Gnostic Runology – Historical Influences 2

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Religious Currents in Europe leading up to and during the 1800s

With the popularity of Freemasonry beginning to decline towards the mid to late 1800s, space started to open for other groups to make an attempt to hold the torch of spiritual reform in Europe.

Now, some new esoteric, spiritual or religious currents become popular that will play a role in the emergence of the Runology of the 20th century. They were:

1) the Spiritualist movement – a combination of the ideas of Swedenborg (highlighting personal revelation) and Mesmer (emphasizing energetic healing),
2) the *Od* or Odic Force – Reichenbach's idea of Vital Force(s) that emanate from all living things (somewhat similar to Mesmer's "Living-Magnetism")
3) the Theosophical Movement – Initially based on Blavatsky's books which brought the ideas of the Asian to Europe (and to the West in general) and, with it, the popularity of Esotericism and Occultism became more widespread.

Did Theosophy lay the groundwork for the *Völkisch* Movement? If we want to understand the environment wherein the *Völkisch* Movement was able to flourish, we'll have to back up a little in history to see the bigger picture.

The Great Awakenings

After the Protestant Reformation (which began in German in October of 1517 and ended sometime in the mid-1600s), there continued to be attempts to reform traditional Christianity in Europe. The belief in personal empowerment and independence in religious matters has its roots in the Protestant Reformation, but now we start to see a variety of unique religious flavors emerging...

Beginning in the early to mid-1700s, there were a number of surges in religious popularity that historians have named the "Great Awakenings". We have already noted the Rosicrucian manifestos and their influence above, so now let's look at other religious currents during the same time period.

According to the scholar Christine Leigh Heyrman, "during the middle decades of the 18th century, a new 'Age of Faith' arose to counter the currents of the Age of Enlightenment, to reaffirm the view that being truly religious meant trusting the heart rather than the head, prizing feeling more than thinking, and relying on biblical revelation rather than human reason."

The philosophers of the 18th-century Enlightenment had a dramatic effect on subsequent developments in philosophy and religion. In particular, the works of the German Philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) gave rise to a new generation of German philosophers and they began to see wider recognition internationally. However, in a reaction to the Enlightenment, Romanticism began to develop towards the end of the 18th century. Key ideas that sparked changes in philosophy were the fast progress of science, including the idea of 'evolution'.

The first Great Awakening was an evangelical upsurge in England, Scotland, Germany and the American colonies between the 1730s and the 1770s. It has been described as a focus on religious experience, rather than on traditional doctrinal divisions (between the Protestant and Catholic churches). With it, there was an emphasis on religious faith as opposed to religious intellectualism and scholasticism. Here we also see the emergence of the theological view that religious conversion had to be a "new birth" experienced in the heart and not simply an intellectual grasp of 'proper' Christian doctrine.

The second Great Awakening began around 1790, gaining momentum by 1800 and on into the 1820s, before losing much of its momentum in the 1840s. During this time, there was more emotional preaching and the need for not only personal reform, but also social change (getting rid of "sin" in all its forms).

Scholar Henry S. Commanger, in his paper The Significance of Freedom of Religion in American History (published in 1982, in the book Freedom of Religion in America) says that "Romanticism found expression in the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth-century, which was characterized by en-thusiasm, emotion, and an appeal to the super-natural", this he also contrasts with the skeptical rationalism of the Enlightenment.

There are scholars who claim that there were more Great Awakenings (such as: a Third from 1855–1930 and a Fourth from 1960–1980), but for our purposes we only to look at these first two. We can see that both of them emphasize a more personal and emotional perspective of religion, instead of just adherence to a doctrine. Thus, the seeds for a personal interpretation of religious teachings begin to grow from here and, as the influence of these Great Awakenings begins to wane, we see the emergence of a new spiritual movement called 'Spiritism' or 'Spiritualism'.

Spiritualism

Spiritualism first appeared in the 1840s in upstate New York (earlier religious movements such as Millerism and Mormonism had also emerged from this area, during the second Great Awakening). Many believed that this area was a special place where direct communication with God or angels was possible.

Spiritualism was concerned with the afterlife and communicating with 'the spirits of dead people' (whom they called 'discarnate humans' or simply 'spirits'). Central to their system is the idea that 'spirits' are capable of growth and perfection, progressing through higher spheres or planes, and that the afterlife is not a static state, but one in which 'spirits' evolve. Here we see the emergence of the idea that a disincarnated person can continue to develop after death, similar to a 'spiritual evolution'.

One of the reasons Spiritualists were interested in contacting spirits was the idea that spirits can provide knowledge about moral and ethical issues, as well as about God and the afterlife. Many believers therefore speak of "spirit guides" (specific spirits, often contacted, and relied upon for guidance).

Spiritualists believe that those they called 'spirit mediums' are gifted with the ability to communicate with 'spirits', however anyone may become a 'medium' through study and practice. According to Spiritualists, anyone may receive 'spirit' messages, but formal communication sessions (séances) are held by mediums, whereby they claim to directly receive information.

1) Swedenborg, Mesmer and the Foundations of Spiritualism

For Spiritualists, the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and the teachings of Franz Mesmer (1734–1815) provided an outline for accessing direct personal knowledge regarding the afterlife, the 'spirit' world and the supernatural.

Swedenborg's Spiritual Awakening

Swedenborg was a Swedish Lutheran theologian, scientist, philosopher and mystic, who was best known for his book on the afterlife, Heaven and its Wonders and Hell From Things Heard and Seen [De Caelo et Eius Mirabilibus et de inferno, ex Auditis et Visis] (1758). This book is often known as simply "Heaven and Hell" in English translations.

Prior to his spiritual career, Swedenborg was an inventor and a scientist. But then, at 53, he entered into a spiritual phase where he experienced dreams and visions, which began on 6 April 1744 (Easter Weekend). It culminated in a 'spiritual awakening' in which he received a revelation that he was appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ to reform Christianity.

In Swedenborg's understanding: after death, we wake up in the 'intermediate region' of the spiritual world, neither in Heaven nor Hell, but in a neutral "no man's land" that he called the "World of Spirits". Here we gradually lose the ability to pretend and the spiritual "real us" comes out. Following this judgment, the new 'spirit' goes on to the Heaven or Hell by its own free will. God does not force them. Spirits gather with those that are similar to themselves, whether in Heaven or Hell.

According to Swedenborg, people are kept in spiritual freedom by means of the equilibrium between Heaven and Hell. He says that anyone can enter Heaven, but as soon as an evil person inhales the Heavenly air, they have excruciating torment so they quickly shun it and escape to keep with their true state. He emphasized that the basic spiritual orientation of a person toward good or evil cannot be changed after death. Thus, an evil spirit could leave hell, but never wants to.

Two features of Swedenborg's view particularly resonated with the early Spiritualists:

1) that there is not a single Hell and a single Heaven, but rather a series of higher and lower Heavens and Hells;
2) that 'spirits' are intermediates between God and humans, such that the divine sometimes uses them as a means of communication.

Although Swedenborg actually warned against seeking out 'spirit' contact, his works seem to have inspired others to, in fact, do so.

Mesmer's "Living-Magnetism"

The second person who influenced Spiritualism was Franz Friedrich Anton Mesmer (1734-1815), a German medical doctor with an interest in astronomy.

In 1766 he published a doctoral dissertation where he discussed the influence of the Moon and the planets on the human body and on disease. Almost 75 years earlier, in 1687, Sir Isaac Newton explained that ocean tides result from the gravitational attraction of the Sun and Moon on the oceans of the earth. Tidal generating forces vary inversely as the cube of the distance from the tide generating object.

Mesmer's dissertation was called De planetarum influxu in corpus humanum ["On the Influence of the Planets on the Human Body"], and it built off of Isaac Newton's theory of the tides, suggesting that certain tides in the human body might correspond to the movements of the Sun and Moon.

At the beginning of 1768, Mesmer got married and started his practice as a doctor in Vienna, Austria. Over the next few years he would experiment with attempting to heal patients by provoking an "artificial tide" in them.

In 1776, Mesmer published a book in German, entitled Schreiben über die Magnetkur ["Writings about the Magnetic-Cure"] in which he mentions his dissertation and gives examples of his findings from 'magnetic' experiments with people and animals. The following year, after partial success in curing the blindness of an 18-year-old musician, Mesmer decided to leave Vienna. He moved to Paris, France and rented an apartment and established a medical practice. Here, it is said that he was often visited by Mozart.

In Paris, he published a French language book *Mémoire sur la Découverte du Magnétisme Animal* ["Memoir on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism"] in 1779, with the help of one of his French students. At the end of this book he gave 27 "Propositions" or Axioms regarding 'magnetism'.

Mesmer 'magnetic' theories center around a natural energy transference that he says occurs between all animated and inanimate objects. For him, this invisible natural force was possessed by all living things, including humans, animals, and vegetables. He also believed that this force could have physical effects, including healing.

Mesmer's ideas attracted a wide following between about 1780 and 1850, and continued to have some influence until the end of the 1800s. Although he did not contribute religious beliefs to the Spiritualists, some of his techniques (later known as hypnotism) were used to help induce trances. Through these trances subjects often reported contact with supernatural beings.

2) Reichenbach's Odic Force

Baron Dr. Karl Ludwig von Reichenbach (1788-1869) was a notable chemist, geologist, metallurgist, naturalist, industrialist and philosopher. Towards the end of his life, he dedicated himself to research on a field of energy (combining electricity, magnetism and heat) emanating from all living things, which he called the 'Odic force'.

In 1839, Reichenbach retired and began an investigation into the pathologies of the human nervous system. He studied neurasthenia, somnambulism, hysteria and phobia (at the time, there were reports that these conditions were affected by the Moon). After interviewing many patients he was able to rule out many causes and cures, but came to the conclusion these ailments tended to affect people who had particularly vivid sensory faculties, whom he called "sensitives". Influenced by the Mesmer's theories, Reichenbach considered that these conditions may be affected by environmental electro-magnetism.

He began investigating how the human nervous system could be affected by various substances, and discovered the existence of a new force that seemed to be connected to electricity, magnetism, and heat. He thought this force was radiated by most substances and that "sensitives" were more influenced than others.

His investigations led him to propose that this new force was similar to magnetism and was a kind of "life principle" that permeated and connected all living things together. He named it the 'Odic force' and said that:

1) the Odic force has a positive and negative flux, and a light and dark side;
2) individuals can forcefully "emanate" it, particularly from the hands, mouth, and forehead;
3) and that it has many possible applications.

The Odic force was said to explain the phenomenon of hypnotism. In Britain, after the translation of Reichenbach's *Researches on Magnetism, Electricity, Heat and Light in their Relations to Vital Forces* in 1850 by Dr. Gregory (professor of chemistry at the University of Edinburgh), research was undertaken to try to show many of the Odic phenomena to be of the same nature as those described previously by Franz Mesmer and Emanuel Swedenborg.

Reichenbach hoped to develop scientific proof for this universal life force, but he did not put forth any reliable way to do controlled experiments with so-called "sensitives". The "sensitives" had to work in total or near-total darkness in order to be able to observe the phenomena. His experiments relied on the perceptions reported of those who claimed to be "sensitive" (since he was unable observe any of the reported phenomena himself), but scientists were unable to duplicate these experiments.

Proponents of the Odic force say that, in total darkness, it is visible as colored auras surrounding living things, crystals, and magnets, but that viewing it requires time first spent in total darkness, and only very sensitive people have the ability to see it. They also say that it resembles the Eastern Qi and Prana, but unlike these: the Odic force was not associated with breath, but instead mostly with biological electromagnetic fields.

We'll look at the 3rd aspect, the Theosophical Movement, in the next class.