The Rise of Liberal Religion

Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century

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Introduction

In 1904 the Quaker mystic and philosopher Rufus Jones published *Social Law in the Spiritual World* with a grand ambition. "The cure for skepticism," Jones declared at the outset, "is always deeper knowledge," and with this book he sought to bring deeper knowledge to a new generation of modern skeptics.[1] Like many intellectuals of his day, Jones knew firsthand the struggle of the modern believer, as he had grappled first with Darwinian evolution and then with the even more unsettling theories of modern psychology. "There are few crises to compare," he noted, based on this experience, "with that which appears when the simple, childhood religion, imbibed at mother's knee and absorbed from early home and church environment, comes into collision with a scientific, solidly reasoned system."[2] Yet Jones had emerged from this collision of ideas with a deep sense of divine presence intact. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the landmark study from the Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James published two years earlier, had greatly excited Jones—it too had been the product of a profound spiritual crisis engendered by modern thought—yet Jones found James's work too intellectual to inspire or comfort ordinary Americans. He wrote *Social Law* to meet this need. "The trouble with many of the best works on these themes," Jones declared, "is that they are too learned and technical to help the wayfaring man who wants to get the newer insight and who yet cannot find any way to get into the onward moving current. This present book is an attempt to help such persons."[3]

Social Law was both a skillful reinterpretation of James by a practicing mystic and a bridge between James and the popular inspirational writers of the twentieth century. The great preacher and author Harry Emerson Fosdick, for example, later wrote that Jones's *Social Law in a Spiritual World* "opened the door to a new era in my thought and life. . . . Much of my message has been rooted in the rich soil which that book provided."[4] As Fosdick recognized, Jones's work brilliantly incorporated Jamesian psychology into a living religious system. It stands as an influential first attempt to make the pragmatic openness of James's thought religiously relevant and accessible. Though *Social Law* never reached a wide audience, its grand religious project succeeded better than Rufus Jones

could ever have imagined. The liberal approaches to religion found in James and Jones—intellectually engaged, psychologically oriented, and focused on personal experience—characterized large swaths of middle-class spiritual life by the middle of the twentieth century.

In the pages that follow, I argue that this popularization of religious liberalism happened largely in and through books. Jones's understanding in *Social Law* that modern religion required modern books in order to reach "the wayfaring man" was prescient: books and book culture were integral to the rise of liberal religion in the twentieth century. In order to succeed at all, the liberal project of renovating religion in light of modern knowledge had to succeed in the marketplace of print. And, by and large, it did. In the centuries since the Protestant Reformation and the invention of moveable type, print culture and religious culture had grown increasingly intertwined at the popular level. Only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, did the economic, cultural, social, and religious forces align to make the consumption of mass-market books a part of everyday American spiritual practice. When Jones wrote *Social Law*, he could only begin to glimpse the swirl of religious and commercial interests that would continue to shape this religious and reading revolution in the twentieth century. This book tells that story.

To be clear, what follows is not a work of cultural or theological criticism, but rather a history of popular religion and spirituality. My intention is to identify, describe, and account for significant religious and cultural developments and chart their change over time. In fact an argument (mostly implicit) in what follows is that the theological and cultural commitments of scholars have too often limited their ability to see significant developments in American popular religion, including the spread of liberal religious sensibilities through middlebrow culture as described here. As the sociologist Eva Illouz writes, "A critique of culture cannot be adequately waged before we understand the mechanism of culture: how meanings are produced, how they are woven into the social fabric . . . and why they come to organize our interpretation of the self and others."[5] This study aims to further our understanding of the mechanisms of popular religion and spirituality in modern America. Though my own leanings undoubtedly color my account in many ways, my aim first and foremost is to document and understand, not critique.

After this introduction, which outlines critical background in the nineteenth century and early twentieth, the ensuing chapters focus on the decades after World War I, when a modernizing book business and a modernizing religious liberalism together facilitated wider spiritual horizons for a great many middle-class Americans. This book tracks those developments through the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, pivotal yet underappreciated decades in American religious history. Most important, these decades witnessed the full flowering of American consumer culture, and through it the increasing integration of American religion

and the print marketplace. Scholars often speak of American religious life in terms of a "spiritual marketplace," yet the metaphorical marketplace of "seekers" and "church shoppers" rests on the foundation of a very real consumer marketplace.[6] In material ways that go beyond adherence to broad cultural norms, participation in religious and spiritual life *happens* through commodities bought and sold, and for much of the twentieth century the most significant of these religious commodities was the book.

Historians and social critics have long understood media and the consumer marketplace to be defining aspects of modern American culture. Yet my argument about the powerful and enduring cultural influence of religious liberalism may elicit a bit more surprise. After all, for decades now the dominant story in American religion has been the cultural and political mobilization of religious conservatives. The Protestant mainline and the various other institutional forms of religious liberalism garner much less attention, and the attention they do receive generally highlights decline and dysfunction. To some degree the media have rediscovered the Religious Left as a political force in recent years, yet the broad cultural significance of liberal religion in the twentieth century is still poorly understood.[7] Nevertheless liberals coordinated massive, nationwide cultural programs during much of the twentieth century—especially reading programs—that exerted significant religious influence. While many liberal churches and denominations are indeed in significant demographic decline from their midcentury heyday, my examination of religious reading and publishing programs not only demonstrates the powerful cultural force of liberalism in the mid-twentieth century, but also suggests new ways of seeing the cultural imprint of liberal religion in our own times. As the sociologist Christian Smith (echoing Jay Demerath) has observed, "Liberal Protestantism's organizational decline has been accompanied by and is in part arguably the consequence of the fact that liberal Protestantism has won a decisive, larger cultural victory."[8] The legacy of Jones and James lives on in deeply significant ways, and an examination of religion and book culture in the mid-twentieth century helps us see how and why.

Despite this significant insight about the "cultural victory" of liberal Protestantism, scholarly work on religious liberalism has tended to focus, often exclusively, on Protestant churches and seminaries. Generations of scholars have exhaustively chronicled the intellectual history of Protestant liberalism—its Enlightenment roots; its romantic flowering in the transcendental movement; its embrace of history, Darwinian biology, and psychology; its postmillennial faith in progress and human nature; its Social Gospel activism—while failing to see that over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries liberalism's seeds found fertile ground not only in churches but all across the American landscape.[9] The "cultural victory" Smith and others observe happened not because more Americans joined liberal churches, but because liberal religious values and sensibilities became more and more culturally normative. A full

account of religious liberalism therefore must encompass its manifestations both in the churches and in the wider culture, yet only recently have historians begun to chart the cultural and spiritual contours of liberal religion farther afield. Some might see "religion farther afield" as a product of secularization, as a symptom only of the decline of churches and orthodoxies. I maintain, in contrast, that religious liberalism flourished beyond the bounds of churches, making this a story of rise rather than of decline.[10] In the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s we see most clearly the ties between institutional Protestantism and the wider culture of religious liberalism that was then reaching critical mass.

Liberal Protestantism since the nineteenth century had sought to redeem the culture through full participation in it. In contrast to the more familiar evangelical formulation calling believers to remain "*in* but not *of* the world," American religious liberals endeavored to achieve their ends through an empowerment of secular culture.[11] This meant, at times, that liberal Protestants so thoroughly embraced the culture, politics, and intellectual life of the wider society that their own Christian distinctiveness was diminished. But in the first half of the twentieth century, this stance nevertheless bore considerable fruit, especially in the critically important arena of books. Liberal Protestants often occupied key positions as publishers, booksellers, and civic leaders and quite naturally used these positions of influence to advance their cultural and spiritual agendas. Though liberal religious leaders and secular professionals in the book trade shared an initial apprehension about the possible corruptions of the marketplace, each recognized the tremendous commercial and religious opportunities their social influence afforded and eventually embraced the marketplace with enthusiasm.

In spite of this apparent optimism, my tale of religious liberalism and the book business begins in a moment of crisis. World War I dealt a mortal blow to simple notions of progress, especially moral progress, arising from nineteenth-century liberalism. As many Americans learned—including protagonists of this story, such as Harry Emerson Fosdick—one could not look at human societies, or human nature, in the same way after Verdun and the Somme.[12] The crisis of liberalism wrought by the horrors of war in Europe compounded challenges already endemic to American cultural life, especially the rise of vast state and corporate bureaucracies, an increasingly pervasive mass culture and ethos of consumerism, rapid scientific and technological advances, and continuing urbanization and industrialization. The journalist and public intellectual Walter Lippmann best captured the spirit of the times when he wrote of the "acids of modernity"; to many Americans it did indeed appear that the world they knew was rapidly corroding.

The crisis of liberalism forms the essential historical framework for understanding the interplay of the book business and religious culture in the 1920s and 1930s. In religious terms, both modernism and fundamentalism arose in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth in response to these modern

conditions, and the wrenching battles between these camps in many denominations furthered the sense of crisis. Leaders of major Protestant denominations and the ecumenical Federal Council of Churches responded with a number of initiatives, including the various book programs described here, designed to cope with these challenges. Those most afflicted by this post–World War I crisis were white, educated urbanites, and therefore this study attends most especially to this group of Americans. Yet the impetus behind the new reading initiatives was precisely to extend embattled liberal religious sensibilities beyond their demographic base in the cities and reach into the suburbs and small towns, while similarly moving beyond the solidly middle class out to those strivers not quite yet in the middle class. In the process that which was to be defended was transformed, and new forms of liberal spirituality emerged into wider public consciousness.

These cultural processes unfolded most importantly in the marketplace of print. In the decade after World War I, liberal Protestant leaders, executives of the American publishing industry, and other important cultural figures collaborated on a series of new initiatives to promote the buying and reading of religious books in the United States. In response to the moment of crisis, these cultural leaders sought to guide American moderns by offering their expertise in the field of religious reading. They believed that a common set of widely accepted religious ideas, practices, and presuppositions would hold together a fragmenting culture, expand existing markets for books, and maintain their privileged status in American religious discourse. In this last ambition they failed; the core values they proclaimed in fact undermined the very idea of religious authority. Nevertheless the reading campaigns that liberal Protestants crafted—Religious Book Week in the 1920s, the Religious Book Club, founded in 1927, and the Religious Books Round Table of the American Library Association, among others—formed the basis of a thriving religious reading culture that remained central to American cultural and religious life through much of the century. In addition major New York publishing houses, such as Harper's and Macmillan, established religion departments for the first time in the late 1920s, a transformation at once rooted in changing economic realities and in religious liberals' openness to market culture. From these reading and publishing endeavors emerged new structures for the promotion of reading, but even more significantly a greater entanglement of religious practice with the patterns of consumerism and an enhanced emphasis on spiritual forms emerging from and moving beyond liberal Protestantism. Chapters 1, 2, and 3 detail these reading and publishing initiatives.

The most important of the new spiritual forms for twentieth-century liberalism were psychology and mysticism. The centrality of mystical and psychological approaches to religion stemmed from the liberal search for a universal essence of religious experience. Both the German Friedrich Schleiermacher and the

American Ralph Waldo Emerson had influentially argued in the nineteenth century that individual experience remained the inviolable heart of religion after the assaults of modern thought had stripped away dogma, revelation, and ecclesial authority.[13] James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, first published in 1902, was the landmark text along these lines for twentieth-century liberals. It presents obvious shortcomings to readers in religiously diverse twenty-first-century America, since James universalized liberal Protestant assumptions about the nature of religion. The anti-institutional bias inherent in James's privileging of individual religious experience reflected, most especially, the pervasive anti-Catholicism of his cultural milieu, while neglecting the myriad ways those experiences are socially embedded and produced. Yet *Varieties* functioned marvelously as a psychology of religion designed specifically to help twentieth-century Protestant moderns retain spiritual vitality. Later American inspirational writers such as Rufus Jones turned to James's work precisely because of its applicability to those seeking meaning, happiness, and wholeness in a modern, consumerist, psychologically oriented culture.

The Jamesian emphasis on religious experience permeated American religious liberalism in the twentieth century and branched in a variety of directions. Some drew most heavily on James's conception of "the religion of healthy-mindedness" and became what I call laissez-faire liberals.[14] Laissez-faire liberals blended psychology with the mind-cure spiritual tradition (often called New Thought or positive thinking) to argue for the practical, material benefits of religion. These liberals typically eschewed liberalism's mystical spirituality and ethical concerns. Historians, sociologists, and numerous other social critics have extensively described, documented, and generally lamented the rise of a therapeutic culture in the twentieth century, which they have typically connected to the ascendancy of liberal theology and the advancement of consumerism.[15] Therapeutic ideology, these critics contend, provided no resources for social or political criticism. Rather, therapeutically empowered individuals merely adapted as needed to the demands of society, while consumer culture gave them the tools to do so, often in the form of self-help books described by one historian as the "success literature of modern consumer capitalism."[16] The laissez-faire liberalism of popular writers like Henry C. Link, Emmet Fox, Glenn Clark, and Norman Vincent Peale contributed to the conceptual framework of therapeutic culture. This branch of liberalism, according to critics, represented the final stage of the modernization of soul care and the ultimate victory of therapeutic consumerism over redemptive and prophetic religion.

Other twentieth-century religious liberals, however, moved in more mystical and ethical directions. Mystical and ethical liberals, such as Rufus Jones, Harry Emerson Fosdick, and Joshua Loth Liebman, also understood religious experience psychologically but never embraced mind cure's strictly utilitarian philosophy of religion. Their mystical sensibilities and ethical commitments tempered

liberalism's inherent individualism with an ever-present attention to realities beyond the self. The political quiescence and consumerist hedonism of laissez-faire liberalism was matched by the social activism and moral sophistication of mystical and ethical liberalism. The distinction, though not hard and fast, is a useful reminder that religious liberalism does not equate neatly with political liberalism. Many laissez-faire liberals in fact were politically conservative—often tending toward libertarianism—while the mystical and ethical liberals typically championed a more progressive politics, including a robust social welfare state and, on occasion, pacifism. Nevertheless the main story of this book is religious and cultural, not political. Through that cultural lens we see that despite their differences, authors from each branch of liberalism, through their popular writings, brought into the American cultural mainstream spiritual vocabularies inflected with the accents of mysticism, mind cure, and psychology.

The most significant force shaping middle-class reading practices in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, and therefore critical to the cultural agenda of religious liberalism, was what scholars of popular literature call "middlebrow" culture.[17] Middlebrow literary culture arose in the early twentieth century as middle-class Americans anxiously engaged with the emerging mass culture, hoping to solidify their tenuous social status with cultural markers acquired by reading the "right" books. But middlebrow culture was not simply "other-directed," to use David Riesman's term. Middlebrow readers also toiled for inner reasons, to use the resources provided by an expanding cultural and intellectual marketplace to better understand themselves and their place in the modern world. Indeed, in addition to devouring the popular novels, outlines of history and philosophy, and Book-of-the-Month Club selections commonly associated with middlebrow reading, vast numbers of American readers participated in a vibrant but little studied *religious* middlebrow culture. Though the academy remains divided between those who embrace the study of popular cultural forms, including middlebrow literature, and those who recoil in horror, I find the category middlebrow useful to highlight questions about expertise, access to books and learning, the organization of knowledge, and reasons for reading. Middlebrow, in this way, refers to a relationship between consumers and producers, between readers and those who tried to shape reading. The cultural process of "middlebrowing" happens in the packaging of a text, especially its presentation by experts to the public, and in the interaction between reader and text, especially through the hopes, desires, and fears a reader brings to the act of reading. Those who read inspirational and religious bestsellers in the decades after World War I read them in the context of middlebrow culture, according to middlebrow rules, and for this reason we must understand the culture of middlebrow reading if we hope to understand the print culture of liberal religion in this period.

World War II brought about a significant new phase in the course of religious middlebrow culture. As political leaders declared books to be "weapons in the war of ideas," an interfaith organization, the National Conference of Christians and Jews, became the central broker of religious reading, coordinating a second, vast Religious Book Week campaign that ran from 1943 to 1948. This reading program built on the foundation of mystical and psychological spirituality formed in the 1920s and 1930s, and changes in American reading and book culture during the war, to advocate interfaith exchange as a cornerstone of modern American spirituality. During World War II spiritual openness was seen not simply as morally desirable for individuals but as essential to national survival. In this context the previously dominant understanding of the United States as a Protestant nation gave way to a new, pluralistic framework that included Jews and Roman Catholics, and the term *Judeo-Christian* entered the national vocabulary. These developments of the 1940s popularized and democratized a cosmopolitan spiritual outlook that had previously been the privileged domain of a cultural elite. The cosmopolitan ambition to be a citizen of the world—to live out the ancient credo "I am human: nothing human is alien to me"—had animated transcendentalists, Theosophists, and even certain supporters of the famed 1893 World's Parliament of Religions.[18] The spiritual cosmopolitanism that emerged in the 1940s typically eschewed this sort of grandiose universalism, favoring what the philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah calls a benign universalism that acknowledged a shared humanity while celebrating authentic difference.[19] The political drive toward Judeo-Christianity and the religious reading campaigns of the war years together brought this more modest version of spiritual cosmopolitanism to the American middle class. The huge success of Rabbi Joshua Loth Liebman's *Peace of Mind* (1946) and the Trappist monk Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) testifies to the arrival of postwar popular cosmopolitanism. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 chart these changes in religious middlebrow culture during the war and postwar years.

This remarkable energy in promoting book buying and reading, despite its significant cultural successes, was not enough to maintain the institutional vitality or privileged cultural status of the liberal establishment. In many ways, in fact, liberal elites were the victims of their own success, as their drive for a universal spiritual language and true pluralism—a drive rooted, at its core, in their own sense of Christian ethics as much as in their desire to stay culturally relevant—made their grasp on power, centralized and hierarchical as it was, increasingly untenable. The cultural victory of liberal Protestantism actually contributed to its institutional decline, partly because religious individualism naturally resists institutionalization. But even more, as religious liberals embraced the notion of redeeming the entire culture, they found increasingly meaningful outlets for their religious energies outside the churches, both in social activism and in cultural programs such as reading promotion.[20] The story

of Frank Laubach, which I take up in the conclusion, offers the most compelling example of reading promotion as a sublimated form of religious mission. In this way my story tells of men and women seeking a spiritual center for the culture as a whole who inevitably confronted the ultimate reality that, in the modern world, as Yeats observed, "the center cannot hold." The religious leaders, authors, critics, editors, and publishers who sought to define and hold together a common faith for a vast continent of a nation, steeped in consumerism, fractured along fault lines of race and gender, class and region, denomination and religious tradition, swam against the tides of history and their own liberal tradition, and tired short of their goal.[21]

Yet even as liberal Protestant institutions and leaders failed to hold their privileged place in the national discourse, the spiritual vocabularies and sensibilities liberals promoted gained ever-wider currency and legitimacy.[22] Psychology and mysticism arose from liberal Protestantism in the nineteenth century, but eventually spilled beyond the banks of even that wide stream. Historians of religion in America, themselves often personally committed to institutional Protestantism, have too often simply failed to see the vitality and dynamism of this "shadow culture" or "invisible religion" occurring beyond the walls of church life.[23] The pluralist turn of American religious print culture by the 1940s further enhanced the importance of these alternative spiritualities. This story, then, is an ironic tale of initial resistance yet ultimate complicity in the transformation of American religious culture from Protestant dominance, in spite of sizable and significant minority traditions, to a much more open, democratic, even chaotic spiritual environment. The psychologically and mystically rooted cosmopolitanism that came to characterize much of American religion and spirituality after World War II first emerged as a popular reality from the liberal Protestantism and book-buying consumerism of the interwar years—but ultimately took on a life all its own.

Backstory: Book Culture and Liberal Religion before 1920

To promote a national program known as Religious Book Week, Rufus Jones wrote in the spring of 1921 a brief article, "The Habit of Reading," intended to initiate readers into the mysteries of earnest religious reading and book buying. Jones began by lamenting the poor reading habits of most Americans and noted, ominously, the impressive "experiment made by many of the new cults in America."[24] "They grow, expand, and flourish," he wrote, "largely through the use of books." Christians needed to be just as diligent, especially since, with the recent expansion in religious publishing and book promotion, "there exists today within the reach of everybody who can read a very remarkable assortment of

transforming and enlightening books." Among the many worthwhile kinds of religious books available, Jones cited biography, biblical criticism, and especially texts exploring the implications of modern scientific and historical inquiry for persons of faith. As a historian and student of psychology himself, Jones implored, "No Christian man or woman today can afford to miss the fresh and vivifying light which will come to religious faith from . . . writers who unite great faith with exact and profound knowledge."

Jones aimed not only to make his readers aware of important new religious books, but also to advocate particular ways of reading those books and particular ways of relating to the entire marketplace of books. "It is not enough to read capriciously and sporadically, to borrow a book occasionally and then have done with it," he argued. "I am pleading for the ownership of books and for *the cultivation of the habit of reading*" (italics original). Proper religious reading, for Jones, meant reading in a very specific manner. "The true and effective way to read an illuminating book," he counseled, "is to read it, pencil in hand, to mark cardinal passages, to make notes, and to digest the message which the book contributes." He then added, just to make sure his point was clear, "That means that the book ought, if possible, to be owned rather than borrowed." Book buying might, incidentally, through the laws of supply and demand, stimulate the writing of more and better religious books, but for Jones the primary benefit of proper book reading and buying was personal. One must own religious books because "one needs to go back again and again to a good book, to reread marked passages, and to become literally possessed of it." A good book can possess us, according to Jones, only if we first possess it.

In this remarkable editorial Jones encapsulated quite neatly the tension between modern and earlier evangelical ideologies of the book, a tension at the heart of the religious book business in the decades after World War I. When he remarked that the proper way to read was with "pencil in hand . . . to go back again and again to a good book, to reread marked passages" he presented modern Americans with old advice about how to read. Nineteenth-century evangelicals spent considerable energy trying to persuade Americans to read in just this way. They worked tirelessly not only to write, produce, and distribute books, but also to educate American readers about how to read those books, and in the process established an ideology of reading religiously that continued to exert great influence well into the twentieth century. Yet Jones's enthusiastic endorsement of a for-profit promotional scheme signaled a new relationship to the marketplace of print. After at least a century of oscillation between fear of the market's corrupting powers and hope in its millennial possibilities, many advocates of religious reading after World War I abandoned their fears and fully embraced the market as the single greatest tool for the dissemination of their message. The religious leaders and bookmen who championed Religious Book Week sought to use the tools of modern business to advocate for an older culture of the book

that, they hoped, might help counter the corrosive influences of the very consumer culture they now embraced.

Print mass media in the United States arose as an evangelical endeavor in the early years of the nineteenth century. The millennial dream of building God's kingdom in the new nation inspired the postrevolutionary generation of publishing pioneers to embark on the audacious enterprise of bringing the sacred word to every American; the rapid pace of change in this emerging society made such previously outlandish dreams plausible. In short order evangelical reformers founded the American Bible Society (1816), the American Sunday School Union (1824), and the American Tract Society (1825).[25] The overall output of books grew rapidly, and religious publishing added significantly to this vast expansion.[26] Though leery of blurring the sacred and the profane, religious publishers by midcentury became increasingly open to using secular culture for spiritual purposes. As a result, the book business became an ever more potent force in American religious life. The famed preacher Horace Bushnell, notes the historian Paul C. Gutjahr, even remarked in 1844 that his fellow American Christians "operated as if 'types of lead and sheets of paper may be the light of the World.' "[27]

Nineteenth-century print culture shared with the Protestantism that sparked it a democratizing impulse rooted in the ideology of the priesthood of all believers. In the vastly expanded world of print this impulse led to what one might call a priesthood of all readers, a situation ripe for religious turmoil rooted in interpretive chaos. As a result religious leaders devised ideologies of proper reading, strategies for vulnerable readers to navigate these uncharted and potentially treacherous waters. These modes of reading religiously exerted powerful cultural influence long into the twentieth century. The tract societies and colporteurs bringing reading material to the nation had great reason to fear, since, according to their implicit theory of print communication, "reading . . . was a very dangerous activity."[28] So dangerous were books that evangelical writers in this age of the temperance crusades often "compared the power of reading to the intoxicating, addictive power of alcohol." Some even more succinctly "believed that books could kill" since they offered unregulated and unsupervised access to a whole universe of ideas, including the sinful and demonic.[29] Religious publishers throughout the nineteenth century sought to overcome the possible dangers of reading by teaching their readers how to read properly.[30] Noah Porter, the president of Yale College, used his widely reprinted 1870 reading guide, *Books and Reading: Or, What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them?*, to urge caution in the face of such power. "No force nor influence can undo the work begun by those few pages," Porter exhorted. "No love of father or mother, no temptation of money or honor, no fear of suffering or disgrace, is an overmatch for the enchantment conjured up and sustained by [an] exciting volume." Therefore, Porter continued, "we ought to select our books—above all our favorite books—with a more jealous care than we

choose our friends and intimates" and read those books in the prayerful and attentive manner befitting their sacred power.[31]

George Philip Philes, the author of another reading guide, echoed Porter's exhortations and added, more practically, that each worthwhile book should be read four times in order "to master and use it; not only to swallow it, but to make it part of ourselves, and thereby strengthen all our powers."[32] When read in such a way, a text would lay bare for the reader its meaning, and the printed word would touch a human soul as a means of divine grace. This idea, so foreign to modern theorists of reading, rested, writes the historian David Paul Nord, on "the belief that the meaning of a text resides entirely in the text and that the text is hegemonic."[33] Prayerful reading would eliminate the anarchic possibilities inherent in both Protestant doctrine and the emerging mass media, allowing readers direct access to sacred, timeless truths.

Evangelicals such as Porter and Philes believed the modes of sacred reading they cherished were losing ground to what they called "shallow" or "passive" reading. This debate persisted throughout the twentieth century in various guises, secular and religious, as critics came to see the "shallow" reading that so vexed nineteenth-century jeremiahs as but one of the myriad vices of American consumer culture.[34] The philosopher Paul Griffiths, for example, contrasts religious reading—"as a lover reads, with a tensile attentiveness that wishes to linger, to prolong, to savor"—with consumer reading, which "wants to extract what is useful or exciting or entertaining from what is read, preferably with dispatch . . . all in the quick orgasm of consumption."[35] Just as nineteenth-century tract writers believed a good religious text to be "hegemonic," its meaning plain to any attentive reader, Griffiths asserts, "the basic metaphors [of reading religiously] are those of discovery, uncovering, retrieval, opening up: religious readers read what is there to be read, and what is there to be read always precedes, exceeds, and in the end supersedes its readers."[36] Griffith's stark divide between religious and consumerist modes of reading echoes the concerns of Porter from a century earlier. This continued concern throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveals an abiding conviction in the power of the printed word to mold character and faith, for good or ill.

The irony at the heart of this great reading debate, as the pioneers of religious mass media clearly recognized, is that religious reading in the nineteenth century depended on the market, and by the twentieth century not just the market but the culture of consumerism itself. For Griffiths, "the work read . . . can never be discarded because it cannot be exhausted," yet by the mid-twentieth century especially, books had became cheap and disposable commodities. Rufus Jones even contended in 1921 that to read religiously one *must* enter the marketplace, one *must* buy. Sharing books, reading aloud—none of these traditional modes of relating to sacred texts would suffice. Religion, of course, as one part of larger cultural systems, exists only as embedded in a web of cultural norms, beliefs,

and practices; in America this means religion *happens* in a consumer marketplace.[37] Though many have feared the dire consequences of American consumerism and mass production for proper religious practice, Americans of all traditions of faith in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries lived their religious lives in a culture profoundly shaped by the dictates of the market.[38] Gutjahr observes that in American practice by the early twentieth century, even Bibles, once "simply a religious guidebook for life . . . had become collectable commodities."[39] The anxieties and hopes embedded in these cultural developments—the promise of the market to bring good religious books to millions and the fear that one would never quite know just what they read or how—persisted well into the twentieth century, long after consumerism had thoroughly transformed every corner of American culture.

For all the fulmination of self-proclaimed reading arbiters, readers increasingly took the notion of a priesthood of all readers to its logical conclusions. While some read with the solitary fervor and intensity the evangelists hoped for, many blended such practices with communal and cursory styles of reading, all while sampling freely from available reading options. These flexible and pragmatic approaches to reading created new opportunities for engagement with a wide array of ideas about the self and the divine.[40] The most critical of these new religious developments for twentieth-century religious liberalism were a renewed and transformed emphasis on mystical practice and experience, the healing ministry known as mind cure, and the rise of modern psychology. These three interrelated spiritual innovations spread as significant components of popular religion in large part through the mass print media. Rather than religious movements dependent on revivalism or church life, these were first and foremost discourses, creatures of the printed word.[41] Initially explored only by an avant-garde of liberal intellectuals late in the nineteenth century, the new books and ideas emerging at the margins of liberal Protestantism eventually reached a nationwide middle-class audience. The mass media unleashed by nineteenth-century evangelicalism enabled the alternative spiritualities of the twentieth century to flourish, especially with the rise of religious middlebrow culture in the decades after World War I.

Mysticism, mind cure, and psychology each arose, in their modern iterations, in the cultural milieu of nineteenth-century Anglo-American liberal Protestantism, and each reached a period of particular ferment in the years around 1900. In response to the economic, cultural, and social developments historians describe using the rubric *modernity*—positivistic science, corporate and government bureaucracies, the research university, Darwinism, historical-critical study of the Bible, consumerism, urbanization—liberals at the elite and popular levels fashioned the discourses of mysticism, mind cure, and psychology. These discourses in fact drew so deeply from the same liberal Protestant well that only slowly over the course of the twentieth century did

they emerge from their common origins as distinct modes of language, thought, and practice.

In spite of critical differences, the appeal of each was the same: all three claimed access to universal truth, and all three built universal claims on the foundation of individual experience. Claims of universal truth often masked structures of domination rooted in race, gender, and nation, to be sure. But we need not accept the universal claims of these nineteenth-century liberal discourses to appreciate their appeal to later popularizers, or to so many twentieth-century Americans. As the historian Leigh Schmidt notes, "It was exactly the sui generis rhetoric that made 'mysticism' timely, not timeless."[42] Claims to universality, in other words, were very much of the moment, and mysticism, mind cure, and psychology, by offering universal truths rooted in individual experience, seemed to offer insight into the essence of the human condition.

Of the three, mysticism as a category of experience had the deepest roots in Western religious life and the longest relationship with liberalism.[43] Though the terms *mystic* and *mystical* are ancient in origin, the term *mysticism* in English dates only to the mid-eighteenth century, used then by Anglicans to critique the ecstatic "excesses" of sects such as Methodists and Quakers. Not until the 1840s and 1850s, in the hands of British and American romantics and transcendentalists, according to Schmidt, did the term begin to acquire modern meanings. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, Bronson Alcott, and others, Schmidt writes, refashioned mysticism from a term of sectarian critique into something "loosely spiritual, intuitive, emancipatory, and universal."[44] The notion of mysticism as the solitary soul's union with the divine, an experience at once ineffable and timeless, not bound by culture, language, history, or even self, was an invention of nineteenth-century liberalism, as was the notion that such mystical experiences served as "the fountainhead of all genuine spirituality."[45]

A host of American and British writers in the years around 1900 seized on the new discourse of mysticism to advance the cause of liberal Protestantism. The historian T. J. Jackson Lears locates the vogue in mysticism at this time within a broad context of antimodernism, and certainly the fascination of many turn-of-the-century scholars of mysticism with the Orient or with medieval Catholic spirituality supports such an argument.[46] What the embodied ecstasies of Pentecostalism offered to the dispossessed at Asuza Street in Los Angeles in 1906, mysticism provided for elite liberals: pure experience of the divine. Critics note that the mysticism vogue in these years was mostly second order—it was a vogue in mysticism studies more than in mystical practice—yet this simply confirms that these were thoroughgoing moderns seeking refuge in a spiritual zone safe from the disenchantment of modernity. In addition to James's *Varieties*, the years around and after 1900 witnessed the Anglican William Ralph Inge's *Christian Mysticism* (1899); *The Mystical Element of Religion* (1908), a study of

medieval Italian saints by Baron Friedrich von Hügel, a British Roman Catholic; Rufus Jones's *Studies in Mystical Religion* (1909); *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness* (1911) and *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People* (1914) by the Anglican Evelyn Underhill, a student of von Hügel; the Methodist John Wright Buckham's *Mysticism and Modern Life* (1915); and the German Lutheran Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). From outside this wide array of Western Christian traditions, the German-American editor Paul Carus introduced many Americans to Buddhist mystical practice through his own writings and his collaborations with D. T. Suzuki. Carus's work was but one small part of a larger turn-of-the-century vogue in Eastern traditions that included the Vedanta of Swami Vivekenanda and Madame H. P. Blavatsky's Theosophy. Even this cursory review of mystical writings reveals the deep hunger for authentic experience of the divine among Protestant moderns at the dawn of the twentieth century.

Mysticism helped liberals at the turn of the twentieth century cope with science, especially with the positivistic conceptions of human nature most starkly represented by evolutionary biology and laboratory psychology. Many of the early scholars of mysticism in fact, including Rufus Jones, John Wright Buckham, James Bissett Pratt, and William James, were also ardent students of biological and psychological science. The critical bridge between mystical spirituality and the emerging science of the psyche was the popular religious ideology of mind cure.[47] Like mysticism and indeed like psychology itself, mind cure was an artifact of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism. Mind cure shared with mysticism the use of altered states of consciousness (often hypnosis) and union of the self with the larger cosmos, what Emerson called the "Over-Soul" and later writers "More," "Supreme Mind," and "Universal Consciousness." The intense popular interest in metaphysical healing between 1885 and 1910 (and again the Pentecostal emphasis on faith healing) paralleled the scholarly focus on mysticism in these same years.[48] This ideology of mind cure proved a powerful allure for writers and readers throughout the twentieth century. Though mind cure frequently succumbed to the temptation of the easy answer—the historian William Leach accurately describes it as "wish-oriented, optimistic, sunny, the epitome of cheer and self-confidence, and completely lacking in anything resembling the tragic view of life"—it nevertheless attempted to meet the real needs of modern Americans.[49] Indeed mind-cure philosophies have remained into the twenty-first century as the inevitable companion of liberal religious efforts to forge spiritual practices that engage the problems of everyday life in modern terms.

Rather than an antimodern retreat, then, mind cure promised to harness modernity's advances for the enrichment of human life. The belief system of mind cure, often called New Thought by the late nineteenth century, postulated a correlation between the mind of the individual self and Mind as an expression

of an omnipotent and omnipresent Divine. The techniques of mind cure—meditation, hypnosis, autosuggestion, prayer—all focused on removing blockages between mind and Mind and opening the self to Supply—of energy, of health, of wealth, of wisdom—that might then flow in infinite abundance. The title of the first New Thought bestseller, Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite* (1897), captured the means of mind cure perfectly; its subtitle, *Fullness of Peace, Power, and Plenty*, revealed its ends. Mind cure retained little of Calvinism's sense of divine mystery and otherness. God's power, it held, is here, to be used now. The trick was to figure out how, and thus mind cure developed intellectually along the lines of a science and in practice as a technology. Those who claimed to understand Mind possessed insight into the deepest secrets of existence, a gnosticism for modern times.

Mind cure as a religious ideology held particular appeal for women. The historian Donald Meyer describes mind cure as a post-Calvinist Protestant expression of "pure wish," but Beryl Satter more precisely characterizes New Thought as a "gendered discourse of desire."[50] Indeed the institutional history of New Thought reveals a preponderance of white, middle-class women among both the leadership and adherents, especially in the urban centers of the North and Midwest where the movement was strongest. The ways print culture facilitated the emergence of textual communities centered on the home was critical to mind cure's success among women, who often encountered these new teachings in print before reaching out to local communities. If the sudden transformation mind cure offered recalled the life-changing power of evangelical conversion, its focus on the feminine aspects of the divine marked a radical departure from mainstream Protestantism.

The new psychology of the 1880s and 1890s emerged in response to the same liberal Protestant crisis and with preoccupations about the nature of mind and consciousness that were similar to mind cure.[51] Like mind cure, academic psychology offered a metaphysical science of healing. In fact it makes little sense to distinguish psychology and mind cure prior to the 1880s, when the first academic psychology departments were founded in American universities. Indeed throughout the twentieth century the two discourses continued a regular intercourse in the arena of popular religion. Norman Vincent Peale, most famously, drew heavily on both psychoanalytic theory and the Unity School of Christianity, a New Thought denomination, in his hugely popular speeches and writings of the 1940s, 1950s, and later. The legitimacy of psychology in the twentieth century required it to renounce, sharply and deliberately, all ties with its popular religious cousins, but in the arena of lived religion such high/low distinctions mattered little.

Even a cursory glance at the biographies of the discipline's American founders—men such as William James, G. Stanley Hall, George Coe, James Leuba, Edwin Starbuck, and James Mark Baldwin—reveals the liberal Protestant ori-

gins of psychology as an academic discipline in the United States.[52] The young psychologists of religion that followed the pioneers James and Hall labored to use science itself as a means to keep religion viable in the modern age. Some, like Coe and Leuba, proved less willing than James to accept emerging theories of the subconscious as adequate to the task of accounting for mystical experience. Much of this later skepticism proved decisive as psychology began its long process of withdrawal from its religious roots. But in the realm of popular religious life, the more open and pragmatic categories of James prevailed. His famed definition of religion—"the feeling, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine"—indicates most clearly his determination to place experience at the center of religious life.[53]

The trait that made James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* the most influential of all the early twentieth-century psychologies of religion is the deftness with which he bridged liberal Protestant intellectual culture and the wider religious currents of mysticism and mind cure, all while legitimating, rather than reductively dismissing, religious experience. James devoted considerable attention to the mind-cure philosophies he took as emblematic of what he called the "religion of healthy-mindedness." In *Varieties* he quoted extensively from Trine's *In Tune with the Infinite*, describing, without condescension or criticism, what he found there as "traces of Christian mysticism, of transcendental idealism, of vedantism, and of the modern psychology of the subliminal self."[54] *Varieties* proved so useful to later writers because it brought under the universal umbrella of science experiences ranging from evangelical conversion to mind-cure healing, psychical phenomena, and mystical rapport with the More, without reducing any of these to neurology or the psychology of the subconscious. In this enterprise many religious innovators and popular inspirational writers recognized a kindred spirit.

Coe, Leuba, Starbuck, and others in the years from 1902 through World War I continued to debate, in academic settings, the significance of what James achieved in *The Varieties of Religious Experience.* Rufus Jones's *Social Law in the Spiritual World*, as noted, was the first significant effort to translate *Varieties* for a popular audience. Jones had studied James's *Principles of Psychology* intensively when it appeared in 1890 and taught courses in Jamesian psychology at Haverford College in the 1890s. In 1900–1901 he went to Harvard for graduate study, though was disappointed to learn that James was in Europe preparing for the Gifford Lectures that would become *Varieties*. In spite of his appreciation of James's psychology, Jones—unlike James and his fellow psychologists—lived a life in regular communion with the world beyond. He was a birthright Quaker and therefore came by his mysticism as honestly as James did his post-Calvinist New England angst. After returning from Harvard to Haverford, he set out to produce the work that would make Jamesian psychology and his own Quaker

mysticism available to a reading public also struggling with matters of faith, science, and authentic experience.

James taught that all knowledge and all experience are mediated through consciousness; yet as a mystic, Jones also held that God can be apprehended only through this very same medium: the conscious experience of an individual personality. The study of personality therefore became a critical tool of spiritual development. "If we could drop our plummet down though the deeps of one personality," Jones wrote in *Social Law*, "we could tell all the meanings of the visible world, all the problems of social life and all the secrets of the eternal Personal Self."[55] Critics have made the argument that liberal religion—Protestant liberalism in particular—suffered a spiritual malaise in the twentieth century largely due to an overeager embrace of scientific psychology.[56] Jones too embraced science and psychology, but he tempered it with mystical experience and thereby kept psychology from crowding out spiritual vitality.

In *Social Law* Jones took what he understood to be the fundamental lessons of the new psychology and applied them to the mystical heart of his Quaker tradition. He grouped mystics into two classes: negation mystics and affirmation mystics. The first class sought ecstatic rapture of union with the divine, which Jones regarded as spiritual escapism. The affirmation mystics, on the other hand, "do not make *vision* the end of life, but rather the beginning. . . . More important than the vision is obedience to the vision."[57] For the affirmation mystic, the solitary, personal, inward, mystical experience, which for Jones always lay at the heart of spiritual life, was to be valued only insofar as it empowered the participant to service in the world. "The truth test is to be sought, not in the feeling-state, but in the motor-effects,"[58] he wrote, reflecting James's philosophical pragmatism. For Jones, the test of mystical experience was its social utility. In *Social Law* he argued that modern psychology and timeless mystical practice, taken together, offered a path through the thickets of modern life, a path ultimately of personal and social salvation. Jones's vibrant adaptation of James foreshadowed a long line of similar twentieth-century efforts.

Rufus Jones wrote *Social Law* in 1904 to help distraught moderns find personally and socially useful religious experiences. Less than twenty years later, he joined a wide-reaching effort, Religious Book Week, designed to encourage Americans to read books like *Social Law in the Spiritual World* and the many others offering the latest wisdom. The 1920s witnessed a remarkable renaissance of religious publishing and a host of marketing innovations devised to get more books, and the right books, into the hands of readers, and to instruct those readers how to read those books. What emerged was a religious middlebrow culture that freshly asserted the centrality of books and reading in middle-class religious life and that reconfigured the relationships among individual autonomy, institutional authority, and cultural expertise. Liberal religious leaders like Jones turned to James—and the discourses of mysticism, mind cure, and psychology

more broadly—in their efforts to create and promote a religious reading culture suited to modern life.

Religious middlebrow culture structured both the relationship of readers to texts and the expectations readers had for the transformative power of reading. As modern life challenged previously held assumptions about faith, character, personality, and the self, readers turned to inspirational literature for guidance, and the rules of middlebrow culture shaped the meanings readers made in those encounters. But religious middlebrow culture also shaped spirituality by introducing previously marginal ideas about the nature of religious experience into the mainstream of popular thought and by preparing readers for a spiritual engagement with religious "others." The corrosive "acids of modernity" forced liberal Protestants in particular to search for new tools, tools adequate to the task of guiding readers in a constantly shifting consumer culture. Middlebrow reading habits in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s became a central part of religious practice for countless Americans. The content of the books they read shaped middle-class spirituality for the remainder of the twentieth century.