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A History of the

United Society

of Believers

Stephen J. Stein

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Yale University Press

New Haven and London

Publication of this volume has been supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, an independent federal agency.

Published with assistance from the Kingsley Trust Association Publication Fund established by the Scroll and Key Society of Yale College.

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Designed by Sylvia Steiner.

Set in Primer type by G & S Typesetters, Inc., Austin, Texas.

Printed in the United States of America by Courier Westford, Inc., Westford, Massachusetts.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stein, Stephen J., 1940-

The Shaker experience in America : a history of the United Society of Believers / Stephen J. Stein.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-300-05139-5

1. Shakers—United States—History. I. Title.

BX9766.S74 1992

289'.8'0973—dc20 91-30836 CIP

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.



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The same impulse to reach out to others motivated Frederick Evans to propose that the United Society consider joining forces with the Korshian Unity founded by Cyrus Read Teed. Teed, a practitioner of eclectic medicine and a visionary, established a church and cooperative home in Chicago in 1888 after two decades of lecturing throughout central New York. Known to his followers as Koresh the prophet, he taught a theory of "cellular cosmogony" that rejected the Copernican view of the earth. He proposed that the universe had emanated from a single source, God, and that the earth was concave. Teed also had a vision of the "Divine Motherhood" and believed in a dual godhead. The society he formed accepted his views on "mental science and metaphysics" as well as "alchemy, reincarnation, celibacy, [and] communism." Some three hundred joined his church in Chicago. In 1894 the community relocated in Estero, Florida, where they acquired large agricultural holdings and also interacted with the Shaker colony. Nothing came of Evans's proposal, although the Believers continued to feel a bond with the Koreshians. When Teed died in 1908, his followers split into several factions.¹⁶⁰

The Shakers recognized common cause with other outsiders, too. The pastor of a Universalist church in Marshalltown, Iowa, corresponded with Charles Clapp at Union Village about their common interest in spiritualism. He was gathering "accounts of Spirit phenomena wherever they have occurred" and hoped to acquire Shaker books dealing with "mediumship." The members of the North Family at Mount Lebanon shared their enthusiasm for spiritism with their long-time friend and correspondent Laura Holloway Langford. Langford, an affluent, cultured woman who purchased the Shaker farm at Upper Canaan in 1906, exchanged letters with the Believers for thirty-five years, beginning in 1874. A talented author and editor, she was especially interested in women's issues, social reform, and religion. (She also published a Buddhist cookbook.) Helena Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, was her close friend. Langford became a patron and benefactor of the Shakers. She wrote on their behalf, marketed their produce, and made proposals for the use of their vacant properties. The Believers, in turn, regarded her with special affection as a kindred spirit.¹⁶¹

Following the death of Langford's second husband in 1902, Anna White wrote to console her friend. White's epistle was occasioned by strong thoughts of Laura, proving in her opinion "that telepathy is as real as is spirit communication." White thought that Colonel Langford had understood the "inner workings" of Shakerism even though he had not experienced extended contact with the Believers. "If he still lingers on this

side," she wrote, "please convey to him our help our strength in passing over—our kind remembrance and love. He may soon meet some of our people and then he will know more." Laura need have no fear about his ultimate destiny, for he had risen above his passions and "fulfilled the higher law of his being."

Your faith in immortality will help dispel the clouds of grief, and the thought that he will be with you still will be a comfort to you in many a weary hour. You will miss his bodily presence; that can never be replaced, but the spirit may be so quickened as to know him better even than when in the body.

She closed the letter with lines from a poem entitled "Beautiful Death."¹⁶²

Spiritualism's rejection of death as final made it attractive to persons affected by the changing attitudes toward death and mourning in the late nineteenth century. Spirit communication provided consolation for the living and hope for the dead. Shaker families, too, it was assumed, remained intact across the barriers of time. Elaborate circumlocutions developed whereby it became unnecessary to use realistic language about death. In the Shaker magazine, the list of those who had died at the villages appeared under the heading "To Evergreen Shores." Family journal entries throughout the society employed similar references. Andrew Fortier "departed . . . across the dark river unto the Ever green shore," Rhoda Hollister "took her flight to the better land," Ann Buzley "departed to the Spirit land of souls," Otis Sawyer "passed to the spirit home," Ruth Barry "passed to spirit life," Dorothy Wright took "her exit from the mortal part," Henry Blinn "passed from sight," Matilda Reed passed "from our earthly vision," and Annie Dodson passed "from the mortal to the immortal state." Rarely was the explicit language of death or dying used, although it was reported that Galen Richmond "dropped dead" and that Ann Eliza "died . . . mid terrible agonies." At Shaker funerals it was common to receive communications from the deceased, and such contacts often continued for years afterward.¹⁶³

Dreams were frequently the means through which Believers received spirit messages. Catherine Allen published her "visionary dream" of the judgment of souls, where all the living and former leaders of the society were seated in "a spacious hall dedicated to religious purposes." From this assembled body emanated a white aura; the atmosphere surrounding them was "dense with spiritual force." At the center was an altar on which glowed a "quenchless flame" of God's pure love. A song pleaded, "Come to the Judgment! Enter the flame and be purified." This scene

151. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, vol. 15 of *The Works of William James*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985); *Chicago Daily News*, 11 Sept. 1893; Carter, *Spiritual Crisis*, 209-217. An abstract of Offord's paper "The Doctrine and Life of the Shakers" appears in John Henry Barrows, ed., *The World's Parliament of Religions: An Illustrated and Popular Story of the World's First Parliament of Religions, Held in Chicago in Connection with the Columbian Exposition of 1893*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Parliament Publishing Company, 1893), 2:1380.
152. Barrows, ed., *World's Parliament of Religions* 2:1380.
153. Charlotte Byrdsall, "Who Are True Spiritualists?" *Shaker Manifesto* 11 (1881): 172-173; Antoinette Doolittle, "The Supernatural," *ibid.*, 8 (1878):127-128.
154. "Journal Commencing January 1st 1875. Canaan Upper Family," DeWint, 23 July 1876, 15-18 May 1878; Central Ministry Journal 1874-1890, 15 July 1876, 15 Feb. 1878; "Records by Anna White," 17-19 Aug. 1880; Cecelia Devyr, "Dawn of a New Era," *Shaker and Shakeress* 5 (1875):54. Kathleen Patricia Deignan speaks of Shakerism's "radical pneumatology," or doctrine of the Holy Spirit, in the period after the Civil War. See "The Eschatology of Shaker Christianity" (Ph.D. diss., Fordham University, 1986).
155. George Lomas, "Materializations by Spirits," *Shaker Manifesto* 8 (1878):167; Daniel Offord to Laura Langford, 15 Nov. 1908, NOC; Rebecca A. Hathaway to Catherine Allen, 18 Apr. 1920, OCIWHI IV A 8; Delmer Wilson, "Dreams," 19 Jan. 1923, 4 Mar., 25 Nov. 1924, MeSl.
156. James M. Peebles, "As a Spiritualist, I Believe," *Shaker* 6 (1876):60; "Diary Mt Lebanon Center Family," 12 Apr. 1898; Central Ministry Journal 1874-1890, 28 Oct. 1877; Peebles, "Spiritualism," in White and Taylor, *Shakerism*, 250-252.
157. James M. Peebles, *Seers of the Ages: Embracing Spiritualism, Past and Present; Doctrines Stated and Moral Tendencies Defined* (Boston: W. White, 1869), 139-140, 182-184.
158. Anna White, "True Spiritualism," *Manifesto* 25 (1895):77-80. For more on the relation between spiritualism and social reforms, see Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Women in Occult America," in *The Occult in America: New Historical Perspectives*, ed. Howard Kerr and Charles L. Crow (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 177-195.
159. *Manifesto* 25 (1895):212-213; Barrows, ed., *World's Parliament of Religions* 2:972; Frances Ellen Burr to Anna White, 24 Feb. 1903, NOC; "William Anderson's Astrological Documents," Upton Papers, NOC; "North Family Journal," 3 Sept. 1918. For more on Vivekananda's career, see Steven F. Walker, "Vivekananda and American Occultism," in *Occult in America*, ed. Kerr and Crow, 162-176; and Carl T. Jackson, *Vedanta for the West: The Ramakrishna Movement in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming). On psychical research, see Moore, *In Search of White Crows*, 133-168.
160. Robert S. Fogarty, *Dictionary of American Communal and Utopian History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1980), 110-111, 214-215; Howard D. Fine, "The Koreshan Unity: The Chicago Years of a Utopian Community," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 68 (1975):213-227; Cyrus R. Teed, *The Cellular Cosmogony or the Earth a Concave Sphere*, with a new introduction by Robert S. Fogarty (Philadelphia: Porcupine Press, 1975), [i-vi]; Frederick Evans, *Shakers and Koreshans Uniting* (Mount Lebanon, N.Y.: The Shakers, [1892]). For a comparative study of feminism

- among the Shakers, the Koreshans, and the Sanctificationists (a single-sex community formed in Texas in 1890), see Sally L. Kitch, *Chaste Liberation: Celibacy and Female Cultural Status* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).
161. J. W. Woodrow to Charles Clapp, 22 Mar. 1890, DLC sec. 352a; Andrews and Andrews, *Fruits*, 175-181; Laura Holloway, *The Ladies of the White House: of, In the Home of the Presidents: Being a Complete History of the Social and Domestic Lives of the Presidents from Washington to the Present Time, 1789-1881* (Philadelphia: Bradley, 1881); Holloway, *The Buddhist Diet-Book* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1886). The largest body of Holloway (Langford) correspondence with the Shakers is part of the Shaker Papers at DeWint.
162. Anna White to Laura Langford, 30 May 1902, NOC.
163. "Records at New Lebanon 1871-1905," 20, 26 Dec. 1882, 17 Mar. 1884, 1 Aug. 1887, 14-15 Feb. 1890, 25 June 1897, 11 Aug. 1902, 11 June 1903, 4 Jan., 3 Apr. 1905. For background on changing attitudes toward death and dying, see Douglas, *Feminization of American Culture*; Stanley French, "The Cemetery as Cultural Institution: The Establishment of Mount Auburn and the 'Rural Cemetery' Movement," in *Death in America*, ed. David E. Stannard (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 69-91; and Martha V. Pike and Janice Gray Armstrong, eds., *A Time to Mourn: Expressions of Grief in Nineteenth-Century America* (Stony Brook, N.Y.: Museums at Stony Brook, 1980).
164. Catherine Allen, "Come to the Judgment," *Manifesto* 25 (1895):53-55; "Diary" 30 Oct. 1883, DLC sec. 327.
165. "North Family Journal," 30 Oct. 1910; "Diary Watervliet," sec. 297, 11, 22 July 1894; Leila S. Taylor, "A Remarkable Statement," *Christian Science Journal* 25 (December 1907):543-549; "Notes About Home," *Manifesto* 25 (1895):45-46; "South Family Events by Anna Goepper," 1 May 1913; "South Family, Watervliet, N.Y. Record of Events from Day to Day Kept by Anna B. Goepper Beginning Apr. 5th 1915 for Annie Case, Eldress and Trustee," N, 30 May 1915. For background on Eddy and Christian Science, see Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy*, 3 vols. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966-1977); Stephen Gottschalk, *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); R. Laurence Moore, "The Occult Connection? Mormonism, Christian Science, and Spiritualism," in *Occult in America*, ed. Kerr and Crow, 135-161; and Rennie B. Schoepflin, "Christian Science Healing in America," in Norman Gevitz, ed., *Other Healers: Unorthodox Medicine in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 192-214.
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