CHAPTER 21

Historical Imagination and Channeled Theology

Or, Learning the Law of Attraction

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For a scholar using historical method, theologies come across as just-so stories. They are not built on the sort of external evidence that would count as such in historiographical quarters. They involve, more, intellectual and aesthetic constructions grounded in intuitive insights about the nature of the world and the human place in it. Sometimes they arise from within a faith tradition as rational reflections on it. Often, in contemporary times, they appear outside such reassuring boundaries. Either way, their ‘proof’ comes through their resonance with the rest of a community’s or an individual’s life—their ability to pull things all together and render them intelligible, meaningful, and satisfying. One knows the theology is ‘true’ because heart and head respond together; things click into place, and the flow of life is experienced as better and stronger. So imagination stirs feeling, and feeling tones the ‘objective’, rational realities of received tradition and of one’s living in ways that—if it all works—bring greater joy and freedom, at least in some ultimate register.¹

But if theology is a labor involving the imagination, arguably history itself, for all its use of external evidence, is also predicated in important ways on an imaginary.² Histories portray the past in terms of ideas and concerns that present time and experience prompt. In effect, histories answer or provide data concerning feeling-framed questions that generate their own form of propulsion. Such questions can fuel searches into time that has come and gone—or is still with us. Or, when asked less deliberately, such questions turn into assumptions or carry-alongs from the past that continue to live unexamined, or only partially examined, in present time. For a working historian who observes such processes, issues of difference and resemblance, cast in a temporal register, are key. If these observations are applied to traditional theologies, the

¹ These observations put me in the not-so-shabby company of William James. In his Gifford Lectures that became The Varieties of Religious Experience, he announced his conviction “that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.” See James 1961 [1902]: 337. With some twists and turns, my observations also echo a tradition in Anglo-American liberal theology beginning with Horace Bushnell. See, especially, Bushnell 1876 [1849].

² See the classic study by Hayden White (1973) that makes just this point from the perspective of literature and its poetic base as expressed in figures of speech.
question that arises immediately is whether and how they change across time and thus shift traditions and their outcomes. Beyond that, do such theologies learn from one another, and, if so, can they be seen to build on one another in exercises of historical imagination? And do they sometimes work under the radar and carry assumptions forward that are based more on surrounding cultural perceptions than on intrinsic parts of an inherited message?

With these observations in the background, I want to tell a story—a story that involves multiple texts and contexts and that juxtaposes historiographical concerns with theological ones in acute and especially interesting ways. In the metaphorical religiosity that I study—that is, in Spiritualism, Theosophy, New Thought, the New Age movement, and the like—original revelatory events (that is, trance productions) frequently lead not to discursive interpretations as in traditional Western theologies, but to further trance productions. Thus, the general questions I raised concerning theologies take on new sharpness and insistence. Do trance productions with a general family resemblance—demonstrably different in construction from more rationally reflective theologies—build upon one another across time? And if trance theologians can be seen to learn historically and imagine out of the reservoir of the past, what might that tell us about similar processes in other, more rationally constructed theologies?

One place to look for answers is within the mediumistic phenomenon that now, in imitation of technology, is called channeling.\(^3\) The human ‘receivers’ who are the channels have generated considerable interest in the popular media and among psychologists, neuroscientists, and similar professionals. Yet little if any scrutiny has been given to the content of channeled messages as forms of theological expression. Moreover, as little attention has been given to the ways such channeled discourses reflect a historical imagination related to previous ideas and constructions. Yet channeled theologies often bounce off one another with a circumscribed set of themes, even as they incorporate non-trance-produced ideas that are agreeable to the general tenor of their messages. Indeed, at times they shift, almost, into novella mode as they recount their stories and messages in what seem didactic fictions. Given all of this, in what follows I explore one prominent story in the tradition of American

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\(^3\) Etymologically, if Gordon Melton is right, the twentieth-century (and after) term *channeling* gained currency in the 1950s out of interest in unidentified flying objects (UFOs), extraterrestrials and ‘space commanders’, and a community of people who consider themselves space contactees (J. Gordon Melton, personal communication, 14 July 2010). But the term had already been used to reflect radio, thus technological, frequencies as early as 1934, when Guy Ballard (writing as Godfré Ray King) published his *Unveiled Mysteries*. 