

The Three Faces of Charles H. Vail

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Introduction

Rev. Charles H. Vail (1866-1924) was a Universalist minister who served small congregations in Albany, N.Y., Jersey City, N. J., Richfield Springs, N.Y., and Albion, N.Y., in the years just before and after the turn of the twentieth century. He was the first national organizer of the Socialist Party, an indefatigable activist who crisscrossed the country on behalf of the party, ran for governor of New Jersey, and published three influential manuals of “scientific socialism.”¹ And he was an active Freemason who wrote two books on the esoteric secrets found both in Freemasonry and in the parallel stories of the “world’s saviors.”² Vail’s combination of commitments might seem startling or idiosyncratic, much like that of an accountant who plays classical piano and fanatically follows the Packers. But in this essay I hope to show that Vail’s threefold identity as Universalist, socialist, and esotericist was not only coherent, but can illuminate forgotten aspects of all three traditions.

To achieve this goal, I will first consider each of Vail’s identities in isolation, focusing on Vail’s work as a Universalist pastor, his work and ideas as a socialist organizer, and then his understanding of esoteric religion. Then I will analyze his

¹ Charles H. Vail, *Modern Socialism* (New York: Commonwealth, 1897); Vail, *Principles of Scientific Socialism* (New York: Commonwealth, 1899); and Vail, *Militant and Triumphant Socialism* (New York: Cooperative, 1913).

² Vail, *The Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry* (New York: Macoy, 1909); and Vail, *The World’s Saviors: Analogies in their Lives Examined and Interpreted* (New York: Macoy, 1913).

identities by pairs—Universalism and socialism, Universalism and esotericism, socialism and esotericism—considering not only the connections Vail himself made but also previous instances of intersection. Finally, I will conclude by showing how Vail’s evolutionary vision of a coming millennium provided a point of contact among all three identities.

Vail as Universalist

In 1892 Charles Vail, twenty-six years old and recently widowed, graduated from Saint Lawrence, married his classmate Nina Bedell, and embarked on his career as a Universalist minister. After a brief ministry in Albany, he was selected as pastor of the First Universalist Church in Jersey City, New Jersey. Because I have access to the records of this congregation, I will use it to illustrate Vail’s pastoral career. I hope at some point to gain more information about his other lengthy pastorate, in Albion, New York, which began in 1906 and perhaps lasted to the end of his life. Jersey City was a small congregation that had seen some significant conflict in its twenty-year history. Its third minister, Phebe Hanaford, was one of the first women ordained in the Universalist tradition, and in her three years of ministry she brought in sixty-five new members, more than doubling the size of the church. But Hanaford scandalized some of the longstanding members by maintaining a relatively public partnership with Ellen Miles, who also served as the church’s organist. When church leaders asked her to “dismiss” her companion, Hanaford refused and led an exodus of forty-four members—all but four of whom had joined during her ministry—to a Second Universalist that went unrecognized by the Universalist convention.

Vail arrived in Jersey City sixteen years later, and by that time, Hanaford had moved on to a ministry in New Haven, Connecticut. His socialist commitments do not seem to have generated any controversy comparable to that experienced under Hanaford. His work got off to a promising start, as the members voted unanimously “to do all in their power to make his pastorate a success.”³ The installation was a festive affair, with prayers and sermons from several Universalist colleagues in New York City. Pastor John C. Adams, a prominent denominational leader, gave a sermon solidly in the social gospel tradition, criticizing the “business” and “numbers” models of ministry and endorsing the “humanitarian idea of the church, with its kindergartens, boys’ clubs, societies, and missions.” Vail was welcomed to Jersey City by John L. Scudder, a Yale graduate and Congregationalist minister who was then in the process of building First Congregationalist into the largest church of his denomination in the state. Scudder worked with local activist Cornelia Bradford to create the city’s first settlement house, and a decade later he gained national recognition by establishing “People’s Palace,” a \$100,000 institution offering working class youth the opportunity to exercise, bowl, play pool, attend plays, and shoot rifles, all under the supervision of the church.⁴ In his welcome of Vail, Scudder praised the Universalists for having “sweetened and simplified theology” and added that he didn’t think anyone was preaching hellfire anymore. The perhaps unintended implication, of course, was that Scudder’s congregation was already doing all that a socially conscious Universalist church might hope to do. The rapid rise of People’s Palace may provide the explanation for Vail’s failure to build First Universalist into a mighty force for social change.

³ First Universalist Church of Jersey City Record Book, bMS 262/1 (3), Andover Harvard Library Archives.

⁴ “A \$100,000 Church Gift,” *New York Times*, November 29, 1903.

The next six years were marked by a mix of stability and decline. Like many couples who had met in seminary, Charles and Nina Vail shared pastoral leadership, with the unordained Nina serving as head of the Sunday School. The lay leadership, in particular, was remarkably stable: though congregational president Solon Palmer abruptly left the congregation during Vail's ministry, both the treasurer and clerk served throughout his time and for several years thereafter—in the latter case, until the congregation folded. Early on, Vail attempted to fulfill a dream of his predecessor by creating a building fund for a church “in a more desirable neighborhood,” but within six months it became apparent that this dream was out of reach. The church spent the next several years casting about for ways to apply the funds raised to the renovation of their existing building.

In most cases, Vail received one-year contracts at the end of the calendar year. Two years into his ministry, he proposed a salary reduction from \$1500 to \$1200 in exchange for the elimination of evening services, which he said were so poorly attended that they caused “injury” to the church. The church members, he pointedly observed, seemed to see the evening services as for somebody else, not themselves. At the time, he assured the congregation that he knew he could “rely upon you to do the best for me the status of your finances will allow.” The following two years, financial difficulties prevented the congregation from extending Vail formal contracts, but he stayed on anyhow, and in 1899 he received one last annual renewal. Finally, in November of 1900, the trustees voted “that under the present circumstances” they could not offer Vail a new contract, and instead would have to make “a temporary arrangement.” It is not clear if they hoped that Vail would be the temporary arrangement once again, but he moved on.

They struggled over the next year and a half to find a replacement, then called Vail's predecessor in 1902 at the old salary of \$1500. Though he proved successful at procuring stopgap grants from the denomination, he was not able to repeat his earlier success in recruiting members, and the congregation folded a few years later.

Over his six years, Vail attracted a mere handful of new members, and lost even fewer—at least if we count only those who were formally dismissed. Despite his socialist ideals, he never asked the church to eliminate the old, hierarchical system of pew rents. The church budget remained stable—and always just short of balanced. This was the story for a great many Universalist congregations in the final years of the nineteenth century, and beyond.

Vail as Socialist

During his time in Jersey City, Vail published two books on socialism—perhaps a strategy for offsetting the salary cut; perhaps one of the reasons he had little time to recruit new church members. Though the two books are far from rich in autobiographical detail, they provide several hints about Vail's path to socialism. The first, *Modern Socialism*, suggests that he had been influenced by the Nationalist movement that had grown out of Edward Bellamy's bestselling socialist utopia, *Looking Backward*, published in 1888. In depicting a socialist society that had emerged peacefully when the state absorbed large capitalist "trusts," Bellamy drew on the writings of Laurence Gronlund, a Danish immigrant economist who had first suggested this model of the transition to socialism. Though Gronlund's vision was undeniably socialist—he called for "common ownership of the instruments of production," "collective management of

production,” and “distribution of the income of society,” features that Vail identified as the core of socialism—Bellamy and his admirers sought to avoid stigma by substituting the term “Nationalist.” Between 1889 and the mid-1890s, they built up an impressive network of Nationalist clubs, including one organized in Jersey City in 1890.

Vail’s *Modern Socialism* was heavily indebted to Gronlund and Bellamy, who are quoted throughout the book. His opening chapter on “economic evolution”—a central theme in all of his socialist books—placed strong emphasis on the growth of large trusts, describing them as “one of the most significant phenomena of the present day” and a “foreshadow[ing of] the doom of the competitive system.” “As individuals have combined into corporations, and corporations into trusts,” he promised, so the trusts will combine into a Co-operative Commonwealth”—thus invoking the title of Gronlund’s book and a phrase equally favored by socialists and more moderate social gospellers.⁵ Vail insisted that socialism’s “all-inclusiveness” made it preferable to other reform strategies, but reassured his readers that their own relatively conservative concerns—for temperance or the preservation of the family, for example—would best be addressed under socialism. He also insisted that the transition to socialism would be achieved by democratic means.⁶

At the same time, Vail occasionally quoted Marx, as well as the stridently Marxist Socialist Labor Party. He devoted a significant section to Marx’s theory of surplus value, and he sided with Marx on one crucial point: terms like “Nationalism” were evasions that did not clearly “express the doctrine of the social ownership and management of the means of production and distribution.” Vail proudly called himself a “Scientific

⁵ *Modern Socialism*, 23-25.

⁶ *Modern Socialism*, 98, 82, 134, 67.

Socialist” and affirmed that socialism “stands for one of the highest ideals of which it is possible for the human mind to conceive.”⁷ He also closed with a rallying cry for proletarian action: “Socialism arises necessarily out of the economic situation of the proletariat. To become emancipated from this condition it is necessary for the proletariat to become supreme and this can only be accomplished by overthrowing the capitalist order.”⁸

Principles of Scientific Socialism, published just two years later, offered a more thoroughgoing Marxism, with lengthy quotes from Marx throughout. It is noteworthy that this book was later reprinted by the publishing house of Charles Kerr, which also issued several pamphlets written by Vail. Previously the publisher of Jenkin Lloyd Jones’s *Unity* newspaper, Kerr turned his attention to socialism after breaking with Jones and soon became by far the most influential socialist publisher in the nation.⁹

Vail’s two books came at an auspicious moment, because the socialist movement was moving toward greater organizational unity in the final days of the nineteenth century. In 1901 two factions came together to create the Socialist Party of America—the only explicitly socialist party ever to achieve a significant showing in a presidential election. Though the party’s most numerous base was composed of immigrant workers, many of them organized in foreign language federations, it knew that its electoral success would depend on the support of native-born voters, including those who were not nearly so anticlerical as Karl Marx. Accordingly, it made a point of reaching out to ministers as both publicists and candidates, eventually electing ministers as mayors of Berkeley, Schenectady, and Butte, Montana. The party recruited Vail first as its “national

⁷ *Modern Socialism*, 6.

⁸ *Modern Socialism*, 164.

⁹ Kerr book.

organizer” and then as its candidate for the New Jersey governorship. In the former capacity, he gave two hundred forty-one lectures in twenty-five states, often sharing the platform with his wife.¹⁰

Vail offered his final word on socialism in *Militant and Triumphant Socialism*, published in 1913. His mind had changed relatively little in the previous fifteen years, and the book’s main innovation was the titular distinction between “militant” socialism—the proletarian movement of resistance to capitalism—and “triumphant” socialism, or the future state of peace and prosperity that would result from that movement.¹¹ This distinction allowed Vail to spend more time discussing the wonders of socialism—clearly his preferred topic—than the evils of capitalism.

All of Vail’s socialist books were marked by an irenic spirit that set them apart from most socialist propaganda. While other socialists spit fire at the capitalists and sought “language that would sear like hot iron into the brain of every worker,”¹² Vail observed mildly that “the great majority of . . . men, according to the light which they have had, have done grandly well.”¹³ For Vail, a Marxist understanding of the structural roots of oppression meant that “the capitalist, like the pauper, is the legitimate product of the present system” and thus absolved of individual guilt.¹⁴ He sympathized deeply with the small capitalists who were being squeezed by the big trusts, urging his readers to “think of the numbers of suicides committed by members of this class every year, and then the mental agony they must have suffered before being driven to seek relief by self-

¹⁰ My source here is the Wikipedia article on Vail, which appears to be based on “Life of Charles H. Vail,” *The Socialist* (Seattle), whole no. 108 (August 31, 1902): 2.

¹¹ *Militant and Triumphant Socialism*, 7.

¹² James Oneal, *Militant Socialism*, 1912, p. 2.

¹³ *Principles of Scientific Socialism*, 109.

¹⁴ *Militant and Triumphant Socialism*, 51.

destruction.”¹⁵ He was Marxist enough to believe in the class struggle but anticipated that at least a few persons of privilege would join the proletariat in a revolution that “will mean the redemption of all classes.”¹⁶

Vail as Esotericist

The last face of Charles Vail to show itself publicly was his identity as an esotericist—that is, a religious thinker concerned with the hidden meanings beneath doctrines and symbols, with the correspondences between heaven and earth, with the spiritual life inherent in all nature and the practices needed to transmute one reality into another, with the underlying harmony among diverse religious traditions, and with practices of initiation that would give the individual access to ultimate reality.¹⁷ Vail published two books on these themes in 1909 and 1913, issuing both through a Masonic publishing house.

Ancient Mysteries and Modern Masonry set out to prove that Freemasonry was “one of the channels” through which the “Ancient Mysteries” that had once existed in all cultures had been handed down to modernity. Vail promoted the theory that all religions could be traced to a single Brotherhood of Initiates “whose knowledge was the fruitage of a prior system of evolution.” Invoking the theory of Atlantis, he argued that the traditions had eventually been scattered, and responsibility for the preservation of wisdom handed on “to the advanced pupils of our present system of evolution” Though the “crude dogmas of popular theology” presented this wisdom as applying only to a few special

¹⁵ *Principles*, 95.

¹⁶ *Modern Socialism*, 122.

¹⁷ An authoritative account of the defining features of esoteric traditions can be found in Antoine Faivre, “Introduction I,” in Antoine Faivre and Jacob Needleman, eds., *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

figures, in fact the real goal of religion “was to make the Initiate a God, either by union with a Divine Being without or by the realization of the Divine Self within.” Over the course of the ages, Vail explained, this truth was nearly lost, and he dismissed the idea that even Freemasonry or any other organization had preserved a continuing existence since the time of the Mysteries. But if the “old forms” had “perished” their spirit had not, and because Masonry was “moulded upon” the Mysteries it had the potential to be a “channel of the Mystic teaching.” Vail thus wrote to urge his fellow Masons to avail themselves of this opportunity for spiritual growth.¹⁸

The World's Saviors made a similar argument in a broader context. It was a comparative study of parallels between Jesus, Krishna, Buddha, Quetzalcoatl, and other religious figures that presented these parallels not as reason for skepticism but as an “impregnable foundation” for faith. The parallels revealed “the fundamental unity of all religions.” Savior stories were similar, Vail argued, because the “great Brotherhood” of religious founders had all passed through the “ancient mysteries.” These ancient mysteries included both a “solar myth”—a story of a deity born at the winter solstice, killed in the spring, and then resurrected—and “rites of initiation” that could set any individual on a path to the perfection enjoyed by the founders. These rites revealed both “cosmic realities” and “the unfolding of the human spirit”—thus, the stages of initiation corresponded to the spheres of the solar system. Mythic stories about Jesus or Buddha were really allegories of “the life history of every Initiate.” In Vail’s account, this democratizing principle coexisted somewhat awkwardly with repeated paeans to the

¹⁸ *Ancient Mysteries*, 9, 16, 25, 107, 144.

“great Brotherhood of Divine Men, which from time to time have sent its members into the outer world to teach and to found new religions.”¹⁹

Few of the ideas in these books were original to Vail, who may have gotten them from a variety of sources. In 1909 the esoteric tradition of Freemasonry that he claimed was already about a hundred years old, as Masons had begun in the late eighteenth century to expand the traditional system of three “degrees” (Apprentice, Fellow-Craft, Master Mason) to include higher levels with their own special initiations. (The title pages of both books identified Vail as a 32nd degree Mason.) The church Vail served in Albion had a close relationship to Freemasonry: its building had been funded in 1895 by railroad magnate George W. Pullman, a Universalist and Freemason who had grown up in the town, and Pullman had arranged for the Grand Master of the Freemasons in New York State to lay the cornerstone. It may be that Vail was introduced to esoteric Freemasonry by Masons he met there. On the other hand, some of the most frequently quoted authors in both books were prominent Theosophists, notably Annie Besant and George Robert Stow Mead. Since Theosophists had been the original instigators of the Bellamyite Nationalist clubs—though the Society’s leadership eventually distanced itself from the movement—it is equally possible that Vail became familiar with esoteric traditions at the same time as he was becoming a socialist.

Universalism and Socialism

The possibility that Vail may have become both a socialist and an esotericist via Bellamyite nationalism is just one of the ways in which his three faces were connected. There was also a venerable history of interaction between the Universalist and socialist

¹⁹ *World’s Saviors*, 11, 16, 163, 173, 193.

movements, going all the way back to the 1827 founding of the Working Men’s Party—a proto-socialist organization that was the first political party for class conscious workers. The Party was first organized in Philadelphia, and its instigator William Heighon launched it by means of a speech at that city’s First Universalist Church. Several ministers who had served that congregation—notably Abner Kneeland, Theophilus Fisk, and Abel Thomas—subsequently played important roles either in the Working Men’s Party or in other forms of labor activism. In later years, the journalist Kate Richard O’Hare was one of many nationally prominent socialists with Universalist roots.

None of this is to suggest that either the leadership or the majority of the Universalist denomination were ever socialist. But Universalism provided more fertile ground for the sprouting of socialist commitment than virtually any other organized denomination. In 1908 the Christian Socialist Fellowship amassed a list of ministers who had publicly declared their commitment to the Socialist Party of America. Eleven of the roughly one hundred fifty ministers listed were Universalists. This may seem like a small share, but relative to their overall numbers, Universalists were better represented than any other denomination except for the tiny Swedenborgians: one out of fifty Universalists and one out of thirty-three Swedenborgians appeared on the list. Universalist ministers were five times as likely as Episcopalians and Congregationalists, and more than twenty times as likely as Baptists and Methodists, to appear on the list. (The Unitarian ratio was 1 in 60 and growing, as several of the ministers on the list transferred their affiliation to Unitarianism after its publication.)²⁰

²⁰ My ratios are based on the denominational statistics compiled by the Association of Religion Data Archives, www.thearda.com. ARDA’s statistics begin in 1925; since Universalism was on the decline between 1908 and 1925 it may be that I have slightly overstated the proportionate strength of socialism among Universalist ministers.

Socialist Universalists, like socialists in most other denominations, were widely scattered across the nation. Vail had two comrades in New York, and there were also three in Kansas—perhaps because the denominational superintendent there was a socialist. No other state had more than one on the list. The most prominent was doubtless Alexander Kent, who left had left First Universalist in Washington, DC, in 1891 to organize a free-standing “People’s Church”—a popular strategy for radical ministers who chafed at the restraints imposed by denominations. Another man on the list, H. C. Ledyard, would eventually leave the ministry to work as a union organizer during the Depression. So it is noteworthy that Vail, despite his prominent role in the party, does not seem to have felt called to leave either his denomination or the practice of congregational ministry.²¹

As a member of the Christian Socialist Fellowship, Vail was part of a significant cohort of ministers eager to integrate Christian faith with socialist action. Interestingly, however, he seemed uninterested in some of the rhetorical strategies preferred by his comrades. Several religious socialists contemporary with Vail produced extensive writings on the biblical roots of socialism, typically portraying Moses and Jesus as the earliest socialist teachers. Vail cited the prohibition on usury in Leviticus, but rarely went further in his exegeses.²² He also did not join the many socialists—both professedly Christian and decidedly atheist—who lambasted the mainstream churches for their support of capital.

A casual look at Vail’s three socialist books might suggest that they are manuals of economic socialism without any reference to religion whatsoever. A closer look

²¹ “The Preacher Comrades,” *Christian Socialist*, 1908.

²² *Principles*, 145.

reveals scattered allusions in each book. The introduction to *Modern Socialism* included a very rare bit of autobiography: Vail tells us that he first began investigating socialism because his work as a clergyman had made him aware of the tensions between “the Kingdom of God” and existing economic practices. Later in the same book, he affirmed both that “the principles of the existing [economic] order are unchristian” and that “the ethics of Socialism are clearly akin to Christianity if not identical with them.”²³ This was so in large part because Vail understood the Golden Rule or “law of love” as the most basic principle of Christianity. In *Principles of Scientific Socialism* he reiterated these points, with particular emphasis on the idea of the “solidarity of the human race”—a theme with a longstanding Universalist pedigree. “Socialism rests the title to the means of subsistence,” Vail explained, “upon the fact that all are members of one race, children of one common Father.”²⁴ Interestingly, though, at no point in his socialist books does Vail allude specifically to Universalism.

In *Militant and Triumphant Socialism*, Vail placed most of his theological reflection in lengthy footnotes, one of them stretching over three pages. The result was a somewhat jarring counterpoint to the unadorned Marxism of his main text. Thus, his discussion of Marx’s principle of economic determinism is accompanied by a footnote explaining that, far from contradicting notions of divine providence, “the Law of Economic Determinism is the law of the Divine Method of human progress.”²⁵ The next footnote relates socialist theory to four distinct ethical theories that Vail identifies as “Intuitionist, Utilitarian, Scriptural, and Religious.” Vail’s distinction between “scriptural” and “religious” ethics is particularly interesting: while the former is “based

²³ *Modern Socialism*, 5, 98, 80. Last quote may be Vail quoting someone else.

²⁴ *Principles*, 102, 106.

²⁵ *Militant and Triumphant Socialism*, 13.

upon a claimed revelation from God,” the latter “rests upon occult knowledge attained by men who have reached an advanced stage of development,—the Christs, Buddhas, etc.” The problem with scriptural ethics, from Vail’s point of view, is that there are multiple competing revelations, while religious ethics points to an underlying commonality. The account of religious ethics also allows him to repeat the themes of human solidarity and divinely-guided evolution. “The basis of morality is . . . the unity of all souls, all selves, in the One Universal Self,” and the evolution—“a study of the method of Divine procedure”—reveals how that self is always developing, from God and back to God.²⁶

Esotericism and Universalism

When Vail asserted the harmony between Christianity and socialism, he clearly had a certain version of Christianity in mind. That version might have been traced to either his Universalism or his esotericism, for those two religious streams had interacted extensively over the previous century. Esoteric forms of Freemasonry, for example, began to emerge early in the nineteenth century, just a few years after the founding of Universalism as a distinct denomination. Most of the founding fathers of Universalism—including John Murray, Hosea Ballou, Edward Turner, and Adin Ballou—were active Freemasons. Paul Dean, a leader of the Restorationist faction of Universalists in the 1830s, was one of the most important Masonic leaders in the antebellum United States, serving as both Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Massachusetts and Grand General High Priest of the United States.²⁷ There is no reason to assume that all these individuals were drawn to the esoteric dimension of Freemasonry, but all undoubtedly appreciated

²⁶ *Militant and Triumphant*, 15-17.

²⁷ “Paul Dean,” DUUB.

the emphasis on religious tolerance that was so important a part of both Freemasonry and Universalism.

Another important link between Universalism and esotericism was forged in the 1840s, when a circle of Universalist ministers helped give birth to the Spiritualist movement. Spiritualism is not always regarded as a form of esotericism, because its primary appeal was to publicly accessible forms of experience rather than to secret initiations. But, especially in the form typically embraced by Universalists, it involved much more than the practice of contacting the spirits of the dead. Like other esotericists, Spiritualists believed that there were hidden correspondences between heaven and earth, that all of nature was alive, that a host of spirits would play a mediating role as humans ascended the multiple levels of the cosmos, and that spiritual discipline might make transmutation possible. The most comprehensive theorist of Spiritualism was Andrew Jackson Davis, a seemingly uneducated medium whose revelations were first publicized by Universalists. The explosive growth of spiritualist practice nearly destroyed the Universalist denomination, which responded by expelling any minister who refused to acknowledge the unique authority of the Christian scriptures. This ruling caused a great migration of social activists out of Universalism, even as it left room for a significant movement of Christian Spiritualism within the denomination. Among the Universalist social activists who identified with spiritualism were prison reformer John Murray Spear, who spent several years of his life in an attempt to build a perpetual motion machine (a modern form of esoteric transmutation), pacifist and utopian socialist Adin Ballou, and Thomas Lake Harris, part of the original circle of supporters of Andrew Jackson Davis and the organizer of a series of utopian communities. Late in his life Harris mentored the

poet Edwin Markham, a prominent socialist of Charles Vail's generation who was affiliated with All Souls Universalist in Brooklyn. (Unitarian Universalists today know Markham best for his poem "Outwitted"; in his own day it was his class-conscious "Man with the Hoe" that garnered most attention.)

Since Vail did not mention his Universalist affiliation in his esoteric books, or cite any Universalist-connected authors, it is hard to know to what extent he was influenced by past ties between Universalism and esotericism. Allusions to Universalist theology are also few and far between, though at one point in *Ancient Mysteries* he does argue that biblical passages that seem to limit salvation to an elect few are really talking about the limited number of people who can expect to achieve initiation in this lifetime. "The 'Strait Gate,'" he wrote, "is not the gateway of heaven, but the gateway of Initiation."²⁸

Esotericism and Socialism

Just as Universalism provided an important seed-bed for the Spiritualist movement in the United States, so did Spiritualism provide the religious milieu for much socialist activism in the nineteenth century, especially among native-born Americans. Spiritualist ideas were widely adopted at the utopian socialist communities of the 1840s, most especially at Hopedale, and Spiritualists were well-represented in the subsequent movement toward political, partisan forms of socialism. Paul Buhle's recent history of *Marxism in the United States* devotes several pages to spiritualism, noting that as late as the turn of the twentieth century a number of activists were simultaneously leading spiritualist churches and Marxist political organizations. In 1871 a highly idiosyncratic activist named Victoria Woodhull briefly gained the support of Marxists, feminists, and

²⁸ *Ancient Mysteries*, 81.

spiritualists in her bid for the presidency of the United States. Her platform was one of the most consistently radical ever articulated in the United States, calling for universal access to land, an end to monopolies and charters, government oversight of “all public enterprises,” guaranteed employment, graduated taxation, abolition of capital punishment, protection of free expression, government representation for minorities, and full equality for women. She also promised to “frame a new constitution and . . . erect a new government” if women’s suffrage was not soon granted. “We mean treason: we mean secession, and on a thousand times grander scale than was that of the South. We are plotting revolution.”²⁹ Though Woodhull’s scandalous past and her ill-advised attack on popular minister Henry Ward Beecher brought her political career to an abrupt end, her sense that the causes of socialism, feminism and spiritualism were interrelated was widely shared.

A more immediate influence on Vail, as previously noted, was the interaction between the “Nationalism” of Edward Bellamy and the Theosophical Society. Soon after the publication of *Looking Backward*, a circle of Boston Theosophists had concluded that the novel might be the basis for an organized movement. They procured the endorsement of Theosophical leader Madame Blavatsky, who agreed that Bellamy had identified the “first great step” to the “Universal Brotherhood of Humanity” that was Theosophy’s primary objective. But Blavatsky got cold feet when the movement turned toward electoral politics. “If nationalism is an application of Theosophy,” she urged, “it is the latter which must ever stand first in your sight.” But Theosophical ideas remained

²⁹ “Woman Suffrage,” *New York Tribune*, May 12, 1871.

embedded in many socialist journals.³⁰ And one of Blavatsky's successors at the head of Theosophy was Annie Besant, who had previously been a prominent member of the moderately socialist Fabian Society in Britain.

Besant was perhaps the only author to be cited in both Vail's socialist and esoteric writings: he used her contribution to *Fabian Essays*, published before she became a Theosophist, in *Modern Socialism*, and he drew at length on her *Esoteric Christianity* in *Ancient Mysteries*. Vail did not comment on Besant's dual identity, but one of the quotations he took from *Fabian Essays* is intriguing. Arguing that socialism would not cause idleness, he quoted Besant's query, "Is it to be argued that men will be industrious, careful and inventive when they get only a fraction of the result of their associated labor, but will plunge into sloth, recklessness and stagnation when they get the whole?"³¹ The logic ran closely parallel to a standard argument of early Universalist apologists, who pointed out that it was unlikely that people who believed in an all-loving God would refuse to obey that God's moral laws.

Evolutionary Millennialism

By this point it should be clear that multiple factors might have helped Vail forge a threefold loyalty to Universalism, socialism, and esotericism. Indeed, he was not the first prominent American to combine all three loyalties. One of the most popular novelists of the 1850s, George Lippard rallied early socialist sentiment with sensational exposés of the sex and violence lurking beneath the class divisions of America's

³⁰ J. Gordon Melton, "The Theosophical Communities and Their Ideal of Universal Brotherhood," in Donald E. Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 396-418.

³¹ Vail, *Modern Socialism*, 151; Besant, *Fabian Essays*, 208.

industrial cities. Deeply influenced by a Universalist ministerial mentor, Charles Chauncy Burr, Lippard popularized an image of Jesus as a class conscious worker with an explicit program of social reconstruction—an image that would be repeated by countless socialists and labor activists as they sought to drive a wedge between the religion of Jesus and the cultural conservatism of the churches. Lippard also believed that secret societies and other esoteric practices could help workers build strength and solidarity for their fight against capital, and so he organized the Brotherhood of the Union as a “re-vivication” of the ancient Rosicrucian Order, devoted to “protect[ing] the Man who Toils from the exactions of the Man who is too indolent or too criminal to Work.”³² Lippard’s Brotherhood provided the organizational template for the Knights of Labor, which would grow into the first mass labor movement in the United States.

The irony is that, while Lippard shared Vail’s Universalist, socialist, and esoteric commitments, it is hard to imagine two more contrasting personalities. Lippard delighted in salacious violence and depicted capitalists as leering, raping, and murdering monsters. He also had a quasi-messianic view of his own activist role. Vail, as we have seen, kept his own personality far in the background, and steered clear of direct criticism of individual capitalists or, indeed, any individuals whatsoever.

Indeed, the common thread connecting Vail’s three commitments seems to have been precisely the aspect of his personality that most distinguished him from Lippard: his consistently optimistic faith in the favorable destiny of humanity as a whole. Vail was an admirer of Darwin who believed that the evolutionary principle could be applied to social as well as biological realities; thus he consistently couched Marx’s dialectical

³² *Quaker City Weekly*, June 30, 1848, in Reynolds, *Lippard*, 205; *Quaker City Weekly*, June 2, 1849, in Reynolds, *Lippard*, 210, 212.

materialism as a theory of “economic evolution.” At the same time, he remained comfortable with traditional religious language about the coming millennium or Kingdom of God. This allowed him to interpret both socialism and esotericism as part of a divinely directed evolutionary process that would culminate in perfect peace and justice.

Vail was particularly straightforward about this in the conclusion to *Modern Socialism*. “We plead guilty to the charge of optimism. We believe that the ideal of the ages will be realized. . . . We expect long ages of humanity on this earth when war, oppression, enmity, poverty and want shall exist only in tradition; when the sun shall rise to gladden the eyes of every man, woman, and child.”³³ (166) In *Principles of Scientific Socialism*, he rooted socialism in humanity’s “eternal impetus towards progress” (165), and in *Militant and Triumphant Socialism* he used the category of “triumphant socialism” as the basis for a broad-ranging millennial vision that would be attained only through evolution. Indeed, drawing on the esoteric understanding of all nature as alive, he argued that socialism would allow all of humanity to achieve “self-consciousness” as a single “organism.” In the conclusion to that book, he compared socialism to John the Baptist. Individual socialists had the opportunity to be forerunners of a new age, and he urged them to “carry to those of your fellows sitting in darkness the light of Socialist teaching. Proclaim aloud the gospel of emancipation—that there may be recruited one vast army of progress, marching step by step, side by side, shoulder to shoulder, to take possession of the promised land—the kingdom of social justice and righteousness.”³⁴

To varying degrees, evolutionary millennialism of this sort was a part of all socialist propaganda—Vail differed from his comrades only in his relative lack of

³³ *Modern Socialism*, 166.

³⁴ *Militant and Triumphant Socialism*, 137, 144.

emphasis on the evils of the capitalist present. It may be more surprising to see an evolutionary dimension in his esotericism, since he affirmed strongly that all religions were rooted in an *ancient* brotherhood of teachers whose unity had been shattered. Indeed, many of Vail's contemporary esotericists, particularly in Europe, were in fact turning toward conservative politics and an intense suspicion of modernity in all its forms. But for Vail, the central task of enlightened teachers in every age was "quicken human evolution." "The great Spiritual Hierarchy," he explained, was always "as ready to give, as man in his evolutionary condition is ready to receive, instruction in Divine Wisdom." Even the loss of old wisdom traditions could thus be interpreted as a byproduct of evolution. "With the growth of the race old forms perished, and those who identified the spirit with the form thought all was destroyed." But what was really happening was that "the guardians of truth" were giving a new teaching to "those who were ready to receive it."³⁵

In *The World's Saviors*, Vail elaborated this point in a way that hinted at both his socialist and universalist commitments. The reasons for religious diversity, he explained there, was that the universal brotherhood had sent a new "World Teacher" whenever a "fresh impulse" was needed to help a "new civilization" be born. "Each religion is thus suited to the type of mind to be developed—the type of the particular sub-race to whom it is given." He assumed that his readers would share his own belief that the present was such a transitional age, in which the "appearance of a great World Teacher" could be expected. As evidence, he pointed particularly to the socioeconomic crisis bemoaned by socialists: "The present economic system has reached the limit of its usefulness,—further progress cannot be made without a social reconstruction. Competition must give way to

³⁵ *Ancient Mysteries*, 19, 107.

cooperation. The old order is rapidly breaking down.” But his argument then took a surprising turn: perhaps the coming teacher would not inaugurate yet another new religion. Instead, Vail reasoned, “the tendency of to-day is toward unity,” and so the “definite message” of the coming teacher might simply be a “proclamation of the unity of religions”—of “each distinct religion being a branch on the One Tree of Life.” Building on this hope, Vail then devoted the final pages of his volume to a call for mutual recognition among all religions.³⁶

As it happened, Vail’s image of a coming universal religion was widely shared by *both* socialists and Universalists at the turn of the twentieth century. In the pages of the *Christian Socialist*, alongside the exegetical arguments that Jesus was a socialist, one could find dozens of activists insisting that “socialism will make religion real” that “socialism is religion” or that the attainment of “a just, economic and social system” would make possible new “unfoldments of the universal soul.”³⁷ Universalists, meanwhile, were beginning to insist that their denominational name had a broader significance than a particular theory of Christian salvation. As another member of the influential Pullman clan, J. M. Pullman, put it when addressing Jenkin Lloyd Jones’s Liberal Congress, “You Universalists have squatted on the biggest word in the English language. Now the world is beginning to want that big word, and you Universalists must either improve the property or move off the premises.”³⁸

³⁶ *World’s Saviors*, 197-202.

³⁷ George Elmer Littlefield, “Why I Am a Socialist,” *Christian Socialist* 2/11 (1905): 1; Everett Dean Martin, “Why I Am a Socialist,” *Christian Socialist* 6/3 (1909): 2; and Harvey Dee Brown, “Economic and Spiritual Forces,” *Christian Socialist* 6/11-12 (1909): 10.

³⁸ Cited in Charles A. Howe, *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism* (Boston: Skinner, 1993), 80.

So Vail's evolutionary millennialism made it easy for him to embrace both socialism and esotericism as logical concomitants of his professional work as a Universalist minister. Not only was the whole world coming together, it was coming together around certain themes—notably the solidarity of the whole human family—that Universalists had been preaching for more than a century. But herein was a final irony. In the millennial scheme implicit in all of Vail's writings, Universalism's role was clearly that of John the Baptist—a forerunner that could step aside now that the vision was becoming a reality. Perhaps Vail had been convinced by John Scudder's installation sermon assuring him that all his neighbors were universalists of some variety. Perhaps the reason he never mentioned Universalism in his books was the same as his reason for terminating the evening service at Jersey City: why reach out when the whole world is coming your way?

The case of Charles H. Vail, in short, provides some tantalizing clues about the steady decline of Universalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But I do not intend this as a cautionary tale, or a case study in what Unitarian Universalists should not do if we want our movement to grow. Rather, in the spirit of Vail's own unapologetic optimism, I would urge us to spend less time counting Unitarian Universalists and more time tracing the progress of the principles of our faith. Whether in the environmental movement or in popular spiritualities or in the proliferation of interfaith dialogue, our principles are on the march. Contemplating that may give us at least a bit of Vail's faith in the divine design of history.