Chapter 5

Spirit is Universal

Development of Black Spiritualist Churches

Mary Ann Clark

Introduction

Although little known or studied today, Spiritualism was one of the most significant of the religious movements to sweep through the United States in the early to mid-nineteenth century. This was during a pivotal period in the history of religion in the United States when Americans developed their own distinctive form of religiosity, a form that eventually set them apart from their European cousins. Significantly this new form of religiosity was built on a foundation of religious individualism, a new view of the place of the dead in the sacred cosmos, and a new relationship between the living and the dead—all of which were highlighted in Spiritualism. It is these views that have continued to be influential into twenty-first century American religious culture.

Nineteenth-century Spiritualism was an important movement among white American of all classes. Thousands of people became involved with spiritualism either as mediums or their clients. It was reported that in 1854 there were three hundred Spiritualist clubs in Philadelphia alone and one scholar has estimated that nearly one-third of the American population was somehow involved in the movement by 1867 (Cox 2003, 237n2). Significantly, it also gave members of the African American community a way to continue many of their own spiritual beliefs and practices, especially those focused on the relationship between the living and the dead. Although during the earliest history of Spiritualism black and white spiritualists worked together, eventually Black spiritualists split from the mainline National Spiritualist Church to form their own National Colored Spiritualist Association. However, even though both groups may have forgotten the contributions they made to each others’ religious sensibilities, the ideas of both groups about the dead and the afterlife have never been the same. Just as metaphysical religion has often been discounted as an important influence on American religious history, the influences of the African and African-inspired beliefs and practices underlying these traditions have been little recognized in either the standard view of American religious history or that subset focused on African American traditions, especially the Black Church. Yet it is these traditions that can provide a
deeper understanding of contemporary American, especially African American, esoteric traditions.

**Theory and Methods**

In her groundbreaking survey of what she calls American metaphysical religion Catherine Albanese proposes three different view of American religious history. The first of these, based on William McLoughlin’s *Revivals, Awakenings and Reform* (McLoughlin 1978) lays out what became known as the evangelical thesis: that the four “great [evangelical] awakenings” were the most important factors shaping American religious history. The second viewpoint, espoused by the Yale historian Jon Butler in his *Awash in a Sea of Faith* and other works, instead stressed the role of European state churches. According to this view, it was the development of a state-church/denominational tradition that became the most important force in the development of religion in America. Albanese, without discounting the importance of these two threads, argues that what she calls metaphysics or metaphysical religion has also had, and continues to have, an important influence on American religiosity (Albanese 2007). In fact she says that the forces represented by these three viewpoints have all been important in the development of an America religious sensibility. They each developed in relationship with each other and participants in one movement were also participants in the other two such that “(e)vangelicals could also be mainstreamers; mainstreamers could have their metaphysical side; and so, too, could evangelicals” (Albanese 2007, 17). Albanese argues that although these three viewpoints are each important in understanding American religious development, the third strand, the metaphysical religious viewpoint, has often been ignored or devalued in spite of its important influences on American religious sensibilities (Albanese 2007, 5).

Albanese also posits four themes that typify the American metaphysical movement. First is a pre-occupation with the mind and its powers. In this view, the mind is not limited to the purely rational but also encompasses the intuitive and poetic, and such capabilities as visionary, auditory, tactile, kinesthetic, gustatory and olfactory extrasensory manifestations, telepathy, trance and mediation. In fact, “the mind” includes all the ways that one can communicate between the material and spiritual world and all the ways one can cause both material and spiritual transformation. This communication depends on Albanese’s second theme, a tendency to develop and use one or more theories of correspondences between the material and spiritual worlds, an idea that is also important in Fairve’s definition of esotericism. These theories incorporate