Exploring the Connections Between Religious Experience, Spiritualism, and Women's Rights

Sarah Porch-Lee
Independent Researcher

Applying a feminist viewpoint to an anthropological analysis of the religion of Spiritualism, the study of religious experience, and the American women's rights movement shows these worlds to be interconnected. The objective of this article is to articulate these connections by first describing the foundations of the study of religious experience and the historical background of the American Spiritualist religion and then moving into a discussion of how the women's rights movement was intertwined with Spiritualism. This piece was part of a larger research project, and the sections included here review key pieces of literature connected to religious experience and Spiritualism which reveal how vital each field has been to the aforementioned women's rights movement. Ultimately, it is revealed that the three inter-connected worlds of religious experience, Spiritualism, and the women's rights movement were largely dependent on each other for success in a kind of symbiotic relationship.

Keywords: feminist study of religion; women's mediumship experience; women's religion in Victorian America; women's rights agitation and religion; feminist religious history

Having been raised in a conservative religion that attempted exacting control over the women within its ranks, I became interested in a feminist approach to religion. I wanted to see examples of female empowerment being exhibited throughout time in religious works. Spiritualism and mediumship quickly became apparent as important vehicles for religious women to act with authority over their religious lives and to become spiritual leaders for others. Analysing the religious experiences associated with mediumship and Spiritualism shows how empowering each can be for their practitioners. This has been true throughout history, as well. This paper connects the broad academic field of religious experience to Spiritualism and the act of mediumship, while showcasing how Spiritualism

ISSN: 2057-2301

and mediumship were used in the women's rights movement and how they serve as examples of historical feminist religious experience.

This article was part of a larger study on mediumship that I conducted for my master's dissertation. That paper took a feminist anthropological approach to analyse how mediumship is experienced by practitioners. Modern American mediumship has close ties with the American religion of Spiritualism, which was integral to the women's rights movement in the United States. A review of current literature shows a fascinating background for women's mediumship, which includes William James's foundational work on religious experience and moves through the Spiritualism movement in Victorian America.

Background

Because this paper addresses the field of religious experience research, it is helpful to include here a general overview of the field itself. While the phrase 'religious experience' is a generally understood and common-enough term, the implications are somewhat more complicated on a micro level – especially when analysed within an academic framework. Rankin provides an excellent overview of the various threads of meaning that stem from the use of the term 'religious experience' (2005, p. 2). She describes the types of people who have been connected to religious experience: famous founders and teachers of the world's religions, renowned adherents to these religions (Biblical characters, gurus, and saints), and every-day religious followers (Rankin, 2005, p. 2). Yet, these are not the only ones who have experiences that might be considered 'religious.' Special experiences are also felt by 'non-religious people who have mystical or spiritual intimations' (she offers artists, musicians, and poets as examples) (Rankin, 2005, p. 2). The individuals who have religious experiences are dynamic and deserve proper representation in analysis.

The way individuals feel about their experiences is also dynamic. Religious people who have special experiences within a church setting, during sacred text readings, or merely 'in the context of a religious tradition' may tend to view their experiences as religious (Rankin, 2005, p. 4). In fact, they may view the event as validation of their religious beliefs (Rankin, 2005, p. 7). However, people of no religious category may also have unique experiences which they would never classify as 'religious' (Rankin, 2005, p. 2). Some may categorise their experience as 'paranormal,' or something out of the ordinary from everyday life (Rankin, 2005, p. 8). The complexities of the types of experiences and the beliefs of the people who have them can feel murky to a scholar

ISSN: 2057-2301

attempting analysis of a potential religious experience. Rankin offers the insightful suggestion that these experiences should be considered on 'a continuum of experiences, a range of different types of awareness of something beyond, a transcendent reality or of the divine within' (2005, p. 9). This idea can be developed to provide a clear analytical framework of mediumship experience among individuals.

In spite of a myriad of experience categories, Rankin (2005, p. 9) utilised the phrase 'religious experience' for most of her descriptions within her paper. Adopting a consistent terminology at the outset of analysis can allow a range of experiences to be considered while not reducing or explaining away a practitioner's own thoughts on an event. This terminological consistency is especially helpful for a discussion of mediumship, which has been adopted as the official practice of the Spiritualist religion, while also existing as an individual practice and experience outside of religious settings.

The Foundational Value of the Study of Religious Experience

There is overarching value in undertaking academic analysis of religious experiences. Religious differences are among the most volatile on Earth, so perhaps learning from other religions' documented experiences will allow people to settle their religious arguments (Hardy, 1997, pp. 4-5). Organisations like the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (AHRERC) provide opportunities for this type of harmonious religious future by offering an academic holding place for important experiential records (Hardy, 1997, p. 5). Scientific methodology is being utilised within the field of religious experience to document experiences and build a written record for the field; these records can be filled in with interviews from people who constitute as 'more interesting cases' (Hardy, 1997, p. 5). Anthropologists have undertaken religious research for some time and have never found a people group without some record of religion in their culture (Rankin, 2005, p. 12). This illustrates how important record keeping is for religious studies (including the study of experience). There is much we do not understand about religion, its ontological status, or implication on our lives, and the existence of religious experience may point to a reality about which we are still learning (Rankin, 2005, p. 39). In this case, careful academic measures are imperative for the historical record. Taves (2009, pp. 139-140) concurs with the necessity of an academic approach to religious experience (but for less grandiose reasons); she hopes a record of experiences will be built through 'careful empirical studies' that will reveal which events are consistent throughout different cultures. Whether it be for world peace, the historical record, or a future database that highlights experiential consistency, a formalised academic approach to religious experience is a valuable scholastic undertaking.

ISSN: 2057-2301

William James and the Development of the Field of Religious Experience Research

The academic approach to religious experience can largely be attributed to William James. He was influenced by his prior student's work *Psychology of Religion* (by Edwin Starbuck, published in 1899) for which he wrote the foreword (Hardy, 1997, p. 2). Shortly after this influential encounter, James went on to deliver his famous series of lectures, published under the name *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (VRE) in 1902, and which is considered to be a foundational work on religious experience (Hardy, 1997, p. 2). James worked to develop an academic approach to his study of religion that would not only honour religious adherents, but also theologians and scientists, as well (Taves, 2003, p. 306). Upon the publication of these works, anthropologists were credited as the only group to actually follow the lead of James and Starbuck, as they travelled out into other cultures (for better or for worse) to study others' 'spiritual experiences' (Hardy, 1997, p. 2). It is important to note that James's work placed heavier weight on individual religious experience over corporate experience ('religious doctrine, practice, or institutions'), and this focus would continue to influence the wider western concept of religious experience, as well (Taves, 2009, p. 5). This also had related effects on western ideas about mysticism (Taves, 2009, p. 5). Spiritualism and the field of religious experience research would go on to have a symbiotic development in connection to their interest in mystical experience.

James was clear in his preference towards individual experience. He stated in the VRE that 'In critically judging the value of religious phenomena, it is very important to insist on the distinction between religion as an individual function, and religion as an institutional, corporate, or tribal product' (James, 2011, p. 278). On the one hand, he speaks of merely distinguishing one from the other, but on the other hand, he began his statement by opening a discussion of value judgements (James, 2011, p. 278). The temptation to move into value judgments of one experience over another seems to be a strong human impulse, but it is best for anthropologists to generally avoid these judgments. James then clearly ties individual experience into mystical experience with his suggestion that 'One may say truly, I think, that personal religious experience has its roots and centre in mystical states of consciousness' (2011, p. 311). He takes this further by connecting the mystical to the divine (something that would be very attractive to religious Victorian Americans) by saying:

> "This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and

ISSN: 2057-2301

> triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed" (James, 2011, p. 339).

Looking at religious experience with this lens certainly paints individual experience as an attractive and promising venture. However, we now understand that such broad generalisations of belief systems are not appropriate and may not always be true. In spite of his generalisations and value judgments, James's work on individual experience was connected to Spiritualism and mediumship in some interesting ways (see 'Spiritualism and its Connection to the Study of Religious Experience,' below) after a brief introduction to Spiritualism.

Spiritualism: Origins

The simple and well-known origin story of Spiritualism in the United States is that in the mid-1800s in New York, the Fox sisters began hearing rapping noises in their house. These raps were attributed to spirit communications and the Fox sisters became famous. Eventually, the religion of Spiritualism was formed and grew to extreme popularity in Victorian America as women gathered to practice séances. As time passed, Spiritualism's popularity burned out, its mediums were debunked, and it now holds a charmed place in American religious history.

In reality, the literature brings much more depth to the Spiritualist religion and proves it earned its place as a religious and social organisation woven into various aspects of Victorian American life. Taves (1999) goes into great depth describing Spiritualism's initial ties into the advent of popular psychology in the mid-1800s. As Americans' interest in psychology grew they began to consider ideas such as 'animal magnetism,' and its proponents were given to participate in new religious movements growing in the US (such as Spiritualism, Christian Science, Theosophy, and Seventh-day Adventism) (Taves, 1999, p. 124). The rise of Spiritualism came at a time when religious pluralism 'diluted the authority of competing Christian sects while the natural sciences, professionalized medicine, and literary criticism of the Bible all began to challenge religious truth claims' (Nartonis, 2010, p. 362). These trends would allow people to have more freedom in their religious ideas and choices. Spiritualists also accepted the idea of mesmeric psychology (as explanations of phenomena such as spirit rapping), and viewed trance mediums as icons of their group (Taves, 1999, pp. 163, 165). Spiritualists were not strictly focused on psychology and trance sessions, though. Like most western religions, they looked to the Bible for religious background, but also sought for 'primitive' or 'true

ISSN: 2057-2301

Christianity' - a form of pure or original Christianity that was not marred by biased doctrine or leadership (Taves, 1999, p. 186). These Spiritualists believed that their current religious experience should reflect the religious experiences previously recorded (in the Bible, for example), and that animal magnetism and psychology could offer explanations for biblical miracles (Taves, 1999, p. 186). It is worth noting here that this type of action can be attributed to toxic western tendencies to appropriate and explain cultural material found in global religious documents into western mindsets and religions.

Spiritualism's interest in primitive Christianity was also indicative of its iconic activity: spirit communication with humans (Nartonis, 2010, p. 363). The Bible is full of examples of angels speaking with humans. Taves states that Spiritualists equated angels and spirits in the Bible (1999, p. 186). Spiritualists considered spirit communication to be natural (not supernatural); they believed 'animal magnetism provided a natural doorway to the other world' (Taves, 1999, p. 166). In more common language: they posited that trance opened the door to the spirit world (Taves, 1999, p. 166). Herein lies the pull of Spiritualism for those who reject the idea that death must separate people from their loved ones (Braude, 2001, p. 202). This exciting idea exploded in popularity after the fame of the previously mentioned Fox family and their phenomena, and groups throughout the northern and eastern US began meeting to attempt these 'manifestations' for themselves (Braude, 2001, p. 19). Formal instructions began to circulate in print to aid people interested in spirit communication (Braude, 2001, p. 20). The American Spiritualist movement had truly taken off by this time.

Today, séances and spirit communication are commonly associated with non-Christian practices; however, that was not the case at the time that American Spiritualism came to popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. During its origins, Spiritualism was considered as 'a religious revival' among Protestants (Taves, 1999, p. 167). It sought to challenge the formal nature of existing churches, and instead promoted its own brand of gatherings: 'circles, Sunday lectures, and camp meetings' (Taves, 1999, p. 167). These types of assemblies seem less formal and were possible to conduct outside of a typical church building. In fact, it is noted that Spiritualists discussed separating from their original churches (Taves, 1999, p. 167). This indicates Spiritualists could be fully encapsulated within other churches, and Spiritualism was such a sweeping movement that they had enough converts to consider launching out on their own.

Spiritualists in the American South commonly considered themselves to be Christians; they kept their actions honed on spirit communication, rather than any sweeping religious or social changes that northern Spiritualists promoted (Braude, 2001, p. 30). Ultimately, Spiritualism was quite compatible with socially normalised Christian religions. Speaking with deceased loved ones did not break any rules of Christianity; it

ISSN: 2057-2301

was only when Spiritualists attempted to apply lessons from spirit communications that they were challenged (Braude, 2001, p. 43).

Spiritualism was actively engaged with the religious ideas of its surrounding physical environment, as well. As mentioned above, Spiritualists considered their newly formulated concepts as adequate explanations for ancient religious experiences described in the Bible (Taves, 1999, p. 186). This extended into their desire to find one 'essence of religion' that applied to all religions; indeed, they believed Spiritualism was the answer, and that it underpinned every other religion (Taves, 1999, pp. 195, 198). Spiritualism promoted a novel religious concept that there existed 'a universal faith in spirit communication through "mediums," which, in their view, characterized all religions' (Taves, 1999, p. 349). Taves attributes this to a specified religious theory developed by Spiritualists (1999, p. 198). Unfortunately, this encourages religious reductionism and appropriation of marginalised groups; nevertheless, this was part of the originating considerations of American Spiritualism. British Spiritualist James Burns believed 'Indian spirits' had influenced American Spiritualism (Taves, 1999, p. 196). Spiritualism also found adherents in African slaves held captive in the southern U.S., because spirit possession and mediumship were already commonly practiced in their home cultures (Braude, 2001, p. 28). Although groups are always influenced by the people and environments surrounding them, it is important to acknowledge when a white social organisation (like a religious group) takes from a marginalised and antagonised minority group without clear permission or cohesive inclusive measures.

Having looked at the environment and the cultural trends that fostered interest in Spiritualism, I now turn to Spiritualism itself and what is offered adherents. At its heart, Spiritualism was built as a religion with the goal of showing the 'immortality of the soul;' the proof of which was revealed through speaking with spirits of the deceased (Braude, 2001, p. 2). There were several types of interest in Spiritualism which all worked together to bring it into the common culture by the mid-1800s. People came to Spiritualism because they found comfort after a loved one died, while others came to it for entertainment value (Braude, 2001, p. 2). Spiritualism seemed to offer evidence of immortality and introduced an appealing option in lieu of the existing religious institutions (Braude, 2001, p. 2). 'It held two attractions that proved irresistible to thousands of Americans: rebellion against death and rebellion against authority' (Braude, 2001, p. 2). Spiritualism's original popularity in America is credited to three causes: 1) interest in processing grief by speaking with the deceased, 2) an interest in empirical proof of the soul's immortality, and 3) a dismissal of evangelicalism and Calvinism as interest grew in liberal religious teaching (Braude, 2001, pp. 33-34). Spiritualism gave fresh opportunities

ISSN: 2057-2301

to people seeking religious teachings and communities who were open to these new ideas.

Spiritualism also had a unique attraction for women. Originally, people learned about Spiritualism in homes throughout their community, and the mediums were usually women (or girls) (Braude, 2001, p. 21). This came at a time when women were not typically allowed into leadership of anything (especially religious institutions). While this openness to female religious leadership seems revolutionary (and it was, in some ways), it was not quite as progressive as it appears on the surface. Women were (and still are) taught by western society to be caretakers; and this learned role was part of the reason why women were interested in Spiritualism (Scheitle, 2005, p. 239). Additionally, nineteenth century American ideals equated 'the qualities of piety with the qualities of femininity'; therefore, it was quite natural for Spiritualists to view women as ideal candidates for mediumship (Braude, 2001, p. 24). More acutely, women were also conditioned into use of their emotions and 'non-rational, or intuitive, forms of knowledge' (Scheitle, 2005, p. 239). All valuable skills for the mediumship role and the communicative trance experience.

Perhaps due in part to the new opportunities for women, Spiritualism drew in social activists who felt nineteenth-century society needed changes and called out the religious establishment as oppressive (Braude, 2001, p. 2). Mediums were known to speak on women's rights during trances (Braude, 2001, p. 79). The Spiritualists' calls for social change did not end with women's rights; they famously promoted abolition of slaves, as well (Braude, 2001, p. 29). Its abolitionist connections possibly reduced Spiritualism's popularity in the American South, where slaveholding was incredibly lucrative for the white population (Braude, 2001, p. 30). Spiritualism's popularity either benefited or declined depending on its surrounding social structure. Nartonis measured the growth of Spiritualism through a study of its periodicals and found its original ascent was over by 1873 (Nartonis, 2010, p. 364). Braude states that Spiritualism began to grow again in the 1880s, but it was at the centre of the women's rights movement any more (2001, p. 192). Spiritualism was no longer considered radical as an institution (Braude, 2001, p. 192). Although it did not have a permanent position as an essential social tool, Spiritualism's effect on women's autonomous religious experience was nevertheless tangible.

An Introduction to Spiritualism

Spiritualism holds a special place in American religious history. It began in the US in 1848 and thrived in a world that had started to resist violent Protestant doctrines of judgement

ISSN: 2057-2301

and eternal damnation (Braude, 2000, p. xi). Spiritualism's religious activities and theology were very unique at the time and provided a more encouraging view of death for religious seekers (Braude, 2000, p. xi). As a religion, Spiritualism is attributed to American origins and Spiritualist churches still exist throughout the US (Braude, 2000, p. xi). Although it is credited as American, Spiritualism views itself as a kind of religious umbrella that uses and includes religious practices and beliefs from other religions around the globe (Braude, 2000, p. xii). In a (now twenty-year old) study on Cassadaga (a large Spiritualist group that still exists in central Florida), Braude found that the group has focused its teachings on historical Spiritualist leanings: that of healing, relationships with deceased indigenous people, and utilising 'Asian wisdom' (2000, p. xii). It was not possible to confirm with Cassadaga whether this appropriation of other cultural activities continues, or if they include indigenous groups in their work. It is important to acknowledge that it is unethical for white Americans to non-consensually appropriate the identities and religious beliefs of minority groups and global religions - especially in profit generating activities which most local Spiritualist churches promote. This is particularly relevant to modern-day institutional Spiritualism, wherein mediumship is gate-kept behind paywalls. Most religious activities in local Florida Spiritualist churches are accessed via donation or registered fee access, which is a structural complexity of Spiritualism.

Institutional structure has long been a matter of contention for Spiritualism. This structural difficulty creates problems for scholars who wish to study Spiritualism, because there is ambiguity over who or what can be categorised as 'Spiritualist' (Braude, 2001, p. 7). Historically, Spiritualists hosted conventions, but they did not initially form a denominational style church organisation (Braude, 2001, p. 7). This made group promotion problematic, because they did not have official buildings and could not pay lecturers (Braude, 2001, p. 163). Over time, various Spiritualists (typically men who desired leadership roles) started calling for structure that would encourage unity (Braude, 2001, p. 163). The calls for structure resulted in the formation of the American Association of Spiritualists in 1865 (Braude, 2001, pp. 165-166). In spite of new organisational structure, a lot of Spiritualists (who had left rigid churches behind) were not interested in being a part of yet another restrictive and formalised religious group (Braude, 2000, p. xii). Another significant organisation was founded in 1893: the National Spiritualist Association (NSA) (Carroll, 2000, p. 21). The NSA has faced internal conflict over the direction of the group; its members have critiqued its focus on proving scientific validity and séance activity to the detriment of spiritual and philosophical development (Carroll, 2000, p. 22). Braude thusly sums up the internal Spiritualist struggle, 'The conflict between the desire to protect spiritual freedom and individual conscience and the need to organize to promote the faith has plagued Spiritualism from its earliest days' (2000, p. xii). In addition,

ISSN: 2057-2301

Spiritualism has struggled with fiscal viability, disagreements between adherents, accusations of fraud, and the desire to prove its scientific validity (Carroll, 2000, p. 22). Ultimately, the division is between the experience of the individual versus the requirements of institutional survival. Interestingly, this difference between individual and corporate religion is considered vital to the very essence of the study of religious experience.

Apart from its organisational woes, the activities within Spiritualism are fascinating to consider. Hunter (2018, loc. 2688) notes that Spiritualism provides 'a particularly interesting case study in the "domestication" of the supernatural' as the movement evolved from randomised rapping activity in New York to some form of organised mediumship services in churches throughout the US and the UK. Spiritualist churches now look very much like the surrounding Protestant churches in America: the authority of the Bible is touted and the service flows through hymn singing, prayers, and sermons (Carroll, 2000, p. 16). Yet, there is still a distinct Spiritualist activity included in its meetings: mediumship (Hunter, 2018, loc. 2702). Additionally, the sermon material itself is exclusive to Spiritualism because it cites their own doctrine and may be presented by a person in trance state (Carroll, 2000, p. 16). Although Spiritualism has prided itself on global religious commonalities, it still retains a certain uniqueness in the US.

Not only is this uniqueness directly connected to the field of religious experience research, but it is also relevant to the emerging field of supernatural or paranormal studies. Religious work like that produced by Spiritualism falls within the interests of an academic approach to the paranormal. In a discussion on physical mediumship, Hunter discusses the downfall of the practice into ill repute; however, he posits that anthropology can act as a witness to document its recent return to the public interest (2018, loc. 1078). As an academic field, anthropology can provide proper documentation and analysis for mediumship activities (Hunter, 2018, loc. 1078). Supernatural and paranormal experience need not be avoided or criticised in academic settings, but rather can be engaged with (refer to Bowie, 2010, p. 4). Bowie further advises that there is not one standard by which to measure the idea of 'normal' or 'natural' (Bowie, 2010, p. 5). Using such an open-minded approach aids an anthropologist in her work with groups or people who may differ from a cultural majority.

The structural difficulties felt by Spiritualism over the years have an interesting connection to experience. During its origins, 'individual freedom in all things' was a primary concern for Spiritualism, and this had direct consequences on their inability to form group cohesion or cooperation (Braude, 2001, p. 163). However, this focus on individual experience is commonly considered to be a hallmark of both paranormal experience and religious experience. Hunter suggests that paranormal phenomena are

ISSN: 2057-2301

accessible to all, and that participation is the key to this experience (2020, p. 70). He states, 'This would appear to be a fundamental aspect of the paranormal in general, it requires our participation in the moment to be experienced, whether spontaneously or in a ritualised context' (Hunter, 2020, p. 70). Participation is enacted by individuals and occurs at an individual level. Even within corporate groups, like Spiritualist churches, it is individuals who have experiences. Mediumship may be promoted by Spiritualism, but ultimately it is practiced by the medium and the sitter. Spiritualism is an interesting corporate vehicle of mediumship, but mediumship is an individual experience. Even so, groups of mediums have organised to promote ideals and guarantee the success of mediumship for future practitioners.

Spiritualism and its Connection to the Study of Religious Experience

At the heart of this paper lies the field of religious experience research. In this section, a review of the academic discussion of religious experience's connection to mediumship will be undertaken. This type of work is generally unique to the fields of anthropology and religious experience research, since, according to McGuire, 'Thus far, only a few scholars have given serious research attention to religious experience' (2008, p. 94). She continues to explain that anthropological studies, specifically, have only focused on a few types of phenomena experiences that typically fall within the category of 'altered states of consciousness' (McGuire, 2008, p. 94). Therefore, anthropological analysis of religious experience in connection to mediumship and gendered issues is a unique and exciting opportunity with which to engage.

The idea of 'authenticity' was a key concept in the development of religious experience study. William James famously referred to 'the fruits of religious experience' as determinant factors of authenticity (Rankin, 2005, p. 32). The debate over authenticity of religious experience was woven into the origins of Spiritualism. In the nineteenth century, religious movements and groups disagreed 'over the legitimacy of religious experience' – specifically within groups that engaged in 'visionary' and mesmerist experiences versus formal church traditions, as various groups tried to explain away the experiences of other groups (Taves, 1999, p. 164). The latter activity is still a common practice among American religions (especially traditional evangelical groups). Spiritualists engaged in this legitimacy/proof debate as well. They attempted to prove their authenticity by appropriating biblical references into their doctrines - for example, they taught that spirit communication was noted in the Bible (Taves, 1999, p. 186). Not only did they attach the authenticity of their religious experience to the Bible, they also showed that their form of 'biblical' religious experience could still occur (during their trance

ISSN: 2057-2301

sessions) and was not relegated to the Bible (Taves, 1999, p. 186). There was also a driving trend at the time to connect religion and science - a desire to prove the veracity of religious beliefs through a scientific framework (Taves, 1999, p. 349). Generally, academics who study religious experience today no longer attempt to reduce religion or science into the same box, yet religions themselves may still attempt to do so. The Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp (SCSC) (located in central Florida) still promotes its beliefs as scientifically proven (SCSC, n.d.). Still, McGuire cautions her readers to be mindful that 'religious traditions' are social constructions and no specific religions should be described as 'unitary, unchanging, pure, or authentic' (2008, p. 200). The implications for religious experience research are to keep an open mind and to view the field broadly (through an interdisciplinary eye, if possible).

This fascination with combining science and religion tied Spiritualists into the very formation of the academic field of religious experience research itself. Spiritualism's explanation of 'true religion' as inclusive of spirits and mediums, brought an original amalgamation between religion and historical works on magic and enthusiasm (as a particular action) (Taves, 1999, p. 180). This was considered to be a psychologically based understanding of religion (especially Christianity); this new psychologically religious approach set the stage for serious religious experience academics such as William James to expound upon in the future (Taves, 1999, p. 180). (Of relevance to anthropology: Spiritualism inspired famed anthropologist Edward B. Tylor's materialist religious theory (Taves, 1999, p. 180). Even today, learning about New Age spiritual concepts (including modern-day Spiritualism) takes the student back into the nineteenth-century where they must absorb the influence of James who was duly influenced by historical Spiritualism (Pearson, 2003, p. 418). It was the Spiritualists' use of trance, opening a path 'to the other world,' that encouraged them to claim empiricism within religious experience; an experience that they viewed psychologically, rather than theologically (Taves, 1999, p. 167). The popularity of Spiritualism was acutely responsible for the opportunities later undertaken to combine religious experience and psychology in academia.

Spiritualism was grounded in the idea that they were relevant to all other existing religions. A current lens may show this concept is rooted in appropriative, white, colonial language (and this could be true). Spiritualists may have another belief at the heart of their internalised understanding of themselves, though. Spiritualists did not view themselves as exclusive or elite, rather they taught spirit communication (their identifying experience) 'required no special knowledge, and that it was equally accessible to everybody' (Braude, 2001, pp. 178, 179). This open-handed approach to religious experience is reflected in McGuire's study of religious experience: she questions the validity of considering traditional religious experience norms as more religious than private, personal religious

ISSN: 2057-2301

experiences (2008, p. 88). She critiques academia's favouritism of formalised religions over other spiritual practices that may be found outside of established religious institutions (McGuire, 2008, p. 96). Spiritualism does have formal church settings, yet mediumship is an experience that can be felt outside a formal religious building or gathering. The experiences of these mediums are just as valid and important as those of mediums working in a Spiritualist building. McGuire does not accept that individual religious practice is 'anomalous,' and she criticises the belief that the 'definitional boundaries that distinguish religious practices of one religious group from another's' causes them to be fundamentally oppositional (2008, p. 186). From this standpoint, Spiritualism's religious inclusiveness both promotes their own ideas, while simultaneously allowing individuals to flourish within its walls.

The Individual Nature of the Mediumship Experience

The power of individual experience is made evident in Spiritualism. It has been the driving force of Spiritualism through the years, which has also limited the ability of structural and organising forces to unite it in a clear, doctrinal way (Carroll, 2000, p. 22). On an individual level, mediumship is open to everyone and anyone – with correct training; however, there is no cohesive and overriding method for mediumship training (Emmons, 2000, p. 76). This lack of structure and information will drastically affect individual experience.

This discord between individuals and corporate entity has been evident even in my own fieldwork with Spiritualist mediums. Local corporate entities were either dismissive of attempts for academic observation and discussion or were too disorganised to respond in a cohesive manner. However, individually, mediums were free to interact as they choose – while still being gate-kept by disinterested "corporate" individuals. Systemically, Spiritualism is not set up for longevity in a world where electronic organisation and religious open-handedness are expected (and therefore necessary) for survival.

On the individual level, western mediums risk personal judgment and marginalisation; they struggle to find environments that allow them to thrive (Emmons, 2000, p. 80). Because of the unwelcoming nature of their surrounding social environment, mediums find encouragement by looking to the individual experiences of other mediums (Emmons, 2000, p. 80). On a micro level, it is the experience of the individual that allows mediums to thrive. McGuire further stresses the importance of individual experience for religious study; she encourages research into the individual as opposed to the generic religious experience expected by a corporate religious organisation (2008, p. 4). James also stressed the importance of individual religious experience in *The Varieties of*

ISSN: 2057-2301

Religious Experience, especially in lieu of corporate experience. According to these ideas, the experiences of mediums as individuals (in contrast to the corporate expectations of a Spiritualist church) is worthy of analysis.

Spiritualism's Connection to the Women's Rights Movement

An integral theme in this paper is the connection of the formulation of women's rights agitation to Spiritualism and American mediums. This connection fosters interest in feminist research on each of these topics separately: religious experience, women's rights, mediumship, and Spiritualism. These interconnected topics each have a place here because of their impressive influences on each other (especially in the US). This section will analyse Spiritualism's effect on women's rights in the US, and will then undertake a deeper investigation into women's (typically unequal) experiences with religion, at large. Although women's rights are topics of historical significance, women are *still* working to improve their rights in the American religious scene. Again, the confluence of topics here illuminates connected areas of interest: historical activity with modern day work which remains somewhat understudied.

A Social Move Towards Equality

Spiritualism not only provided women with religious opportunities, it also specifically worked to improve women's day-to-day existence. According to Braude (2001), Spiritualists worked to emancipate women in relation to restrictive dress codes, negative medical experiences, economic disparity, and the socially implied marriage obligations of the day. Nineteenth-century Spiritualists understood that women's fashions not only restricted bodily movements, but could also cause harm to internal organs, and they worked to change these dress expectations (Braude, 2001, p. 142). Spiritualists resisted medical ideas that women were 'encouraged…to view themselves as weak' and restrictions that kept women out of paid healthcare work; they also worked with other agitators who sought to transform women's health treatment (Braude, 2001, p. 142).

Spiritualists were also involved in a 'marriage revolution' which taught that 'marriage commonly resulted from parental or social pressure, women's lack of economic alternatives, and men's lust' (Braude, 2001, p. 119). While supporting marriages built on love, they 'condemned the conditions imposed on such unions by a society that made women subservient to men' (Braude, 2001, p. 118). Mediumship provided a direct response to women's economic problems, as some women found financial success

ISSN: 2057-2301

through it (Braude, 2001, p. 118). On the other hand, Spiritualism grew in initial popularity at the hands of unpaid female mediums (Braude, 2001, p. 21). Ultimately, Spiritualism played an active part in working for women's equality through many aspects of their lived, day-to-day experiences, and by the end of the nineteenth-century (when Spiritualism's popularity had diminished), many women had found paying jobs and were part of a growing cultural revolution which provided 'social and legal equality with men' (Sered, 2011, p. 44).

These issues discussed above contributed to the unequal status that women receive in the US Some of these areas continue to plague women (restrictive dress codes that are expensive and uncomfortable to maintain still exist in educational institutions and work places), unequal pay for women (risking economic dependence on others), and regressive health care complications relating to reproductive rights or inability to access affordable healthcare.

The Threatening Feminine

Spiritualist women found cultural and religious liberation and opportunities during the exciting days of nineteenth-century America. Yet, this liberating wave of women's rights activity had its limits. A 'national moral panic' had been moving across the US which focused on Spiritualists and various of their activities; this social upset resulted in the Comstock Law – considered to be a landmark law in censorship (McGarry, 2000, p. 9). By the late 1800s, the Spiritualist desires to abolish slavery and engage with women's rights, free love, and dress reform had been demonised enough to create a kind of culture war that resulted in censorship so strict that it worked its way into US law (McGarry, 2000, p. 10). Spiritualists, known to be prolific publishers of printed works, felt the brunt of the censorship law, which specifically addressed and regulated printed material sent through US mail (McGarry, 2000, p. 13). Women's interests have long been regulated in both public and private settings, and the creation of laws that allow prosecution and legal consequences continue to oppress women in the US.

At the same time legal struggles began to plague certain Spiritualists and their publications. Female leaders within their ranks began to experience a loss of public reputation, as well. This loss of reputation seems to be connected to the social construct that women are emotionally unstable and to the religious idea that women are sexual temptresses. This was part of the loss Spiritualism felt in the religious scene of Victorian America, specifically through the leadership of Helena Blavatsky and Victoria Woodhull (Braude, 2001, p. 191; McGarry, 2000). These two women were famous Spiritualist

ISSN: 2057-2301

leaders, but by the late 1800s their reputations were diminished so dramatically that it cast doubt that women, in general, had the capabilities to ever be religious leaders (Braude, 2001, p. 191). In Woodhull's case, her public disapproval resulted in the Comstock censorship law discussed above (McGarry, 2000). Both women displayed their sexuality to the public; while this is morally neutral today, it provided reason for public censure at the time (Braude, 2001, p. 191). Blavatsky and Woodhull confirmed the public's worst fears about the dangers of exposing female sexuality to the amoral public sphere. In the popular mind, the passivity believed to be inherent in women's nature made Woodhull and Blavatsky pawns for the spread of licentiousness, not vehicles for revelation (Braude, 2001, p. 191).

The concept of 'woman as temptress' was eating away at the female religious empowerment that had begun to be publicly embraced. Additionally, Braude finds that Woodhull and Blavatsky were focused on their own, individual leadership opportunities, rather than working for general female leadership liberation (2001, p. 191). While this is not necessarily a shortcoming in either case, it does speak to the lack of intersectionality that has plagued feminist work throughout its time in the American social and political scene. Ultimately, Braude believes by that time, Spiritualism was no longer a central force for women in either the political or religious realms (2001, p. 191). Some of its female leaders were being subjected to too much public censure, while these same leaders were not focused on the wider goals of women's rights agitation. This is not to say that Spiritualism, in general, fell away from its humanitarian work, though; Spiritualists remained consistent in their support of free love, racial equality, and rejection of Christianity's hierarchical divisions – which separated them from the larger group of American suffragettes who toned down their messages in order to be heard by society (Braude, 2001, p. 200). In conclusion, two major social complications contributed to a decline in Spiritualism's organisational effect on the women's rights movement (as cited above): public perception of 'woman as temptress' and its leaders' lack of cooperation with the suffragettes' specific goals.

Spiritualism and Women's Rights Agitation

The connection that Spiritualism has to women's religious and daily empowerment has been made, and it may now be interesting to consider why Spiritualism had these effects on women's lives and how they occurred. Women's rights agitators were closely aligned with Spiritualism when both movements started and grew (Braude, 2001, p. 3). Winkel comments that, 'religion is discernible as a social "variable" that is contingent on "culture"; in other words, religion is a social sphere that mirrors socio-cultural beliefs and

ISSN: 2057-2301

(gender) codes like any other social field' (2019, p. 247). With this consideration, it is evident why most pre- and early nineteenth-century religions reflected subjugating roles for women just as wider cultural norms did. Yet, the mid-nineteenth century introduced some unique changes for women in both culture and religion; it seems both areas of change fed off of, and encouraged, the other to continue. Braude credits Spiritualism as possibly being the most effective promoter of the original women's rights movement in the US (2001, p. 57). Specifically, Spiritualists clearly condemned established social hierarchies of the day (i.e. authority structures of slavery, church domination of members, males above females, and even that of government above citizenry) (Braude, 2001, p. 56). These condemnations were quite radical for the time (and still are); Spiritualism easily delivered a 'religious anarchism' that meshed well with extreme reformists (Braude, 2001, p. 62). As a religious movement, Spiritualism gave women's rights speakers a place to find an audience and an entire community that was ready to act (Braude, 2001, p. 80). These agitators fought for the end of slavery, the rights of children (who were used as labourers), marriage reform, and socialism (Braude, 2001, p. 3). Because they centred their beliefs on the relevancy of the individual as a receptor of truth, Spiritualists adopted an individualistic ideology which could not accept the domination of one person over another (in any realm: political, social, or religious) (Braude, 2001, p. 6). In agitation, Spiritualism seemed to both work with a wider social movement (the fight for women's rights) and provide that movement with ideology and enough participants who would cause the movement to succeed.

This is not to say that Spiritualists or women's rights advocates were anti-American. Patriotism has always been (and continues to be) a required quality in Americans and their movements. Julia Schlesinger, a prominent nineteenth-century author, has been credited with noting 'that spiritualism [sic] is essentially more patriotic than typical nationalism, and that part of the patriotism of spiritualism [sic] is its commitment to women's rights' (Youngkin, 2010, p. 283). With such extreme positions being connected to their ranks, it would have been necessary to tie American patriotism closely to their. movement's identity. Spiritualism inspired so much empowerment for women, that Braude identifies the women's suffrage movement as having 'benefited more than any other movement' from this specific empowerment (2001, p. 192). It accomplished this by being the first to create large numbers of women who spoke publicly and who led in religious settings (Braude, 2001, p. 201). Although today women's religious options are still limited in the US, women's suffrage has continued to be honoured as a majorly important moment in US history.

ISSN: 2057-2301

Conclusion

What can be seen through this analysis of religious experience research, Spiritualism, mediumship, and their connections to American women's rights is that each realm was fully realised due to the existence and influence of the others. The original, academic study of religious experience was due (at least in part) to William James's interest in Spiritualism. It was the existence of Spiritualism which allowed the American women's rights movement to flourish in its early days. Taking a feminist approach to the study of religion shows that when religious experience is fully realised on an individual level it should bring individual empowerment and – hopefully – the ability to find equality in a supportive community as evidenced through Spiritualism's historic origins.

References

Bowie, F. (2010). 'Methods for studying the paranormal (and who says what is normal anyway?)', *Paranthropology: Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal,* Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 4-6.

Braude, A. (2000). 'Preface', in Guthrie, Jr., J., Lucas, P., Monroe, G. (eds.) *Cassadaga: The south's oldest Spiritualist community*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Braude, A. (2001). *Radical Spirits*. 2nd edn. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Carroll, B. (2000). 'The context of Cassadaga: A historical overview of American Spiritualism', in Guthrie, Jr., J., Lucas, P., Monroe, G. (eds.) *Cassadaga: The south's oldest Spiritualist community*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida.

Emmons, C. (2000). 'On becoming a spirit medium in a "rational society,"' *Anthropology of Consciousness*, Vol. 12, No. 1-2, pp. 71-82.

Hardy, A. (1997). 'The significance of religious experience', Occasional Paper, Series Vol. 2, No. 12.

Hunter, J. (2018). *Engaging the anomalous: Collected essays on anthropology, the paranormal, mediumship and extraordinary experience.* Milton Keynes: August Night Press.

ISSN: 2057-2301

Hunter, J. (2020). *Spirits, Gods and Magic: An Introduction to the Anthropology of the Supernatural.* 2nd edn. Milton Keynes: August Night Press.

James, W. (2011). *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. DigiReads.com Publishing.

McGarry, M. (2000). 'Spectral sexualities: Nineteenth-century Spiritualism, moral panics, and the making of U.S. obscenity law,' *Journal of Women's History*, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 8–29.

McGuire, M. B. (2008). *Lived Religion: Faith and practice in everyday life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195172621.003.0001

Nartonis, D. (2010). 'The rise of 19th-Century American Spiritualism, 1854-1873,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 361–373.

Pearson, J. (2003). 'Ritual and religious experience: William James and the study of 'alternative spiritualities,' *Cross Currents*, Vol. 53, No. 3, pp. 413–424.

Rankin, M. (2005). 'An introduction to religious experience,' Occasional Paper, Series, Vol. 3, No. 2.

Scheitle, C. P. (2004-2005). 'Bringing out the dead: Gender and historical cycles of Spiritualism,' *OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying*, Vol. 50, No. 3, pp. 237–253.

Sered, S. S. (2011). 'Priestess, mother, sacred sister: Religions dominated by women.' *Oxford Scholarship Online*. DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195104677.003.0003

Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp. n.d. 'Who we are.' Available at: https://www.cassadaga.org/who-we-are.html (Accessed: 23 August 2021 and 9 April 2022).

Taves, A. (1999). *Fits, trances & visions: Experiencing religion and explaining experience from Wesley to James*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

ISSN: 2057-2301

Taves, A. (2003). 'Religious experience and the divisible self: William James (and Frederic Meyers) as theorist(s) of religion,' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 71, No. 2, pp. 303-326.

Taves, A. (2009). *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A building block approach to the study of religion and other special things.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Winkel, H. (2019). 'Religious cultures and gender cultures: Tracing gender differences across religious cultures,' *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 241–251.

Youngkin, M. (2010). '"Mrs. Schlesinger wields a facile pen": Articulations of Spiritualist feminism in Julia Schlesinger's "Carrier Dove,"' *Victorian Periodicals Review,* Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 262–295.

ISSN: 2057-2301