Twenty-First Century American Ghost Hunting: A Late Modern Enchantment

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Contents

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Introduction

If you moved into a new home and strange things started happening, or if you completed a home renovation and unexplainable occurrences began cropping up, what would you do? Perhaps you hear footsteps where no one is walking, or you see shadowy figures out of the corner of your eye, or you hear someone or something whisper your name in the middle of the night when everyone else in the house is asleep. Many Americans would call in a ghost hunter or paranormal investigator. They would probably begin this process with an internet search. Perhaps they would come across the website paranormalsocieties.com, which calls itself "the online paranormal society directory!" The black background and the logo with spooky font reminiscent of a horror movie advertisement would indicate that the searcher had come to the right place to seek paranormal answers. On the website, the haunted individual would find roughly 4,892 paranormal investigation groups listed in the United States, the majority of which focus on ghosts and hauntings. The searcher could locate ghost hunting groups by state and find them listed by city. After perusing the site for a while and trying to contact some teams through Facebook, email, or phone, the searcher would probably realize that some of the groups are no longer active; though more groups are being added to the site every week. A few Google searches would reveal that paranormalsocieties.com is not even an exhaustive list of the ghost hunting groups in a given area. Finally, an observant browser might notice that nearly all of these ghost hunting groups were founded within the past fifteen years.

The beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a ghost hunting boom in America. In October of 2004, the reality television show *Ghost Hunters* premiered. It focused on two Roto-Rooters plumbers who investigate hauntings in their spare time. This show and similar reality shows that followed sparked a craze.[1] Thousands of Americans began to think of ghosts and hauntings in new ways. Thousands more began forming paranormal investigation teams and investigating public and private locations reported to be haunted. These ghost hunters would largely view themselves as scientific investigators. They would sometimes rely on spirit mediumship and psychic sensitivities as spirit investigators had done for centuries, but more often they relied on sophisticated electronic equipment. They would measure energy fluctuations in the environment with electromagnetic field meters, try to capture video footage of spirits with full spectrum or infrared cameras, and try to catch anomalous spirit voices with electronic voice recorders. A slew of new, more and more specialized equipment with flashing lights and beeping alarms used to detect energy and communicate with spirits would follow. Though always claiming to maintain a healthy skepticism, the majority of these ghost hunters would become convinced that they had captured empirical evidence of the paranormal and would strive to strengthen their cache of evidence in the hopes that it might one day be acceptable to mainstream science.

This dissertation is about contemporary American ghost hunting, but more importantly it is about enchantment in late modernity. Enchantment is a term critical to my research and it is a term used and debated by scholars of religion for more than a century. I will define and

[1] Clearly American culture was ripe for the debut of these paranormal reality television shows. My chapter on ghost hunting and media, however, will show that a generation of contemporary ghost hunters trace the beginning of their own ghost hunting endeavors to watching the shows.

discuss it in detail below. I aim to use twenty-first century American ghost hunting as a model to further understanding of what it looks like to have an enchanted worldview in late modernity. At the beginning of the twentieth century, pioneering German sociologist Max Weber observed and predicted the disenchantment of the world (Entzauberung der Welt) as modernity advanced. Later in the twentieth century, sociologists and other observers became skeptical that modern forces lead to a decline of religion and magic. Instead, many scholars have turned toward analyzing how disenchantment and re-enchantment go hand-in-hand even in the modern West, while others have focused on how modern societies are not so much disenchanted as differently enchanted. Weber's observations are far from without merit, however. Traditional religion and religious institutions have certainly seen a decline in the late-modern West. Modernity has certainly changed enchantment even if it has not forced it to recede. This dissertation analyzes how enchantment has changed in late modernity. In light of the shifting contemporary American spiritual landscape, an exploration of ghost hunting will help us understand how enchantment appears and functions in late modernity. Ghost hunting is a model late-modern enchantment. Few would deny that a worldview that sees the world as haunted by spirits of various types is enchanted. On the other hand, ghost hunting bears the marks of modernity. For example, it is scientistic, it is deeply shaped by mass media and the internet, and it draws on alternative spiritual ideas and practices in an eclectic and combinative manner.

Ghost Hunting and the Contemporary American Religious Landscape

Ghost hunting is especially instructive as an object of study in the twenty-first century's shifting American spiritual and religious landscape. Traditional religious affiliation is on the

decline while the percentage of the population that claims no religious affiliation is rapidly climbing. For over forty years, the General Social Survey (GSS), a nationally representative survey of American adults, has asked: "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion?" The percentage of people who answer "no religion" has risen at an accelerating pace since 1990, and that acceleration is especially clear in the last two decades. In 1990, 8% of respondents replied that they adhered to "no religion." By the year 2000, this had risen to 14%. The latest data from 2018 shows that 23% of respondents chose "no religion."[2] Those who identify with no religion do not seem to be primarily atheists or agnostics. The Pew Religious Landscape Study, with rounds in 2007 and 2014, surveyed "more than 35,000 Americans from all 50 states about their religious affiliations, beliefs and practices." In 2014, 22.8% of respondents identified as religiously unaffiliated, up from 16% in 2007. Interestingly, only 3.1% of respondents identified as atheists and an additional 4% as agnostics. In fact, 27% of the unaffiliated reported that they are "absolutely certain" that God exists and 22% reported that they are "fairly certain." 13% of the unaffiliated claim religion is "very important" in their lives, while 21% say it is "somewhat important." 24% of the unaffiliated reported attending religious services once or twice a month or a few times a year, with a much smaller percentage reporting attending services at least once a week. Finally, 20% of the unaffiliated reported praying at least daily. To sum up, many of

[2] "Religious Preference," GSS Data Explorer, accessed October 6, 2020, https://gssdataexplorer.norc.org/trends/Religion%20&%20Spirituality?measure=relig_rec.

the religiously unaffiliated are not completely irreligious people, even if they may be less religious by some measures than those who do affiliate. [3]

Religious "nones," as they are often called, have grown across multiple demographic groups. They have grown across racial, gender, regional, educational, and age divides, though their growth is most pronounced among younger adults.[4] Other Pew surveys have found the percentage of Americans who identify as "spiritual but not religious" rising in recent years, from 19% in 2012 to 27% in 2017.[5] So what does the spiritual life of a "none" who believes in God and prays daily look like? What does it look like to be "spiritual but not religious?" To answer these sorts of questions, scholars of religion need to start looking beyond traditional religion in the United States. This endeavor becomes increasingly pressing as the ranks of the unaffiliated continue to grow.

One way to look for religion beyond traditional religious affiliation is by examining paranormal belief. The paranormal is a slippery category, at least as slippery as the category "religion." It is generally thought to include belief in ghosts and hauntings, psychic powers, cryptids such as Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster, UFOs as alien spacecraft, and some forms of alternative healing. My favored definition of the paranormal comes from sociologists

[3] Michael Hout, Claude S. Fischer, and Mark A. Chaves, "More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Key Finding from the 2012 General Social Survey," Institute for the Study of Societal Issues, March 2013, https://sociology.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/faculty/fischer/Hout%20et%20al_No%20Relig%20Pref%202012_Release%20Mar%202013.pdf; "Religious Landscape Study," Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life, accessed October 6, 2020, https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/; "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life, November 3, 2015, https://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz, "More Americans Now Say They're Spiritual But Not Religious," Facttank: News in the Numbers, Pew Research Center, September 6, 2017, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/.

Chrisopher D. Bader, Joseph O. Baker, and F. Carson Mencken's study of paranormal belief in America. They argue that the paranormal consists of those beliefs and practices that are "dually rejected" by both mainstream science and mainstream religion.[6] This definition highlights that the paranormal is not always explicitly supernatural and also emphasizes what this range of beliefs and practices, often grouped together, has in common.

Paranormal belief is widespread in the United States and is projected to grow even as traditional religious affiliation is declining.[7] The Baylor Religion Survey waves of 2005 and 2007 found that 69% of Americans hold at least one paranormal belief, while 51% report at least one paranormal experience.[8] The more recent 2014 Baylor Religion Survey found that 52% of Americans hold at least one paranormal belief. Paranormal belief likely did not decline between the two surveys. Rather, the first waves of the survey included more categories of paranormal belief in their survey questions. Though demographic factors such as age, sex, income level, marital status, and economic marginalization do affect the likelihood that a person will have a given specific paranormal belief, paranormal belief in general is widespread among all demographic groups. In other words, for Americans, the paranormal is normal.[9] The prevalence of paranormal beliefs and practices in the shifting spiritual landscape provides justification for the study of ghost hunting and similar phenomena to understand modern enchantment.

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[6] Christopher D. Bader, Joseph O. Baker, F. Carson Mencken, *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture,* 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 30-32.

[7] Ibid., 257.

[8] Christopher D. Bader, F. Carson Mencken, and Joseph O. Baker, *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 75.

[9] Bader, Baker, and Mencken, *Paranormal America*, 2nd ed.; 163, 234.

Modernity and Enchantment

Theorists of disenchantment and enchantment often use modernity as a central category, yet they almost always leave it undefined. Intellectual historian Michael Saler calls modernity "one of the most ambiguous words in the historian's lexicon." In response to the state of modernity as a category, Saler analyzes the landscape of literature on modernity and comes up with a general definition. Without going into an in-depth historiography of modernity, I find his broad definition helpful in setting the stage for what I mean when I refer to modernity or call the twenty-first century "late modern." Saler explains:

> In broad outline, modernity has come to signify a mixture of political, social, intellectual, economic, technological, and psychological factors, several of which can be traced to earlier centuries and other cultures, which merged synergistically in the West between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. These factors include (but are not exhausted by) the emergence of the autonomous and rational subject; the differentiation of cultural spheres; the rise of liberal and democratic states; the turn to psychologism and self-reflexivity; and the dominance of secularism, nationalism, capitalism, industrialism, urbanism, consumerism, and scientism.

Saler notes that various accounts of modernity may accentuate various features he has listed, but he notes that intellectuals since the eighteenth century have emphasized that modernity is disenchanted. In the following section I define disenchantment and enchantment and highlight key contemporary perspectives on enchantment and modernity.[10]

I will define enchantment by defining its opposite, disenchantment. Of the two terms, disenchantment is the primary concept that has been taken up over the past century by

[10] Michael Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment: An Historiographical Review," *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006), 694-695; Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8-10.

scholars interacting with Max Weber's thought. Though the idea of disenchantment arises from German Romanticism, from thinkers such as Friedrich Schiller, it is Weber who largely originated the modern conversation on disenchantment into which I am entering. Max Weber's most famous formulation of his ideas about the disenchantment of the world ("die Entzauberung der Welt") was delivered in a speech at Munich University in 1917 on science as a vocation. In his speech, Weber links "the process of disenchantment" to the advance of intellectualization and rationalization, or, in other words, to "this 'progress' to which science belongs as a link and motive force." According to Weber, the world is increasingly disenchanted in that in their daily lives, people in the modern West "need no longer have recourse to magical means in order to master or implore the spirits" or access "mysterious powers" as Western moderns once did and as most humans still do. Instead, "technical means and calculations perform the service." So, for example, if a Western modern is riding on a streetcar, "there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather…one can, in principle, master all things by calculation."

Drawing on Weber, historian of Western Esotericism and metaphysical religion Egil Asprem defines the idea of disenchantment as "the understanding that mystery, magic, and sacredness were disappearing from a world increasingly dominated by industry, bureaucracy, science, and technology."[11] Richard Jenkins, also drawing on Weber, defines disenchantment as "the historical process by which the natural world and all areas of human experience become experienced and understood as less mysterious; defined, at least in principle, as knowable,

[11] Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900-1939* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014), 17.

predictable and manipulable by humans; conquered by and incorporated into the interpretive schema of science and rational government."[12] Having an idea of what disenchantment entails, one can turn to enchantment. In the sense relevant to this dissertation, enchantment is either a state in which or a process by which the cosmos is perceived to contain fundamental mystery, magic, or sacredness. Enchantment stands in contrast to a set of circumstances in which all things can be understood by rational, systematic, scientific means. Enchantment often entails the presence of the supernatural, while disenchantment often tends toward materialism and naturalism. While disenchantment tends toward order, in that forces and things are calculable and manipulable, this is a rational order only and not a divine order. Drawing on Weber, Asprem includes in the "disenchanted condition" the qualities of "axiological scepticism" and "metaphysical scepticism." The former describes "a sharp separation between facts and values," meaning that "while science can produce facts about the world, there is no meaning inherent in those facts that can tell us how we should live our lives." The latter holds "the reach of scientific knowledge is limited to the strictly empirical," so the metaphysical is out of the scope of scientific rationality. Asprem explains that, according to Weber, "value and meaning are based not on facts, but on worldviews ('Weltanschauungen') and worldviews…are matters of subjective conviction, belonging exclusively to the private sphere." In general, divine order as fact belongs to enchantment.

These definitions of disenchantment and enchantment are merely starting points or lenses to use in beginning to address questions raised by the ebb and flow of the supernatural

[12] Richard Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment, and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millennium," *Max Weber Studies* 1, no. 1 (Nov 2000), 12.

and religion in modernity. Some parts of this study will render these initial definitions problematic. For example, American ghost hunters often consider themselves both scientific and rational while affirming the existence of the supernatural, and they often render the world more mysterious through systematizing processes that initially seek to make the world less mysterious. In ghost hunters, a group that would seem to epitomize enchantment, are found the marks of forces that Weber and some Weberians see as disenchanting.[13]

One reason defining enchantment is complicated is that disenchantment does not seem to have progressed in the late modern West as Weber and some of his interpreters have predicted. For example, at the very time Weber was outlining his disenchantment thesis, Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on supernatural experience and the Holy Spirit, was booming on the West coast and tearing across the country, ready to overtake the world. The late twentieth century saw the rise of the American Religious Right and New Age spirituality. Entering the second decade of the twenty-first century, conservative evangelicalism maintains strong numbers and political influence, and the alternative spirituality descended from New Age is as strong or growing. While it is true that the number of people who claim a religious affiliation has been declining in the past twenty years, it is also true that most of the unaffiliated still believe in God and many hold beliefs that could be classified as supernatural and practices that could be classified as religious or spiritual.

Often the debate around enchantment and disenchantment is carried out using the language of secularization. Sociologist Peter L. Berger defines "secularization theory" as the idea originating in the Enlightenment and gaining dominance in the 1950s and 1960s that

[13] Jenkins also notes the ways in which that which seems to be disenchanting can also be enchanting. Jenkins, 13.

"modernization necessarily leads to a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals." Berger's work is itself an example of the recent fate of secularization theory. Though in his earlier work he was a proponent of secularization theory, he would later repudiate the position. In the introductory essay of a 1999 book entitled *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*, he describes the ways in which secularization theory has been proven false and focuses on the ways in which religion remains highly relevant in modern societies.[14] There seems to be a new orthodoxy in religious studies and sociology that argues secularization as it has been classically understood has never occurred or has only occurred in an attenuated or partial way. Scholar of spirituality and culture Christopher Partridge, citing sociologists of spirituality Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, explicates a "fourfold typology of secularization theories": the disappearance thesis, the differentiation thesis, the de-instensification theory, and the co-existence theory. Noting that the first two are more common and the second two are less common, he defines them:

> The *disappearance thesis*, which reflects nineteenth-century theories, claims that religious understandings of the world will effectively disappear in the West. The *differentiation thesis* is more cautious in that it argues that religion will become privatized and socially insignificant: 'religion gets pushed out of social domains whilst remaining (of some) significance in private life.' The *de-intensification theory* claims that religion will remain in society, but only in a de-intensified, weak, and insubstantial form. The *co-existence theory* is more positive in that, 'whilst secularization takes place in particular circumstances, in other contexts religions maintain their vitality, even grow.'[15]

[14] Peter Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 1-18.

[15] Christopher Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West: Volume I: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture, and Occulture* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 8. He is quoting Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, eds., *Religion in Modern Times: An Interpretive Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), 307-308.

The first three theories, and especially the disappearance thesis, are the ones that the modern orthodoxy disavows or rebuts. To dive deeper into how scholars in the past few decades have argued against secularization theory and disenchantment, one can turn to Partridge's argument in his book *The Re-Enchantment of the West*.

In his book, Partridge discusses what he calls the re-enchantment of the West, with a particular focus on the United States and Great Britain. The book explores the contemporary "alternative spiritual milieu." Partridge holds that while secularization theories appear to be correct if applied to institutional Christianity in the West, they are not correct if one takes into account the alternative spiritual milieu in the West. At the time the book was written, around 2004, Partridge saw a spiritual awakening in the West emerging from "essentially a non-Christian religio-cultural milieu, a milieu that both resources and is resourced by popular culture – the 'occult milieu', what I refer to as 'occulture.'" For Partridge, occulture is a well of popular spiritual and cultural ideas that would be familiar to those studying the occult in the West, New Age religion, or what historian of American religion Catherine Albanese calls metaphysical religion.[16] Partridge defines the term "occult" "to include a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern Spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, Theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology, and a range of beliefs emanating out of a general interest in the paranormal."[17] Ultimately, Partridge argues that the forces Weber and his followers originally marked out as disenchanting have pushed the decline of traditional

[16] Partridge himself never uses the term metaphysical religion. The term metaphysical religion as I use it is introduced and described by Catherine Albanese in *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007). I define and go more in depth about metaphysical religion in my chapter on ghost hunting and scientism.

[17] Partridge, 1-5.

Western religion while at the same time fueling the rise of alternative spiritualities. He uses a combination of his personal observations of alternative religious communities, ethnographic studies of these communities from other scholars, and survey data to argue that alternative spirituality in the West is thriving and on the rise even as more traditional forms of religion are on the decline.

Though Partridge sees the alternative spiritual milieu as a significant problem for secularization theories, he does leave room for the voices of contemporary secularization theorists who do not see this type of spirituality as a problem for their theory. Partridge highlights the work of sociologist Steve Bruce, who does not see New Age spirituality as something as significant as scholars like Partridge make it out to be. Bruce argues, "for the vast majority of people interested in the New Age milieu, participation is shallow. They read a book or two and attend a few meetings. They do not become committed adherents to particular cults; they do not regularly engage in time-consuming rituals or therapies; they do not radically alter their lives." Bruce also notes that even for those who do become deeply committed to New Age spirituality, the impact on their lives is limited ("largely perceptual and rhetorical") and their numbers are low. Bruce also argues that New Age spirituality is particularly suited to the values of the secular West. "Rather than see the New Age as an antidote to secularization," he writes, "it makes more sense to see it as a style and form of religion well-suited to the secular world." In other words, New Age spirituality does not resist secularization, it capitulates to it. As Partridge summarizes for Bruce, "alternative spiritualities provide eclectic, individualized religion for disenchanted Westerners who want to hang on to the remnant of belief without inconveniencing themselves too much." Ultimately, Partridge sees alternative

spiritualities' accommodation to Western culture as a strength, not a weakness for their ability to enchant. Partridge strongly disagrees with Bruce's argument that alternative religion is less weighty and significant in people's lives, and he uses ethnographic and statistical evidence to prove his point. Currently, the scholarly consensus seems to be on Partridge's side of the debate without completely dismissing Bruce's points.[18] My reading of the evidence also puts me in Partridge's corner.

Ultimately, it seems that we see both disenchantment and re-enchantment in Western society, or both disenchantment and the failure of disenchantment. Some Weberians, such as Richard Jenkins, make sense of this by seeing in modern culture a dialectic of disenchantment and re-enchantment. Jenkins argues that Weber was providing real insight when he spoke of rationalizing forces and their effect on Western society, but at the same time enchantment seems to abound in the modern West in particularly modern ways. For Jenkins, disenchantment and re-enchantment are two sides of the same coin. In the modern West, disenchantment leads to re-enchantment while enchantment leads to disenchantment. In the modern West, we ought to see "(re)enchantment as no less diagnostic of modernity than disenchantment."

More recent scholarship has found new ways to challenge the traditional disenchantment thesis. Egil Asprem rejects Jenkins' dialectic because re-enchantment is couched in oppositional terms, with the norm being disenchantment and re-enchantment always functioning as a reaction. Instead, Asprem proposes that we look at how historical actors "negotiated the issues conjured up by the ideal-typical image of a 'disenchanted world.'" He wants "a shift in focus away from disenchantment and re-enchantment as *processes,*

[18] Partridge, 29-37.

towards a focus on disenchantment as a cluster of intellectual *problems*." According to Asprem, "the problem of disenchantment can be phrased like the main features of a 'disenchanted world.' with question marks added." For example, "Are there incalculable powers in nature or are there not? How far do our capabilities for acquiring knowledge extend? Can there be any basis for morality, value, and meaning in nature?" Instead of positing disenchantment and re-enchantment as social forces, Asprem wants us to analyze how figures in history have dealt with disenchantment questions. Asprem's framing of disenchantment as a set of intellectual problems is useful to think with, though I am not ready to dismiss a dialectical model like Jenkins'. If Jenkins' model frames re-enchantment as a reaction to disenchantment, this is only because disenchantment is a new force in modernity and the force that sparked the dialectic.

Historian of literature Emily Ogden might agree with Asprem's attempt to view disenchantment as a problem intellectuals have wrestled with rather than a social force. In her book on mesmerism in nineteenth-century America, Ogden proposes, in a way she recognizes to be hyperbolic, that "enchantment can *only* be modern!" In other words, enchantment itself is a concept fundamentally rooted in modernity and the secular project. Quoting Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular*, she highlights that enchantment is "best understood as a term applied 'in retrospect' by those for whom 'modernity is a *project*.' While such people look to a 'pre-modern' past, they construct that past as enchanted for the first time."[19] In other words, the concepts of enchantment and disenchantment are modern ideological constructions meant to separate the modern and the pre-modern: enchantment was then, disenchantment is now.

[19] Emily Ogden, *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 8; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 13-14.

Asad and others have argued that secularism, rather than the objective state of the modern world or the world and society absent religion, is a social project or a way of imagining the world. Secularism includes a set of values and ideals that aims to advance the existence of the autonomous subject freed from the past to rationally pursue freedom and pleasure.[20] I am in agreement with Ogden, Asad, and others that the modern world may not be secular in the way the term was originally theorized as free from superstition, religion, and enchantment, but it is the secular project that allows us to conceive of enchantment. Ogden and Asad make the point that not only can enchantment be modern, modernity constitutes enchantment in important ways.

Recognizing, like Ogden and Asprem, that enchantment and disenchantment are concepts that do ideological work related to modernity, historian Jason Josephson-Storm suggests we view disenchantment as a myth. Josephson-Storm argues that disenchantment is a myth that "came to function as a regulative ideal." In reality, disenchantment never happened and, as Bruno Latour has famously noted, "we have never been modern." According to Josephson-Storm, "attempts to suppress magic have historically failed more often than they've succeeded" and it is unclear to him "that science necessarily deanimates nature." [21] He makes his argument in part by showing how some of the key thinkers often referenced as originators of modernity and disenchantment were themselves either thoroughly enchanted or linked to enchantment by a thoroughly enchanted historical and social milieu. For example, figures such

[20] See Asad, 71-79. For similar arguments about secularism as a project, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007) and Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[21] Jason A. Josephson-Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 3.

as Max Muller, Max Weber, and Marcel Mauss were "profoundly enmeshed in the occult milieu, and much of what they thought they knew about the non-West was mediated by European esotericism."[22] In another example, the development of critical theory was influenced notably by the writings and ideas of "the controversial German poet and neo-pagan mystic" Ludwig Klages.[23] Josephson-Storm calls us to focus on the ideological work the myth of disenchantment does, and the way in which, through the myth of disenchantment, "Christendom increasingly exchanged its claim to be the unique bearer of divine revelation for the assertion that it uniquely apprehended an unmediated cosmos and did so with the sparkling clarity of universal rationality."[24] Josephson-Storm sees himself as challenging the reality of a separate and current age known as modernity when he questions the reality of disenchantment. My work, in many ways, supports Josephson-Storm's contention that "we have never been disenchanted," though I am not ready to eliminate modernity as a category or period. Enchantment in the twenty-first century is different from enchantment in, for example, the medieval period or late antiquity.[25] Modern ghosts are different from ancient ghosts. The forces marked as modern may not eliminate enchantment, but they often seem to change it.

This dissertation proceeds with the assumptions of the new orthodoxy: the late modern West is still enchanted, but differently enchanted; if disenchantment has made its mark on the twenty-first century United States, so has re-enchantment. In particular, I hope to shed light on

[22] Ibid., 6.
[23] Ibid., 209-239.
[24] Ibid., 8.
[25] It is important here to remember that, while we may refer to pre-modern magic and the supernatural as enchantment, we can only do so from the position of modernity. Late antiquity and the medieval period are enchanted only insofar as we are looking back at them. Modernity makes the concept of enchantment visible. I do not see a problem with seeing enchantment in the past once it is made visible from a modern position.

how enchantment works in early twenty-first century America by using ghost hunting as *exempli gratia*. The worldview of ghost hunters is not only enchanted, it is enchanted in a particularly modern way. Ghost hunters' appropriation of science, the ways they interact with media, and their engagement with a spiritual marketplace all mark them as modern.

Who Are Ghost Hunters?

It is hard to say how many people in the United States are actually ghost hunters or take an interest in paranormal investigation. The Baylor Religion Survey of 2005 found that 49% of Americans believe ghosts probably or absolutely exist, 25% have researched ghosts, apparitions, hauntings, or electronic voice phenomena, 20.7% believe communication with the dead is possible, and 22% claim to have experienced a haunting.[26] Beyond that, the 4,892 currently or formerly active paranormal investigation groups listed on paranormalsocieties.com discussed at the beginning of this introduction gives us another idea about how widespread ghost hunting is. Finally, an entire cable television channel, the Travel Channel, is dedicated to paranormal programming with at least eight shows devoted to ghost hunting.

Ghost hunters seem to be roughly equally divided along gender lines. Although women are the founders or lead investigators of many groups, these roles tend more often to be filled by men.[27] Ghost hunters tend to be racially homogenous. Almost all ghost hunters I have

[26] Electronic voice phenomena are ghostly voices that appear on audio recordings and are a common form of evidence used by ghost hunters to establish a haunting. Bader, Mencken, and Baker, *Paranormal America* (2010), 44, 107.

[27] On gendered power dynamics among ghost hunting groups, see Marc Eaton, "Paranormal Investigation: The Scientist and the Sensitive," in *The Supernatural in Society, Culture, and History*, ed. Dennis Waskul and Marc Eaton (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2018), 76-94.

encountered have been white. This state of affairs is highlighted by the ghost hunting television show *Ghost Brothers*, which tries to stand out in a crowded ghost hunting television market with the hook that all of the team's investigators are Black. This is not an indication that African Americans are uninterested in ghosts, as long-standing African American spirit traditions are well-documented.[28] Ghost hunters tend to span the political spectrum from left to right. Though some ghost hunters identify with a particular religious denomination, most of them tend to be religiously unaffiliated in spite of having a Christian background.

Research Methods

My research combines ethnography with media analysis. Ghost hunters have produced a truly enormous amount of content since 2004. They have written books, published websites, recorded podcasts and internet radio shows, produced television shows, and posted on social media. These are the texts I have analyzed. Whereas many historians struggle to find primary source material, I have dealt with an overabundance of material. Since I have not been able to analyze all of the material available to me, I have immersed myself in the material for several years to get a sense of its contours, themes, central ideas, and boundaries. I have read through countless ghost hunter websites and books. I have listened to hours of ghost hunter podcasts and radio. I have watched hours of ghost hunting reality television shows. I also attended a large paranormal convention in New Jersey in May 2018, where I spoke with ghost hunters from around the region and listened to presentations from paranormal investigators and some

[28] For just one example, see LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memmory Among Gullah/Geechee Women* (Duke University Press, 2014).

of the stars of popular ghost hunting reality television shows. Finally, I observed several paranormal Facebook groups over the course of several years.

After immersing myself in ghost hunter media, I conducted interviews with ghost hunters and participated in ghost hunts. I interviewed 28 ghost hunters from around the country over the phone. I participated in seven ghost hunts with six different paranormal investigation teams. These investigations were sometimes in private homes reported to be haunted, sometimes in public places. Five of these investigations were in Virginia and one was in the Omaha, Nebraska area. The purpose of my ethnographic work was to hone my observations and arguments as they had been developed out of my analysis of ghost hunting media. I formed my arguments from textual analysis and checked and edited my work through ethnographic interview and observation.

Dissertation Chapters

This dissertation contains this introduction, five main body chapters, and a conclusion. The first chapter following the introduction gives some of the historical background of twenty-first century American ghost hunting. Before entering into my main argument, I take the time to link ghost hunting to nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the tradition of psychical research that arose at the turn of the twentieth century. I also give an overview of a few of the major figures in ghost hunting in the twentieth century between the advent of psychical research and the ghost hunting boom post-2004.

The third chapter is on ghost hunting and scientism. In this chapter I examine the ways in which ghost hunters employ the rhetoric and social capital of science to legitimize

paranormal investigation. I explore what science means to ghost hunters and what they mean when they claim to be scientific. I argue that, for ghost hunters, science enchants as much as it disenchants, and that science's supposed disenchanting power is ironically what makes it so powerful as an enchanting force.

The fourth chapter focuses on ghost hunters' encounters with the demonic. Demons are a central interest for many ghost hunters, and I dig into why so many ghost hunters find demons especially compelling. Drawing on the work of German philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto, I argue that we ought to take ghost hunters' experiences of the demonic seriously as powerful religious experiences akin in many ways to traditional experiences of the divine. I argue that encounters with demons have particular enchanting power in that they provide empirical evidence of the existence of a divine order or a cosmos divided between good and evil.

The fifth chapter analyzes the relationship between ghost hunting and mass media. Though I do write briefly about ghost hunter Facebook groups, the main focus of the chapter is television. The twenty-first century American ghost hunting boom was sparked by reality television shows, and ghost hunting is fundamentally shaped by television media. I explore what the mediatization of enchantment looks like using the case of ghost hunters. I also explore how, through the process media studies researchers term cultivation, paranormal fiction shapes ghost hunters' enchanted worldviews. Ultimately, ghost hunters' enchanted worlds begin to look like the worlds presented to them on television.

The sixth and final body chapter explores ghost hunting and spirituality. I give an overview of the personal spiritualities of a number of the ghost hunters I have interviewed.

Most ghost hunters are religiously unaffiliated even while they draw on a Christian background. They fit well in a contemporary American spiritual landscape that has seen a rise in those who identify as "spiritual but not religious." I examine the sources of ghost hunter spirituality, including vernacular Christianity and metaphysical religion, and ultimately conclude that we should see ghost hunting as drawing from what Christopher Partridge calls "occulture." I argue that paranormal investigation is itself a spiritual activity, and I show that ghost hunting spirituality is empirical, seeking, experiential, and compatible with a neoliberal social order.

In the conclusion, I examine what we can learn about enchantment in late modernity if we employ twenty-first century American ghost hunting as *exempli gratia*. In order to study enchantment in late-modernity, we need to study specific examples of late modern enchantment. Ghost hunting is one suitable example or model. The conclusion highlights how scientism, experience, media, and the contemporary spiritual landscape shape late modern enchantment. The conclusion also contributes to conversations on how disenchantment and enchantment interact in modernity and how we ought to modify or to what extent we ought to endorse Weber's original thesis.

Chapter 2

From Spiritualism to Ghost Hunting

Contemporary ghost hunting has deep roots in the American spiritual landscape. A full picture of contemporary American ghost hunting is only achievable if we take account of this history. Some of the problems of modernity that drive ghost hunting have also driven nineteenth-century Spiritualism and turn-of-the-twentieth-century psychical research. These problems are similar, but have changed over time between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries. Ghost hunters are truly the heirs of these earlier movements, even if they deviate from them in significant ways. I will provide a short overview of Spiritualism and early psychical research and highlight how they are connected to and form the basis of ghost hunting a century or more later. I will then profile three twentieth-century ghost hunters to give the reader an idea of the type of ghost hunting activity that occurred between the height of psychical research and the debut of the ghost hunting reality television shows that would spark a ghost hunting boom in the United States. As will become evident, Spiritualism, psychical research, and contemporary ghost hunting have all been transatlantic phenomena, with ideas and practices being shared between North America and Great Britain.

Spiritualism

Most historians trace the beginning of the Spiritualist movement to the upstate New York town of Hydesville, where, in 1848, mysterious rappings or knocking sounds were experienced by witnesses in the presence of two adolescent girls, sisters Kate and Margaret Fox, in the house where they lived with their parents. Whatever was making the sounds was able to use the knocks to answer numerical questions, such as how many children a questioner had or how old those children were. The residents of Hydesville began attributing the raps to the ghost of a murdered peddler reportedly buried in the basement. Eventually the mysterious force would begin using the raps to answer yes or no questions. Amy and Isaac Post, a spiritually inquisitive Quaker couple who knew the Fox family well, experimented with the raps and brought the phenomena to the attention of their circle of like-minded friends. It was soon revealed that multiple spirits, including those of deceased loved ones of visitors who came to witness the manifestations, were communicating through the Fox sisters and their raps. Deeper forms of communication were made possible by Kate and Margaret's older sister Leah Fox Fish, who discovered that she was able to commune with spirits while she was in a trance state. Soon a spirit communication craze was spreading across North America and crossing the ocean to Britain and the rest of Europe. You might say that Spiritualism began with a haunted house.[1]

[1] Works on Spiritualism from which this overview draws include Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America,* 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001); Cathy Gutierrez, *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit,* 177-256; Molly McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Mary Farrell Bednarowski, "Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism: An Attempt at a Scientific Religion," (PhD diss., University of Minnesota, 1973).

Historian Ann Braude defines Spiritualism as a nineteenth-century "new religious movement aimed at proving the immortality of the soul by establishing communication with spirits of the dead." This basic definition is a good one. Communication with the dead was central to nineteenth-century Spiritualism, and one of the main goals of such communication was proving the immortality of the soul, whether the point of this was to soothe the religious uncertainties of practitioners or to assure practitioners that their loved ones had indeed continued on after death and were in an agreeable state. The most common mode of spirit communication was the séance. To conduct a séance, a group would generally gather around a table in a darkened room with at least one medium present in the circle. The participants would hold hands or place their hands flat on the table. They would then seek to communicate with any spirits present through various means. Sometimes the medium would relay to the other sitters what the spirits were saying, and the medium would often do this while in a type of trance. Sometimes the medium would give her or his body over to be controlled by the spirits. A medium might also communicate through automatic writing, a process that involved a medium's writing being controlled or inspired by the spirits. Sometimes sitters would employ a board with letters and a planchette, the early equivalent of a Ouija board, to communicate with the dead. Other signs of spirit activity might also occur. One might hear rappings like the companions of the Fox sisters did. One might feel the table moving beneath one's hands or experience other objects moving mysteriously. As the nineteenth century progressed, sitters experienced more and more physical manifestations of mediumship. For example, a strange substance that would come to be called ectoplasm might flow out of a medium's orifices and form the shapes of spirit hands or faces; or a spirit trumpet, resembling the cone of a

megaphone, might float around the room with voices issuing from it. Ultimately, there were many variations on both the séance and the phenomena that occurred during séances.

For the purposes of a history of American ghost hunting, I want to emphasize a few aspects of Spiritualism. First, serious proponents of Spiritualism claimed their beliefs about spirits, the afterlife, and sometimes even the divine realm were based on empirical evidence or scientific proof. Second, a significant portion of the people who found Spiritualism appealing were seeking to overcome religious doubt and disillusionment with traditional religious teaching and authority. Third, Spiritualism had a diffuse or non-existent authority structure. Along with a keen interest in spirits of the dead, these three aspects of Spiritualism link nineteenth-century Spiritualists with early-twenty-first century ghost hunters.

Much of the appeal of Spiritualism in the nineteenth century was based on the premise that Spiritualist practices could provide empirical proof of the immortality of the soul. With the aid of a spirit medium, a person – usually a woman – who had the heightened ability to communicate directly with spirits, one could experience the reality of the soul's immortality through one's own senses by seeing the medium enter into a supernormal trance state, hearing through the mouth of the medium the words of dead loved ones or famous persons, and sometimes seeing or hearing other amazing supernatural manifestations of spirit power. A Spiritualist no longer had to accept on faith the reality of the immortal soul or the divine realm. A Spiritualist no longer had to found belief in spiritual truths on the second-hand teachings of traditional religious authorities or sacred texts. A Spiritualist could experience fantastic things with her own eyes and ears.

Often Spiritualists saw their practices as essentially scientific. This is not surprising given the Spiritualist emphasis on empiricism just described. Especially in the period after the Civil War, the prestige of science was on the rise in North America, and some of the scientific discoveries that boosted the prestige of science were as mysterious as spirit communication to the average observer. Telegraph technology, for example, allowed previously inconceivable instant communication across long distances through mysterious unseen electrical forces. Braude provides an anecdote that is instructive in this case. When Samuel F. B. Morse, one of the inventors of Morse code, appealed to the U.S. Congress for $30,000 to build an experimental telegraph line between Washington and Baltimore in 1842, he was met with incredulity, skepticism, and mockery. A congressman from Tennessee suggested sarcastically that if Congress was going to give money to Morse's project, they might as well also fund experiments in mesmerism, a widespread pseudoscientific, semi-occult practice of the day. Another congressman suggested, with equal sarcasm, that the Millerites, a radical religious group that was predicting that the second coming of Christ would occur in 1844, should also be given some funding while they were at it. For these congressmen and others, telegraphy seemed just as outlandish as pseudoscience and forms of religious fanaticism. Eventually, some Spiritualists began to draw analogies between telegraphy and spirit communication, calling the process of spirit communication "the spiritual telegraph."[2]

In 1869, renowned English Spiritualist speaker and writer Emma Hardinge described Spiritualism as "a religion" that was "separate in all respects from any existing sect, because it

[2] Braude, 4-5.

bases its affirmations purely upon the demonstrations of fact, science, and natural law."[3] Examples of such attitudes and attempts to place Spiritualism within a scientific framework abound in the Spiritualist literature. For example, Andrew Jackson Davis, one of the writers with the most influence on nineteenth-century Spiritualism, conceived of the séance in terms of scientific principles pertaining to energy and electricity. In his writings, he suggests that sitters should be positioned around the séance table based on whether they had a positive or a negative energy. Those sitters who were more feminine in character were considered negative, and those with a more masculine character were considered positive. They were to be seated alternately around the table "as so many zinc and copper plates in the construction of magnetic batteries." A "magnetic cord," constructed of a rope covered in "silk or cotton velvet" with a copper and a steel wire wound around it, was to be placed in the laps of the sitters. The ends of the rope were to meet between two mediums sitting beside each other at the table and be placed in pails or jars of cold water. Furthermore, Davis suggested attaching the copper wire to a zinc plate and the steel wire to a copper plate to increase the rope's conductivity.[4] One could be forgiven for thinking that Davis was aiming to set up some sort of laboratory experiment. Contemporary American ghost hunters, like the Spiritualists, often see their investigations of hauntings and attempts to contact spirits as scientific and see the scientific nature of these endeavors as one major source of their value and validity.

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[3] Emma Hardinge, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York: The Author, 1870), 11, quoted in Albanese, 220.

[4] Andrew Jackson Davis, *The Present Age and Inner Life: A Sequel to Spiritual Intercourse* (Hartford: S. Andrus, 1853), 76, quoted in Albanese, 225-226.

Many of those drawn to Spiritualism during the antebellum period were searching for an alternative to what they perceived as the cold Calvinism or the hellfire evangelicalism of their youths. Though many denominations during the time of Spiritualism's rise were liberalizing and emphasizing a tender God of love, many of those drawn to Spiritualism still associated orthodox Christianity with the Calvinism that emphasized God's wrath and power, or the Methodism that emphasized the condemnation to hell of unconverted souls. The American Calvinism of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries generally taught that humankind was utterly depraved and deserving of damnation. God, then, was acting justly when he predestined many to suffer in hell after death and predestined a few to salvation. The American Methodism of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries was a revivalist religion seeking desperately to make converts to a pietistic, heartfelt Christianity. Though Methodist evangelists rejected the idea that God predestined some to damnation and some to salvation without regard to one's actions on Earth, they still emphasized the power of hell in order to motivate as many people as possible to embrace the Gospel and the salvation offered by Jesus. Within the Spiritualist movement, those communicating with the spirits developed a theology they found more palatable and comforting. God's love was emphasized far above God's wrath, and hell was declared a fabrication by clergy gone astray from God's truth. Spirits instead were generally thought to enter an eternal progression upon the deaths of their mortal bodies. A spirit may begin in a base, unpleasant state, but through the guidance of God and higher spirits, each spirit would move upward and upward into more glorious and divine realms. Unlike in traditional Calvinist teaching, God did not predestine souls to their fates. Free will and individualism were central to Spiritualist thought.

Later in the nineteenth century, a different form of faith crisis helped draw people to Spiritualism. The rise of Darwinism, higher criticism of the Bible, and the expanding prestige of science caused people to doubt traditional religious orthodoxies on other grounds. Darwin's theory of evolution raised doubts about Christian accounts of how life came to be while also raising questions about how humans could be spiritual, ensouled creatures while being so closely related to animals and born of purely natural processes rather than special creation. Higher criticism of the Bible was used by scholars to analyze Christian sacred texts as if they were any other historical texts and raised questions about how writings so evidently human in origin and historically situated could also be divinely inspired and authoritative. The rising prestige of science motivated people to pursue empirical and rigorous knowledge in all areas of life. The empirically verifiable was more and more highly valued, often at the expense of other ways of knowing, such as religious faith. For many, Spiritualism proved to be a worthy alternative to the traditional orthodoxies because of its claims to empirically or scientifically verify spiritual truths.

Like nineteenth-century Spiritualists, early twenty-first century ghost hunters also turn to experiences with spirits to fill the gaps they perceive in traditional religion. I have already noted that the perceived empirical or scientific nature of ghost hunting appeals to practitioners. It should also be noted that the majority of ghost hunters I have interacted with come from religious backgrounds and sometimes identify with a particular faith tradition, but are generally not active in a local congregation. Ghost hunters are often seeking types of knowledge and experience that they are not getting from traditional religion.

Finally, it is important to note that nineteenth-century Spiritualists generally had weak or non-existent modes of organization and structures of authority. Spiritualism had a spirit of fierce individualism, and this was reflected by the fact that anyone could experience enlightenment through spirit communication. An important feature of Spiritualism is that many of its most prominent spirit mediums and speakers were young, uneducated women, who could command authority in a firmly patriarchal society by way of the spirit wisdom they channeled. Ultimately, the spiritual truths of Spiritualism were experienced and discovered by individuals rather than taught. Spiritualist opinions about the spirit world abounded and could not be effectively struck down because there was no governing authority enforcing any kind of orthodoxy. These individualist tendencies also meant that Spiritualists did not organize themselves into large or long-lasting organizations. The National Association of Spiritualists, an organization that still exists today, was not founded until 1893 when Spiritualism was no longer at its peak. All of this does not mean that Spiritualists did not gather communally. The séance, for instance, generally required a group, and Spiritualists also held large conventions as did most of the social, religious, and political organizations of the day. Spiritualists also formed virtual communities by reading and publishing periodicals and books.

All of these features are evidence of the connection between nineteenth-century Spiritualism and twenty-first century ghost hunting. Ghost hunting also lacks any sort of authoritative organizational structure that can determine which beliefs about spirits or ghost hunting practices are correct or orthodox. As was the case with Spiritualism, certain ideas or practices are common and widespread among ghost hunters, but no central authority has the power to guarantee any one ghost hunter's adherence to such ideas or practices. Also, as in

Spiritualism, there are people who are influential in the ghost hunting community, but they do not have any sort of official or institutional power. While ghost hunting does promote a certain individualism in that each member of a given group is an investigator seeking his or her own empirical evidence, ghost hunting also has communal features. Ghost hunters often investigate in groups, just as Spiritualists performed séances in groups. Ghost hunters often gather together at sizeable conventions held all around the country and at various times of the year. Finally, ghost hunters also form virtual communities by consuming some of the same media, such as books, podcasts, and television shows; however, as was generally the case with Spiritualist periodicals and books, no one piece of media unites all ghost hunters. There is not one podcast, book, or show that one can say virtually all ghost hunters have interacted with except for perhaps some of the more prominent television shows, such as *Ghost Hunters* or *Ghost Adventures*.

Ultimately, nineteenth-century Spiritualists and twenty-first-century ghost hunters are grappling with similar problems of modernity. This is revealed in their similar commitment to empiricism and scientism, their struggles with mainstream religion, and their embrace of a diffuse authority structure. We can say that Spiritualists and ghost hunters are part of the same broad modern tradition. The rest of this dissertation will make evident how the modern problems of ghost hunters differ in distinct ways from the earlier modern problems of the Spiritualists.

Psychical Research

Spiritualism never received the level of recognition by the scientific community that it desired in spite of its appeal to some prominent scientists, such as physicist Oliver Lodge, who was key in the development of radio technology. Spiritualism did, however, spawn serious attempts by legitimate scholars and intellectuals to understand psychical phenomena, such as trance mediumship, scientifically. The psychical research Spiritualism inspired would become a central influence of and the soil from which popular ghost hunting in the twenty-first century would grow. Ultimately, the psychical research that began at the turn of the twentieth century was more rigorous and scientifically sound in the eyes of the scientific community than contemporary ghost hunting has ever managed to be, even if it never received the full approval of mainstream science. Later, in chapter three on scientism and ghost hunting, I will describe contemporary ghost hunting as a sort of popular or folk psychical research.

The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was in many ways spawned by Spiritualism. Not only did the society contain many Spiritualists and former Spiritualists, but it also pursued the questions concerning the mind and survival after death that Spiritualism raised. The Society was organized in London in 1882. Its membership consisted primarily of educated men and women from diverse fields and occupations. Though the Society faced quite a bit of resistance from the new academic psychologists of the time,[5] it was generally not academically or politically embarrassing to be a member of the Society in its early decades. Early members of the Society include Arthur Balfour, a future prime minister; authors Alfred Tennyson, William Ruskin, and

[5] See D. J. Coon, "Testing the Limits of Sense and Science: American Experimental Psychologists Combat Spiritualism, 1880-1920," *American Psychologist* 47, no. 2 (1992): 143-151.

Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll); two bishops; and eight Fellows of the Royal Society.[6] The leaders of the Society, in addition to being well educated, often had the financial resources to devote much of their time to psychical research. Henry Sidgwick (1838-1900) was the first president of the Society and a professor of moral philosophy at Cambridge.[7] Henry met his wife Eleanor (or Nora) through their shared interest in both the investigation of Spiritualist phenomena and in the advancement of higher education for women. She would go on to become the principal of Newnham College at Cambridge.[8] As we will see, Nora Sidgwick was one of the Society's most prominent researchers. Frank Podmore (1856-1910) graduated from Oxford and went on to become a civil servant in the General Post Office in London. Besides engaging in research for the Society, he was also joint honorary secretary from 1888 through 1896.[9] Frederic H. W. Myers (1843-1901) was a poet and professor of classics. He was one of the more enthusiastic members of the Society, and he would eventually become its president in 1900.[10] Finally, I hardly have to introduce William James (1842-1910), the Harvard professor who is often called the founder of American psychology. He wrote one of the most important American works in religious studies, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James was one of the founding members of the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR), which was formed in 1885, but, due to financial difficulties, was reabsorbed into the SPR in 1889. Nevertheless, James would serve as the president of the SPR from 1894 through 1895.[11]

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[6] R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 138-139.
[7] Renee Haynes, *The Society for Psychical Research, 1882-1982: A History* (London: Macdonald and Co., 1982), 175.
[8] Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychical Research* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 115-116.
[9] Gauld, 142-143.
[10] Gauld, 89-96; Haynes, 181.
[11] Haynes, 178-179.

The Society for Psychical Research was a more sober, more subtle, and more disillusioned outgrowth of Spiritualism. The Society's methods were significantly more scientifically rigorous than those of earlier séance sitters. Among Spiritualists, the Society would earn the reputation of being hard-headed when it came to determining whether alleged psychical phenomena were legitimate in any given case. Nevertheless, many members of the SPR were indeed on a spiritual quest. The Society wanted to overturn what they feared was an ever-tightening philosophical materialism in science and society by uncovering some sort of evidence that might question the ability of physical laws to completely explain the cosmos. They were hoping against hope that the universe was not as cold and indifferent as it seemed.

At its founding, the SPR's stated purpose was "[t]o unite students and inquirers in an organised body, with the view of promoting the investigation of certain obscure phenomena, including those commonly known as Psychical, Mesmeric, or Spiritualistic; and of giving publicity to the results of such research."[12] The founders of the organization committed themselves to investigating phenomena that seemed to have received too little scientific attention in a manner that accepted nothing *a priori*. In a presidential address, Sidgwick explained what the Society meant when they claimed to approach investigations scientifically: "we approach the subject without prepossessions, but with a single-minded desire to bring within the realm of orderly and accepted knowledge what now appears as a chaos of individual beliefs."[13] Here we see continuity with Spiritualism. Both the Society and Spiritualists rejected the idea that Spiritualist phenomena were necessarily supernatural and instead sought to

[12] "Constitution and Rules" in *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1 (1883): 331.
[13] Henry Sidgwick, *PSPR* 1 (July 1883), 246.

uncover the as yet undiscovered laws behind these phenomena. Speaking on behalf of the Society, Sidgwick declared, "we feel bound to begin by taking these experiences, however important and however obscure, as a part of the great aggregate which we call Nature; and we must ascertain carefully and systematically their import, their laws and causes, before we can rationally take up any definite attitude of mind with regard to them."[14]

The Society's critiques of Spiritualism are evident in its claims to navigate a middle way between superstitious credulity and dismissive skepticism. As Sidgwick explained, "we occupy a very peculiar position. It is not only that we are attacked with equal vigour by Materialists and Spiritualists: but that each of the opposing parties attributes to us an extreme and irrational bias in favour of the other extreme."[15] The Society was not only continuing the Spiritualist effort to defeat materialism through science; it was also criticizing earlier Spiritualists for their lack of scientific rigor. Typical of the SPR's criticisms of Spiritualism are Myers' comments on automatic writing: "The ascription of the paltriest automatic messages to the loftiest names – human or divine; the awe-struck retailing of the halting verses of a 'Shakespeare,' or the washy platitudes of a 'St. John,'-- all this has been equally repugnant to science, to religion, and to plain common-sense."[16] Indeed, though many Spiritualists joined the SPR at its founding, there was a large exodus in 1886 after Nora Sidgwick published a report stating that popular medium William Eglinton was a fraud.[17] Sidgwick's denouncement of Eglinton was likely only the point at which a brewing conflict boiled over. Many Spiritualists had been hoping the Society would lend

[14] Sidgwick, *PSPR* 1 (July 1883), 246.
[15] Henry Sidgwick, *PSPR* 5 (May 1889), 2.
[16] F. W. H. Myers, "A Defence of Phantasms of the Dead," *PSPR* 6 (Jan 1890): 337.
[17] John Beloff, *Parapsychology: A Concise History* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 75-76; Gauld, 203-204.

the movement much needed respectability. These hopes were slowly crushed, especially as many of the Society's researchers began interpreting hauntings and apparitions as evidence of telepathy rather that spirit communication. Furthermore, the Sidgwicks were generally more skeptical of psychical phenomena than the Spiritualist wing of the Society would have liked.[18]

A good example of the meticulousness of the Society's researchers can be found in the way they investigated haunted houses. Let us look at a case investigated by Frank Podmore in 1884. Local papers had been reporting "some remarkable disturbances" at the house of a horse dealer in Worksop. Nearly all of the witnesses were "of the humbler class" and unable to "write a connected account" of the events, so, at the request of the Society's Haunted House Committee, Podmore set out to interrogate the witnesses "in order, if possible, to arrive at some rational explanation of the business." Podmore made sure to interrogate all seven of the witnesses separately, and to record the testimony of each witness immediately. The three most important witnesses were allowed to read over their statements and sign them. All of these witness statements are included in their entirety in Podmore's report in the Society's journal. Also included is a chart of the house plan. Podmore meticulously describes the locations of all nearby buildings. Much of the potentially psychical occurrences involved objects flying around the house without any apparent physical cause, so Podmore examined the house for any holes in the walls or ceilings and any machinery that would be able to produce the disturbances by mechanical means. He finds none. After carefully reconstructing where each person present in the house was standing when certain psychical events took place, often by collating the testimony of multiple witnesses, he concludes that the flying objects could not have been

[18] Beloff, 75-76; Gauld, 139-140.

thrown. He then considers whether the owner of the home, Joe White, could be involved in an elaborate hoax. Podmore finds this unlikely, as he cannot discern any way, given the evidence, that White could have produced the phenomena. He also questions what motive White could have had, since he did not profit from the incidents, and he in fact lost valuable household objects. Podmore's report does not end in any conclusion about the events. This was simply a case to be entered into the Society's collection of evidence.[19] It is difficult to accuse Podmore of being careless in his investigation or of coming to grandiose conclusions about the evidence.

A second report on a haunting investigation, also published in the *Journal*, demonstrates a case in which a researcher explicitly rejected the possibility of psychical activity. In his report, an investigator by the name of G. A. Smith began by recounting in detail the experiences reported by a husband and wife whom he called "Mr. and Mrs. X." Smith was not impressed with the evidence. About the testimony of Mr. and Mrs. X, he explained, "From the manner in which their evidence was given, and from their own remarks, it seems pretty clear that it has been repeated to one and another a considerable number of times, and the little differences of detail, which *evidently* once existed in the impressions of each, have now been corrected and straightened out, until the accounts form a fairly harmonious whole." He then proceeded to explain all of the alleged ghostly manifestations as the results of natural causes. He concluded that an apparition reported by Mr. X was a dream image. Mr. X also claimed to have heard a whispering voice say, "Hark! the master has returned, we must depart," when he passed a spare bedroom upon arriving home one evening. Smith attributed this experience to a

[19] F. Podmore, "Report on the Worksop Disturbances," *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* (Dec. 1884): 199-206.

combination of the wheezing and coughing of an old woman next door and the heightened expectation generated from the belief that the house was haunted.[20] Given the sober and cautious manner in which the Society usually approached their investigations, one can see how the hopes of Spiritualists for the credibility the SPR might lend to the cause were dampened. Unfortunately for the Spiritualists, the Society was pursuing a different, though related, goal.

A certain ambivalence of purpose permeated the SPR in its early decades. Though the literature of the Society is littered with claims that their goal is to examine psychical phenomena without bias or presuppositions, it is clear that the Society did have the aim to prove that these phenomena did occur and that they were unexplainable by conventional physical means. The next step would be to uncover what sorts of unknown laws, material or immaterial, governed these phenomena. It is true that not all members of the society shared this aim. Some of them simply wanted to prove once and for all that these phenomena could be explained by known physical laws.[21] However, judging from the publications of the Society and other writings from the SPR's leaders, the majority of the Society's members pushed toward the discovery of something unknown.

The leaders of the Society seemed to believe that if they eventually accumulated enough unexplainable cases, the larger scientific community would have to relent. Henry Sidgwick argued, "Scientific incredulity has been so long in growing, and has so many and so strong roots, that we shall only kill it, if we are able to kill it at all as regards any of those questions, by burying it alive under a heap of facts." He was clear about the ultimate goal of the

[20] G. A. Smith, "Report on a Haunted House at Norwich," *JSPR* 1 (March 1885): 313-317.
[21] Moore, *White Crows*, 143-144.

Society's investigations: "We must drive the objector into the position of being forced either to admit the phenomena as inexplicable, at least by him, or to accuse the investigators either of lying or cheating or of a blindness or forgetfulness incompatible with any intellectual condition except absolute idiocy."[22] The task laid before the Society was not easy. At this time, the self-proclaimed "New Psychology" was trying to place itself on the same footing as the hard sciences, and, as part of this process, it was trying to establish boundaries between itself and the embarrassment that was psychical research.[23] Nevertheless, the Society continued onward, believing they would one day be vindicated. As Myers declared, "The humblest scouts who strive loyally to push forward the frontier of Science, even though Science at first disown them, are sure in time to hear her marching legions possess the unfrequented way."[24]

Historian of parapsychology Alan Gauld has argued that the driving force behind the SPR was a group of young, educated "reluctant agnostics." This group, who were the Society's most active workers, "all had come from religious, and even deeply religious, households; all had been driven some distance away from the faiths in which they had been reared."[25] According to historian R. Laurence Moore, this group "worried constantly, as they readily admitted, about what they regarded as the excessively materialistic biases of nineteenth-century science." These biases were a problem because of the perceived moral and social implications of philosophical materialism. Many of these men worried that society would be driven into amorality and despair.[26] In the words of Gauld, in the face of the "chilling prospect" of a

[22] Sidgwick, *PSPR* 1 (July 1882): 12.
[23] Coon, 145.
[24] F. W. H. Myers, "In Memory of Henry Sidgwick," *PSPR* 15 (1900): 460.
[25] Gauld, 140-141.
[26] Moore, 141.

"blankly indifferent" universe, "Psychical research seemed to offer a touch of warmth and hope…It was at least a candle in the darkness that was beginning to loom on every side."[27] The necessity such men felt to save the soul of western civilization is made clear in an exchange of letters between philosopher Thomas Davidson and William James in 1883 and 1884. Davidson urged that only "complete social regeneration" could save Europe, and this could only be achieved by "a scientific insight into the eternity of the individual, such as no philosophy now in vogue is able to give." James replied in agreement, arguing that for a new popular religion to replace "the ruins of old Christianity," there would have to be cultivated "belief in new *physical* facts and possibilities." James continued, "Abstract considerations about the soul & the reality of a moral order will not do in a year, what the glimpse into a world of new phenomenal possibilities . . . would do in an instant. Are the much despised 'spiritualism' & the 'Society for Psychical Research' to be the chosen instruments for a new era of faith? It would surely be strange if they were, but if they are not, I see no other agency that can do the work."[28]

What we see in the above quote from James is an insistence that only science could save humanity from the void science had created. For these elite, educated, reluctant agnostics, only super-material truths that persisted in the face of rigorous scientific investigation could stand in the face of doubt. According to Myers, "What is needed is simply a dispassionate intellectual curiosity bent upon unravelling the indications of man's survival after earthly manhood with the same candid diligence which has so lately unravelled the indications of man's descent from the brute." Furthermore, mankind must maintain "the same dispassionate

[27] Gauld, 148.
[28] Coon, 144.

curiosity and steady persistence of research by which alone objective truth in any direction has ever been obtained by man."[29] The psychical researchers had bought into claims that science was the ultimate arbiter of all truth. Because of this, only scientific findings could bring them back from the void. They had not abandoned Spiritualism's empirical quest for religious truth – they were just less naïve about what scientific investigation truly entailed.

Though most twenty-first century ghost hunters lack the nuance and intellectual credibility of a Myers or a James, the quest of early psychical researchers shaped ghost hunting throughout the twentieth century and served as a root for contemporary ghost hunting. Like the SPR, ghost hunters seek to employ science to rebuild what science has corroded. Investigation is the center of a spiritual quest for both the SPR and contemporary ghost hunters. On top of that, significant ideas about the spirit world and hauntings held by ghost hunters come from early psychical research unbeknownst to many ghost hunters. For example, one of the most widespread categories of haunting described by contemporary ghost hunters, the "residual haunting," is first described by Myers.

In 1889, Frederic Myers published several pieces in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* presenting and discussing the evidence gathered by the Society on "phantasms of the dead." In his presentations, he tried to theorize what exactly caused those phantasms that he and his partners had deemed authentic. These phantasms did not behave like people without bodies; rather, they seemed more like dream figures with no particular purpose. He concludes that "we have no warrant for the assumption that the phantom seen, even though it be somehow *caused* by a deceased person, *is* that deceased person, in any

[29] Myers, "In Defence," 340-341.

ordinary sense of the word." Instead, he compared these phantoms to the hallucinations that SPR researchers had earlier concluded could be telepathically communicated between the minds of living people. He also dismissed the idea that phantoms were necessarily attempts by the dead to communicate with the living. Instead, he argued that a ghost should be conceived of as "*a manifestation of persistent personal energy*, - or as an indication that some kind of force is being exercised after death which is in some way connected with a person previously known on earth." Myers continues, "It is theoretically possible that this force or influence which, after a man's death, creates a phantasmal impression of him, may indicate no continuing action on his part, but may be some residue of the force or energy which he generated while yet alive." In other words, ghosts may actually just be psychic images deposited in certain locations by living people that remain after those people have died. To illustrate his point, Myers cites a case analyzed by his associate Edmund Gurney. Gurney, in reference to a case in which a phantasm of an old woman kept appearing in the bed where she had been murdered, argues that the phantom suggests "not so much any continuing local action on the part of the deceased person, as the survival of a mere image, impressed, we cannot guess how, on we cannot guess what, by that person's physical organism, and perceptible at times to those endowed with some cognate form of sensitiveness."[30]

We can see these early theories of Myers and Gurney reflected in the writing of Brad Steiger, a paranormal investigator and prolific author of books on the paranormal. In the introduction to his 2012 book *Real Ghosts, Restless Spirits, and Haunted Places* Steiger

[30] F. W. H. Myers, "On Recognised Apparitions Occurring More Than a Year After Death," *PSPR* 6 (July 1889): 14-15.

communicates an idea similar to Myer's and Gurney's theory of how a living person might create a phantasm that persists after the person's death. When discussing types of ghosts, Steiger describes what he calls "spirit residue":

> I have found that a large number of structural hauntings are caused by the residual presence of spirits. In these cases a powerful human emotion—fear, jealously, hate, pain— has somehow been impressed into the environment. It is my contention that the sounds and sights of the haunting may be perceived by the psyche of a sensitive individual as if they were images on a strip of motion picture film that keeps being fed through a projector again and again. The percipients of these kinds of hauntings cannot interact with the ghosts any more than one can interact with the images on a motion picture or television screen.[31]

The type of ghost Steiger describes is strongly reminiscent of the dream-like phantom figures described by Myers, or Gurney's phantom of an old woman that appeared at the location of her murder. What Steiger here describes as "spirit residue" is described as a "residual haunting" by many of Steiger's ghost hunting colleagues.

Twentieth-Century Ghost Hunting

As the twentieth century progressed, many psychical researchers would begin focusing their attention on the supernormal abilities of the human mind, such as extrasensory perception, rather than on the spirits of the dead and hauntings. As we saw, the early SPR did investigate hauntings, but this became less and less common. Nevertheless, some investigators, affiliated to varying degrees with psychical research organizations, continued to actively seek out and investigate hauntings. I will highlight just a few of these twentieth-century ghost hunters to give the reader an idea of what sort of ghost hunting activity was occurring in the

[31] Brad Steiger, *Real Ghosts, Restless Spirits, and Haunted Places* (Visible Ink Press, 2012), xii.

years between Spiritualism and psychical research's early height and the ghost hunting boom that was sparked by reality television at the end of 2004.

Harry Price's (January 17 1881 – March 29 1948) legacy has deeply shaped American ghost hunting even though he never set foot on American shores. Price was a celebrity ghost hunter in Britain and across Europe beginning in the 1920s until his death in 1948. He first rose to prominence when he, in partnership with the Society for Psychical Research, exposed the famous British spirit photographer William Hope as a fraud. One of the high points of Price's fame came while he was investigating Borley Rectory, a residence that Price would call "the most haunted house in England." Price was known as more than an investigator of séances and other paranormal phenomena, he was known as a ghost hunter.

Harry Price can be a difficult figure to pin down. More than one biographer has accused him of fabricating details about his life to make himself more exciting and appealing. If nothing else, Harry Price was and is controversial. It seems that most of the writers who comment on Price either love him or hate him. He is either championed as the preeminent British psychical researcher and one of the greatest ghost hunters of all time, or he is decried as an attention-grubbing fraud. Examples of this back-and-forth abound. The first biography of Price, written shortly after his death by Paul Tabori, the literary executor of his will, describes Price in glowing terms. On the other hand, Trevor Hall's 1978 book on Price's career is scathing, claiming to unveil Price as a fraud. The British ghost hunter and writer Peter Underwood, writing in 1985, defends Price's reputation and describes him positively, even while acknowledging his love of attention. "Thousands of people wrote to [Price], rightly pointing out that he was the only investigator of his day who approached psychic matters without sentimentality, who could

keep to the facts and was not carried away by religious conviction and wishful thinking. Consequently, his results and considered opinion carried greater importance for any cool and balanced mind than those of anyone else," Underwood writes. However, Underwood also finds himself admitting that Price's sensational books on Borley Rectory were different in tone and writing than his previous works. While never ceasing to defend Price, Underwood goes as far as to suggest that perhaps, during his later years, "Price's critical faculty deteriorated" and he allowed his desire for publicity and sales override other concerns.

The controversy continues into the twenty-first century. A website founded in 2004 (www.harrypricewebsite.co.uk) seems to function as a virtual shrine to Price, but the most recent biography of Price, written in 2006 by Richard Morris, sometimes functions as a point-by-point refutation of things Price has claimed about himself. The negative portrayals of Price depict him as a man willing to compromise much for media attention, a man willing to embellish the truth to enrich himself, and a man even willing to fake paranormal phenomena to spend time in the spotlight. The positive portrayals generally paint him as a hard-nosed semi-skeptical researcher who both took psychical research seriously and brought it to the attention of the masses. Price was also quite controversial during his lifetime. Even then, people suspected him of cheating and compromising his integrity for fame. This state of affairs was certainly evident in Price's ongoing feud with the SPR, where he was kept out of leadership positions in spite of his renown and his membership in the organization.

Price's ambivalent reputation aside, what really matters for our purposes is that he was widely influential. The laboratory Price founded in 1926 to investigate mediums and others claiming to possess psychical abilities, the National Laboratory for Psychical Research, garnered

enough media attention to become a topic of conversation in ordinary British homes.[32] Within a short time, the honorary membership rolls of the laboratory would match those of the SPR in size and would include eminent psychologists and internationally renowned psychical researchers.[33] Price also made it into ordinary homes through the *British Journal of Psychical Research* that he published with an appealing cover and a writing style that he hoped was "both interesting and bright."[34] But Price's most effective means of reaching a wide audience were the publication of his books aimed at a popular audience and his frequent appearance in the news media. Price wrote around twenty books during his lifetime, the most popular of which concerned the famously haunted Borley Rectory. He often appeared in widely-read British newspapers, including *The Times*, the *Daily Express*, and the *Daily Mail*. Price invited the media to all of his major investigations.[35] Some of the most popular articles in which he appeared concerned Borley Rectory as well.[36] And Price did not stop with print. In 1936, he participated in a live BBC radio broadcast from a haunted house in Kent, in some ways prefiguring the ghost hunting television shows that would become popular in the early twenty-first century.[37] Price participated in other radio broadcasts on the subject of hauntings as well.[38] At times, Price's experiments and investigations were so sensational that one might wonder if they were

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[32] Richard Morris, *Harry Price: The Psychic Detective* (Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2007) 91-92.

[33] Elizabeth R. Valentine, "Spooks and Spoofs: Relations between Psychical Research and Academic Psychology in Britain in the Inter-War Period," *History of Human Sciences* 25, no. 2 (2012), 73.

[34] Morris, 91-92.

[35] Morris, 91; Peter Mulacz, "Historical Profiles in Poltergeist Research" in *From Shaman to Scientist: Essays on Humanity's Search for Spirits*, ed. James Houran (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 168.

[36] Morris, 123-130.

[37] Peter Underwood, *The Ghost Hunters: Who They Are and What They Do* (Createspace Independent Publishing Platform, 1985), 27.

[38] See, for example, Harry Price, *The Most Haunted House in England: Ten Years' Investigation of Borley Rectory* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1965), 166.

performed simply for the publicity. One of the best examples of this is perhaps the Brocken experiment. During the summer of 1932, Price announced to the media that a copy of an old German magical text had been mysteriously left for him at his laboratory. The text described a spell for turning a goat into a handsome man with the help of a virgin and an "alchemical ointment." Price announced that he would perform this spell on top of the Brocken, the highest of the Harz Mountains in Germany, "if only to prove the fallacy of transcendental magic." The international news media showed up in force.[39] In summing up Price's influence, Underwood says, "There is no doubt [Price] did more to bring psychical research to the man in the street than anyone before him."[40]

Through his various writings, Price essentially provided a how-to guide for amateur investigators of hauntings. Price would at times go into considerable detail in describing how he investigated a given haunting, especially in his books about Borley Rectory. For Price, the investigation of a haunted house essentially involved interviewing witnesses of haunting phenomena, spending time in haunted places in an attempt to experience the haunting phenomena oneself, and doing one's best to thoroughly search and seal a house to rule out any natural causes for observed phenomena. For Price, good evidence of a haunting consisted of the scrutinized testimony of reliable witnesses. When Price chose individuals to investigate Borley Rectory, he chose them "for their intelligence, ability, culture and independence of thought. They included doctors, university men, engineers, army officers, and level-headed business men – none of whom had any bias towards psychical research or spiritualism, and

[39] Morris, 155-160.
[40] Underwood, 27.

none of whom had ever heard of Borley Rectory before they began their investigation."[41] The testimony of witnesses was more valuable the more one could rule out the possibility of subjective hallucinations. More than once, Price cites as exemplary the testimony of three level-headed women who, on the lawn of Borley Rectory, simultaneously saw a ghostly nun on a "bright summer's evening." Price also holds up as exemplary cases in which physical objects are effected by psychical phenomena, such as when an investigator was mysteriously locked in a room while in an empty house with entrances sealed, or when three witnesses saw glass bottles appear and then shatter on the ground of a sealed kitchen.[42]

Price also considered it good evidence of a haunting when he or researchers he recruited witnessed phenomena firsthand under fairly controlled conditions. Price explains how these controlled conditions were established when he describes how he began his first investigation of Borley Rectory on June 12, 1929:

> my secretary and I began a minute examination of the Rectory from rafters to cellars. With yard stick and steel tape we measured every room, passage and piece of furniture, and made a working plan of them, We sounded the walls for possible cavities or hidey-holes, examined all cupboards, explored under stairways, and, with powerful electric torches, crawled on our hands and knees along the joists and rafters under the eaves…Dusty and slightly bruised, we scrambled back from the 'attics,' and resumed our search. We sealed the door behind us. As we came to a window, we sealed that, too. We examined the chimneys and fireplaces, took more measurements, and satisfied ourselves that at least the upper portion of the house could not be invaded without our knowing it.

Price continues with a description of how he and his secretary finished investigating and sealing the ground floor and continued down into the cellars.[43]

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[41] Price, *Most Haunted House*, 186.
[42] Ibid., 187.
[43] Ibid., 35-36.

Careful observation in hopes of witnessing phenomena under semi-controlled conditions was the center of Price's methodology. This is made especially evident in the "Blue Book" he printed as a guide for those he recruited to investigate the Borley haunting and subsequently printed as an appendix to his first book on the rectory. Careful observation is central to Price's instructions:

> 4. Visit all rooms, etc., at intervals of about one hour…Before going on duty at each period, inspect grounds…
> 8. Take exact times of all sounds or happenings; also make notes of your own movements, with exact times. Record weather conditions…
> 11. For one half-hour before, and half-hour after dusk, take up position in Summer-house. Remain perfectly quiet, and watch the 'Nun's Walk' on far side of lawn. It is this path that a black, draped figure is said to frequent…
> MOVEMENT OF OBJECTS. When going on duty, see that objects are on chalked outlines, and check frequently. When an object is heard to fall, immediately ascertain in which room object has fallen, and draw rough plan of room, showing the direction of flight. Estimate approximate force expended, and, if object *seen* in flight, note speed, course, force, and trajectory. Examine object and restore to chalked outline.[44]

Interestingly, unlike early twenty-first century ghost hunters, Price did not describe relying heavily on complex machinery or sophisticated gadgetry during his investigations. He describes only a few pieces of sophisticated equipment. A camera plays a major role in the first haunting investigation he ever undertook as a teenager. He set up a camera and flash so that they could be triggered from another room to take a photo of a flight of stairs where phantom footsteps were often heard. When the footsteps were heard by Price and his companions, he triggered the camera and flash, but unfortunately caught nothing paranormal in the photograph.[45] After this early experiment, it seems that Price mainly used photography to

[44] Ibid., 194-196.
[45] Harry Price, *Confessions of a Ghost Hunter* (New York: Causeway Books, 1974), 18-24.

document the scenes of alleged hauntings and perhaps to record physical evidence such as objects that had been moved mysteriously. In his second book on Borley Rectory, Price did include a controversial photograph of a flying brick that Price claims may have been flung by a poltergeist. Other sophisticated pieces of equipment Price used include "delicate transmitting thermograph[s]" that he installed in allegedly haunted locations to record fluctuations in temperature, and "small electric bells, dry batteries and switches" which were used to create "secret electrical contacts" for the seeming purpose of detecting when doors or windows were opened or closed paranormally or otherwise.[46] In fact, a significant portion of the equipment Price employed was used to detect fraud and assure that no living physical body entered a house to cause the phenomena experienced. We have already seen how Price made a habit of "sealing" windows and doors. Some of his equipment consisted of tools such as screw eyes, string or tapes, and lead seals that he could use to detect whether a given path of entry had been disturbed during an investigation period.[47]

Though Price's investigations of hauntings provide a limited precedent for the technology use of later ghost hunters, his investigations of mediums and séances employed a host of gadgets. Price argues that "modern scientific psychical research necessitates a great technical knowledge in many branches of science and the use of instruments and apparatus which must astound the layman."

[46] Ibid., 31, 39; Price, *Most Haunted House*, 118.
[47] See, for example, Price, *Confessions*, 31.

In his popular work, *Ghost Hunting: A Practical Guide*, originally published in 1973, English paranormal investigator Andrew Green (July 28, 1927 – May 21, 2004) lays groundwork that would be used by many future amateur paranormal investigators. The traces of Green's method can still be found in early-twenty-first-century ghost hunting. Green notes at the beginning of his work that interest in ghosts is "rapidly increasing," as evidenced by the many case histories being published and the many books about ghosts being released. He finds that a guide for new investigators of hauntings is sorely needed. He also firmly places his guide in the context of parapsychology, an object of study that he believes is taken seriously in America, Russia, and part of Europe.[48] The position that Green takes from page one of his work is that ghosts do indeed exist: "The existence of ghosts can hardly be challenged in the face of the ever-mounting evidence that is published throughout the world. In Britain alone some 150 cases are reported each year and probably twice that number are never publicized." Similarly, on the very last page of his text, he asserts, "*Not* all ghosts are fictional, they *do* exist, they are seen and heard, they have imparted knowledge (by telepathic processes) and will continue to do so until the human race becomes extinct."[49] However, during his career, Green was sometimes accused of being an overzealous skeptic. The basis of these accusations is also to be found in his guide. The majority of the work seems to be devoted to instructions on how to determine that a house is not haunted. Perhaps a mysteriously opening door is caused by wind or a shift in air pressure in a room. Perhaps phantom footsteps are caused by "the regular contraction of floorboards" caused by a heat source such as a radiator or fireplace. "Once one

[48] Andrew Green, *Ghost Hunting: A Practical Guide* (St. Albans Mayflower, 1976), vii-viii.
[49] Ibid., 1, 149.

board contracts and creaks, it releases the pressure on the adjoining board which then also contracts and creaks." Green goes as far as to suggest that ghost hunters procure a geological map of any property they investigate, in case the composition of the subsoil or other geological features are causing phenomena.[50] In Green's work, then, we find an earlier example of the ideal of a skeptical attitude found among twenty-first-century ghost hunters – an attitude that has its roots in turn-of-the-twentieth-century psychical research.

Although Green holds that ghosts are real, he is skeptical of the idea that they provide proof of the existence of the soul or life after death. Green admits that he "would prefer to experience proof" of life after death rather than to accept the idea without evidence, but he also admits that he has not encountered such proof. He rejects the popular belief that a ghost is "the earthbound spirit of someone who has died and for certain reasons continues to haunt the locality until persuaded to 'pass on.'" For Green, ghosts are telepathic impressions created by living human minds and associated with specific places at specific times. These impressions are created when "someone at some time has created an intense thought-picture of himself or of his pet animal in a particular situation at a specific site." This generally occurs during times of extreme stress, "such as physical pain or emotional upset," when brain waves "reach a certain pitch." Such telepathic images can outlive the people who created them, and they are sometimes created during the moments before a violent or unexpected death. Sometimes the telepathic "hallucinations" are caused not by a death, but by some other circumstance that involved the intense focusing of one's thoughts. Green uses the example of a member of a religious order who spends most of his time in a monastery. Because of the "amazing

[50] Ibid., 71, 68, 61-62.

concentration of deep thought" associated with the monastery, whether the monk died in the monastery "is immaterial; his whole consciousness is centred within the building," resulting in the creation of a ghost. It is clear that, for Green, there is no such thing as what later ghost hunters would call an "intelligent haunting." He has found "no evidence of any genuine cases where actual conversations have been carried out with a ghost, for the phantom voice has been created at a different point in time to that in which the witness finds himself." For Green, all hauntings are "residual."[51]

Notably, Green recommended the use of some of the equipment that would become common among later ghost hunters. Though he insists that electronic equipment is not essential, he does recommend the use of a flash camera and a tape recorder. He even suggests that infrared filming equipment might be useful, and that one might wire a camera to go off when it detects movement in a room. Green does mention the development of specialist ghost detection devices, noting that "ghost-hunting is one of those activities which is liable to call for inventiveness where equipment in concerned." As an example, he describes a piece of equipment devised by a member of the Society for Psychical Research. The device consisted of a camera connected to a tape recorder which is also hooked up to a notification light and buzzer. The contraption was set up so that the camera would go off and the tape recorder would start recording whenever there was any sound or temperature fluctuation in a sealed room. At the same time the buzzer would sound and the light would illuminate to make observers aware of the activity. Though Green does mention the use of a tape recorder, he does not seem to expect the appearance of anything like electronic voice phenomena (EVP) on

[51] Ibid., 26-34, 83.

the tapes. Twenty-first century ghost hunters would come to rely on recorders almost solely for the purpose of recording ghostly voices, or EVP. He mentions "Raudive voices" in a separate section as a fairly new subject for parapsychology, and he expresses uncertainty as to whether the alleged phantom voices can be proven to be paranormal.[52]

Hans Holzer (Jan. 26, 1920 – April 26, 2009) is the most influential ghost hunter for contemporary American ghost hunters that I will discuss. He was born in Vienna but left Austria with his family in 1938 before the Nazi takeover. As a young adult, Holzer studied archaeology, history, and numismatics. After he came to New York City, where he would spend the rest of his life, he earned a master's degree in comparative religion and claimed to have earned a doctorate in parapsychology from the dubious London College of Applied Science.[53] Holzer also took an interest in the theatre and wrote plays. Holzer gained much of his fame as a ghost hunter through his numerous publications, having published more than 140 books on the paranormal before he died, and through his investigation of the famously haunted Amityville house with spirit medium Ethel Johnson-Meyers in 1977. Holzer also made television appearances on shows such as the popular paranormal investigation show of the 1970s *In Search Of…* Holzer claimed to have coined the term "the other side" to refer to the realm of spirits.[54] Holzer's influence on the current generation of ghost hunters has in many cases been direct. Jeff Belanger, a ghost hunter, author, and longtime writer/researcher for *Ghost*

[52] Ibid., 39-40, 49-53.

[53] Rumors across the internet propose that this institution was not a legitimate institution of higher education, and traces of its existence are difficult to find.

[54] William Grimes, "Hans Holzer, Ghost Hunter, Dies at 89," The New York Times, April 29, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/30/books/30holzer.html.

Adventures, one of the most popular ghost hunting reality television shows, says of Holzer, "He became our first multi-media spokesperson for the paranormal…He had the personality for it; he had the storytelling ability, and he was putting himself out there at a time when no one else was."[55]

Holzer emphasizes his "scientific credentials" and depicts himself as a hard-nosed investigator. In describing his methods, Holzer says, "I neither believed nor disbelieved; I looked only for facts no matter what the implications."[56] Unlike most contemporary ghost hunters, Holzer worked with mediums instead of a host of gadgets, though he did often carry a polaroid camera on investigations and sometimes a tape recorder to document the investigations. It would be the reality television shows of the twenty-first century that would convince contemporary ghost hunters to utilize a range of electronic equipment for investigation. Holzer's method of investigating involved interviewing the witnesses of a haunting, then visiting the haunted location with a spirit medium. Holzer would tell the medium nothing about the case, then let the medium form psychic impressions without having been given details that could be used for fabrication. Generally, the medium would enter a trance that would allow the ghost to speak through her to those present. Holzer sometimes calls the process of gathering with a medium to contact ghosts a "séance."[57]

Holzer viewed ghosts as generally harmless to the living, and he would sometimes attempt to help them cross over into the full afterlife with the help of a medium. According to

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[55] Aaron Sagers, "Hans Holzer at 100: America's First TV Ghost Hunter Still Haunts Paranormal Community," Den of Geek, January 24, 2020, https://www.denofgeek.com/culture/hans-holzer-at-100-americas-first-tv-ghost-hunter/.
[56] Hans Holzer, *Ghost Hunter* (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), 10-11, 16.
[57] Ibid., 31.

Holzer, a ghost is a person or part of a person confined to a location after death by some sort of emotional disturbance or an unwillingness to abandon earthly life that could often be worked out through communication or actions on behalf of the ghost. For example, a ghost may want its mortal remains properly buried. Holzer had a concept of the residual haunting that we see first elaborated by psychical researcher Frederic Myers, insisting that most hauntings were simply caused by impressions of emotional events from the past imprinted onto the atmosphere and replayed to observers and not full-blown conscious ghosts. Holzer held that all ghosts, and especially apparitions, are perceived through people with extra sensory perception or mediumistic abilities, but that these abilities are present in varying degrees in much of the population. He claimed that he himself, as an artistic person, was sensitive, but he was not a medium so the impressions he could gather on his own were limited.[58] Holzer had views about the afterlife or "the other side" reminiscent of some views found among nineteenth-century Spiritualists. The other side is a world just like ours, just without illness or time and perhaps a bit better. Spirits are organized in a society and the realm is even run by a bureaucracy that determines things such as which spirits can contact the living.[59]

Ghost Hunting in the Twenty-first Century

By the late 1990s, an amateur ghost hunting network was forming on the internet. Ghost hunters created websites and communicated with each other online. This online milieu

[58] Ibid., 15-21, 31-32. On Holzer's ideas about the nature of hauntings, see also Holzer, *Ghosts: True Encounters with the World Beyond* (New York: Black Dog and Leventhal Publishers, 1997), 23-56

[59] Jeff Belanger, "Dr. Hans Holzer – A Lifetime of Explaining the Unexplained," ghostvillage.com, February 7, 2005, http://www.ghostvillage.com/legends/2005/legends35_02072005.shtml.

formed the base from which the twenty-first century American ghost hunting boom would grow. In October 2004, the reality television show *Ghost Hunters* premiered on what was then called the Scifi Channel. The show featured two plumbers who served as the lead investigators of The Atlantic Paranormal Society in their spare time. Other ghost hunting reality shows about other paranormal investigation teams would follow, and thousands of ghost hunting teams would begin to spring up around the country. We will return to the media-inspired ghost hunting boom after 2004 in chapter five on ghost hunting and media.

I approached contemporary American ghost hunters with their roots in mind. At times they seem more akin to Spiritualists, while at other times more like psychical researchers. Though ghost hunters are diverse and many of them are quite skeptical, the majority seem certain, based on their personal experiences, that the spirit world does exist. In this way, they are like most Spiritualists. Elite psychical researchers, at least, were driven hard by skepticism. Unlike Spiritualists, however, most ghost hunters do not spend significant amounts of time trying to establish deep communication with the spirits. Spiritualists spoke for hours with their spirit contacts about what the afterlife looked like and what the spirits knew about the cosmos based on their higher spiritual state. Although some ghost hunters participate in these types of activities, most limit communication to the purpose of establishing the identity of the spirits and the cause of a haunting. Ghost hunters are much more interested in ghost communication as a means of establishing the reality of the spirit world. This concern primarily with establishing the existence of ghosts places them alongside psychical researchers. Ultimately, many contemporary ghost hunters are most like those Spiritualists at the turn of the twentieth

century who approached psychical research with a firmer faith in the existence of spirits than researchers like James or the Sidgwicks.

Given that Spiritualism and psychical research are modern phenomena even though they are each over a century old, I also used my knowledge of Spiritualism and psychical research to help discern what makes ghost hunting late modern. What changed between now and now? This will be evident in the following chapters. The creep of materialism and the prestige of science are driving social forces now and then, making empirical investigation of the spirit world of continuing interest to many. Late modern ghost hunters have wider access to electronic equipment and they associate that equipment with scientific investigating. Traditional religious authority was questioned a century and more ago with the rise of higher biblical criticism and continues to be questioned by forces such as pluralism now. Christianity remains prominent as a base on which to build spirit belief, though survey data suggests the influence of Christianity is waning in the twenty-first century. Late modern ghost hunters have much easier access to a much wider array of religious options from which to choose to build a worldview around spirits. An interest in experience of the supernatural that we see among Spiritualists and psychical researchers has developed over time into ghost hunting that is centered around experience in important ways. Media shifts are perhaps the source of the greatest difference between the turn of the twentieth century and a century later. Contemporary American ghost hunting is bounded and shaped my electronic mass media, particularly television and the internet.

Chapter 3

Ghost Hunting and Scientism

One of the ways ghost hunting is a distinctly modern enchantment is that it is scientistic. In other words, ghost hunting employs the trappings of science. Ghost hunters use scientific-seeming language and concepts and even conceive of their endeavor as scientific. I use the term "scientistic" to avoid making certain ideological judgments. I avoid calling ghost hunting "scientific" or "pseudoscience" to avoid entering the complex debate over what is and is not truly science. That is not the project of this dissertation. It is true that many professional scientists, as well as elite parapsychologists, would argue that what the majority of ghost hunters in twenty-first-century America do is not science or a truly scientific endeavor and, as I will show, even some ghost hunters have that intuition. In using the terms scientism and scientistic, I want to be clear about what I am not doing. Mirroring the complexity of the term as it is used, philosopher of religion and science Mikael Stenmark identifies ten specific versions of scientism. As a starting point he defines scientism in general as the idea that "there are no real limits to the competence of science, no limits to what can be achieved in the name of science. Or, if there are limits to the scientific enterprise, the idea is that science, at least, sets the boundaries for what we humans can ever achieve or know about reality. There is nothing outside the domain of science, nor is there any area of human life to which science cannot successfully be applied."[1] Many ghost hunters simply do not believe this. Though they value

[1] Mikael Stenmark, "What is Scientism?" *Religious Studies* 33, no. 1 (March 1997): 15-32.

science highly as a way of knowing, they also often maintain that there are truths that go beyond science, or that can be known in a way that is not scientific. For example, a good number of ghost hunters would maintain that demonic spirits can be understood by way of religious teachings and not solely through scientific investigation. Others would ground their belief in the reality of spirits on their personal experience of ghosts and not on rigorous scientific investigation. Nevertheless, ghost hunters employ language, concepts, and equipment they view as scientific to make their ideas seem credible to themselves and to others. I am using the term scientism as it has been employed in the study of Western Esotericism and metaphysical religion. Olav Hammer, in his discussion of metaphysical religion, explains, "Scientism is the active positioning of one's own claims in relation to the manifestations of any academic scientific discipline, including, but not limited to, the use of technical devices, scientific terminology, mathematical calculations, theories, references and stylistic features – without, however, the use of methods generally approved within the scientific community, and without subsequent social acceptance of these manifestations by the mainstream of the scientific community through e.g. peer reviewed publication in academic journals."[2] Examining the ways in which ghost hunting is scientistic provides the researcher with an idea of what enchantment looks like in late modernity. Ghost hunting paints a picture of what one can expect to find when examining how science and enchantment interact in early-twenty-first century enchanted worldviews.

[2] Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 206.

Scientistic Ghost Hunting

First, let us examine what it looks like for ghost hunting to be scientistic. When asked about the role of science in their investigations of hauntings, most ghost hunters will admit that they view it as central to their endeavors. Mark, who is part of a team based out of St. Louis, MO, when asked whether he thinks ghost hunting is a scientific endeavor, responded, "It can be. And I think it should be." Zak Bagans, well known for being the star of the popular television series *Ghost Adventures*, comments on ghost hunting and science in the book he co-wrote with Kelly Crigger. "Is paranormal investigation really a science?" he asks rhetorically. "Yes. Yes it is. I don't consider myself a scientist, but I would not be doing my job if I did not educate myself and stay on top of the latest theories surrounding our field of research. And what we do is just that – scientific research."[3] Sean, a ghost hunter based in Cincinnati, OH, explained to me that when it comes to having a personal experience of the paranormal, "that's great, but that's not reproducible." One needs evidence that can be measured, recorded, and produced for others to examine. Rhonda, a ghost hunter based in Arkansas, says, "You have to have a scientific part of [ghost hunting] to try to keep yourself grounded…You know, you have to be skeptical, you have to prove that it's paranormal…You can't just go in and say, 'Ok, that's a ghost.'" Sociologist Marc Eaton has also noted the scientistic nature of ghost hunting in his own ethnographic research, noting that for many ghost hunters, scientistic approaches to investigation are valued above intuitive or mediumistic approaches.[4]

[3] Zak Bagans and Kelly Crigger, *Dark World: Into the Shadows with the Lead Investigator of the Ghost Adventures Crew* (Las Vegas: Victory Belt Publishing, 2011), 213.
[4] Marc Eaton, "Paranormal Investigation: The Scientist and the Sensitive."

Scientistic Equipment

Many ghost hunters also view themselves as scientific by virtue of the technical equipment they use. Bryan, a ghost hunter based in Colorado, lectures on paranormal investigation with his team. One of the first questions he asks of ghost hunters and potential ghost hunters is, "How are you applying science to your paranormal research?" Bryan reports that, to his chagrin, "the general answer is, 'if I have an electronic device that…lights up and beeps and makes noise, that's science.'" Bryan's frustration is based in part on accurate observation. A significant number of ghost hunters do see their use of electronic equipment as part of what makes their investigations scientific. For example, Mike, a ghost hunter based in Minneapolis, MN, holds that the equipment he uses is part of what makes his investigations scientific. He points out that being able to interpret the data produced by the equipment requires "a scientific know-how and knowledge." When I asked Rhonda, a ghost hunter based in Arkansas, whether ghost hunting is a scientific endeavor, she answered in part by mentioning that "scientists come up with awesome equipment to try to prove [whether or not ghosts exist]." Similarly, a book authored by the founders of The Atlantic Paranormal Society, a group famous for starring in the television show *Ghost Hunters* which helped spark a ghost hunting craze beginning in 2004, advertises the group on its back cover as using "the most sophisticated scientific equipment available."[5] The satirical humor of Kenny Biddle, a paranormal investigator who monitors the world of ghost hunting closely, comments on the perception that ghost hunting equipment makes the endeavor scientific. In an online post, Biddle writes, "Ghost

[5] Jason Hawes, Grant Wilson, and Michael Jan Friedman, *Ghost Hunting: True Stories of Unexplained Phenomena from The Atlantic Paranormal Society* (New York: Pocket Books, 2007).

hunters absolutely love their gadgets. Simple observations show that technology attracts ghost hunters like moths to the blue glow of a bug zapper. It's the 'sciencey' aspect of it; gadgets make it look like one is being all scientific, with blinking lights and noises that reach excited peaks."[6]

Here I will give a few examples of the types of equipment many ghost hunters use. Most ghost hunting teams employ EMF (electromagnetic field) meters. These meters are designed to measure the strength of or fluctuations in electromagnetic fields. EMF meters were originally designed as an electrician's tool to pick up the electromagnetic fields given off by electrical wiring or devices. EMF meters are complicated and highly technical devices, and it is not clear that many ghost hunters have a proficient understanding of exactly how they work. What is important to know for our purposes is that many ghost hunters hold the theory that spirits give off electromagnetic energy, they are made of energy, and/or they use electromagnetic energy to manifest and produce paranormal phenomena. This means that ghosts would cause spikes or other changes in electromagnetic energy fields and could thus be detected by an EMF meter.

Another important device for many ghost hunters is an electronic voice recorder. Recorders are used to capture EVP (electronic voice phenomena). EVP are voices that are found on audio recordings, generally when they are being carefully reviewed. EVP are not audible when the recording is being taken, which is why they are only found upon review of the audio. EVP are essentially anomalous sounds on audio recordings that often sound like whispering or vocalizations. It is up to the investigator to determine which anomalous sounds are genuinely

[6] Kenny Biddle, "The Xbox Kinect and Paranormal Investigation," Skeptical Inquirer, July 7, 2017, https://skepticalinquirer.org/exclusive/the-xbox-kinect-and-paranormal-investigation/.

ghostly and what the EVP are saying. EVP can also be found on the audio of video cameras. Generally, ghost hunters will hold "EVP sessions," during which questions are asked to any entities that may be present in a location while a recorder is running. The questions vary widely and are often particular to the details of the alleged haunting, but they can include questions such as "what is your name?" "Do you want us to leave?" "Why are you here?" "Are you the one who scratched/pushed/was watching the people who live here?" It is not clear how the voices are supposed to be made to appear on audio recordings, and investigators advance many more or less sophisticated theories. For example, some investigators theorize that the voices are produced using sound waves outside of the range of human hearing, but within a range that is picked up by recording devices. Others suggest that EVP are not produced by sound waves at all, but are instead imprinted through some sort of electromagnetic process.

A second popular mode of capturing ghostly voices is the ghost box. The ghost box, which can take the form of an actual device or an app on a smartphone, is essentially a device or program that rapidly scans AM/FM radio signals, including signals that only come through as static. The idea behind the ghost box is that spirits can use the static, and perhaps the snippets of voices being transmitted, to communicate. Some ghost hunters argue that one can tell when a spirit is communicating because one will hear a voice rising out of the static that is not a snippet of the human voices transmitted via radio. Others argue that spirits can also use the snippets of human voices to communicate. The use of electronic means to capture communication from spirits is often called instrumental transcommunication (ITC). This term can technically apply to the capturing of images on cameras, but it is more generally used to refer to the type of communication received through the ghost box or digital recorders.

Video cameras are used by many ghost hunting teams to capture possible visual manifestations or EVP. It is up to the investigator to determine whether a given visual anomaly on a video recording is caused by paranormal forces or something explainable by conventional means. A wide variety of anomalies may be interpreted to be paranormal. Some of the more common phenomena include moving shadows and small orbs of light that move around the video. Many teams investigate in the dark, so they use infrared cameras in order to film in the dark. Teams may also use full spectrum cameras, which capture the full spectrum of visible light, near infrared light, and some ultraviolet light. The theory behind the use of these cameras is that spirit entities may manifest in a spectrum of light not captured by a standard camera or the naked eye. Another popular tool is the thermal imaging camera, which detects infrared radiation and thus forms images based on the heat energy being given off by objects. With such a camera, hot and cold spots that sometimes move can be detected. Finally, the use of SLS cameras has recently become popular. SLS cameras were designed to be used by video game systems that map a player's body and movements in order to operate a game. Sometimes, SLS cameras will map out human bodies when there are no human bodies presently in view. This is sometimes taken as evidence of the presence of a spirit, the idea being that the camera is somehow picking up a spirit body or manifestation and mapping it out.

Other types of equipment have been developed and sold specifically for the purpose of ghost hunting. One such piece of equipment that one commonly finds is the REM pod, a short black cylinder with an antenna rising from the top center. The website ghoststop.com, which sells REM pods, describes it as follows: "With an all new design, the REM Pod uses a mini telescopic antenna to radiate its own independent magnetic field around the instrument. This

[electromagnetic] field can be easily influenced by materials and objects that conduct electricity. Based on source proximity, strength and [electromagnetic] field distortion (4) colorful LED lights can be activated in any order or combination." Relying on the theory that ghosts either are energy or they manipulate energy, many ghost hunters believe spirits can influence the electromagnetic field of the REM pod and set it off. Some ghost hunters will use the REM pod to try to communicate with spirits. For example, the investigator might say something along the lines of "if you are male, set off the blue light" or "if your name is Michael, touch the antenna and set off the device." On one ghost hunt that I observed in downtown Richmond, VA, a REM pod was placed on a kitchen table and began to emit an audible tone as a green light lit up. Robert, the founder of the team, said, "If you are a spirit, light up the blue light." The green light went off and the blue light did indeed come on. "That's something for your dissertation," Robert told me.

Another common piece of equipment is the Parascope or triboelectric field meter. The Parascope is said to light up when it picks up the kind of energy involved in static electricity. The most common type of Parascope is the 360-degree Parascope which consists of a dome attached to a circular base with short rods radiating out from around the dome. The rods light up when a triboelectric field is detected. The multiple rods are meant to help one detect the direction in which the field is moving. It is sometimes used to communicate with spirits in a way similar to the REM Pod. As the reader can see, the activity of ghost hunting is filled with specialized technical electronic equipment, and the use of this equipment is often taken as evidence that investigations are scientific.

Scientistic Language: Energy

A significant way ghost hunting is scientistic is ghost hunters use scientific-sounding language and concepts to describe their ideas and investigations. A key example of scientistic language I will examine here is the use of the term "energy." As should be evident from some of the equipment ghost hunters use, ghost hunters tend to be especially concerned with energy. At times, ghost hunters refer to spirits as if they are made of energy. In her *Ghost Hunters' Survival Guide*, Michelle Belanger makes reference to the widely-held belief that ghosts are "nothing but energy." Influential twentieth-century ghost hunter Hans Holzer explains that "ghosts are not only expressions of human personality left behind in the physical atmosphere but are, in terms of physical science, electromagnetic fields uniquely impressed by the personality and memories of the departed one, they represent a certain energy imprint in the atmosphere."[7] At other times we read and hear about ghosts *using* energy to manifest themselves. Holzer again tells us, "The majority of ghostly manifestations draw upon energy from the living in order to penetrate our three-dimensional world."[8] Ghost hunter Melissa Martin Ellis explains how spirits sometimes cause electronic devices to stop working because "entities try to manifest by drawing energy from their immediate environment and will often drain even brand new batteries."[9] Similarly, ghost hunter Rich Newman explains, "For a spirit to be heard in real time, that spirit has to have a certain degree of energy – energy that can also

[7] Holzer, *Ghosts: True Encounters from the World Beyond*, 25-26.
[8] ibid., 25.
[9] Melissa Martin Ellis, *The Everything Ghost Hunting Book: Tips, Tools, and Techniques for Exploring the Supernatural World* (Avon, Mass.: F+W Media, Inc., 2014), 7.

be used to manipulate objects or even to make the spirit actually materialize."[10] Cold spots, or areas within a room or other space that are unnaturally cold, are widely taken to be a common sign of a haunting. Cold spots are often explained in reference to a ghost's use of energy. Newman defines a cold spot as "A self-contained cold area that often appears during a haunting. It's thought that it is caused by a spirit drawing thermal energy from the area."[11]

All of this talk of energy raises the question of what exactly ghost hunters mean when they use the term energy. At times, they seem to mean "energy" in the sense it would be used in the study of physics. This is evident when, for example, Holzer mentions electromagnetic fields as a form of energy, or when Newman and others equate heat with the presence of energy. As we have seen, ghost hunters use a variety of equipment to detect various forms of energy, such as electromagnetic fields and triboelectric energy, in the environment under the assumption that detecting energy and its fluctuations is a way to detect spirit activity. Other times energy is taken to be a sort of psychic force. For example, when discussing poltergeists, which are in this case taken to be spirits that cause phenomena such as loud noises and the movement of objects, Newman explains that "[r]epressed negative feelings, anxiety that stems from puberty, and even common, everyday anger can provide the energy necessary for this type of [poltergeist] activity."[12] In other words, according to Newman, poltergeists draw on some sort of human emotional energy in order to manifest. John Zaffis, a ghost hunter and demonologist, uses energy to explain why he does not like to mention the names of demons: "I

[10] Rich Newman, *Ghost Hunting for Beginners: Everything You Need to Know to Get Started* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2011), 74.
[11] Ibid., 212.
[12] Ibid., 13.

prefer not to give any type of recognition to such a negative and oppressive power. Mentioning its name could certainly give it power, simply due to the fact that you are giving it energy by thinking of it."[13] Once again, energy here appears to be emotional or psychic rather than strictly physical. Ghost hunter Michelle Belanger discusses how "negative emotions" can "seem to soak into the very walls and floorboards" of a home "creating residues of dark, heavy energy." Belanger actually uses the term "psychic energy" and she is one of the few ghost hunters who explains what she means by the term "energy" in this sense. She asks us to "think of the term 'energy' as a kind of linguistic placeholder. It's the best word most psychics have for the emanations they pick up from places and from people, but it is worlds apart from literal electricity…Whatever language we apply, it's just an attempt to give a name to that subtle something that is not strictly physical, but that many of us feel and react to, nevertheless."[14]

One will often hear ghost hunters talk about "negative energy" in particular. Negative energy can be generated by negative emotions, such as sadness and anger, or negative experiences or actions, such as a murder or suicide. For ghost hunters, it is the nature of energy to be stored in things. Prominent paranormal researcher Rosemary Ellen Guiley explains, "At a subtle level, everything hums with its own energy. Objects act like sponges, absorbing the energy around them, including the energy of people. Thoughts, emotions and even past events can become stored in an object like psychic recordings."[15] When negative emotions or negative experiences occur in a location, the negative energy generated is sometimes stored there. The

[13] John Zaffis and Brian McIntyre, *Shadows of the Dark* (Lincoln, NE: iUniverse, Inc., 2004), 165.

[14] Michelle Belanger, *The Ghost Hunter's Survival Guide: Protection Techniques for Encounters with the Paranormal* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2009), 21, 32.

[15] John Zaffis and Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *Haunted by the Things You Love* (New Milford, CT: Visionary Living, Inc., 2014), x-xi.

energy is often said to be stored in physical objects, such as the floors and walls of a room, or other more portable objects. Residual negative energy has the effect of causing negative emotions in the living, generating "residual hauntings," or hauntings that are simply past events playing themselves over again because of the energy stored in the environment, and sometimes attracting or empowering negative spirits.

Ultimately, the boundaries between physical energy and psychic energy are not clear cut, and it is not always clear which kind of energy a ghost hunter is referring to or whether the ghost hunter is even distinguishing between the two. One of the primary reasons the language of "energy" is used rather than some other term is because "energy" seems native to a scientific discourse. Energy is a property that can be empirically measured, preferably by technical equipment, but also through one's intuitive abilities. Ghost hunting becomes a more scientific, and thus legitimate, endeavor if it is about detecting, measuring, and even clearing away energy, rather than simply tracking down spirits. Ghosts also have the stamp of scientific validity if they can be empirically measured in some way. An investigator can show that a ghost is real because they can detect the energy fluctuations it produces using an EMF meter or a Parascope.

Finally, scientistic energy language is not unique to ghost hunters. The metaphysical religious milieu, with which ghost hunters often interact, is filled with this type of energy language. Catherine Albanese, in fact, puts the term energy at the center of her multi-part definition of metaphysical religion: "far from understanding mind and its correspondences in fixed and static ways, American metaphysicians have thought in terms of movement and energy. Indeed, by the early twentieth-century, their preference for the energetic shifted into

high gear, with energy, its existence, and its dynamic thrust and flow seemingly everywhere for the metaphysically inclined."[16] Energy language has maintained a strong presence into the twenty-first century in metaphysical religion and occulture more generally.[17] This is the context in which ghost hunting is situated and it is evidence that the scientism found in ghost hunting is a broader spiritual phenomenon in twenty-first century American culture.

Ghost Hunting as Folk Science

While it is helpful to think of ghost hunting as scientistic, it can also be helpful to think of it as a folk science. According to one definition, folk science often differs from professional science in that it consists of popular attempts to approximate professional science and popular ideas about what science entails. Pushing further into folk science's purpose, philosopher of science Jerome Ravetz defines folk science as "part of a general world-view, or ideology, which is given special articulation so that it may provide comfort and reassurance in the face of the crucial uncertainties of the world of experience." Scientistic ghost hunting often functions precisely in this manner. The phenomena for which reassuring explanations are provided include death and paranormal experiences, such as the experience of a haunted house. Ravetz also notes that folk sciences are sometimes scientistic to approximate professional science, noting that a "sophisticated audience" for a folk science "requires a reasonable facsimile of a leading branch of 'Science,' such as physics" for the folk science to seem credible. By calling ghost hunting a folk science, I am not commenting on the value of its truth claims. As Ravetz

[16] Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 14.

[17] I will say more on "occulture" in a later chapter. See Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*.

notes, professional science can function as the folk-science for certain social or educational elites as long as it functions in its comforting explanatory role. In such a case, professional science is often made to take on roles outside of solely providing explanations for the functioning of the material world. I find the category folk science helpful in that it helps make the point that ghost hunting is driven by popular ideas of what science entails more than it is driven by the actual practices of professional scientists.[18]

Some ghost hunters recognize that what they are doing would not be judged scientific by all outside observers. One Virginia ghost hunter told me that ghost hunting is "a pseudoscience," by which he meant that its theories and practices were not on as strong a footing as mainstream scientific practices. Gina, a ghost hunter with a team based out of Bear, DE, also noted that, while she thinks many groups like to think they are being scientific, ghost hunting is actually more of a "pseudoscience." She recognizes that ghost hunting does not involve a series of trials carried out according to the scientific method. Bryan from Colorado notes that the problem with applying science to ghost hunting is that you do not have repeatable experiments, controlled conditions, or solid measurements. As I discussed above, however, many ghost hunters believe they are indeed being scientific, and even those who

- [18] Jerome R. Ravetz, *Scientific Knowledge and Its Social Problems* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 386-390. More recent work on folk science is often found in the field of cognitive science that examines popular and intuitive ways of understanding the world that stand in place of rigorous empirical professional science. See for example, Frank C. Keil, "Folkscience: coarse interpretations of a complex reality," *Trends in Cognitive Science* 7, no. 8 (Aug 2003): 368-373. For an example of the category employed in the social sciences, see Kimberly E. Klockow, Randy A. Peppler, and Renee A. McPherson, "Tornado folk science in Alabama and Mississippi in the 27 April 2011 tornado outbreak" *GeoJournal* 79 (Jan 2014): 791-804.

believe they are not quite hitting the mark when it comes to science do hold being scientific as a goal.

Often for ghost hunters, being scientific means little more than being a hardnosed investigator. Often this entails performing skepticism. The idea that to be a properly scientific investigator one has to employ a degree of skepticism is revealed in many ghost hunters' interest in "debunking" allegedly paranormal phenomena, or proving that phenomena that may be said to have a paranormal cause actually have a natural cause. Many ghost hunters claim that they go into investigations ready to debunk paranormal claims in order to sift out those phenomena that are genuinely paranormal. Brian, an investigator based in Mont Alto, PA, differentiates between ghost hunting and paranormal investigating, seeing the former as simple thrill seeking and the latter as the serious investigation of paranormal claims. According to Brian, with ghost hunting, "you're really not out there to try to debunk anything" whereas with "paranormal investigating, on the other hand, you try to get your hands on the newest piece of equipment to try and debunk anything; we go into everything with a little bit of skepticism…" Debunking is actually a recurring element in the popular and influential television show *Ghost Adventures*. During his voice-over narration of the show, the show's host, Zak Bagans, will pointedly proclaim when a phenomenon his team thought might be paranormal has been debunked. For example, in an episode on Gettysburg, the team sees a door seemingly moving on its own. When they discover that the door is simply being pushed by air currents, Zak announces in the voiceover, "We just debunked that the door moved on its own because of the

air currents in the house."[19] *The Everything Ghost Hunting Book*, published in 2009, states, "A strong dose of healthy skepticism is a good place for any investigator of the paranormal to start. If you don't try to debunk potential paranormal experiences, you won't make a good investigator."[20] The extent to which an effort is made to debunk allegedly paranormal phenomena varies widely from team to team. I have spoken to teams that come away from most investigations with what they view as evidence of the paranormal, and I have spoken to one investigator who claims to have never captured what he views as unequivocal evidence of paranormal activity. Almost every team, however, will bolster their scientific credentials by claiming to debunk. Ultimately, claims of skepticism are central to how many ghost hunters present themselves and view themselves. They fear the perception that they are credulous, gullible, or deluded people manufacturing evidence of spirits. They use skepticism to prove that they are scientific, rigorous, and credible investigators. They want to paint a picture of themselves as hard-nosed investigators, so hard-nosed that they even reject what some might view as evidence of the paranormal forces they seek.

For ghost hunters, to be scientific also means to be empirical and rigorous investigators. Ultimately, most ghost hunters make some effort to be rigorous in their investigations in pursuit of the goal of being scientific. A few examples will help flesh out what these attempts look like. Ghost hunting groups often use EMF (electromagnetic field) meters to detect fluctuations in energy that they believe may be caused by spirit activity. Investigators are often concerned with assuring that any high EMF readings they pick up are not caused by electrical

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[19] *Ghost Adventures*, season 4, episode 1, "Gettysburg," directed by Zak Bagans and Nick Groff, written by Zak Bagans and Nick Groff, aired September 17, 2010.

[20] Ellis, 53.

wiring or electronic devices in homes. When a high EMF reading is detected, investigators will often search the area for possible electrical interference and try to determine whether a natural cause is likely. It is common for ghost hunting teams to do a preliminary EMF "sweep" of an investigation location to get get baseline EMF readings, so that they will know if any high EMF readings later are unusual. Ghost hunters are also often concerned with pareidolia, the human psychological tendency to detect patterns in visual and auditory stimuli where no true pattern exists. Pareidolia is of particular interest to many ghost hunters because critics could classify much of their evidence of the paranormal as manifestations of pareidolia. Ghost hunters will often offer anomalies in photographs that look like faces or silhouettes of people as evidence of the presence of a spirit. They will also offer anomalies in audio recordings that sound like words, groans, or sighs as evidence of spirit communication. Though a concern with pareidolia generally does not keep investigators from using these types of evidence, many of them still scrutinize images, videos, and audio recordings to try to discern whether they might simply be imagining the patterns they detect. For example, one strategy ghost hunters use to rule out pareidolia as an explanation for their audio evidence is by listening for audio anomalies that appear to be direct replies to questions the investigator has asked. For example, during a recording session, an investigator may ask any spirits that may be listening, "what is your name?" If, when the recording is played back, they hear an audio anomaly that sounds like a person's name is being given after the question was asked, this would be taken as stronger evidence of paranormal communication than would anomalous sounds that do not seem to be a direct reply to a question or statement.

Some ghost hunting teams will even try to use psychic mediums in a manner they view as scientific. Brian, a ghost hunter based in Mont Alto, PA, described to me a method of investigating with mediums or sensitives similar to that famously used by the prominent late-twentieth-century ghost hunter Hans Holzer.[21] Brian will bring a medium out to a location without telling them anything about the location or the phenomena said to occur there. He will then compare the impressions the medium gets with the reports he has been given about the haunted location. The purpose of this exercise is to assure that the medium is not simply researching the location beforehand or repeating what they hear from witnesses or investigators during the investigation.

If a ghost hunter's idea of being scientific goes beyond being a skeptical and rigorous investigator, they will often make reference to the scientific method. Ideas about what the scientific method is and how it is used are often driven by information gathered from popular media and non-specialist scientific education. Mark from St. Louis discusses the scientific method by noting that "people should make every single effort to be precise and well-thought-out" as they try to determine what is and is not paranormal. The scientific method is often held up as the standard for investigating. Rich Newman, author of the ghost hunting book *Ghost Hunting For Beginners*, tells us, "Employing the scientific method means that we make observations during a case, we formulate hypotheses concerning the activity that's occurring, and then we test them."[22] Sean, an investigator with a team based in Cincinnati, Ohio, told me that his bachelor of science degree has been useful for him in paranormal investigations

[21] See Hans Holzer, *Ghost Hunter*, 18-19.
[22] Newman, 183.

because it gives him "a fairly robust background in the scientific method." When elaborating on his use of the scientific method, he mentions taking "the evidence" he gathers and using it to "come up with some theories" that can be tested. Zak Bagans, lead investigator on the popular ghost hunting television show *Ghost Adventures*, also makes much of the scientific method in a book he has written with a co-author, explaining that "It's based on gathering observable, empirical, and measurable data subject to specific principles of reasoning. A scientific method consists of the collection of data through observation and experimentation, and the formulation and testing of hypotheses. Experimental studies are then established and executed to test the hypotheses, which must be repeatable to dependably predict future results." Bagans and his co-author acknowledge that the method is not always executed by ghost hunters: "Unfortunately, not everyone in the paranormal research field follows this process, and in fact it's filled with amateurs who simply crawl into a dark place with a digital recorder and ask questions, hoping for a response." He also admits that ghost hunting is not quite cut out for the scientific method: "The scientific method relies on repeatable experimentation to verify or deny data. Spirits of the departed are intelligent beings that don't always display a predictable pattern of behavior. They come and go at their leisure and have always proven to be elusive and inconsistent."[23]

Bagans' comments raise the issue of how strictly ghost hunters adhere to the scientific method in the field. He admits that the situation of a ghost hunt is not amenable to the use of the scientific method like a laboratory experiment is. This is one reason that more academic parapsychologists have not focused on investigating haunted locations in recent decades. What

[23] Bagans and Crigger, 215-216.

many ghost hunters end up with is a folk version of the scientific method in which scientific standards of evidence and measurement are not strictly maintained. As we have seen, for ghost hunters, following the scientific method can often mean anything from making "every single effort to be precise and well-thought-out" while investigating to making observations, forming hypotheses, and testing them in ways that are not rigorous, well-designed, or systematic by the standards of professional scientists. Here I will form a general picture, based on an amalgamation of investigations I have witnessed and interviews I have performed, of how a ghost hunter might go about employing the scientific method.

Many times, hypotheses are formed before an investigation takes place. A ghost hunter will listen to reports from people who have experienced a given haunting and then form a hypothesis about what the haunting entails. Do people hear the laughter of a child or see the apparition of a young girl? Perhaps the ghost of a child haunts the location. Do people smell the stench of rotting meat and end up with mysterious scratch marks? Perhaps the haunting is demonic. Sometimes observations made during and after investigations are used to form hypotheses and theories. Other times, the investigation functions as the testing of the hypotheses. As for the gathering of evidence to test hypotheses or theories, investigators look for anomalous readings on their equipment as evidence that a location has paranormal activity. Ghost hunters will also try to get information from potential spirits through communication. Communication can occur through the capturing of EVP or other forms of ITC, or by soliciting yes or no answers through interaction with various ghost detection devices. For example, a spirit could be asked to activate the lights on a REM pod if the answer to a question is yes. Through these means, investigators can try to determine details about the spirits with which

they are communicating. Sometimes a team will have a medium or sensitive who is able to pick up impressions from and information about spirits. Often, rather than trying to systematically gather evidence for theories about how spirit activity works or is possible, the ghost hunter is investigating what type of haunting a location is experiencing and the set of circumstances that have created or are driving the paranormal activity. On rarer occasions, ghost hunters set out to flesh out theories around paranormal activity generally. The part of the scientific method that demands results be repeatable is not often taken into account. Many ghost hunters would accept Bagans' argument that spirits do not always cooperate when being tested. Ghost hunters do try to collect evidence that is more than merely subjective and can thus be shared and examined by others. Examples might include reports of EMF fluctuations, apparitions or other visual anomalies caught on film, or recorded EVP or other forms of ITC. The documentation of precise measurements from equipment is often spotty. Sometimes results actually are repeatable in some sense among ghost hunters, but not in a sense that would be accepted by professional scientists. Certain locations, such as the Waverly Hills Sanatorium in Louisville, KY, have a reputation for being haunted and ghost hunting groups consistently capture what they view as evidence of paranormal activity at these locations. Locations will often have a reputation for providing certain kinds of evidence. Many ghost hunters have reported seeing or documenting "shadow people" at Waverly Hills Sanatorium, for example.

Ghost Hunting in Comparison with Scientistic Metaphysical Religion

Scholars of religion have done much work on the topic of metaphysical religion and science. Given the ways in which contemporary ghost hunting overlaps with metaphysical

religion, some of scholars' insights about metaphysical religion's relationship with science and the idea of science apply to ghost hunting as well.

Though many ghost hunters identify as Christians and have backgrounds in conventional Christian denominations, many of them draw on ideas from metaphysical religion. According to historian of American religion Catherine Albanese, metaphysical religion reached maturity in the late-nineteenth century with traditions such as Theosophy and New Thought, which would eventually lead to New Age spirituality. We can think of metaphysical religion as those types of religion in the lineage and spiritual milieu of New Age. Metaphysical religion would include some of the ancestors of New Age, including Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and, as mentioned, Theosophy and New Thought, as well as the types of spirituality often popularly labeled metaphysical that came after late-twentieth-century New Age. A strong interest in spirit communication can be found in metaphysical religion, and metaphysical ideas about spirits made their way into ghost hunting circles as ghost hunters explored these topics. Ghost hunters who identify as spirit mediums, or empaths, or sensitives are often at home in metaphysical spirituality and draw their ideas about what it means to be a medium, empath, or sensitive from metaphysical sources.[24] Ultimately, metaphysical practitioners and ghost hunters have similar attitudes toward science and use similar strategies to appropriate science.

Scholar of new religious movements James R. Lewis makes a key observation about metaphysical religion and religion that appeals to science in general. He argues that when

[24] The terms empath and sensitive are often used interchangeably in ghost hunting circles even though theorists of these phenomena will often take pains to distinguish between them. An empath is someone in tune with and sensitive to the emotions and psychic energy of the living and the dead. A sensitive is sensitive to psychic energy and spirit presences.

religions appeal to science to support their truth claims, they are often not making an appeal to rationality, but, in the Weberian sense, they are appealing to the "charisma" of science. Science has a "magnetic aura" of authority in our culture, and this is the source from which religious movements seek to draw legitimacy. Ghost hunters and others are often not making an effort to make a case through reasoned scientific argument; they are trying to draw on the "mystique of authority" and the high social status of science in the West.[25]

Religious studies scholar Olav Hammer explores science in metaphysical religion[26] from Mesmerism to the New Age. He notes that mainstream science is often positioned as a significant Other in relation to esoteric or metaphysical traditions. On the one hand, conventional science is a negative Other against which the metaphysical tradition's own spiritual or holistic science must be contrasted. Mainstream science is depicted as rigidly mechanistic and materialistic, or it is depicted as necessarily limited in the truth it can explore. At other times, conventional science is a positive Other to which a metaphysical tradition is compared. Scientistic terminology and methodology is used to depict the metaphysical spiritual science as akin to conventional science and sharing in its success and authority. It is a common theme in metaphysical discourse that the dichotomy between religion and science is soon to be overcome by a higher holistic or spiritual science. The world of ghost hunting shares these approaches to mainstream science.[27] In a similar vein, Egil Asprem draws on the work of David

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[25] James R. Lewis, "How Religions Appeal to the Authority of Science" in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, ed. James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer (Leiden, Brill, 2010), 23-26

[26] Hammer and Hanegraaff do not use the term metaphysical religion, preferring to talk about the New Age or esotericism. According to the definition of metaphysical religion I borrow from Albanese, the phenomena they discuss fall under the umbrella of metaphysical religion and I use the term when discussing these authors for consistency.

[27] Olav Hammer, *Claiming Knowledge: Strategies of Epistemology from Theosophy to the New Age* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 201-250. For more work on Significant Others and boundary work in metaphysical religion, see David J.

J. Hess and Jeremy Northcote to observe, "both New Agers and parapsychologists will tend to portray themselves as revolutionary, utopian underdogs vis-à-vis a repressive scientific orthodoxy, while attempting in various degrees to the use the paranormal as a mode of scientific re-enchantment."[28] Ghost hunters likewise often maintain a similar rhetorical tension with mainstream science.

Scholar of Western Esotericism Wouter Hanegraaff has noted that New Age scientism is less akin to science and more akin to *Naturphilosophie* or philosophy of nature. *Naturphilosophie* is the pursuit of the reality that underlies what humans observe in nature rather than a rigorous method of objective research. This is the pursuit that has oriented thinkers such as Leibniz, Hegel, and Henri Bergson. Hanegraaff notes, "the ability to generate new knowledge is essential for strictly scientific theories, but for *Naturphilosophie* it is not a central concern." Instead *Naturphilosopie* strives for "internal consistency, philosophical elegance, and religious profundity." A *Naturphilosophie* is convincing if it can "'make sense' of the world of experience." As for its relationship with science, *Naturphilosophie* "must merely be able to demonstrate its *consistency* with accepted scientific knowledge and it must interpret this knowledge in such a way as to show its relevance for human concerns."[29] Similarly, the scientism of ghost hunters can sometimes be categorized as *Naturphilosophie*. Many ghost hunters are pursuing what they see as scientific knowledge to make sense of big questions

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Hess, *Science in the New Age: The Paranormal, Its Defenders and Debunkers, and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

[28] Egil Asprem, "Parapsychology: Naturalising the Supernatural, Re-Enchanting Science" in *Handbook of Religion and the Authority of Science*, 661.

[29] Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 64-67.

about human existence, such as is there life after death? and what is the nature of the anomalous experiences that seem to be so common? Ghost hunters are trying to rigorously and empirically analyze anomalous experiences to make sense of them, and they have made sense of them by populating the cosmos with spirits. They also strive to make their spirit-haunted cosmos congruent with mainstream science. Ghost hunters are successful not when they generate systematic and objective new knowledge, but when they make meaning of anomalous experiences.

Ghost hunting and Psychical Research

As I discuss in chapter two, ghost hunting has its historical roots in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Spiritualism and psychical research. Historian of religion Egil Asprem's analysis of psychical research in Britain and the United States at the turn of the twentieth century is helpful for understanding contemporary ghost hunters. Asprem calls the first generations of psychical researchers "open-ended naturalists." Open-ended naturalism developed out of or alongside Victorian scientific naturalism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Victorian scientific naturalism was a worldview developed during the professionalization of the sciences in Britain. Science was gaining social capital and authority in Victorian society, and scientific naturalism developed as a worldview that explained the cosmos in light of rising scientific consensuses around atomism, evolution, and the conservation of energy. Victorian scientific naturalists were not content with limiting science to explanations of the strictly material world. They tried to expand the scientific method and scientific discoveries about the material world into "all compartments of society, from medicine and education, to

industry, economy and politics."[30] Examples of this tendency include theories around social Darwinism and eugenics, which were thought of as scientific progress applied to the social world. Psychical research is an expansion of this naturalist agenda. The founders of psychical research wanted to apply science to the phenomena of Spiritualism and the occult, two forces that were deemed supernatural or beyond the normal. Asprem differentiates psychical researchers from other Victorian scientific naturalists by calling them "open-ended naturalists." Among many scientific naturalists, agnosticism was "put forward as the proper epistemological and religious attitude."[31] Agnostic positions varied, but they often held either a) the realm of the supernatural or transcendent is beyond empirical observation and therefore unknowable, or b) phenomena that seem to be supernatural in origin ought to be explained, if possible, according to normal mechanisms that we do know about empirically. For example, Thomas Henry Huxley, the man who invented the term agnosticism in 1869, explained the famous Christian exorcism passage from Mark chapter 5 in the New Testament by referencing "physiological and pathological science" as well as "anthropology," implying that the exorcism episode need not be explained with reference to supernatural forces, but rather with reference to natural human disease and human superstition.[32]

Open-ended naturalists rejected the agnostic position, either by insisting empirical science can be trained on the realm of the supernatural, or by theorizing about and seeking explanations from mechanisms that could not be reduced to currently understood material

[30] Asprem, "Parapsychology: Nauralising the Supernatural, Re-Enchanting Science," 636.
[31] Ibid.
[32] T. H. Huxley, "Agnosticism," in *Christianity and Agnosticism*, ed. T. H. Huxley, H. Wace, et al (New York: The Humboldt Publishing Company, 1889), 11; Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 294.

causes. Open-ended naturalists are open about what counts as nature or what can be examined by empirical science. Frederic W. H. Myers, a classicist and one of the founders of the Society for Psychical Research, is an example of the former tendency. He coined the term "supernormal" to replace the term supernatural when referring to the phenomena analyzed by psychical research. Myers argued, "there is no reason to suppose that the psychical phenomena with which we deal are less a part of nature, or less subject to fixed and definite law, than any other phenomena."[33] In other cases, open-ended naturalism "does not deny the possible existence of beings and worlds other than 'natural' ones, but insists that the only way in which solid knowledge can be established about such realities is by focusing on their *interaction with* the natural world, drawing conclusions from such interaction by the critical use of reason and evidence."[34]

Twenty-first-century American ghost hunting is an open-ended naturalist project. Spirits are thought of as part of an expanded natural world or they are thought of as detectable empirically. Ghost hunting also comes in conflict with and contrasts itself with the scientific naturalism of mainstream science in the twenty-first century. Psychical research at the turn of the twentieth century was perhaps more successful at challenging hegemonic scientific naturalism given its considerable resources and social capital, and the advocacy of respected thinkers such as William James. Ultimately, however, early psychical researchers failed to open

[33] F. H. W. Myers, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), xxii; Asprem, *Disenchantment*, 302-303.
[34] Asprem, *Disenchantment*, 443.

the boundaries of mainstream science, even as parapsychologists today continue the struggle.[35] Asprem notes that parapsychologists and psychical researchers have actually been successful in shaping ideas about the paranormal in popular culture. Contemporary ghost hunters arise out of the cultural landscape that parapsychology has shaped. We might think of ghost hunting as folk parapsychology. Ghost hunting is generally an amateur attempt to emulate contemporary parapsychology and psychical researchers of the past. They differ in that ghost hunters are generally less scientifically rigorous and less knowledgeable about what science demands in terms of evidence and research than elite parapsychologists. While, like parapsychologists and psychical researchers, ghost hunters have largely been unsuccessful in expanding the boundaries of mainstream science, they have been more successful in expanding what counts as science in the popular American imagination. Thousands of Americans who are not themselves paranormal investigators research ghost hunting and call on ghost hunters for help with the paranormal every year.[36] Thousands are likewise drawn to paranormal conventions that focus in part on ghost hunting, attend ghost tours led by paranormal investigators, and pay to attend public ghost hunts led by ghost hunting teams.

Scientism and Enchantment

As evidenced by the phenomenon of ghost hunting, enchantment abounds in late modernity through scientism. Postmodern critique notwithstanding, the high status of science

[35] Psychical research continues in the twenty-first century, though now the field is often called parapsychology and has been since the time of pioneering researcher J. B. Rhine in the mid-twentieth century. Many parapsychologists today are amateurs, but many others have graduate degrees in relevant scientific fields.

in our society has hardly waned since the ascension of Victorian scientific naturalism. Science's credibility is powerful when compared to the credibility of any particular religious tradition, which must compete with other, sometimes contradictory, traditions for authority and epistemological power. Religion is also actively contested in a way that science is not. This is not to say mainstream science is never contested, but religion is often seen as subjective while science is seen as objective. Certainly the forces of disenchantment first outlined by Weber are active in twenty-first century America. While atheism and agnosticism are, according to survey data, still relatively rare in the United States, materialist and scientific naturalist worldviews are ever present, haunting even the most successful religions.

One strategy religious and spiritual traditions employ against the specter of scientific naturalism is scientism. In our example, to combat the corrosive power of scientific naturalism, ghost hunters claim the label of science or appropriate the trappings of science. Through their scientism, ghost hunters are both enchanters and disenchanters. They subject the mysterious realm of ghosts and spirits to scientific analysis. Spirits are explained, at least metaphorically, in physicalist terms, such as energy. The behavior of ghosts is mapped and spirits are categorized. Ghost hunters try to explain away some apparently paranormal phenomena as the result of delusion, trickery, or the misunderstanding of natural causes. They strive to be debunkers as much as believers. In this sense, ghost hunting is disenchanting the spirit realm. At the same time, these seemingly disenchanting moves are made to secure the existence of supernatural beings. While they portray themselves as debunkers and systematizers, one often still hears ghost hunters say there are no experts in the paranormal, as so much is not and cannot be

known. Ghost hunters disenchant for the sake of enchantment. They try to declaw scientific naturalism by claiming to operate according to its norms.

The effort to use science to clear away the detritus of superstition and misperception to get to the truly enchanted puts ghost hunters in a lineage of religious liberals going back to the Enlightenment. Take the example of historical criticism of the Bible. German New Testament scholar and theologian Rudolf Bultmann is typical of many higher critics of the Bible in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. He writes of the need to "demythologize" the New Testament to get to the core divine truths of the text. He describes the New Testament as shrouded in a "mythical world picture" that includes a heavenly realm above, a hell below, and an earth full of supernatural activity. Bultmann explains that advances in science and other modern realms of knowledge have revealed that this world picture does not reflect reality, and we ought not expect modern Christians to embrace this mythical world picture. He insists that this mythical world picture is not particularly Christian – what is Christian is the truths that remain once the demythologizing is done.[37]

We see a similar drive to use scientific methods to get to core truths in the work of prominent twentieth-century liberal Protestant thinker and preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick taught a course devoted to the problem of how the ancient truths of scripture could be discerned by a modern world. Like Bultmann, Fosdick saw the need to use scientific knowledge to clear away the brush. Describing his course to a student, Fosdick wrote:

> I trace certain apparent contradictions between Biblical methods of thinking and our own. In particular, the contrast between Biblical cosmology and modern science, Biblical

[37] Rudolph Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation" in *New Testament & Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

> angelology and demonology and modern psychology…In the last section, I endeavor to sum up the abiding messages of Scripture in terms of their development through the manuscripts of the Bible chronologically arranged.[38]

In a similar vein, Fosdick made a widely-quoted statement in 1930 that made clear his commitment to setting aside superstitious supernaturalism in favor of true faith: "The crude, obsolete supernaturalism which prays for rain is a standing reproach to our religion…disastrous to true religion."[39]

Taking a step away from the world of liberal Protestantism (but not too far), we find the career of William James. Like other psychical researchers I describe above, James sought to use science to prove to himself and the world that the materialism of scientific naturalism was not necessarily the whole picture.[40] Even in his work outside of the realm of psychical research, James sought to use scientific methods to categorize and get to the core of religious experience to perhaps find the universal kernel of the truly enchanted. These efforts would become a foundational text in religious studies, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Ultimately, twenty-first century ghost hunting is a popular expression of this liberal religious tradition of using science to clear the path to true enchantment.

Perhaps one of the key insights the scientism of ghost hunting reveals is that late modern enchantment and disenchantment often go hand in hand. Disenchantment can shelter modes of enchantment, and disenchantment can lead to further enchantment. Scientistic ghost

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[38] Robert Moats Miller, *Harry Emerson Fosdick: Preacher, Pastor, Prophet* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 320-321.
[39] Ibid., 238.
[40] On how psychical research was not merely peripheral to James' interests, see Krister Dylan Knapp, *William James: Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

hunting also reveals that science can enchant as much as it disenchants. Weber categorized science as an overall disenchanting force, but when we actually analyze science's effects on the ground, it is not clear that this is always or even usually the case. Science may work to disenchant the elite realms of professional researchers, but on a popular level, science seems to enchant. The power of science's rationalizing method is appropriated to create objective knowledge of spirits. Social capital that is not found in religious demonology or metaphysical speculation is taken from science. Science makes things real, and ghost hunters employ scientism to make the spirit world real.

Chapter 4

Ghost Hunters and Demonic Enchantment

In the enchanted worldview of many American ghost hunters, demons haunt the cosmos. They haunt places marred by evil, violence, or black magic, they can haunt our homes, and they can even haunt our bodies. Belief in demons and encounters with the demonic are particularly powerful forms of enchantment. Not only are demons supernatural spirits, they are also objectively evil spirits. They are a sign that the cosmos does have a transcendent order – good and evil do exist. In this chapter, I argue that, for ghost hunters, experiences of the demonic are particularly powerful and enchanting experiences that ultimately reinforce the reality of the divine and a transcendent moral order. I will also draw on the work of early-twentieth-century German theologian and philosopher of religion Rudolph Otto to show that ghost hunters' demonic experiences, characterized by horror and dread, should be considered powerful religious experiences.

Ghost Hunters and Demon Belief in the United States

Though most ghost hunters will emphasize that demonic hauntings are very rare, a casual consumer of ghost hunting media will quickly realize that discussions and explorations of the demonic abound. Interest in the demonic among ghost hunters is so strong that it is common to hear or read ghost hunters – in person, in books, on internet radio shows, etc. – scolding investigators who too quickly jump to the conclusion that a haunting is demonic. James

Long, a prominent demonologist, exorcist, and bishop in the United States Old Catholic Church, in his book *Through the Eyes of an Exorcist*, expresses dismay that so many ghost hunters actually want to encounter a demon. He proclaims that he "cannot understand the fascination of wanting to see a demon."[1]

Ghost hunters' fascination with demons is consistent with patterns seen in the American public at large. Belief in demons is thriving in the United States and may even be stronger than it was in the middle of the twentieth century. A poll conducted in 2012 found that 57% of respondents believed "it's possible for people to become possessed by demons."[2] According to a 2007 wave of the Baylor Religion Survey, 48% of respondents agree or strongly agree that demonic possession is possible. Three years later, the Baylor Religion Survey found that 70% of respondents believe that demons probably or absolutely exist.[3] Also in 2007, a Pew Research Survey found that 68% of Americans believe that angels and demons are active in the world.[4]

Historically, demon belief seems to have surged in the United States around the time of the release of the *The Exorcist* novel in 1971 and film in 1973. The movie deeply affected audiences across the country and its effects shocked a public that assumed the influence of religion was waning in society. Just several years earlier, in 1966, *Time Magazine* had released

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[1] James Long, *Through the Eyes of an Exorcist* (Lulu.com, 2013), 100.

[2] "National Halloween Survey Results," Public Policy Polling, accessed October 13, 2020, https://www.publicpolicypolling.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/HalloweenResults.pdf.

[3] "Baylor Religion Survey, Wave III (2010)," The ARDA,, accessed October 13, 2020, http://www.thearda.com/Archive/Files/Codebooks/BRS2011_CB.asp#V99.

[4] Russell Heimlich, "Goblins and Ghosts and Things That Go Bump in the Night," Pew Research Center, October 27, 2009, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2009/10/27/goblins-and-ghosts-and-things-that-go-bump-in-the-night/. Thank you to Joseph Laycock for tracking down most of these statistics. For more on the prevalence of belief in demons and exorcism in the twenty-first[t] century US, see "Why Are Exorcisms as Popular as Ever?" The New Republic, December 28, 2015, https://newrepublic.com/article/126607/exorcisms-popular-ever.

its iconic cover asking the question, "Is God Dead?"[5] The public response to *The Exorcist* and the other demon-themed media it inspired may have been a reaction to the God is dead rhetoric of the 1960s. More evidence of this reaction can be found in the best-selling status of evangelical author and preacher Hal Lindsey's 1970 book *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, which elaborated on premillennial dispensationalist end-times prophecies and marked the 1970s as the age of the antichrist. The popular reaction revealed that, for many Americans, God and the devil were very much alive and well. *The Exorcist* paved the way for other demonic media such as Malachi Martin's 1976 "nonfiction" book *Hostage to the Devil* and David Seltzer's *The Omen* film that same year. The *Exorcist* and the reaction of which it was a part led to a marked increase in the public demand for Catholic exorcisms and played a large role in sparking the rise of charismatic or neo-pentecostal deliverance ministries that aimed to deal with the demonic in the decades that followed.[6] Judging by some measures, the surge of interest in the demonic that started in the 1970s and the following decades has held steady or even continued to grow. Prominent American Roman Catholic exorcists testify to the increase in demand for exorcisms by pointing to the growing number of American exorcists officially appointed by the Catholic church. In a 2016 interview, Father Vincent Lambert reported that when he was appointed by his archbishop to be the exorcist for Indianapolis in 2005, he was one of only twelve officially appointed exorcists in the United States. He reported that at the time of the interview, the

[5] See Joseph Laycock, "The Folk Piety of William Peter Blatty: *The Exorcist* in the Context of Secularization," *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 5 (2009).

[6] See Michael W. Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (New York: Doubleday, 2001). I also want to thank Joseph Laycock for our discussion about *The Exorcist* and its aftermath.

number had grown to around fifty.[7] Another American Roman Catholic exorcist, Father Gary Thomas, reported in a 2018 piece in the *Atlantic* that there had been fewer than fifteen recognized Catholic exorcists in the United States in 2011, but that number had grown to well over 100.[8] Also relevant are Gallup's findings that the percentage of Americans who believe in the devil, a concept closely linked to demons, rose from 55% in 1990 to 70% in 2007.[9] In 2014, the Baylor Religion Survey found that 58% of Americans absolutely believe in Satan, while 49% absolutely believe in demons.[10]

Ghost Hunters' Concepts of the Demonic

To understand American ghost hunters' demonic experiences, one needs to understand what ghost hunters are talking about when they talk about demons. There is no organization or governing body that has the power to establish or police ghost hunters' ideas and practices, so they can be diverse. Speaking generally, ghost hunters often draw on Christian cosmology to think about demons. Demons are conceived of as evil spirits with a desire to torment humans. To get a sense of how demons are imagined by ghost hunters, one can start with two of the most influential demonologists in paranormal investigation circles: Ed and Lorraine Warren. The Warrens, a Catholic husband-and-wife team, were paranormal investigators based in

[7] "A Day in the Life of a Modern Exorcist," YouTube, Vice, September 21, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7szlOjtKGY0&feature=youtu.be.

[8] Mike Mariani, "American Exorcism," The Atlantic, December 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2018/12/catholic-exorcisms-on-the-rise/573943/.

[9] Frank Newport, "Americans More Likely to Believe in God Than the Devil, Heaven More Than Hell," Gallup, June 13, 2007, https://news.gallup.com/poll/27877/americans-more-likely-believe-god-than-devil-heaven-more-than-hell.aspx. One might be tempted to attribute the rise in American devil belief to the 2001 September 11th terrorist attacks. To the contrary Gallup polling found that the percentage of Americans who believe in the devil had risen to 68% by May 2001.

[10] Bader, Baker, and Mencken, *Paranormal America,* 196-197.

Connecticut. They rose to prominence in the 1970s and remained active until Ed died in 2006 and Lorraine died in 2019. One event that catapulted them into the limelight was their investigation of the infamous Amityville haunting of the 1970s. More recently, the Warrens rose out of paranormal circles into the wider realm of popular culture through the film *The Conjuring*, its sequel, and its spinoffs. In *The Conjuring,* actors Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga play Ed and Lorraine Warren in a story based on a 1971 haunting in Rhode Island investigated by the Warrens. The Warrens' writings, interviews, and lectures in the last decades of the twentieth century were central in forming many paranormal investigators' views of the demonic realm both before and after the boom in ghost hunting initiated by the October 2004 release of the Scifi Channel reality show *Ghost Hunters*. Many ghost hunters looked to the Warrens for guidance about demons and demonic hauntings until the Warrens' deaths, and the teachings they left behind are still referenced in the current moment. Some of the most prominent demonologist in paranormal circles, such as John Zaffis and Carl and Keith Johnson, learned directly from the Warrens. The Warrens are indeed controversial figures among contemporary ghost hunters, with some highly praising them and others seeing them as frauds or attention seekers; however, one still finds the mark of the Warrens on some of ghost hunters' most widespread ideas about demons. The Warrens will serve as a strong base on which to build an understanding of how ghost hunters see demons.[11]

[11] A person following the footnotes will soon notice that I have only cited one book, Gerard Brittle's *The Demonologist*, in my overview of the Warrens' beliefs about demons. This is because *The Demonologist* is the most complete account of the Warrens' approach to demonic cases and has the best range of quotes from which to draw. Rest assured that I have followed the Warrens for many years and can affirm that what is found in *The Demonologist* is generally consistent with what the Warrens profess and teach elsewhere. I should also note that even the Warren organization seems to recognize the normative value of *The Demonologist*. The production team of *The Conjuring* film, which consulted directly with Lorraine Warren, gave the book to Vera Farmiga when she was doing research for her role as Lorraine. Furthermore, the Warrens' son-in-law, who used to sell tickets to events in

The Warrens often refer to demons as "inhuman spirits" to emphasize that, unlike a ghost, an inhuman spirit is "something that has never walked the earth in human form."[12] According to the Warrens, demons are fallen angels, an idea that is common in Christian cosmology.[13] Demons are driven by their absolute hatred of God and their desire to see the ruin of humankind. The Warrens admit that it can be difficult to tell the difference between a malevolent human spirit and a demonic inhuman spirit, but certain signs reveal when a spirit is demonic. Lorraine explains, "Only the demonic…has the power to bring about such incredible negative phenomena as fires, explosions, dematerialization, teleportation, and levitation of large objects."[14] Dematerialization is when objects cease to exist for a time and teleportation is when objects are moved instantaneously from one place to another. Whereas an earthbound human spirit might do little things like "levitate a pencil or break a cherished teacup," in the case of a demon "the whole house would be ruined in a deliberate, orderly way." Demonic manifestations often occur in the absence of natural light and demons often appear in the form of "a large, formless mass, typically described by witnesses as 'blacker than natural black.'" Demons can also appear in other frightful forms. Ed Warren describes demons' visible forms as "physicalized monstrosities." He also says about the appearance of a demon, "its appearance is an abomination, a monstrosity. To see what's really behind the phenomenon is not something to be desired. To actually see the demonic is to feel ruin. What shows is something distinctly

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which one could meet with Lorraine Warren and view some of the Warrens' haunted objects, used to give out copies of *The Demonologist* to whomever bought two or more tickets.

[12] Gerald Brittle, *The Demonologist: The Extraordinary Career of Ed + Lorraine Warren* (New York: Graymalkin Media, 2013), 3.

[13] Ibid., 109.

[14] Ibid., 16.

preternatural in appearance: something real enough as you see it, but yet something not of this world." Ed further describes demons as having scales and looking like a reptile.[15] In 1972, Ed claims he was able to audio record a demon, speaking through a deep-trance medium, describe its physical appearance: "I am wicked—and ugly looking…I have a horrible face. I have much gross hair on my body. My eyes are deep-sunk. I am black all over. I am burnt. I grow hair. My nails are long, my toes are clawed. I have a tail. I use a spear."[16] Though a demon's true appearance is horrifying, demons can ultimately appear in any form they choose.[17]

Demons also physically harm people. Ed Warren, describing his years of experience confronting the demonic, says, "I have been burned by these invisible forces of pandemonium. I have been slashed and cut; these spirits have gouged marks and symbols on my body. I've been thrown around the room like a toy. My arms have been twisted up behind me until they've ached for a week. I've incurred sudden illnesses to knock me out of an investigation."[18] Author Gerald Brittle summarizes what the Warrens told him about demonic hauntings in interviews:

> Everything associated with the spirit was terrifying and negative. Quite distinct from a ghost, which would vanish if fear was aroused, this spirit only *intensified* in an atmosphere of fear. Its arrival was accompanied by a sense of utter terror and foreboding; an undeniable sense of evil and wild animosity would fill the room. Often a foul, revolting stench—of sulfur, excrement, or rotting flesh—would fill the area where it materialized; many times it would leave behind a residue of blood and other bodily fluids. And like a beacon, it projected an unmitigating sense of hate and destructive jealousy; its every action was cruel, violent, and wrong. Furthermore, the Warrens noted, when these bizarre entities were present they played dirty, used foul language, and caused injury.[19]

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[15] Ibid., 156.
[16] Ibid., 107, 109.
[17] Ibid., 154-155.
[18] Ibid., 107.
[19] Ibid., 44-45.

Sometimes demons are known to leave rather obvious clues to their identity, such as by turning crosses upside down or by scrawling blasphemies on walls and mirrors. One might hear diabolical laughter, or a "threatening voice, sounding like no human being you ever heard" may order one to leave a haunted location. Demons can make many frightening sounds, from heavy breathing and knocking to explosions, bestial noises, and bloodcurdling screams.[20] Demons can be identified by their reactions to "religious provocation" as well. They will lash out and produce preternatural phenomena when confronted with "religious articles [such as a crucifix or holy water], the recitation of prayers, or reference to God or Jesus Christ."[21] Demons will also manifest in some of the ways that human spirits can manifest, such as by causing a sudden drop in temperature in a room or malfunctions with electronic devices such as telephones.[22]

The ultimate goal of a manifesting demon is to either possess a person's body or drive them to murder or suicide (or both).[23] According to the Warrens, before a demon gets to the final phase of possession, its activity will go through two prior phases: infestation and oppression. During the infestation phase a demon will essentially begin haunting a person's home or another location where the person spends time. A series of small paranormal disturbances will build up over the course of weeks or months. The point of infestation is to create fear and generate the negative psychic energy from which demons draw power. The Warrens explain that infestation will not occur, or will not get far, unless a person creates an opening for the demonic and invites it into their lives of their own free will. A demon must be

[20] Ibid., 45-46, 99, 100, 196.
[21] Ibid., 81, 99.
[22] Ibid., 87, 99.
[23] Ibid., 157.

invited. There are many ways to invite the demonic in. One could perform black magic, or hold a séance, or use a Ouija board. In one famous Warren case, two young women invited demonic infestation by paying too much attention to and trying to communicate with a doll that would preternaturally move on its own and which they later believed to be haunted by the spirit of a dead little girl. It turned out that, in reality, a demonic force had taken hold of the doll. People who attempt to reach out to more innocuous spirits often end up contacting the demonic instead. The Warrens also note that if one engages in dark behavior or has a dark attitude, one will attract dark spirits. Evil and sinful acts attract demons, as does a "dour, depressive person."[24]

After infestation, demonic activity intensifies and a demonic haunting will enter into the oppression phase. Oppression is ultimately a psychological attack meant to dominate a person's will. Once a person's will is broken, the demon can take possession of them. During oppression, a demon's supernatural manifestations will become more intense and the demon will try to directly affect a person's mental and emotional state. If oppression is successful, the next step is full on possession in which a demon takes control of a person's body.[25] For the Warrens, demon possession looks much like it was portrayed in Blatty's book and film *The Exorcist*. The possessed person's physical features become grotesque and the demon or demons speak through the person in strange voices. A possessing spirit will seek to mutilate the body it inhabits or "take off on a spree of wild physical mayhem. The demonic spirit isn't content simply to possess the body: its mind is fixed on death. The basic motive behind possession is

[24] Ibid., 127-136.
[25] Ibid., 138-150.

that 'One can kill many.'"[26] In fact, in a murder trial concluded in 1981, the Warrens testified that Arne Cheyenne Johnson killed his landlord under the influence of demonic possession.[27]

To get rid of demonic infestation or oppression, the Warren's used house blessings or bindings. These were performed by the Warrens themselves or a priest, usually a Catholic priest. A house binding forces the demonic spirit "to either show itself (if present) or move on." A binding, when performed by Ed Warren, involved moving room to room with a crucifix and holy water. Holy water was sprinkled "at all four points" of a room and Ed said aloud, "In the name of Jesus Christ, I command all spirits – whether human or diabolical – to leave this dwelling and never return."[28] In the case of full-on possession, a priest must be called in to perform the Roman Catholic rite of exorcism.

While the Warrens and their school of thought about demons are influential, many ghost hunters deviate from their schema, either building on the Warrens' school or contradicting it in significant ways. Due to the diversity of ghost hunter belief, I will not be able to exhaustively survey every way in which ghost hunters deviate from the picture of demons laid out by the Warrens. I will provide a few examples and explain how those examples reflect general tendencies of belief and practice among ghost hunters.

Kurt, a ghost hunter based in central Ohio, tries to provide a non-sectarian account of the origin of demons. He believes there were pools of positive and negative energy generated by the Big Bang, and that demons are made from the negative energy. When describing the origin of demons and what they are, he says "I try to do this as non-denominational as I can.

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[26] Ibid., 220-221.
[27] Gerald Brittle, *The Devil in Connecticut* (New York: Bantam, 1983).
[28] Brittle, *The Demonologist*, 99-100.

Because it doesn't actually matter…if you believe in a magical being that lives in the sky and waves their hand, or if you believe that it's an old man that lives in the sky, or if you believe in the power of the planets, or whatever, or you can be an atheist. One thing that we know for a fact…that happened, and I do say fact because it's been proved beyond theory, is that we know that there was a Big Bang…Out of that explosion you had two pools of energy…you had a positive energy and you had a negative energy, and…that negative energy is what, I honestly (sic), has become the demonic part, if you will." He explains that we know the Big Bang was a big explosion, and "every explosion, you're gonna put out positive ions, you're gonna put out negative ions" as we see in "atomic explosion tests that we've done."

In Kurt's description, we see two prominent tendencies among ghost hunters: a tendency to deviate from institutional religious teaching and become religiously eclectic, and a tendency to scientize. Toward the first tendency, many ghost hunters, perhaps the majority based on my non-systematic accounting, have roots in traditional religious faith but no longer affiliate with the faith of their upbringing. Many of them are "nones" or are "spiritual but not religious." This being the case, it is unsurprising that many ghost hunters do not strictly adhere to the very Catholic school of the Warrens. In this case, Kurt wants an account of demons that can function across religious traditions. We also see Kurt using scientistic language. He appeals to the Big Bang, which he takes care to note is proven scientific fact. He attempts to draw on the chemical processes of an explosion and he uses the language of energy. Ghost hunters often depict their investigations of the paranormal as scientific endeavors. As we can see in this example, that tendency can move into demonology.

A further example of religious eclecticism can be found in Kurt's description of one particular demonic case he helped resolve. He describes a devout Catholic family that was dealing with a demonic haunting and insisted on having a priest bless the house and perform an exorcism. Kurt discerned that this particular spirit was "not from the Christian realm," but was rather Thelmaic or Egyptian. He offered to bring in a Thelmaic priest to address the problem. The family, however, insisted on continuing down a Catholic path. They had their house blessed twice by a Catholic priest and continued to be tormented. According to Kurt, the family relented and even received the consent of their priest for a Thelmaic cleansing. When Kurt uses the term "Thelmaic" he means something pertaining to Thelema, which is a Western Esoteric belief system largely created by Aleister Crowley which uses a trio of deities adapted from ancient Egyptian religion.[29] Like many ghost hunters, Kurt draws on metaphysical religion and the occult milieu for ideas about spirits and how to deal with them. It should be noted that Kurt highly respects the Roman Catholic International Association of Exorcists as a source of information about demonology. He does not cast aside more traditional religious views in favor of the nonconventional; he combines them.

Like Kurt, other ghost hunters often draw on resources outside of the Roman Catholic Church and other traditional Christian institutions to deal with demonic hauntings. One popular ritual for dealing with demons or negative spirits in a space is called a cleansing or clearing. Anh[30] is not a ghost hunter, but they do overlap with ghost hunters' demonological milieu. They

[29] Much ink has been spilled on defining Western Esotericism. It is essentially a tradition in the West beginning in late antiquity and coming to maturity in the medieval and early modern periods focused on the recovery of hidden knowledge and magic. Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) is a key figure in the history of Western Esotericism. He was an English occultist who gained some notoriety for his occult activities.

[30] Anh is a non-binary individual who uses they/them pronouns.

are the owner of a metaphysical shop in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, and they offer home cleansings for a fee. They are willing to tailor a cleansing to a client's religious sensibilities, but they also offer one according to their own set of spiritual beliefs. They call the highest tier of home cleansing a home exorcism. As part of their ritual, they will use a blade, such as a pocket knife or athame, a ritual knife meant for spell work, that is meant to metaphysically cut dark bonds on the home and the people who live there. They will also perform sigil work, in which they draw sigils, or powerful magic symbols, meant to drive away evil and bestow protection. They will often leave the client with a sigil to place beneath their doormat. Anh also often performs candle magic, or magic that involves the burning of various candles. They do smoke cleanses using natural materials such as sage. The cleansing material is lit on fire, then blown out so that it is smoldering and releasing smoke. The smoke is what does the cleansing of the space and the atmosphere. Anh's cleansing is just one example of the type of non-Christian practices that may be used for dealing with demons. Oftentimes ghost hunters will note that the particular religious tradition or ritual of a cleansing or clearing does not matter as much as the power of the clearer's "intention." It is the power of a practitioner's intention or will in an exorcism or clearing that makes the ritual effective.

Though many or most ghost hunters are interested in demons, not every ghost hunter believes in them. A particular ghost hunter might not believe in demons for a variety of reasons. At times, demons do not fit into a particular ghost hunter's theology or cosmology. A ghost hunter may align themselves closely with professionalized parapsychology. The founders of psychical research who led and wrote for the Society for Psychical Research in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were not particularly interested in demons and were

more likely to see accounts of exorcism and the demonic as folklore or mental pathology rather than legitimately supernatural activity. The same can be said for the founders of laboratory parapsychology later in the twentieth century. In 1949, laboratory researcher J.B. Rhine, who could be considered the founder of modern parapsychology, was alerted to the case of alleged demonic possession that would later inspire William Peter Blatty to write *The Exorcist*. In the case, Rhine did not see diabolical activity. Instead, he saw evidence for psychokinesis and theorized that the demonic phenomena were actually being caused by the power of the young victim's unconscious mind.[31]

A ghost hunter may also hold a theology or spirituality that does not leave room for an objectively, totally, and essentially evil being like a demon. Many of the ghost hunters in this category still leave room for spirits that behave badly or in evil ways without being objectively, totally, and essentially evil, as they are depicted in the Catholic tradition of the Warrens and some other Christian strains of thought. Defining demons as objectively and essentially evil is important for many ghost hunters, as will be seen later when I discuss experiences of the demonic. For the purposes of this chapter, I will only call those spirits that are evil in this way demons. As I will show, many ghost hunters themselves make this distinction when discussing whether they believe in demons.

Some of the ghost hunters who reject the existence of demons as I have defined them hold what might be called a New Age spirituality, or a type of spirituality Catherine Albanese would classify as metaphysical.[32] In these spiritualities, the cosmos is essentially good even if

[31] William J. Birnes and Joel Martin, *The Haunting of Twentieth-Century* America (Tom Doherty Associates, 2011), 356.
[32] On metaphysical religion and ghost hunting, see chapter three on scientism.

individual souls sometimes experience trauma or lack enlightenment, causing them to fail to express fully their own goodness. Some beings behave badly, but they are not essentially evil beings. A variant of this metaphysical outlook can be found especially among people who identify as witches or some variety of pagan. Rather than focusing on the idea that the cosmos is ultimately good, they will emphasize the ambiguity in all things. Jodi, a pagan and ghost hunter from the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, believes demons are a "heavily Christianized construct." While she does not use the term demon, she does "believe that there is evil, that there are things of near full darkness;" however, she continues, "I do not feel things are so black and white, purely or absolutely good or evil. As such, I don't see even dark entities as without use or recourse."

Other ghost hunters deny demons because they hold liberal variants of Christian theologies. For example, David, an author of paranormal books and ghost hunter based in San Diego, Is agnostic about demons. He is seventy to eighty percent sure they do not exist. He comes from a conservative evangelical background, and though he still considers himself a Christian, he has distanced himself from his upbringing. He believes the demons mentioned in the Bible are metaphorical and stand for the non-personified forces of evil in the world. He worries that a focus on demons will cause us to ignore the real evil affecting our world that we find primarily in human beings. He does not like the theological implications of a demon infested world. What would it say about God if God allowed a world in which demons could so easily prey on the innocent? He also is not completely convinced by the evidence for demonic possessions. In spite of these dissenting voices, the world of ghost hunting in America is largely marked by an intense interest in and a desire to encounter the demonic.

Rudolph Otto and Demonic Experiences

One reason many contemporary American ghost hunters value or crave encounters with the demonic is because those encounters function as powerful religious experiences. They are powerful in both their emotional intensity and effectiveness as well as in their enchanting power. If one is sure one has encountered a demon, once can be sure not only that the spirit world exists, but that there is a moral order in the cosmos, as evidenced by the objective evil of the demonic. In this sense, demonic experiences are more powerfully enchanting than simple experiences of spirits of the dead. An experience of a spirit of the dead has less cosmological significance than an experience of a demon.

I call demonic encounters religious experiences simply to liken them to other experiences that scholars label "religious." I argue that the effects of demonic experiences can be as significant and as powerful as others we deem religious. Scholar of religion Ann Taves notes that the term "religious" is often used to mark an experience as special, or something set apart by the experiencer. Demonic experiences are certainly set apart by experiencers in the way religious experiences are set apart. [33] On another register, in religious studies, "religious" is used, for better or worse, to mark those social and cultural phenomena that are deemed worthy of study and close attention by the discipline. Those phenomena that pertain to the supernatural but are not marked as "religious" are often cast aside as social and cultural detritus, either uninteresting or insignificant. I want to mark demonic experiences as significant,

[33] See Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

in the lives of experiencers and for scholarly analysis, rather than just anomalous and strange. Overall, I want readers to recognize that experiences of the demonic can be just as impactful and significant in the lives of experiencers as any mystical experience or ecstatic worship experience. We can conceptualize demonic encounters as religious experiences by using the lens provided by early-twentieth-century German theologian and philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto.

Otto argued that when one encounters the numinous, one experiences a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.[34] Put simply, the numinous, for Otto, is the divine. To be more precise, it is that indescribable, transcendent thing one encounters when one encounters the holy. It is that part of the holy that is left once you take away the aspect of holy that means completely good or morally right. According to Otto, the term holy has "a clear overplus of meaning" once you subtract that part of its meaning that means completely good, and that overplus is what is captured by the term numinous.[35] Otto goes as far as to say this powerful, transcendent aspect of the holy was what was originally meant by some of the early terms for holy, such as the Hebrew *qadosh*, the Greek *hagios*, and the Latin *sanctus,* before they later came to mean good or morally right.

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[34] As far as I can tell, nowhere in *Das Heilige* does Otto use the phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* even though many commentators have used this phrase to summarize and communicate his ideas. Otto frequently uses *mysterium trememdum*, and he has an in depth discussion on the term *fascinans*, but never does he join all of the terms together.

[35] Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 5.
I am using John W. Harvey's 1929 English translation of Otto's work. I feel comfortable doing so especially because Otto himself approved of the translation, writing, "An English critic has said that 'the translation is much better than the original'; and to this I have nothing to object."

Otto, as a Christian theologian, believed that he was actually naming something divine or transcendent when he used the term numinous. In other words, he thought that there was something about religious experience that is *sui generis.* This element of Otto's thought has brought him under fire by some scholars of religion in the past few decades.[36] Fortunately, it is not necessary for us to adopt Otto's theology in order to use his terms and his lens. We need only grant that many people have the experience of encountering something they would term divine or transcendent during religious experiences. Eminent historian of American religion Robert Orsi has come to the defense of Otto and his concept of religious experience. Orsi argues that the religious studies scholar often finds that their subjects encounter something not accounted for in social and cultural reductionist accounts of religion. The divine is really real to their subjects in a way that problematizes scholarly attempts to bracket the question of whether the supernatural is real. There is something extra in the equation of religious experience: "2 + 2 = 5."[37] Orsi stops short of arguing that the something extra in religious experience is supernatural, and I will as well. Orsi's argument and defense is useful in that it allows us, in the case of ghost hunters' demonic experiences, to consider more clearly how those experiences feel for believers and the effects of how those experiences feel.

Otto describes the experience of the numinous as a *mysterium tremendum* - a terrifying mystery. Otto writes that *mysterium* "denotes merely that which is hidden and esoteric, that which is beyond conception or understanding, extraordinary and unfamiliar."[38] *Tremedum* is

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[36] See, for example, Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[37] Robert A. Orsi, "The Problem of the Holy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 99.

[38] Otto, 13.

only meant to evoke fear or terror as an analogy. It is not the common fear of something scary. It is more akin to the holy fear of the Hebrew Bible, the "fear of God" or "fear of the Lord." Otto suggests the closest English word to his sense of *tremendum* might be "awful" as long as we maintain its association with the word "awe." To imagine how fear or terror might be associated with experiences of the numinous, one might reference the theophanies of the Hebrew Bible. In particular, one can look at Exodus chapter 20 in the Hebrew Bible, that pivotal chapter where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. After Moses and his brother Aaron receive the commandments on Mt. Sinai, they find the people of Israel standing before the mountain terrified by the presence of God:

> When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.' Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid; for God has come only to test you and to put the fear of him upon you so that you do not sin.' Then the people stood at a distance, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was.[39]

How, then, is Otto's *mysterium tremendum* related to the fear ghost hunters experience when encountering demons? Otto writes that the antecedent stage to fear of the numinous or "religious dread" is "daemonic dread."[40] Otto is using the term daemonic in its ancient Greek sense. In ancient Greek thought, a *daemon* was a superhuman spirit which could vary in power and moral temperament and was often conceived of as less than a god. Though we eventually get the English word "demon" from this term, *daemons* were not conceived of as necessarily evil. They varied in temperament like the more familiar (to us) classical gods of the Greek

[39] Though Otto does discuss the Old Testament as a rich source of numinous dread, I do not believe he ever cites this passage in particular. He does cite one of Luther's sermons on Exodus 20.
[40] Ibid., 14-15.

Pantheon on Mt. Olympus. Otto sees daemonic dread as an antecedent stage to religious dread because, like many Western scholars of his time, he sought to rank forms of religion in terms of how civilized, advanced, beautiful, and good they were. Otto's view is also evolutionary, with more primitive forms of religion evolving into more civilized forms of religion. At the bottom of the religion hierarchy would lie things like magic and animist forms of religion, while at the top would lie modern Western (especially Protestant) Christianity. Otto's assumption is that a phase of fear and worship of daemons or powerful spirits in a society, Greek or not, proceeds the fear and worship of gods as part of what might truly be called a religion. Otto is granting that an encounter with a powerful spirit is closely related to or even a form of the experience of the *mysterium tremendum* of the truly numinous. Otto also includes among primitive forms of *mysterium tremendum* the "dread of ghosts." Otto calls the dread of ghosts a "queer perversion, a sort of abortive off-shoot" of daemonic dread, yet he still recognizes the affinity between dread of ghosts, daemonic dread, and dread of the truly numinous. Ultimately, the *mysterium tremendum* experience "first begins to stir in the feeling of 'something uncanny', 'eerie', or 'weird'" like one would experience when encountering a ghost or hearing a ghost story.[41]

By outlining the more "primitive" forms of numinous dread, Otto paves the way for us to link demonic horror with religious experience and to even paint demonic horror as a type of religious experience. If we do away with Otto's hierarchy of religions, we can recognize that dread of ghosts, daemonic dread, and religious dread are not actually separate categories or stops along an evolutionary progression. We can say that all of these forms of dread are some

[41] Ibid., 15-16.

sort of numinous dread. They all fall under the category of religious experience. Otto himself begins to move in this direction when he draws an analogy between daemonic experiences transitioning into divine experiences and a man's taste in music becoming more refined. He explains that a man with an uncultured ear "may be enraptured by the sound of the bagpipes or the hurdy-gurdy," though after he progresses in his musical education he can no longer bear the sound. Nevertheless, the man would have to admit to himself that the feeling conjured and the faculties he employed were the same when he listened to the bagpipes and hurdy-gurdy then and when he listens to more refined music now.[42] Otto's concept of numinous dread is valuable as a phenomenological description of at least some common forms of religious experience. As our excerpt from Exodus above begins to show, and as Otto shows in his own work, terror or fear or dread of a specific sort is often a major component of religious experience.

Ghost Hunters' Experiences of the Demonic

Fear or dread is usually one of the central components of a ghost hunter's demonic encounter. Paranormal investigators who claim to have encountered the demonic often describe the event as not only one of their most intense experiences, but also as a horror beyond all horrors. As one would expect from an encounter with a *mysterium tremendum*, people often describe demonic horror with a sense of awe. Lorraine Warren describes one encounter with a demon: "I could not begin to relate the sheer desperate terror I felt as that morbid black thing inside the whirlwind came closer and closer to me. I tried to move, but I

[42] Ibid., 75.

couldn't. I tried to scream, but no words came out! I felt a sense of doom then that I have never felt before."[43] A Miami-based paranormal investigator with whom I spoke likened the feeling of coming face-to-face with a demon to the initial shock of encountering one's greatest fear drawn out indefinitely. Bishop James Long, whom I quote above, describes encounters with demons as follows:

> the pure hatred will rattle your entire body. When you are in the presence of true hatred, the desire to see beyond what you are feeling emotionally will immediately subside. The desire to want to see the entity that is causing such emotional turmoil will cease to exist. Standing in front of something that has pure hate for you is an experience one never forgets. The hatred and evil is more powerful than any other emotion you will ever experience in your life. A complete dread engulfs your entire being.[44]

From these examples, we can see that demonic experiences can be as powerful as any other religious experience.

Demonic experiences' continuity with other less-ambiguous experiences of religious dread is not the only aspect that marks them as powerful religious experiences. Demonic experiences are also profoundly enchanting. They are potent experiences that prove to the experiencer not only the reality of the supernatural, but also the reality of a divine moral order. The blatant evil of the demonic assumes the existence of cosmic good and evil. Gerald Brittle, who wrote *The Demonologist*, a book detailing many of Ed and Lorraine Warren's demonic encounters from the 1970s, comments on the cosmic significance of these encounters: "When considered in totality, what the Warrens say cannot help but challenge our whole notion of life, death, and man's place on this planet."[45] For an example of the way demonic experiences can

[43] Brittle, 6.
[44] Long, 100.
[45] Brittle, x.

affect a ghost hunter's worldview, one can turn to the reflections of prominent paranormal investigator and demonologist John Zaffis. Zaffis is well-known in ghost hunting circles and even at one time had his own Syfy Channel reality series called *Haunted Collector*, in which Zaffis located haunted objects in the homes of people seeking help and safely removed them. In his 2004 book *Shadows of the Dark*, Zaffis describes the religious doubts he held before getting involved in paranormal investigation and demonology: "I was never a strong Catholic beforehand at all. I grew up in the 1970s and we questioned everything, and I mean everything. We questioned the Devil, we questioned God, and we questioned our parents and society." Things changed when he began his career as a paranormal investigator and began encountering demons: "It opened my eyes up…If these things could really happen and there are such things as demonic influences, I was ever more convinced that there had to be a Higher Power, or there has to be a God. With me, when you look at something, there is black and white, there's Yin and Yang, there are always two sides to everything. If there is a negative here, [there] has to be a positive." Zaffis held a desire for proof of the reality of the divine, and he was not satisfied to rest on traditional religious claims alone. He says, "Sure, I was taught in [Catholic] school that God existed, that spirit was real, but I never really accepted any of it at all. These types of [demonic] experiences started to make me realize that there is definitely a Higher Being, which I refer to as God."[46] Tiffany, a paranormal investigator based in Maryland, describes in her bio on her paranormal group's website how her view of the cosmos has been affected in a similar way by her experiences of the demonic: "I've never been religious, regardless of the fact that I was raised in the Catholic church. But, I've seen enough to know that there is true evil in the

[46] Zaffis and McIntyre, 7-11.

universe, and much of it hiding among us. If that evil exist[s], then a supreme good has to exist as well. I think that extreme good, who or whatever it is, put me here to do what I do."[47]

I can provide one case study in particular that aptly demonstrates the religious significance and enchanting power of demonic experience. I interviewed one ghost hunter, a dentist in Iowa, who became a "Christian," a term he uses as a general term, and then a Roman Catholic as a result of his experiences with the demonic. He reports that the beginning of his move from being not particularly religious to being a Christian was a specific incident he experienced in the eighth grade. For a period of time, he had been having paranormal experiences. He was having nightmares, he was seeing three-to-four-foot-tall shadow figures running around, and he was hearing knocking on his bedroom walls. One night, an eight-foot-tall black shadow in the form of a hooded figure appeared in his bedroom. He hopped out of his bed and began praying more fervently than he ever had before. This caused the shadow figure to disappear, and he was never bothered again until he encountered dark forces through ghost hunting later in his life. He tried to interpret this experience from "a science-minded point of view." He explains, "I had a phenomena (sic) that was going on, my independent variable was that I prayed, and after that, I had no more phenomenon." When I asked if the experience was a conversion experience for him, he explained that the event convinced him that God or a higher power exists, something that is more powerful than the forces that had been plaguing him. Prior to the event he was involved in the Christian youth ministry Young Life, but he found himself persistently questioning the existence of God. This questioning is unsurprising given

[47] "Investigators," Spectral-Echo Paranormal Association, accessed October 13, 2020, https://spectralechoparanormal.weebly.com/investigators.html.

that his father was an atheist and his mother was a Unitarian. The shadow figure event "made God absolutely, 100% a reality" for him. The conversion to Catholicism came much later and also arose out of a process of reasoning from the starting premise that the demonic is real. He explains, "the big kicker for me is that…I know that the demonic thing is for real…and I know that God exists and can clear this stuff up, and can kick this stuff out. And so therefore, if the Catholic Church has a 2000-year history of being, basically, paranormal investigators and able to…perform exorcisms, perform blessings, and all that sort of thing and it works, the only conclusion that I can come to is that…God is real, Jesus is real, and [the Bible's general message about angels and demons is real]…if it's not real, why does this stuff work?" When I told him it sounded like his paranormal experiences led him to become Catholic, he responded, "that's 100% true."

Timothy K. Beal, in his work on monster theory, builds on Otto's likening of religious experience to terror. He argues that monsters are monstrous because they are "otherness within sameness." They are, as Freud says, *unheimlich* or uncanny. Beal holds that there are two primary reactions to the monstrous – it is either demonized or deified. When monsters are demonized they are labeled a threat to "our" order and the "order of the gods." When they are deified they are marked as a "revelation of sacred otherness." Beal notes that, often, the monstrous is both demonized and deified. This is what we see in ghost hunters' encounters with the demonic. The demon is of course demonized as a violation of all that is good and holy, yet it is also treated, often not consciously, as a revelation of divine order in the cosmos. Demons violate the good and orderly while also making the good and orderly real.[48]

[48] Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and Its Monsters* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 5-10.

Conclusion

Experiences of the demonic are religious experiences. They have no less power to orient the lives of people than other experiences traditionally labeled "religious." Through Otto's lens, we can see that demonic experiences are phenomenologically similar to other powerful experiences we deem "religious." Otto may have been wrong about the *sui generis* nature of religious experience, but he provides insights into what religious experiences feel like for those who experience them and the emotional effects they leave. Beal reminds readers that Otto believed in a "transcendent wholly other" and even in the introduction to *The Idea of the Holy,* the work where Otto introduces his ideas about encounters with the numinous, he "discourages readers from reading his book if they have not had such an experience of the sacred." Beal does not so discourage readers and neither do I. Like Beal, I see value in Otto's likening of experiences of the holy to experiences of terror in spite of his theological commitments. We can liken the terror of a perceived encounter with God to the terror of a perceived encounter with a demon.[49]

Around the United States, ghost hunters are longing for the terror of the demonic. They crave an experience of the numinous from its dark side. Ghostly experiences give them a taste of the *mysterium trememdum*, but an experience of the demonic intensifies the encounter with the numinous. A ghostly experience provides evidence of the reality of the supernatural and perhaps the soul, but a demonic experience provides more powerful evidence of the supernatural and establishes some order in the cosmos. It is not all meaningless and relative:

[49] Beal, 7.

good and evil truly exist, as attested by the existence of essentially evil spiritual monsters. Though many ghost hunters have backed away from traditional religious affiliation or maybe never claimed it at all, they still seek enchantment. They search for spirits haunting our disenchanted world. They have moved beyond seeking merely the spirits of the dead as their Spiritualist ancestors have and have sought more powerful forms of enchantment. Sometimes demonic experiences are powerful enough to drive them back to the old order provided by traditional religious institutions like the Roman Catholic church. Other times these demons help to establish a new regime of enchantment made up of pieces of the old religious order combined with other ideas, both old and new, often deriving from America's metaphysical spiritualities. Ultimately, demonic encounters are a powerful form of enchantment that can shape the cosmologies and religious orientations of those who experience them.

Chapter 5

Ghost Hunters and Media

In late modernity, mass media often functions as a driver of enchantment. In this chapter I use the example of twenty-first century American ghost hunting to show that television is often the source of or fuel for enchantment, and to give an illustration of what enchantment via television looks like on the ground. I also briefly explore the role of Facebook in paranormal communities. The ghost hunting subculture is heavily shaped by reality television that portrays ghost hunting and the paranormal. Reality television shows about the paranormal portray and create an enchanted American landscape. Ghost hunting is also likely shaped by the massive amount of paranormal fiction available to American audiences. Media studies research on the cultivation effects of television consumption provide insight into how media consumers' enchanted worldviews are made to conform to the enchanted worlds portrayed in media. The case of ghost hunting will show how media is in many ways constitutive of enchantment in late modernity. Ultimately, I argue that enchantment is going through a process of mediatization.

Television and the creation of a ghost hunting boom

To a significant degree, contemporary American ghost hunting is organized around television. The ghost hunting craze that began in the mid-2000s and continues today was linked to the airing of the first ghost hunting reality television shows in the United States. The first

show to air was *Ghost Hunters*, which was then on the Scifi Channel (which would later become the Syfy Channel). It began airing on October 6, 2004. At the time, *Ghost Hunters* starred two paranormal investigators, Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson, who had day jobs as plumbers. The two men had founded The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) in Rhode Island in 1990. The show focused on their travels around the country to investigate and gather evidence of hauntings. The men used EMF meters and other early ghost hunting electronic equipment, and they looked to record EVP. Other ghost hunting reality shows began to pop up shortly after, including *Paranormal State* in 2007 and *Ghost Adventures* in 2008. The show *Ghost Hunters* brought the practice of paranormal investigation to the attention of the first wave of the ghost hunting boom.[1] A similar dynamic occurred in the United Kingdom with the slightly earlier release of the ghost hunting reality show *Most Haunted*.[2] Most American ghost hunters I have interviewed trace their interest in ghost hunting in large part to the television shows, with *Ghost Hunters* perhaps being the most prominent. Along these same lines, it is rare to find a ghost hunter who was active in paranormal investigation before the end of 2004.

Before the release of *Ghost Hunters*, an online ghost hunting community that was quite small compared to what was about to come with the TV shows had taken shape. The stars of *Ghost Hunters* seem to have drawn their methods and basic practices from this milieu. For example, if one looks at an example publication that arose from the pre-television American ghost hunting milieu, such as the version of ghost hunter Troy Taylor's *The Ghost Hunters*

[1] I am not the only or the first one to recognize that *Ghost Hunters* and other television shows sparked a ghost hunting boom. See, for example, Sharon A. Hill, *Scientifical Americans: The Culture of Amateur Paranormal Researchers* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017), 19.

[2] Michele M. Hanks, "Between Belief and Science: Paranormal Investigators and the Production of Ghostly Knowledge in Contemporary England," (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaigne, 2011), 233-266.

Guidebook: The Essential Guide to Investigating Ghosts & Hauntings that was published in June 2004, one sees the basic tools, terms, and methods of the *Ghost Hunters* show laid out. Taylor writes about EMF meters and gathering EVP, and he mentions the types of hauntings familiar to the *Ghost Hunters* crew, such as "residual hauntings." The online community was ready to receive the curious research ventures of the many who watched *Ghost Hunters* and other shows and went online to learn more and determine how they could investigate themselves. Anthropologist Michele Hanks has argued that, in the case of the UK, these online communities were essential in sparking the ghost hunting boom that accompanied the television shows, and the evidence points to a similar dynamic in the US.[3]

The influence of the original *Ghost Hunters* TV show and later shows in bringing paranormal investigation to the attention of would-be ghost hunters became even more clear while I was interviewing ghost hunters. One woman with whom I spoke had encountered a paranormal investigation team before she became a ghost hunter, "but it didn't occur to me at that time that I could actually join a group and do that. It wasn't, as I say, until I saw TAPS [the ghost hunting team from the show *Ghost Hunters*]. But, you know, then I was like, 'hey, normal people can do this, and this is what I want to do.'" Becky, a ghost hunter based in Tucson, AZ, explained to me that when she first started researching ghost hunting, she turned first to books by Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson, the stars of *Ghost Hunters*. When I asked Brian, a ghost hunter based in Mont Alto, PA, how he learned ghost hunting was a possibility, he told me, "Pretty much the same way, I think, everybody does…seeing it on TV. Everybody has a camera. They go out, they take pictures, they see something that they don't really understand in the

[3] Ibid., 233-289.

picture. They don't have the experience or the knowledge to know what's going on. But you start watching the TV shows, you start seeing it and hearing about it on TV. You kind of pick up a knack for it and you really start searching."

Paranormal reality television's enchanted American landscape

I argue that paranormal reality television has been a major source of late modern enchantment. Paranormal reality television saturates the market place. A channel in the Discovery family of cable networks, the Travel Channel, airs virtually only paranormal reality content. Before the Travel Channel transitioned into this role in 2018, Destination America served as a paranormal-only cable channel. In as much as paranormal reality programming claims to represent reality, it strives to portray an American landscape that is absolutely enchanted. I argue that, even though ghost hunters and other consumers of paranormal media can express skepticism and take these programs with a grain of salt, these programs do function to produce enchanted worldviews.

As an example, let's take two of the most successful ghost hunting reality programs, *Ghost Adventures* (2008-present) and *Ghost Hunters* (2004-2016, 2019-present). These shows have played a large role in establishing the outlines of the ghost hunting reality show format. In each episode, the paranormal investigation teams are called out to a reportedly haunted location. Sometimes this location is a private residence with a family seeking help and understanding, and other times the location is a public place, such as a bar, restaurant, or theatre, or a famously haunted location such as a former prison or asylum. The show begins with an explanation of the haunting. Witnesses are interviewed and the phenomena of the

haunting are described. The investigators are usually shown around the property by hosts or witnesses. After this the investigation proper begins. The paranormal team generally spends a night or more investigating the claims of the haunting with their specialized equipment and their intuitive abilities. Digital recorders and/or ghost boxes or other devices are used to establish communication and record EVP. Cameras are set up around the premises and camera operators follow the investigators themselves. The TV investigators often have the newest equipment, with new equipment being developed every year. The investigators often report any strange feelings or anomalous experiences they have. In the case of *Ghost Hunters*, the evidence is then summarized and presented to the client or host who called in the team. In the case of *Ghost Adventures*, the episode often ends seconds after the nighttime investigation with a summary voiceover. *Ghost Adventures* is a bit more controversial than *Ghost Hunters* and some other ghost hunting shows. Zak Bagans, the lead investigator of the *Ghost Adventures* team, has a flare for the dramatic. He is often criticized by other investigators for trying to provoke spirits, especially malevolent spirits, into action through means such as shouting and insults. He is also not shy about narrating his feelings of being influenced, attacked, or overcome by spirits. *Ghost Adventures* also aims for a more visceral style by having the paranormal investigation team also function as the camera crew, so that Zak and his co-investigators are locked down alone for a night in the haunted location they are investigating.

Ultimately, these influential shows portray a cosmos alive with spirits and an American landscape covered in hauntings. In the vast majority of episodes, evidence of a haunting is procured and rudimentary communication with spirits is established. Furthermore, in almost every episode for the first several years of each show, the teams discover a new location that is

haunted, with locations being drawn from all over the United States and sometimes abroad. Though famously haunted locations are often revisited by different shows, the shows never seem to completely run out of new locations. The famously haunted locations seem to be hyper-enchanted. Ghost hunters from all over the country have visited them and experienced similar haunting phenomena. The shows enchant these locations for the viewers, and then the viewer can themselves experience the enchantment first hand through a personal visit.

This type of activity has frequently been described by scholars as "legend tripping." Michael Kinsella explains, "A legend-trip involves a journey to a specific location and/or the performance of certain prescribed actions that, according to local legend, have the potential to elicit a supernatural experience." In the age of the internet, the legends that lead to a legend-trip are often not local in the same sense, and this is also true in the case of paranormal reality television. Many ghost hunters are legend-tripping when they watch TV ghost hunters investigate a famously haunted location and lay out what one might experience there, then visit the location to experience the paranormal themselves.[4] Though, as I will show later, ghost hunters are often skeptical of the TV shows in one way or another, they are generally not skeptical of the shows' reports that locations are haunted. Skepticism is often directed toward the legitimacy of the evidence gathered or the dramatizing of paranormal experiences, but not usually toward the sheer number of hauntings TV paranormal teams encounter. Rarely will a ghost hunter disagree that a famously haunted location visited by a TV team is legitimately haunted.

[4] Michael Kinsella, *Legend Tripping Online: Supernatural Folklore and the Search for Ong's Hat* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 27-41.

The paranormal reality show *Portals to Hell* (2019-present) highlights extremely haunted and hyper-enchanted locations. In this show the investigators examine locations thought to have portals. Portals are believed to be spiritual entryways through which spirits can travel. In locations with portals, one would expect to find many spirits, including spirits that are just passing through. Sometimes the portal is demonic, or a "portal to Hell." These evil portals allow demonic and dark spirits to enter a location in order to torment the living and the human spirits of the dead that reside there. Generally, a dark portal must be opened or invited. This can happen in a variety of ways, including through someone dabbling with the occult in a location or perhaps even through a traumatized person attempting to contact the spirit world. In this show, the investigators often find themselves not only making contact with spirits, but making contact with multiple spirits and having to determine whether they are human or inhuman demonic spirits. The locations in *Portals to Hell* are hyper-enchanted in that the haunting activity is thought to be intense; the places, saturated with spirits; and the spirits, of multiple types and cosmological positions. Also in *Portals to Hell* one finds a mechanism of enchantment. Theoretically a portal could be opened anywhere, so any place has the potential to be haunted. The entire American landscape is susceptible to haunting.

Paranormal reality television's enchantment of the American landscape goes beyond haunted buildings and the ghostly. Two more examples of enchanting paranormal reality television are the strikingly similar shows *Fear the Woods* (2017-present) and *These Woods Are Haunted* (2017-present). These shows feature eyewitness interviews and reenactments of terrifying supernatural encounters in North American forests. Throughout each episode, an experiencer of a scary uncanny event in the woods will narrate their experience interspersed

with reenactments of the events using actors, horror makeup, and limited special effects. Included are stories of haunted wooded graveyards and demons encountered in the woods, but also included are dangerous brushes with sasquatch-like creatures and other cryptids. Most times, the woods in which these encounters occur are not all that remote. Sometimes the woods are right outside someone's house and other times they are a short drive away. The picture these shows paint is of an American landscape covered in haunted and creep-infested forests that are interspersed with human civilization. This media mixes with viewers' personal experiences and previously held beliefs to enchant. Take, for example, the Facebook comments of two members of the paranormal Facebook group TELL A GHOST STORY. When asked to describe why she is interested in these shows, one woman explains, "I love the woods. I live in the Mountains of East Tennessee. Our land has many spirits. Including Native Americans. I guess that is why they interest me so much." When asked to say more about the connection between her personal experiences and the reality shows, she explains, "it's validating that there are things out there we can't explain." Another woman explains how the shows draw her in to explore the unexplained for herself: "I think I am already afraid of the woods. But makes me more interested to explore to see if I could feel, hear or experience anything out of the ordinary."

A recent paranormal documentary series on Amazon Prime, *Hellier* (2019-present), struck me with the way it resonated with members of a Facebook group created by the owner of a metaphysical and magic shop located in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. The metaphysically inclined in the Facebook group exchanged excited posts about how interesting and compelling they found *Hellier* to be and the ways it resonated with their personal

experiences of the paranormal in rural, southern, and/or Appalachian settings. *Hellier* focuses on a paranormal investigation in and around the small Appalachian town of Hellier near the border between Kentucky and West Virginia. One of the paranormal investigators receives an email claiming to be from a man living in Hellier who is being tormented by small, goblin-like creatures that emerge out of an abandoned mine on his property. The investigation leads the investigators to ponder the myriad strange happenings in the Appalachian region including UFO sightings, stories of hauntings, and stories of strange creatures such as the Mothman. These investigators have a tendency to tie all of these phenomena together and strive to find a unified paranormal theory to explain them all. *Hellier* enchants Appalachia through varied reported manifestations of the paranormal.

Ghost Hunters' interaction with and critique of paranormal reality television

For decades, media scholars and cultural critics have claimed that paranormal media is to blame for the proliferation of paranormal belief. Paranormal belief is often seen as a negative trend in society by many of these scholars and critics. Michele Hanks, in her dissertation on twenty-first century ghost hunters in the UK, has contested this view. She argues that her subjects generally do not link their paranormal belief to television shows such as the ghost hunting reality show *Most Haunted*, but rather view these shows as having developed the direction of their paranormal interests. Hanks argues that such television programs "provide an imaginary and cultural repertoire for acts of self-fashioning and self-

actualization that are grounded in far earlier, childhood encounters with the paranormal."[5] Childhood encounters are key in Hanks' research as well as my own. Most of the American ghost hunters I have interviewed recount a childhood interest in the paranormal, and many of them report a strange or paranormal experience in childhood that first sparked that interest. As I have already described, the ghost hunting reality shows are what direct these people with established paranormal interests toward ghost hunting themselves. In this sense, Hanks' argument makes a salient point about ghost hunting reality television and its effect on paranormal belief. On the other hand, we should not dismiss the possibility that the glut of paranormal reality shows increases the level of paranormal belief and the level of engagement with the paranormal in American culture. Paranormal belief has been widespread over the past century, so there is a degree to which recent paranormal media is meeting pre-existing demand rather than creating interest. On the other hand, it is difficult to rule out that early childhood belief in the paranormal among most ghost hunters was sparked in part by media in the decades before the advent of *Ghost Hunters*, or that paranormal media helped shape the conceptual framework that led future ghost hunters to notice experiences that could be labeled paranormal or led them to conceive of anomalous experiences in a paranormal framework. For example, one ghost hunter I interviewed traced his interest in the paranormal to the paranormal television of his childhood during the late 1960s and early 1970s. He cited scary movies and TV shows about bigfoot and other paranormal topics. Aside from possibly

[5] Hanks, 233-244. For media scholars who attribute paranormal belief to paranormal media, see, for example, J. B. Maller and G. E. Lundeen, "Sources of Superstitious Beliefs," *Journal of Education Research* 26 (1933): 321-343; Glenn Sparks, and William Miller, "Investigating the Relationship Between Exposure to Television Programs that Depict Paranormal Phenomena and Beliefs in the Paranormal," *Communication Monographs* 68, no. 1 (2001): 98-113. For popular commentators, see Richard Dawkins and James Randi.

increasing the level of paranormal belief in the population, the ghost hunting boom in America following the premiere of ghost hunting reality shows and the admission of ghost hunters that their interest in ghost hunting was sparked by television indicates that paranormal television does increase engagement with the paranormal. Ghost hunting is an activity that requires a substantial time and often a significant financial investment. This activity exploded once ghost hunting reality television began to air. A significant possibility is that ghost hunters would not have been nearly as engaged in paranormal ideas and activities without the stimulus of paranormal reality television. Later on in the chapter, I highlight some of the empirical research, set aside by Hanks, that seems to indicate that paranormal television viewing and paranormal belief are related.

Though paranormal reality television has influenced ghost hunters, they do not consume such media uncritically. Most of the ghost hunters I spoke to took pains to distance their practices from what is seen on TV. One woman was almost embarrassed to admit she watches the television shows. “I’ll be honest, I do watch the shows,” she says. “This is just for entertainment because we all know that television, that’s what that’s for.” However, even she admits the shows are useful for some things: “Sometimes I’m interested in the experiments they do, sometimes I’m interested in contacting the people who make the equipment to kind of find out a little more about how things work. But television shows are for television, that’s for your entertainment.” Another ghost hunter shows similar ambivalence: “I don’t really watch television shows except for entertainment. I mean, I consider them to be entertainment. I mean, let’s be real. But…obviously I watch them when I can. I really don’t consider any of the groups out there except maybe the TAPS team as being something that I would want to

emulate. I think a lot of them are just out there for…for notoriety." When I asked Barry, a ghost hunter based in Connecticut, whether he watched the ghost hunting shows, he replied, "Oh yeah. And, you know, I watched them with a…with a kind of professional eye, and some of them I'm laughing at and some of them…they're getting some good stuff. And others I think are ridiculous. But I definitely did and do watch them." Similarly, Carol from Paragon, IN tells me "most of that stuff on TV we think is just for TV…but every once in a while they will get something and I'm going, 'oh, that's awesome.' But especially Ghost Adventures: that's all Hollywood in my opinion." These investigators stress that they know the difference between entertainment and reality. They want to draw a distinction between reality television and real ghost hunting. Ultimately, they are of two minds about the shows. They are drawn to them, but do not want to admit to valuing them too highly. They will mark the shows as over-the-top entertainment while also admitting that the shows have something worthwhile in them. The most significant evidence that the shows are influential in spite of individual ghost hunters' protests is that American ghost hunting exploded in popularity after the shows began airing and that one can get a decent idea of how an average ghost hunter investigates by watching a few episodes of ghost hunting reality television. The television shows have certainly established the basic template of what ghost hunting is and how it is done.

I am not the first to recognize the ambivalence that comes with watching paranormal reality television. Though she was not focusing on ghost hunters specifically, media studies scholar Annette Hill has done work on British audiences' reception of the show *Most Haunted*. Hill argues, "the best way of describing the multimodal responses of audiences to ghost hunting TV is to picture them going through a revolving door of scepticism and belief." Particular

audience members trade off the positions of believer and skeptic. Audience members, like the ghost hunters I have described, are fully aware of the ways reality television bends reality for entertainment purposes. Like many media consumers in the twenty-first century, they are media critics. Hill explains that the revolving door is "marked with genre signs, fiction and fact, understanding of mediated representations, and the construction of reality for entertainment purposes. The revolving door is also marked with psychological signs, disbelief and belief, understanding of deception and self-deception, and misunderstanding of paranormal ideas." Ultimately, Hill sees ghost hunting TV as a performative space in which people can play with and formulate identity: "It creates a playful atmosphere where people can laugh and shout and scream about a televised ghost hunt. They can experiment with different identity positions, and styles of performing the self with other viewers and audiences. A disbelieving attitude is tried out and tested in this rehearsal space. A willing attitude is explored and its impact observed. People begin to try out their own role in the production of beliefs."[6] Like British audiences of *Most Haunted*, ghost hunters watching American ghost hunting reality television construct themselves alternately as skeptics and believers. They also use paranormal reality television to construct their identities as investigators. By criticizing or showing skepticism toward the shows, they establish themselves as hard-nosed investigators. They also claim their expertise by performing their role as critics.

[6] Annette Hill, *Paranormal Media: Audiences, Spirits and Magic in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 75-80.

Mediatization of Religion and Enchantment

The concept of mediatization was developed in media studies to answer the question of how media influence the wider culture and society. Media studies scholar Stig Hjarvard explains that mediatization takes into account the fact that in contemporary culture and society, "the media may no longer be conceived as being separate from cultural and social institutions." The aim of mediatization theory is to "gain an understanding of how social institutions and cultural processes have changed character, function, and structure in response to the omnipresence of the media." Rather than focusing on how specific media messages affect people or how people use media, mediatization theory focuses on the structural changes in culture and society produced by the rise of modern media. An example that illustrates what scholars mean by the mediatization of a realm of culture or society can be found in politics. Kent Asp talks about the mediatization of political life as a process in which "a political system to a high degree is influenced by and adjusted to the demands of the mass media in their coverage of politics." Hjarvard uses the example of how "politicians phrase their public statements in terms that personalize and polarize the issues, so that the messages have a better chance of gaining media coverage." Mediatization is a process that marks late modernity. Hjarvard argues, "Mediatization should be viewed as a modernization process on a par with globalization, urbanization, and individualization, whereby the media, in a similar way, contribute to both disembedding social relations from existing contexts and re-embedding them in new social contexts." Mediatization marks religion and enchantment in twenty-first century America.[7]

[7] Stig Hjarvard, *The Mediatization of Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1-9.

Hjarvard argues that the mediatization of religion in the West is, in part, "the historical process by which the media have adopted many of the social functions that were previously performed by religious institutions." Hjarvard mentions "rituals, worship, mourning, and celebration" as social activities partly taken over by the media from the domain of institutionalized religion. Elsewhere Hjarvard indicates that media can build moral systems. He also explores how media can function as a source of enchantment. He points to the abundance of fantasy and supernatural narratives on offer in the media and argues that "the media have become society's main purveyor of enchanted experiences." Enchantment is often communicated through "banal religious representations." Banal religious representations consist of elements that are often not associated with traditional religion, such as vampires or ghosts, and also traditional religious symbols, such as crosses, taken out of their traditional religious context. These elements help to create and maintain "both individual faith and collective religious imagination." They are "banal in the sense that their religious meanings may travel unnoticed and can be evoked independently of larger religious texts or institutions." They appear in media that generally do not have the purpose of conveying religious meaning. Paranormal reality television is full of banal religious representations. Their banality is significant in that religious meaning can be communicated unnoticed to people who have little interest in traditional religious content. Furthermore, the decontextualized nature of the religious representations makes them available for mixing and combining into new religious

formations. Ghost hunters' spirituality is eclectic and combinative, and this is in part due to the influence of mass media.[8]

The mediatization of religion means that religious cosmologies are being constructed partly by media. Paranormal belief in general and ghost hunting in particular are key examples of this phenomenon. The reality portrayed by paranormal reality television, even when viewers do not accept it uncritically, shapes paranormal believers' and ghost hunters' religious realities. Television helps create a supernatural that is real and helps shape what the supernatural entails. In the case of the shows I have profiled, the cosmology created involves an enchanted American landscape dotted by hauntings and spirits, as well as an American wilderness populated by cryptids and frequented by UFOs. The demonic is also real and dangerous, as is spiritual good that can counteract the demonic.

The category of the paranormal is created in the American imagination and its reality is maintained in large part by media. As I have explained in the introduction, the paranormal is a slippery category (as slippery as the category "religion") that is distinct from the supernatural generally in that it consists of what is dually rejected by traditional religion and mainstream science in Western society.[9] It is a category that includes cryptids, UFOs, ghosts, and psychic abilities. The paranormal is a modern mode of enchantment particularly well-suited for secular entertainment. The paranormal is the supernatural placed in a scientistic register and separated from traditional religious teachings,[10] thus making it ideal for late-modern Americans still

[8] As is evident here, when Hjarvard discusses the mediatization of religion, he often categorizes the supernatural in general as within the sphere of religion, and I will follow that approach for this discussion.

[9] I am indebted to Baker, Bader, and Mencken for this definition. *Paranormal America*, 31.

[10] I believe this is partly what Kripal means when he calls the "psychical," "the sacred in transit from a traditional religious register into a modern scientific one, and when he calls "the paranormal" as "the sacred in transit from

interested in the supernatural and ideal content for media producers who want to produce compelling and non-sectarian supernatural content. Without paranormal mass media Americans would not be less enchanted in worldview, and people do not accept paranormal media uncritically, but paranormal mass media is currently a prime avenue of enchantment and it sets the supernatural in a paranormal register. As traditional religious institutions decline in influence and religion is mediatized, the paranormal is on the rise.[11]

Another aspect of the mediatization of religion is that religion and the supernatural are portrayed to audiences according to media genres. The broad genre of entertainment and the more specific genre of reality television are the pertinent ones to our discussion. As religion is mediatized, the religious is communicated through entertainment and, in our specific case, through reality television. When the paranormal, including ghost content, is presented to viewers by the television media, it generally takes the form of entertainment rather than news or documentary. The purpose of these media are not to present the scientific consensus on paranormal phenomena or raise doubts as to their reality. They are meant to tantalize through the supernatural and unexplained. The paranormal is presented as real. We have seen that viewers of ghost hunting reality shows often go through a revolving door of doubt and belief, but this is not because the American shows intend to raise any doubt about the reality of spirits and hauntings. Few viewers want to watch a reality show in which the hauntings clearly are not real. The genre of entertainment also means that paranormal reality television is meant to be

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the religious and scientific registers into a parascientific or "science mysticism" register." *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and The Sacred* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 9.

[11] It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to explain and trace why the religious and supernatural is so often portrayed in a paranormal vein in secular mass media.

engrossing in a way religious content as presented by media affiliated with traditional religious institutions often is not. The religious content of entertainment is likely to reach audiences uninterested in traditional religion and draw in audiences not generally interested in religious content.

Given the effect of paranormal reality television on ghost hunters, I argue that enchantment is going through a process of mediatization. As we can see with the example of ghost hunters and paranormal reality television, the mass media are more and more a source of enchantment even as traditional religious institutions decline as a source of enchantment. Mass media promotes enchantment among those who seek to be merely entertained rather than proselytized. Those who are unmoored from traditional religion and who show little interest in religious messages otherwise find themselves inundated with banal religious representations on television, allowing various supernatural elements, from traditional symbols like crosses and crucifixes to folk supernatural elements like vampires and ghosts, to be more readily mixed together when taken into one's religious worldview. Mediatization means that the supernatural is especially communicated in a paranormal register whereas it may have once been communicated in a traditional religious register, such as an institutional Christian register. When studying enchantment in late modernity, we should be cognizant of the way media and media genres shape enchantment. Media are world-building in a way traditional religion is and has been world-building. Though the present work focuses mainly on the medium of television, much could be said about the way the internet mediates enchantment as well.

Ghost Hunters and Media Cultivation Effects

Cultivation effects are a primary mechanism by which the mediatization of enchantment and religion takes place. Media studies scholar George Gerbner developed the idea of cultivation in the 1960s, arguing that long-term exposure to television could lead viewers to view the world and society as being much like it is portrayed on television. Gerbner would come to focus on television viewers' attitudes toward crime, and in the 1970s conducted a series of empirical studies using survey data to determine that those who consumed more television were more likely to see the world as a violent place and to be fearful of becoming a victim of crime. Gerbner argued through content analysis that television portrayed the world as violent and crime ridden, and so viewers' perceptions and attitudes toward the world were conforming to what television portrayed. Gerbner's work has been tremendously influential in media studies in spite of critiques that his work only shows a correlation between strong television viewing and certain attitudes toward the world given the limitations of the type of study he employed. Scholars following Gerbner's lead have added to the literature supporting the validity of cultivation effects over the past several decades.[12]

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, both scholars and critics of the prevalence of paranormal belief in America have referred to cultivation effects to explain widespread paranormal belief. Media studies scholars have performed some empirical research working within the cultivation effects framework on television and paranormal belief. In general, the research has found that increased exposure to paranormal television is correlated with an

[12] W. James Potter, "A Critical Analysis of Cultivation Theory," *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 6 (December 2014): 1015-1036; Michael Morgan and James Shanahan, "The State of Cultivation," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 54, no. 2 (May 2010): 337-355.

increase in the likelihood that a television viewer will hold paranormal beliefs. Interestingly, studies have been divided on the effect of having had a paranormal experience on whether paranormal television viewing increases paranormal belief. A 1997 study found that paranormal television consumption was positively correlated to paranormal belief only among those viewers who reported never having had a paranormal experience. A 2001 study found just the opposite: only the group that reported having had a paranormal experience showed increased paranormal belief correlated to higher consumption of paranormal television media.[13] These mixed findings leave open the question asked by Hanks and myself about which comes first: childhood paranormal belief (perhaps rooted in a paranormal experience) or the influence of consumption of paranormal media. Ultimately, cultivation effects research provides evidence that heavy television viewers' visions of reality conform to the version of reality they see on television. Paranormal reality television and even fictional paranormal television have the power to shape ghost hunters' worlds.

Ghost Hunters and Paranormal Fiction

Some evidence suggests that ghost hunters are more likely than the general population to have an interest in horror and paranormal fiction. I have come to this conclusion from observations accumulated over many years of speaking to ghost hunters and reviewing ghost hunters' media. First, I have directly asked many of the ghost hunters I have interviewed if they

[13] Glenn G. Sparks, C. Leigh Nelson, and Rose G. Campbell , "The Relationship Between Exposure to Televised Messages About Paranormal Phenomena and Paranormal Beliefs," *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 41, no. 3 (1997): 345-359; Sparks and Miller, "Investigating the Relationship."

are into horror and paranormal fiction. Certainly some have no interest in horror, at least, but many of them have admitted to an interest. Nick, a ghost hunter based in Norwalk, CT, is a self described "horror nerd." He even has a few horror-movie-themed tattoos. He explains the connection between ghost hunting and his love of horror: "Well when I was a kid in the 80s me and my father watched all the horror movies. I remember they scared me but I still liked watching them… Most of us paranormal explore[r]s like horror too. I guess we like the feeling and the rush especially when you really are living horror. I often say I loved horror movies all my life and in a way my life is a horror movie doing the paranormal exploring."

Beyond that, horror and paranormal fiction often come up in ghost hunters' conversations about paranormal investigation and with each other. The majority of these conversations I have seen happen online on platforms such as Facebook. Monitoring several paranormal Facebook groups over several years, I have often seen posts that show an interest in horror and paranormal fiction and expect that interest to be shared by many in the Facebook group. I spent August through October 2019 monitoring several Halloween-themed Facebook groups. In those groups, I found many people who had overlapping interests in paranormal investigation and horror. Ghost hunters' interests in horror is also evident in the way many of them designed their team websites in the first decade of the American ghost hunting boom beginning in 2004. One might expect ghost hunters, given their scientism, to adopt sleek websites that look like they might be for scientific research organizations. To the contrary, many of them adopted a spooky aesthetic for their websites. There were lots of black backgrounds with spooky fonts. Horror symbols such as skulls or ravens were often used. One could easily imagine the template of many ghost hunters' websites being used to advertise

Halloween events or haunted house attractions. This design choice is an example of ghost hunters explicitly linking their work to horror aesthetics. Spooky websites for ghost hunting teams are now less common, but many of them still maintain a dark aesthetic.[14]

A key example of the relationship between ghost hunting and horror and paranormal fiction can be found in the annual convention called Scarefest, hosted each fall in Lexington, KY. Scarefest was founded in 2008 as a paranormal and horror convention, and it found a strong audience. The conference combined speakers and presentations about paranormal investigation with presentations on horror fiction, especially in film and television. Over the years, as the conference grew, attendees and potential attendees demanded more horror content. The conference still calls itself a paranormal and horror convention, and it still has ghost hunters present and speak, but the convention is now particularly focused on allowing horror fans to meet, take pictures with, and have autographs signed by actors and other people involved in the production of horror films and television. Emblematic of the convention is the celebrity-hosted ghost hunts they planned to offer in 2020.

Paranormal investigation has had an influence on popular horror mass media. The popular and critically acclaimed 2007 horror film *Paranormal Activity* shows the marks of influence by paranormal investigation or paranormal reality television specifically. The film documents the progression of a demonic haunting in a home. All of the footage is in the style of home video cameras and the majority of footage is taken with cameras sitting stationary and recording the activity in a room. The premise of the movie is that all the footage is amateur

[14] For an example of a ghost hunting website that still maintains a spooky aesthetic, see http://www.blackravenparanormal.com/intro.html.

footage found at a crime scene. The camera set-up mirrors the way paranormal investigators set up cameras to monitor a location being investigated. This type of footage is commonly shown on ghost hunting reality television shows. The demonic haunting portrayed in the film is of a type that one might expect from ghost hunters' accounts of demons and demonic hauntings. *Paranormal Activity* would go on to spawn sequels and become a movie franchise. Another movie franchise influenced by paranormal investigation is the *Insidious* series. The original 2010 horror film *Insidious* focuses on a haunting surrounding a young boy who has sunken into a mysterious coma after a paranormal encounter. The action of the movie is driven in part by a medium and a duo of paranormal investigators who are called into the home by the boy's parents. Finally, there is *The Conjuring* film franchise which began in 2013. Both *The Conjuring* and *The Conjuring 2* are based on the case files of the famous paranormal investigators and demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren.

Aside from what is known in general about media cultivation effects, the degree to which horror and paranormal fiction shape the cosmologies of ghost hunters is unclear. Just as ghost hunters draw a strong distinction between entertainment and reality in ghost hunting reality television, the ghost hunters I spoke to about horror film and television clearly categorized fiction as fiction. They also recognized the fiction based on real paranormal investigation, such as the *Conjuring* movies, to be completely sensationalized. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe the horror and supernatural fiction many ghost hunters consume so eagerly does not influence their ideas about the paranormal at all. After all, ghost hunting reality television has significantly shaped how most ghost hunters investigate even though those ghost hunters clearly mark the television shows as entertainment. Perhaps, in the same way, ghost

hunters' critical awareness of fiction as fiction does not completely prevent their ideas about the paranormal from being influenced by fiction. Media studies cultivation effects research provides some evidence that media consumers continue to draw on material marked as fiction or untrue, or material they are told to disregard due to an error, when later forming judgments.[15] In a similar way, we can imagine ghost hunters marking fiction as fiction, yet still allowing the fictional content to shape their worldviews.

Tracing the influence of fiction on ghost hunting is not a simple task, given that paranormal investigation has also influenced popular media. One case of potential influence can be found in the influence of the 1973 film *The Exorcist* and later depictions of demonic possession in film and television. Ghost hunters' conceptions of demonic possession mirror the conceptions presented in the *Exorcist* and other media. This evidence is complicated by the fact that *The Exorcist* is based on an actual reported American case of demonic possession, and William Peter Blatty, the screenwriter, studied Catholic demonology when writing the book and film. Ghost Hunters could be influenced by Catholic demonology directly as well as by mass media in this case. On the other hand, affirming that television and film fiction do not shape ghost hunters' very concept of a ghost and a haunting and what these phenomena entail is almost impossible. Ghost hunters' ideas about ghosts are certainly not wholly shaped by their investigations and the findings of other investigators. Ghost Hunters come into investigating

[15] L. J. Shrum, "Development of a Cognitive Process Model to Explain the Effects of Heavy Television Viewing on Social Judgment" in *NA – Advances in Consumer Research Volume 25*, eds. Joseph W. Alba and J. Wesley Hutchinson (Provo, UT: Association for Consumer Research, 1998), 289-294; R. S. Wyer, Jr. and T. L. Budesheim, "Personal Memory and Judgments: The Impact of Information That One Is Told to Disregard," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 53 (1987): 14-29.

with preformed conceptions about spirits, and film and television media are some of the most influential purveyors of these ideas.

In some ways, the connection between an interest in paranormal investigation and an interest in horror and paranormal fiction is unremarkable. It is unsurprising that ghost hunters, who are enthusiastic about investigating the paranormal and unexplained, would be drawn in by fiction that focuses on the paranormal and unexplained. In other ways, the connection between horror fiction and ghost hunting teaches us something about modern enchantment. In some cases, ghost hunting and the consumption of horror and paranormal fiction meet similar desires. A desire for enchantment or the desire to reinforce enchanted worldviews may drive some of the popular consumption of horror and paranormal fiction. Ghost hunters are clear pursuers of enchantment, and they also seem more likely to consume horror and paranormal fiction. Nick, the ghost hunter I quote above, likens the enjoyment of watching a horror movie to the thrill of paranormal investigation. Ultimately, the case of ghost hunters helps illustrate that the mediatization of religion results in more people turning to media for enchantment where they used to turn to traditional religion. Furthermore, the influence of paranormal investigation on popular culture means that a loop is created with horror and supernatural fiction influencing ghost hunters who in turn influence fiction. In a broader sense, mass media enchants the American population while the enchanted worldviews of the American population enchant the media.

Ghost Hunters as television media creators

In as much as television is influential among ghost hunters, many ghost hunters have a desire to make television. Average ghost hunters most often get the chance to be on television when they serve as experts or witnesses to local hauntings. Local paranormal investigators will often be featured on ghost hunting reality television shows, generally giving background about a haunting or describing their own experiences with the haunting. Haunting reenactment shows, similar to *These Woods Are Haunted* and *Fear the Woods*, also often feature ghost hunters as witnesses and narrators. Local news media sometimes feature ghost hunters when reporting on hauntings. This is especially common around Halloween. Ghost hunters often proudly advertise on their websites the television media in which they have been featured. For example, on January 4, 2020, Don, a medical doctor and paranormal investigator based in Charlottesville, VA, proudly proclaimed on his paranormal Facebook page that he was being featured on the Travel Channel show *Haunted Hospitals*.

Some ghost hunting teams create their own television episodes featuring their investigations. Often these episodes are uploaded to a video sharing site like YouTube. These episodes are more than just videos collected during investigations, though these are commonly uploaded as well. They are specifically edited to take on the look and feel of paranormal reality television. The Twisted Paranormal Society based in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia has a show called *The Twisted Realm* that can be found on VIDI Space, Amazon Prime, Roku, Apple TV, and Google Play. As of this writing, they have 8 episodes across two seasons, with each episode between fifty minutes and an hour. The shows follow the same basic structure established by *Ghost Hunters* and the shows that came after. The haunting is introduced and

witnesses are interviewed, the property is toured, then the main investigation begins when the lights go out.

Ghost hunters write many books, they produce online radio shows and podcasts, they build websites, but television has pride of place in the ghost hunting world. The most successful ghost hunters and most of the ones who make a full-time living off of ghost hunting are on television. The ghost hunting boom was sparked by television and the vast majority of ghost hunters watch the ghost hunting shows even if they are often critical of what they see. This has driven many ghost hunters to strive to be on television and create television of their own.

Internet Media and Paranormal Enthusiasts: Enchanted Facebook

The internet is widely used by ghost hunters. Many paranormal teams have websites that often describe a team's mission, give bios of team members, present some of the evidence of hauntings a team has gathered, and provide team contact information for people who believe they have a haunting on their hands. Many teams rely on Facebook for a website that serves many of the same functions as sites not on the platform. Through Facebook, teams can be contacted and teams can share posts about the paranormal with those on Facebook who "like" their paranormal team's page. As I have already mentioned, the ghost hunting subculture was centered on the internet even before the first ghost hunting reality shows aired in the US. Anthropologist Michele Hanks has argued that in the UK, widely available access to the internet was a key factor besides the airing of the show *Most Haunted* in spiking the ghost hunting boom. The same seems to hold for the American case. Ghost hunters frequently turn to the internet to research paranormal topics and to network.

In particular, I focus on how ghost hunters use Facebook. Ghost hunters' enchanted worldviews are bolstered by daily or weekly contact with ghost hunting content and other like-minded individuals in paranormal Facebook groups and on ghost hunting team Facebook pages. Here I explore what sort of content appears in paranormal Facebook groups. I have been following several ghost-hunting-related Facebook groups for several years. Due to the difficulties of seeking consent to quote from posts within these groups that are often private so that only group members can see posts, I obscure the group names and refrain from directly quoting more personal posts.

One group I have followed advertises itself as a group in which one can seek advice on ghostly matters. The group has around 4500 members primarily from the US and the UK. For many of its members, it functions as a group where ghost hunters and others interested in the paranormal can share interesting ghost-related links, share evidence of the paranormal such as videos of apparitions or recordings of EVP from around the internet, or even make ghost-related jokes and share ghost memes. People do indeed come to the group to ask the more experienced investigators in the group advice on ghostly matters. Oftentimes someone will share a piece of paranormal evidence they have gathered, like a photo or video, and ask group members' thoughts on what they have captured. Group members will then weigh in on whether the evidence is truly of a paranormal nature or perhaps something more conventionally explainable like a camera lens flare. Sometimes those who post share opinions on ghost hunting equipment or investigative techniques. One recent post discussed a smart phone app recently featured on the television show *Ghost Nation*. The app comes with the disclaimer "This app is intended for entertainment purposes only and does not provide true

Ghost Hunting functionality." The original poster asks why the team on *Ghost Nation* would use such a thing. One commenter defends the app by referencing the results they have had when using it on investigations. Another commenter argues that this type of disclaimer is standard for paranormal apps to avoid lawsuits. Yet another commenter contextualizes how the app was used on the *Ghost Nation* episode in which it was featured. Jokes and memes appear often as well. One post contains a photo of what looks to be genuine fear reactions of several teenagers that appear to be visiting a haunted house attraction. Overlaid over the bottom of the photo is text that says "When you take your sceptic (sic) friends Ghost Hunting and they see a spirit." Another post contains a photo of someone wearing a white sheet over their head complete with eye holes in the sheet. The overlay text says, "The most common ghost [sic] are the visions dressed in white sheets with flailing arms. These are people who died changing their duvets, destined to roam bedrooms forever trying to find the corners."

Another group I have been following has similar content. This group is named after a paranormal investigation team that runs the group, and it has over 13,000 members. This group has an example of paranormal-related memes that are meant to be interesting and engrossing rather than funny. It is a meme entitled "Dracula's Death." It displays an illustration of an armored medieval warrior facing into the distance holding a sword and wearing a ragged red cape. Swords are scattered across the field around him and hills and a dark tower rise in the distance. The meme includes a brief description of how Vlad the Impaler, widely taken to be the historical source of Dracula tales, died in a battle during the Turkish invasion and had his severed head impaled on a spear. This group includes posts from many people asking for help with their paranormal problems. People often join the group just to ask for help. For example,

one man asks why his prayers to God, Jesus, the archangel Michael, or a spirit guide never seem to work in ridding him of negative entities that torment him. One woman's daughters are experiencing frightening spirit manifestations, so she is asking the aid of psychics or anyone who can astral travel.

My observations of ghost hunters and my consumption of ghost hunting media lead me to argue that enchantment is often a social affair. Enchanted worldviews are maintained in part through social ties. A social circle that is enchanted encourages enchantment. Because of this, ghost hunters' enchanted worlds are maintained through their social ties with others in the ghost hunting subculture, including ties facilitated through social networks such as Facebook. A ghost hunter has the option to join many paranormal Facebook groups and connect with thousands of ghost believers around the country and the world. Through Facebook groups, a ghost hunter can come into contact every day with people who share their views of the paranormal and encourage their paranormal beliefs. Within these groups, belief in the paranormal is not hidden or embraced with embarrassment, it is assumed and taken for granted. Paranormal belief is relaxed and casual enough to joke about. Paranormal belief is naturalized. Religious studies scholar Jeffrey Kripal has called the paranormal our "secret in plain sight" because of how widespread paranormal interest and belief are, all while Americans tend to hide their paranormal interests in public for fear of ridicule.[16] The paranormal is no longer a secret on Facebook. The thriving ghost hunting subculture on Facebook is a force for enchantment. Facebook functions as an enchanted social network.

[16] Kripal, *Authors of the Impossible*, 7.

Conclusion

The case of ghost hunting and its relationship with paranormal reality television and horror and paranormal fiction demonstrates that enchantment is mediatized in late modernity. Paranormal reality television has essentially created an enchantment boom in the United States. A series of television shows moved ghost hunting from a small and often unnoticed online subculture to a burgeoning subculture that made its mark on American ideas about the supernatural. If we accept that ghost hunting, with its supernatural cosmology, is religion, then we can say paranormal media sparked a small religious revival in the United States. Ghost hunting demonstrates that television media is a major source of enchantment in the twenty-first century United States.

The case of ghost hunting also shows that the media's communication of religious messages or enchantment is complicated. Late modern Westerners are media critics. They recognize the ways mass media warp reality, and the ways that even reality television is designed to entertain more than convey reality. Ghost hunters mark paranormal reality television as entertainment and they categorize fiction as fiction. Nevertheless, we have reason to believe that being media critics is not enough to shield a population from the world-shaping power of mass media. The marks of paranormal reality television and, to a lesser extent, horror and paranormal fiction on ghost hunters are clear. Ghost hunters have brought media messages into reality.

Television media shapes ghost hunting by constituting what it entails. Ghost hunters have looked to ghost hunting reality television to tell them how to ghost hunt. For example,

rather than centering mediumistic abilities as some prominent twentieth-century ghost hunters such as Hans Holzer did, twenty-first century ghost hunters center electronic equipment and attempt to communicate through a sort of digital dowsing process. Though some ghost hunters receive messages through mediums, many more communicate through EVP or by asking spirits to manipulate the lights and sounds of electronic devices. In another example, most ghost hunting teams operate as non-profit ventures that do not charge for their services, much like the teams on television. One can learn nearly all the basics of ghost hunting as it is practiced by watching the television shows.

Television media shapes late modern enchantment in several ways. First, it moves enchantment out of a traditional religious register and focuses enchantment more in an eclectic, combinative register built from decontextualized banal religious representations that include the folk supernatural such as vampires or ghosts. Mass media brings enchantment to audiences who have tuned out of traditional religious messages, which is significant especially as the portion of the population who have tuned out grows. As traditional religious institutions decline, we can expect to see mass media become more powerful as a source of enchantment. Television media also shapes enchantment by presenting enchantment and religion in terms of the paranormal. Survey data has shown a decline in religious affiliation in the United States in recent decades, but it has failed to show a decline in interest in the supernatural and the realm of spirituality. Particularly well suited to, and perhaps even partially constituted by, this milieu is the paranormal, that which lies between the boundaries of traditional religion and mainstream science. The paranormal is the supernatural scientized and separated from religious institutions. The paranormal has proven popular among late modern Western

audiences, and it has been bolstered by television media. The non-sectarian and cutting edge paranormal is fit for television, and, thus, television participates in moving enchantment into a paranormal register. Media cultivation effects research reveals the ways in which media is able to shape ghost hunters' worldviews. Decades of empirical research in media studies point to the probability that heavy television viewership over time shapes the way viewers perceive the real world; therefore, we must take seriously that television enchantment shapes viewers' enchanted worldviews. Enchanted worldviews shift to mirror enchanted television.

Chapter 6

Ghost Hunting and Spirituality

Twenty-first century American ghost hunter spirituality reveals much about what we can expect to find among alternative and emerging spiritualities in the late modern West. Ghost hunting is native to the emerging spiritual landscape in America in which traditional religious affiliation is declining and the percentage of people who hold supernatural beliefs and self-consciously practice spirituality while affiliating with no religion in particular is increasing. This chapter provides an overview of ghost hunter spirituality by delving into what ghost hunters I have interviewed have said about themselves. We will see how ghost hunters draw on Christianity and metaphysical religion to form their spiritualities and how ghost hunting might best be labeled an element of the cultic milieu or occulture. We will mark the features of ghost hunting as a spiritual practice to highlight what we can expect to find among other late modern enchantments. Ghost hunting spirituality is eclectic and combinative, empirical and experiential, and it is geared toward seeking. As has been established in earlier chapters, it is scientistic and deeply shaped by popular media.

An inventory of Ghost Hunter Spiritualities

Here I give an overview of the spiritualities and religious backgrounds of eighteen ghost hunters whom I asked about religion and spirituality directly. According to my estimate, the majority of ghost hunters are not regular attenders of religious services. I asked ghost hunters

in two paranormal Facebook groups I have monitored about their level of attendance at religious services. In one group, out of the ten ghost hunters who responded, seven do not attend religious services at all. Only one of these seven asserted they do not believe in God. One respondent goes to church every Sunday, and the remaining two go to church irregularly. In another Facebook group, four out of six respondents do not attend church, though one respondent attributed his lack of attendance to his work schedule. The remaining two attend church irregularly.

Of the eighteen ghost hunters I interviewed about religious and spiritual background, the largest group are those who were raised in a Christian tradition, but who no longer affiliate with any particular denomination. Those in this group often still express a belief in God, and they may or may not loosely self-identify as Christians. They often still engage in some Christian practices, such as prayer. First, I will give an overview of those raised Catholic. Gina, based in Bear, DE, was raised Catholic: "I was raised to go to church. We went to church every Sunday. My parents were very, you know, strong Catholics. We went to church every Sunday. You know we went to all the holidays. Typical Italian family. I personally don't go to church anymore. I do believe in God. I do believe there is a higher being. I still pray when I need help. I may not – I don't go to a church to do it, but I do it where I need to. I am very thankful for the blessings I have in my life. But I know probably within the Catholic religion, you know, talking about ghosts and the paranormal was not something that you did." Along these lines, there was a long time when she didn't tell her "old Italian" father that she was a paranormal investigator, but now, "he knows, I said, you know, I haven't changed my faith. I still believe in God and I still pray. And he's like, ok, you know, as long as you still have that, that's good with him." When asked if

ghost hunting has had any influence on her religious or spiritual life, she expresses that the knowledge that there is life after death is a comfort: “I think it gives me peace of mind. You know…you always wonder what happens when someone passes away, you know? Is there a heaven? Do they go to heaven? If there’s spirits still on Earth, why are they still here? You know, and I think for some people, it just gives them a peace of mind that there is something hopefully better when you pass over.” Gina does not feel that her beliefs about the soul have changed as a result of paranormal investigation. She still holds that “there is a heaven” and that people die and cross over “to the other side” unless “there’s something here that’s troubling them or they’re attached to something,” in which case they stay as haunting spirits. Gina is open to the possibility that she doesn’t have all the answers: “I mean, I’m sure if you ask somebody else on my team, they might tell you something completely different.”

Mike from the Twin City area in MN is “a confirmed Catholic, but I’m about as non-practicing as you can get.” In spite of investigating the existence of spirits, Mike generally has not thought deeply about religious questions. He has seen that religious provocation works, meaning that using Christian symbols and language can cause some spirits, especially evil spirits, to react, and he assumes this points to some sort of religious reality, but he does not understand it very well. It actually never occurred to him to ask questions about whether the soul continues after death until he saw the ghost hunting TV shows and became part of a paranormal team. Sean from Cincinnati, OH, also does not say much about his spirituality. When asked if he considers himself a religious or spiritual person, he says, “I would certainly say spiritual, sure…I am a bad Catholic, non-practicing.”

Becky from Tucson, AZ, "was raised Catholic. I went to actually a Catholic school from second to eighth grade. So I was, you know, very involved in the Catholic Church while growing up." When Becky was a teenager, her family moved to Tucson where they could not find a church they liked. They were used to a small community church, and when they could not find that, they stopped attending. "So into adulthood, I tried going to different churches. I tried different religions and I never found one that I connected with. When I started doing the paranormal stuff, I basically became more spiritual. I basically knew that I do believe in God. I do believe there's a…you know, higher being, whatever you want to call him…I can't say which religion is right or wrong. I just know that there's something out there, and there's, you know, a higher power. And I call him God. And, you know, I do believe in him and I do ask, you know, for his protection when I go and do these things. But I don't believe in any particular religion." The spiritual resurgence caused by her entrance into paranormal investigating led her to feel that investigating was her calling: "I feel that it was a calling for me to do this, to be quite honest with you, because everything that happened to me in this whole thing kind of fell in my lap. It, just, it was like, here, this is what you need to be doing… I honestly feel like I was given a gift, that I need to use it. And because of that, it's caused me to do some soul searching and, you know, knowing that there's something beyond our life right now made me know that there has to be something else out there, and that's what got me back into, you know, believing in something."

Other ghost hunters who no longer attend church report being raised in Protestant denominations. Maggs from Nashville, TN, was raised Episcopalian, but she now says she is not very religious. "I don't go to any kind of church whatsoever," she explains. On the other hand,

she reports, “I think that I have a personal relationship with a being that I consider a God.” Later in the conversation, however, she expresses that she has not decided concretely whether there is a God. She does believe in reincarnation because of a paranormal experience in her childhood.

Shannon, a ghost hunter and medium, reports, “I was raised Methodist. As I have gotten older, I…I don’t really subscribe to organized religion anymore, because I am a medium and have had dead people show me things that completely contradict what I was taught in organized religion. I’m more spiritual now. You know, I do believe in, you know, there is a higher power. Now, you know, people call him God. People refer to him as the higher source. Whatever words you use, me, he’s still God because I was raised…as a Christian, so that’s still my go-to word. You know, there is a higher power…not as involved in everyday life as organized religion says he is. And there are angels and demons and things like that…some things are a little different that what I was taught in Sunday school.” Shannon reports that she often functions as a counselor for spirits when she helps them to cross over to a more permanent and less liminal afterlife. Sometimes spirits are hampered in their progress by their religious upbringing: “A lot of them are scared. You know, we…we run into ghosts that, you know, they were raised Southern Baptist. And Lord help ‘em, they smoked a cigarette or had a beer before they died, and they’re convinced they’re going to go to hell. I mean, they can see the light, but they were of the belief that if they went into the light, you know, they could still go to the bad place.” Shannon believes that human spirits, no matter how morally bad, can go into the light, but they may end up in “spiritual rehab” for a long time.

Anne was also raised Episcopalian, though she does not currently go to church. She elaborates, “I went through an agnostic period during my younger adult years, which is probably why I ended up in ghost hunting. You know there were some deep, deep questions that Christianity just wasn’t answering for me. The idea of you have to have sheer faith in a religion just really didn’t sit well with me. It’s like, well, how do I have faith in something I neither see nor hear nor ever experience? So I think a lot of...the reasons I went into ghost hunting was because I had some deep questions that I wanted answered. And I wanted them answered…in tangible ways.” Anne reports that her belief in God is stronger after having experienced the unexplained while ghost hunting.

Julia, based in Utah, was raised in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. She explains, “I wouldn’t call myself a religious person. I think I am spiritual. So I have my own, kind of, ideas about things, but I try not to bring that into investigations.” She views organized religion as oppressive. It marks out people with paranormal experiences as “the weirdo.” She feels that in organized religion, you are not allowed to have a different viewpoint or ask questions.

Rhonda from Arkansas told me, “I do not attend church. Just because I was brought up in a split home, Catholic and Baptist, I did attend church…I’ve been on again off again Methodist, basically. I believe in God, I daily say prayers…I do believe in that. So yes, I’m religious in that fact. I do not go to church to get that, I get it alone.” When I asked if ghost hunting had affected her spiritual life, she replied, “Yes…not quite…not as scared of dying, and I’ve had a lot of death around me.” She has found particularly compelling evidence working

with EVP for years. She described clearly hearing the voice of her deceased daughter on a recording.

A smaller group of the ghost hunters I interviewed consist of those who clearly affiliate with Christianity or a specific denomination. This group may or may not attend church regularly, and they sometimes express beliefs that many traditional adherents of Christianity in the United States would find unconventional. Jerry from Minnesota states clearly, "I'm a Christian. I'm a Lutheran." In spite of this, Jerry does raise some uncertainty about which religion has "got it right." He mentions being drawn to Native American spirituality, and this influence is evident in his house clearing ritual which seems to draw very little from Christianity. When he cleanses a home, he opens all the windows in the house and starts on the lowest floor. He then moves clockwise around and up through the house while smudging, which is done by burning four plants associated with Native American religion in order to cleanse the area with the smoke. All the while, he assures the spirits that they can leave the house and go to God. Jerry says that paranormal investigating gives him the answers to questions not answered by religion.

Carol from Paragon, IN, reports that she is a Baptist and her husband and investigating partner is as well. When asked if she has always been Baptist or if she was raised Baptist, she replied, "Yes, always." She does not feel ghost hunting has affected her religious beliefs and, "if anything, I think it's confirmed a lot of the beliefs that I grew up with." She does note, "I did not make the people at church aware that I was sensitive," meaning that she has intuitive abilities that allow her to connect with spirits. She also notes that in the Bible, soothsayers are "not so well liked," but she excludes her own practices from the Bible's condemnations by arguing that

one is not a soothsayer unless one charges people to exercise spiritual abilities. “I would never charge anybody for these gifts that God has given me, because that’s how I look at it, as a gift.”

Brian, based in Mont Alto, PA, explains, “My religious background is very shaky. Growing up, I was baptized Methodist, was very active in the church. In 2004, I came down with an illness and I did the typical, you know, why me? Blamed God. I got away from God completely. For a long time, I didn’t believe in anything.” He describes an experience about a year before the interview, sitting at the funeral of a close friend. He explains that what the minister said about the friend and the “reasons” why he “was taken” resonated with him and led him to an understanding of why he himself had gotten sick. Then he “slowly started to come back to God.” He notes, “we use God or any higher power that someone believes in, whether it be any type of religion. We use that on every investigation.” When asked to elaborate further, he explains, “Well, there’s different methods to protecting yourself, whether it be Reiki, or praying to God, or carrying pieces of something that has been blessed with you. When we start an investigation we hold an opening prayer. You know, we ask God to protect us, protect the spirits, allow the spirits to communicate with us, don’t hold them back. If you’re gonna hold anyone back from communicating with us, the evil that would come through, you know, we ask that he shields that from us or us from them throughout. You know, I wear a cross now. I’ve never worn a cross in my life, and I wear them now daily. Healing stones, there’s things that, you know, we use throughout the investigation. At the end of the investigation, we hold a closing prayer that, you know, [praying that] no [spirit] comes with us. You know, protect us wherever we go. After this one, we thank the spirits. We thank the higher power for allowing us

to come into their space and, you know, thanking them for giving us that platform to communicate with them."

Jacob, another ghost hunter, has ideas reminiscent of nineteenth-century Spiritualists and more recent metaphysical practitioners. He believes that there are levels in the spirit world, and spirits are constantly advancing to higher levels. Spirits have "their own societies" in the spirit world. Only the lower-level spirits haunt places. Hell, rather than being a separate realm of torment, is actually the state of staying at a lower spiritual level and not advancing. In spite of these beliefs, Jacob identifies as a Christian. He explains that passages in the Bible that prohibit contacting the dead are not making a moral claim, but are actually in place to protect people, because contacting the spirit world is dangerous. He does not currently attend church, but that's not for a lack of trying. When asked what churches he has attended in the past, he replies, "You name 'em. I've been to every church, I've been kicked out of every church…Roman Catholic, I've been to Methodist, I've been to Baptist. I've been a Lutheran. And my mouth gets me in trouble because I'm a, I'm not really a follower." When he discusses some of the debates he has had over doctrine with particular church members, he reveals his empirical approach to the supernatural: "And of course, they would always bring it back on me. 'Well, how do you know about ghosts and everything?' I've been out there with 'em. You know, I've been hanging around 'em. How do you know all this? You know all this because a bunch of men wrote this book way back in the day, which had been edited and edited and edited." He compares his own firsthand experiential knowledge of ghosts to churchgoers' secondhand knowledge of religious claims from heavily edited texts like the Bible. Jacob uses Catholic holy water and holy oil for house sealings. When I asked if a Protestant pastor's blessing of water or oil would work just as

well, he replied that he does not know. He believes Jesuits are particularly effective exorcists because of their training and the fact that they devote their entire lives to their calling.

Mary firmly identifies as Roman Catholic: “I was born Roman Catholic. I went to Catholic school. You know, I was actually an altar boy, or altar girl, whatever…So I’ve always been religious. I think that [paranormal investigating] has helped open me up to other religions, for sure.” Ghost hunting has led her to interact with people of other faiths and given her respect for how they handle the afterlife, spirits, and hauntings. Aside from that, she says about ghost hunting, “I don’t think it’s changed my personal belief. I mean, I’m still Roman Catholic. We still go to mass every Sunday. My uncle’s a deacon and I argue with him regularly about whether or not spirits are demons.” The belief that there are no human spirits that can haunt and that, in fact, what seem to be human spirits are actually demons is a common conservative Christian belief.

Barry, a ghost hunter from Connecticut, also identifies as Catholic. He describes his background: “I was raised Roman Catholic, went to Catholic school until I was in sixth grade. My family was not big on going to church, but we went for the big holidays, Christmas and Easter, and occasionally in between.” He used to attend church as an adult before he got divorced, after which he felt, “the Catholic Church really doesn’t want me.” He did try going to a Methodist church for a while. Barry has found the power of Catholic faith in confronting demons to be compelling evidence for its truth. It has not sent him back to church, but he explains, “I’m Christian. I do read the Bible. I will use Christian things in my clearings. I have Padre Pio’s card that I carry with me. A lot of the prayers I say are to the Archangel Michael and different saints that I will use to try to get a house cleared. So I’ve got that religious

background. And then on top is a sprinkling of Eastern and, you know, other beliefs that I have." An example of a non-Christian technique he employs is visualizing an open door of light through which spirits can pass to the afterlife when he is trying to clear a location of spirits.

After accounting for those ghost hunters raised Christian but no longer practicing, and those who currently identify as Christians, we have some ghost hunters left to account for. I have already mentioned in my chapter on demonic experiences ghost hunters who identify as witches or neopagans, or those with a New Age or metaphysical spirituality. I also encountered Cindy from Waterville, ME. "I'm a Native American, and I'm a shaman," she explains. "I was raised between a Catholic, Native American, and Wiccan religion." She later explains, "both sides in my family have major Native American in them, and it was just something that was passed down. They just continue to pass it down."

Some ghost hunters simply do not identify as religious and do not come from a religious background. "I'm not extremely religious," Tara tells me. "We never went to church growing up or had any religious belief system." When asked if she believes in the persistence of the soul after death, she replied, "Yes…not necessarily the soul, but energy." She does not have much of an idea about what one experiences after one dies, noting that everyone "thinks so differently" about that. When asked if she believes in God, she equivocates and expresses concern that I am going to hold her answer against her. She explains, "I really don't believe in the typical God/Jesus is God's son point of view. I do believe that there could possibly be a supreme being or something to that effect. Or even multiple supreme beings or whatever, what have you." She does not believe in the Christian concept of demons, but she believes that it is possible for non-

human spirits to haunt a place. For example, one might encounter elemental spirits that inhabit things like forests and lakes.

Mark, based in St. Louis, MO, struggles to define his spiritual outlook. When asked what his religious or spiritual background is, he replies, "That's a good question. I wouldn't say I struggle with it but it's something that's not…I wish I could be one of those people who said 'oh, I'm Catholic' or 'oh, I'm this.' I would say, you know, I wish it was more solid. If anything I'm a spiritualist or maybe even a pantheist…Everything comes from some source, I would like to believe. For a while there I've been almost agnostic, sometimes almost atheist. You know, where everything we do is just a chemical reaction. But I would say that more often than not, I'm on a spiritual, almost a pantheist type vibe. And again, agnosticism kind of does play into my spiritual and religious beliefs and the fact that I am firmly of the belief that our brains are not cognitively powered enough to really fully understand the concept of a higher immortal…being…So I don't think I really have any strong spiritual or religious beliefs. I do, I mean, just do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Everything is a lot more divine than we realize it to be." When asked about the effect of ghost hunting on his spiritual beliefs, he explains, "If anything, it's made me slightly more open to the fact that, you know, we are more, not immortal, but incorporeal, more spiritual, more of a soul than a person." Nevertheless, he is not completely convinced hauntings are caused by spirits. Maybe the phenomena come from other dimensions or our own subconscious.

My findings about ghost hunters' relationship with Christian identity and church attendance invites comparison with the findings of sociologists Christopher D. Bader, Joseph O. Baker, and F. Carson Mencken on the relationship between church attendance and paranormal

belief generally. Bader, Baker, and Mencken find, based on survey data gathered beginning in 2005 and continuing through 2014, that Americans who attend religious services the most, once a week or more, are the least likely to report paranormal experiences or beliefs. They hypothesize that this is because of the anti-paranormal rhetoric of many traditional religious teachers. Evangelical Christian biblical literalists, for example, promote Christian supernatural beliefs, but they often condemn non-Christian supernatural beliefs, such as those that would fall under the umbrella of the paranormal. On the other hand, those who report never attending religious services are less likely to report paranormal beliefs or experiences than those who attend infrequently. Bader, Baker, and Mencken suggest that atheism or a drive to completely rule out traditional supernatural belief correlates with low paranormal belief as well. Bader, Baker, and Mencken's findings roughly correlate with my own. The ghost hunters I interviewed are somewhere in the middle on the scale of traditional religious belief and not on the extreme ends. Most neither attend religious services frequently or express high levels of traditional religious belief, nor do they often completely reject the realm of traditional religious belief. They are most often people raised in Christian traditions and influenced by those traditions. They are, thus, open to the supernatural without having strict limits placed on their conceptions of the supernatural by traditional religious teachings.[1]

[1] Bader, Baker, Mencken, *Paranormal America,* 123-127.

Sources of Ghost Hunter Spirituality: Christianity, Metaphysical Religion, the Cultic Milieu, and Occulture

One major source of ghost hunter spirituality is Christianity. Christianity tends to form the spiritual base onto which beliefs and practices from other sources are added. This is because of the historical cultural dominance of Christianity in the United States. As I describe above, most American ghost hunters were raised in homes that were at least nominally Christian. What individual ghost hunters draw from Christianity varies. At the most basic, ghost hunters tend to employ a general cosmic framework that they source from Christian teaching. The cosmic framework I am describing is highly generalized and can be thought of as the base of what we might call vernacular Christianity.

I define vernacular Christianity as the Christian-inflected spirituality and cosmology shared by many Americans who are rooted in a Christian background, upbringing, or environment. The idea of a type of religion common to people who are not spiritual elites, the "folk" or "common people," that differs from elite religion is well-known in religious studies and American religious history. Religion as it is actually lived out in people's lives often differs from religion as it is taught by religious teachers or how it is idealized by religious elites.[2] Religious elites can include clergy, theologians or religious scholars, and laypeople especially devoted to the elite religious vision. How the priest or pastor in any given church practices Christianity or imagines Christianity should be practiced is generally different from how the lay people who

[2] See Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950,* 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Much of the work on folk Christianity or popular religion in American religious studies has focused on the category of "lived religion."

attend that church practice Christianity. For that matter, a difference generally exists between how a theologian or religious scholar imagines Christianity should be practiced and how even priests and pastors practice. Ultimately, though vernacular Christianity is largely sourced from elite Christianity, it remains distinct by being driven by popular concerns, ideas, and practices among non-elite religionists.[3]

The vernacular Christianity ghost hunters employ maintains a cosmology in which a God or ultimate power exists; humans have souls, which are a human's immaterial essence; the soul always or sometimes persists after death; souls pass into a separate realm, perhaps heavenly, after bodily death. These beliefs are not uniquely Christian, but in the case of many Americans, they are sourced from Christian teaching and have their origins in Christianity. For many ghost hunters, this basic Christian vernacular cosmology is fleshed out with other Christian beliefs and practices. As we have seen, Catholic ghost hunters will draw on the saints or use holy water. Other Christian ghost hunters will construct prayers of protection from spirits to be prayed before and/or after investigations. In other examples, Christian ideas about heaven and the afterlife are employed in efforts to guide wayward spirits into the afterlife and out of the liminal

[3] Orsi and others have critiqued the category of popular religion or folk Christianity by pointing out that the categories are often used to distinguish between a "true" or "pure" form of religion, that of the elites, and a deviant form religion, that of the common people. That is not my intent here, and my argument does not hold that vernacular Christianity is normatively inferior to elite Christianity. Orsi and others also point to a too-strict divide between elite and popular religion. I do not mean to maintain a rigid divide, but I do want to highlight vernacular Christianity as a recognizable phenomenon distinct in significant ways from elite or official Christianity. It is also important to note that even the Christianity of religious elites must be negotiated and formed to fit the concerns and lives of elites, and so is not in some unadulterated or "pure" form. I hope my use of the term vernacular Christianity as opposed to folk or popular Christianity captures these distinctions. Folklorist Leonard Primiano puts forward the term vernacular religion to do just that. See Leonard Norman Primiano, "Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife," *Western Folklore* 54, no. 1 (January 1995): 37-56.
For a justification of the use of the term "vernacular" religion, see Christopher James Blythe, *Terrible Revolution: Latter-day Saints and the American Apocalypse* (New York: Oxford, 2020), 5-8.

space of haunting. Ultimately, Christianity is a central spiritual source for most ghost hunters in the United States.

Ghost hunters also draw on metaphysical spirituality from American culture and media. Metaphysical spirituality is increasingly becoming as prominent as Christian spirituality in late-modern enchanted worldviews. As I discuss in chapter three on scientism and ghost hunting, I borrow the term metaphysical religion from historian of American religion Catherine Albanese to refer to the type of religion in the historical lineage of Theosophy, New Thought, and New Age spirituality. Chapter four on demonic experiences describes the rituals combining Neopaganism and folk magic performed by Anh to rid homes of demonic energy. Anh uses a combination of sigil work, candle magic, and smoke cleansings, along with other elements, in their house exorcisms. Barry, the same ghost hunter who relies on Catholic elements to clear a home, also performs metaphysical visualizations, such as using his mind to visualize and manifest a door of light through which spirits can cross. Brian uses "healing stones" and Reiki, an element of Japanese spirituality filtered through a metaphysical lens. Jerry, though he identifies as a Lutheran, draws metaphysical ideas about how to cleanse a house from YouTube and also incorporates Native American elements that are popular in metaphysical circles. Aside from using the term metaphysical religion, another way to describe the diverse, non-conventional elements ghost hunters draw on is to describe them as drawing from the "cultic milieu" or "occulture."

When trying to position ghost hunting in the American spiritual landscape, some terms developed by sociologists of religion studying religion on the margins or alternative spirituality prove particularly helpful. In particular, we can use the terms "cultic milieu" and "occulture" to

situate ghost hunting. Ghost hunting draws from the cultic milieu and forms part of the cultic milieu, and it constitutes a part of American occulture. Both ways of talking about ghost hunting help us to understand the liminal space ghost hunting occupies in American spirituality.

The term cultic milieu was coined by sociologist Colin Campbell in 1972. The term "cult" as it appears in "cultic milieu" does not refer to the popular usage of the term used to denote a fringe, authoritarian religious sect. Instead, cult is a technical term that was being used by sociologists of religion in the 1970s and continues to be used by some scholars today. To get an idea of the usage of "cult" out of which "cultic milieu" arose, one can turn to the typology developed by Roy Wallis in 1976. Alongside cult, Wallis outlines the terms church, denomination, and sect. Campbell also places these four terms together in the essay in which he introduces the cultic milieu. Wallis defines each of these groups according to how they are viewed by insiders and outsiders, or according to emic and etic terms. Insiders can view each of these social groupings as "uniquely legitimate," meaning it is the only source of salvation or truth, or "pluristically legitimate," meaning it is just one source of salvation and truth. Outsiders can view these social groupings as either respectable or deviant. A cult is a group that insiders see as plurisitically legitimate and outsiders see as deviant.[4] On the ground, cults generally look like groups of practitioners of what I call metaphysical religion above. So, for example, a cult could be a New Age healing group or a Neopagan collective that gathers to perform magickal rituals. I will say more about the relationship between metaphysical religion and the cultic

[4] Partridge, 24-25; Roy Wallis, *The Road to Total Freedom: A Sociological Analysis of Scientology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 13.

milieu below. Ultimately, the cultic milieu is a reservoir of ideas, organizations, and practices from which cults draw content.

Whereas cultic groups are ephemeral and loosely organized, constantly forming and dissolving, the cultic milieu which undergirds them is a more stable presence. Campbell argues, "cults must exist within a milieu which, if not conducive to the maintenance of individual cults, is clearly highly conducive to the spawning of cults in general. Such a generally supportive cultic milieu is continually giving birth to new cults, absorbing the debris of the dead ones and creating new generations of cult-prone individuals to maintain the high levels of membership turnover."[5] Campbell directly defines the cultic milieu as follows:

> The cultic milieu can be regarded as the cultural underground of society…it includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices. Unorthodox science, alien and heretical religion, deviant medicine, all comprise elements of such an underground. In addition, it includes the collectivities, institutions, individuals, and media of communication associated with these beliefs. Substantively, it includes the worlds of the occult and the magical, of spiritualism and psychic phenomena, of mysticism and new thought, of alien intelligences and lost civilizations, of faith healing and nature cure. This heterogeneous assortment of cultural items can be regarded despite its apparent diversity as constituting a single entity—the entity of the cultic milieu.[6]

The sources of unity for all of these things drawn together in the cultic milieu include "the fact that all these worlds share a common position as heterodox or deviant items in relation to dominant cultural orthodoxies." The need for spokespeople of various cultic movements to defend their heterodoxy and defend "individual liberty of belief and practice" draw the members of various cultic groups together. These groups express "mutual sympathy and

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[5] Colin Campbell, "The Cult, the Cultic Milieu, and Secularization," in *The Cultic Milieu: Opposiitonal Subcultures in an Age of Globalization,* eds. Jeffrey Kaplan and Helene Loow (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2002), 52.
[6] Ibid., 53-54.

support" much more often that they criticize each other.[7] Another factor that creates unity is the strong presence of the mystical tradition in the cultic milieu. The mystical tradition, as defined by sociologist of religion Ernst Troeltsch, is spirituality in which one focuses on attaining union with the divine. This union can be "attained by a diversity of paths." As a result, the mystical tradition "tends to be ecumenical, super-ecclesiastic, syncretistic and tolerant in outlook." Syncretization and unity is also a result of the "overlapping communication structures" of the milieu. Campbell mentions the milieu's "magazines, periodicals, books, pamphlets, lectures, demonstrations and informal meetings." Almost fifty years later we can talk about forms of online and social media as communication structures of the cultic milieu. Campbell talks about the way the communication structures of each group cross-promote other groups within the milieu and provide links between one group and another. The syncretism of the cultic milieu often means groups create cultic teachings that are mutually supportive. For example, Campbell notes that in some cultic circles "visitors from outer space prove to be psychic and mediums confirm that there is life on other planets." Finally, the cultic milieu "is manifestly united by a common ideology of seekership." Members and groups within the cultic milieu identify themselves as spiritual seekers. They have cast aside orthodoxy to explore a deeper truth. All who draw from the cultic milieu are fellow travelers.[8]

The cultic milieu is a useful idea for analyzing the ghost hunting subculture in general and ghost hunter spirituality specifically. When constructing their spiritual identities, ghost hunters draw on ideas and institutions that Campbell would place in the cultic milieu. The

[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 55-56.

outsider nature of ghost hunting places the enterprise itself within the cultic milieu, and the syncretic nature of the cultic milieu invites ghost hunters to adopt a variety of ideas and practices from within the cultic milieu. Much of metaphysical religion is sourced from the cultic milieu. Thinking of metaphysical religion and ghost hunting as both strongly sourced from the cultic milieu, we can better understand their relationship and the nature of their interaction. Ghost hunting itself may not completely fit within the category of metaphysical religion, but the shared roots in the cultic milieu of metaphysical religion and ghost hunter spirituality closely link them. The category of the cultic milieu helps the scholar conceptualize from where and how ghost hunting draws its spiritual elements and how the diverse elements on which ghost hunters draw are related.

Also useful when thinking of ghost hunting is the term "occulture" developed by Christopher Partridge. Occulture, according to Partridge, is a more precise alternative to the term cultic milieu. Partridge argues that the term "occult" more precisely describes the elements of the cultic milieu than the terms "cult" or "cultic." Partridge also conceives of the cultic milieu as like a subculture, yet overflowing the bounds of one subculture, thus the incorporation of the word "culture." To put it concisely, Partridge writes, "occulture includes those often *hidden, rejected,* and *oppositional* beliefs and practices associated with esotericism, theosophy, mysticism, New Age, Paganism, and a range of other subcultural beliefs and practices, many of which are identified by Campbell as belonging to the cultic/mystical milieu and by Stark and Bainbridge as belonging to the occult subculture."[9] Partridge specifies that in

[9] Itallics original. Partridge, 66-68. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival, and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

his use of occulture, the associations of the occult with Western traditions seeking ancient, esoteric, and perennial natural and supernatural knowledge cloaked in hidden symbolism should be expanded to include "a vast spectrum of beliefs and practices sourced by Eastern spirituality, Paganism, Spiritualism, theosophy, alternative science and medicine, popular psychology (usually Jungian), and a range of beliefs emanating out of the general cultural interest in the paranormal."[10] In this dissertation, I privilege the term occulture in agreement with Partridge that it is more precise than the term cultic milieu and less likely to cause confusion. Ultimately, rather than trying to fit ghost hunting securely in the realm of Christian-inflected spirituality or metaphysical religion, we can say ghost hunting is part of occulture. The term highlights the syncretic nature of ghost hunting while also illuminating the space ghost hunting occupies in American culture and making sense of the sources from which ghost hunters draw spiritually.

Ghost Hunting Spirituality as Late Modern Enchantment

Twenty-first century American ghost hunting serves as a model for understanding enchanted worldviews in the late modern West, but before I begin probing the implications of ghost hunting for our understanding of contemporary American enchantment, I want to emphasize that ghost hunting itself is a spiritual activity. So far in this chapter, I have focused on the ways ghost hunters address the realm of religion and spirituality explicitly, but I would argue that ghost hunting generally often functions as a spiritual practice. Ghost hunters often report that they investigate in order to gain answers or reaffirm previously held beliefs about

[10] Partridge, 70.

questions relating to the soul and the afterlife, the supernatural realm in general, and even life's meaning. For example, in the very first episode of the supremely influential television show *Ghost Hunters,* demonologist Carl Johnson affirms in an interview, "My major drive with ghost hunting is to substantiate evidence of an afterlife. I need some kind of, if not proof, then strong suggestion that there is continuance after this life. And that's my major motivation for ghost hunting." Chapter four on demonic experiences shows how paranormal investigation has led some ghost hunters back to traditional Christian faith. Some of the ghost hunters I have interviewed, such as Anne and Rhonda detailed above, discuss how ghost hunting affirmed their belief in a God and the survival of the soul after death.[11] When examining ghost hunters' spiritualities as an example of late modern enchantment, I consider paranormal investigation itself part of those spiritualities.

Judging from ghost hunters, we can expect late modern enchanted worldviews to be eclectic and combinative, drawing on various sources based on what an individual finds reasonable, compelling, and effective. Peter Berger described the situation in late-twentieth-century modernity in which one must choose one's religion as the "heretical imperative." He explained that in his period's pluralist situation, one is forced to choose rather than rely on the "sacred canopy," a religious worldview and cosmic order that is a given. These things are no longer given. As we see from twenty-first century ghost hunters, we are very much still in the modern moment Berger described decades earlier.[12] Examining ghost hunters gives us insight

[11] For a lengthier discussion of ghost hunting as a spiritual practice, see Marc Eaton, "'Give Us a Sign of your Presence': Paranormal Investigation as a Spiritual Practice," *Sociology of Religion* 76, no. 4 (2015): 389-412.
[12] See Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967). Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (New York: Anchor Press, 1979).

into how people do their choosing. Ghost hunters draw on the religious and spiritual resources available to them. These resources are drawn from family, upbringing, community, culture, and media. As we saw in the overview, many ghost hunters draw on ideas and practices from their Christian upbringings, while many also draw from metaphysical religion and occulture.

Judging from ghost hunters' practices, we can also expect to see spiritual practices that are decontextualized or moved outside the bounds of traditional religious institutions in late modern enchantment. What we find in ghost hunting are Christian elements of belief and practice as sourced by largely unchurched people. Official Christian teaching in the United States very rarely addresses ghosts, so ghost hunters improvise based on the religious and spiritual resources they have. While exorcism and house blessing rituals are sometimes drawn from institutional Christian liturgies, they are frequently performed outside of those institutions by people not ordained by those institutions. Other similar rituals for clearing or cleansing spaces are cobbled together with Christian and other elements. Those other elements are often drawn from occulture or the cultic milieu, which are themselves filled with decontextualized and recontextualized beliefs and practices.

Ghost hunting is also a spirituality of seeking. Robert Wuthnow, in his 1998 sociological work *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s,* argues that over the second half of the twentieth century Americans had been moving from a spirituality of dwelling to a spirituality of seeking. He argues that for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most people in America practiced spirituality through a Christian or Jewish framework. Organized religion dominated, and religion was often rooted in family or ethnicity. This was particularly true before mass culture dominated American life. Things began to change in the 1950s and

1960s. Americans began patching together their spiritualities like a quilt. These changes happened due to a number of factors, including increasing geographic mobility and the move from a production to a consumption economy. Americans were becoming religious consumers of various ideas and practices. Thus, Americans moved from dwelling to seeking. Dwelling is the traditional spirituality of inhabiting sacred places, both literally and metaphorically. One is at home in the universe and one knows one's place. There are sharp boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Seeking spirituality negotiates among competing visions of the sacred. It emphasizes partial knowledge and practical wisdom. Boundaries are blurred.[13] It should be obvious that ghost hunting is a spirituality of seeking. A thriving ghost hunting subculture is evidence that as we leave the second decade of the twenty-first century, Wuthnow's spiritualities of seeking are going strong. Ghost hunters are not settled in the cosmos. They are seeking new truths and investigating old ones empirically. Instead of simply accepting religious traditions that are passed down, they are testing the traditions to see if they fit with personal experience and work on a practical level. Religious traditions and ideas compete in the ghost hunting subculture over which ones best make sense of the spirit world as experienced. Boundaries between religious traditions are crossed constantly on ghost hunts and in house clearings. If ghost hunting can be used as a model for late modern enchantment, then we can expect late modern enchantment to include experiential and empirical spiritualities of seeking.

Ghost hunting reveals that seeking itself can be a spiritual end separate from the enlightenment that is meant to come at the end of seeking. Though many ghost hunters prize

[13] Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998). Thank you to Matthew Hedstrom for his unpublished framing of Berger and Wuthnow's work in regard to the contemporary American spiritual landscape.

the answers about the soul and the afterlife they discover through paranormal investigation, others seem to find spiritual fulfillment in the hunt itself. Bader, Baker, and Mencken, in their study of paranormal belief in America, divide paranormal beliefs into two categories: those focused on enlightenment, "personal, internal, spiritual growth," and those focused on discovery, or the uncovering of something new, exciting, and not fully recognized by the mainstream. Many New Age and holistic healing paranormal beliefs would fall under the enlightenment category, whereas much of Bigfoot and UFO hunting, as well as ghost hunting, would fall under discovery. Ghost hunting does break the bounds of this dichotomy in that some ghost hunters are seeking enlightenment from the spirit world. Bader, Baker, and Mencken see enlightenment paranormal beliefs as more akin to religion and associated with spirituality, whereas discovery beliefs are more akin to the boundaries of science. I would argue that discovery itself can be a spiritual experience or end. In a world of seeker spirituality, seeking itself can be the point.[14]

The empirical nature of ghost hunter spirituality should help make clear that ghost hunters are often focused on experience. Ghost hunters' belief in spirits is often based in paranormal experience and ghost hunters are constantly seeking paranormal experience. Multiple ghost hunters have suggested to me that either my or some hypothetical skeptic's skepticism about the paranormal can be attributed to the lack of an experience, and that the presence of an experience is all that is needed to solidify belief. Close to a majority of ghost hunters I have interviewed trace their interest in the paranormal to a specific paranormal experience or experiences, often in childhood. For example, Travis, a ghost hunter based in

[14] Bader, Baker, Mencken, *Paranormal America,* 13-14, 45-46.

Iowa, describes how as a child he read "everything I could get my hands on" on the paranormal. He describes this drive as coming from "a Ouija board experience I had, and then some subsequent phenomena around my house." In chapter four on demonic experiences, I outline how powerful some experiences of spirit encounters can be for ghost hunters.

Courtney Bender, in her study of contemporary American spirituality focusing on the mystic and metaphysical practitioners of Cambridge, MA, places religious experience at the center of American spirituality, especially American alternative spirituality. Like ghost hunters, her subjects are focused on experience, interpreting experience, and cultivating experience.[15] Bender explains that a focus on religious experience has been appealing to religious liberals and seekers since the Enlightenment, when intellectual currents moved religion from the realm of reason, rationality, and the mind to the realm of emotion and the heart. Religion was no longer a set of logical propositions one assented to, it was a matter of emotional attachment and experience. Drawing on Wayne Proudfoot, Bender illustrates how locating religion in the realm of experience became an apologetic tactic of religious liberals that became prominent in the early twentieth century and is still maintained by even some sociologists in the twenty-first century. Religious experience has been depicted as something irreducible and universal at the root of religion. According to this view, sociologists and other scholars can analyze and reduce how these experiences are described, narrated, explained, or elaborated in ritual, but they cannot reduce the experience itself.[16] Both Bender's metaphysicals and the ghost hunters I have studied fall into a tradition of religious liberals and dissidents defending the centrality of

[15] Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 1-20.
[16] Ibid.,, 8-10.

religious experience. This is evidence of the centrality of religious experience to enchanted worldviews in late modernity.

At first glance, key differences seem to exist between the main types of experiences Bender's metaphysicals have and pursue and those ghost hunters have and pursue. Through, for example, meditation or certain embodied practices like yoga, Bender's metaphysicals are largely seeking enlightenment in a more traditional sense – experiences are meant to reveal deep spiritual truths and improve the soul. Ghost hunters are most often trying to experience the reality of the supernatural; yet, as I indicate in chapter four on demonic experiences, empirical evidence of the reality of the supernatural is itself spiritually powerful. This helps explain ghost hunters' desire to experience the paranormal over and over again. One experience is not enough. One experience drives ghost hunters to seek more experiences. Once again, we see echoes of Bender's metaphysicals. Bender explains, "Experience does not just happen. Cambridge's spiritual practitioners vigorously pursue, cultivate, and develop experience with the divine energy sources that they believe underlie prior experiences and all of life."[17] For ghost hunters, the purpose of investigating and accumulating more experiences is often to validate previous experiences. I recall the conversation I had with Don, the ghost hunter who was driving me home from the first ghost hunt I ever observed. He presented to me the experiences he believed proved the reality of the paranormal, yet he went around and around asking himself if he could be sure of what he experienced and pondering whether new evidence would validate what he thought he knew. Much of ghost hunters' effort in investigating is focused on translating compelling experience into evidence that is compelling

[17] Ibid., 90.

for those who have not had the same experience. Scientific equipment is meant to translate experience into data. Indeed, often scientific measurements are meant to validate ghost hunters' experiences to themselves. Using ghost hunters as a model, we can hypothesize that experience and the pursuit of experience is central to late modern enchantment.

Neoliberalism is a central feature of the late modern West, and it would be difficult to discuss contemporary spirituality without some reference to the neoliberal social order. Andrea Jain, in her recent work on global spirituality in the twenty-first century, *Peace Love Yoga,* outlines the category "neoliberal spirituality." She explains what she means by neoliberalism and how the label can apply to spirituality:

> Neoliberalism relies on the selective deployment of key ideological assumptions, such as the importance of self-governance and individual responsibility. Commodities and other areas of culture confront us with consumer choices that direct the blame for social problems onto the ostensible poor decision-making, the "free choices," of individuals. Neoliberalism, in other words, delegitimates political protest in advance of it by claiming that the current state of affairs, including socioeconomic circumstances, is what we have all chosen. By privatizing social and political concerns, neoliberalism protects entrenched social structures. The types of spirituality I turned my attention to are rooted in neoliberal meritocracy—it revolves around its adherents' ability to discern and certify the merit that leads to the envied lifestyle of balance, wellness, success, freedom, and self-care.[18]

Jain draws examples of neoliberal spirituality from the world of yoga, in which corporations sell yoga-related products with the promise that they will promote personal and spiritual growth. While ghost hunting is not marked by the selling for profit of goods and services meant to promote growth and personal flourishing, ghost hunting as a spiritual practice fits well in a landscape of neoliberal spirituality in significant ways.

[18] Andrea R. Jain, *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 4.

First, ghost hunters tend to be spiritual consumers constantly shopping a spiritual marketplace. Occulture and the Christianity and metaphysical religion embedded in American culture is laid out before them like a supermarket. Wuthnow has observed that much of contemporary American spirituality is shaped this way as Americans have increasingly become shaped into consumers since the 1950s.[19]

Second, ghost hunting does sustain an economic marketplace. The products promise greater access to the paranormal and answers about the supernatural rather than the traditional enlightenment and self-improvement of Jain's neoliberal spirituality. I am talking about the slew of electronic equipment marketed and sold to ghost hunters. Some equipment, such as full spectrum or other specialty cameras, are sold to a broader clientele than just ghost hunters. Beyond this, sellers provide specialty ghost hunting equipment, some of which I describe in chapter three on scientism. Parascopes detect triboelectric energy, EMF pumps give off electromagnetic energy under the assumption that spirits can use it to manifest, and teddy bears that light up when touched can be used to draw in and detect spirit children. More and more equipment comes out every year and often makes its debut on the ghost hunting reality television shows. Small businesses and websites sustain themselves by selling this equipment to ghost hunters, and ghost hunters are constantly digging into their pockets to purchase more and better equipment. The expense of equipment and plans to acquire more are frequent topics of ghost hunter conversation. Like the yoga practitioners highlighted by Jain, ghost hunters too enter the marketplace to gain spiritual access.

[19] Wuthnow,12, 66-67.

Ghost hunting also often maintains an ideology of free choice and the importance of individual action that is compatible with and doubtlessly fed by neoliberalism. The central unit in the ghost hunting world is the individual investigator. Ghost hunting teams are important, and larger networks of teams sometimes develop, but ultimately each investigator is a maverick out on their own to find the truth. As discussed above, each individual is seeking a personal experience of the supernatural, and each individual is working to convince themselves first. Second, the personal actions and choices of individuals who experience hauntings are often emphasized by ghost hunters. As I discuss in chapter four on demonology, ghost hunters commonly believe that a demon can only enter one's life if it is somehow invited. Ghost hunters also discuss how negative spirits are drawn to negative energy created by a person's moods or actions, and that troublesome hauntings are more likely to strike houses that are in disarray physically, emotionally, and spiritually. While empathy for victims of hauntings is certainly present, it often appears that the victims are not so innocent.

Ghost hunting might subvert a neoliberal order in one significant way. The vast majority of ghost hunters do not charge haunted individuals for their investigations. Ghost hunters hold it as a key ethical principle that their services as they are directed to help people afflicted by hauntings should be free of charge. As a result, ghost hunting most often functions as a hobby or side gig for those who participate. Everyone has a day job. Ghost hunters will charge for some services, such as guided ghost tours that highlight the ghostly legends of a given town or location and public ghost hunt events that are held for curious members of the public to experience a ghost investigation first hand. The money made from these events often goes to charity or is invested back into the ghost hunting team, often in the form of new equipment.

Ghost hunters are generally suspicious of investigators who are out to make a profit. They fear accruing the stigma placed on swindling fake psychics and other purveyors of supernatural services. How much a commitment to free investigative services really undermines the neoliberal order in practice is unclear. Jain argues that a key feature of neoliberal spirituality is "gestural subversions" of the neoliberal social order. The products sold by spiritual corporations may be produced according to a certain ethical standard and the slogans printed on shirts and mugs may highlight values beyond capitalist productivity, but ultimately these are only gestures toward subversion that ultimately serve to reinforce the neoliberal order.[20] In the end, ghost hunting often reinforces the neoliberal social order by being remarkably apolitical. Ghost hunters themselves span the political spectrum and generally do not find their politics challenged by ghost hunting spirituality. This is one way in which contemporary American ghost hunters are different from their nineteenth-century Spiritualist ancestors, who were often involved in radical politics as a group.[21] Ultimately, ghost hunting's fit alongside neoliberal spirituality and its easy integration into a neoliberal social order illustrates something significant about enchantment in late modernity.

Ghost hunting's experiential and empirical spirituality of seeking is also scientistic and mass media based, as we have seen from earlier chapters. In chapter three on scientism and ghost hunting, I describe the ways in which ghost hunting is scientistic, attempting to draw on the authority of science to verify its supernatural claims. In chapter five on ghost hunting and mass media, I show how ghost hunters draw ideas and practices from both reality television,

[20] Jain, 6-8.
[21] See Braude, *Radical Spirits.*

such as the shows *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Adventures*, and from paranormal fiction. I explain how mass media is often a stronger source of religious symbols and messages than traditional religion for ghost hunters. If one takes a peek at the spiritualities on the rise alongside ghost hunting in the twenty-first century, one should also expect to find scientism as well as shaping by mass media as much as or more so than by traditional religious institutions.

Conclusion

Ghost hunting fits naturally within the American spiritual landscape marked by the decline of traditional religious affiliation and the rise of the "spiritual but not religious." Ghost hunting as a spiritual practice is something we might expect from the spiritual landscape predicted by Berger and Wuthnow. Ghost hunting is a way for people to explore metaphysical questions and construct religious meaning outside of the bounds of traditional institutions. Its sensibilities are eclectic, combinative, and empirical. While many Americans across demographics seem to find dwelling in old truths, authority structures, and orthodoxies less desirable, ghost hunting offers a way for spiritual seekers to choose ideas, practices, and ways of knowing that make sense to them and that seem to work in their spiritual worlds. Ghost hunting is an arena in which ideas about the supernatural, the cosmos, and the afterlife can be tested. Ghost hunters are free to draw from the cultural resources that seem most appealing and reasonable rather than those that are prescribed as authoritative. Occulture, science, and mass media all play central roles in ghost hunter spirituality. These features of ghost hunting spirituality are features of enchantment in the late modern West.

Conclusion

I have presented twenty-first century American ghost hunting as a model late modern enchantment. The only way to discern in significant detail what an enchanted worldview looks like in late modernity is to examine specific examples of late modern enchanted worldviews. Few would argue against the claim that the worldviews of most ghost hunters are enchanted. Ghost hunters, for the most part, see the cosmos as populated by spirits with which the living can interact and which have an effect on the material world. They seek to gather evidence of these spirits and most claim to have found some evidence. This view of the world is enchanted in that it proposes a world picture that is not strictly bound by materialist naturalism and it proposes forces that are mysterious and not always rational. Nevertheless, contemporary ghost hunting is modern, not only by virtue of its placement in time, but also by virtue of the way modern forces have marked and shaped the endeavor. Ghost hunting is scientistic, it is mediatized, and it is shaped by a late modern Western spiritual landscape characterized by seeking, empiricism, and choice.

When he first elaborated his thesis about the disenchantment of the modern West, Weber linked the advance of modernity to the advance of science. The dominance of science as a way of knowing has certainly marked the past two hundred years and, as we see in the case of ghost hunting, it has even marked enchantment. Ghost hunting illustrates that science is both a disenchanting and an enchanting force. It certainly disenchants in the way Weber originally described, taking away many instances in which one must appeal to mysterious forces

and making more and more things in principle reducible to rational calculation. On the other hand, science opens up new avenues of enchantment and provides a source of authority outside of traditional religion with which enchantment can be defended. Scientific discussions of energy have opened up new vistas of enchanted thought and theorization for ghost hunters, who see the universe as permeated with part-psychic, part-physical energy. They turn scientific ideas about and technological means of measuring energy into a suite of methods to contact and verify the existence of the spirit world. Furthermore, ghost hunters use the authority of science to defend the reality of the paranormal. They make claims that they are using science to clear away misperception and superstition to get to the core of the truly supernatural. The epistemic authority science has gained partially through disenchanting is appropriated to defend enchantment. In these ways, scientism marks enchantment in late modernity.

Ghost hunting also teaches us to expand the bounds of which experiences we deem "religious." Generally, more often than they experience beatific visions or ecstatic worship experiences, many ghost hunters experience the uncanny or terrifying. Rudolf Otto's insights, bolstered by the later work of religious studies scholars and monster theorists, demonstrate that experiences of the terrifying or uncanny are forms of religious experience. In the case of ghost hunters, these experiences certainly have enchanting power. An experience of a ghost is evidence for a ghost hunter that the soul exists and persists after physical death, but an experience of the demonic is evidence that, rather than simply material and mechanical, the cosmos is ordered between good and evil, divine and diabolical. Enchantment in late modernity is likely to be marked by powerful religious experiences that do not fit into traditional categories of religion.

Late modern enchantment is mediatized. It is fundamentally shaped by modern forms of media, especially mass media. In particularly, this dissertation examined the influence of television and Facebook on ghost hunters' enchanted worldviews. In late modernity, media builds and regulates worldviews in a way that traditional religion once did in a much more powerful way. Ghost hunters' religious worlds are built in part from banal religious representations on television presented in the packaging of entertainment. Folk supernatural elements such as ghosts and vampires are combined with traditional religious elements unmoored from their traditional religious framing, such as crucifixes and holy water. These elements are eclectically employed to build enchanted worldviews. Media draw many banal religious representations from occulture. On television, the supernatural is often translated into a paranormal register. Furthermore, entertainment television's religious messages are more readily received by those uninterested in overt religious messages such as those that might be conveyed by traditional religious media. Cultivation effects research in media studies provides evidence that heavy television consumption leads viewers to conceive of reality in a way that matches how it is portrayed on television. The enchanted American landscape portrayed by paranormal reality television and fiction becomes the actual American landscape in the minds of ghost hunters. In a different realm of media, on Facebook, ghost hunters find a community that assumes the reality of the spirit world with enough confidence to joke about it. This community reinforces ghost hunters' enchanted worldviews.

Late modern enchantment is shaping a Western spiritual landscape that is eclectic, creative, driven by seeking, and desirous of experience. Ghost hunters and others are left without a sacred canopy and are forced to choose the lens through which they see the world.

The natives of this spiritual landscape are constantly seeking rather than dwelling in one spiritual place, and they seek to experience spiritual truths for themselves. Each ghost hunter wants to experience the paranormal in order to be convinced that it is real. Enchanted worldviews are creatively cobbled together by drawing on vernacular Christianity, metaphysical religion, and by drawing deeply on occulture. Elements of occulture are prominent in ghost hunter spirituality, and we can expect them to be increasingly prominent all over the emerging spiritual landscape. Even the traditionally religiously affiliated draw creatively from sources such as metaphysical religion and occulture in the contemporary spiritual landscape. As a result, we have people like the lifelong committed Baptist Carol who ghost hunts with her husband and considers herself a "sensitive."

Revisiting Disenchantment

What can be said about disenchantment and enchantment in modernity based on our study of one particular late modern enchantment? Let us revisit the discussion of disenchantment and enchantment I outlined in the introduction. First, I argue that disenchantment has occurred in the modern age and continues to occur. I want to defend disenchantment as real rather than imagined phenomenon. Egil Asprem has taken a step toward positioning disenchantment not as a social force as much as a set of problems that drive a project among certain thinkers. For Asprem, disenchantment is not so much an outgrowth of modernity as much as a modern debate around the question of whether the world is disenchanted. Theorists of modernity speak disenchantment into existence when they debate

about the "ideal-typical image" of a disenchanted world and act on those debates.[1] Thinking of disenchantment as an intellectual construct is useful, and Asprem's effort aligns with Josephson-Storm's endeavor to reveal as a myth the claim that "what sets the modern world apart from the rest is that it has experienced disenchantment and a loss of myth."[2] These efforts highlight the fact that, when we actually examine modern societies, it does not appear that modern forces such as rationalization, industrialization, psychologization, the advance of science, the rise of the autonomous self, etc. naturally tamp down enchantment. As Christopher Partridge and Josephson-Storm have noted in the case of the thriving nature of alternative spirituality in late modernity and as the example of contemporary American ghost hunting shows, modern forces are just as likely to spawn new varieties of enchantment. Nevertheless, I can not follow Josephson-Storm all the way to his destination where disenchantment simply has not occurred and modernity itself is a myth.

Josephson-Storm defines the "myth of modernity" as "the very fable that there was such an age as 'modernity' and that it had certain features."[3] Josephson-Storm does not deny that the past few centuries have been marked by most of the forces typically labeled modern. The exception is disenchantment. For Josephson-Storm, to argue against the reality of disenchantment is to argue against the existence of modernity. This position makes sense when one looks at the ways in which theorists of modernity, Adorno and Horkheimer being prominent examples, have centered disenchantment in their concepts of modernity.[4]

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[1] Asprem, *Disenchantment*, 27-28.
[2] Josephson-Storm, 8.
[3] Ibid., 7.
[4] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

Nevertheless, I do not think that Josephson-Storm's argument demands that modernity must be centrally defined by disenchantment and I do not accept his argument that disenchantment is entirely a myth. Josephson-Storm himself admits that modernity is associated with forces beyond disenchantment, and that he "will not unravel all possible associations and nuances of the term." He explains, "I am not claiming that industrialization never happened, nor am I denying that rationalization occurred in any cultural sphere…" Rather, his goal is to undermine the myth of disenchantment alone.[5] It seems that Josephson-Storm leaves room for an era called modernity as long as we do not bind it too tightly to disenchantment.

I am convinced that disenchantment, whether we think about it as a social force or as resulting from an intellectual project, has occurred and is occurring partly because of the changes enchantment has undergone in modernity. Ghosts and ghost belief have, for example, changed over the last millennium. Let us focus on what is new about the ghosts of contemporary American ghost hunting when compared to the ghosts of, for example, the medieval period or late antiquity. Modern ghosts are sought out by ghost hunters, whereas most pre-modern people worked hard to avoid them. The existence of modern ghosts is open to doubt and much of the activity of ghost hunters is devoted to proving their reality. Ghost hunters see ghosts as composed of or manipulating energy. According to ghost hunters, the best way to detect a ghost is through scientifically rigorous methods and equipment. Ghost hunters actively choose the supernatural or cosmological frameworks in which to situate ghosts.[6] The examples go on, but each of these new features of ghosts according to ghost

[5] Josephson-Storm, 8.

[6] For a comparison of ancient accounts of ghosts with modern account of ghosts, see R. C. Finucane, *Ghosts: Appearances of the Dead and Cultural Transformation* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1996).

hunters can be partially explained in reference to disenchantment. The ascent of materialist naturalism leads people to actively seek out what was once considered dangerously supernatural, the scientific problematizing of ideas about the existence of an immaterial soul leads people to conceive of spirits in terms of energy, the rupturing of the sacred canopy requires people to actively choose from a marketplace of spiritual ideas how to interpret supernatural experiences.

If disenchantment and enchantment coexist in modernity, what is the best model for understanding how they interact? I argue for a dialectical model similar to that proposed by Weberian Richard Jenkins. Jenkins employs a term I have not used since the introduction: re-enchantment. For Jenkins, "Disenchantment has indeed been the fate of the world, but this has only served to open up new vistas of possible (re)enchantment…it may be high time to think about (re)enchantment as no less diagnostic of modernity than disenchantment."[7] Jenkins argues that, historically, disenchantment has been a stimulus to re-enchantment, just as enchantment and re-enchantment have at times generated disenchantment. As I mention in the introduction, Asprem critiques Jenkins' dialectic for centering disenchantment as a necessary force to which re-enchantment is always a reaction. We should take the insights of Asprem and Josephson-Storm seriously in recognizing that disenchantment is not a necessary development. Disenchantment is an intellectual project executed by historical actors as much as it is a social force. Nevertheless, in modernity, disenchantment does seem to be the primary force. Late modern enchanted worldviews are deeply shaped by disenchantment. Ghost

[7] Richard Jenkins, "Disenchantment, Enchantment, and Re-Enchantment," 28-29.

hunting certainly is. This is not to say that disenchantment is a stronger force than enchantment or that it will ultimately prevail. Recent scholarship has been convincing in showing that disenchantment is far from dominant or complete in the West. On the other hand, disenchantment (as an always incomplete process) has occurred and is occurring. Enchantment is occurring as well, and these seemingly opposing forces shape and drive each other. In late modernity, in large part due to disenchantment, we are differently enchanted.

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