of Spear’s colleague, Dr. Alonzo E. Newton, who published an account of the New Motor experiment (See appendix).

⁸) Brandon, *The Spiritualists*, 9–10.

⁹) Ibid.

¹⁰) Podmore, *Mediums*, 298.

¹¹) Britten, *American Spiritualism*, 222.

Following its construction, various methods were used to “jump start” the machine using human vital energy. Spear created a sort of suit from copper and zinc plates and then, in trance, attempted to imbue some of his personal magnetism to the machine. Followers claimed they could see an ‘umbilical chord’ between Spear and his creation. However, the final step required one of Spear’s female followers—referred to as ‘the Mary of the new dispensation’—to spiritually ‘give birth’ to the machine. Birthing the machine apparently involved simulating the pain of labor in its proximity. The New Mary is never named in any primary source and was apparently the subject of a great deal of malicious gossip at the time.¹²

The experiment proved disappointing. While some followers claimed there was movement in some of the metal balls that hung suspended from the machine’s arms, the New Motor did not appear to be working. One J.H. Robinson famously wrote in an 1854 issue of *The Spiritual Telegraph* that the New Motor ‘cannot turn a coffee mill’. He further remarked, ‘Jesus of Nazareth has not yet made his second advent in zinc and copper in Lynn, nor do I expect to recognize him in such a questionable form’.¹³

In 1854, Andrew Jackson Davis visited the machine and suggested that the spirits may have misdirected Spear. Spear, however, was informed by the spirit of Benjamin Franklin that the machine was in its infancy and still required nourishment from a mother. Spear removed the machine to Randolph, New York where he claimed that a more suitable electrical environment would help it to mature. Sadly, a letter sent by Spear in Randolph informed his followers that the machine had been destroyed by a mob. Several historians and at least one contemporary have suggested that there was never a mob; that Spear destroyed the machine himself and that this was simply a convenient story to conceal an embarrassing failure.¹⁴ Following the experiment with the New Motor, Spear increasingly became involved in the free love movement. In 1858,

¹² John Buescher has done the most thorough historical research of Spear and concludes that ‘the new Mary’ was Alonzo Newton’s wife, Sarah Newton. Buescher was able to obtain some documents written by Spear’s colleague, Thaddeus Sylvester Sheldon. With the aid of these documents (much of the content of which had been crossed out by the authors), Buescher concludes that, ‘John, Sarah, and others were undertaking actual, not metaphorical, sexual labors in their attempts to create the New Motor’ (Buescher, *Remarkable Life*, 131).

¹³ Britten, *American Spiritualism*, 227.

¹⁴ Brown, *Heyday*, 176; Schrenck ‘God Machine’. Robert Schneck recruited a historian in Randolph who looked through the archives of the only two newspapers that existed in the county in 1854, there was no mention of Spear, a riot, or the New Motor.

he divorced his wife and married his amanuensis, Caroline Hinckley, by which he had already sired an illegitimate child.¹⁵ Spear died in 1887 in Philadelphia, a city synonymous with Benjamin Franklin.

Using Technology to “Immanentize the Eschaton”

The term “immanentize the eschaton” was coined by the political theorist Eric Voegelin, who used this term to explain the radical political movements of his day, including Marxism and Nazism. Voegelin theorized that the Christian concept of *parousia* had created a state of anxiety and alienation in Western culture. This in turn, led to dispensationalist thinking as first espoused by the twelfth century monk Joachim of Fiore.¹⁶ (Voegelin defines dispensationalism as the belief ‘that history has an *eidos*’).¹⁷ This anxiety and alienation also gives rise to what Voegelin termed “gnostic movements.” Voegelin has an extremely broad definition of gnosticism that includes any body of knowledge that allows a group, ‘to feel that God is within man and not above man’. Voegelin describes the philosophies of Hegel and Schelling as forms of ‘intellectual gnosis’, paracletic sectarian leaders as ‘emotional gnosis’, and the revolutionary activities of Comte, Marx, and Hitler as ‘volitional gnosis’.¹⁸

Several scholars have suggested that Voegelin’s references to “gnosticism” bear no resemblance to the beliefs of the ancient Gnostics and in fact resemble anti-heresiological rhetoric. The worldview that Voegelin attributes to the ancient Gnostics seems to actually be rooted in Christian millenarism.¹⁹ In fact, Voegelin himself appears to have admitted in the late 1970s that the term “gnostic” may not have been ideal.²⁰ Despite this problem, Voegelin’s theory has an internal consistency that helps to show how Spear’s project was tied to Christian eschatology on the one hand, and socialist utopianism on the other.

¹⁵ Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 150.

¹⁶ Fiore described a three-part dispensationalist scheme consisting of the past Age of the Father, the present Age of the Son, and the coming Age of the Holy Spirit. Fiore is credited with creating a place for optimism within Christianity, which had previously viewed the world as fallen and without room for change or progress. Fiore’s three-part scheme was an influence on Hegel and, by extension, Marx. See Ashe, *Prophecy*, 116–199.

¹⁷ Voegelin, *New Science*, 121–122.

¹⁸ Voegelin, *New Science*, 124.

¹⁹ Versluis, *New Inquisitions*, 69–76; Hanegraaff, ‘On the Construction of “Esoteric Traditions”’, 30–34.

²⁰ Hanegraaff, ‘On the Construction of “Esoteric Traditions”’, 33.

For Voegelin, the common purpose of the diverse modern movements he describes is for humans to divinize themselves and to ‘immanentize the eschaton’ through the ‘redivination of society’. Furthermore, Voegelin argues that the cultural authority of science is directly related to this yearning for the eschaton. He writes, ‘Scientism has remained to this day one of the strongest gnostic movements in Western society; and the immanentist pride in science is so strong that even the special sciences have each left a distinguishable sediment in the variants of salvation through physics, economics, sociology, biology, and psychology’.²¹ This idea of ‘immanentizing the eschaton’ and ‘redivinizing society’ is highly applicable to the vision of Spear and his followers. Simon Hewitt, one of Spear’s followers, believed that social reform would precipitate the millennium.²² For Spear, both social reform and the eschaton would be facilitated through divinely revealed technology.

David F. Noble in his book *The Religion of Technology* arrives at a thesis very similar to Voegelin’s. Noble also suggests that Christianity is responsible for a notion throughout Western thought that history is moving towards an objective goal.²³ He links technology to the Christian search for the prelapsarian state of man.²⁴ Noble points out that the term *artes mechanicae*, a precursor to the word ‘technology’, can be traced to the ninth century monk Erigena, who argued that the mechanical arts had a divine quality.²⁵ Like Voegelin, Noble cites Joachim of Fiore as the father of dispensationalism.²⁶ However, Noble is able to directly link Joachim’s interpretation of scripture with the Western pursuit of science and technology. He points out that Joachim had a great influence on Franciscan scholar Roger Bacon, one of the fathers of the scientific method. Bacon counseled the pope to develop the useful arts as part of a sort of ‘spiritual Cold War’, warning that the Antichrist ‘will use these means freely and effectively, in order that he may crush and confound the power of this world’.²⁷ The effect of this connection is summarized neatly by Noble, ‘This new historicized millenarianism was to have enormous and enduring influence upon the European psyche, and it encouraged

²¹) Voegelin, *New Science*, 127.

²²) Buescher, *Remarkable Life*, 78.

²³) Noble, *Religion*, 22.

²⁴) Noble, *Religion*, 10.

²⁵) Noble, *Religion*, 15.

²⁶) Noble, *Religion*, 25.

²⁷) Noble, *Religion*, 27.

as never before the ideological wedding of technology and transcendence. Technology now became at the same time eschatology'.²⁸

Utopian Technophilia in Antebellum America

James W. Carey and John Quirk have suggested that the technological utopia had already become a well-established trope long before the New Motor experiment in 1853. As early as 1770, the minor philosopher and dramatist Louis Sebastien Mercier wrote *L'An 2440*, an early science fiction novel describing an electrical utopia.²⁹ They also point to several writers in American studies including Perry Miller, Henry Nash Smith, Leo Marx, and Alan Trachtenberg who have indicated that these hopes for technology may have been especially strong in America where, prior to the carnage of the Civil War, it took the form of the 'Machine in the Garden' narrative.³⁰

The term 'technological sublime' was coined by Leo Marx after encountering an article from an 1847 issue of *Scientific American*. The article opined, 'There appears to be something in the pursuit of mechanical invention which has a reaching up after our divine title, 'lords of the creation' It is truly a sublime sight to behold a machine performing nearly all the functions of a rational being'. Marx argues that antebellum Americans had adopted a worldview in which, 'all other hopes, for peace, equality, freedom, and happiness, are felt to rest upon technology'.³¹ Furthermore, these utopian visions were frequently eliding with religious sentiment. Thoreau commented that, 'There is a transcendentalism in mechanics'.³² Emerson, in his essay on history, writes that the story of Prometheus is simultaneously a record of the dawn of the 'mechanic arts' as well as the first story of Jesus.³³

More than any other invention, the telegraph inspired religious sentiment and created the feeling of what Jeffrey Sconce called, 'Utopian technophilia'.³⁴ He cites one response to the telegraph that takes a particularly religious tone, 'The most remarkable effect, if I may judge from my own narrow thought, will be the approach to a practical unity of the human race; of which we have never

²⁸) Noble, *Religion*, 22.

²⁹) Carey and Quirk, 'Electronic Revolution', 125.

³⁰) Carey and Quirk, 'Electronic Revolution', 118.

³¹) Marx, *The Machine*, 192.

³²) Noble, *Religion*, 92.

³³) Emerson, *Essays*, 34.

³⁴) Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 22.

yet had a foreshadowing, except in the gospel of Christ'. Noble goes so far as to argue that the telegraph was seen as a divinely inspired and a sign of the eschaton.³⁵ It is into this context that Spear emerges with his own notions of science and dispensationalism.

The Internal Consistency of Spear's Science

Several historians have noted that Spear's spirits had a preoccupation with science. For instance, Brown notes the teaching of the Electricizers that human hair both conducts sound (thus, there is hair inside the ear) and aids memory. Accordingly, Spear taught that women who braid their hair have damaged their circuitry and will become confused easily. Brown also describes how Spear's spirits sent him to Hamilton College where he was to give a lecture on geology (a subject Spear admitted he knew nothing about).³⁶ However, for Spear's followers the fact that he had no training in science, simply proved the authenticity of his spirit messages.

The two primary sources of Spear's writing are *Messages from the Superior State*, edited by Simon Hewitt, and *The Educator*, edited by Alonzo Newton. These contain hundreds of pages of lectures by the spirits on topics ranging from geography to ethics to physics. *The Educator* also contains a catalogue of Spear's other spirit writings containing many more thousands of pages that were never committed to a book.

Many historians have misunderstood the New Motor experiment because they have not considered it within the context of these writings. Spear's spirit communications are essentially an occult system of correspondences presented as science. However, Spear was aware of the popular science of his day, and there is an internal consistency to the science of the spirit messages, much as there is in the imaginary technology of good science fiction. The New Motor is theoretically possible within a consistent but flawed theory that combined and confused biology, physics, electronics, and metaphysics. By looking at this internal consistency, it is possible to better understand what the New Motor actually was and what Spear meant when he called it, 'the Physical Saviour of the race'.

Sconce notes that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, 'Electricity was for many a mystical and divine substance that united body and soul'.³⁷

³⁵ Noble, *Religion*, 94.

³⁶ Brown, *Heyday*, 169.

³⁷ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 7.

Spiritualist writings describe both electrical and magnetic cosmologies in which spirit phenomena are extensions of the earthly laws of physics. Spear described God as ‘the grand central electrical focus’, however, Spear was informed by his spirits that electricity is only a medium of communication with the divine. To claim that electricity itself is divine, according to the spirits, is to be guilty of pantheism.³⁸ Spear’s spirits also explained that electricity and magnetism are one and the same, suggesting that Spear had at least some awareness of the concept of electromagnetism. Electromagnetism would later be discussed extensively in *Experimental Investigation of the Spirit Manifestations* (1855) by Robert Hare. Hare was a highly respected scientist prior to his interest in Spiritualism and believed that his theories of matter also extended into the spirit world.³⁹ Like Spear, Hare claimed to frequently receive messages from Benjamin Franklin.⁴⁰

The connection between electricity and animation was made long before Spear when Luigi Galvani was able to cause frogs’ legs to twitch by applying an electrical current. Galvani’s nephew, Giovanni Aldini, repeated these experiments with human corpses. By applying electric currents he was ghoulishly able to make the corpses lift weights, roll their eyes, and blow out candles.⁴¹

Ruth Brandon describes the New Motor as a product of the ‘age of the gothic’ in that it blurred the boundaries between life and death: The New Motor was simultaneously a machine and a living organism.⁴² The common factor shared by the New Motor and gothic literature is the theoretical applications of ‘galvanism’. Galvani’s experiments inspired Mary Shelly to write *Frankenstein* (first published anonymously in 1818). Edgar Allan Poe also incorporated galvanism into his story, ‘The Strange Facts in the Case of Monsieur Valdemar’ (1845).⁴³ However, for Spear the idea that electricity could be used to create artificial life was science fact, not science fiction. In fact, the Spiritualist Emma Hardinge Britten compared Spear to a modern Frankenstein, writing that, ‘the new ‘monster’ was a being of metal and wood, instead of flesh and blood like its German prototype’.⁴⁴

³⁸) Hewitt, *Messages*, 20.

³⁹) Carroll, *Spiritualism*, 70.

⁴⁰) Cox, *Body and Soul*, 150.

⁴¹) Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 31–32.

⁴²) Brandon, *Spiritualists*, 10.

⁴³) Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 34.

⁴⁴) Britten, *American Spiritualism*, 221.

Spear was correct in deducing from Galvani's experiments that organic life requires electric currents to trigger muscle movements. However, Spear was ignorant of the fact that this electricity is generated by the consumption of calories in food. Instead, he imagined that the heart beats because it is receiving a constant transmission of electricity from the heavens. The source of this electricity, naturally, was God. The theory behind the New Motor was that a machine that closely imitated a biological organism could also become a conduit for this free and infinite source of divine electricity, creating a type of perpetual motion. In this way, Spear's New Motor was somewhat like imagining a solar power cell by studying photosynthesis in plants.

An article in *Fate* magazine once described the New Motor as a 'combination of a *homunculus* and of a *perpetuum mobile*'.⁴⁵ While Spear and his followers did consider the New Motor to be in a sense 'alive', it was not necessarily sentient. Sconce is not entirely correct in describing it as a 'proto-robot'.⁴⁶ The New Motor was to imitate life only in as much as it could conduct the same biological/metaphysical processes as an organism. While the function of the New Motor was soteriological, it was certainly not understood as a mechanical prophet or messiah. Spear (channeling Benjamin Franklin) explained that, 'It is alive, but it is inferior to man'.⁴⁷ In fact, much of the anthropomorphic language used by Spear and his followers seems to have been used to support a specific analogy between the machine and Jesus rather than a general analogy of the machine to a person.

If galvanism and electricity made it possible to imagine the New Motor, the telegraph made it possible to imagine the bizarre rituals intended to 'jump start' it. Sconce, writing on the significance of the telegraph to the Spiritualist movement, suggests that because this device made instantaneous communication possible, 'it seemed to carry the 'animating 'spark' of consciousness' beyond the physical body'.⁴⁸ Spear was not the only Spiritualist who interpreted the telegraph as evidence that human vital energy could be transferred and manipulated through magnets, copper, and zinc. In the same year that Spear conducted the New Motor experiment, Andrew Jackson Davis described a 'spirit battery' to be used for séances. The spirit battery incorporated a 'magnetized rope' as well as zinc and copper plates.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Fodor, *Two Worlds*, 152.

⁴⁶ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 20.

⁴⁷ Buescher, *Remarkable Life*, 102.

⁴⁸ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 7.

⁴⁹ Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 9.

In *The Educator*, the spirits take this occult correspondence between electromagnetism and consciousness to its logical conclusion and assert that consciousness is a form of magnetism and that ‘the being called God’ is actually ‘the Grand celestial magnet, the mind of all minds’.⁵⁰ Furthermore, minds function on each other magnetically and when one mind ‘passes over’ a weaker mind, the weaker mind will come into alignment with the stronger mind.⁵¹ Within this scheme, humanity becomes increasingly like God through exposure to the grand celestial magnet. Conversely, inanimate objects can become more like humanity through exposure to human magnetism—allowing for the possibility of artificial life. (In fact, for Spear there is not really such a thing as an ‘inanimate object’ as he claims that all matter, even grains of sand, contain the germ of life).

Science in Spear’s Dispensationalism

Science holds a place of primary significance in Spear’s dispensationalism. Both *Messages from the Superior State* and *The Educator* lay out a three-part dispensational scheme consisting of an ‘Age of Power’, an ‘Age of Feeling’, and an emerging ‘Age of Wisdom’. The structure resembles Joachim of Fiore’s division of history into the ages of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Both systems equate a past age with the Old Testament, the current age with the New Testament, and predict an emerging age of enlightenment. Spear writes, ‘The Jewish was an era of Force; the Christian was an era of Feeling. The third era, which has now commenced, is the era of Wisdom. It will embrace, however, both force and feeling, adding a still nobler attribute, making of the three one grand, beautiful trinity—FORCE, FEELING, WISDOM’.⁵²

Spear tells us of the present age:

The Present Age is the AGE OF WISDOM—now merely in its dawn. It will manifest itself, not so much in one individual, standing out in bold relief before the eye of the World, as in a general organic effort of the race, whereby the vices of the more primitive periods may be overcome, and harmonious human relations and life may be permanently and wisely established.⁵³

⁵⁰) Newton, *Educator*, 186.

⁵¹) Newton, *Educator*, 184.

⁵²) Newton, *Educator*, 42.

⁵³) Hewitt, *Messages*, 17.

This passage, describing how human wisdom will serve the role once fulfilled by Moses and Jesus is a clear manifestation of the Christian *parousia* morphing into technological aspirations, as described by Voegelin and Noble. Furthermore, this view appears to have been more or less consistent with the view of technology in antebellum America.

Voegelin imagined that modern movements such as Marxism, would be secular, despite being the product of Christian dispensationalism. Spear addresses the idea that science contributes to secularization, however he dismisses it:

If it be said that this makes our age superior to that of Christ, and therefore lessens the estimate of him and his religion, then it is replied that the Age of wisdom is only a fuller development and a more perfect REALIZATION of that Love in Life which is the very essence and Christianity. And therefore, instead of superseding the religion of Jesus, it only makes it truly and wisely practical.⁵⁴

The spirits also provide ample description of what the coming Age of Wisdom will look like. Spear's writings contain numerous prescriptions for an ideal social order, including how cities should be configured, how government should be structured, and how education and worship should be conducted. These ideas are not presented as theories but rather as a social order that is 'objectively' ideal because it has been mandated by the spirits. There are also lengthy passages that describe the foods, clothing and amusements that future generations will enjoy using spiritual technology.

The spirits are also clear that this is a socialist utopia in which trade has been eliminated. For Spear, global socialism will not be the result of a revolution but rather a spiritual technology that totally eliminates the need for labor. He writes:

First, Man needs a substantial material or mineral basis, on which he can quickly and securely stand. Without such a basis,—with want staring a portion of earth's inhabitants in their faces,—there will be not only unceasing irregularities, but one class will, as it were, devour the other. Thus has it been in the past and thus will it be in the future until man's wants are materially met.⁵⁵

Thus the utopia cannot come until the New Motor—or some similar technology—provides an infinite source of free energy. Using Voegelin's terminology, this divine technology is the gnosis that will immanentize the eschaton.

⁵⁴) Ibid.

⁵⁵) Newton, *Educator*, 51.

The New Motor as Gnostic Science

While Spear thoroughly saturated his writing in the terminology and material symbols of science, he was no scientist. One does not necessarily need to be a scientist to make the theological claim that science will be the fulfillment of the essence of Christianity. The real question is why Spear could not preach of the Age of Wisdom while leaving the actual technological progress to living scientists and technicians. Even Andrew Jackson Davis made this critique: Following the failure of the New Motor he pointed out that Benjamin Franklin and other dead scientists are no more technologically gifted than the living. He is quoted, 'Spirits can prove the immortality of the human soul—nothing else with certainty'.⁵⁶ The answer, of course, is that despite any cosmetic resemblance to science, Spear's writings are revelation rather than the product of the scientific method.

Accepting the claims of Voegelin and Noble that science and technology have evolved in dialogue with Christian eschatology, it seems that this process has given rise to a parallel phenomena which resembles science and bears the same relationship to eschatology, but is the product of revelation rather than scientific thinking. Flying saucers represent a more modern form of revelatory technology with soteriological overtones. Fred Nadis describes the flying saucer craze as an instance in which, 'a segment of the American public sought salvation in technology'.⁵⁷ The underlying phenomena behind the alien technology of the flying saucers and the spiritual technology of the New Motor, may be described as 'gnostic science'. I ascribe four criteria to this concept:

1. It holds eschatological or soteriological significance.
2. It is the product of revelation rather than empiricism.
3. It does not further the body of scientific knowledge, but instead contributes to a process of 're-enchantment'.
4. It appeals to Weber's type of 'charismatic authority' rather than 'bureaucratic authority'.

The first criterion has already been outlined: While gnostic science does not necessarily conform to a substantive definition of religion, it always has eschatological applications in the broader sense as described by Voegelin. Gnostic science is never minor and never malign: it is always understood to have the capacity to completely revolutionize the world for the better.

⁵⁶ Britten, *American Spiritualists*, 225.

⁵⁷ Nadis, *Wonder Shows*, 218.

Regarding the second criterion, gnostic science is seen as a sort of gift that comes from any source that is transcendent, whether that be spirits, aliens, or scientists like Benjamin Franklin, Albert Einstein, and Nikola Tesla who hold a hagiographic position in the popular imagination. Stahl et al. suggest that this reaction to new technology is universal and intuitive.⁵⁸ Noble has noted that Augustine saw technology not as the product of human ingenuity but as a gift from God. Augustine believed that with the eschaton, God would fully restore the human capacity for invention to its prelapsarian state. Noble quotes Augustine, 'Think how great, how beautiful, how certain, how unerring, how easily acquired this knowledge will then be'.⁵⁹ Thus for Augustine, all technology comes from a transcendent source. The modern equivalent of this perspective is science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke's famous aphorism that, 'Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic'. The fact that technology is seen as the product of applied science rather than magic or revelation may in fact be a sort of historical anomaly produced by the industrial revolution.

In line with this view of technology, some Spiritualists argued that even the mundane technology of the telegraph actually had a transcendent source. Thus, the telegraph's inventor, Samuel Morse, was not a scientist but a prophet. Sconce quotes one medium:

Morse, of himself, could not have fashioned the magnetic telegraph. His mind was reaching out for thought that would help him in his work, and, as the mental action of your sphere is visible to the denizens of this, those who had been watching the workings of his mind suggested, through a familiar process of mental impression, that which enabled him to shape the invention into a form of practical utility.⁶⁰

It is hardly surprising then, that after Morse died, mediums began channeling him, just as Spears had channeled Benjamin Franklin.⁶¹

The third criterion references Max Weber's thesis that modernity has arrived at a state of 'disenchantment'. Weber, in his essay 'Science as a Vocation', wrote that, 'There are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather that one can, in principle, master all things by calculation. This means that the world is disenchanted'.⁶² Wouter Hanegraaff has reformulated Weber's

⁵⁸) Stahl, et al., *Webs of Reality*, 117.

⁵⁹) Noble, *Religion*, 12.

⁶⁰) Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 25.

⁶¹) Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 36.

⁶²) Weber, 'Science as a Vocation', 139.

notion of ‘disenchantment’ as a social pressure to accept a culturally established ideology in which ‘instrumental causality amounts to a worldview capable in principle of rationalizing all aspects of reality’.⁶³ Hanegraaff argues that this social pressure is at odds with an instinctive and holistic epistemology, which Lévy-Bruhl described as ‘participation’. The tension between the instinct for participation and the social pressure of disenchantment takes many forms, as individuals seek outlets for participation or attempt to legitimate participation epistemologies in terms of instrumental causality.⁶⁴ Hanegraaff describes modern occultism as a form of magic that has adapted in order to legitimate participation in a disenchanted world.⁶⁵ Gnostic science represents a similar form of adaptation: It appears to conform to a model of instrumental causality, while actually relying on revelation.

Contemporary sociologists and historians have begun to write on ‘re-enchantment’.⁶⁶ John Walliss in his essay ‘Spiritualism and the (Re) Enchantment of Modernity’ argues that the Spiritualists rebelled against the disenchantment of the Industrial Age and sought to re-enchantment through a new understanding of science, technology, and death.⁶⁷ This analysis corresponds to Hanegraaff’s model of the tension between participation and disenchantment. Not surprisingly, Walliss cites the New Motor experiment as the most interesting example of Spiritualist re-enchantment through technology.⁶⁸ Walliss’ thesis that the Industrial Age created a yearning for re-enchantment also parallels Voegelin’s theory that gnosis serves as an antidote to a feeling of historical anxiety.

The final criterion of gnostic science is also Weberian. Weber argues that social order began with charismatic authority—centered around charismatic individuals such as magicians, priests, and heroes. The authority that comes from this charisma is transferred to families, positions of office, and so forth until authority rests primarily in the hands of a bureaucracy. Weber believed that this bureaucracy had evolved to the point where it is now impossible for new charismatic figures to emerge.⁶⁹ Gnostic science reverses this historical process by rejecting the methodologies and institutions of science—which

⁶³ Hanegraaff, ‘How Magic Survived’, 377.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Hanegraaff, ‘How Magic Survived’, 378.

⁶⁶ Hanegraaff, ‘How Magic Survived’, 358.

⁶⁷ Walliss, ‘(Re)Enchantment’, 32.

⁶⁸ Walliss, ‘(Re)Enchantment’, 37.

⁶⁹ See Weber, *Economic Organization*.

can be understood as bureaucratic—in favor of charismatic scientists, such as Tesla and Einstein, and men like Spear who serve as mediums of otherworldly technology.

Despite their high praise for scientists, many Spiritualists took a dim view of the scientific establishment. Britten cites a tenet of the pseudo-scientific philosophy of Andrew Jackson Davis, ‘That all merely scientific developments of electricity as a motive power are superficial, and therefore useless or impracticable’.⁷⁰ Similarly, despite the fact that Spear’s spirits once directed him to give a lecture at Hamilton College, they continuously excoriated the scientific and educational establishments. The following passage is typical:

This Association [of Educators] regrets that there is among the inhabitants of this earth a *clanship*. Generally speaking, men look to certain *locations*, and to *authorities*, rather than to broad and comprehensive principles The Aristocracy of Scholars is therefore now by this Association condemned [*Italics in original*].⁷¹

So in Spear’s writing we have the spirit of Benjamin Franklin condemning the ‘Aristocracy of Scholars!’ This is an appeal to return to charismatic authority, which will in turn create a space for re-enchantment.

Spear’s perspective is typical of Spiritualists and advocates of fringe technology that reject scientific authority in deference to charismatic scientists. Gnosis is understood to reside with the brilliance of charismatic figures, not the scientific bureaucracies that followed on their coattails. In Spear’s day, Franklin was the quintessential charismatic scientist. Indeed, several Spiritualists believed that Spiritualism was possible through a technological device constructed in the spirit world, probably invented by the late Franklin.⁷² Samuel Morse took this charismatic mantel after Franklin and Nikola Tesla after that. Sconce comments that electricity was the quantum physics of its day. As quantum physics has replaced electricity as the new mysterious frontier of science, Albert Einstein has emerged as the new source of charismatic authority for gnostic science.

Conclusions

In the conclusion of his biography of Spear, John Buescher comments on Marx’s aphorism that history repeats itself first as a tragedy, then as a farce. He writes:

⁷⁰ Britten, *American Spiritualism*, 224.

⁷¹ Newton, *The Educator*, 298–299.

⁷² Britten, *American Spiritualism*, 39.

John's career preceded and dreamily foreshadowed the totalistic utopian movement of the next century, and if John's life was a farce, then a tragedy followed, in the horrors perpetrated in the names of those utopian movements—many of them Marxist—in order to create a heaven, but resulting instead, in vivid impersonations of hell.⁷³

This connection to Marxist movements—which is quite accurate—points once again to a reading of Spear's work in light of Voegelin as an attempt to immanentize the eschaton.

As a practical matter, it is interesting to consider that gnostic science offered a sturdier form of dispensationalism that was more resistant to failure. Because gnostic science requires human technicians to construct and utilize it, failure may be blamed on humanity rather than on the gnosis itself. Consider the chaos inflicted on the Millerite movement when their prophesy culminated in 'The Great Disappointment' on October 23, 1844. By contrast, Spear continued to have a role of leadership after the highly publicized failure of the New Motor experiment. Indeed, Newton continued to claim that the experiment was successful in creating a viable 'prototype'.

A theory of gnostic science allows for seemingly 'bizarre' episodes such as the New Motor to be understood within broader historical processes of religion, science, and cultural authority. While the New Motor experiment was certainly odd, it was not at all unprecedented: technology and religion have been co-evolving for some time in the American Spiritualist movement. Although Spear found himself far ahead of the curve, the attention his project received indicates that it had a strong resonance in the popular imagination.

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⁷³) Buescher, *Remarkable Life*, 296.

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Appendix

The following is the most complete description of the New Motor as described by Alonzo Newton in *The Educator*:

Suffice it to say, that upon the centre of an ordinary circular wood table, some three feet in diameter, were erected two metallic uprights, six or eight inches apart; between these, and reaching from the one to the other, near their tops, was suspended on pivots a small steel shaft, which was crossed at its center by another shaft, about six inches in length, on the extremities of which were suspended two steel balls enclosing magnets. The first-named shaft was nicely fitted with sockets at its extremities, so that the balls could revolve with little friction. Beneath these suspended balls, between the uprights, and in the centre of the table, was arranged a very curiously constructed fixture—a sort of oval platform, formed of a peculiar combination of magnets and metals. Directly above this were suspended a number of zinc and copper plates, alternately arranged, and said to correspond with the brain as an electric reservoir. These were supplied with lofty metallic conductors, or attractors, reaching upward to an elevated stratum of atmosphere. In combination with these principal parts were adjusted various metallic bars, plates, wires, magnets, insulating substances, peculiar chemical compounds, etc., arranged, by careful direction, in accordance with the relations of positive and negative, or masculine and feminine, as set forth in the foregoing treatises. At certain points around the circumference of the structure, and connected with the centre, small steel balls enclosing magnets were suspended. A metallic connection with the earth, both positive and negative, corresponding with the two lower limbs, right and left, of the body, was also provided. Certain portions of the structure were subjected to very peculiar processes, such as immersion for a time in novel, chemical preparations, exposure to heat and to electrical action, etc. etc., designed apparently to fit them to perform their respective functions. The details of all these processes have been preserved, and may be inspected by the curious. All parts were adjusted with mechanical nicety, and finished with tastefulness.

Besides the elevated conductors connecting with the brain, already alluded to, and representative of vital influx through that organ, provision was made for inhalation and respiration,—thus recognizing the three essential vital processes, ‘without which, each and all natural and harmonic action cannot take place’. In short, the various parts of the model were alleged to represent (not in outward form, but in function) the essential vital or motive organs of the

human or animal system,—that is, what is necessary to constitute a living organism. Animated life, be it remembered, has many forms, but the ultimate source and laws of motion are undoubtedly the same in all.⁷⁴

⁷⁴) Newton, *The Educator*, 240.

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