The Occult Influences of Five Modern Prophets

Chad E. Brack
November 11, 2019

In this essay I discuss five popular figures from the last 500 years, each of whom displayed prophetic characteristics, namely charismatic leadership as described by Max Weber. Nostradamus, Joseph Smith, Rudolph Steiner, Edgar Cayce, and Nikola Tesla come from wildly different backgrounds and appealed to a variety of demographics, but some surprising similarities exist between them. Aside from falling into the category of prophet, these men shared the common trait of dealing in what is sometimes called ‘occult science.’ In other words, they sought to tap into some type of hidden, spiritual power that could be bridged with the natural world. They differed mainly in their methods and goals. Rudolph Steiner and Edgar Cayce are especially interesting because of their theosophical influences; both combined aspects of Eastern and Western religious traditions with occult science to produce formulas for holistic wellbeing.

Before discussing the individual prophets, I must first define what I mean by prophet and the occult. According to Weber, a prophet is “a person recognized as ‘a purely individual bearer of charisma,’” which he defines as “compelling personal magnetism.” Prophetic movements often form around a person but can also overlap between religious, political, and other groups or movements. Prophets usually feel

2 Pals, Nine Theories of Religion, 150.
drawn to do something particular and proclaim some kind of divine authority, which Carl Olson calls “a personal magic of leadership” that convinces others of a message or attracts people to a cause.\(^4\) Charismatic prophets tend to act on a “powerful sense of mission” and sometimes proclaim a “comprehensive ‘religious doctrine or divine commandment.’”\(^5\) As Catherine Wessinger describes it, they believe in “access to an unseen source of authority.”\(^6\) I think this definition adequately fits our five prophets, even if attracting followers is not necessarily their primary goal.

Next, we can define *occult* as meaning something “hidden” or “secret.”\(^7\) The idea comes from medieval Aristotelian natural philosophy, which distinguished between observable qualities, like color or taste, and occult qualities, such as magnetism. The occult qualities were thought to be causes hidden from man’s intellect.\(^8\) During the scientific revolution of the 17\(^{th}\) century, occult qualities became part of normal science, and “occult science” became equated with “superstition.”\(^9\) The three main occult sciences were astrology, alchemy, and natural magic.\(^10\) Each of our five prophets can be tied to some form of occult science.


We begin with Nostradamus, who appeared to practice the occult science of Kabbalah. Nostradamus (1503-1566) was a Provençal apothecary, doctor, and Roman Catholic of Jewish descent. Though he hated being called a prophet, he drew followers, and some people still believe in his predictions to this day. Nostradamus seemed driven toward something like predicting coming disasters, but his goals are hard to decipher because his writings are so cryptic. The key here is that he was charismatic, even if that charisma is in large part due to being mysterious. He distrusted professional astrologers, though he used astrology, and he seemed to be practicing Kabbalistic techniques, which include occult methods.

Kabbalah means “received tradition” and presents the appearance that it continues some type of ancient line of thought.\textsuperscript{11} It is a work of medieval Jewish mysticism that deals with comprehending the relationship between the perfect god and finite creation. It also “ascribes secret meanings to each element of scripture,” which is thought to reveal hidden truth if interpreted correctly.\textsuperscript{12}

There is evidence that Joseph Smith (1805-1844) was also directly influenced by Kabbalah along with Hermeticism.\textsuperscript{13} Both occult sciences are “supposed ancient and divine,” with Kabbalah thought to originate from God’s word to Adam and Hermeticism from the sacred knowledge of ancient Egyptian Gnosis from Hermes.


\textsuperscript{12} Rohmann, \textit{A World of Ideas}, 216.

Trismegistos.¹⁴ According to John Brooke, “there are striking parallels” between the Mormon coequality of spirit and matter and celestial marriage with traditions of alchemy and hermeticism.¹⁵ “Both propose a distinct relationship between the visible and invisible worlds.”¹⁶ Smith was a treasure hunter who used folk magic.¹⁷ In Smith’s “magic world view” and in the Hermetic-Kabbalistic interpretation, magic was about “obtaining experiential knowledge of God and the celestial hierarchies.”¹⁸

During Smith’s life, Masonry was commonly believed “to be associated with a Rosicrucian legacy of alchemical, Kabbalistic, and Hermetic lore and its reformative religious aspirations.”¹⁹ Smith joined the Freemasons and incorporated masonic rituals into the later Mormon Church. According to Brooke, from the 1840s, popular mesmerism, hermetic Theosophy, and Freemasonry spread through the US;²⁰ “the rise of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints can only be understood if it is placed in the context of the hermetic tradition.”²¹ Smith also took concepts directly from Kabbalistic texts in his sermon, the “King Follett Discourse.”²² Furthermore, as


¹⁶ Brooke, The Refiner’s Fire, xiv.

¹⁷ According to Owens (“Joseph Smith and Kabbalah,” 161), Smith’s family “carefully preserved” magical parchments, a dagger, and the talisman Joseph Smith carried.

¹⁸ Owens, “Joseph Smith and Kabbalah,” 156.


²⁰ Brooke, The Refiner’s Fire, 283.

²¹ Brooke, The Refiner’s Fire, 278.

Michael Homer points out, both “Mormonism and Spiritualism share a common ancestor in Swedenborgism,” and even Mormon authors note similarities between Mormon doctrine and Swedenborg’s “revelations.” Smith seems to have mastered combining and repackaging doctrines and rituals from various occult backgrounds.

Owens describes “intellectual magic” as the “seventeenth-century mix of Hermeticism, Kabbalah, and alchemy.” Smith appears to have used intellectual magic and charismatic leadership to form a basically new religion. Brooke identifies Smith as possessing the type of charisma that breaks through societal and cultural stresses by “creating a liminal moment in a process of religious theater.” Smith claimed that his visions, divine knowledge, and revelation served to “correct” the corrupted Bible. His movement also impressed spiritualists with the skills of Mormon mediums. He established an updated Christianity with roots in “rediscovered” knowledge that appealed to people living in a time of both scientific and spiritual exploration.

The next two prophets were deeply influenced by Theosophy, which also derives from intellectual magic. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (HPB) (1831-1891) founded the Theosophical Society (TS) in 1875 and became “one of the most influential women of

---


all time.”27 She modeled her teachings on “the theosophia of the ancient Alexandrian world,” which “united mystic theosophy of old Egypt with the refined philosophy of the Greeks.”28 One of the main objectives of the TS was occult training, especially in astral travel.29 HPB wanted to replace “spiritualist belief with the philosophy of occultism.”30 She believed American spiritualism had become “a substitute for conventional religion” and “an object of scientific interest,”31 but she called spiritualism “devoid of real occult knowledge.”32 Spiritualists focused on revelation by séance. “Occultists favored psychical research combined with the study of old books on magic, Hermeticism, and Kabbalah.”33

HPB used channeled writing in hopes to end the “war of science with religion” by reconciling the two sides through occultism.34 “[I]n the middle of the so-called Victorian conflict between science and religion,”35 Theosophists thought science was fallible and suffering from false assumptions, but they also believed science would


32 Goodrick-clarke, The Western Esoteric Traditions, 214.


eventually agree with esoteric “higher truth.” In other words, HPB and her followers believed occultism was “capable of beating science at its own game.” They wanted to demonstrate “the existence of occult forces unknown to science” such as “psychic and spiritual powers in man.” The Theosophists also wanted to discover the laws that govern the universe and believed those laws would combine esoteric philosophy with modern science, as empirical science based in sensation could never know absolute truth. Later Theosophists even conducted experiments using their own “science” by means of “clairvoyant investigations into the atomic nature of substances.”

HPB claimed to be a “World Teacher” with occult powers, and her Theosophy attempted to merge Eastern mysticism, Christian ethics, and strands of Taoism and Kabbalah. HPB taught that all religions are one and that humanity and the universe are evolving toward “union with the divine spirit.” Theosophy’s main contributions to Western esotericism include assimilation of Eastern traditions and comparative religions, principles related to “Gnostic, Hermetic, Kabbalist, and Buddhist cosmology

36 Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 444-445. This higher knowledge tells people how the world works, how to act in it, and how to be liberated from it (481).


41 Goodrick-clarke, *The Western Esoteric Traditions*, 239.


and hierarchies,” reincarnation and spiritual evolution, and presenting these “esoteric ideas in the context of modern science.”

Both Rudolph Steiner and Edgar Cayce have deep roots in HPB’s Theosophy. Steiner (1861-1925) was an architect and philosopher from Austria-Hungary who wrote extensively on philosophy, spiritual science, and esotericism. After Steiner was shunned by academics for his suggestion of a type of “spiritual cognition” that provided participation in “cosmic life,” he joined the TS. Steiner eventually broke away from the TS and founded his own anthroposophy, which he derived from the words for “human” and “wisdom” in Greek. He deemed his “quasi-scientific visionary method” spiritual science (Geisteswissenschaft), and he believed it to be grounded in controlled epistemological processes as objective as natural science. Steiner’s teachings echoed writings from HPB, as did his view of higher knowledge. His four-part model for human construction (physical body, etheric body, astral body, and self) also reflected theosophical influence. Steiner claimed to mystically meet Christ in 1899, who taught him the oneness of all religions and that religion should

---

44 Goodrick-clarke, The Western Esoteric Traditions, 225.


46 Rohmann, A World of Ideas, 22.

47 Brandt and Hammer, “Rudolph Steiner and Theosophy,”130.


50 Brandt and Hammer, “Rudolph Steiner and Theosophy,” 125.
adapt to science. Steiner also taught reincarnation and a world memory called the
*Akasha-Chronik.*\(^{51}\)

In 1922 Steiner founded the Christian Community, where he was seen as a
“teacher of theologians” with divine authority.\(^{52}\) He was also praised as a savior and
leader “in a time of great spiritual distress.”\(^{53}\) Some of his followers described him as
a scientist who united science and religion, and his “knowledge of hidden things, not
Steiner himself” most attracted people to him.\(^{54}\) Steiner founded the Waldorf Schools
of holistic education, which combine four levels of knowledge: “sensory, imaginative,
inspirational, and intuitive (spiritual), each engaging a higher plane of spirituality.”\(^{55}\)
The Waldorf Schools still thrive today. Steiner was indeed a charismatic leader who
attracted a diverse following, and his teachings were firmly based in occult
influences.

Following in the theosophical tradition, Edgar Cayce (1877-1945) was a farmer,
photographer, and Christian known as “the Sleeping Prophet.” He is credited as a
forerunner of the New Age movement and alternative medicine.\(^{56}\) Cayce suffered

\(^{51}\) Brandt and Hammer, “Rudolph Steiner and Theosophy,” 126, 122.


\(^{53}\) Ahlbäck, “Rudolf Steiner as a Religious Authority,” 10.

\(^{54}\) Ahlbäck, “Rudolf Steiner as a Religious Authority,” 13-14.

\(^{55}\) Rohmann, *A World of Ideas*, 22.

from a head injury as a child and began seeing “little folk.” Eventually, Cayce experienced angelic visions and obtained the ability to channel “the Entity” while he slept. The Entity gave health readings, tales of past lives, and predictions for the future, information which it claimed came from the Akashic Record.

For the first 20 years Cayce focused on helping people with their physical ailments, especially those who were “disillusioned with traditional medicine.” That changed in 1923 when Arthur Lammers, a theosophist, convinced Cayce to use his power to answer metaphysical questions. From the 1920’s to the 1930s, Cayce mentioned Theosophy at least 50 times during readings. Cayce taught reincarnation with a new “salvic grace” and “re-energized the Atlantis myth” that was transmitted to Steiner and Cayce through HPB. He never confirmed theosophical influence, but his readings “encompassed, reflected, and refracted many of the themes already established within Theosophy,” and they even fused themes from some of its splinter movements.

Although Cayce’s diagnoses matched then current medical knowledge and terminology, he received thousands of requests for readings and became a local

60 Schorey, “Sleeping Prophet,” 143.
celebrity of sorts. In 1942, Theosophists began joining Cayce’s mainly Christian Association for Research and Enlightenment (A.R.E.). The A.R.E. and Steiner’s anthroposophists have also worked closely together since the 1970s. Cayce popularized many occult subjects and introduced them to Christians who would not have otherwise been open to “alternative philosophies.” His “psi abilities” also allowed people to build their own “scientific, geological, and archaeological evidence to support the Atlantean hypothesis.” Much like Nostradamus and Steiner, Cayce’s abilities seemed to lend themselves to charismatic leadership. He drew a large following while alive, and people still study his 49,000 pages of 14,500 readings. He never promoted his own religious movement; instead, he simply encouraged people to remain in their faiths but apply his wisdom and practices. Like the other prophets I have discussed, his teachings were grounded in the occult.

The final prophet, Nikola Tesla is a bit different from the previous four. Tesla (1856-1943) was a Serbian inventor, engineer, and futurist who came from an Orthodox Christian background. Tesla invented the AC motor and tried to transmit electricity wirelessly. He sought to create a utopia through fantastical inventions. He was a charismatic individual and self-promoter who loved attention. He also claimed capabilities that seemed implausible at best. As Dobson explains, Tesla was a successor to Faraday, but Faraday gave demonstrations with shocks and sparks. Tesla,

64 Schorey, “Sleeping Prophet,” 147.
67 Johnson, Edgar Cayce in Context, 1.
on the other hand, produced effects “more akin to wizardry,” with “flamboyant showmanship” that came across as “magical spectacles.” At the time, electricity tended to be anthropomorphized as a personification of gods, fairies, etc., and “Tesla appeared to encourage his own depiction as one of these types: the wizard, or, a magical masculine embodiment of electricity itself.” He carefully controlled perceptions of himself and his work, operating a “miracle factory” as an “audacious wizard” who used colorful language to describe his demonstrations, e.g. summoning “a ball of leaping red flame” by “snapping his fingers.”68

Tesla had visions from a young age and was able to build things based on them. Later he claimed that those visions came from Mars and that he was rediscovering knowledge from the ancient world.69 This is occult science. He claimed to have caused an earthquake, and to be working on a way to read thoughts by scanning the retina. Today, people claim that he actually possessed such advanced scientific prowess but failed due to vast conspiracies against him and from others stealing his work.70 He has become an icon of eccentric genius capable of almost magical technology. According to Bernard Carlson, his goals were typically thwarted by his own determination toward visionary pursuits that were at odds with sponsors and employers.71


Tesla fits into the prophet category because of his charisma and attempt to bridge hidden powers with accepted science. HPB cited people like Faraday, Edison, and Tyndall because she believed the “ether” mediated magical forces like it did other phenomena. Additionally, radio signals inspired occultists and spiritualists; Edison even joined the Theosophical Society. Tesla tried to capitalize on this kind of excitement by offering a new type of science that seemed magical or spiritual in essence, and he presented himself as the only person who could pull it off. It is unclear whether he actually believed some of his claims, such as receiving signals from Mars, or if he simply used such stories to further his persona. At any rate, his electric wizardry skirted the line between science and magic.

As I have shown, each of the five prophets we studied possessed some kind of charismatic leadership and all of them dealt in occult sciences, or at least in the appearance of the occult. They differ in their approaches and goals. Nostradamus seemed to rely on Kabbalah, and his overall intentions are hard to determine. He developed a following, but he appears to have not planned or wanted to be considered a prophet. Smith drew from intellectual magic with the intention of becoming a religious leader. He founded a “corrected” Christianity and buried its occult influences through doctrinal changes. It is hard to say whether Smith believed his teachings or was a fraud, especially since he clearly fabricated the Book of Abraham and appears to have plagiarized his ideas. Tesla was extremely charismatic.

---

and marketed himself as capable of wonderous inventions. His occult-like powers were more subtle, but he did blend channeling and esoteric ideas into the contemporary science of his day. At the very least, his wizardesque persona and outlandish claims heavily appealed to those who did practice occult science.

Of the five prophets, I am most interested in Steiner and Cayce. Both seem genuine in their desire to help people, and neither come across to me as especially interested in fame or fortune even though they both established organizations that still exist today. Both prophets claimed to tap into a universal consciousness of sorts, and they both borrowed heavily from Thesosophy. They also combined aspects of Eastern religious traditions with Christianity in a way that Christians could digest and accept. Neither seemed to produce any prophecies or proofs that are overly compelling, but their genuine attempt at producing spiritually derived knowledge, sometimes with some accuracy, is interesting. I find HPB to be a fascinating character as well because of her vast influence in the occult. HPB combined many forms of occult science, but Cayce and Steiner seemed to focus on the power of visionary and psychic revelation through an accessible otherworldly record. People today still believe such power is possible.

According to Goodrick-Clarke, “The dissolution of man’s place within a divine order was crystalized by the publication of The Origin of Species (1859) by Charles Darwin ... [Theosophy and Spiritualism] reflected a widening gulf between orthodox religious belief and science in the West.”

Both Steiner and Cayce’s ongoing

75 Goodrick-clarke, The Western Esoteric Traditions, 211.
movements reflect HPBs occultic syncretism, which is still reverberating in modern America. “Theosophy’s cultural legacy has been extensive, influencing modern art, quantum physics, and, more recently, New Age religion.” It inspired characters like Aleister Crowley, who wanted to bring magic into harmony with science, and Annie Besant, the grandmother of New Age spirituality. Today the Internet is booming with tales of the Akashic Records, astral projection, and Atlantis. Wiccans practice magic, and “healers” use crystals, sound therapy, and other occult powers to compete with modern science. I think much of this can be traced back to the prophets and influences discussed in this essay.

In conclusions, all our prophets were mysterious in their own ways. Nostradamus was cryptic, Smith was an eclectic evangelist, Steiner was a spiritual philosopher, Cayce was a healer with a limited education, and Tesla was an electric wizard. They each attracted disciples due to their charisma and perceived occult powers. They all blurred the lines between magic, religion, and science. Some deliberately sought to harness immaterial forces for use in the natural world, others wanted to establish religious movements. Some seemed genuine. Some appeared at least partially fraudulent. All claimed access to hidden knowledge, and all still attract dedicated believers to this day.

________________________

76 Goodrick-clarke, The Western Esoteric Traditions, 226.

77 Asprem, The Problem of Disenchantment, 496.


79 Johnson, Edgar Cayce in Context, 4.
Bibliography


