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## Harmonial Religion in East Texas, 1875–1915

KEITH KING

The Belo publications considered Texas Populists, “as devoted to their political principles as they are to their religious convictions.” Historical consensus holds these religious convictions to be “predominately...Protestant in composition.” More recently, Charles Postel suggested that harmonial religion, outside the Protestant mainstream, shaped the contours of the agrarian revolt.<sup>1</sup> Religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom explained “Harmonial religion encompasses those forms of piety and belief in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person’s rapport with the cosmos.”<sup>2</sup> Among the common characteristics of harmonial religions are charismatic founders, elaborate rituals, reliance on allegedly rational argument, and empirical demonstration. Ahlstrom placed the modern antecedents of these belief systems in the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg through “Transcendentalism, spiritualism,...and a half-dozen medical cults” including Christian Science and New Thought. Phineas P. Quimby, a healer, coined the terms “Christian Science” and “science of medicine.” Quimby’s ultimate influence primarily derived from two patients, Swedenborgian preacher, Warren Felt Evans, and Mary Baker Eddy. Evans became the first to publish on New Thought with *The Mental Cure* (1869) and *Mental Medicine* (1872).<sup>3</sup> New Thought shares with Spiritualism the supposition that “the mind is capable of transcending all limitations the world seems to place around it, because the mind is ultimately sovereign.”<sup>4</sup> Eddy established the Church of Christ (Scientist) in 1879 practicing a “metaphysical, religious, biblical” system of healing. Members who considered Eddy too dogmatic migrated to New Thought.<sup>5</sup>

Spiritualism and medical cults began to flourish in America during the middle of the nineteenth century. By the 1870’s they affected East Texas agrarians.

Swedish Lutheran, Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) descended from a moderately successful mining family. His father, Jesper

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Swedberg, became Bishop of Skara with responsibility for Swedish missionaries in colonial North America. The son's early career focused on science and technology making significant contributions in geology, anatomy, and finance. In 1743 he began to experience visions including a conversation with Jesus revealing the true meaning of Christianity. He devoted the remainder of his life to interpreting religious topics. In 1758 he produced his influential *Heaven and Hell* explaining that mankind existed simultaneously in a material and ethereal plane and that our personalities continued to evolve in the spiritual plane after our bodies decayed. Properly prepared individuals can comprehend this dual existence even before physical death and our spiritual evolution after physical death provides an opportunity for mankind to escape the torment caused by our refusal to accept the truth that had been revealed to Swedenborg.<sup>6</sup>

Following his death in 1772, Swedenborg's ideas began to influence British Methodists leading to the organization of the New Jerusalem Church in 1787. New Churchmen migrated to the United States and established the General Convention of the New Church in North America in 1817. John Chapman, informal New Church missionary, spread the message along with apple seeds throughout the old Northwest. Ralph Waldo Emerson admired Swedenborg. The Transcendentalist understood all religious history contained "traces of the trance." Emerson considered the Swedish mystic "a scholar from a child," and the "last Father in the church." These doctrines reached Texas by 1876. Swedenborg's scientific attitude and theories on the body attracted educated followers interested in healing. The first formal "society" existed to serve faculty members at the state medical school in Galveston. The *Galveston Daily News* published the statement of a "deposed" Methodist clergyman from Waco outlining New Church doctrine in October 1889. These doctrines included denial of the Trinity, denial of physical resurrection, and denial of eternal punishment. The New Church established its Texas state convention in December.<sup>7</sup>

The Rev. Albert B. Francisco became the first state missionary in 1895 based in Galveston but pastoring the entire state. New Church doctrine argued that individual acts of charity and good works mattered more than large congregations so members usually resided in isolated communities. Francisco's East Texas flock lived in Beaumont, Woodville, Colmesneil, Call, Adsul, Liberty, Paris,

and Clarksville, while he hoped to expand into Bonham, Sherman, and Dallas.<sup>8</sup> Francisco had been a Populist candidate for Congress in Missouri and the mission board encouraged him to contact Populist gubernatorial candidate Thomas L. Nugent, “somewhat a New Churchman” and his wife, a “thorough going New Churchwoman.”<sup>9</sup> This relationship attained Francisco the Populist nomination for state superintendent of schools in 1896 after a convention fight against agrarian prohibitionists led by Ebenezer LaFayette Dohoney.<sup>10</sup> His association with Nugent and Dohoney created the popular image that New Churchmen were Populists and spiritualists. While generally admired by Texas Swedenborgians, Francisco’s most serious critic, J. W. Baker, came from Bagwell. The missionary attempted to explain New Church doctrines to Dr. Pat B. Clark of Clarksville and Baker, “a very profane and filthy old man, who claimed to be a New Churchman,” took offense claiming that Francisco taught universalism and socialism. Although Francisco denied the charge to the mission board he later became publicly identified as a Christian socialist.<sup>11</sup>

During the antebellum period “literate middle-class and upper-class whites” exhibited interest in Swedenborg’s ideas including “philosopher-theologian” Andrew Jackson Davis.<sup>12</sup> Beginning in 1884 Swedenborg appeared to Davis in trances. He later published these periodic conversations as his “Harmonial Philosophy.” This system of thought “heralded the advent of a new dispensation when advanced societies of other ‘spheres’ would effect a transformation of this world.”<sup>13</sup> He believed that mankind possessed the attributes of the Infinite. He propounded Swedenborg’s teachings on dual existence which established him as the prime force in popularizing American spiritualism. Davis’s followers stressed the imminence of the new perfect era. Davis meant Harmonial Philosophy to elevate mankind through science, arts, and technical progress. “Man is a microcosm or universe in miniature; . . . that all arts, sciences, philosophies, &c (sic) have their seat or germ in the Human Soul.”<sup>14</sup> He claimed his system incompatible with superstition or magic. Advocates of Harmonial Philosophy must research natural laws through scientific investigation. He considered organized religion to be a product of superstition and a deterrent to human happiness.<sup>15</sup> Davis maintained that his philosophy and spiritualism required commitment to social reform. He incorporated the First Harmonial Association of New York in 1878 that supported a host of reforms circulating in the nineteenth century.

In the post-Civil War era Spiritualism endorsed organized labor, socialism, women's equality, fair treatment for Native Americans, and prohibition. Spiritualists opposed traditional churches, capital punishment, land speculators, and robber barons.<sup>16</sup> In East Texas a disciple of Davis, E. L. Dohoney, advocated for these reforms.

Originally from Kentucky, Dohoney served as district attorney in Lamar County before being elected state senator. He attended the 1875 state constitutional convention where he worked for local-option of alcohol sales gaining the sobriquet "Father of Prohibition in Texas." He sponsored Francis Willard's 1882 tour of Texas in support of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. He held party offices in the Democratic, Greenback, Prohibition and People's parties throughout this public career.<sup>17</sup> During these years he supported free public schools, using insanity as a defense in capital murder cases, abolition of capital punishment, Christian Communism, world peace, railroad regulation, the Knights of Labor, women's suffrage, and owner-occupation of land while opposing monopolies, traditional churches, and open-carry of firearms in public places. He believed in gender equality. He instructed the preacher to omit the word "obey" from his wedding vows. Although he opposed abortion he argued that women should have control of their own bodies within legitimate means.<sup>18</sup>

It is difficult to be certain about the exact number of practicing spiritualists in nineteenth century Texas. At least one formal organization with twenty-nine members existed in Grimes County. A state spiritualist association sponsored a state lecturer. The 1906 census listed 957 members but many sympathizers like Dohoney experimented with spiritualism while maintaining membership in traditional churches. Spiritualists propounded the seemingly contradictory positions of opposition to Christian dogma while using biblical examples in attempting to demonstrate life after death and spirit communication. Dohoney served as an elder in the First Christian Church until he prepared to publish *The Constitution of Man in the Physical, Psychological and Spiritual Worlds* in 1903 publicly embracing his spiritualism and mental science which caused him to resign from the local congregation, "but not from the invisible body of Christ."<sup>19</sup>

Dohoney began experimenting with séances in 1882. He expected this activity to affirm his religious views. Dohoney could not prove the validity of spiritual phenomena, but he assumed that fair-minded men accepted their authenticity. As counterfeit money inferred the

existence of genuine money, so even a phony spiritual experience inferred a real spiritual world. Unless Satan caused spirit-rapping and table-tipping, Dohoney argued, God permitted them to prove the existence of spirits. He charged that ignorant, bigoted theologians and arrogant scientific materialists crushed sincere spiritualists and drove them outside churches and intellectual respectability. During the 1890s Dohoney, Capt. S. J. Wright, and Mrs. Stella Pollard organized a spiritualist circle in Paris with John Willis Ring as the medium. Dohoney often received verification of his political and economic theories through séances.<sup>20</sup>

Medium John Willis Ring attracted negative attention for spiritualism in northeast Texas, moved to Galveston, and subsequently became lecturer for the National Spiritualist Association. Although Ring was Dohoney's primary medium he also utilized Stella Pollard, a Mrs. Tabor, Madame Monteith, Professor Henry, and C. Walter Lynn. In 1895 Henry performed an out-of-body visit to Edmonton, Kentucky to ascertain the health of Dohoney's family and Tabor summoned the spirits of veterans of the major wars in American History for a July 4<sup>th</sup> celebration. Stella Pollard summoned the spirit of Harriet Beecher Stowe who encouraged Pollard and Dohoney to update *Uncle Tom's Cabin* illuminating capital's enslavement of labor. Monteith produced the spirit of George Washington to advise Dohoney. In 1899 Lynn provided Dohoney with a spirit letter from Francis Willard who approved of Dohoney's logic in *The Constitution of Man*. Dohoney subsequently began sending questions to Lynn who provided answers from Greek philosophers, American patriots, and other spirits. Through automatic writing former Dallas newspaper publisher A. H. Belo advised Dohoney to remain in Paris instead of relocating to the Texas Panhandle.<sup>21</sup>

Dohoney published extensively editing the *Paris Advocate*, contributing articles to other publications, reprinting speeches and pamphlets, and producing six books. His books are repetitious. He reiterates the same anecdotes in three volumes. He accepts anecdotes reported by other sources as verified if a third source published them. Because Josiah Wilbarger's scalping and rescue met this standard it is "unquestioned Texas history" and proof of telepathy and spirit communication. His writings relied extensively on the works of Swedenborg and Davis teaching that man's existence is immortal with the potential to avoid physical death. Dohoney believed mankind

exhibited seven temperaments; motive, muscular, vital, lymphatic, mental, spiritual, and harmonial. The harmonial temperament included the best aspects of all the others. He believed Swedenborg a "spiritual" man second only to A. J. Davis. He likened Davis to Columbus who did not completely understand his discovery, but Davis was the first to espy the spirit land. Jesus represented the perfect harmonial man. For Dohoney the primary conflict of history is spiritualism vs. materialism. The spiritualist army included "informed christians, christian scientists, mental scientists, theosophists and spiritualists proper."<sup>22</sup>

East Texas Populist, J. W. H. Davis, rejected the concept of spiritual existence after physical death but accepted mental science. Davis lived in Navasota, Grimes County. He belonged to the Farmers' Alliance and ran for county treasurer on the third party ticket in 1892 and 1894. An inconsistent speller, Davis still provided a column for the Navasota Leader, the Grimes County Tablet, and The Patriot, the official journal of the Grimes, Waller, Montgomery, and Madison counties Farmers' Alliance. Writing as "Three Party," Davis's typical columns challenged special interests and the Democratic party while advocating the honor of women and the purity of the ballot. He occasionally propounded Christian Socialism.<sup>23</sup> Davis's associate, John B. Rushing of Appleby, Texas worked alongside Davis in agrarian organizations and collected Davis's correspondence, ledger books, manuscripts, newspaper clippings and journals used by Davis to develop his ideas.

J. W. H. Davis believed that organized churches refused to meet their social responsibilities and that clergymen did not practice the charity and love they preached. He advocated recognizing the human nature as well as the divine nature of Christ. Davis's Christianity required the existence of God and at least two people to treat each other as brothers. God provided all mental, moral, and material possessions for mankind to hold in trust, but plutocracy divided man into classes, forcing human greed. Davis encouraged readers to reject selfishness and practice love for mankind.<sup>24</sup>

Davis believed in God as a Supreme Being, the First Cause of the Universe. He believed that God, the invisible holy good, created the visible good. He referred to God as the father and to truth as His first offspring. According to Davis the greatness of the Alliance rested in its stress upon the Supreme Being. God resided in nature, providing

universal life, and He resided in man as the Son of Man and Brother of all Mankind. Davis rejected a physical Hell. Like Swedenborg he considered torment as a corrective condition of the mind. He doubted the existence of a physical Heaven declaring death “the end of all things.” Surviving death meant existing in the hearts and minds of friends and children.<sup>25</sup>

Davis read a unique assortment of journals devoted to mental science and New Thought, beliefs in the regenerative and healing powers of the human mind. These journals included *Social Thought*, *An Exponent of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth* published in Rich Hills, Missouri by Charles Lincoln Phifer, *Christian*, published in Denver, Colorado by Thomas J. Sheldon, *The Progressive Thinker*, the official organ of the National Spiritualist Association published in Chicago, *New Thought*, published in Melrose, Massachusetts by M. J. Clarkson and *Freedom: A Journal of Realistic Idealism* published and edited by Helen Wilmans and Charles Cyrel Post, first in Boston and then in Seabreeze, Florida. According to mental science man existed in the image of God. Pain and evil existed as corrective tests when thought did not reflect God’s image. Each person possessed healing energies within himself. The Kingdom of Heaven resided within each person, offering possibilities of universal love, life, truth, and joy. Properly used, mental science provided a “vibratory power” that kept man from dying or growing old. Mental science opposed both scientific materialism and religion, as based on fear and hatred and rejected the concept of an avenging God.<sup>26</sup> Davis did not cite Swedenborg or A.J. Davis but distilled their theories from Quimby through Wilmans and Post.

Like J. W. H. Davis, Charles Post advocated for agrarianism, practiced mental science, and had ties to Georgia. He moved to Georgia in 1886. He served as a Farmers’ Alliance lecturer and helped organize the People’s Party serving as the state’s representative to the national executive committee. The Democratic press attacked him as an atheist, spiritualist, anarchist, cur, and infidel. He married Helen Wilmans and they moved to Florida. Post incorporated Seabreeze in 1901 serving as mayor and land developer.<sup>27</sup> Wilmans began writing in California before moving to Chicago to publish *The Woman’s World* and establish a school of mental health. Studying under Emma Curtiss Hopkins, Wilmans became a leader in the New Thought movement.<sup>28</sup> Wilmans produced volumes on mental science such as



*The Home Course in Mental Science*, *The Conquest of Poverty*, and *The Mind Cure Treatment*. According to Wilmans, the mind trained to acknowledge its own power can cure every form of disease including secret vices, sex weaknesses, catarrh, consumption, bad eyesight, gray hair, constipation, tuberculosis, tumors, heart, kidney or liver ailments, tobacco use, drunkenness, nervousness, insanity, mental or moral defects such as lack of self-esteem, lack of business courage, and "other weaknesses that stand in the way of a successful career."<sup>29</sup>

Among his papers J. W. H. Davis left a statement of personal philosophy. He expressed frustration with politics and finance along with disappointment over Christians who refused to follow Christ's command, "Love your enemies." Using language derived from mental science, he described his belief in the "'vital energy'" and the "vibrating mentality" residing in the "spirit substance," the oversoul. For Davis the human mind is an intimation of the infinite mentality, the Creative Force. The child's mind consists of two divisions, love and intellect. Love is perceptive and inspirational, the basis of all things, while intellect is intuitive, rational and reasoning leading to knowledge. The child begins with unconscious understanding and moves to conscious wisdom. Through effort and evolution humans may enter a super-conscious intellect that comprehends the unity of all things including the mind and the physical existence of thought. If a super-conscious human desires an objective and believes in his own abilities he can use the Creative Force to alter circumstances and cure disease telepathically. Davis believed that his ideas were so controversial that they should be kept from public disclosure.<sup>30</sup>

Harmonial religion, outside the cultural mainstream, attracted individuals outside the political mainstream. Support for harmonial religion can be viewed as a consequence of anxiety and uncertainty arising from periods of rapid social and technological change as experienced during the Gilded Age. Charles Postel argued that agrarian reformers, like J.W. H. Davis, E.L. Dohoney, and Charles C. Post, considered it an age of discovery and progress requiring dedication on a "Shrine of Science." Harmonial religion attracted these individuals because of its emphasis on reasoning and observable events. Political reform and the human spirit could be studied like commodity reports or electricity. Analysis derived from observations sanctioned rejection

of mainstream churches that supported the status quo and traditional political parties not responsive to agrarian demands. For some agrarian radicals, harmonial religions provided a comfortable merger of science and faith. Swedenborgians, spiritualists, and mental scientists insisted their fundamental beliefs arose from scientifically observable events that supported elements of faith. Observed experience provided justification when agrarians challenged political and cultural norms. For Charles Post mental science offered Mankind freedom to act or dissent because it stressed reason not revelation. For J.W. H. Davis it provided a path to perfection “in soul and body.”<sup>31</sup>

## Notes

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