

# **Cults in 19th Century Britain**

**Robert Cecil**

**1988**

**Monograph Series No. 27**

*THE INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH*

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ICR Monograph Series No. 27

This version prepared for free download 2006.

The original hard copy edition:

ISSN 0306 1906 – ISBN 0 904674 15 0 – Published 1988

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## **THE AUTHOR**

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# Cults in 19th Century Britain

There has never been a time of which we have record when Christendom has not been vexed by controversy about dogma or church organisation or both. This applied as forcibly to 19th century Britain as to earlier centuries, even though religion was under threat and Christians might have been expected to close ranks against the assaults of infidelity and secular ideology. Variations of belief flourished partly because religious tolerance was gaining strength, especially after the emancipation of Roman Catholics in 1829, and partly because scientific discoveries, coupled with historical and textual criticism, had cast doubt on the literal truth of the Bible. The human mind, throwing off its shackles, or in some cases reluctantly prised loose from traditional authority, was resuming that enquiry into man's origin and destiny which seems to be innate in us all. Perennial interest in the mystery of life and death justifies our concentrating on this aspect of heterodox thought, where the invasive influence of cults was at its strongest.

Whilst new heresies, as we shall shortly see, were making their appearance, there was also the revival of an ancient heterodoxy that was as old as orthodoxy itself. Indeed adventism, or belief in Christ's Second Coming, had formed part of the belief of some of the earliest Church Fathers. It had originated as a Jewish Messianic myth, but had acquired some special connotations in the morbid and ingenious minds of certain early mediaeval Christians. Whilst the mythic picture varied at different times and places, certain eschatological features, loosely based upon the Book of Revelation, were common to most of them. The signs and portents of the Second Coming included a 'time of troubles', marked by war, drought, famine and pestilence, during which the Antichrist would dominate; after these trials Christ would come in his glory, greeted by saints and martyrs, both living and dead, and would preside over the Last Judgment. Those who survived this final ordeal would inherit the New Jerusalem, where "there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."<sup>1</sup>

One of those who accepted this prophecy, whilst interpreting it in his own way, was the Swedish visionary, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who made a special study of Revelation. He believed that the Last Judgment had occurred in 1757 and that at the date of his death in London men were already living in 'the last days'. A startling series of events in Europe had created a climate favourable to such beliefs. The execution of Louis XVI, the reign of terror and the short-lived triumph of atheism in France con-

vinced many who in more sober times would not have been regarded as visionaries that the course of human history had abruptly changed. Had events merely become unpredictable, or were men witnessing ‘signs of the last things’, which had indeed been predicted? We, who live at a period when waves of hysteria about thermo-nuclear destruction intermittently sweep the country, can have some appreciation of men’s state of mind in those days. Clergy preached sermons identifying Napoleon with Antichrist and devising anagrams linking him with Apollion. Extreme Protestants commented with mixed glee and foreboding on the expulsion from the Vatican of Pope Pius VI; they had long associated the Roman Church with “Babylon the Great, the Mother of Harlots”; it looked as if her day of reckoning had come. Shortly before the French Revolution there had been a resurgence of Martinists, Rosicrucians, Masonic Lodges of the Egyptian Rite and the like, and this underworld had been haunted by the shadowy figures of Cagliostro and the Count of Saint-Germain.

Britain had nothing equally piquant to offer, but here, too, it was a period when a disturbed and credulous public would lend an ear to a charismatic figure with an inner urge to assume the prophetic mantle. One aspirant to such a role was Richard Brothers, a half-pay Captain, who in 1794 published *Revealed Knowledge of the Prophecies and Times*. He stressed the incidence of revolution, earthquake, pestilence and the downfall of the Pope, after which all men would become one family. This was too much for the authorities, who placed him in an asylum. One of his assumed titles was “Prince of the Hebrews”. Extermination of the Jews had formed part of certain mediaeval eschatologies; this had been transformed in a more humane era into conversion of the Jews, which thus became a sign of ‘the last days’. In 1815 a society aiming at the conversion of the Jews was founded and in some minds became linked with the pretensions of the British Israelites, who held that the British were indeed the Lost Tribes.

Brothers’ career overlapped that of Joanna Southcott (1750–1814), the daughter of a Devonshire farmer and author of four books of prophecy between 1801 and 1804. She claimed the powers of the angel, described in Revelation (Ch. VII), who “sealed the servants of the Lord in their foreheads”. Those so sealed would, at the Second Coming, be gathered up alive into heaven. As if this were not enough, she was also:

“ . . . the woman clothed with the sun”, of whom it is written, “and she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne.”<sup>2</sup>

After a number of false pregnancies, she died without having produced the Messiah, who was designated the Shiloh, or Prince of Peace. Five years

after her death a group of her followers proclaimed the Shiloh in London; they were led, according to the Newgate Calendar, by Samuel Sibley and his wife. Their message was not one of peace and joy; they cried “Wo! Wo! to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the coming of the Shiloh!” The inhabitants in the immediate vicinity became incensed and the adventists had to be rescued from the mob. A decade later a crippled shoemaker, named Zion Ward, who edited a weekly, *The Judgment Seat of Christ*, emerged as the new leader. In 1832 he was imprisoned for blasphemy and died five years later.

One historian of this period, following the Marxist practice of interpreting religious phenomena from an economic base, has attempted to relate the rise and fall of these minor millenarian waves to cyclic movements of the economy:

“ . . . it was certainly a cult of the poor .... There is a sense in which any religion which places great emphasis on the after-life is the Chiliasm of the defeated and the hopeless.”<sup>3</sup>

Like many other Marxist interpretations, this one is strong in theory, but weak in facts. If despair of well-being in this world were the motivation, one would expect the millenarians and their followers to be drawn predominantly from the lowest economic and social category. This is demonstrably not the case. Sibley was a watchman and his followers are described as “journeyman mechanics and labourers”; Ward was self-employed. Thackeray, who was a shrewd social observer, mentions two adventists among the employees of the devout Mrs Sophia Newcome, whose “mansion at Clapham was long the resort of the most favoured of the religious world”.<sup>4</sup> One of these is the house-keeper; the other is the head-gardener; it is not the illiterate, lower servants, but the half-educated, upper servants, who are touched by this obsession. The millenarian myth that was to begin, much later, to appeal to the proletariat was Marxism itself, which has all the essential characteristics: violence, directed against the rich, who have indulged in usury (profit-making); the triumph of the virtuous poor (proletariat), and the final establishment on earth of egalitarian peace and harmony (withering away of the state, classless society etc.). “For it is the simple truth that, stripped of their original supernatural, sanction, revolutionary millenarianism and mystical anarchism are with us still”.<sup>5</sup>

The fact is that in the first half of the 19th Century all classes of society were in some degree touched by millenarian ideas. We can see this most clearly by briefly examining the best organised group, namely the Catholic Apostolic Church (CAC). The two leading figures in the first phase were the Scots Minister and friend of Carlyle, Edward Irving (1792–1834); and

the wealthy banker and one-time M.P., Henry Drummond (1786–1860). Drummond owned a large house at Albury in Surrey and there convened in 1826 a meeting of those interested in the unfulfilled prophecies of Scripture, which seemed on the verge of realisation. One of those attending the meeting was Irving, who in the previous year had begun preaching ‘the Second Advent’ from his pulpit in the Regent Square Church in north London. He and his followers believed that one of the signs that the Second Coming was imminent would be the Pentacostal gift of tongues (*glossolalia*) and powers of healing. In 1830 allegedly miraculous cures of consumption occurred in a family living near Rosneath, Dumbarton, and in the following year people, mainly women, began to ‘speak with tongues’ and prophesy in Irving’s Church. This led to his eviction in 1832; his excommunication from the Church of Scotland and his death followed in 1834. After his burial a number of women, clothed in white, stood round his grave in the belief that he would rise again.<sup>6</sup>

Drummond and his friends, drawn mainly from the Anglican and Presbyterian Churches, did not regard themselves as discredited by the excesses of the ‘Irvingite’ *glossolalia*. They acquired their own church in Gordon Square and co-opted twelve Apostles, who constituted the ruling body of the CAC. Each Apostle was empowered to ‘seal’ 144,000 of the righteous, this being the number prescribed in Revelation (Ch. VII). By 1851 there were 37 churches in Great Britain with an estimated 8,000 members. Each Apostle also had assigned to him an overseas area, or ‘tribe’, which he was supposed to visit. There was, for example, a small colony in Malta, grouped round the Rt. Hon. J.H. Frere, who had at one time been H.M. Minister in Spain (1800–9). His brother, Hatley, is mentioned in a letter of 1844 written from Malta by John Holt, a Lancashire J.P., who was on a sailing trip round the Mediterranean:

“At Athens we were joined by Mr Frere, a brother of Rt. Hon. J.H. Frere, the intimate friend of Canning, who in 1813 published an interpretation of prophecy and has a very confident expectation that 1847 is to be the end of the Christian dispensation – the date of the advent of our Lord and the battle of Armageddon, and the period of pouring out the Seventh Vial .... and a Mr Fletcher who has been sent out by the Archbishop of Canterbury and who has been two years at Antioch, Damascus, etc. on a visitation to the Nestorian and other Eastern Christian Churches, mentions persuasions and appearances which convince the Turks that in this year – 1260 of the Hegira – Constantinople is to fall .... In the East a feeling is abroad that we are in the Times of the End.”<sup>7</sup>

The CAC had no monopoly of millenarians; some, like the Earl of Shaftesbury (Lord Ashley), remained within the fold of the established Church, which found it necessary to combat their views. Archbishop Whately of Dublin opposed their heterodoxy in one of his books; Samuel Waldegrave, Bishop of Carlisle, devoted the Bampton Lectures in 1854 to refuting the tendency. In 1848 John Holt, back in London, attended a series of meetings at Exeter Hall, which had become a major centre of Low Church propaganda. In a letter to his sister-in-law, who seems to have been less enthusiastic about the end of the world, he listed some of the speakers who had touched on this great theme:

“I conceive you may not reciprocate these sentiments on that portion of unfulfilled prophecy which I believe is having its accomplishment in these contemporary events – and especially in my conviction that we live on the eve of the millennial morrow. I wish you had heard the many distinguished men that I have lately listened to on this subject, earnest, sober, learned, honest, prayerful, deep students of prophecy – McNeile, Stowell, Bickersteth, Cumming, Villiers, Lord Ashley, Freemantle, Daniel Wilson, Goodhart and other ....”<sup>8</sup>

To some adventists the deferment of the Second Coming was a serious test of faith. Edmund Gosse, whose parents were Plymouth Bretheren, has vividly described the confusion in his father’s mind:

“Our thoughts were at this time abundantly exercised with the expectation of the immediate coming of the Lord, who .... would suddenly appear, without the least warning, and would catch up to be with him in everlasting glory all whom acceptance of the Atonement had sealed for immortality .... The world, after a few days’ amazement at the total disappearance of these persons, would revert to its customary habits of life .... My father lived for nearly a quarter of a century more, never losing the hope of ‘not tasting death’, and as the last moments of mortality approached, he was bitterly disappointed at what he held to be a scanty reward for his long faith and patience.”<sup>9</sup>

The self-constituted elect faced domestic problems, which pressed less severely upon more orthodox Christians. These are illustrated by the following letter, addressed in 1879 to my grandfather by a kinsman, Samuel Cecil; it displays an inimitable admixture of worldliness and other-worldliness:

“You know our hope – that girding ourselves to be prepared for the Lord’s coming in his own way, we shall at his coming be accounted worthy to escape those things that are coming on the earth. How far our

faith may avail to include our children in the blessing, now that they have arrived at age to choose for themselves, we cannot tell. But if the parents should be taken and the children left, would you kindly undertake the oversight of their interests until they come of age? Our property being nearly all vested in Trustees, there must be someone to whom they must be authorised to pay the dividends, until they can themselves give receipts .... Earnestly hoping that this may all be unnecessary – that we may be all, as one family, taken away from the evil to come; and earnestly longing that you may yourself be a partaker of the same glorious hope, as I am, as ever.”<sup>10</sup>

The expectation seems to be that, however terrible the evil to come, it would not prevent the Trustees from paying out dividends – an impressive tribute to Victorian confidence in the stability of contemporary financial institutions. Eschatological speculation was undoubtedly promoted (though in what degree it is impossible to assess) by study of the works of Swedenborg, which gradually became more widespread. For Swedenborg, however, the Last Judgment had coincided with his own visionary experiences and had not been marked by the clangour of the Last Trump with the dead rising from their graves, as in a painting by Stanley Spencer. Judgment, for Swedenborg, would be an almost imperceptible process of separation between sheep and goats. This would take place in the world of spirits, an intermediate point between heaven and hell; unlike purgatory, it was not a world where reparation and repentance were possible, but one in which characteristics that had become dominant in life would reassert themselves after death with inescapable results. Those who gravitated to hell did so because it was for that their lives had fitted them. All who went to heaven became angels; there was no independent order of angelic beings.

One effect of this teaching was to bridge the immense chasm that had opened, in Evangelical Christianity, between life and death; death-bed remorse and absolution lost their significance. Mental and moral states, which men had developed in their lives, accompanied them through the gateway of death into the world of spirits, so much so that some, who had recently died, were scarcely aware of the transition from this world to the next. Swedenborg claimed to know this from his frequent and detailed conversations with angels. To all who had been subject to his influence death not only lost its sting; it also lost its finality as a mark of punctuation. An early disciple, William Cookworthy (1704–80), likened death to “putting off an old coat to put on a new one”. On his death-bed he said to his daughter, “Is this the death, which I so long dreaded? This great, this mighty change! What is it? Why, ceasing to breathe, that is all!”<sup>11</sup> The sculptor, John Flaxman (1755–1826), was also a Swedenborgian; when he

died, his friend, William Blake, said of his death, "I cannot think of death as more than the going out of one room into another."<sup>12</sup> This attitude intensified interest in the dubious borderland between life and death that was in any case developing during the first half of the century, under the influence of the Gothic novel and the relaxation of Christian orthodoxy.

Blake was not an uncritical Swedenborgian, but until his death in 1827 he held fast to certain basic ideas, which he had found in Swedenborg's works, as these became available in English translation from 1783 onwards. Blake perceived that the institutionalised churches had perverted the message of Jesus by laying so much emphasis on death, judgment and the intercession of clergy. The moral problem confronting man was not connected with what he believed or what religious rites he observed; the root question was what attitude he took up towards the sufferings of his fellowmen. This would determine his moral state and whether he carried heaven or hell around with him; no amount of sly hypocrisy, or lip-service to Christian platitudes, could conceal his true state, which, as in Swedenborg's world of spirits, would in due time stand fully revealed. Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience* bore the subtitle: "showing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul". In his *Songs of Innocence* he mainly extolled children, because their responses had not been corrupted by deceit and dissembling, which were the fruits of adult experience. Such experience would prove fatal in the world of spirits, where the false antithesis between appearance and reality would vanish, "because no one there is permitted to have a divided mind, that is to speak one thing and will another."<sup>13</sup>

Blake's vision of heaven was also Swedenborgian. He wrote in *The Book of Los*: "The eternal world is one of mutual cooperation in which all forms of life are nourished and supported by all other forms, as in the economy of the individual human body." Swedenborg in his *Heaven and Hell* had been even more specific, describing heaven as "a whole angelic society" which, "when the Lord manifests himself as present, appears as one object in human form."<sup>14</sup> All participating in this angelic society would fulfil particular functions, corresponding to the functions of the different organs of the body. Indeed, he continues: "The whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world, not only in general, but also in particular."<sup>15</sup> The doctrine according to which God was a Grand Man (Adam Kadmon), composed of the totality of perfected humanity, was of Cabalistic origin and had been delineated by the 17th century mystic J.G. Gichtel in his *Theosophica Practica* (1696). It is probable that Swedenborg's concept derived from Gichtel's, or that both shared a common origin. Such thinking reinforced the trend towards narrowing the

gulf fixed by orthodox theology between God and man, thus paving the way for the various cults of humanity that were to emerge later.

It was not to be expected that such radical rethinking of Christianity would make rapid strides. Swedenborg himself modestly observed on his death-bed that “from and after the year 1780 it will spread very much.”<sup>16</sup> His antagonism to established churches suggests that, for spreading his beliefs, the last thing he would have done would have been to found a church. His followers thought otherwise. They had at first met together as the Theosophical Society, but in 1787 they reconstituted themselves as the New Church, which later became the New Jerusalem Church. In the USA the New Church Society opened its doors in Baltimore in 1792. One of those in England who opposed the new development was the Rev. John Clowes, who for over 50 years was Rector of St John’s, Manchester. De Quincey writes affectionately of him as “holy, visionary, apostolic .... translator of Swedenborg and .... organising a patronage of other people’s translations ....”<sup>17</sup> Clowes, it may be assumed, held that Swedenborg’s ideas would make more rapid progress among his fellow pastors if not emanating from a rival church. This view would have gained strength in the decade following Clowes’ death in 1831, as spiritualism came into prominence, encountering clerical hostility, but finding supporters among students of Swedenborg. In Le Fanu’s overtly Swedenborgian novel, *Uncle Silas*, the heroine’s father, although a great landowner, is depicted as attracting the disapproval of the local clergy because of his Swedenborgian leanings. It is recorded that, when Ruskin’s friend, Thomas Dixon, loaned one of the prophet’s books to William Rossetti, the latter’s pious mother promptly burnt it.<sup>18</sup> In 1879 there were 70 New Jerusalem Churches in Britain. By that date the Swedenborg Rite was also firmly established in Masonry, having been imported from North America, and by the end of the century there were estimated to be 13 such lodges in this country.

There was another powerful ingredient spicing the cultist brew that was beginning to intoxicate impressionable minds. It had originated with Franz Mesmer who well before the French Revolution had created a sensation in Vienna by postulating the existence of ‘magnetic fluid’ and a force denominated ‘animal magnetism’, which could be employed in healing. This theory, too, had links with Cabalistic tradition. Medical research was already interested in electricity, though unclear what curative function it could fulfil, and it was at first supposed that electricity might have some affinity with the magnetic fluid. The hostility of orthodox doctors was soon aroused, however, when it became apparent that in some people the mesmeric trance was accompanied by inexplicable manifestations of paranormal powers. The medical profession in the early decades of the 19th

century was engaged in a struggle to divest itself of its dubious association with apothecaries, bonesetters and others, whose practice seemed to rest upon no scientific foundation. At the same time the more scientific practitioners themselves enjoyed minimal success in their efforts to check disease and alleviate suffering; they were in no mood to tolerate the interference of mesmerists, hypnotists and somnambulists (as they were then sometimes designated), whose claims seemed to be even more extravagant than those of the existing subculture of ‘quacks’. Given the prevailing enthusiasm for all things supernatural, orthodox doctors feared that the new craze might carry all before it.

One of those who took up the cudgels on behalf of ‘science’ (as he understood it) was Dr. Samuel Hibbert, who was a member both of the Royal Medical Society of Edinburgh and of the Philosophical Society of Manchester. In his book, published in 1824, he attempted to formulate a ‘philosophy of apparitions’, which would be rational and materialist. His main thesis was that all psychic experience had its origin in disorders of the blood, brain or nervous system; any manifestation, however well attested, that could not be so explained was dream or delusion. He then analysed a few carefully selected cases, in which ghostly visitations, or ‘second sight’ could plausibly be ascribed to epilepsy, delirium tremens, incipient lunacy or the action upon the blood of some stimulant or depressant. One of the agents so examined was the ‘febrile miasma’, which, according to Hibbert, “has been found possessing its greatest degree of virulence” at Cadiz and Malaga. Whether this location had been chosen in order to account for Spanish mysticism does not become clear, although a derogatory mention of St. Teresa of Avila occurs later. He is particularly scathing about death-bed visions – “the mere phantasies of .... diseased imagination.”<sup>19</sup> On the other hand, he defends himself against charges of impiety by excluding Scripture from his purview:

“Concerning the manner in which the Deity, for signal purposes, has formerly chosen to hold an immediate communion with the human race, it would be irrelevant to offer any observations.”<sup>20</sup>

It was prudent on the part of the medical profession – never renowned for its piety – to keep on the right side of the clergy, who had their own reasons for denigrating those claiming ready access to the mysteries of the supernatural. By the 1850s spiritualism had been imported to these shores from the USA, linking the hypnotic trance to belief in survival. Swedenborgians had for some time been using mediums in the hope of holding conversations with angels, as the founder of their faith had done, and the most famous of all the mediums, Daniel Home, arrived in London in 1855

with an introduction to a leading Swedenborgian, Dr. J. Garth Wilkinson.<sup>21</sup> Home, who took no money for his displays and was never detected in any kind of fraud, always insisted that his chief aim was to refute materialism by demonstrating the truth of immortality. As he wrote, "I have a mission entrusted to me. It is a great and holy one."<sup>22</sup> Ruskin, who in the 1870s attended seances organised by Lord Mount-Temple at Broadlands, admitted, "I could never have recovered my faith in Christianity except for spiritualism."<sup>23</sup>

In 1856 Home's psychic gifts deserted him. Befriended by a wealthy Polish family, he travelled with them to Rome; after studying Catholic doctrine, he was received into the Church and admitted to a private audience with the Pope. His spiritual adviser, Father de Ravignan, rashly assured him that, since Home was now a Catholic, there would be no recurrence of his psychic experiences. Before long, however, he resumed his life as a medium and from that time was consistently reviled by the priesthood. He fared no better at Protestant hands. When he had first reached England and was living near London, "the good clergyman of Ealing found it his duty to publicly preach against me, and to attribute the manifestations to the devil."<sup>24</sup> The Rev. Charles Kingsley was equally hostile, denouncing in one phrase, "Spirit-rapping, Holloway's Pills, Table-turning, Morison's Pills, Homeopathy, Parr's Life Pills, Mesmerism, Pure Bosh ...."<sup>25</sup> This tirade adds to the irony of the fact that in 1932 a medium, named Charles D. Boltwood, claimed to be in touch with Kingsley and to be receiving biblical revelations from him.<sup>26</sup> One suspects that, in addition to table-turning, a certain amount of grave-turning must have taken place.

It is not difficult to understand the opposition of priests and pastors. If spiritualism made inroads among the faithful, mediums would begin to constitute a rival source of guidance. For this role most of them were manifestly unfitted; more and more of them were being revealed as frauds, for whom a comfortable living in this world was more important than disclosure of truth about the next. It was held against them that their deception was practised at the expense of the bereaved, who were specially vulnerable. Both medium and the message came in for criticism. Lord Tennyson was deeply committed to the doctrine of immortality and his brother, Frederick, was a convinced spiritualist; but the Poet Laureate remained doubtful:

"I grant you that spiritualism must not be judged by its quacks; but I am convinced that God and the ghosts of men would choose something other than mere table-legs through which to speak to the heart of man ...."<sup>27</sup>

Moreover the banality of most spirit messages marked them as unlikely to emanate from any level more exalted than that of the minds of the medium and those taking part in the seance. No-one seems to have examined the possibility that it was precisely this form of interaction at a subconscious level that was occurring. There is a psychic phenomenon, well known in the East and recorded in Sufi lore, by which a mind finely attuned can 'pick up' from other minds information stored in them, but normally inaccessible. That this might be the process in operation was largely excluded by the obsession that the messages must be coming from the dead and that the void to be traversed was that of death itself, rather than one attributable to ignorance and lack of perception.

All the contemporary criticisms are summed up in Browning's *Mr Sludge 'The Medium'*, in which the leading figure is presented as "a vulgar and contemptible mountebank." It is commonly believed that the poet intended to portray Home, whom he and his wife had known in Florence. Browning never claimed to have caught Home in deception, nor is it certain that to have done so would have much shocked him; the poet had a penchant for shady characters, whose colourful careers he could display. What seems to have alienated him was the impact of Home's powers upon the impressionable mind of Elizabeth Browning. This would be enough to explain Robert Browning's attitude, without necessarily accepting at face value Home's account of the seance at which there occurred the levitation of a wreath, which came to rest upon the head of Elizabeth, ignoring that of her more famous husband. In any case, *Mr Sludge*, whilst it mercilessly attacks fraud, falls short of asserting that there can be nothing else to spiritualism. Sludge admits that he cheated, but insists that unaccountable things do happen:

"This trade of mine – I don't know, can't be sure,  
But there was something in it, tricks and all!"

G.K. Chesterton was probably right to conclude that "Browning's aversion to the spiritualists had little or nothing to do with spiritualism."<sup>28</sup>

As a means of checking infidelity, spiritualism had serious drawbacks, which churches were quick to detect. Orthodoxy still held that the dead were sleeping till the Day of Judgement, when their fate would be finally determined. The souls with whom spiritualists, like Swedenborgians, made contact seemed already to be in heaven, where life bore a marked resemblance to life on earth. It was only too apparent to the clergy that belief in hell was on the decline; the assumption that everyone automatically went to heaven was not necessarily beneficial; there was much to be said for maintaining the traditional tension between being saved and being

damned. Moreover there was a great deal more to religion than belief in immortality. One of those who thought in this way was the writer George MacDonald (1824–1905). As a young man, he had been a Congregationalist Minister, though never touched by Calvinism or belief in predestination. In one of his early novels he expresses what was undoubtedly his own view about spiritualists;

“Offered the spirit of God for the asking .... they betake themselves to necromancy instead, and raise the dead to ask their advice, and follow it, and will find some day that Satan has not forgotten how to dress like an angel of light .... What religion is there in being convinced of a future state? Is that to worship God? It is no more religion than the belief that the sun will rise tomorrow is religion.”<sup>29</sup>

Among men of religion there was a suspicion that spiritualism was not a life-line thrown to true faith in an age of infidelity, but rather an incursion of materialism. Christianity had always rested, in the last resort, upon revelation; spiritualists, on the other hand, were claiming to supply proof. In doing so they were in step with the spirit of the age; everywhere, it seemed, men were laying bare the secrets of the natural world and harnessing them to their uses. Why, they asked, should not the unseen world, too, be forced to disclose its mysteries? By tapping this new source of illumination, it might be possible to construct a spirit world that would satisfy man’s reasonable hopes and enable him to discard the confused and outdated imagery of the Bible.

Between hostile clergy, who believed spiritualist messages came from the devil, and sceptical rationalists, who wrote off the whole business as a hoax, few people were to be found, who were prepared to apply scientific methods to the analysis of such manifestations as were attested by observers of unassailable integrity. In the 1870s, however, three Cambridge academics, Henry Sidgwick, Frederic Myers and Edmund Gurney, agreed that this treacherous field of enquiry needed to be investigated in an impartial way. Joining forces with Professor Barrett of the Royal College of Science in Dublin, they founded in 1882 the Society for Psychical Research. They concentrated at first on ‘thought transference’ or telepathy, and the related area of clairvoyance and psychic perception. Evidence collected in this latter area was published in 1886 with the title, *Phantasms of the Living*. This work made little or no impact on the scientific community, whose prejudices had scarcely changed in the 60 years since Hibbert had ascribed all such manifestations to disorders of blood and brain. In Paris the experiments of Jean-Martin Charcot had convinced him that hypnotic phenomena were “simply hysterо-epilepsy, artificially induced.”<sup>30</sup> This conclusion de-

mystified hypnosis to his satisfaction, so making it more acceptable to medical science; but it also disqualified it from general use. The fact that it could be beneficially employed, for example, with patients allergic to the anesthetics in common use, did not interest doctors as much as the preservation of what they regarded as their scientific integrity. All that could be conceded was that mind and personality were revealing themselves as more complex than had earlier been realised. This was dramatised in 1886 by R.L. Stevenson in a story, the merits of which brought it before a wide public. *The Strange Case of Mr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* might almost have been written as a case-book illustration of Blake's "two contrary states of mind". Jekyll's last testament records:

"I thus drew steadily nearer to that truth, by whose partial discovery I have been doomed to such a dreadful shipwreck; that man is not truly one, but truly two. I say two, because the state of my own knowledge does not pass beyond that point. Others will follow .... and I hazard the guess that man will be ultimately known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and independent denizens."

The 19th century had not recorded progress in its search for God and the Infinite; but it was certainly making advances in the discovery of Man.

Whilst insight was being gained into diseases of mind and personality, perception was growing on the other side of the Atlantic that mind also had power to cure. 'Mind-cure' was the term originally employed for what in the hands of Mary Baker Eddy became known as Christian Science. Like Buddhism, Christian Science was preoccupied with pain and death; but the response was not to escape into Nirvana, but rather to deny the reality of these facts, fundamental as they are to life as we know it. Mrs Eddy (1821-1910) began her spiritual journey by rejecting the Calvinism of her upbringing. She married young and in 1843 her prayers failed to save the life of her first husband, who died of yellow fever; but the doctor who attended him assured her that her prayers had prolonged her husband's life. Her own health was poor and for three years she was a patient of the faith-healer, Phineas P. Quimby. In 1866 she suffered a fall on an icy street that was thought likely to prove fatal. She lay in bed with the Bible open at the passage:

"And behold, they brought to Him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy: Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee."<sup>31</sup>

Mrs Eddy got up and made a recovery that her friends regarded as miraculous. From 1867-79 she practised as a healer and was reputed to

have restored to life a child who had been given up for dead. At the end of that period she decided, for reasons that remain unclear, to found a church, which by the end of the century was firmly established in the USA. Progress in Britain was slower; but the first Church of Christ, Scientist, opened its doors in London in 1897.

Use of the word ‘Scientist’ was presumably dictated by the fact that science was the new gnosis; for similar reasons Marx attached the adjective to his brand of socialism. It is more puzzling, however, to understand why Mrs Eddy named her science after the Christ who suffered for men and died on the Cross. In her terms, this sacrifice would seem to have been meaningless, since Christ died to redeem the human race from sin, whilst in Mrs Eddy’s eyes sin, like death itself, was unreal. In an authoritative work on Christian Science death is described as:

“ .... part of the belief in material life, and therefore unreal in the strict meaning of the word .... Those who have passed through the experience called death in no wise lose their individuality .... those whose affections and interests have been centred on the material, will find that they have but entered on a fresh dream of material living and dying.”<sup>32</sup>

From the same source one learns that Mrs Eddy “passed away without pain or struggle” in December 1910. It cannot be said that her religion, whilst it may well have aided the living, has contributed to our understanding of the mystery of death and survival. It was, however, an antidote to more dismal creeds and, as such, was welcomed by William James:

“Mind-cure might be briefly called a reaction against all that religion of chronic anxiety which marked the earlier part of our century in the evangelic circles of England and America.”<sup>33</sup>

One may regret that the early Christian Scientists, like the followers of Swedenborg, decided to found a church, thus ignoring the long history of discord, rivalry and doctrinal distortion that has plagued institutionalised religions. If Mrs Eddy had stayed with her original concept and the designation Mind-cure, her less ecstatic followers might have anticipated some of the promising research undertaken in recent years by such American neurobiologists as Professor Robert Ornstein and his colleague Dr David Sobel. Their research has shown how much the maintenance of good health and the prolongation of life depend upon mental attitudes, and how great a role can be played by the brain in keeping us well and resistant to the onset of disease.<sup>34</sup>

The story of the main Christian heterodoxies of the 19th century can conveniently be brought to an end at this point. As the restless search for

panaceas continued and the Judaic-Christian legacy became exhausted, the new knowledge that was sucked in to fill the vacancy derived increasingly from Eastern sources. These provided the antecedents of the Theosophical Society, founded in 1882 by Helena Blavatsky (1831–91), whose major work, *The Secret Doctrine*, was published three years before her death. Through this and other channels Eastern concepts of survival, such as reincarnation and eternal recurrence, were introduced into Western minds. The only Western philosopher to pursue the idea of recurrence was Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900); he was reticent about the source on which he had drawn, but was probably indebted to Pythagoras and other Greek sages, rather than to Buddhism and Hinduism. The first English translation of Nietzsche began to appear in 1895 and in that year R.L. Stevenson published his remarkable fable of recurrence, *The Song of the Morrow*. In general, however, the idea made scant headway in Britain, since it offended against two strongly held assumptions: the first, that time is linear extension from a known past into an unknown future and not, as Nietzsche depicted it, an ever-turning wheel. The second assumption is that man has free will, whilst this is restricted, according to Nietzsche, to responding ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to an inexorable fate. The fruitful upsurge of Eastern teaching did not gather momentum until the 1960s with the introduction of a flood of literature about Sufism and the revival by Idries Shah of Sufi classics of earlier centuries.

## NOTES

1. Revelation, XX, 4–5
2. *Ibid.*, XII, 5
3. *The Making of the Working Class*: E.P. Thompson (Gollancz 1963), p. 381
4. *The Newcomes*: W.M. Thackeray (Nelson, 1902), ch. II
5. *The Pursuit of the Millennium*: N. Cohn (Paladin, 1970), p. 286
6. *Irving and his Circle*: A.L. Drummond (Clarke, 1935), p. 231
7. Author’s family papers.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Father and Son*: E. Gosse (Penguin, 1970), pp. 205–6
10. Author’s family papers.

11. *New Church Worthies*: D. Bayley (London, 1884), p. 48
12. *Ibid.*, p. 140
13. *Heaven and Hell*: E. Swedenborg (Dent, 1940), sec. 508
14. *Ibid.*, sec. 69
15. *Ibid.*, sec. 89
16. *The Rise and Progress of the New Church*: R. Hindmarsh (London, 1861), p. 39
17. *Autobiographical Sketches*: T. de Quincey (London, 1853), p. 133
18. *Four Rossettis*: S. Weintraub (Allen, 1978), p. 204
19. *Sketches of the Philosophy of Apparitions*: S. Hibbert (Edinburgh, 1824), p. 111
20. *Ibid.*, p. 87
21. *Natural and Supernatural*: B. Inglis (Abacus, 1979), p. 256
22. *Incidents in My Life*: D.D. Home (New Jersey, n.d.), p. 127
23. *MacDonald and His Wife*: G. MacDonald (Allen, 1924), p. 335
24. *Incidents in My Life*, *op.cit.*, p. 64
25. *The Water-Babies*: C. Kingsley (London, 1863), ch. IV
26. *The Beast and the Monk*: S. Chitty (Hodder, 1974), app. 2
27. *Tennyson: Poet and Prophet*: P. Henderson (Routledge, 1978), p. 189
28. *Browning*: G.K. Chesterton (Macmillan, 1951), p. 93
29. *Annals of a Quiet Neighbourhood*: G. MacDonald (London, 1867), ch. XV
30. *Natural and Supernatural*, *op.cit.*, p. 392
31. Matthew, IX, 2
32. *Christian Science and its Discoverer*: E.M. Ramsay (Boston, 1935), pp. 88–9
33. *Varieties of Religious Experience*: W. James (Longman, 1903), p. 95n
34. See, for example, *The Healing Brain*: R. Ornstein & D. Sobel (Macmillan, 1988)