

“Omdat het steunt op *weten*.”

Spiritism in the Netherlands

between 1890 and 1940



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¹ M. Stanescu, *De vorba cu spiritele*,

<http://storage0.dms.mpinteractiv.ro/media/401/321/14006/4609874/8/sedinta-spiritism.jpg?width=500&height=379> (4 July 2012).

‘De hier volgende bladzijden bevatten in beknopten vorm en zoo eenvoudig mogelijk medegedeeld, het voornaamste wat in verschillende grootere werken over het Spiritualisme geschreven is. Het doel, dat ik ook met deze 2^{de} veel vermeerderde uitgave van dit werkje betoog, is om daarmee een leiddraad te geven ten dienste van hen, die hun onderzoek op dit *gewijd* gebied wenschen aan te vangen, en wien het ontbreekt aan kennissen of vrienden, die hen in dezen zouden kunnen voorlichten; terwijl ik tevens heb trachten aan te tonen, hoe door de *gansche Heilige Schrift* een spiritualistische ader henenloopt. Mochten ook deze bladzijden strekken, om de somberheid uit menige sterfkamer weg te namen, en een vriendelijk licht te doen opgaan over de donkerheid van dood en graf! Daartoe achtervolgde de “Vader der geesten” dit geschrift met Zijn onmisbaren zegen!’

E.M. van IJsendijk.²

[‘The following pages contain in brief form and communicated as simple as possible the most distinguished that has been written on spiritism in various greater works. The goal, that I also have with this second expanded edition, is to provide a guideline for them, who wish to start their research in this *sacred* area, and who lacks the acquaintances or friends, who could educate them in this matter; while I also have tried to show, how a spiritualist leitmotiv runs through the *entire Holy Scripture*. May these pages also see to taking away the somberness from many a dying room, and to let a kind light shine over the darkness of death and grave! Thereto followed the “Father of spirits” this writing with His indispensable blessing!‘]

² E.M. van IJsendijk, *Het land aan gene zijde: een spiritualistische bijdrage door een hervormd predikant* (3rd pressing; Den Haag 1933) I.

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Introduction: research methodology and the history of spiritism before 1848

§ I – Introduction and research methodology

This thesis analyses the self-image of spiritist beliefs and practices in the Netherlands during the height of “verzuiling” (“pillarization”). During this period, social reality in the Netherlands was characterized by three (according to some historians four) distinct politico-religious “pillars”, which were characterized by religion and/or ideology and maintained their own social environment and institutions. The vertically divided Catholic, Protestant and Socialist pillars had their own newspapers, political parties, broadcasting organizations, trade unions, schools, social institutions and sports clubs. The practice of religion took a very prominent place in Dutch history during this period, which experienced its heydays between approximately 1890 and 1940. This national context was of decisive influence on the development of spiritism and the construction of the spiritists’ self-image. In this thesis, I will answer the following research question:

How did Dutch spiritists construct their self-image between 1890 and 1940 and which strategies did they use to maintain their public presence?

This question provides new knowledge and insights in a variety of ways. First, it is of course an analysis of a half century of Dutch spiritism. This is the first thesis to study the history of Dutch spiritism during this period. This thesis will therefore partially be just this: an analysis of the self-image of Dutch spiritists during the height of pillarization. It provides new information and insights into this phenomenon and therefore adds to the knowledge available on the history of spiritism.

The history of spiritism in the Netherlands during the period under consideration has barely been researched. In fact, no monograph has appeared on spiritism after 1900. Because of this, I almost exclusively had to rely on primary source material for this research. I will

describe and discuss the nature of these sources shortly hereafter. Because the spiritist writings were highly subjective and apologetic in tone and were often written with the aim of propagating spiritism, they cannot be used to write a history of spiritism during this period. Instead, I will analyze how spiritists used these writings to construct their self-image. This self-image can be defined by analyzing the sources from a meta-level and by distinguishing the ways in which this construction takes place. For example, when a spiritist source sums up examples of experiments in which the existence of spirits has scientifically been proven I will mainly focus on what this means for trying to integrate a scientific component into the spiritists' self-image. In this way, these ambiguous sources can still be used to reconstruct part of what spiritism was during this period.

As stated before, very little has been written on the history of spiritism in the Netherlands. Within academic historiography, only one author has written a monograph on the history of Dutch spiritism. This is the dissertation of Derk Jansen on nineteenth-century spiritists, published in 1994.³ It is a detailed analysis of one specific group of intellectuals situated in Groningen who tried to unite Protestantism with spiritism. In many ways, my thesis follows from and builds on Jansen's research. Although the present thesis discusses more than one particular strand of spiritism and analyses different aspects of it than Jansen did, the starting point of 1890 is not only the beginning of pillarization, but also the decade in which Jansen's research stops. So besides being a good starting point when discussing pillarization and spiritism's relation to it, 1890 is also a good year to build on the scarce earlier research. Apart from Jansen's dissertation and some international studies on spiritism that mention the Netherlands, I had to rely exclusively on primary sources, written by spiritists and their opponents. Although the *status quaestionis* is quite limited, I have taken the latest research and historiography into account during my research.

The fact that Dutch spiritism has barely been researched becomes even stranger when we compare it to the international situation. In the United States, Brazil, and several European countries, extensive historical research has been done in the history of nineteenth- and twentieth-century. These researches vary from biographies of important spiritists to national histories of spiritism, and from case studies of a specific ghost appearance to a transnational

³ D. Jansen, *Op zoek naar nieuwe zekerheid: negentiende-eeuwse protestanten en het spiritisme* (Groningen 1994).

history of certain spiritist techniques or phenomena.⁴ This has resulted in an extensive and detailed transnational historiography on spiritism in its many forms. Some examples of this are the relation between American spiritism and nineteenth-century feminism⁵, the Florida-based Spiritualist Camp *Cassadaga*⁶, and the performative aspect of spiritists and mediums in Victorian England.⁷ The Netherlands form a strange blank spot among these well-researched countries. However, this has nothing to do with an international lack of research or of interest in the history of spiritism and it remains unclear to me why this research of spiritism has never taken off in the Netherlands.

The primary sources on which my thesis is largely built are focused on the same theme (spiritism), yet often treat it in different ways or highlight different aspects of it. The ambivalent nature of spiritist literature is explained by the backgrounds of the authors. “Spiritism” was actually a belief system with many different variations, which lacked a unitary official doctrine or institution. A central characteristic of spiritism is actually its anti-dogmatism, which explains the omission of a central doctrine. Spiritism was rather a bottom-up structured conglomeration of several autonomously operating groups and individuals which all revolved around a common religious and ideological core. The diffuse nature of spiritism makes it impossible to speak of it as a monolithic belief system. When I use the terms “belief system” or “spiritism”, I actually refer to this core of beliefs to which all spiritists subscribe. It is therefore more appropriate to speak of spiritists than of spiritism when discussing the self-image of this belief “system”. Regarding this core, I follow the definition of spiritism that was given by the Remonstrant minister P. Eldering in his 1917 book (and critique) on contemporary spiritism:

⁴ R. Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York City 1983). W.B. Carpenter, *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, etc.: Historically and Scientifically Considered* (Cambridge 2011). S. Brown, *The Heyday of spiritualism* (New York City 1970). I. Wulfhorst (ed.), *Spiritualism: a challenge to the churches in Europe* (Geneva 2004). D.J. Hess, *Samba in the Night: Spiritism in Brazil* (New York City 1994).

⁵ A. Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Bloomington 2001).

⁶ J.J. Guthrie, P.C. Lucas, and G. Monroe, *Cassadaga: the South's Oldest Spiritualist Community* (Gainesville 2000).

⁷ A. Lehman, *Victorian women and the theatre of trance: mediums, spiritualists and mesmerists in performance* (Jefferson 2009).

‘Het hedendaagsch Spiritisme is de leer, dat gestorvenen voortleven in stoffelijke gedaante, dat er gemeenschap mogelijk is tusschen de wereld der dooden en die der levenden en dat zoowel dit voortbestaan als ook die mogelijkheid van gemeenschap proefondervindelijk en wetenschappelijk kan worden bewezen.’⁸

[Contemporary Spiritism is the teaching that the deceased live on in a material form, that communication is possible between the world of the dead and that of the living, and that both this life after death and that possibility of communication can be proven experientially and scientifically.]

Although this citation comes from an author that is opposed to the practice of spiritism, this core set of beliefs can be found among all the spiritist writers, periodicals, and organizations that we come across in this thesis. All spiritists ascribe to a belief in the existence of the afterlife, semi-material spirits, and the possibility to contact these spirits. I call this the “spiritist hypothesis”. The final point of Eldering’s definition is more crucial: virtually all spiritists repeatedly claimed and went to great lengths to show that their beliefs *could* be and often *had* been proven scientifically. This quest to scientifically prove the spiritist hypothesis is what connects all branches of spiritists and occasionally unites them as a unitary front against skeptical and hostile opponents. It must be noted that the critics and opponents of the spiritists, whose writings form another major source for this research, often do not look upon spiritism as a diverse and diffuse conglomeration of different faiths. Ignoring the variations and complexities among spiritists, they rather define spiritism as a monolithic bloc of kindred spirits.

The diffuse nature of spiritism obviously has consequences for the ways it should be researched. Although the primary literature was written by a wide array of different spiritists, one cannot help but recognize the construction of a more or less consistent spiritist self-image. Again, spiritist authors differ and disagree on certain spiritist techniques, attitudes towards religion, and the exact characteristics of the “astral sphere” (the domain where spirits dwell). However, the common core is usually stressed more intensely than the various ideas and beliefs that are only adhered to by a part of the spiritists. The primary sources on which this thesis is built are usually polemic or propagandistic pamphlets, that aims to *convince* a certain

⁸ P. Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme in zijne wetenschappelijke en godsdienstige waarde beoordeeld* (Zaltbommel 1917) 1.

group of people. The target audience consists of spiritists themselves, people who are curious about spiritism (and, according to spiritist authors, need to be convinced and converted), or enemies of spiritism. Consequently, whoever the audience is, the author aims to convince the reader of the truth of the spiritist hypothesis. Even in periodicals written for an already spiritist audience, there is a continuous focus on *proving* the existence of spirits and the possibility of contacting them. This attempt to prove spiritism verges on the obsessive and is prominent in all spiritist publications. Spiritists thus had a common self-image in viewing themselves as essentially scientific.

Besides a common core set of beliefs and a focus on the scientific method, the spiritists had another thing in common: their opponents. As stated earlier, opponents treated spiritism as a unified belief system. The most oft-heard accusations were that spiritism was sinful and that the spiritist hypothesis was *not* proven scientifically because research done by spiritists was flawed. Because of this criticism of the core and essence of spiritism, all spiritists felt attack by this critique. The apologetic defenses that spiritists formulate in response to these critiques show another common feature shared by a majority of spiritists: their non-dogmatic (and often anti-dogmatic) character. Both the religious and scientific opponents of spiritists are seen as dogmatic. The spiritists' religious opponents are seen as stuck within the doctrines of their respective churches and therefore as dogmatic, narrow-minded and no longer able to look past certain borders. Although spiritism features a significant amount of religiosity, it is usually not defined as a religion by its adherents. This is not only the case because of its presumed scientific character, but also because religion is usually associated with this dogmatism. The aversion of institutional churches (both the Roman Catholic Church and the several Protestant denominations) could have led to this refusal by spiritists to call their belief a "religion". In fact, the largest Dutch spiritist organization was called *Spiritist Brotherhood Harmonia*, thus an egalitarian and voluntary brotherhood rather than a hierarchical and dogmatic religion. Scientists were accused of dogmatism because they did not accept any scientific experiments and research results that undermined their own materialist theories. It was, according to the spiritists, a materialist paradigm defending itself against new scientific insights that could disprove and refute their theories. Because spiritists had a broader and less biased approach to science, they *could* prove the paranormal phenomena to which the dogmatic scientists refused to respond. A final factor that helped forge a more or less unified self-image in spite of the fragmentary character

of spiritism was that many of the most prolific and respected spiritist authors were all members of the *Spiritist Brotherhood Harmonia*.⁹

A final subject that needs to be discussed in this methodological section is the contextual factor. This has largely to do with the period of pillarization which has consciously been chosen as the timeframe in which this research is situated. It starts in 1890, when the Dutch politico-religious pillars are seriously starting to get erected and it ends in 1940 with the outbreak of the Second World War, which in many ways formed a breaking point in Dutch history. The fifty-year period between 1890 and 1940 has been chosen for its consistency. Because there are relatively few sources to draw information from, it is convenient that we can rely on fifty years of published spiritist and anti-spiritist material. As we have seen, 1890 was also chosen as a starting point because this is where Jansen's research stops. By starting in 1890, we can see which continuities and discontinuities marked the history of spiritism after this year. Jansen also states that the breaking through of pillarization could have changed the course of spiritist history. This thesis will show that the subsequent period was marked by both continuities and discontinuities. Finally, by situating spiritists in a pillarized context, with powerful and active religious and political ideologies dominating Dutch society, we can see how spiritists *operated* through interaction, clash, and negotiation with the pillars. The pillars has a defining influence on the political, religious, social, and institutional climate in the Netherlands. A semi-religious tradition such as spiritism could of course not be ignored by the pervasive Protestant, Catholic, and Socialist networks and, vice versa, spiritists could not ignore them. This led to some interesting clashes and interaction, in which we see both sides defining and stressing their self-image. What is important for this thesis is that spiritists often define their identity *against* the hegemonic religious traditions. Therefore, the study of this interaction is crucial for obtaining a full image of how spiritists constructed their self-image. Altogether, we will see how spiritists tried to find a place for themselves in a society where the pillars dominated not only politics and media, but also everyday life.

This thesis contributes to present historiography in several ways. First and most obvious, it extends and deepens current knowledge on the history of Dutch spiritism, the spiritist self-image, and how Dutch society looked upon and interacted with the spiritists. As we have seen, almost no research has been done on these subjects and this thesis tries to fill

⁹ This includes H.N. de Fremery, J.S. Göbel, E.M. van IJsendijk, H.G. Nederburgh, and Felix Ortt.

this historiographical gap. This becomes even more evident when comparing Dutch research with the extensive international historiography on spiritism. Second, research in religious history between 1890 and 1940 largely focuses on pillarization and the pillarized religions, i.e. Catholicism and the different Protestant denominations. This thesis is interesting because it focuses on an “alternative” religious tradition which largely operated *outside* the pillars. This sheds light on religious life and history out of the hegemonic pillars, which not only dominated public life between 1890 and 1940, but also still dominates the current historiography of this period. Moreover, historical research in the period of pillarization typically focuses on the *institutional* factor and history of religion. This thesis will not focus on spiritist churches, political parties, and broadcasting networks. This is not only because these did not exist, but also because this thesis focuses on the *religious experience* of spiritists. The thesis will look at how the spiritist beliefs were constructed, developed, adjusted, propagated, and defended within an interactive social context. The religious experience is an under-researched and neglected factor in present historiography. In this way, this thesis advances academic knowledge of spiritism and sets an example for further historical research, by showing new ways of looking at and doing research in religious history. Future research should aim at extending and deepening the present, limited knowledge of the history of Dutch spiritists and on applying the methodology used in this thesis on similar religious groups, such as theosophists and the New Age “movement”.

The thesis is divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. In the introduction and the first chapter the spiritists’ perception of the history of spiritism before 1890 will be discussed, as well as the introduction and spreading of spiritism in the Netherlands during the second half of the nineteenth century. When discussing this perceived history, which precedes the period in which the actual research takes place, the ways in which this history is used to construct the spiritist self-image is central. The preceding history and a discussion of prior research done on the history of Dutch spiritists forms the basis on which the actual thesis is built. This takes off in chapter two, in which the “doctrine” of spiritism, i.e. the truths and ethical values propagated by spiritists are discussed. The methodological problems with regard to outlining a “doctrine” of such a fragmented and bottom-up structured “group” lacking a central organization will of course be addressed and reckoned with in the second chapter. After the ideas, beliefs, and values of spiritists have been defined, we can use this knowledge and turn to the *practical* manifestations of Dutch spiritism in Dutch pillarized society. This will be the subject of chapter three, in which spiritist techniques, spiritist public

events, and media coverage of spiritist actions will be analyzed. These practical manifestations will be connected to the doctrine outlined in the second chapter. In this way, we can define the ways in which spiritist theories and practices influenced and connected to each other. Finally, in the fourth chapter, we will analyze the interaction between the Dutch spiritists and other significant social groups, such as representatives of the pillars and the scientific community. This embeds the analysis of the spiritist self-image in a national and interactive context. In the concluding chapter, I will answer the research question and define what the spiritist self-image was and how it was constructed during the fifty years under consideration.

§ II – The spiritists’ history of spiritism before 1848

In the previous section, a minimal definition of spiritism was given. Although nowadays spiritism is largely treated as a socially peripheral phenomenon – categorized as a part of occultism, New Age, or superstition – a quick look at global religious history shows that spiritist beliefs and practices have been present among almost all cultures. The Dutch spiritists use this (in their eyes) impressive, long, and continuous history to construct their self-image. These countless spiritist traditions are mentioned to show that spiritism has always been around and that millions of people have believed in it, from tribal times all the way up to the present. It is often presented as a continuous tradition and its longevity is used as a way to convince people of its truth. Parts of the spiritists’ perception of the history of spiritism are used in the construction of their self-image. I will now briefly discuss those historical perceptions that are relevant to the construction of the spiritist self-image.

The belief in spiritual entities played a large role in ancient animist and shamanist cults and traditional religions, found on all continents. Here, rituals to please and contact spirits played a central role in the religious and social experience of adherents. Religious authoritative figures, such as shamans and priests, had a privileged role or “gift” of being able to contact and communicate with spirits, a gift similar to the gift of ‘mediumnity’ (the possession of powers to qualify as a medium) which we will discuss later.¹⁰ Many animist and shamanist religions and cultures evolved into what we now classify as polytheistic and

¹⁰ I.M. Lewis, *Ecstatic religion: a study of shamanism and spirit possession* (London 1989). W.H.C. Tenhaeff, *Het spiritisme* (Den Haag 1936) 1 – 2.

monotheistic religions. There are examples of spiritist beliefs and practices in the Sanskrit Vedic Texts, ancient Egypt, among the Chaldeans, Assyrians, Brahmanism, Buddhism, and among the pre-Islamic Arabs. Also, the three great monotheistic traditions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – have all known traditions that practice(d) spiritism. The Torah, the New Testament, and the Quran all mention the contacting of the dead.¹¹ The emergence of European spiritism starts with the various pagan traditions present on the continent, as well as – more systematically – with ancient Greek philosophical and religious analyses. The oldest complete example of Greek literature, the Homeric epics, features Odysseus summoning the spirits of the deceased prophet Tiresias and of his mother. Plato first extensively elaborated upon the dualist separation between body and soul, laying the foundations for the body-soul dualism central to Christianity and the ways in which most cultures understand the structure of human beings. Spiritist beliefs and practices featured heavily within Greek culture and religion.¹² Needless to say, twentieth-century spiritists used this information to stress that the respected ancient Greek culture had largely been influenced and characterized by spiritism.

An important semi-historical document is the Bible. In the Old and New Testaments, many verses speak of spiritist practices. As contemporary spiritists and their opponents often draw upon the Bible to propagate and strengthen their arguments, three examples of spiritist beliefs in the Bible will be mentioned here. The ways in which they were used by spiritists and their opponents will be discussed at length in the fourth chapter and will therefore be omitted in this paragraph. The first and most used verses are Deuteronomy 18:10 – 11:

‘Let no-one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead.’¹³ (New International Version)

In this passage, contacting the dead is explicitly forbidden by Mosaic Law. This states that the consulting of mediums and spiritists (in the King James Version, the consulting of ‘familiar

¹¹ H.C.A. Muller, *Het onverklaarbare in het leven na den dood. Spiritisme en occultisme* (Amsterdam 1925) 7 – 86. T. van Winsen, *Het licht der toekomst. Korte schets van het spiritisme en zijne beoefening* (Rotterdam 1907) 15 – 28.

¹² Muller, *Het onverklaarbare* 62 – 78. P. Adjutus Drieghe, *Het Spiritisme in zijn Hoofddlijnen* (Antwerpen 1926) 8 – 10.

¹³ *The Holy Bible. New International Version* (London 1997) 139.

spirits'¹⁴) is prohibited. Figures sometimes associated with spiritism, such as wizards, witches, and necromancers are also criticized. These verses clearly state that the summoning of spirits, or having someone summon them for you, violates God's Law. Similar warnings are issued in Leviticus 19:31, 20:6 – 7, and 20:27. Understandably, these verses were very popular among Christians opposed to the practicing of spiritism throughout the ages. Spiritists had their own interpretation of this Bible verse, which we will come across in chapter three.

A second popular Biblical passage is the story of the summoning of the spirit of the deceased prophet Samuel by King Saul. Although consulting mediums had been prohibited, Saul approached one who summoned the spirit of Samuel. God allows the spirit of Samuel to speak to Saul. Samuel states that Saul no longer obeys the word of God, which includes the matter of him consulting mediums. Shortly after this séance, Saul is punished for his disobedience to God. His land gets taken by the Philistines and he is killed during the battle (1 Samuel 28:1 – 31:13).¹⁵ The fact that this divine punishment directly supersedes Saul's spiritist practices, has led critics to state that spiritism is a sin which is punished gravely by God. It is used often as an example for the dire consequences of committing spiritist acts. A third passage is found in the first epistle of John. Here, the author states:

'Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.'¹⁶ (1 John 4: 1 – 3, New International Version)

This passage is often cited by spiritists themselves, to show that there are benign and malign spirits, and that one has to test whether the spirits are of God, and that, if this is the case, it is allowed to communicate with these spirits.

During the Middle Ages, the theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274) is stated to have dismissed the possibility of contacting the dead. He noted that the human soul is not

¹⁴ *The Holy Bible. The Authorized King James Version of 1611 now reprinted with the Apocrypha. In three volumes with reproductions of 105 of the sixteenth-century woodcuts of Bernard Salomon* (First part; London 1963) 346.

¹⁵ *The Holy Bible. New International Version* (London 1997) 211 – 214.

¹⁶ *The Holy Bible. New International Version* 865.

capable of knowing what happens on Earth and cannot have influence on visible Creation. Therefore, it is incorrect to ascribe the sources of the spiritist phenomena to the spirits of the deceased, because it is impossible for the living to contact the dead and vice versa. This would make practicing spiritism a useless, if not sinful operation. These reflections would later be quoted by contemporary Catholic opponents of spiritists.¹⁷ Also, a lot of witches who were persecuted were accused of spiritist practices. Some spiritist authors, following the nineteenth-century perception of the Middle Ages, put forth that spiritism waned during the Middle Ages because life was primarily focused on God and the afterlife.¹⁸ However, spiritists do not discuss the Middle Ages in any way to construct their self-image.

This would be different for the (early) modern period. What is illustrative is that several intellectuals responded to spiritism from the early modern period onwards. The English philosopher Joseph Glanvill described the presence of knocking ghosts where he lived.¹⁹ In 1767 there was mentioning of a knocking ghost in the German town of Dibbesdorf who appeared to know all the right answers to the questions he was being asked. This led the German philosopher and poet Gotthold Lessing to state that it could be the spirit of deceased person, trying to contact the living.²⁰ Though not many philosophers felt the need to criticize or respond to spiritism, there were some intellectuals who are stated to have believed in the truth of the spiritist hypothesis, such as Goethe, Victor Hugo, Isaac Newton, Charlotte Brontë, Alexander Dumas, Immanuel Hermann Fichte, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Richet, and Alfred Russell Wallace, Louis Napoleon III, Queen Victoria, Abraham Lincoln, Camille Flammarion, Hendrik Jan Schimmel, Justus van Maurik jr., Abraham Rutgers van der Loeff, Petrus Hofstede de Groot, and Frederik van Eeden.²¹ An oft-used

¹⁷ J. Laenen, *Hedendaagsch Spiritisme* (Antwerpen 1912). W. de Veer sr., *Spiritisme* (Haarlem 1905).

¹⁸ F.C. Heijster, *Parapsychologie en het spiritisme* (Amsterdam 1939).

¹⁹ Laenen, *Hedendaagsch Spiritisme*. R.H. Robbins, *The encyclopedia of witchcraft and demonology* (New York 1981) 141.

²⁰ Tenhaeff, *Het spiritisme* 8 – 10. Heijster, *Parapsychologie*.

²¹ *Ibid.* S. Draaisma, *Wat is het spiritisme? Goed? Slecht?* (Bolsward 1923) 3. H.B. Kennedy van Dam, *Getuigenis voor het spiritualisme. Lijst van eminente getuigen* ('s-Gravenhage 1901). F.L. Ortt, *Het Spiritisme. Een studie* (3rd pressing; 's-Gravenhage 1906) 29 – 36. Eene Nederlandsche Vrouw, *Spiritualisme. Spiritisme. De filosofie des levens of de harmonie tussen het zichtbare en het onzichtbare* ('s-Gravenhage 1883) 14 – 15. A.N.J. Fabius, 'Levensbericht van Justus van Maurik jr.', in: *Jaarboek van de Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde* (Leiden 1905) 166 – 167, 175. H.J. Schimmel, *Opstellen over spiritisme* (Bussum 1908). A. Rutgers van der Loeff, *Verhouding van de wetenschap tot het zoogenaamde Spiritisme* (Enschede 1874). J.P. de Bie and J. Loosjes, *Biographisch woordenboek van protestantsche godgeleerden in Nederland. Deel 3* ('s-Gravenhage

technique by spiritists was to draw up immense lists of eminent persons who believed in spiritism in an attempt to convert others to their beliefs through this “argumentum ad verecundiam”. This way, spiritists tried to give more credibility to their beliefs and try to make these beliefs appear intellectual by pointing to intelligent and famous individuals adhering to spiritism. If such smart and capable figures believed in spiritism, who are regular people to state that it is false? However, this line of reasoning fails as every major and minor religious tradition counts famous and extraordinarily intellectual figures among their followers.

From the eighteenth century onwards, influential thinkers started to openly propagate (semi-)spiritist beliefs. Their ideas would result in what in the nineteenth century would become Modern or neo-spiritism. Spiritists became more visible and prominent in international intellectual debates. As the Dutch spiritists under consideration mostly adhere to this modern spiritism, the development of this belief system deserves attention. The two most important pre-1848 precursors to modern spiritism were Emanuel Swedenborg (1688 – 1772) and Franz Mesmer (1734 – 1815). The Swedish philosopher and mystic Swedenborg was a famous visionary and inspirational figure for the founding of the dissenting Christian Lord’s New Church, founded in 1787, also known as Swedenborgianism. In his works, Swedenborg describes several meetings he had with the spirits of deceased people when he traveled to the afterlife. He communicated with these spirits in an unhindered manner, unlike most spiritists who have to go through great troubles to establish communication and, after this, often get vague and incomplete messages, if any at all. Swedenborg has been described by his followers as possessing the same properties as the spirits, being a spirit himself in the spirit world. He was the first author to extensively describe the ways in which he had experienced the spirits he had encountered. He described them as varying in benevolence, with some spirits being sympathetic and helpful towards him, and other being deceitful and potentially harmful in nature. Swedenborg did not learn anything from the spirits he encountered, but instead taught them some things about their deceased and spiritual state. Although Swedenborg mentions that his journeys to the divine sphere did increase his knowledge, well-being, and purity of soul, his encounters with human spirits did not contribute to this in any way.²²

1919) 376. J.W. Traanberg, *Frederik van Eeden en het spiritisme* (Utrecht 1974). Sylvia Lucia, ‘Wat is spiritisme en wat is spiritualiteit?’, <http://www.123website.nl/sylvialucia/53068836> (31 oktober 2011).

²² G. Barger, *Redenen waarom Swedenborgianen geen spiritisten zijn* (’s-Gravenhage 1914) 71 - 85. J.S. Göbel and A.J.C. Snijders, *Spiritisme. Pro en Contra* (Baarn 1906).

Swedenborg's reports were very influential for the development of spiritism. Elise van Calcar, one of the most influential Dutch spiritists in history, called Swedenborg the father of modern spiritism.²³ Other spiritists also noted his influence and Swedenborg is mentioned in practically every historical work on the development of modern spiritism.²⁴ Many of the pamphlets pressed between 1890 and 1940 to promote spiritism in the Netherlands mention Swedenborg's reports and theories and describe him as an inspirational, exemplary, and visionary figure. A lot of properties and qualities ascribed to spirits are first found in the writings of Swedenborg. This includes the distinction between good and bad spirits. This was mentioned in earlier literature as well, but spiritists often seem to draw on Swedenborg's accounts regarding the benevolence of ghosts. Another influential notion is that of the confused, ignorant spirit, who does not know where he is residing. It will later be discussed how many spiritists state that spirits are often unaware of their spiritual state and residence and that mediums should inform the deceased on this matter, to help them accept their new immaterial state and guide them towards spiritual perfection. Finally, modern spiritists followed Swedenborg's early critique of modernity. Already during the eighteenth century, Swedenborg stated that both the Christian churches and professional science were becoming too dogmatic and locked within their own strict paradigms, not open to any alternatives. Swedenborg proposed his own theories as a unifying middle ground, uniting Christian religion and modern science in a harmonious whole that could answer both the religious 'why?' and the scientific 'how?'. Swedenborg was also often mentioned as a man with proven visionary gifts who had successfully predicted the Stockholm fire of 1759, which was reported to have mysteriously stopped expanding ten meters from his house.²⁵

When authors such as Van Calcar and Wisse presented Swedenborg as a precursor to spiritism, the "Swedenborg Genootschap voor Holland en België" ("Swedenborg Society for Holland and Belgium") responded with a polemic pamphlet explicitly dealing with this matter. The author and director of the society G. Barger stated that Swedenborg had not been a spiritist. Swedenborg had not contacted the spirits as a medium, using earthly techniques, but that he had visited the spirit world after having transformed into a ghost himself. Also, as opposed to later spiritists, he did not claim that he could learn anything from the ghosts he

²³ E. van Calcar-Schiötling, *Emanuel Swedenborg, de ziener* ('s-Gravenhage 1882).

²⁴ G. Wisse, *Het Spiritisme. Een critische bijdrage* (Kampen 1915). J. Athur Hill, *Spiritualism. Its History, Phenomena and Doctrine* (London 1918) 17 – 29. Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme*. Göbel and Snijders, *Het spiritisme*. A.L. Constandse, *Leven de dooden?* (Amsterdam 1933). IJsendijk, *Het land* 47.

²⁵ IJsendijk, *Het land* 47.

encountered. While there have been spiritists that take a critical stance and agree that a lot of spirits are ignorant or even deliberately misinforming, all attribute some value and possibility of obtaining knowledge to the contacting of the deceased. Swedenborg was a unique visionary who was granted the gift of contacting the spirits while keeping his full rationality. This also contradicts spiritist practices, where the medium often wholly or partially loses his or her rationality and is steered by other, metaphysical forces. We will come across this loss of rationality in chapter three, when we discuss the “passive spiritists”. For the reasons given above, Swedenborgians rather see their prophet as a unique visionary than as a precursor to spiritism.²⁶ Why modern spiritists attribute so much value to Swedenborg remains unclear. He does fit in the essentially *modern* version of spiritism by repeatedly trying to *prove* the truth of his contact with ghosts, such as with the 1759 Stockholm fire. This attempt to prove his contact makes him a modern rather than a traditional spiritist. Because of this, Elise van Calcar has a point in calling Swedenborg the father of modern spiritism. His methodology shows considerable similarities with that of the “scientific” modern spiritists.

A second major early influence on modern spiritism was the German physician Franz Mesmer. Famous for coining the term “to mesmerize”, Mesmer largely influenced later spiritists with his theory of animal magnetism and other spiritual forces. “Magnetizing” people is often the second major activity of spiritists and spiritist organizations after organizing séances. Mesmer (and many others after him) believed that the human body was connected through a thin, silver cord (called the “fluidium cord”) to the soul, which he called the “ethereal body”. Mesmer stated that humans receive cosmic energy through this cord, which they can emit and transmit to other people. An obstruction in the fluidium cord could cause illnesses, which “magnetizers” – people who had developed the skill to transmit the energy from their ethereal body unto others – could cure or diminish by using the surplus of their cosmic energy. Mesmer’s theories resulted in the magnetizing healing sessions that have become widespread over Europe and elsewhere. Some followers compared these practices to Biblical events, such as healing services and the laying on of hands. Mesmer’s notion of the existence of spiritual forces, of which magnetism was only the most predominant example, and the attempts of proving their existence was a major influence on spiritist beliefs and

²⁶ Barger, *Redenen waarom Swedenborgianen*.

practices. This would not only inject spiritism with the practice of magnetism, but indirectly also with acts such as hypnotism, telepathy, and other ways of healing.²⁷

§ IV – Conclusion

In this chapter, I have first described the topics of this research and the methodology that I will use. Subsequently, I have discussed the spiritists' perception of the parts of their own history that were relevant to the construction of their self-image. We have now taken knowledge of the period preceding 1848 and the ways in which spiritists perceived of and referred to this. Three things strike the reader's attention when looking at the spiritist perception of their own history. The first is that spiritism is shown as something which has always been present, from prehistoric tribal communities all the way up to modern societies. Spiritism, the idea that humans continue to live on as spirits after they have died and the possibility of contacting these spirits, is as old as man and religion itself. It was therefore seen as a *continuous* phenomenon, persisting for millennia. It had been present in countless animist and shamanist religions and cults and has also taken a place, either central or peripheral, in practically every religious tradition in the world, including the three great monotheistic ones. There was a belief in spirits, which feature in the Torah, New Testament, and the Quran, and spirit observations were noted in all ages. Second, spiritism was not bound to a specific geographical region. Spiritists could be found in every major region on Earth and spiritism was a common tradition shared among the whole of humanity. Third, spiritists tended to have a progressive image of historical development. They go through great lengths to draw (early) modern thinkers into their camps and tend to discuss later thinkers, such as Newton, Goethe, Dumas, Swedenborg, and Mesmer, more extensively and with more appreciation than ancient or medieval figures. This chapter has been the first step in looking at how spiritists constructed their self-image, in this case by using historical examples. In the next chapter, we will look at the emergence and subsequent development of modern spiritism, the strand which forms the topic of this research, its appearance and development in the Netherlands, and how this all further contributed to the spiritists' self-image.

²⁷ J.H. Sommer, *Spiritisme* (Kampen 2001). C.G. Spoon, *Wat is toch dat Spiritisme? Een vraaggesprek tussen een overtuigde en een belangstellende* (Heelsum 1938). Heijster, *Parapsychologie*. Arthur Hill, *Spiritualism* 30 – 39.

Chapter One: The emergence of modern spiritism and its introduction in the Netherlands (1848 – 1890)

Now that we have discussed the historical self-image of spiritists before 1848, we will now turn to the subsequent period, during which “modern spiritism”, which has since been dominant, emerged. This modern spiritism, from a spiritist perspective, primarily focused on *scientifically proving* the possibility and the taking place of contact with spirits of the deceased. This is what marks modern spiritism as a distinct category and what, according to spiritists, distinguishes it from the more traditional, pre-scientific forms of spiritism, which, as we have seen, are often part of and overlapping with a conventional religion. The scientific component which was essential to modern spiritism also had a decisive influence on the self-image of the spiritists, who saw themselves as essentially operating in a scientific manner. We will further define modern spiritism in the next chapter when we look at what beliefs, dogmas, and practices it embodied. This chapter will further describe the historical development of spiritism between 1848 and 1890. Although there are more secondary and academic sources available for this period, the bulk of material still consists of primary sources drawn up by spiritists themselves. For these reasons, the research question for this chapter is:

How did late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch spiritists view the introduction of modern spiritism to the Netherlands and its subsequent development between 1848 and 1890 and how did this influence their self-image?

This twofold question will be answered in two separate paragraphs. Section I continues the historical narrative that started in the previous chapter. It discusses how spiritists saw and interpreted the emergence and breakthrough of modern spiritism after 1848 and how this influenced their self-image. Section II discusses the introduction of modern spiritism in the Netherlands and the same influence on the spiritists’ self-image. In the concluding third section, an answer will be given to the research question. This final section will summarize the information given in the introduction and the first chapter, which allows us to proceed to the subsequent period, where the beliefs and practices of Dutch spiritists and their interaction with Dutch society will be discussed.

§ I – The spiritists’ perception of the emergence and exportation of modern spiritism (1848 – 1890)

The most direct influences, which triggered the founding and rapid expansion of modern spiritism, were the “Hydesville Knockings”, observed by the Fox Sisters. This event, which occurred in the state of New York in the United States in March 1848, is the starting point of almost every history of modern spiritism. In fact, it is often marked by spiritists as the point where the traditional spiritism discussed above developed into what is now called modern spiritism. The narrative drawn up in spiritist sources goes like this. Two sisters, Margaret and Katie, fifteen and twelve years old respectively, lived in a house in a small village. At night, they would hear strange knockings of which it was impossible to trace where they came from. In time, the girls discovered that there was a pattern in the knockings and that it was possible to communicate with the spirit responsible for them. They would design numbers of knockings for ‘yes’, ‘no’, and eventually even the letters of the alphabet. This way, they discovered that the ghost was named Charles B. Rosma and that he had been a peddler who was murdered in the Fox residence several years before. A lot of other people who were invited to the house heard the knockings as well. After having received directions from the spirit of Rosma, the Fox family found the corpse of a murdered man buried beneath their house. After moving to a different location, the sisters kept being followed by the knocking ghost. The knockings continued wherever they went. When they told of their experiences to several people, a meeting was organized in the Corinthian Hall in Kansas City where independent outsiders were allowed to check whether there was no trickery involved in the knockings heard by the Fox Sisters. This meeting was supposed to be a professional, scientific investigation in order to find evidence for or against the existence of spirits dwelling on Earth. The initiators set up a falsifiable, scientific experiment, on the basis of which the correctness of the Hydesville Knockings could be proven. After several experiments and additional investigations, the people present agreed that there was no trickery involved and that there was no other conclusion possible than that spirits of deceased people did exist and that the contact with them had been genuine.²⁸

What makes this series of events so important for the further development and breaking through of modern spiritism and how did it contribute to the spiritists’ self-image?

²⁸ M. Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme* (Baarn 1909) 9 – 11. Göbel and Snijders, *Spiritisme*. Arthur Hill, *Spiritualism* 40 – 43. Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme*. De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*.

First, the events were widely reported and brought spiritist beliefs and phenomena under broad public attention. This first occurred all across the United States and subsequently spread via Great Britain to all of Europe. Second, because of the repeated experiments, executed by independent professionals, it appeared as if the existence of spirits and the afterlife, and the possibility to contact the deceased, had been scientifically proven. This supposed provability triggered the enthusiasm of spiritists for their beliefs, because they now saw themselves as the ones who had the answers to some of life's universal questions within their possession. As will be discussed later, this scientific component would become essential and characteristic to this newly found modern spiritism. The attempts to prove the truth of the spiritist beliefs and practices scientifically is what determined the new common direction in international spiritism and were what distinguished modern spiritism from the old, traditional variety of beliefs and acts grouped under the common denominator of "spiritism". Because they now saw their hypothesis as proven, the scientific component became part of the spiritist self-image which defined spiritists as those who *knew* the truth about the afterlife and how to communicate with it. Third, the Hydesville Knockings would trigger a massive American – and later transnational – epidemic of arising new mediums and perceived supernatural phenomena. From the later 1840's onwards, spiritism would become a culturally widespread and well-known trend, with, according to spiritists, already over thirty thousand people classifying themselves as medium only three years after the Hydesville Knockings.²⁹ Spiritists obviously saw this as the success of their powerful and proven hypothesis. Because this supposedly scientific spiritism was finding so many followers, it is only logical that a majority of international *and* Dutch spiritists adopted this scientific attitude. The Catholic canon and archivist Jozef Laenen (1871 – 1940) attributes the popularity of spiritism to the fact that it met the need for the spiritual and the metaphysical that many people felt at that time.³⁰ Where spiritism had earlier been a more peripheral, esoteric phenomenon, from 1848 onwards almost everyone would encounter it directly or indirectly, among their friends and family or in the media.

The spiritists, scattered and divided as they were, would become a movement with a common core of doctrines, values and truths. The self-proclaimed scientific character would become a common quality for the spiritists. It is therefore characteristic that the greatest and most influential spiritist theoretician of the nineteenth century, Allan Kardec (1804 – 1869;

²⁹ Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme*. Arthur Hill, *Spiritualism* 40 – 43.

³⁰ Laenen, *Hedendaagsch Spiritisme*.

pseudonym for Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail), would weave a scientific and unifying message throughout his entire oeuvre. His works were focused on discovering and describing *the* one and objective spiritist truth. He is rightfully known as the systematizer of spiritism and wrote the *Five Fundamental Works of Spiritism*, also known as the *Spiritist Pentateuch* or *Spiritist Codification*, which, for some spiritists, functioned as a Spiritist Gospel. Kardec is also the one who coined the term spiritism in 1857. “Spiritism” was the term predominantly used in continental Europe, whereas the term “Spiritualism” was more popular in the United Kingdom and United States.³¹ Kardec’s *Five Fundamental Works of Spiritism* contain for the first time a systematic spiritist philosophy on the nature and qualities of spirits, the afterlife, ways and techniques of communicating with the deceased, Christian doctrine, karma, morality, and reincarnation. He stated to have received this information by having communicated with countless spirits. He even relates the teachings of Jesus to his own philosophy, which meant that a true Kardecist would be a pious Christian.³² However, after Kardec’s death there were other writers who wished to disassociate themselves from Kardec’s theories. Most objections focused on the big importance of reincarnation in his teaching, in which most spiritists did not believe, and in the strong doctrinal and, according to some, even dogmatic character of his philosophy.³³ Kardec’s importance lies in the fact that he systematized and popularized spiritism and gave a spiritist interpretation of and view on many theological and philosophical concepts. This made spiritism a more “total” religious and philosophical system, dealing with every aspect of society, religion, and philosophy. Because of Kardec, spiritism matured and could play an equal role in intellectual debates. Most Dutch spiritists, even those who were not Kardecian spiritists, read and drew inspiration from the extensive oeuvre of Kardec and his detailed theories on the afterlife, spirits, communication with the dead, and his spiritist interpretations of Christian theology. This way, Kardec contributed to the spiritist self-image by supplying a large pool of theories and ideas from which spiritists drew.

As stated above, spiritism went through two developments from 1848 onwards. The first was one in expansion of followers. Where spiritism before had largely been a scattered and variable phenomenon, it now received mass appeal and got enough adherents to call itself a serious alternative religious/spiritual/philosophical strand. Second, because of the increasing number of followers, spiritism became clearly visible as a social phenomenon. As was

³¹ Göbel and Snijders, *Spiritisme*.

³² Tenhaeff, *Spiritisme* 16 – 19.

³³ Max, *Openbaringen uit het geestenrijk* (Amsterdam 1919) 10 – 11.

described in the introduction, although spiritism was not a centralized and doctrinal belief system, a common core of beliefs and values was shared by all spiritists. This core became clear during the second half of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of modern spiritism with the “Hydesville Knockings”, the writings of Kardec, and the massive spread of spiritism across the globe. These events and subsequent developments resulted in the fact that a self-proclaimed scientific and objective character became essential to the spiritist self-image. We can see this in the writings of countless adherents, but also in the several organizations that were founded during the second half of the nineteenth century. Aside from communities trying to establish contact with their beloved deceased ones, there were also organizations that claimed to be primarily focused on investigating the truth and techniques of spiritism in a scientific manner. The committee that investigated the case of the Fox Sisters can be called the first precursor to this type of organizations. In 1851, the first scientific society that executed research in spiritism was founded in New York City. One year later, the United Kingdom followed. From the 1860’s onwards, spiritist periodicals started to appear throughout the United States and most European countries.³⁴ The British have had the most impressive reputation of investigating spiritism scientifically. The reports of the research done by the London Dialectical Society, the Society for Psychical Research, and Professor William Crookes (1832 – 1919) were often cited by spiritists and propagated as evidence for the truth of their beliefs. Their research was most often used to stress the scientific truth of spiritism. During the 1850’s, Modern Spiritism was first introduced in the Netherlands. The introduction and development of spiritism in the Netherlands will now be discussed in the second section of this chapter.

§ II – The genealogy and history of spiritism in the Netherlands before 1890

From 1848 onwards, spiritism spread like wildfire, first over the North American and next over the European continent. The year 1858 marks the first introduction of Modern Spiritism to the Netherlands. During this year, the famous Scottish medium Daniel Dunglas Home (1833 – 1886) visited the Netherlands after having been invited by the Dutch-born British spiritist J.N. Tiedeman Martheze, who wished to introduce his fellow Dutchmen to

³⁴ Beversluis, *Spiritualisme* 11 – 12.

spiritism.³⁵ Before this visit, there had already been some interest in spiritism, but this had been a small phenomenon compared to the second half of the nineteenth century. The famous seventeenth-century corrupt court clerk Cornelis Musch (1593 – 1650) was a known spiritist and medium.³⁶ Later writers claimed that the eclectic thinker Willem Bilderdijk (1756 – 1831) had been a spiritist. This can largely be attributed to his appeals to intuition, inspiration, and divination, his praise of Swedenborg and Jung Stilling (of which he was also very critical), and his use of terminology and discourse which would later be used by spiritists. Bilderdijk was an incredibly diverse and eclectic thinker, whose interests at a certain point also focused on occultism, spiritism, and magnetism. He wrote about ethereal fluid and a higher “spiritual world” which emits her light on and through the material realm in his didactic poem *De geestenwareld* [‘The spirit world’]. This, however, does not make him a follower and he can hardly be called an early propagator of spiritism.³⁷ However, Bilderdijk did translate the German book *Über Geisternähe und Wirkung* (1795 – 1797) by Gustav Dedekind to Dutch in 1820. In the introduction, Bilderdijk spoke highly of the contents of Dedekind’s book and stated that there have been phenomena which can be explained in no other way than by spiritism. Bilderdijk states that, after death, we live on as spirits, that there are good and bad spirits, and that these spirits can influence our Earthly lives.³⁸

J.S. Göbel (1847 – 1916), one of the founders of *Spiritist Brotherhood Harmonia*, founder of one of the largest spiritist periodicals *Toekomstig Leven* [‘Future Life’], and one of the most prolific Dutch spiritist writers, dedicated an article entirely to Bilderdijk’s spiritism. According to him, Bilderdijk would have been a powerful medium and this would explain a lot about his life.³⁹ This article was clearly written with the aforementioned aim to portray respected and famous people, in this case Bilderdijk, as spiritists. Having an intellectual like Bilderdijk posthumously admit that he was a spiritist was, according to spiritists, good for their reputation. Trying to positively influence their own reputation and self-image was a major activity among spiritists. Aside from Bilderdijk, there had been some interest for animal

³⁵ E.H. Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles; or, Spirits and their work in every country of the earth: a complete historical compendium of the great movement known as "modern spiritualism"* (Manchester 1883) 326 – 327.

³⁶ P.C. Molhuysen and P.J. Blok, *Nieuw Nederlandsch biografisch woordenboek. Deel 1* A.W. (Leiden 1911) 1351 – 1353.

³⁷ Jansen, *Op zoek* 44 – 48. J. van Eijnatten, *Hogere sferen. De ideeënwereld van Willem Bilderdijk (1756 – 1831)* (Hilversum 1998) 385 – 392.

³⁸ G.E.W. Dedekind, *Proeve over de werking en invloed der geesten* (Haarlem 1820) V - X

³⁹ J.S. Göbel, ‘Bilderdijk’, in: *Het toekomstig leven: halfmaandelijksch tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* 10 (1906), no. 17 (1 september) 265 – 280.

magnetism, mesmerism and forms of spiritism among Dutch early Romantic thinkers, religious sects (such as the “Zwijndrechtse Nieuwlichters”, who used spiritism for missionary ends), and alternative medical doctors and healers. Also, some German books dealing with spiritism, the most famous one being *Die Seherin von Prevost* (1829) by Justinus Kerner, were read in the Netherlands.⁴⁰ However, the true introduction of Modern Spiritism, which led to an expansion thereof throughout every part of the Netherlands, started after Home’s presentations and séances in 1858. Dutch historical events and people used to construct the twentieth-century spiritist self-image almost exclusively antedated this year.

As stated earlier, the young medium Home, who was already quite famous in 1858, was invited to the Netherlands by his fellow spiritist J.N. Tiedeman Martheze, who wished to introduce spiritism to the Dutch. It has been stated that Tiedeman invited Home on behalf of the editorial staff of the periodical *De Dageraad. Tijdschrift toegewijd aan de verspreiding van waarheid en verlichting in den geest van de natuurlijke godsdienst en zedeleer* (*The Dawn. Magazine dedicated to spreading truth and enlightenment in the spirit of the natural religion and ethics*).⁴¹ The British advocate of modern spiritism Emma Britten, using multiple sources among which Home’s own writings, wrote the following story on Home’s visit. When Home arrived, he was immediately invited to the palace of Queen Sophie (1818 – 1877). She had heard great stories about his gifts and asked him to organize a séance in Noordeinde Palace. Home himself wrote that he had first tried to contact the spirit world for ten hours straight, seven days in a row, without any results. Although this irritated Home, Queen Sophie did not lose faith in him. After seven days, she took Home to the bedroom of her son Maurits, who had passed away in 1850.⁴² This death had made a big impression on her and her mourning period had been long and intense.⁴³ She stated that everything in this room had remained intact and unchanged since Maurits’ death. However, there is a bill from 1850 that mentions an order for new white wallpaper in the room. Also, after the birth of prince Alexander in 1851, it is stated that he lived in Maurits’ old room until 1869.⁴⁴ Be that as it may, Home wrote that, in this room, he succeeded in contacting the spirit of the deceased

⁴⁰ Jansen, *Op zoek*, 49 – 70, 227.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 70. G.A.M. Zorab, *D. D. Home, het krachtigste medium aller tijden: een biografie en een verdediging van de authenticiteit van de bij hem waargenomen verschijnselen* (Den Haag 1980) 137.

⁴² Britten, *Nineteenth century miracles* 327.

⁴³ R.W.A.M. Cleverens, *De Koningsvleugel: geschiedenis van de particuliere appartementen in het Paleis Noordeinde: een reconstructie* (Hilversum 2001) 57.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

child. He even managed to materialize the hand of the boy. This made an enormous impression on Queen Sophie. Home's services for Queen Sophie, obviously a well-known and influential person, contributed to Home's reputation in the Netherlands and made him – and spiritist beliefs and practices – known and respected throughout the country.⁴⁵

Home supposedly gave a few more séances and presentations before he left the Netherlands again. Spiritists reported positively of his visit: Home was content with the work he had done and the impressions he had made. It is certain that his visit positively influenced Dutch knowledge and appreciation of spiritism. It appealed to middle- and upper-class citizens, who, like the spiritists, were tired of Christian orthodoxy as well as of modern materialism. This was written in an attempt to attribute the spiritists' criticism of modernism and Christianity to a wider crowd. Almost immediately after Home left, similar to what had happened in America after the Hydesville Knockings, a lot of Dutch mediums started to appear. Initially, these were individuals or small, local groups.⁴⁶ But already in 1859, the first spiritist organization, "Oromase" (also known as "Oromase-I"), was founded in The Hague by Major J. Revius (1795 – 1871). The goals of this first Dutch modern spiritist organization were indeed to organize professional experiments to prove spiritism in a scientific manner and to have it acknowledged as a science. It also had a Christian dimension and operated in order to enlarge the available knowledge of Creation. The organization was already discontinued in 1860, probably due to meager successes and disappointing enthusiasm for scientific spiritism, only to be reunited in 1869.⁴⁷ After this short experiment, more spiritist communities started to appear. Among these was "Veritas", founded in Amsterdam in 1869, which focused on the reincarnation-oriented spiritist teachings of Allan Kardec.⁴⁸ In 1872, two organizations experimenting with and doing research on spiritism were founded, "Op zoek naar waarheid" ("In search of truth") in Rotterdam, "Anaximenes in Maastricht."⁴⁹ There were many more small, local communities who practiced and investigated spiritism. The largest of all organizations, which still exists today, was the "Spiritische Broederbond Harmonia" ("Spiritist Brotherhood Harmonia"), founded in 1888.⁵⁰ We have already come across it earlier

⁴⁵ Britten, *Nineteenth century miracles* 327. J. van Eijnatten and F. van Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis* (2nd pressing; Hilversum 2006) 275.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 326 – 336. Sommer, *Spiritisme*.

⁴⁷ Jansen, *Op zoek* 90 – 97.

⁴⁸ Britten, *Nineteenth century miracles* 329. Beversluis, *Spiritualisme* 15. Sommer, *Spiritisme*.

⁴⁹ Sommer, *Spiritisme*.

⁵⁰ Eijnatten and Lieburg, *Nederlandse Religiegeschiedenis* 275.

and we have seen that the majority of the most respected and prolific spiritist authors were influential members of this brotherhood. This organization, with departments and propaganda committees throughout the entire country, would become the biggest spiritist society in Dutch history and exerted a large influence on the subsequent history of spiritism and the spiritists' self-image.

Between 1858 and 1890, there were more people and events that further popularized spiritism. Occasionally, public séances or presentations were held. When major J. Revius, a respected man who had been a military officer for 57 years, but who was also founder of "Oromase", passed away in 1871, speeches held at his funeral mentioned his spiritism in a respectful way. It was claimed that he had tried to prove spiritism by using inductive scientific methods. People seemed to admire this way of working, which was practiced by several spiritists and spiritist organizations throughout the Netherlands. Indeed, the scientific character which from 1848 onwards had become so typical for American and European Modern Spiritism, also became characteristic for Dutch spiritists. From the 1860's onwards, internationally famous spiritist books and pamphlets by Alfred Russell Wallace, William Crookes, and Cromwell Fleetwood Varley, and others were translated into Dutch. The Dutch-language spiritist library slowly but steadily started to grow during the second half of the nineteenth century. Dutch media also started to pay attention to the new spiritist trend, documenting séances and other phenomena. Also, there were polemic debates where anti-spiritist journalists would unmask mediums and accuse them of fraud, after which pro-spiritist journalists would defend the spiritist cause and/or the medium under consideration.⁵¹ Altogether, spiritism became a visible and pervasive social force in Dutch society during the second half of the nineteenth century.

A final noteworthy and impressive strand within Dutch spiritism was the "Groninger Richting" ("Groninger Direction"). This was a group of pastors and theologians from the northern province of Groningen, who wished to respond to the rise of modernism and the growing uncertainty and skepticism it brought during the nineteenth century. In the course of three decades (1860 – 1890), they tried to show that the spiritist hypothesis could scientifically be proven, along with the existence of the afterlife and the immortality of the human soul. They thus adhered to the scientific character of modern spiritism. Their typically modernist, scientific defense of Christianity was supposed to establish an ideal middle ground, where the opposed modernist and religious dogmatic parties were harmoniously

⁵¹ Britten, *Nineteenth century miracles* 330 – 331.

unified.⁵² The Dutch historian Ernst Kossmann (1922 – 2003) saw the Dutch 1860's as a political and social turning point, where resistance against doctrinaire liberalism and social polarization grew. The attention for spiritism, in which spiritists tried to unite supposedly conflicting belief systems and oppose dogmatism, is symptomatic for the resistance during these years.⁵³

The spiritism of the Groninger theologians was, however, not a surrogate religion, although some followers came close to this. It was rather an empirical foundation and proof of the teachings propagated in the Bible. The propagators originated predominantly from 'de beschaafde stand' ('the civilized class') and were influenced by the Dutch father of empiricism C.W. Opzoomer (1821 – 1892) and German Evangelical Protestant authors J.K. Lavater (1741 – 1801), J.H. Jung-Stilling (1740 – 1817), and J.F. Oberlin (1740 – 1826). These were Christian writers that combined their interest in the spirit world and what was called 'the nocturnal side of nature' with a deep and profound Christian religiosity. The influence of these authors should, however, not be overstated. The "Groninger richting" was most of all a *Dutch* product, which was shaped and steered by the theologians themselves in their attempt to respond to the threat of modernism. Because of their heated debates with modern theologians, the "Groninger Richting" received considerable attention during the thirty years of their existence. The founding of "Harmonia" would coincide with the decline and end of the "Groninger Richting". The spiritist Martinus Beversluis (1856 – 1948) would continue to integrate the arguments of the "Groninger Richting" in the debate, but this was of fairly marginal importance. Beversluis was a Reformed Protestant minister, who wrote some early works on Protestant theology, but who was fired from his ministry when he started to propagate spiritism in his church. After being fired, Beversluis started his own spiritist periodical *Geest en Leven* ['Spirit and Life'] and worked alongside Elise van Calcar and E.M. van IJsendijk, and was a major influence on the latter author. Beversluis' death in 1948 would mean the definite end of the thoughts and teachings "Groninger Richting", which he had still used in discussions.⁵⁴

⁵² Jansen, *Op zoek* passim.

⁵³ E.H. Kossmann, *De Lage Landen, 1780 – 1940. Anderhalve eeuw Nederland en België* (Amsterdam 1976) 145.

⁵⁴ Jansen, *Op zoek* passim.

§ III – Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, the following research question was posed:

How did late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Dutch spiritists view the introduction of modern spiritism to the Netherlands and its subsequent development between 1848 and 1890 and how did this influence their self-image?

In this chapter, a general outline was given of the spiritists' perception of the history of spiritism from 1848 to 1890. In the introductory chapter, we saw the countless forms of spiritism and semi-spiritism, often part of and overlapping with other religious systems. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the works of Swedenborg, Mesmer (both discussed in the last chapter), and Kardec, spiritism gradually changed in nature. The teachings became more serious, discussed a wider range of issues, and aspired to be scientific. The "Hydesville Knockings" of 1848 would mark the definite breakthrough and popularization of "modern spiritism" definite. Between 1848 and 1890 spiritists tried to prove the existence of ghosts by using self-proclaimed professional scientific methods. Spiritism was not merely a religious belief. It tried to be a science as well. During the second half of the nineteenth century the basis that would further determine the spiritist self-image emerged. It was during these years that the spiritists incorporated this self-perception as a "scientifically proven religion" into their self-image. Spiritists were motivated in their attempts to prove the spiritist hypothesis by the disapproval both religious orthodoxy, which it deemed to be outdated, and modernism, which lacked Christian and ethical content. Spiritists, in a typically nineteenth-century endeavor, attempted to harmonize these two signs of the times in their own school of thought.

In 1858 spiritism was first introduced in the Netherlands through the visit of the famous Scottish medium Home. After his visit, Dutch mediums and spiritist organizations arose and spiritism became of considerable importance in Dutch society. Spiritists perceived this visit and the subsequent spreading of spiritism in an *evangelical* manner, claiming that the final *truth* about religion and science had finally been brought to the Netherlands. Where spiritism had previously been largely unknown, now everyone would directly or indirectly become familiar with spiritism. Even when they were not spiritists themselves, most people would know of the existence and basic characteristics of spiritism. Spiritists saw this growing number of spiritists as a sign of the success of spiritist activities and of the truth of the spiritist

hypothesis. This success sparked the spiritists' confidence and feeling of superiority, which is discussed in the next chapter. There were different strands of spiritism in the Netherlands. Spiritism in the nineteenth century was largely an elite activity, mainly practiced by religious thinkers, either theologians or pastors. The expert on Dutch nineteenth century spiritism, Derk Jansen, marks the 1890's as a turning point with regard to Dutch spiritism. According to him, the rise of pillarization that started during this decade resulted in the decline and fall of modern spiritism. The newly erected pillars contained religious, ideological, social, and economic factors that provided new certainty and security. Therefore, people no longer had to turn to spiritism to find security and certainty. The pillarization of the political and social sphere would result in the marginalization of spiritism, especially under upper and educated classes.⁵⁵

The 1890's were definitely a turning point in Dutch religious and social history. After having done extensive research on Dutch spiritists between 1890 and 1940, I disagree with Jansen's remarks. It is possible to argue that the role and importance of spiritism declined after 1890. However, because of the relative lack of source material which could indicate such a decline, it would be difficult to support this idea with reliable information. Nevertheless, it can barely be stated that spiritism was of no or little importance after 1890. Within the Protestant and the Catholic churches, but also and mainly in groups outside the pillars, spiritists retained considerable social influence. We will now turn to the role and importance of spiritism in the Netherlands during the five pillarized decades of 1890 to 1940 and how spiritists interacted with other religious and non-religious Dutch groups.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 227 – 231.

Chapter Two: The “doctrine” of Dutch spiritism between 1890 and 1940

‘Maar ons geloof, ons blij geloof,
Dat wij het nooit vergeten,
Is hecht en sterk, onwankelbaar,
Omdat het steunt op *weten*.⁵⁶

[‘But our belief, our gay belief,
That we will ne’er forget it,
Is solid, strong, unshakable,
Because it rests on *knowing*.’]

According to Jansen, the 1890’s brought several changes to spiritist milieus. In the previous chapter, it was shown that spiritism had a strong, self-proclaimed scientific character, which tried to prove the existence of human spirits in an objective way and which tried to establish a harmonizing middle ground between the outdated dogmas of the churches and modernist materialism. The preceding chapters were a short synopsis of the research on Dutch nineteenth century spiritists done by Jansen and others. The present chapter will give a detailed overview of the most important and representative beliefs and values (i.e. the “doctrine”) that Dutch spiritists held between 1890 and 1940. Because of the fragmented and bottom-up structure of spiritism and its lack of a central organizational structure and of official spiritist dogmas and doctrines, we cannot truly speak of a doctrine. This is why the word had been placed between brackets. The “doctrine” described here refers to the common core that all spiritists adhered to. Again, these points should be kept in mind when interpreting the terms “doctrine” and “spiritism” as I use them throughout this thesis. I will discuss some diverging spiritist views, such as on Hell or the nature of spirits, as well, because they were representative for a significant spiritist minority. In this way, I can capture a broad range of Dutch spiritists, though the primary focus remains on the shared core beliefs. By focusing on this core, we can still define what spiritism and spiritist beliefs entailed in spite of their diffuse

⁵⁶ *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 August 1911).

structure, which makes it problematic to truly speak of a spiritist doctrine. Overcoming the research difficulties by treating Dutch spiritism in the above manner, the research question of this chapter is:

Which core truths and ethical values were propagated by spiritists in the Netherlands between 1890 and 1940?

By answering this research question, we will be able to define the core beliefs and values to which all spiritists subscribed. As has been outlined in the introduction, obtaining this information makes it possible to research the spiritist practices and the spiritists' interaction with Dutch society in the subsequent two chapters. This chapter and the next two will, more so than the introduction and the first chapter, be analytical in nature. This chapter will discuss what the beliefs and ethical values that formed this common core *were* and, subsequently, what they *meant* to spiritists and how they helped to construct their self-image. It is divided into three sections, one analyzing this spiritist core (§ I), one analyzing the spiritists' religious and ethical ideas (§ II), and a concluding one answering the research question (§ III). We will look at whether spiritism was an ethical, religious, or scientific "system" – or rather an amalgamation of all three. In short, this chapter will describe *and* analyze the "doctrine" of Dutch spiritism between 1890 and 1940.

§ I – Doctrine: the core truths and values of Dutch spiritism (1890 – 1940)

The analysis in this section contains spiritist views on afterlife, ontological reality, human spirits, and more. The astral sphere, astral body, perispirit, fluid cord, "od power", and other spiritist terms will be defined and discussed. In spite of the aforementioned fragmented character of spiritism, this section will analyze the spiritist "doctrine" and connect it to the spiritists' self-image.

The invisible beyond: spiritist views on the afterlife

The first of the spiritist views mentioned above that will be discussed in this chapter are the views on the afterlife. These views are – as practically all spiritist views are – fragmentary and various. In comparison with other contemporary religious traditions, spiritists tended to be particularly vague, diffuse and often even non-informative about their views on human

afterlife. Nevertheless, a lot of spiritists outlined their views on the afterlife, especially the more serious and prolific theoreticians. There were of course Christian spiritists, who maintained their views of Christian heaven with the addition of souls having the possibility to contact the living and vice versa. However, there were also particular spiritist views of heaven, hell and afterlife in general.

All spiritists between 1890 and 1940 agreed that human beings live on in a spiritual form after their body has died. Becoming a spirit resembles a Pythagorean reincarnation in a different form, during which the spirit retains some of the typical characteristics it had during life. The nature and benevolence of spirits will be discussed in a later paragraph. The term ‘Zomerland’ [‘Summer land’] is the most oft-used term to describe the spiritist version of heaven. The prolific spiritist writer and theoretician H.N. de Fremery (1867 – 1940) was a prominent member of *Harmonia*, a final editor of *Toekomstig Leven* along with Göbel, and was called the leader of spiritism in the Netherlands by one author. His books sold exceptionally well for spiritist publications and they were often considered standard works on spiritism.⁵⁷ He described ‘Zomerland’ in an idyllic manner. It was characterized as a divine domain where human beings had become perfect, i.e. completely one with God. All souls rest in uninterrupted harmony and all their knowing has become omniscient, and their love has become infinite.⁵⁸ What remains unclear is how these perfected spirits can contact human beings, as spirits occurring during séances are not perfect or omniscient at all. Elsewhere in his work, De Fremery states that spirits go through a progressive development during afterlife, where they are purified from their imperfections until they reach the highest state: spiritual perfection and unity with God.⁵⁹ Consequently, the spirits contacting us on Earth must be spirits still in the stage in development, who have not yet achieved this final stage. De Fremery remains surprisingly vague about the afterlife for someone with such an impressive spiritist oeuvre. In his defense, De Fremery does admit that our knowledge of the spiritual

⁵⁷ I. Zeehandelaar, *Het spiritisme en zijn gevaren* (Baarn 1908) 3. L. Modderman, ‘‘Spiritische’ publiciteit en propaganda rond 1900 in Nederland’, <http://www.blikoponeindig.com/PDF%20pagina's/Publiciteit%20en%20Propaganda/Publiciteit%20en%20Propaganda%20rond%201900.pdf> (27 June 2012) 1. Author unknown, ‘Overzicht der tijdschriften’, in: *Dietsche Warande en Belfort* (Antwerpen 1904) 94.

⁵⁸ H.N. de Fremery, *Een spiritistische levensbeschouwing* (Bussum 1907) 339 – 343.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 195 – 196.

domain is largely fragmentary in nature, though this, according to him, also applies to our knowledge of the earthly world and life.⁶⁰

‘Zomerland’ is described more extensively by T. van Winsen and other spiritist authors. Van Winsen describes the afterlife, or the “astral sphere”, as a materially refined, multi-layered domain. As the spirit improves his moral qualities, he progresses along five layers. When he finishes this journey, he will be allowed into the Devachan, a theosophical term coined by H.P. Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical Society, which can be compared to the Christian heaven. After staying here for a while as a reward, the spirit reincarnates and returns to the Earth in a new life.⁶¹ We shall later see how this developmental process features in the work of many other spiritists.

Other authors have also commented on the afterlife, though most admit not knowing a lot about it. Martinus Beversluis, an exceptionally prolific spiritist schooled as a minister, distinguished between three “Heavenly Spheres”, which were together called ‘Zomerland’, a place free of pain and sin.⁶² The jurist H.G. Nederburgh, a member of the propaganda committee and at one time president of *Harmonia*, stated that there are multiple heavens and that every soul develops until it goes to the heaven that fits him or her best.⁶³ The spiritist H.H. Kuyper writes of the possibility of spiritual beings living on other stars and planets, continuing a life in astral form which they originally started on Earth.⁶⁴ Apparently, spirits can also lead an extraterrestrial existence. Finally, G. Doorman also described a spiritist underworld. A spirit who has lived his life in an immoral way is chained to an unpleasant, all-surrounding darkness. Spirits who do not believe that God is love and who have become indifferent live in a shady grey area, probably modeled after ideas of Christian purgatory, where there is no light. The spirits there do not do anything all day, are extremely bored, and live in a state of mediocrity at best. Doorman, like De Fremery, pictures heaven as a full unity with God and Christ. This ‘Zomerland’ consists of a temple where spirits gather to worship and unify with God and his son. It is pictured as a blissful place, with uplifting music,

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁶¹ Winsen, *Het licht der toekomst* 119 – 121. H.P. Blavatsky, *The secret doctrine: the synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy* (London 1888) 39.

⁶² M. Beversluis, *Catechismus van het spiritualisme* (Barendrecht, year unknown) 22.

⁶³ H.G. Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen door den sluier: mediamiek ontvangen uit bronnen van hooger weten* (’s-Gravenhage 1930) 27 – 28.

⁶⁴ H.H. Kuyper, *De aarde het middelpunt van het heelal* (Kampen 1919) 7.

youthful energy, love, and joy.⁶⁵ Even though there were relatively little theoretical debates regarding spiritist afterlife, the authors who did write about ‘Zomerland’ largely described it as an astral sphere where progressive moral development would result in either perfection of the self, unity with God, or, in the Kardecian case, reincarnation. We will now continue with a phenomenon that was much more extensively described and theorized by spiritists: views of Earth and material and ontological reality, followed by views on the nature of ghosts.

Spiritist ontology: the structural makeup of material and post-material realities

The spiritist worldview can be described as a spiritual one, which often deals with what spiritists call “powers” or “forces”. Forces are a central spiritist theme, empowering a spiritual counter reality opposing the material one. As was discussed in the first chapter, spiritists tried to put forward spiritism an alternative for modern materialism, which it generally found hollow and unsatisfying. Spiritists defined modernism as a materialist worldview where God, virtue, and higher meanings of life had become obsolete and where man only accepted the existence of material objects. In this respect, we can see spiritism as a reaction to the spiritists’ perception of modernism: it replaces the static, material world obeying natural laws with an idealist, spiritual, and immaterial (or semi-material) one, emitting powers and containing spiritual life forms. As stated before, this seeking of an alternative to modernism was a typical nineteenth- and early twentieth-century enterprise. Some spiritists speak of God as a powerful entity that controls everything. It is in this ontological reality of powers that contact with spirits is established and in which our lives and those of the spirits take place.⁶⁶ The balance and tension between the material and spiritual world is a central, though complex theme within spiritist analyses.

Generally, spiritists think of the spiritual world as more real, more important and more enduring than material reality. This, however, does not mean a categorical denial of the existence of material reality in favor of a pure immaterial, idealist world. This immaterial worldview is called panpsychism and does not apply to spiritism.⁶⁷ The spiritist worldview rather diminishes the hegemony and importance of the materialist paradigm, mapping out

⁶⁵ G. Doorman, *Naar de waarheid door het spiritualisme!* (Haarlem 1926) 199 – 212.

⁶⁶ L. Attema, *Geen handen af, doch handen op: socialisme en spiritisme: met een handleiding voor spiritistisch onderzoek* (Rotterdam 1914) 4. Sommer, *Spiritisme*.

⁶⁷ A.C. Elsbach, H.T. de Graaf, H.J. Jordan, K.F. Proost en G.H. van Senden (ed.), *Encyclopaedisch handboek van het moderne denken. Tweede deel* (Arnhem 1931) 180 – 181.

spiritual and idealist powers and phenomena which are more powerful and important than mere material forces. Spiritists define immaterial and semi-material powers that are existentially denied by their modern materialist *and* Christian opponents. Spiritism is not necessarily anti-materialist. It is rather an addition to pure materialism, which is said not to encompass and explain everything which is needed in order to understand life, reality, and the universe. For this reason, spiritists try to give a *complete* view of reality by attempting to find answers to the questions that materialism is unable to provide. This way, spiritism does not so much *replace* or *deny* materialism as *complete* the materialist worldview by adding an essentially important spiritual and immaterial component to it. This can also be seen in “materializations” of spirits during séances (which will be discussed later in this chapter) and the use of words like “firmness”, “density”, and “transparence” to describe spirits, which usually only apply to physical objects.⁶⁸ Spiritism is both an ontological and an ethical alternative and addition to materialism. It is ontological, because it redefines the ways in which “being” and “reality” are structured. It is an alternative way of looking at the world, the universe and existence itself. It is ethical, because it proposes a hierarchically higher, primary position for the spiritual world than for material reality, which is deemed of secondary importance. The spiritist ontology and the ethical consequences it implies will now be discussed.

An extensive explanation of the spiritual reality that is discussed so often by spiritists is given by the aforementioned prominent *Harmonia* member H.G. Nederburgh. In his book *Lichtstralen door den sluier*, one of the key works mapping out the theories and beliefs of spiritists, he writes of a spiritual world which exists next to the material one, but which is more valuable and powerful. He describes the spiritual world as an afterlife where humans are destined to go after death. In line with many religious traditions, Nederburgh speaks of earthly, material life as a preparatory stage for spiritual “heaven”, where the spirits of the deceased are bound to spend eternity. Man can prepare for this posthumous fate during his relatively limited lifetime. This preparation consists of spiritual introspection, where the subject does not obtain knowledge of the afterlife through studying, but finds spiritual wisdom within him- or herself. Also, Nederburgh described the possibility of contacting the deceased as a gift from God, because it enables us to gain reliable knowledge of the spiritual afterlife from souls who actually dwell there. As we shall see, this knowledge enables us to

⁶⁸ C.J. Wijnaendts Francken, *Het Spiritisme. Een critische beschouwing* (Haarlem 1908). Beversluis,, *Spiritualisme en Spiritisme* 37 – 38.

prepare for the afterlife, because we know what is to come and can focus our efforts on it. When properly executing these preparations, we can ensure ourselves of a place in a high, benevolent, and pleasant heaven. If a person knows more of what afterlife is like and what is expected of him or her during this life, he or she will be able to focus on the necessary virtues that are needed to ascend to a higher heaven. As we are bound to spend eternity in this posthumous domain, whereas we only live for a limited time on Earth, spiritual reality or afterlife exceeds the material world in importance and magnitude by a landslide. The material dies or withers away, whereas the spiritual is eternal and indestructible. This apology for primarily focusing on the afterlife because it is eternal is far from uncommon within religious circles. For these reasons and more, Nederburgh pleads for a complete focusing on the spiritual domain, where we try to make contact with the afterlife and try to perfect our souls as much as possible.⁶⁹ In Nederburgh's philosophy, which reflects the views of many spiritists, spiritual and immaterial reality is placed much higher hierarchically than material, earthly life and reality. This life is seen as a mere practice for the next, which diminishes the importance and realness of it considerably.

R.O. van Holthe tot Echten, a spiritist "jonkheer" (there is no English equivalent for this title, which literally translates to "young lord") of noble birth, also elaborated on the importance of spiritual reality and issues in a speech he gave on material and spiritual interests during the First World War. According to him, it was the materialism and overly focusing on material interests which had led Europe into the trenches. The focusing on material interests divides man amongst themselves and leads to excessive individualism and selfishness, whereas the spiritual interests teach universal love and lead to peace and harmonious unity. This divine love and harmony is what, according to Van Holthe tot Echten, reigns supreme in the spiritual afterlife. Van Holthe tot Echten also describes this life as a mere preparation for the next, which will last forever. Therefore, it is important to focus on preparing for the next life in order to achieve a higher position in heaven. Van Holthe tot Echten adds to this that focusing on the next life implies evocating and practicing universal love, peace, and virtue. A person that follows this ethical system will function better, because his actions are in line with the path envisioned by God himself. This "spiritual progression" and "opening yourself to the benevolent powers of the spiritual domain" will therefore lead to a parallel improvement of the material, earthly life.⁷⁰ Therefore, practicing spiritism will not

⁶⁹ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 9 – 54.

⁷⁰ R.O. van Holthe tot Echten, *De oorlog uit een geestelijk standpunt* ('s-Gravenhage 1914) 6 – 15.

only benefit the practitioner's own soul and the spiritual domain, but can potentially also improve the material world. This makes the spiritual world not only hierarchically higher than the material one, but also makes the benevolence of earthly life dependent of spiritual reality.

A lot of other spiritist authors spoke of how we should understand reality and unanimously concluded that this should not be done in a solely materialist way. The author "Max", a pseudonym for the writer A.P.L. van den Sanden, stated that spiritists saw the immaterial mind and the spiritual as the essence of the universe and that it is essentially this which opposes them to materialists.⁷¹ H.N. de Fremery, like Nederburgh, also notes that the human conscience cannot be damaged through the ephemerality of the flesh.⁷² Enough has now been said on the spiritist understanding of reality. Now, there will be a discussion of two main spiritist concepts: the perispirit and the astral body.

The posthumous vessel for the soul and its connection to the material realm: the astral body and the "perispirit"

As we have seen, spiritists see death as a stage of transition, rather than as an end. However, the spiritual sphere differs from the Earthly life and reality that precedes it. The spiritual body in which the subject continues to live after death is called the "astral body" by most spiritists. The concepts of the "astral sphere" and "astral body" were not invented by spiritists. They date back to at least the late Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (412 – 485).⁷³ Spiritists perceive of the astral as a very refined state, which is sometimes seen as immaterial, but mostly as semi-material, i.e. being mainly spiritual, but also material in nature. The refined nature of this state is responsible for its invisibility among human beings, with the exception of some visibility or possibility to contact it for trained mediums. The astral body is the body through which the subject operates after having passed on to the astral sphere. It is located within the physical body during life, but emerges from this when the body dies and breaks the bond with it forever, taking the human conscience and soul with it.⁷⁴ This suggests that spiritists distinguish between two states of the astral body: first, as located either within the physical body or as connected to it through an ethereal thread called the "perispirit". Second,

⁷¹ Max, *Openbaringen* 19.

⁷² Fremery, *Spiritistische levensbeschouwing* 125.

⁷³ E.R. Dodds, *Proclus. The Elements of Theology. A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary. Second Edition* (Oxford 1963) 313, 4n

⁷⁴ Winsen, *Het licht* 114 – 115.

the astral body posthumously becomes the vessel through which the individual continues to operate and interact during afterlife.

The spiritist C.G. Spoon defines the astral body as the “mind that has become an acting intelligence in an invisible body.”⁷⁵ From a spiritist perspective, this implies that the human mind has been transferred and perfected in a body which transcends the carnal one. De Fremery adds that the astral body is the body through which a person operates in the astral sphere, the refined state which comprises the world of the afterlife. This body has the possibility to show itself to the material world and was perceived by many people. De Fremery suggests the possibility of hallucination as an explanation for these perceptions, but immediately counterattacks this option by stating that astral bodies have been spotted on too many occasions by too many different people, mediums as well as witnesses, to make hallucination the only explanation. This, as have seen in the introduction, is a classic spiritist technique: asserting the existence of spirits or other spiritist concepts by drawing up immense lists of people who have claimed to have witnessed these things. Afterwards, the number of witnesses is considered proof that the phenomena under consideration cannot be hallucinations or anything other than the truths that the spiritists claim them to be. This is part of what proving the spiritist hypothesis scientifically means for early twentieth-century spiritists.⁷⁶ The astral body can thus, provided that it has sufficiently developed its spiritual powers, show itself to the mortal realm. De Fremery stresses that only spirits with a very strong willpower can manage to actually complete this.⁷⁷ Some people who have been fatally ill have witnessed their own astral body, because they have approached the edge separating this life from the next where the transition from the physical to the astral body takes place. Sleeping and approaching old age are defined as retreating into the astral body. This would suggest that the diminishing of life and vitality makes a person draw towards the astral realm. De Fremery defines dying as the breaking of the connection between the physical and the astral body, after which the person becomes the astral body and can never return to his former being. Finally, De Fremery states that astral bodies have no material needs, are neither hungry nor thirsty, feel neither cold nor warmth, and know no gender.⁷⁸ While most spiritists would

⁷⁵ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?*

⁷⁶ H.N. de Fremery, *Het goed recht van het spiritisme* (Amsterdam 1901) 4 – 24.

⁷⁷ H.N. de Fremery, *Wat gebeurt er met ons als wij sterven?* (2nd pressing; Bussum 1915) 15.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 41 – 43.

agree with these astral characteristics, there are some who believe that spirits occasionally eat, drink, smoke pipe, and drink beer.⁷⁹

Van Winsen further elaborated on the concept of the astral body in a 1907 publication dedicated to making readers familiar with the most basic and important spiritist concepts. He also defines the astral as a state which is materially so refined that it cannot be perceived by people located in the coarser mortal realm. He states that this also applies vice versa: astral bodies cannot perceive material bodies.⁸⁰ This results in two conclusions. First, as stated above, the astral sphere is not a purely spiritual, immaterial domain. Van Winsen and others define it as an extremely refined state. This would imply that the spiritual world, like e.g. bacteria or atoms, are merely invisible because we cannot perceive them from our coarsely materialist perspective. Human vision is adjusted to merely perceive objects and beings similar to our own structural makeup. Only the trained medium who is open to the perception of the astral state can actually witness it. Second, the fact that it is primarily *this* reason (our vision is unable to perceive the differently structured astral sphere) which is usually given by spiritists to explain why human beings cannot see spirits, implies another feature of the astral domain. Whereas conventional religions generally locate the afterlife and souls of the deceased in another dimension or in a far, unreachable corner of the universe (although one author states that human souls continue their lives in astral bodies on other stars and planets after death), the spiritist definition of the astral sphere seems to imply that at least part of the spiritual afterlife takes place on Earth. This would explain why spiritists state that we cannot see spirits and they cannot see us *because* of the structural makeup of the agent, rather than because the material sphere and the astral sphere are located in places too far away from each other to allow communication. In conclusion: according to spiritists, spirits dwell among us and spiritual afterlife takes place on Earth as well. Untrained humans just do not have the properties to perceive this.

These are the most detailed descriptions of the astral body and the astral sphere. It is noteworthy that several spiritists use these (and other) spiritist terms and concepts in their work without specifying what they mean by them in the ways that Spoon, De Fremery, and Van Winsen did. Some authors either use the term in a vague and unclear manner or seem to assume that the reader is familiar with the meaning of the concept. This affirms both the non-dogmatic as well as the esoteric character of spiritism, because it does not define its belief

⁷⁹ Constandse, *Leven de dooden?*

⁸⁰ Van Winsen, *Licht der toekomst* 114 – 115. Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 13. Wisse, *Het spiritisme* 106.

system in detail, especially in publicly available publications. Also, by remaining vague about the astral sphere, spirits, and the ways in which to communicate with them, spiritists face a smaller risk of having their beliefs falsified and disproven by their opponents. An example of an accusation of this vagueness can be found in the work of the anarchist and atheist writer A.L. Constandse (1899 – 1985), who states that spiritists have pragmatically invented the concept of the astral in order to give more empirical and explanatory power to their belief system.⁸¹ The Remonstrant preacher P. Eldering repeats this criticism and adds that the descriptions of the astral sphere describe this place as an infernal rather than a heavenly domain.⁸² Because both sides hold different definitions of what scientific evidence is and how it can be applied to prove religious phenomena, these discussions usually do not delve very deep into the concepts which are the initial topic of discussion and tend to result in mutual accusations and name-calling. These discussions are discussed in the next chapter.

The second concept I wish to discuss is the “perispirit”, also known as “fluidium cord” which has already briefly been mentioned. This term, which was coined in French as “périspirit” by Allan Kardec and which was described by him as ‘semi-matérielle’⁸³, is related to the astral body. It can be defined as a thin ethereal thread connecting the physical body to the astral body. This is the thread which keeps the soul connected to the physical body. It is also the thread that permanently disconnects the astral from the physical body when it is broken. Breaking the fluid cord is, according to spiritists, the invisible process which causes physical death.⁸⁴ According to the spiritist author P. Adjutus Drieghe, a talented medium can use his or her “perispirit” to connect to the astral bodies of deceased human beings. He also states that the “perispirit” is not so much *outside* of the human being as part of it. The corporeal individuals that we perceive and define as human beings are only part of the complete material-spiritual entity that actually forms a full human being. This means that the astral body, the perispirit, and the physical body can collectively be defined as a human

⁸¹ Constandse, *Leven de dooden?*

⁸² Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme* 137 – 150.

⁸³ A. Kardec, *Le livre des esprits, contenant les principes de la doctrine spirite sur l’immortalité de l’âme, la nature des esprits et leurs rapports avec les hommes, les lois morales, la vie présente, la vie future, et l’avenir de l’humanité selon l’enseignement donné par les esprits supérieurs à l’aide de divers médiums. Dixième édition* (Paris 1863) 38 – 39.

⁸⁴ Sommer, *Spiritisme*. F. Dijkema, *Buitenkerkelijke stromingen. Spiritisme, theosofie, Christian Science, Orde van de Ster in het Oosten* (Amsterdam 1930) 11.

being.⁸⁵ It is also sometimes called “silver cord” and connected to the silver cord mentioned in the Old Testament.⁸⁶ The “perispirit” is made up of “fluïdum”, which can best be translated as “magnetic fluid”. This was a semi-material quality which was first defined by Franz Mesmer. Human magnetic fluid received its positive power from the cosmic magnetism emitted by the universe.⁸⁷ We shall come across it again when discussing the spiritist healing practice called “magnetizing”, where the magnetic fluid of one person is used to heal another person of his or her illness.⁸⁸ The Dutch term “fluïdum” is often equated to aura or even used interchangeably. Like an aura, the fluid cord takes different colors which reflect how virtuous or sinful a person’s character is. However, in spiritist circles the term “fluïdum” specifically applies to the perispirit and the magnetizing powers.⁸⁹

The spirits of spiritism

Now that we have discussed the spiritist beliefs concerning afterlife, the perception of material and spiritual reality, and the concepts of the astral body and the perispirit, it is time to discuss the ways in which spiritists defined *spirits* and their qualities and behavior. With the above information, we can already define spirits as semi-material astral bodies, which have reached the spiritual state by having their fluid cords broken and which can communicate with the material world if they have sufficient will power. This is a rather limited definition and this section will elaborate on the spiritist definition of spirits.

We have seen how some authors defined ‘Zomerland’ and the spiritual sphere of existence as a hierarchically higher place than Earthly, material life. Some spiritists have stated that the present life is merely a preparation for the next, and that one should subordinate one’s material to one’s spiritual interests. Finally, writers such as Van Winsen and De Fremery have characterized the spiritual afterlife as a place where the spiritual *progression* of the soul takes place. Logically, this could lead one to assume that this perfected state of spiritual reality also applies to its inhabitants: the aforementioned spirits or ghosts. This is however not the case. Almost all authors stress the flawed and imperfect nature of most spirits in one way or another. While spiritual reality may be hierarchically higher than Earthly

⁸⁵ Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme in zijn hoofdlijnen*.

⁸⁶ Ecclesiastes 12: 6 – 7. Spoon, *Wat is toch dat Spiritisme?*

⁸⁷ Heijster, *Parapsychologie*.

⁸⁸ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?*

⁸⁹ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 13.

existence, spirits are often unknowing and insecure and can actually learn quite a lot from human beings residing in inferior material reality.

A first characteristic which is repeatedly attributed to spirits is actually their *unknowingness*. Being neither omniscient nor particularly bright, many spirits are actually unaware of their spiritual state or of the fact that they are no longer alive. The mystic E. Swedenborg already stated that one cannot learn anything of importance from spirits and that contacting them does in no way benefit one's salvation or spiritual welfare. When Swedenborg entered the spirit domain, it was actually he who started to inform and educate the spirits who dwelled there. Swedenborgians believe that there are both good and bad spirits. The spiritist H.G. Nederburgh, though not a Swedenborgian, stated that a soul, upon entering the afterlife and the spiritual realm, does not feel either at home or at ease. He feels unadjusted to his new spiritual state as well as to the domain which he is now to call his home. Nederburgh emphasizes how hard and painful this slow adjustment, coming to realization and acceptance actually is. For these reasons, according to him, it is of vital importance to use your time in the material phase to prepare as much as you can for the coming spiritual afterlife. Nederburgh does stress the potency to change the spirit's unknowingness and inability to operate, by stating that spirits *do* possess unlimited freedom to do as they please in the spiritual realm. This is what makes 'Zomerland' a *just* place, according to the author.⁹⁰ From this theorizing, we can conclude that it takes spirits a long time to become aware of and adjust to their deceased state, that this could possibly explain the often distorted and odd character of spirits' messages, and that only a long and hard spiritual progression can enable the spirit to become free and arrange his own afterlife.

Spirits are unable to communicate in a freely and undistorted way with mediums. Even the most trained mediums have trouble obtaining information from spirits and are often only able to give very limited and fragmentary parts of information communicated by ghosts. Apart from only obtaining partial information, mediums also tend to use very creative and complicated ways of establishing this contact in the first place. These ways of contacting the spirits will be discussed in the next chapter, but it is important to note that the unknowingness and imperfection of the spirits can possibly be attributed to the problematic and limited ways of contacting them. When discussing the information gathered by mediums, one must remember the efforts he or she has to go through to only receive scraps of messages. This is

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25 – 31. Barger, *Redenen waarom Swedenborgianen* 71 – 81. Sommer, *Spiritisme*.

not true for *all* connections between the mortal and post-mortal spheres, but certainly does apply to a large amount of them.

As we have already seen above, spirits are not static beings. Many authors state that they are constantly preoccupied with personal development and improvement until the point of perfection. This makes it hard to speak of unknowing or intelligent spirits, as they are constantly changing and developing. When consulting the bulk of the literature, one gets the impression that most spirits tend to be insecure and unknowing entities in need of help. The developmental characteristic of spirits leads to another issue: the process of *ethical* development and the distinction between good and bad or evil spirits. While spiritists generally make less mention of bad or evil spirits than other faiths that feature a belief in ghosts, they do feature repeatedly in several spiritist writings. The difference in treatment and frequency could be attributed to the fact that spiritists perceive of spirits as the souls or next stage of being of deceased human beings, whereas other religious and mystical traditions often see spirits as demonic or satanic forces, i.e. as *essentially* bad or evil. These non-spiritist religions often accuse spiritists of actually having contact with these demonic beings.⁹¹ While spiritists generally do not hold a belief in devilish spirits (apart from Christian spiritists who believe in the Biblical Devil), evil spirits are part of spiritist doctrine and often a topic of debate. I will only discuss the *spiritist* interpretation of bad spirits.

Like in other religions, in spiritist doctrine deceased human beings go to either a heavenly or an infernal place depending on how they have lived. Whereas the soul's final destination is usually dependent on living a virtuous life in accordance with the religion's prescribed good behavior, in spiritism the condition of the soul in the spiritual realm also depends on having properly prepared for the life that is to come. Bad spirits can behave the way they do because they are evil and immoral, unaware of and confused about their current state, or both. As was stated above, a spirit that has become aware of its state of being, is free to act in whatever way it pleases. Because reaching spiritual perfection depends on being virtuous and in line with the will of "God", this freedom actually entails having made a choice to behave in a certain way and will tend to fit into a certain pattern. "Bad" spirits are thus ghosts who do not behave in accordance with the will of God and the conventions of 'Zomerland'. This behavior simply tends to oppose that of good spirits, but there are spiritist authors who describe the specific behavior of these spirits, as well as the sometimes separate places in the spiritual realm to which they are confined.

⁹¹ Barger, *Redenen waarom Swedenborgianen* 81 – 85.

The prolific spiritist author H.G. Nederburgh acknowledges the behavior of bad spirits, who misguide and disturb mediums who try to communicate with them. Nederburgh attributes this negative behavior to the fact that they have not yet “awoken”. They are still in a state of either ignorance or denial and therefore behave illogically or plain badly.⁹² This is in line with Nederburgh’s theory of spirits entering the domain unprepared and unaware, which has been discussed above. It also connects to his views on spiritual afterlife, where there are multiple heavens and each soul develops until he goes to the place that fits him best. Bad spirits can thus progress to higher heavens by positively developing themselves. From this, we can conclude that spirits that are now bad must be in a low domain of spiritual afterlife, which they do not yet wholly understand. Martinus Beversluis, also writes about the existence of “low” and “bad” spirits. Beversluis denies the existence of demons as described in Jewish and Christian Scripture, but does acknowledge that there are bad spirits interfering with the material domain. Also Beversluis sees these spirits as not yet fully awoken and stresses that people who have been bad during their life have to be purified from evil in the afterlife. Souls initially go through a painful and nasty stage, until they have been cleansed from sin and are permitted to witness the light. Beversluis states that the time a soul has to spend in this purifying process depends on whether he has been virtuous during his lifetime as well on whether he has prepared for the spiritual afterlife. The bad spirits that mediums can encounter when contacting the beyond are spirits that are at that moment going through this process of spiritual cleansing.⁹³

One can see general similarities between the spiritist concept of a developmental, dynamic afterlife and the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christian doctrine of purgatory. In both doctrines, a sinful soul enters the afterlife, goes through a painful process of spiritual purification, and is granted entry to heaven after having successfully completed this process. Also, in both belief systems the deceased have to “pay” for the sins that they have committed during Earthly life by going through a process of purification through suffering in the afterlife. Of course, there are also differences between spiritist and Christian doctrine regarding the concept of spirits. As has already been stated, Christian Scripture does not only speak of ghosts as the spirits of the deceased (as in the case of the summoning of the spirit of the prophet Samuel), but also as demonic spirits which possess and damage human

⁹² Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 27 – 31.

⁹³ Beversluis, *Catechismus* 14 – 15.

beings (as in the case of the exorcism of the Gerasene demoniac⁹⁴). In the former sense, there are hardly differences between the spiritist and Christian definition of spirits. Therefore, the Christian interpretation of spirits can be said to be different and broader, while the spiritist interpretation can be said to be narrower but more detailed and refined. A remarkable difference is that spiritists only tend to know one or two kinds of afterlife. Some, like Nederburgh, speak of multiple heavens, but these are all reached through the same process of spiritual development. In spiritist doctrine, authors almost exclusively picture ‘Zomerland’ as a purgatorial place with heaven at the end. Some authors see the purgatorial and the heavenly stage as separate, while other view these merely as different phases in one singular spiritual domain. Only a limited number of authors, unrepresentative for a majority of spiritists, speak of an inescapable Hell. Finally, as already has been stated, spiritists tend to define a different set of demands which is required of a person in order to enter heaven, often dealing with a form of preparation for the spiritual existence to come. Altogether, we can conclude that the spiritist perception of the afterlife and the human soul both resembles and differs from the ways in which these are described by Christianity.

The final issues which are yet to be discussed regarding spirits and their characteristics are the different theories formulated by authors about the forms that spirits take and what they do while residing in the afterlife, apart from working on their spiritual development. As is seen more often than not in spiritism, there is a range of ideas about this, which all depend on the author’s personal beliefs and revelations obtained through their contact with the deceased. C.G. Spoon states that humans take both their good and their bad qualities with them to the spiritual domain. In their actions and interaction with fellow spirits, ghosts behave in similar ways as they had during their lifetimes.⁹⁵ This truly marks the spiritual afterlife not as a stage of “death”, but rather as one of transition. Also, as has been stated above, there are some who believe that spirits occasionally eat, drink, smoke pipe, and drink beer.⁹⁶ This goes against De Fremery’s idea that astral bodies have no material needs, are neither hungry nor thirsty, feel neither cold nor warmth, and have no gender.⁹⁷ So far, spirits have generally been described as astral bodies, going through spiritual progression. However, the Remonstrant minister P. Eldering describes a unique case regarding the death of a four year-old girl. When she died, her parents were obviously devastated. However, fourteen years after having passed away, the

⁹⁴ See: Mark 5:1 – 20, Matthew 8:28 – 34, and Luke 8:26 – 39.

⁹⁵ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?* D. van Veen, *Spiritisme. Leer en nut* (2nd pressing; Groningen 1935) 8 – 9.

⁹⁶ Constandse, *Leven de dooden?*

⁹⁷ De Fremery, *Het goed recht* 43.

spirit of the girl started to contact her parents. A story like this one is not unusual in spiritist literature. What makes this case extraordinary is that the spirit contacting her parents was now a mature eighteen year-old girl. This means that the girl had continued to age and grow in the astral sphere.⁹⁸ Generally, however, spiritists, like Christians, believe that while the soul may change during the afterlife, human beings do not posthumously go through an aging process.

§ II – The ethical, religious, and scientific dimensions of spiritism

We now have two issues left to discuss in this chapter. These are the ethical components of spiritism and the (non-)religious character of spiritism. Because spiritist ethics tend to make numerous references to religion, the two sections will partially overlap. After having discussed the ethical prescriptions voiced by spiritists, we will turn to whether spiritism can be defined as a religion, what its relation with the different religions is, and how several authors deal with this.

Reflecting the universal love from the Source: Spiritist Ethics

We have already come across a general image of what spiritist ethics is about. Spiritists tell their followers to behave in a way that is in line with common virtue, as well as to sufficiently prepare for the vastly different life and existence that is to come in the astral sphere. One would expect a person who is preoccupied with telling people how to get to a proper place in the afterlife to focus primarily on the propagation of virtuous behavior. However, when accurately analyzing spiritist writings on this matter, we see that these two prescriptions are actually no separate ethical rules at all, but rather two ways of describing the same thing. Spiritists continue to stress the need to prepare for one's future in the astral sphere. Furthermore, they stated that in this sphere spirits could reach spiritual perfection by behaving in a purely virtuous fashion, i.e. completely in line with the will of God. The preparations that spiritists envision are exactly this virtuous behavior: by learning to neglect one's inferior material needs and completely focus on what is truly important – spiritual purity and altruistic, loving behavior – one already lives in line with God's will in the material sphere. When one has learned to master this degree of virtue and has not only disciplined oneself to *practice* it, but also to passionately *want* to do so, one will be ready for life in the astral

⁹⁸ Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme* 137 – 150.

sphere. The fate of bad spirits is attributed to their insufficient preparation for the astral sphere. This means that these ghosts have been sinful during their lifetime, have taken this sinful character to the astral sphere, and are now feeling uneasy and not at home in a world where pure divine virtue is required in order to attain a proper position.⁹⁹

Beverluis sees the astral sphere as the domain where the universal love of God reigns supreme. Virtuous behavior is, according to him, *not* precisely and literally following the dogmas outlined in the Bible, something of which he accuses Christians of doing. Virtue is rather having an unlimited love towards the world and fellow human beings living there. This should be the prime focus of every living person. By doing this, he not only becomes prepared for life in the astral sphere, but he also comes closer to God by becoming more like Him.¹⁰⁰ Nederburgh also subscribes to this ethical system and adds that it is primarily about doing what is *right*, but also about what is *real*. Because the material dies but the astral body lives on forever, the astral sphere can be said to be more real than the material sphere. Therefore, focusing primarily on universal love is actually more real than not doing so, because it is in line with a world much stronger, more important, and more real than the material one.¹⁰¹ Nederburgh also states that egoism withholds people from establishing contact with the astral sphere and that only virtuous people can thus communicate with the afterlife.¹⁰² This virtuous behavior and gaining access to heaven by practicing it comprises the meaning of life and because of this, each person intuitively feels what is right and what is wrong. The key to heaven does not lie in studying, but is located within ourselves, according to Nederburgh (and Attema).¹⁰³ This intuitive feeling is, according to the spiritist A. de Bruijne-Uiterwijk, the attraction that God has to human beings. The intuitive knowledge of what is right and the will to do so can therefore be equated to being attracted to God and the will to be like Him and get close to him.¹⁰⁴ An anonymous Dutch female author, writing under the pseudonym “Een Nederlandsche Vrouw”, states that by practicing this divine love a human raises himself above the level of the spiritual and becomes a spiritual superman or, rather, a human in the

⁹⁹ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen*. Beverluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme*. A. de Bruijne-Uiterwijk, *Wat wil het spiritisme?* (Utrecht 1904) 2 – 16. Eene Nederlandsche Vrouw, *Spiritualisme. Spiritisme* 23 – 24. Van Holthe tot Echten, *De oorlog* 9 – 11.

¹⁰⁰ Beverluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme*.

¹⁰¹ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 9 – 13.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* 37 – 39.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.* 54 – 60. Attema, *Geen handen af*.

¹⁰⁴ De Bruijne-Uiterwijk, *Wat wil het spiritisme?* 2 – 16.

most complete sense.¹⁰⁵ Finally, the spiritist J.F. van Benthem van den Bergh states that the worldwide growth of spiritists would ultimately bring world peace.¹⁰⁶

The core of spiritist ethics thus consists of practicing a universal love that is similar to the divine love evocated by God. As we shall come to see, spiritists between 1890 and 1940 are mainly preoccupied with proving the scientific and irrefutable truth of their core doctrine: the existence of spirits and their interaction with the human realm. Still, this ethical message is important, because it shows us how spiritists think about how the present life should be lived and what this will result in. Because of the propagation of a lifestyle that is as much in line with the will of God as possible, some spiritists plead for fellow believers to set an ethical example for the rest of society. Van Holthe tot Echten states that this universal love is the Source from which everything came and to which everything should aim to return. Because spiritists try to practice this divine love during their lifetime, they are the representatives of this Source. Therefore, they should be an example for society and every virtuous person should strive to be like them.¹⁰⁷ This is repeated by Van Winsen and Van Veen, who state that people should follow the spiritists not only in their doctrine with regard to spirits, but also in their stress on purely virtuous behavior.¹⁰⁸

Complementing, replacing, or ignoring hegemonic Christianity: Spiritism and religion

We have now discussed the ethical component of spiritism, mainly dealing with the practicing of divine love and having an exemplary function in doing this. This strongly overlaps with the next subject: the complex religious character of spiritism. In the current section, the religious ideas and character of spiritism and the porous borders between spiritism and (established) religion will be discussed. The border between spiritism and religion is very fluid and complex, paradoxically resulting in both a significant degree of religiosity in spiritism as well as an outspoken animosity towards religion; and in characteristics that can at once be categorized as traditional religiosity, modernism and “scientism” (the belief in the universal application of the scientific method). This of course has to do with the aforementioned attempt of spiritists to harmoniously unify religion and modernism. I will make a distinction

¹⁰⁵ Eene Nederlandsche Vrouw, *Spiritualisme. Spiritisme* 23 – 24.

¹⁰⁶ J.F. van Benthem van den Bergh, *Kloppende handen vanuit het ongeziene* (Den Haag 1937).

¹⁰⁷ Van Holthe tot Echten, *De oorlog* 9 – 11.

¹⁰⁸ Winsen, *Het licht* 119 – 124. Van Veen, *Spiritisme* 10 – 11.

between three groups of spiritists: those who tried to combine Christianity and spiritism or incorporate the one into the other; those who wanted to *replace* Christianity with spiritism; and a remainder category which described spiritism in religious terms, but saw Christianity and spiritism as clearly distinct, separate belief systems. This tripartite distinction is primarily made in order to be able to draft an overview of religious spiritists. In reality, these groups were not as clearly categorized and distinguished as I have shown them here. There is of course also a group describing spiritism as non-religious. Because this group is mainly occupied with scientism, it will be discussed in the final section of this chapter which deals with science and spiritism.

There have been significant groups of Christian spiritists in the Netherlands, both before and after 1890. In this chapter and in the previous one, we saw spiritists repeatedly citing from the Bible in order to state that Scripture approves of spiritism. This clearly indicated a strong relation and overlap between spiritism and Christianity. The first category of religious spiritists sees their spiritist beliefs as part of their Christian religiosity. They do not necessarily want to morph both systems into one, but do see them as mutually supportive. C.G. Spoon, a committed spiritist who uses many Bible citations to strengthen his spiritist theses, states that spiritism is not a religion, but a “conviction” (from the Dutch “overtuiging”), and that a convinced spiritist can adhere to any religion. While spiritism itself may not be a religion, according to the author, findings from spiritism prove that certain Biblical events actually took place and that there is truth in the Christian doctrine. Spoon states that every spiritist believes in God and the afterlife, that the Bible is full of spiritist facts, and that the Bible is the most beautiful spiritist book ever written.¹⁰⁹ While continuing to distinguish between the Christian “religion” and the spiritist “conviction”, Spoon clearly states that both often overlap and are mutually supportive of each other. Beversluis largely agrees with this. He states that people of all faiths can adhere to spiritism, which he calls an autonomous belief system. Yet, he states that there is a large consensus among spiritists on the person of Jesus and that most spiritists tend to be Christian. He also uses Bible citations to strengthen his spiritist claims and states for example that the sayings of the old prophets spoke on behalf of YHWH or the Holy Ghost and were contacted by spirits who were favorably disposed towards God. He also names speaking in tongues as an example of mediums being contacted by spirits. Beversluis states that some people see spiritism as a surrogate religion for coping with losing their faith in Christianity. Most spiritists however, according to Beversluis,

¹⁰⁹ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat Spiritisme?*

see their spiritism as an autonomous belief system. For this reason, Beversluis despises the popular saying ‘aan spiritisme doen’ [‘to do spiritism’]. This does not apply to an autonomous religion – one also does not “do” Calvinism or Catholicism. He concludes that, because of its non-dogmatic character and its focus on practicing universal love, spiritists have a much more positive and loving image of God than Christianity does.¹¹⁰ This line of reasoning still clearly distinguishes between spiritism and Christianity and sees them as two separate, autonomous belief systems. However, the authors do state that spiritism contains a certain degree of Christianity as well as vice versa. While they acknowledge their separateness, they clearly try to combine and harmonize the two.

This combining of spiritism and Christianity takes much stronger forms in the second category of religious spiritists. Here, the authors argue that spiritism has come to *replace* traditional Christianity. Here, we see that spiritist authors view (their) spiritism in a much more systematic way, because they position spiritism as a belief *system* that will replace the hegemonic Christian belief *system*. Through the revelations of the spirits and contact with the astral sphere, spiritism can be the new basis for a religious truth which is based on certainty. The spiritist J.S. Göbel compares this to the emergence of Christianity itself: spiritism *came* out of Christianity and shall eventually replace it like Christianity did with Judaism. It would also finally bring harmony between the religious and scientific worldviews. Similar to the fact that there are still Jewish believers, there will be people who continue to be non-spiritist Christians. These people will however no longer be in possession of the true faith, which will then be spiritism.¹¹¹ In another publication, Göbel states that spiritism has a stronger claim to being a true religion, because it scientifically *proves* the doctrine of Christianity. Therefore, it has a stronger empirical basis to be in charge of telling mankind the truth regarding God, virtue, and the afterlife.¹¹² The socialist spiritist L. Attema also pleads for the replacement of Christianity with spiritism. He states that religion is not bad *per se*; merely the religions that serve and strengthen the capitalist order which exploits the people are bad. Also, one can be against religion, but one can impossibly deny the truth of the spiritist experiments, according to Attema. The author then turns to Jesus, stating that he and the apostles as well as the old Hebrews lived in a socialist fashion. The Gospels are socialist and are, like socialism, in favor of unity and equality and against the oppression and exploitation of humans. For this reason, spiritists should actively strive to reform Christianity in order to transform its current corrupt,

¹¹⁰ Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme*.

¹¹¹ Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme in zijn hoofdlijnen*.

¹¹² Göbel and Snijders, *Spiritisme*.

capitalist form into a more just form in line with both original first-century Christianity and socialism. Attema claims that this is up to spiritists to do, because they are the only religion that submits scientific evidence to prove religious doctrines.¹¹³ Attema thus does not so much propose the replacement of Christianity with spiritism, but rather the spiritual purification of and erasure of corruption from contemporary Christianity in order to turn spiritism, Christianity, and socialism into one just and true belief system. Even though he does not argue for the replacement of Christianity, also Beversluis states that spiritists should try to reform and modernize contemporary Christianity through their findings.¹¹⁴

The person of Jesus is important in most spiritist writings. This is for a number of reasons. First, spiritists focus on the non-dogmatic character and plead for loving one's neighbor rather than literally studying dogmatic texts. This is very much in line with the spiritist approach to Christianity, which is mainly meant to prove the existence of God, spirits, and the afterlife and to propose a system of ethics propagating universal love, like the love propagated by Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount.¹¹⁵ By picturing Jesus as a person first and foremost preoccupied with these issues, spiritists try to use the behavior and sayings of Jesus *against* Christians and give them a taste of their own medicine. This frequent fight over the true meaning of Jesus' teachings reminds one of the well-known verse by William Shakespeare, who stated that even '[t]he devil can cite Scripture for his purpose'.¹¹⁶ The goal is, of course, to persuade the reader that spiritists have understood the message of Christ better than the dogmatic and thus corrupted Christians, and are therefore the true representatives of God and Revelation. Second, some spiritists argue that Jesus was actually the most powerful medium that ever lived. This would place spiritism in a direct relation with the teachings of Christ and is therefore often used by spiritists. The healings of Jesus and the laying on of hands are compared to magnetism, which is discussed in the next chapter.¹¹⁷ Other spiritists, such as Attema, also state that Jesus *predicted* the emergence of spiritism. He stated that the "spirit of truth" of which Jesus speaks predicts the coming of spiritism, because it was spiritism which proved the truth and existence of the Christian teachings.¹¹⁸ A final issue with regard to the second category is the fact that they actively rally their followers to go out and

¹¹³ Attema, *Geen handen af*.

¹¹⁴ Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme*.

¹¹⁵ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 44 – 46.

¹¹⁶ W. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (4th pressing; Cambridge 1993) 75.

¹¹⁷ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat Spiritisme?* Göbel and Snijders, *Spiritisme*.

¹¹⁸ Attema, *Geen handen af* 19.

convert other people to spiritism. This spreading of the faith is often also the motivation behind their writings. Spoon and “Eene Nederlandsche Vrouw” even state that spiritists have a *duty* to convert their fellowmen to spiritism. This duty flows from the fact that spiritists have *proven* the truth about God, religion, and the afterlife and are therefore *certain* about how people should live their lives. Therefore, in order to show people the one and only true way to live and believe, a spiritist is obliged to show mankind – who he is supposed to love in his entirety – first the scientific *truth* of his beliefs, and, second, its ethical *consequences*, i.e. how to live their lives henceforth.¹¹⁹ This dutiful character shows the similarities between spiritism and the established religion, as well as the seriousness of several spiritists in their attempt to replace Christianity with spiritism.

The third category is somewhat a remainder category. There are other spiritist authors who incorporate religious themes and elements into their spiritism, yet who do not fall into either of the aforementioned categories. Fremery for example incorporates Eastern religious elements such as Karma and reincarnation into his spiritist doctrine. He states that spirits reincarnate as men and vice versa and that this establishes a perfect circular process. Whether this process goes smoothly or is accompanied by a lot of problems depends on the purity and the goodness of the person’s character. The process is thus determined by Karma.¹²⁰ As we have seen earlier in this chapter, Van Winsen incorporates theosophical ideas by H.P. Blavatsky into his spiritism. In the fourth chapter, the differences as well as the relations between theosophy and spiritists are discussed. There are more authors who use alternative, non-Christian religious ideas within their spiritist doctrines. None of these are, however, representative for a majority or a significant minority of spiritists. Therefore, there is no need to further elaborate on this myriad of views. It is sufficient to state that there *was* such a myriad of views.

The second category can be said to be more religious than the first and the third (which barely comprises a consistent category), as it is actively propagating the replacement of contemporary Christianity with spiritism. It therefore also defines itself as a religious belief system. This is important when discussing the spiritists’ often paradoxical self-image, seeing itself at once as voluntary organization, true religion, and scientific community. We will return to this in the next two chapters, discussing first the practices used by spiritists to demonstrate the truth of their beliefs and next the interaction between spiritists and (other)

¹¹⁹ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?* Eene Nederlandsche Vrouw, *Spiritualisme. Spiritisme* 6.

¹²⁰ Fremery, *Spiritistische levensbeschouwing* 256 – 323.

Dutch religions. Of course, there are also spiritists who see themselves as non-religious. This position was, however, not popular between 1890 and 1940. There are three reasons for this. First, the spiritist belief system, which encompasses an afterlife with spiritual entities who can contact the living, is already almost religious by definition. Second, as has been explained in the introduction, we are largely dependent on primary source material, i.e. ideological writings by spiritists themselves for our knowledge of spiritism during this period. Because of this – as well as the fact that these writings often emerge in the middle of a polemic debate – the opinions evoked by the authors do not tend to be the most nuanced that one can imagine. It is plausible that the views that these authors identify with general spiritism are actually those of a fanatic minority faction within a larger whole. This will make the sources on which we rely more often religious in nature than not. Third, surveys taken between 1890 and 1940 in the Netherlands show a relatively small category of non-religious people, ranging between 2.3 percent in 1899 and 17 percent in 1947.¹²¹ Dutch people were strongly religious and therefore non-religious opinions *in general* were relatively scarce.

A final issue which remains to be discussed is the spiritists' relation with science. The self-proclaimed scientific element within spiritism is perhaps even stronger and more prominent than the aforementioned ethical and religious components. Göbel calls spiritism a new branch of natural science which has hitherto not yet been acknowledged as such.¹²² Attema states that one cannot deny the truth of the spiritist doctrine because they have been proven *scientifically*.¹²³ Spiritist felt superior to Christianity, because spiritists could scientifically prove the existence of the afterlife and Christians could not.¹²⁴ Views like this occur frequently and actually are without a doubt part of the *essence* of what spiritism is in this period. Because the majority of spiritist activities is focused on establishing contact with the astral sphere and proving this scientifically, it seems appropriate to discuss the scientific component in the next chapter, which deals with spiritist practices.

§ III – Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, the following research question was posed:

¹²¹ H. Righart, *De eindeloze jaren zestig: geschiedenis van een generatieconflict* (Amsterdam 1995) 42 – 43.

¹²² Göbel and Snijders, *Spiritisme*.

¹²³ Attema, *Geen handen af* 8 – 9.

¹²⁴ J.J. van Broekhoeven, *Welke perspectieven biedt het spiritisme?* (Amsterdam ca. 1925). Van Winsen, *Het licht* 114 – 115. Eene Nederlandsche Vrouw, *Spiritualisme. Spiritisme II*.

Which core truths and ethical values were propagated by spiritists in the Netherlands between 1890 and 1940?

In this chapter, the spiritist “doctrine” has been outlined and analyzed. It is not possible to fully outline this rich and complex set of ideas in a conclusive synopsis. This chapter showed some characteristic features of spiritism as it was propagated by spiritists. The afterlife consists of a semi-material astral sphere, which one enters upon dying. The death of the body sets in when the fluid cord is broken. This cord connects the astral body of the person to its carnal body. This cord is thus the only connection between the mortal person and the astral sphere. It is also used by mediums to contact the spiritual domain. The way in which souls enter the astral sphere depends on their preparation for the next life, which consists of embodying pure divine, universal love. There is thus a Christian set of ethics propagated by spiritists, to which their followers and people who want to enter the astral sphere in a positive way should adhere. There is some disagreement over the precise characteristics of the astral sphere and the spirits that dwell there. In spite of this, this afterlife is usually seen as a place where human souls slowly progress through several stages until reaching spiritual perfection. The spirits are posthumous humans that have largely retained the same good and bad qualities they had on Earth. The astral sphere deals with the removal of these bad qualities to become spiritually perfect in the eyes of God. This religious way of arguing comes from the fact that spiritism is at least a partially religious movement, which sometimes poses truths that either strengthen existing Christian traditions or try to raise spiritism to the level of the universal religious and cosmological truth, ready to eventually replace Christianity. Spiritists see their doctrine more fit to posit eternal truths than the existing religious traditions, because they use the *scientific method* to actually *prove* the truths they posit.

What did this mean for the spiritist self-image? Spiritism was defined by spiritists as religious, because it stressed the existence of an afterlife, a God, a soul, and a higher meaning of life. However, as opposed to existing religious traditions, spiritists claimed that their beliefs had been proven scientifically. Spiritism can therefore best be defined as a scientific religious worldview. Because spiritists saw their beliefs as *proven*, they perceived spiritism as a belief *superior* to conventional Christianity. Therefore, the spiritist self-image also had superior and, either implicitly or explicitly, missionary tendencies. The latter resulted from the spiritist idea that spiritism could one day replace Christianity, because the latter’s doctrine had become outdated. Finally, spiritists not only saw themselves as religiously and scientifically superior;

they were also *ethically* superior, because they actually *did* possess the divine and universal love that Christians preached, but did not practice. Spiritism was thus also seen as an ethical system and this resulted in a loving, caring, and altruistic self-image, as well as an even more superior one.

Because spiritists focused so extensively on their use of the scientific method, because it was a central part of their ideology and what being a spiritist meant, and because it was what, according to them, distinguished them from other religious traditions, we will give extensive attention to the spiritists' use of the scientific method in the next chapter. In this chapter, we shall discuss the practices and expressions of spiritism in Dutch society. Because these were often preoccupied with trying to show their scientific findings to the world, the self-proclaimed scientific attitude of spiritists will be the main theme of the third chapter. When discussing these practices, they will be linked to the spiritist doctrine which was discussed in the present chapter. This way, we can see how spiritist *thought* influenced spiritist *action* and vice versa. Because the scientific method applies to both spiritist thought and practice, this theme can be used as a bridge between the second and the third chapter.

Chapter Three: Keeping up appearances: Practical manifestations of spiritism in Dutch society between 1890 and 1940

‘Bloeiën en verwelken, Daarom hecht aan aardsche
Worden en vergaan. Schatten niet te veel,
Alles, alles wisselt, En geeft aan de wereld
Op de levensbaan. Niet uw hart geheel.’¹²⁵

[‘Blooming and withering So do not attach too much
Becoming and passing away, Value to earthly wealth
Everything changes And do not grant the world
On the road of life your heart entirely’]

In the previous chapter, we examined the truths and values, i.e. the “doctrine” of spiritism between 1890 and 1940. This chapter deals with practical manifestations of spiritism in Dutch society between 1890 and 1940. Special attention will be given to the spiritist use of the scientific method in experiments and to the scientific self-image of spiritists. Again, spiritist self-perception will occupy a central position in this chapter. We will try to define and explain the connection between the spiritist doctrine and way of reasoning which was discussed in the previous chapter and the practices discussed in this one. These goals result in the following research question:

How did the spiritists’ practices and expressions contribute to the construction of the spiritists’ self-image in Dutch society between 1890 and 1940?

This research question may seem rather general, but with the research goals outlined above it becomes clear what the topic of research and envisioned results will be. This chapter will first discuss several spiritist techniques and practices used by spiritists and described in the literature (§ I). Examples of this are séances, table knocking, direct speech and writing, magnetizing, spirit photography, “od power”, and the materialization of spirits. Next, it will

¹²⁵ J. van Rees-van Nauta Lemke, ‘Bloeiën en verwelken’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 October 1913).

turn to presentations, public séances, and other public activities that were hosted by spiritists (§ II). Third, it will analyze press and media attention that was given to spiritists and their thoughts and activities (§ III). This can tell us something about how spiritism was perceived and valued in Dutch society, both by spiritists and non-spiritists. These three paragraphs will result in an overview of spiritist techniques and complements the solely idealist image that has been given in the previous chapter. A fourth paragraph (§ IV) draws conclusions on the scientific self-image that can be made after the analysis of the material discussed in the first three paragraphs. This chapter will pave the way for the subsequent analysis of the interaction between spiritism and the established Dutch religions, which will be given in the next and final chapter.

§ I – Spirit summoning and phantom photography: spiritist techniques and practices

The techniques that we discuss in this paragraph are diverse ways of contacting the spirits of the deceased, i.e. séances, table knocking, direct speech and writing, magnetizing, spirit photography, “od power”, and the materialization of spirits. These are the most frequently mentioned and presumably most oft-used techniques, and therefore largely representative of what spiritism does. These techniques will be discussed separately and will be connected to the spiritist interpretation of the scientific method. We will define how the scientific interpretation of these techniques contributed to the construction of the spiritist self-image.

The majority of spiritist techniques are aimed at contacting the spirits of the deceased. Often, this contact and communication is mentioned by spiritists without specifying the ways in which this contact was established. Because of this, one can often only guess whether the information that authors claim to have received through contact with spirits was obtained through a séance, telepathic communication, direct writing, or something else entirely. In order to discuss the techniques just mentioned, we can only rely on sources that name and describe these techniques. It is important to note that only a part of spiritist literature actually goes deeper into these practices and describe them at length. Multiple pamphlets state that a wide array of phenomena and countless experiments results all prove the truth of spiritism, while failing to describe any of these experiments, phenomena, or the techniques that were used. Some merely speak of “intense concentration”, “mental effort”¹²⁶, or do not indicate any technique at all. The parapsychologist Baron Hellenbach, who converted to spiritism during

¹²⁶ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 22.

the second half of the nineteenth century¹²⁷, is supposed to have said: ‘I have convinced more people by what I have *told* them about spiritism than by what I have *shown*’¹²⁸. Only a small number of sources provide us with detailed information of spiritist techniques. This lack of information strengthens the image of spiritism as an introvert and esoteric belief system, which is how some spiritists describe their doctrine.¹²⁹ Fortunately, there are enough sources that *do* describe these techniques, which will now be discussed.

The spiritist séance: prerequisites for establishing contact

Among spiritists, there are two ways of establishing contact with spirits. The first is an active way, where techniques are used to contact specific spirits. While a minority of spiritists appears to adhere to the active position, most point out that people with no accurate knowledge of spiritism perceive of spiritism in this incorrect manner: as the conscious summoning of specific spirits.¹³⁰ In the literature, there is criticism of this position by those adhering to the passive position, but not the other way around. Spiritists adhering to this active position do not problematize or theorize their own *or* the passive position, while those who count themselves among the passive spiritists problematize both positions. For this reason, little can be said of the active spiritists’ reflection on and perception of their own position.

Passive spiritists often discuss their position in order to reply to objections given by Christian opponents, who use aforementioned Bible citations that prohibit the “asking of the dead”. Passive spiritists state that the sentence “asking the dead” implies an active and conscious enterprise, while a spiritist séance is not anything like this. They clarify their position in order to counter these oft-used Christian arguments. Instead of a medium asking the dead, it is rather the spirits who take the initiative to contact the medium. The medium is merely a trained professional who has learned to be sufficiently open and receptive to serve as a medium that spirits can use to communicate with the mortal realm. This would solve the contradiction between spiritists stating to be good Christians and at the same time violating

¹²⁷ R. Steiner, ‘The History of Spiritualism’, in: R. Steiner and C. Bamford, *Spiritualism, Madame Blavatsky & Theosophy: An Eyewitness View of Occult History: Lectures* (Great Barrington 2001) 72 – 74.

¹²⁸ Wijnaendts Francken, *Het Spiritisme* [Translation by CvdV; emphasis added].

¹²⁹ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* The ‘active’ and ‘passive’ positions are not categories used by spiritists themselves. I have constructed these categories in order to make visible a spiritist debate on how contact with spirits is established visible.

Biblical rules by summoning spirits. Spoon takes this position and elaborates on it. He states that spiritists do not *ask* the dead because it is they who voluntarily approach *us*. There is no force or pressure involved. Furthermore, the spirits are not dead at all, but merely people who have crossed over to the other side. Another aforementioned Biblical verse states that one should ‘test the spirits to see whether they are from God’ (1 John 4:1). According to Spoon, this indicates that it is allowed to communicate with spirits, as long as they take the initiative to approach us and we test whether they are not evil spirits, but spirits from God. He also states that the Bible is filled with spiritist actions and phenomena and that many prophets get approached by and receive their inspiration from “spirits”. For this reason, Spoon and other passive spiritists see no discrepancy between being Christians and being spiritists, and state that Christian accusations are responsible for the popular perception of these categories as mutually exclusive.¹³¹ A female medium described her personal experiences with regard to this in the spiritist periodical *Toekomstig Leven* [‘Future life’] of 15 April 1912. She states that during a period in her life she had chosen to *not* sit at the séance table for a while. However, she resumed doing this when she felt a very strong urge to do so. She interprets this as a spirit calling *her*. She cites the spirit as saying: ‘Ik kom op uw licht af’ [‘I come towards your light’]. This implies that it is the spirit contacting the medium and not the other way round.¹³²

Both passive and active spiritists often list as a prerequisite that the medium has to achieve a state of trance. This could be used to connect to the passive position: the medium does not actively ask the dead, he merely makes himself available as a vessel for spirits who voluntarily want to contact those present at the séance. This trancelike state is mentioned by many spiritist authors. Nederburgh states that only those who are open and receptive to spirits can experience this contact. He states that modern society is to blame for this difficulty. In a Rousseau-like manner, he states that earlier peoples and societies were more in harmony with nature and could therefore contact spirits in a much less problematic fashion.¹³³ Spiritist literature does not extensively describe this state of trance and seems to assume that the reader

¹³¹ *Ibid.* W.F. Stoeller, *Kort begrip van het spiritisme. Beknopt overzicht deszelfs wezen en doel* (Rotterdam 1897) 10. Sommer, *Spiritisme*. R.O. van Holthe tot Echten, ‘De Roomsche-Katholieke Kerk en het Spiritisme’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelyks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 July 1917).

¹³² H. van de Moer, ‘Persoonlijke mediumnieke ervaringen’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelyks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 April 1912).

¹³³ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 22 – 25.

is familiar with it. Mediums are described as lying exhausted and motionless on the floor.¹³⁴ They are sensitive and spiritists strongly advise against touching the medium while he is in trance, as this could hurt and damage the medium.¹³⁵ Mediums are born with the power to communicate with the deceased. This power is called ‘mediumniteit’ [‘mediumnity’] and is called a gift from God by several spiritists. A person who is not born as a potential medium can never learn to become one, but a person who *is* born with the gift of mediumnity can develop and improve his or her channeling gift.¹³⁶ The state of trance is listed by many authors as a prerequisite to make communication possible.¹³⁷ The fact that spiritist messages are obtained in a state of trance is also used by opponents of spiritism, who state that this perceived contact is the product of hallucinations by the medium or of a collective psychosis experienced by the participants. They use the fact that the messages were obtained in a non- or half-conscious state to stress the *unreliability* of the medium and what it perceived to be spirits.¹³⁸ We shall return to this discussion in the fourth chapter, dealing with debates between spiritists and non-spiritists.

There are a number of other prerequisites for organizing a *séance*. As is typical for spiritism, there is large variation of opinion over what these prerequisites are. For this reason, I will give an overview of requirements that are subscribed to by a large, significant number of spiritists. I will also deal with some diverging views, as long as they appear to be representative for a significant number of spiritists. Most spiritists agree that a *séance* should be held in a dark location. This is necessary in order to create a positive atmosphere for receiving spirits, as well as to make spiritual light visible.¹³⁹ There is also large consensus over the fact that those present at the *séance* need to *believe* and *have faith* in the existence of spirits and their appearance that evening. Skeptics and non-believers are believed to disrupt the receptive atmosphere and to cause the *séance* to fail.¹⁴⁰ Opponents see this as a self-fulfilling prophecy: those who believe in the spiritist doctrine will perceive certain events as

¹³⁴ Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme in zijn hoofdlijnen*.

¹³⁵ IJsendijk, *Het land aan gene zijde* 22.

¹³⁶ Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme* 17. Draaisma, *Wat is het spiritisme?* 16. Nederburgh, *Lichstralen* 14.

¹³⁷ Attema, *Geen handen af* 14. K.S., Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme*. ‘Séances door K.S.’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 November 1912).

¹³⁸ Wisse, *Het spiritisme* 122 – 124.

¹³⁹ Beversluis, *Catechismus* 11. Adjutus Drieghe, *Het Spiritisme in zijn hoofdlijnen*. Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*.

¹⁴⁰ Beversluis, *Catechismus* 11.

the appearance of spirits, while nothing will happen when a non-believer tries to perceive these so-called spirits. It also makes independent research impossible, because the perception of spirits depends on the researcher's prior belief in their existence. Again, we will further elaborate on this in chapter four.

Beverluis states that a *séance* should take no longer than two hours.¹⁴¹ The spiritist M.A. Oxon states that the participants should wait for an hour for spirits to appear. If nothing happens within this hour, the *séance* can be considered to have failed.¹⁴² An ideal *séance* consists of a limited number of people, ranging from two to twelve. There should be no food, tobacco, alcohol, children, or pets present. A *séance* should not be held during extreme heat or cold and should be discontinued if thunder occurs. The medium should be an adult, preferably a Christian, and should have a calm temper.¹⁴³ The people present at the *séance* should sit in a circle to bundle their powers.¹⁴⁴ Some spiritists prescribe silence during the period of waiting for the spirits to appear; others prefer a pleasant and carefree conversation or calm music. All authors seem to prescribe a relaxed and carefree *atmosphere*.¹⁴⁵ As is the case in spiritism, the atmosphere is of utmost importance. De Fremery even states that the sensing of a particular atmosphere in a room is already a spiritist practice where one uses channeling powers.¹⁴⁶ Different spiritists propose different prerequisites, but the ones described above are generally subscribed to by most spiritist authors.

Spiritist techniques for communication with the dead: table knocking, alphabet, direct writing and direct speech

Now that we have discussed the prerequisites needed to start a *séance*, it is time to turn to the actual techniques that are used to contact the deceased, or rather, make it possible for the deceased to contact mediums. A *séance* is usually conducted by a group of people seated around a table. The word “*séance*” comes from the now defunct Old French word “*seoir*”, which simply means “to be seated”. When the word was adopted by the English language, it

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* 14.

¹⁴² M.A. Oxon, ‘Leiddraad voor *séances*’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 June 1915).

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* IJsendijk, *Het land* 13 – 17.

¹⁴⁴ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?*

¹⁴⁵ Oxon, ‘Leiddraad voor *séances*’. Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*. Sommer, *Spiritisme*.

¹⁴⁶ Fremery, *Een spiritistische levensbeschouwing* 336 – 337.

specifically came to mean an attempt to communicate with the dead.¹⁴⁷ This “being seated” usually takes place around a table, as is also the case during a spiritist séance. The table can take a prominent place in communicating with the deceased. As we have discussed earlier, Modern Spiritism emerged after the “Hydesville Knockings” in Rochester in the United States. Although most of the experiments that were executed by, or which involved, the Fox Sisters did not specifically include *table* knocking (and although attempts to contact the deceased through table knocking took place before 1848), their methods of communication were of enormous influence on almost all subsequent spiritists. They agreed with the ghost of Rosma that one knock would mean ‘yes’, two knocks ‘unsure’, and three knocks ‘no’. This exact same system, obviously with some local variations, was adapted by contemporary and future spiritists all over the world. This also applies to Dutch spiritists between 1890 and 1940, who used this system during their séances. Reports of these séances state that spirits generally make their presence known by knocking or moving the table. After contact is established, the medium asks yes/no questions, to which the ghost answers by the number of knocks described above.¹⁴⁸ Spirits can also move or lift the table to show their presence.¹⁴⁹ Altogether, the table plays an important role during the séance and is often the instrument used to communicate with the dead.



Image 3.1: A British Ouija board with a planchette.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ S.H. Rosenthal, *French Words You Use Without Knowing It, The Combined Book* (2011) 75. Beversluis, *Catechismus*.

¹⁴⁸ Benthem van den Bergh, *Kloppende handen*. Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme* 9 – 11. Göbel and Snijders, *Spiritisme*. Arthur Hill, *Spiritualism* 40 – 43. Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme*. De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*. Sommer, *Spiritisme*. Heijster, *Parapsychologie*.

¹⁴⁹ Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*. De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*.

¹⁵⁰ ‘English Ouija Board’, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:English_ouija_board.jpg (28 June 2012).

The Fox Sisters also designed a time-consuming knocking system where spirits could use letters to make words. In this system, one knock was ‘a’, two knocks were ‘b’, and so on. Needless to say, it was a laborious system to use. Nevertheless, any spiritists used the system, including Dutch spiritists between 1890 and 1940. In order to save time, and possibly because advances were made in the communication with spirits, another system was developed. Here, a sheet of paper with all the letters of the alphabet would be placed on the table. The spirit would guide either the finger of the medium or a glass of planchette placed on the sheet of paper towards the letters the spirit wished to communicate. The Ouija Board, which can be seen in Image 3.1, would later partly replace many of these homemade communication objects. This board has a prominent role in Marcellus Emants’ pro-spiritist play which we will discuss in § II. The new communication process saved time and made more detailed and extensive communication possible. Although there is no sufficient historical evidence to empirically prove the truth of this claim, the descriptions of many séances that do not specifically name a technique still imply the use of this technique of pointing out the letters of the alphabet. Therefore, this technique could have been used more often than is indicated in spiritist literature.¹⁵¹

We will now turn to the final techniques discussed in this paragraph: activities described as “direct”. This directness refers to the fact that a medium is *directly* used by a spirit to execute certain actions, such as writing or speaking a message, drawing an image, or performing music. The first two activities, which occur most frequently, are referred to as “direct writing” and “direct speech”. These are also popular spiritist techniques that are used to communicate with the dead. Also, these techniques are often put forward as evidence for the possibility to contact ghosts. As has been described above, spiritists generally see a medium as the person through whom a spirit communicates. The medium does not contact, but is contacted *by* the spirit and is often in a state of trance when this takes place. The direct activities always take place when the medium is in trance. There are barely any cases mentioned in spiritist literature where the medium was conscious of what he or she was doing.

¹⁵¹ H. van de Moer, ‘Persoonlijke mediumnieke ervaringen’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandlijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 April 1912). K.S., ‘Séances door K.S.’ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?* M. Emants, ‘Tegenover het mysterie. Toneelspel in drie bedrijven’, in: *De Gids* 71 (Amsterdam 1907) 16 – 20.

This is logical, because this would compromise the *directness* of the actions which are wholly supposed to be the work of a spirit.¹⁵²

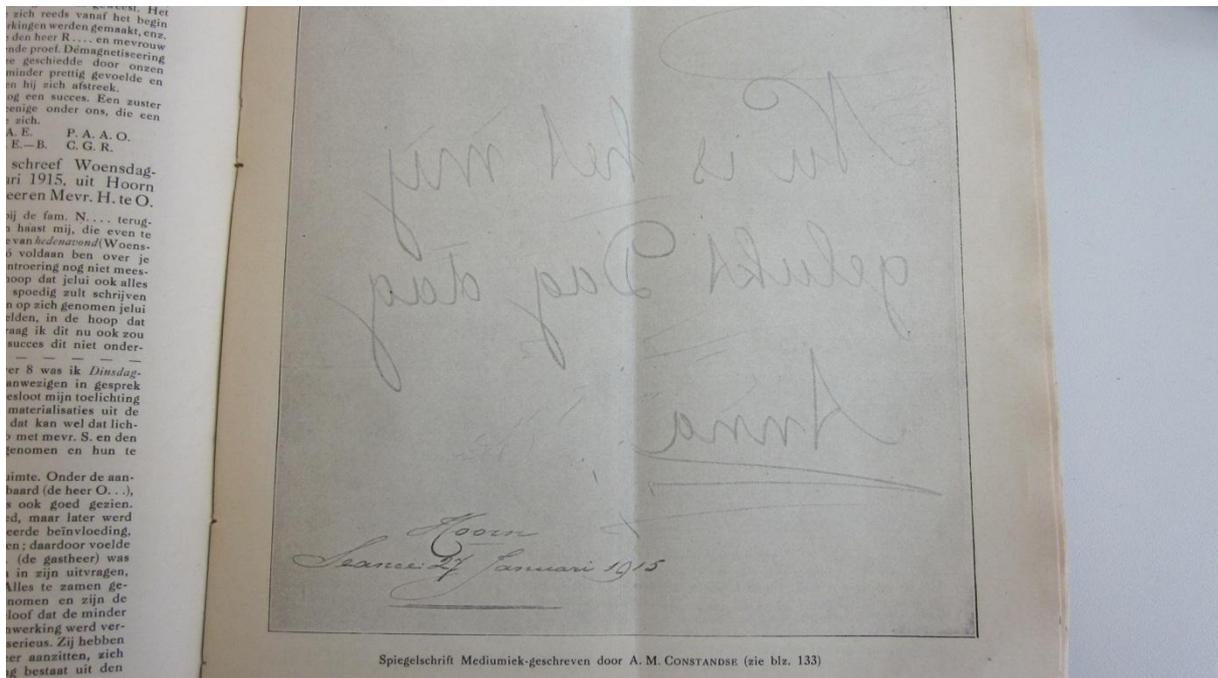


Image 3.2: Direct mirror writing produced by A.M. Constandse in 1915, printed in the spiritist periodical *Toekomstig Leven*.¹⁵³

The ability to execute direct writing demands a well-developed mediumship of the medium. It is often listed as the second hardest practice which only the best mediums can perform, the hardest practice being materialization.¹⁵⁴ The medium does not write himself, but the spirit writes *through* the medium. Because spiritists are prone to prove the truth of their practices scientifically, the direct writing that is put forward as evidence is of such a nature that it could not simply have been scribbled down by the medium himself. When direct writing is mentioned in the literature, it is usually accompanied by examples which are deemed “miraculous”. There are countless examples in spiritist literature. Especially spiritist

¹⁵² Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme* 25 – 26. Draaisma, *Wat is het spiritisme?* 27 – 28. Max, *Openbaringen* 20 – 22. IJsendijk, *Het land aan gene zijde* 25 – 26. Van Winsen, *Het licht der toekomst* 73 – 74.

¹⁵³ Photograph of a copy of *Toekomstig Leven*. *Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 May 1915).

¹⁵⁴ Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme* 25 – 26.

periodicals seem to avidly collect and publish cases of direct writing.¹⁵⁵ I will name but a few examples here. T.D. van Herwerden, a Dutch official who worked on Java, had a young illiterate boy as his servant. The boy had learned of his channeling capabilities. Without knowing how to write at all, the boy during a séance wrote fluently in both Spanish and Latin. The literature states that this could not be the work of the boy himself and that several other people saw him writing down the messages. Similar stories are not uncommon. The daughter of the famous medium Katie King could perform direct writing when she was five and a half years old. The youngest person to ever do direct writing was the daughter of Baron Seymour Kirkup when she was only nine days old. Another oft-mentioned example is that the medium manages to exactly reproduce the deceased person's handwriting. These examples are all stated to have been researched by reliable and independent persons.¹⁵⁶ This does not only apply to direct writing, but also to "direct drawing" (drawing a very complicated picture without normally having the abilities to do so), "direct music" (the same situation but with a musical instrument), and "direct speech" (either the speaking of a language that the medium does not speak or the giving of information that the medium could not possibly know).¹⁵⁷ Also these are well-represented with many examples in spiritist literature and are all said to have been researched by independent persons. In a typically spiritist manner, the enormous amount of cases of direct writing and their verification by independent third parties are used as evidence that direct writing is *indeed* the working of spirits through mediums and that it proves the existence of spirits and their interaction with humans.

¹⁵⁵ See several issues of *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* between 1912 and 1918. There are examples of direct writing or direct speech mentioned in over half of the issues.

¹⁵⁶ Van Winsen, *Het licht der toekomst* 73 – 74. Max, *Openbaringen* 20 – 22.

¹⁵⁷ Laenen, *Hedendaagsch spiritisme*.

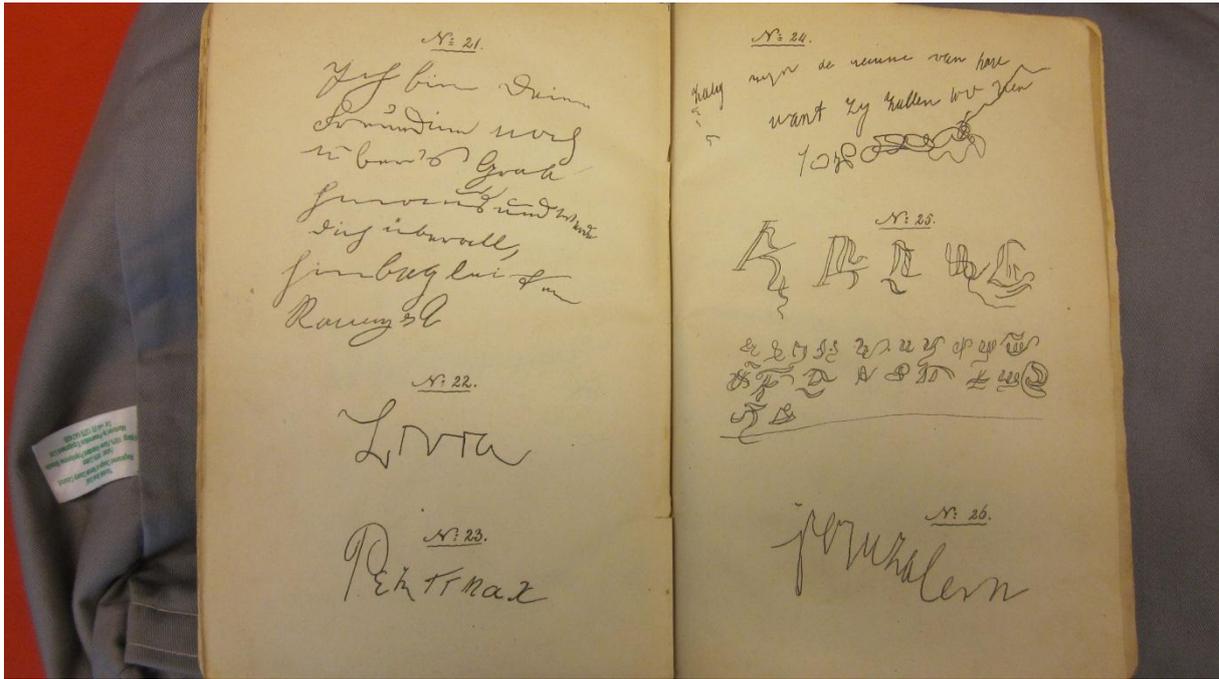


Image 3.3: Some examples of (unfortunately unreadable) direct writing from an 1872 publication by the spiritist A.J. Riko.¹⁵⁸

Given the countless cases of direct writing that are mentioned in spiritist literature, it is strange that very few accounts include a copy or a picture of the direct writing that was produced during the séance. This obviously does not work in the spiritists' favor. There are, however, some pictures that were printed in spiritist literature. I have included three of these pictures in this chapter (Images 3.2 – 3.4). The first image features an example of direct mirror writing. The medium A.M. Constandse supposedly wrote this message in mirror writing. When it was mirrored to normal writing, it showed the handwriting of the spirit he had communicated with. The second picture features several examples from a collection of directly written messages, published by the spiritist A.J. Riko. This author gives an overview of multiple examples of direct writing in an attempt to show that this is a real phenomenon, proving the existence of spirits. The final picture is an example of direct drawing, where a medium who was not skilled in drawing at all supposedly drew this complicated picture. All of these images are meant to be examples that prove that mediums are controlled by spirits during a séance, because they create things that they simply could not create while in a normal condition. Therefore, another alien agent must be responsible for creating these things. This alien agent is, of course, the spirit of a deceased person.

¹⁵⁸ A.J. Riko, *Positief spiritualisme. Geheimzinnige feiten* (Amsterdam 1872).

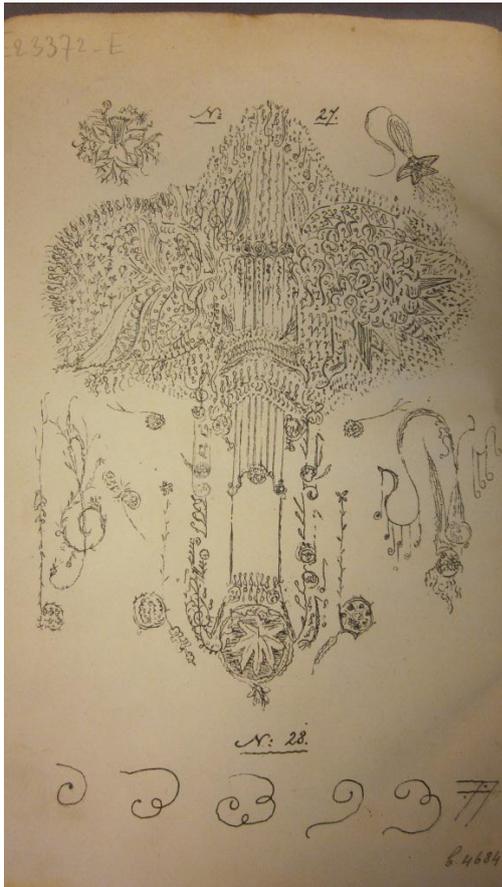


Image 3.4: An example of direct drawing from an 1872 publication by the spiritist A.J. Riko.¹⁵⁹

There are some rare examples of direct writing that appeared *without* the intermediation of a medium. There is a case where the spiritist Elise van Calcar, accompanied by the famous medium Henry Slade, witnessed an example of direct writing without anyone holding a pen. Both well-known spiritists IJsendijk and Van Rees-van Nauta Lemke compared this to the Biblical story of “the writing on the wall”. Here, at King Belshazzar’s feast, the Hebrew words ‘Mene, Mene, Tekel u-Pharsin’ spontaneously appeared on the wall of the room where the feast took place.¹⁶⁰ Spiritists connect this practice to direct writing in order to give their practices a Christian, God-given basis and to equate direct writing with prophetic and divine visions.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Book of Daniel 5:1 – 28.

Other spiritist activities: materializations, spirit photography, “Odic force”, and magnetization

In this section, I will discuss another range of spiritist activities. These include the materializations of spirits at séances, the (attempted) photography of these materializations, Reichenbach’s concept of “od power”, and finally the spiritist healing practice of magnetization. These will provide yet more information on spiritist practices and will eventually make it possible to construct an overview of spiritist practices, which can be analyzed and used to draw conclusions on Dutch spiritism between 1890 and 1940.

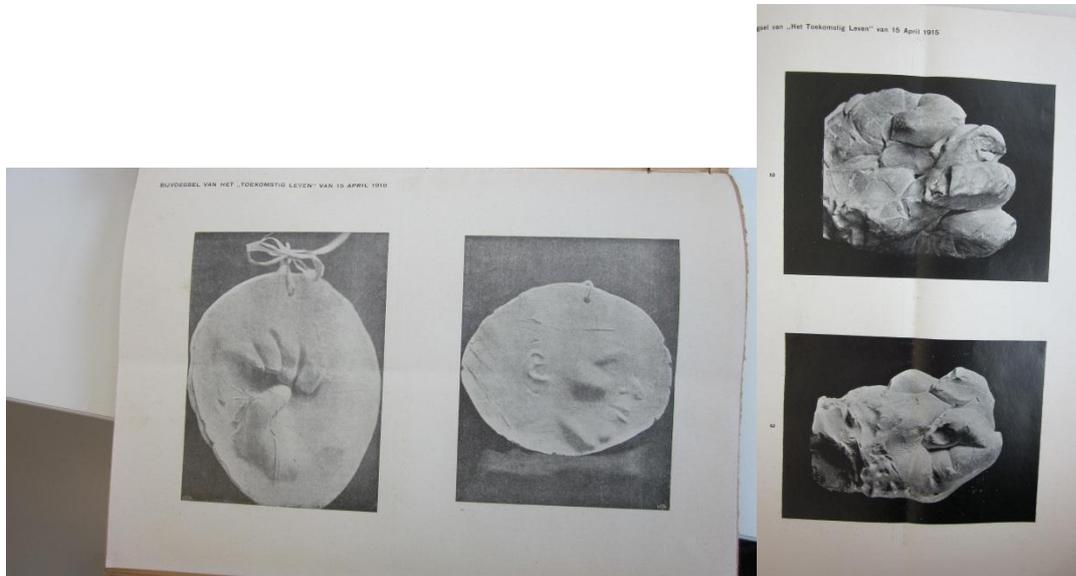
The first phenomenon that will be discussed is the (partial) materialization of spirits. As was stated above, this is seen as the most complicated and hierarchically highest spiritist practice.¹⁶¹ Spoon notes that it is the spiritist practice with the least chance of success. It can only be executed by the most talented mediums and lesser developed mediums should not even attempt to execute them, to save themselves and the other participants the disappointment when they failed to deliver.¹⁶² It is also one of the spiritist practices with the most cases of fraud by the medium. Materialization can be defined as the physical appearance or manifestation of a spirit in the room where the séance takes place. This manifestation makes it possible for those present to see and sometimes to touch the spirit of the deceased. Spiritist literature often mentions reports of successful materializations.¹⁶³ This makes it all the more strange that a clear and detailed description of how these materializations proceed is lacking. Spiritist literature states that either the entire deceased person or only a body part, usually a hand, foot, or face, appears during the séance, either in an unaltered or in a bleak, ghostlike appearance. It is unclear whether these materialized beings can interact with the people present. The literature suggests that they can, but fails to accurately describe this. This could have to do with the fact that materialization, because it is the hardest spiritist practice to perform, presumably only rarely took place. Therefore, we are left to conclude that spiritists at least *imagined* it to be possible to have spirits materialize themselves during séances and that it was possible to interact and communicate with them. The proud and respectful ways in

¹⁶¹ Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme* 25 – 26. Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme*.

¹⁶² Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?* Laenen, *Hedendaagsch spiritisme*.

¹⁶³ See several issues of *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* between 1912 and 1918.

which these materializations are mentioned and described in spiritist periodicals and other literature shows how special spiritists considered this phenomenon to be.¹⁶⁴



Images 3.5 and 3.6: Materializations of a face and hands in plaster.¹⁶⁵

These materializations created opportunities for another popular phenomenon: spirit photography. Spirit materialization created worldwide opportunities to photograph the dead and led to the emergence of “spirit photographers” Mumler (USA), Hudson (UK), and Buguet (France).¹⁶⁶ Like with manifestations, spiritists and non-spiritists alike warned against the frequent fraud that is committed with the publication of so-called spirit photography.¹⁶⁷ Both parties were well aware of the large number of imposters active within spirit photography. While non-spiritists once again saw this as evidence that spiritists are either imposters or brainwashed, spiritists themselves did not necessarily see this as a problem. They stated that frauds are to be found in every organization, be it political, religious, social, or something else. Spiritism did not differ from this and something like spirit photography is bound to attract imposters. However, because spiritists *prescribed* that their followers should research

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme* 25 – 26. Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?* Laenen, *Hedendaagsch spiritisme*.

¹⁶⁵ Taken from: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 April 1918).

¹⁶⁶ De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*.

¹⁶⁷ Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme*. H.N. de Fremery, *Handleiding tot de kennis van het spiritisme* (Bussum 1904) 326.

the phenomena only by strictly using the scientific method, they could filter out fraud and preserve the truth. By taking the utmost care to only obtain *true* spiritist facts, they could take reliable photographs of spirits *and* recognize fake and staged pictures. Spiritists attached a lot of value to reliable spirit photography. Here we see similarities with the aforementioned direct writing. Like with direct writing, spirit photography was often put forward as important evidence for the existence of spirits. It was practically the only spiritist practice that made spirits visible to everyone. The spiritists Spoon and Ortt named the spirit photographs that had been verified by them as accurate as *conclusive* evidence for the existence of spirits.¹⁶⁸ Yet, as with direct writing, there are very few examples of actual spirit photographs that were published – especially for something that was deemed so important. One is reminded of Hellenbach’s observation: ‘I have convinced more people by what I have *told* them about spiritism than by what I have *shown*.’¹⁶⁹ One can easily find several descriptions of photographic evidence, but it is hard to actually find these pictures. More was written about these pictures than were actually shown.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, this once again leads to the strange paradox that spirit photography was stated to conclusively prove the truth of the spiritist phenomena, while spiritists barely showed any. One would logically assume that, if these pictures were so convincing, they would be the first things that spiritists would be inclined to show to convince skeptics of their beliefs. It remains unclear why there is such a reluctance to publish spirit photography, but it is a fact that they rarely appeared in spiritist publications. It is possible that this reluctance was a consequence of the “Cottingley Fairies” incident, a controversy following the publication of an article by Arthur Conan Doyle in 1920. In this article, Doyle showed some pictures taken by two teenage girls which showed them playing and interacting with fairies. Doyle believed in the authenticity of the pictures and published them in *The Strand Magazine*. He was immediately met with a lot of criticism, scorn, and disbelief. This incident was a blow to the reputation of spirit photography and could have led to the decline of the publication of such photos.¹⁷¹

The final two theories we will discuss in this section are those of the “Odic force” and of magnetizing. These practices might not directly seem relevant to spiritism, but an analysis

¹⁶⁸ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?* Ortt, *Het Spiritisme* 49. P. Eldering, ‘Het spiritisme wetenschappelijk bewezen?’, in: *Theologisch Tijdschrift* 50 (Amsterdam 1916) 72.

¹⁶⁹ Wijnaendts Francken, *Het Spiritisme* [Translation by CvdV; emphasis added].

¹⁷⁰ F. Duboisdeghien, ‘Transcendentale Fotografie’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 May 1915).

¹⁷¹ Brandon, *The Spiritualists* 224 – 226.

of the sources will clarify this. We will first turn to a theory put forward by the German *Freiherr* [‘Baron’] Karl von Reichenbach, dealing with “Odic force”. This theory influenced spiritists worldwide and also found a following in the Netherlands. Reichenbach stated that each living person emanates a natural colored light which can be perceived in total darkness. This color reflects a person’s well-being and can only be perceived by a select, gifted group of persons called “sensitives”. This light reflects the “Odic force” (named after the Norse god Odin), which according to Reichenbach was a universal life force which all living beings possessed, including humans, animals, and plants. This theory immediately reminds one of the concept of the aura, known from Zoroastrian, Buddhist, Hindu, and other religious and spiritual traditions. There is however a difference in Reichenbach’s theory, which was very appealing to spiritists. First, Reichenbach and his followers went to great lengths to objectively *prove* the existence of the “Odic force”. Reichenbach himself was not a sensitive and he had to rely on people who claimed to be sensitives for his experiments. He tried to make sure that all their accounts corresponded with each other and with the theory of “Odic force”. With a significant number of independent observations, Reichenbach hoped to be able to *scientifically* prove the existence of the universal life force. This methodology bears similarities to the spiritist method and was therefore appealing to several spiritists. Second, Reichenbach did not try to integrate his theory into pre-existing theories in Hindu, Jainist, or other traditions. He chose to stick to the observable facts and kept his theory autonomous.¹⁷² This was also attractive to spiritists, who stated that one should only focus on results obtained from reliable scientific experiments.

¹⁷² K. von Reichenbach, *Physico-physiological researches on the dynamics of magnetism, electricity, heat, light, crystallization, and chemism, in their relations to vital force* (London 1850). K. von Reichenbach, *Der sensitive Mensch und sein Verhalten zum Ode: eine Reihe experimenteller Untersuchungen über ihre gegenseitigen Kräfte und Eigenschaften mit Rücksicht auf die praktische Bedeutung* (2 parts; Leipzig 1910). T.H. de Beer and E. Laurillard, *Woordenschat, verklaring van woorden en uitdrukkingen* (ed. Ewoud Sanders; Hoevelaken 1993) 839 – 840. E. van Hennekeler, ‘Een nieuwe uitvinding en oude dwalingen’, in: *Psychologische bladen. Nieuwe reeks. Orgaan van den “Nederlandschen Okkultistenkring”*. Gewijd aan de studie van Okkultisme, Psychische geneeswijze, enz. (15 March 1900) 1 – 2. Van Winsen, *Het licht* 108 – 109.

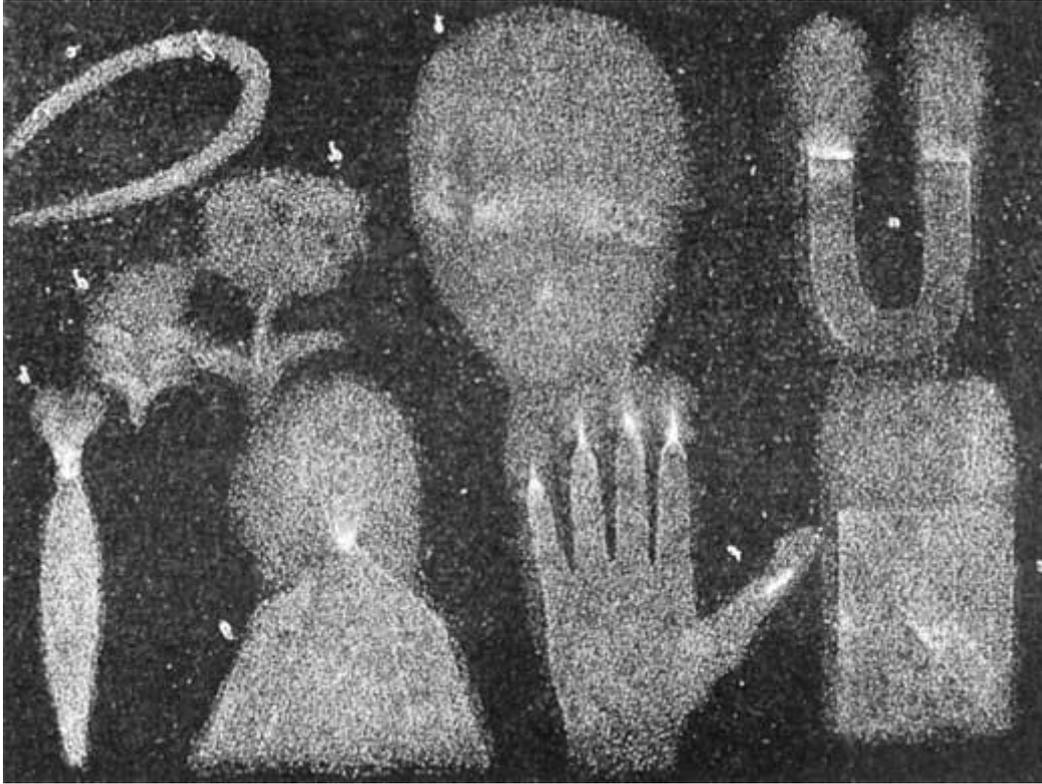


Image 3.7: The “Odic force” of several objects photographed by Albert de Rochas in 1891.¹⁷³

One can easily imagine this theory spreading over the world and finding followers within spiritist circles. The publications and experiments by Reichenbach resulted in decades of global research and attempts to find the “Odic force”. Van Winsen was a Dutch spiritist who believed in “Odic force”, praised Reichenbach’s research methodology, and considered the existence of the universal life force to be proven scientifically. He gives a general overview of the theory in his main publication on spiritism. Van Winsen mentions that the British *Society for Psychical Research* succeeded in taking a photograph of Odic light coming out of the fingertips of a certain Luys in 1897. Again, no picture was included in the document, nor was there a reference to a place where this picture could be found. The “Odic force” was not only popular among spiritists because they share a research methodology with Reichenbach – trying to scientifically prove paranormal phenomena – but also because the universal life force could be used to empirically strengthen the spiritist doctrine. The localization of “Odic force” coming out of an invisible spirit would show the existence of spirits and their dwelling

¹⁷³ Scan from A. de Rochas, *Le Fluide des Magnétiseurs* (1891), uploaded on http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Albert_de_Rochas_Force.jpg (13 June 2012).

on Earth.¹⁷⁴ Some spiritists tried to research the existence of the “Od force”, some used proclaimed successes in researches in this force to strengthen their spiritist hypotheses.

A final and important spiritist practice to be discussed in this section is the practice of magnetism. This is a healing practice which goes back centuries and was used in many religious and spiritual traditions, which was adapted by most spiritists through the works of Franz Mesmer. Mesmer coined the terms “cosmic magnetism” and “animal magnetism” and defined sickness as a disturbance in the magnetic circuit.¹⁷⁵ Magnetism is the most frequently mentioned spiritist practice after organizing séances and is often done before or after séances, because these also function as meetings for spiritists. Magnetism involves the healing of illnesses and medical conditions by emanating magnetic power onto the “patient”. Trained mediums are, apart from abilities to communicate with the dead, presumed to possess relatively strong magnetic powers, which can be used to cure sickness. This magnetic force is a power that a selective group of people can use and which they can develop through inner development and experience. It is part of the ‘fluidium’ which everyone has, but which only talented people know how to use. This force is usually emanated from the “magnetizer’s” fingertips (and sometimes from his feet). This positive, cleansing force is transferred to the location of the patient’s illness and heals it. Magnetism can therefore be said to be a universal remedy, healing “negative” sick aspects of the body with its superior “positive” energy.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ Van Winsen, *Het licht* 106 – 110. De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*.

¹⁷⁵ F.A. Mesmer, *Mesmerism: a translation of the original scientific and medical writings of F. A. Mesmer* (ed. G. Bloch; Los Altos 1980). Heijster, *Parapsychologie*.

¹⁷⁶ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?* Sommer, *Spiritisme*. J.S. Göbel, ‘Het magnetisme is de natuurgeneeswijs bij uitnemendheid’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 June 1912).

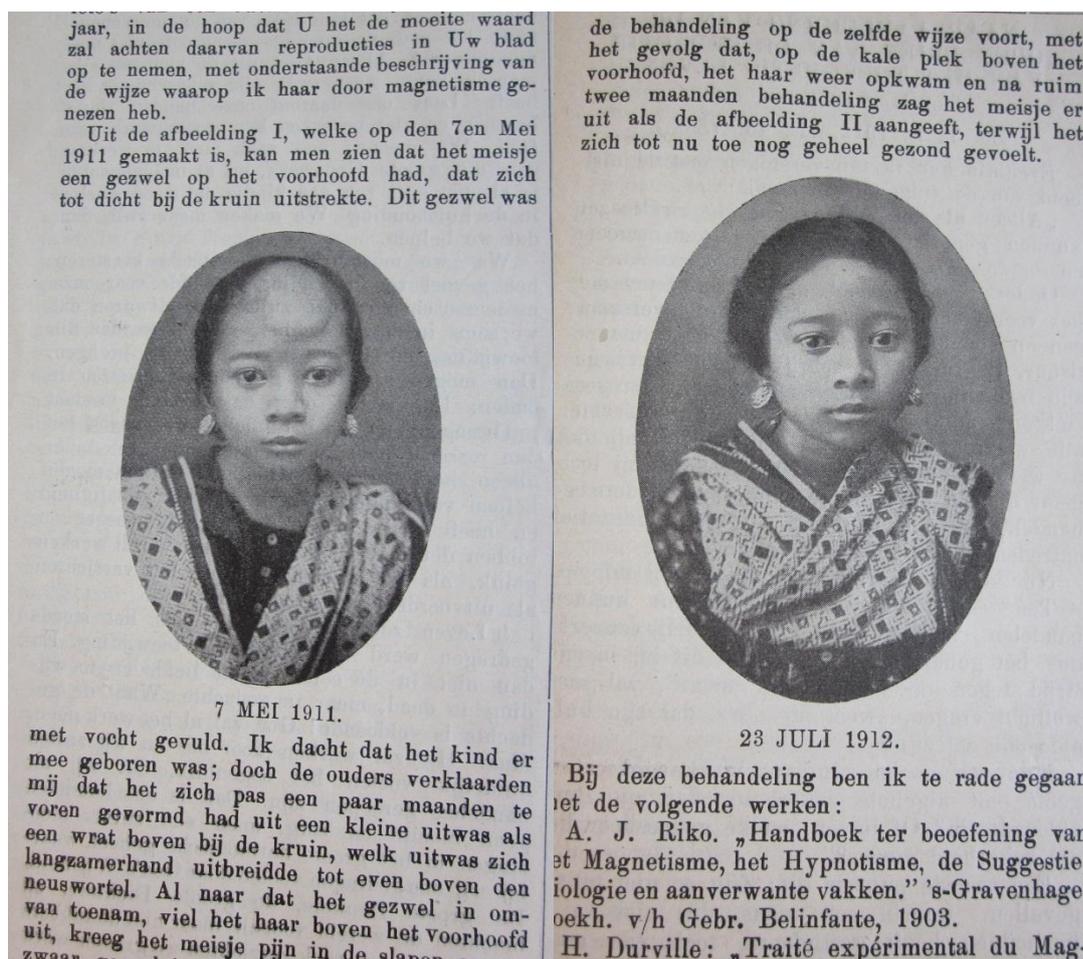


Image 3.8: Left, a picture of a 13-year old Javan girl with a cyst on her forehead, stated to have been taken on 7 May 1911. Right, the same girl on 23 July 1912, now healed from her cyst, which according to the author was done by magnetism.¹⁷⁷

As in the case of spirit photography, spiritist literature and periodicals make frequent mention of incidents where magnetism cured (severe) illnesses. Articles report of it with respect and repeatedly try to show its miraculous powers. An example of this is given in image 3.8. These pictures are taken from a 1912 article which discusses the magnetic healing of a facial cyst of a 13-year old Javan girl (left photo). According to the magnetizer, who is also the author of the article, he put his hands near the cyst for twenty minutes and repeated this several days in a row. Within days, the cyst started to shrink and eventually disappeared completely, as can be seen in the right photo.¹⁷⁸ The story and pictures were included in *Toekomstig Leven* to convince people of the truth of magnetism. The Dutch parapsychologist G. Zorab stated that

¹⁷⁷ H.K.H.W., 'Een genezing door magnetisme', in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 November 1912).

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

magnetism had completely cured people who were terminally ill and allowed patients from the insane asylum to return to completely normal mental health.¹⁷⁹ Stories like this were published quite frequently in spiritist periodicals.¹⁸⁰ Magnetism did get a lot of critique from the scientific and the medical community as being unscientific and not medically approved. It could lead to people with serious illnesses getting treatment from magnetizers while they actually needed a professional medical specialist. There were numerous cases where magnetizers were arrested for pulling off their practices as serious medical science, putting in danger the health of people who believed this.¹⁸¹

Magnetism was extremely popular, yet apart from the connection to the human “fluidium” it seemed to have little to do with spiritism. This also applies to “Odic force”, which was only partially related to spiritism. Why, then, is it treated so extensively in spiritist literature? An explanation for this is that spiritism in practice is seldom an autonomous belief system. For most adherents, spiritism is only *part* of their belief. Many spiritists show interest in beliefs and practices such as hypnotism, occultism, mysticism, Kabbalah, New Age, Eastern Spirituality, astrology, holistic medicine, parapsychology, and so on. It seems characteristic for people who believed in and researched spiritism to also be interested in matters of the occult, the prediction of the future, and/or holistic medicine. These people seemed to bear an interest in *alternative* and unconventional religious, spiritual and other (belief) systems. Spiritism was often just one of them. For this reason, we find many references to telepathy, alternative medicine, hypnosis, and other similar practices in spiritist literature.¹⁸² For example, the socialist politician and spiritist Henri van Kol collected articles on spiritism, but also on occultism, Kabbalah, theosophy, astrology, freemasonry, and more.¹⁸³ Also, the *Spiritist Brotherhood Harmonia* was represented in the ‘Humanitaire- en Idealistische Radio Omroep’ (HIRO) [‘Humanitarian and Idealist Radio Broadcasting Network’], which existed between 1937 and 1940. *Harmonia* had to share their broadcasting time with programs promoting theosophy, Sufism, pacifism, freemasonry, teetotalers, and

¹⁷⁹ G. Zorab, ‘Voorwoord’, in: C.A. Wickland, *Dertig jaar onder de dooden* (Den Haag 1937) 3.

¹⁸⁰ See several issues of *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* between 1912 and 1918.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* Filalethes, ‘Magnetisme en hypnotisme voor den rechter. De zaak-Castellan’, in: *Psychologische Bladen* (’s-Gravenhage; 1 december 1888) and other issues of the same periodical between 1889 and 1890.

¹⁸² Tenhaeff, *Het spiritisme*. Muller, *Het onverklaarbare*. ‘Inventory number 249’, in: *Archief Henri Hubert van Kol* (International Institute for Social History). Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme*. Sommer, *Spiritisme*.

¹⁸³ ‘Inventory number 249’, in: *Archief Henri Hubert van Kol*.

programs opposing vivisection.¹⁸⁴ This shows that people who practiced spiritism often also practiced other belief systems, and that spiritism was part of a larger milieu of alternative, non-conventional political, social, and religious groups.

§ II – Spiritism in the media: the regular press and spiritist periodicals on spirits and séances

In this second paragraph, three topics are discussed. First, we will look at public presentations, séances, informative meetings, and other gatherings organized by spiritists. Next we will look at the press coverage and media attention for spiritists, separated into two categories: those written by spiritist and those written by non-spiritist authors. After this, we will use all the information that has been gathered hitherto to discuss the scientific self-image and *modus operandi* of spiritism: the subject of § III.

Conferences and séances: public spiritist gatherings

The analyses in this section are based on the information that is available in several spiritist pamphlets and periodicals. These mention several national and international spiritist conferences between 1889 and 1912. After the latter year, there is barely any mention of specific spiritist conferences or public gatherings. As the number of spiritist publications also declined from the late 1910's and the early 1920's onwards¹⁸⁵, this could indicate a decline in the practice and popularity of spiritism. We will explain this decline in the next chapter. The British historian of spiritism (and spiritist in her own right) Britten wrote in 1883 that there had been public séances and spiritist presentations in several cities in the Netherlands between 1857 and 1883. Lectures were held, haunted houses started to be interpreted in a modern spiritist fashion, and mediums organized séances and visited families. There were even reports of public séances which were organized in Rotterdam and which everyone who was interested was allowed to witness.¹⁸⁶ The Netherlands thus knew a history of public spiritist presence and organized gatherings before 1890.

¹⁸⁴ *Archief Humanitaire- en Idealistische Radio Omroep* (International Institute of Social History).

¹⁸⁵ See the relatively large percentage of sources published between 1890 and 1920 in the bibliography as opposed to those published after 1920.

¹⁸⁶ Britten, *Nineteenth Century Miracles* 326 – 336.

International spiritist conferences or conferences that paid significant attention to spiritism were organized in 1889, 1890, and 1900. In 1889, there was a congress of spiritists and spiritualists in Paris which, according to a Dutch spiritist periodical, over 40.000 people and journalists of 95 different journals attended. During this conference, there were also lectures and discussions on theosophy, occultism, Kabbalah, and freemasonry – though spiritism formed the main subject area. This supports the observation that people who adhered to spiritism often also participated in other alternative and unconventional religious and spiritual groups and practices, which was concluded in the previous section. Two interesting statements were made in the press coverage of this congress. First, there was mention of a large group of active female mediums and spiritists.¹⁸⁷ This may refer to a relative increase in the number of female spiritists at an early stage, which in the early twentieth century resulted in a majority of mediums being female.¹⁸⁸ The second statement described how spiritist organizations were hesitant of allowing new members to join and often installed a stricter membership policy. This was because of the large amount of negative media coverage and accusations of fraud, hallucination, and other unpleasant things. Because of this, many organizations were apparently hesitant of allowing new members to join, because they feared infiltration from groups hostile to spiritism.¹⁸⁹ Around this time Dutch spiritists and spiritist organization may have started to adopt a more esoteric and closed character, which became characteristic for twentieth-century spiritism in the Netherlands. Other reasons for this withdrawal, such as the intensification of pillarization in Dutch society and competition with scientists, will be made clear in the next chapter

In 1900 there was another international spiritist congress. At this congress, the psychology of hypnosis and suggestion, the exteriorization of sensibility, the movement of objects without contact, telepathy, clairvoyance, and the measurement of the *force vitale* (the universal life force) were discussed. Again, we see a variety of spiritist and non-spiritist phenomena. An interesting event was that before the congress, in a piece published in *Psychologische Bladen* [‘Psychological Papers’], all subscribers were called upon to send in reports of their personal experiences of previous lives, predictions done by spirits that had

¹⁸⁷ Author unknown, ‘Internationaal kongres van spiritualisten en spiritisten te Parijs’, in: *Psychologische Bladen* (’s-Gravenhage; 1 oktober 1889) 12 – 14.

¹⁸⁸ Laenen, *Hedendaagsch spiritisme*. Sommer, *Spiritisme*.

¹⁸⁹ Author unknown, ‘Internationaal kongres’ 12 – 14.

come true, and other messages communicated by spirits.¹⁹⁰ Spiritists were thus actively gathering and collecting personal narratives. In this way they could collect a large and wide array of stories reporting spiritist experiences to create a strong empirical basis for their claims. Ironically, these calls to send in one's own spiritist experiences would be used by opponents to stress the unreliability of the sources used to strengthen the spiritist hypothesis. Calls like this, it was argued, reflected the uncritical way in which spiritists dealt with their source material, because they simply relied on random stories sent in by random people without problematizing authors and contents.¹⁹¹

Apart from these large, international conferences, spiritist periodicals also mentioned several smaller regional and local spiritist gatherings. Usually, these events got a short announcement in the journal, followed by a brief and general report. A lecture by Beversluis in 1912 was attended by over two hundred persons, which, judging from the positive language that was used in the report, was considered a success. Special mention was made of the fact that there were not only spiritists, but also generally interested individuals present.¹⁹² In the winter of 1911/1912, the spiritist Broekhuizen and Göbel organized and gave the 'spirities-religieuse [*sic*] lezingen' ['spiritist-religious lectures'], where the relations between Christianity and spiritism were discussed. They were possibly not that successful. They were announced as the first two lectures in a larger series, but afterwards were never heard of again and were thus probably discontinued.¹⁹³ Spiritism was presumably more popular in the northern province of Friesland, where two lectures held in Drachten and Jorwerd were reported as having been visited by large amounts of interested people. They were considered a success and the report was followed by an announcement of the opening of a spiritist

¹⁹⁰ Author unknown, 'Spiritistisch Congres', in: *Psychologische bladen. Nieuwe reeks. Orgaan van den "Nederlandschen Okkultistenkring". Gewijd aan de studie van Okkultisme, Psychische geneeswijze, enz.* (15 January 1900) 6. M.Brady Brower, *Unruly Spirits: The Science of Psychic Phenomena in Modern France* (Chicago 2010) 48 – 49.

¹⁹¹ Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme*.

¹⁹² H.v.B.v.A., 'Spiritualisme en Godsdienst', in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 January 1912).

¹⁹³ K.C. Jaski, 'De twee eerste spirities-religieuse lezingen, gehouden in de winter 1911 – 1912 te Nijmegen', in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 April 1912).

bookstore.¹⁹⁴ This seems to correspond with reports by Catholics that many Frisian Catholics were getting involved with spiritism at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁹⁵ As we will see in the next chapter, many Catholic and Protestant clergy were worried about the (in their eyes) increasing and dangerous popularity of spiritism. At least once, the ‘Vereeniging voor Christelijke Wijsbegeerte’ [‘Organization for Christian philosophy’] dedicated a series of meetings to a critique of the psychological and philosophical value of spiritism, issuing clear warning against its practice by believing Christians.¹⁹⁶ This Kampen-based organization was a group of theologians and theology students who discussed social issues that were connected to Christianity.¹⁹⁷ In conclusion, there were some other public lectures organized by spiritists¹⁹⁸, but overall there was relatively little mention of public gatherings in spiritist periodicals. Those that were organized were not always successful and the organization *an Sich* of spiritist meeting did not seem to be a lucrative and successful business. It is therefore plausible that the little mention of spiritist lectures can be attributed to these lectures simply not often taking place.

Media attention: the public image of spiritism in the press and the spiritist self-image

In this section, the press coverage of spiritism will be discussed. The first category that will be discussed is that of the non-spiritists, which can largely be equated to the general press. The discussion of spiritist phenomena and the debates between spiritists and their opponents were far from popular in the Dutch media. The debates almost completely took place in the form of (often self-published) pamphlets. Some advertisements were placed in several Dutch newspapers, but apart from that spiritist articles were barely present in the larger papers. When a piece was published, it was usually negative in tone. In fact, most news items about

¹⁹⁴ C.J. van Holthe tot Echten, ‘Propaganda in zake spiritisme in Friesland’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 March 1915).

¹⁹⁵ Draaisma, *Wat is het spiritisme?* 19.

¹⁹⁶ J.S. Göbel, ‘De christelijke wetenschap begint aandacht te schenken aan het spiritisme’, in: *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (15 June 1911).

¹⁹⁷ A. Baars, ‘Wisse versus Schilder’, in: *Reformatorsch Dagblad* (2 October 2010).

¹⁹⁸ Author unknown, ‘Lezing te Amsterdam’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 December 1912). Author unknown, ‘Lezing te Apeldoorn’, in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (1 July 1915).

spiritism were about the unmasking of so-called mediums and their exposure as imposters. These exposures are often disputed. Sometimes, these reports are simply dismissed as slander by enemies of spiritism. This is shown from the fact that some “unmasked” mediums continue to write for *Psychologische Bladen* or *Toekomstig Leven* after their so-called exposure.¹⁹⁹ Of course, spiritists also admitted that there were imposters within their midst and often acknowledged that fraud had been committed by people proclaiming to be spiritist mediums. As there was no central organ where certified mediums were registered, spiritists seldom felt responsible for this fraud. An interesting and oft-heard response to accusations of fraud is that the accused medium was in trance when he was executing the spiritist practices and was not conscious and therefore not accountable for what happened.²⁰⁰ The flower medium Anna Rothe was accused of having stuffed the flowers – which were supposed to have magically appeared – in her clothes. She dismissed this, saying that while she was in trance, her astral body must have gone to the store to buy them and bring them back to her. In this way, she tried to account for the fact that there had been flowers present in her dress while denying that she had willingly tried to delude people.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ A.L. Constandse, *Leven de dooden?* Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*.

²⁰⁰ Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*.

²⁰¹ v.d. W., ‘Onze leestafel’, in: *Onze Eeuw* (Haarlem 1909) 132.

Lakens van Prima Graslinnen
met breede en smalle zoom.
Alle $3\frac{1}{2}$ El lang.

125 cM. br. f.16.30	164 cM. br. f.20.10
136 " " "17.20	180 " " "22.20
152 " " "18.85	200 " " "26.40

SLOOPEN 60 x 80 cM.
Zonder overslag f 7.—
Met " " 8.50

Lakens van Valentinalinnen
met à jour en figuur rand.
Zeer mooi en fijn $3\frac{1}{2}$ El lang.

136 cM. br. f.20.60	170 cM. br. f.27.90
154 " " "25.05	200 " " "34.90

Bijpassende SLOOPEN
met overslag f 10.90

Uitzette	Uitrustingen
en	Luiermanden

gemaakt en ongemaakt.
Vraag *Stalen en Monsters*;
deze worden franco toege-
zonden, en overtuig U van de
soliditeit mijner Artikelen.

H. H. KOLTHOF,
(7491) Fabrikant, Almelo.

hun veroorloven te doen zien hoe gemakkelijk het is genezen te worden als men het ware geneesmiddel aanwendt. Het Instituut maakt geene uitzonderingen. Elke man die het vraagt, zal een gratis monster ontvangen, zorgvuldig verpakt als een gewoon pakje, zoodat de persoon die het ontvangt geene publiciteit of onaangenaamheden te vreezen heeft. De lezers worden verzocht zonder dralen te schrijven.

Men wete, dat een brief naar Amerika voorzien moet worden met een postzegel van $12\frac{1}{2}$ cent. Schrijft uw naam zeer duidelijk en geeft uw compleet adres, opdat er geene vergissing in de afzending kan voorkomen. (3682)

SPIRITISME.

Het spiritisme (spiritualisme) levert het wetenschappelijk bewijs van 's menschen zelfbewust, individueel voortleven na den stoffelijken dood en van de mogelijkheid om alsdan met de op aarde achtergeblevenen in gemeenschap te treden. Alle vraagstukken, met dit onderwerp in betrekking staande, worden uitvoerig behandeld in het halfmaandelijks-*h Tijdschrift*

Het Toekomstig Leven,

gewijd aan de studie van het spiritualisme en aanverwante verschanselen, onder redactie van J. S. GÖBEL en H. N. DE FREMERY. Abbonem.prijs per jaar bij vooruitbetaling f 3.00 (buitenland f 4.00). Afzonderlijke nummers 25 cts.

Men abonneert zich bij elken Boekhandelaar en bij den Administrateur H. N. DE FREMERY, te Bussum, Oudeberm. (7158)

Nieuw Malthusiaansche Bond.

Goedgekeurd bij Koninklijk Besluit (dd. 30 Jan. 1895).
Mevrouw C. RICHTER-NELIS, Gediplomeerd Medewerksters.
Consult dag. 1—5 en 7—9, ook v. minv. Inl. kostel., *Brouwersgr. 4, Amsterdam.*

Image 3.9: An advertisement for spiritism and a spiritist periodical in the newspaper *Het Nieuws van den Dag* of 14 December 1912²⁰²

Spiritism was thus frequently discussed in spiritist periodicals. This was the main platform where spiritists could publish, as newspapers were not keen on publishing spiritist articles, let alone articles favorable towards spiritism. Spiritists sometimes complained of the bias of the prejudiced popular press towards anti-spiritism, but this never had any influence on their chances of publishing in the media.²⁰³ For this reason, spiritists had to focus on their own periodicals, of which they established quite a few. The first spiritist journals were founded in the late nineteenth century, such as the aforementioned *Toekomstig Leven* by J.S. Göbel and *Op de grenzen van twee werelden* [‘at the borders of two worlds’] by Elise van Calcar.²⁰⁴ *Psychologische Bladen*, which was founded in 1888, also occasionally published spiritist articles. Roorda van Eysinga started publishing a spiritist magazine called *De blijde boodschap* [‘The joyful message’] towards the close of the nineteenth century²⁰⁵ and

²⁰² *Het Nieuws van den Dag* (14 December 1912) 3.

²⁰³ Attema, *Geen handen af* 5. Fremery, *Het goed recht* 2.

²⁰⁴ Heijster, *Parapsychologie*.

²⁰⁵ This periodical allegedly appeared between 1885 and Roorda van Eysinga’s death in 1897. The only known preserved paper issues are listed in the collection of Utrecht University. However, when trying to get access to

Beverluis started single-handedly filling and publishing the periodical *Geest en Leven* ['Spirit and Life'] from 1898 onwards.²⁰⁶ Finally, the organization *Veritas* started its own magazine, *Spiritische Bladen*, in 1884. This periodical was discontinued in 1887, but revived in 1926 by the *Spiritist Brotherhood Harmonia*, who adopted the name for their monthly magazine which they (albeit under a different name) continue until this day.²⁰⁷ Altogether, there were quite a number of different spiritist periodicals from the late nineteenth century onwards. Most of these periodicals, with the exception of *Spiritische Bladen* (which still exists) and *Toekomstig Leven* (which lasted until 1951), would be discontinued before the 1930's. They had a short, but vibrant existence. Most spiritist periodicals came out once or twice a month and were filled with varying and original stories. With the diminishing interest in spiritism from the 1920's onwards, these magazines probably faced a lack of readers, funds, and/or contributors and were forced to terminate their activities.

these periodicals, it turned out that Utrecht University could no longer localize these issues. They remain lost up until now.

²⁰⁶ Beverluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme*.

²⁰⁷ 'Tijdschrift Harmonia-Nederland', http://www.harmonia-nl.org/harm_nl.html (14 June 2012). Search results of Picarta:
<http://picarta.pica.nl/xslt/DB=2.41/SET=9/TTL=1/CMD?ACT=SRCHA&IKT=1016&SRT=&TRM=spiritische+bladen> (14 June 2012).



Image 3.10: The front page of *Toekomstig Leven*, one of the most popular spiritist periodicals²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ *Toekomstig Leven*. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen (1 June 1918).

Other spiritist publications appeared during this period, besides books, pamphlets, and periodicals. The most frequently occurring examples consisted of novels containing positive messages about spiritism, which were possibly included to convince readers of the truth and value of spiritism. An example of this is the novel *De zoekers* [‘The seekers’]. This book contains a very poor plot and the storyline is not well-developed. Yet, the book contains a lot of references to spiritism and is clearly meant to promote the truth and value of spiritism.²⁰⁹ It was also reviewed as such in the literary magazine *Groot Nederland*.²¹⁰ Another person who artistically tried to promote spiritism was the playwright Marcellus Emants. In his play *Tegenover het mysterie* [‘Opposed to the mystery’] he clearly advocates the truth and practice of spiritism and séances. A noteworthy detail is that Marcellus Emants was quite a successful Dutch writer. His novel *Een nagelaten bekentenis* [‘A left confession’] from 1894 is an important work in Dutch literature and one of the few examples of naturalism in the Netherlands. The play about spiritism, however, was refused by four major theatre performance groups. It was still published in the prestigious Dutch literary journal *De Gids*, but there is no report of the play ever having been performed.²¹¹ These are two prime examples of spiritists promoting their belief system through artistic and literary means. Of course, other parties, such as the *opponents* of spiritism, could do the same. The novel *Goëtia*, written by F. Lapidoth, does the exact same thing as Jaeger’s *De zoekers*. This novel was first translated from German in 1893 and was reviewed by a few Dutch magazines. Its storyline is poorly developed and the entire novel is about how modern spiritism and occultism are the continuance of old witchery and superstition. However, these superstitious individuals are no longer burned at the stake, but are laughed at and ignored. The novel clearly tries to denigrate and ridicule spiritists, by comparing them to all sorts of pagan superstition.²¹² The 1920 novella *Angst* by Brandt van Doorne (pseudonym for R.A. Kolléwijn), which was published in the Dutch literary periodical *Groot Nederland*, takes a different, more negative approach. Here, a vivid description is given of how a girl with a powerful imagination truly suffers from

²⁰⁹ F.M. Jaeger, *De zoekers* (Amsterdam 1902).

²¹⁰ K., ‘Bibliografie’, in: C. Buysse, L. Couperus, and W. G. van Nouhuys (ed.), *Groot Nederland. Letterkundig Maandschrift voor den Nederlandschen stam* (Amsterdam 1903) 126 – 127.

²¹¹ Emants, ‘Tegenover het mysterie’ 1 – 53.

²¹² F. Lapidoth, *Goëtia* (Leiden 1893). Author unknown, ‘Bibliographie’, in: *De Gids* 57 (Amsterdam 1893) 567 – 568.

a belief in and fear of spirits. The girl's suffering is central to the story and the reader is increasingly confronted with how unbearable the girl's life gets.²¹³

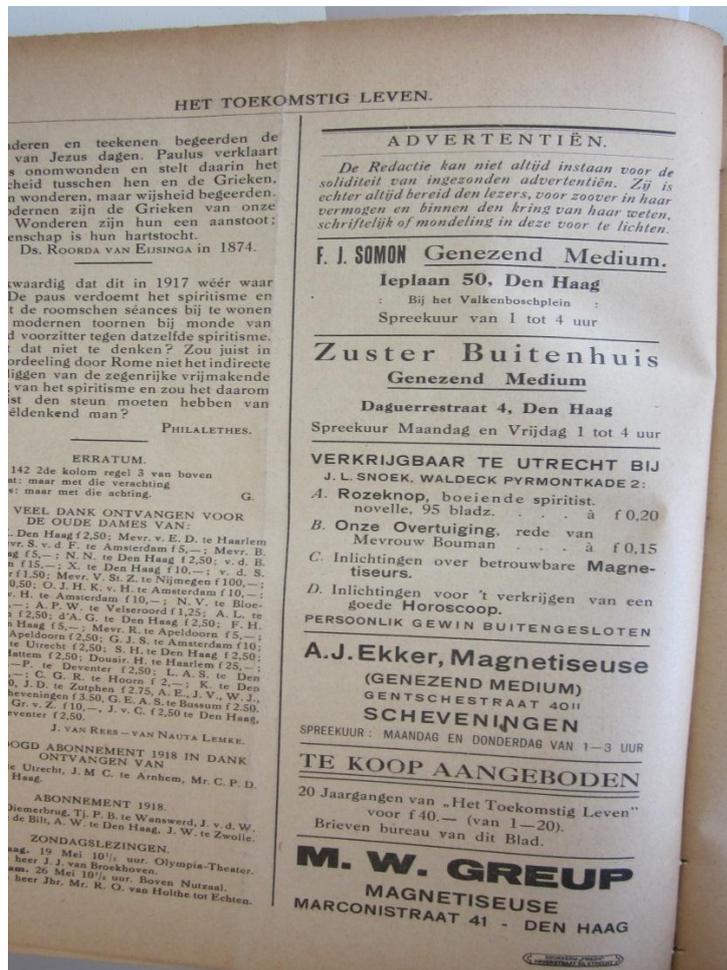


Image 3.11: Advertisements for (healing) mediums, magnetizers, spiritist literature in spiritist periodical *Toekomstig Leven*²¹⁴

We can conclude that press coverage and artistic attempts of spiritists followed a similar pattern as the debates going on in spiritist and anti-spiritist books, pamphlets, and periodicals. In both cases, there is a clearly polarized environment, where nuanced opinions represent a minority. Both parties do their best to stigmatize their opponent and to strengthen and

²¹³ Brandt van Doorne, 'Angst', in: *Groot Nederland. Letterkundig maandschrift voor den Nederlandschen stam* 18 (2nd part; Amsterdam 1920) 345 – 369, 491 – 524. J.J. Salverda de Grave, 'Roeland Anthonie Kollewijn', in: *Handelingen en levensberichten van de Maatschappij der Nederlandsche Letterkunde te Leiden*, 1941 – 1942 (Leiden 1942) 98.

²¹⁴ *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 May 1915).

convince people of their own position. Anti-spiritists either turn to science and state that spiritists have *not* properly understood the scientific method and have not scientifically proven any paranormal phenomenon at all; or to faith, and state that spiritism is a sinful and satanic activity from which true Christians should refrain. Spiritists generally stress their strict use of the scientific method and state that the spiritist facts *have* been proven. They also repeatedly state that their opponents have never sufficiently studied the spiritist phenomena and are therefore in no position to criticize them. We will now continue with the third and final section of this chapter, in which we will briefly discuss the spiritists' attitude towards science.

§ III – Spiritism and science – A *modus operandi* or a flawed self-image?

In this final section, we will discuss spiritism's definition and appreciation of the scientific method, its (non-)scientific *modus operandi*, and how the scientific method influenced their self-image. We have already repeatedly come across the relation between spiritism and science. It should by now be clear that spiritism sees itself as a scientifically proven belief system and that its strength lies in the fact that it scientifically proves the paranormal phenomena and processes it describes. According to Beversluis and many other spiritists, it is exactly this central scientific component that distinguishes modern spiritism from prior, pre-scientific spiritism. It also distinguishes spiritism from the Catholic and Protestant belief systems, because the latter cannot found their argument on scientific evidence.²¹⁵ This continuous and repeated stressing of their scientific *modus operandi* is one of the most important and central characteristics of modern spiritism.

In spite of this importance, spiritists had a pretty general definition of the scientific method and did not tend to problematize or extensively describe this method. What was described was the fact that one should rely on *observable* facts and should start the research without prior conclusions, ideas of the outcome, and prejudices. The researcher should be as objective and unbiased as possible. Experiments in and observations of table knocking, spirit photography, direct writing, and other things that we have discussed above were to verify the spiritist hypothesis. The research results should leave no other possible hypothesis that can explain the phenomena than the spiritist one. This strict research method was demanded in order to truly prove the spiritist hypothesis. This focus on science seemed to wish to target

²¹⁵ Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme* 17 – 18.

two issues. First, it wanted to prove the truth of the spiritist hypothesis to spiritists *themselves*. In this way, they were sure that they were doing the right thing and that their belief system was correct. Second, it wanted to voice a strong and empirical response to the accusations, objections, and ridicule thrown at spiritists by their opponents. As we will see in the next chapter, these objections often consisted of a criticism on the spiritists' lack of empirical foundation for their hypothesis, which was often regarded as speculative superstition. The fact that spiritists only vaguely described their "scientific method" and did not seem to possess a large knowledge of epistemological theories often resulted in critics simply repeating their objections, stating that spiritists have not understood what the scientific method means. This, in turn, usually resulted in one side withdrawing from the discussion, name-calling, or simply ending the discussion in disagreement.

In short, although spiritists showed a large appreciation for the scientific method and deemed it of crucial importance, they defined their interpretation of it in vague and general terms. It is unknown how "scientific" the spiritists' *modus operandi* really was. Discussions about this often resulted in spiritists calling themselves scientific and opponents stating the opposite. The extensive disproof and refuting of counter-arguments, stating that spiritism was fraud or delusion, was a standard strategy of spiritists. A lot of attention was given to mapping out anti-spiritist arguments and debunking them in detail, making the spiritist hypothesis the only possible explanation once more. Modern Dutch spiritists drew their inspiration to focus on the scientific method from their British counterparts. In 1867, the *London Dialectical Society* was established. This was one of the first organizations to research spiritist phenomena in a scientific manner. The organization received considerable media attention in the West, including the Netherlands, and claimed scientific success. They performed a test on hundreds of people in 1869, which according to them proved the existence of certain paranormal phenomena. The accuracy of this test was recognized by all members.²¹⁶ A second and even more influential British organization was the *Society for Psychical Research* (SPR), established in 1882. This was and is an organization founded in order to achieve the same goals: "to examine allegedly paranormal phenomena in a scientific and unbiased way."²¹⁷ This organization also tried to counter the scientific dogmatism which, according to spiritists, was prevalent in science. Scientific dogmatism referred to a situation in which scientific truths had become static, stale, and dogmatic and were no longer open for

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* 13. De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*.

²¹⁷ J.M. Higgins and C. Bergman, *The Everything Guide to Evidence of the Afterlife: A Scientific Approach to Proving the Existence of Life After Death* (Avon 2011) 263.

discussion. Spiritism and the SPR called for a scientific research of *all* phenomena, thus also phenomena deemed to be paranormal. Some respected scientists became board members of the SPR and started to research these phenomena and publish their results. This naturally impressed many of the Dutch spiritist organizations, which were generally just beginning to organize themselves and starting their research. The SPR and one of its most active and prolific members, William Crookes, were very frequently mentioned in spiritist literature.²¹⁸ The international trends largely set by these two organizations had a decisive influence on Dutch spiritism and contributed to their focus on the use of the scientific method.

The most important facet of modern spiritism, according to its advocates, was that their hypothesis had been, or would be, proven scientifically. Some stated that the spiritist phenomena had already been proven and that there were countless research results showing the undeniable truth of the spiritist hypothesis. Attema stated that opponents could keep pointing out what they do not *like* about spiritism; this was irrelevant for something which had scientifically been proven. One does not refuse to believe in the existence of cancer because one dislikes its effects. Beversluis stated that most critics are from a religious tradition that was being endangered by the scientific evidence gathered by spiritists and that this is what motivated their categorical denial of spiritism. Other spiritists stated that this was still a work in progress and that the spiritist hypothesis had not been proven *yet*. However, according to spiritists, contemporary scientific results hinted at the verification of the theory and more future research would probably give conclusive evidence. Both these theses show an incredible confidence in the scientific method *and* the spiritist hypothesis.²¹⁹ In conclusion, the view that their research, *modus operandi*, and spiritism as such, were essentially scientific was something that defined Dutch spiritism between 1890 and 1940.

²¹⁸ I. Grattan-Guinness, *Psychical research: a guide to its history, principles and practices: in celebration of 100 years of the Society for Psychical Research* (Wellingborough 1982). Heijster, *Parapsychologie*. Göbel and Snijders, *Spiritisme*. Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?* ‘Society for Psychical Research’, <http://www.spr.ac.uk/main/> (15 June 2012).

²¹⁹ Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme*. Attema, *Geen handen af* 8 – 9. Beversluis, *Catechismus* 17. Zeehandelaar, *Het spiritisme* 8. F. van Eeden, ‘Het Hypnotisme en de Wonderen’, in: *De Nieuwe Gids* 2 (Amsterdam 1887) 246 – 269. De Fremery, *Het goed recht*. Van Winsen, *Het licht* 4 – 5. Eene Nederlandsche Vrouw, *Spiritualisme*. D.C. Wijnands, *Critische beschouwing der spiritische verschijnselen* (Haarlem 1912).

§ IV – Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, the following research question was posed:

How did the spiritists' practices and expressions contribute to the construction of the spiritists' self-image in Dutch society between 1890 and 1940?

This broad question was answered in three sections. We started out by discussing séances. With regard to séances, two groups of spiritists can be distinguished. There were the active spiritists who consciously and actively tried to summon spirits. This group seemed to form a tiny minority, although opponents regarded them as the standard. The majority of spiritists were *passive* spiritists. They stated that a medium could meet the necessary prerequisites for a séance and concentrate on being open and receptive for the communication with spirits, but that it was the *spirits* who initiated contact and came to *us*. There was no active summoning, only a friendly welcoming and the easing of the communication process. We have also seen that séances are only a part of what spiritism was about. Spiritists were also involved in ethical ventures (as discussed in the previous chapter), healing practices, conferences, periodicals, debates, and much more.

Another interesting conclusion was shown by the analysis of spiritist publications, periodicals, and media coverage. We have seen that spiritism was never popular in the mainstream press. Not only was very little published about it, but what *was* published about spiritism was usually hostile in tone. Pro-spiritist articles were barely ever published in national newspapers. Spiritists felt discriminated against because of these publications and even felt threatened by their opponents, who, they thought, infiltrated their organizations in order to get damaging information that they could leak to the press. For this reason, spiritists largely published in their own periodicals. After 1890, there were a considerable number of spiritist journals and books that appeared and many public presentations were organized. Some of these gatherings were well attended and regarded as a success. The popularity of spiritism seemed to dwindle from the late 1910's and early 1920's onwards. Around 1920, less books on spiritism appeared, less presentations were organized, and more spiritist periodicals were terminated. The reasons for this are discussed in the next chapter.

We have also discussed what spiritists saw as quintessential to their belief system: the scientific provability of the spiritist hypothesis. In spite of the continuously stressed importance of the scientific method, spiritists hardly elaborated on how they defined this

method. They repeated the fact that a research should only focus on observable and verifiable facts and that the method should be strictly maintained, but a clear epistemological program was omitted. Although the method remains shadowy, we cannot state that the spiritists had no scientific methodology at all. Several prerequisites for a successful séance were mentioned, as well as factors that could disrupt communication with the deceased. Clear warnings were given of false, delusional and suggestive information that could be obtained by using wrong techniques and that one should be very critical of messages received from spirits. It was thus important for spiritists to meet certain standards to keep results reliable. So though the spiritists' interpretation of science remains vague and unclear, they were nevertheless focused on making their hypothesis provable. I would once again like to remind the reader of the illustrative citation by Hellenbach, which showed that many people were rather convinced by stories *about* the spiritist experiments than by the actual research results.

Finally, we have anticipated the debates between spiritists and their opponents that are discussed in the next chapter. Here we see that spiritists were regularly accused of fraud, suffering from hallucination or (auto)suggestion, and of being unscientific. Spiritists often went to great lengths in replying to these accusations. In many spiritist publications, there were lists with accusations by opponents, which were one by one discussed and debunked. These writings had a tendency to being Hegelian in nature, proposing the spiritist thesis, discussing and integrating the opponents' antithesis, which leaves us with a spiritist synthesis, where the spiritist hypothesis triumphs after the debate. Of course, this only held true from a spiritist perspective. The anti-spiritists were almost unanimously unconvinced by the spiritist rebuttal of their objections. This often resulted in one side withdrawing from the discussion, name-calling, or simply ending the discussion in disagreement. These often seemed to be the only options left when both sides use such different lines of reasoning and logic, which almost inevitably results in paradigmatic incommensurability. Both sides did, however, largely use the same tactics. They both published literature in which they extensively discussed their own hypothesis and stigmatized their opponents. They both weaved their messages into literary and artistic works and both used science to strengthen their theories. We will now turn to the fourth and final chapter, in which discussions and interaction between spiritists and religious and scientific groups in Dutch society will further be discussed.

Chapter Four: Polemics with the pillars: spiritists and Dutch society

In this final chapter, the relation between spiritists and groups in Dutch society will be discussed. The text will largely focus on the relation between spiritists and the established religions, the socialists, and the scientists between 1890 and 1940. The research question for this chapter is:

In what ways did spiritists interact, clash and overlap with the established religious denominations and with the scientific community in the Netherlands between 1890 and 1940?

By answering this question, we can further research and observe the complex relation between spiritism and established religious denominations. The importance of this lies in the fact that spiritists spent a lot of time and energy on discussions over the spiritist hypothesis with their Christian opponents. Nevertheless, many spiritists regarded themselves as good and sometimes even as superior Christians. This chapter will tackle both the positive and negative interaction between spiritism and established religion.

The chapter is divided into five paragraphs, each dealing with a particular social group and its relation to spiritism. We will first discuss the interaction and clash between spiritists and Catholics (§ I), followed by that between spiritists and Protestants (§ II). The third paragraph (§ III) will discuss the socialists and theosophists. Both of these groups have a secondary relation to spiritism, which does not require a very lengthy analysis. For this reason, these largely unrelated traditions have been grouped together in one section. We will not discuss the interaction between spiritists and liberals, because very little of this interaction is known. After having discussed the interaction with these three groups we will turn to the interaction between spiritists and the scientific community (§ IV). What I call the “scientific community” does not exclusively consist of scientists, but mainly of people using scientific discourse and arguments to deal with spiritists. A fifth and final section (§ V) will reflect on how and whether spiritists withstood all these attacks and accusations. This section finally draws conclusions on the spiritists’ replies and self-image amidst all these debates. Collectively, these five sections will show the relation between spiritists and Dutch society and how spiritists operated in this heated social atmosphere.

§ I – Rivaling the monopoly on communications with the afterlife: spiritists and Dutch Catholicism

The relation between spiritists and Catholics was diverse and complex, but nevertheless almost wholly negative. There was little sympathy or enthusiasm from both sides, though spiritists as well as Catholics devoted time and attention to criticizing each other's doctrines. In this paragraph, the critique that Dutch Catholics voiced towards spiritists will be discussed. We will first discuss the Catholic "diabolical theory", which states that the spirits with whom spiritists communicate are actually demons or possibly even Satan himself. In the subsequent section, we will look at how past popes and other clergy have dealt with the emergence of modern spiritism. Next, we will look at other criticism voiced by Catholics. In a concluding paragraph, we will summarize and analyze the Catholic attitude towards spiritists.

Satanic Spiritism: Catholics on spiritism as devilry

The most popular theory on spiritism among Catholics, which was frequently used in debates, was the so-called "diabolical theory".²²⁰ This theory states that the spirits with whom spiritists allegedly communicate are not the ghosts of the deceased at all. They are evil demons, or possibly even Satan himself, who have tricked the spiritists into believing that they are speaking with human spirits. For this reason, spiritism is regarded a grave *sin*, because it involves communicating and working with the Devil, which is strictly forbidden within Catholicism. People convincing others of the spiritist hypothesis and thus spreading the spiritist message are actually spreading the word of Satan and enlarging the power of the nemesis of Christianity. The mere attendance of a spiritist séance is seen as sinful, because it involves being present at a satanic ritual without interfering and preventing this from happening, which is insulting to God. This could explain why Catholics do not personally investigate spiritist research results, something which the spiritists repeatedly ask others to do. The Catholic De Veer sr. states that contacting the deceased is prohibited by the Bible. Although spiritists do not actually contact the dead – souls and angels are, according to De Veer, too superior to participate in necromancy – the active *striving* towards establishing this

²²⁰ A.W. van Renterghem, 'De vrije uitoefening der geneeskunst in Nederland', in: *De Gids* 78 (Amsterdam 1914) 506 – 507.

contact is already sinful. The Catholic Waterreus agrees that it is indeed spirits contacting the spiritists, but these spirits are neither wise nor benevolent. The communication with these spirits is the latest way through which Satan tries to lead mankind astray. Satan can also cause miracles and unexplainable phenomena to delude people into doing his work. Waterreus sees spiritism, with its call to replace Christianity in a more perfected form, as a direct assault on the Catholic Church and as a call to destroy the Catholic teachings and destroy Christianity. The fact that spiritists try to evocate a pious and ethical image makes their attempts even more dangerous and sinful. Waterreus argues that the contacted spirits *cannot* be souls of the deceased, because Catholic theology shows that souls dwelling in heaven have no way of contacting the living. Also, the spiritist idea that souls can still develop after death is in violation with Catholic theology. Finally, the fact that so many spiritists contradict each other's stories and theories shows their confusion, delusion, and lack of organization. In conclusion, spiritism is seen as the work of Satan. Many Catholic authors state that they wrote their anti-spiritist publications *because* they want to battle the realm of Satan and people who have fallen under his command.²²¹

The idea that spiritists committed sinful and satanic deeds while they claimed to be pious and superior to Catholicism led to Catholics to compare them to the Antichrist. According to Waterreus, the work of the Antichrist can be recognized in the spiritists' attempt to overthrow and replace the Catholic Church, while promising its followers that *they* will be the one obtaining a (higher) place in heaven. By calling Christ the most gifted spiritist medium that ever lived, they insult and alter the Catholic interpretation of the Bible and therefore directly mock and insult God Himself. Each of these remarks is seen as a sign that spiritism is the work of the Antichrist. Practicing this teaching will strengthen the Antichrist and pave the way for his coming.²²² Catholics thus try to discourage their followers from participating in spiritism by comparing it to Satanism and stressing that spiritism is strictly prohibited by the Catholic Church. By calling it the work of the devil, Catholics can state that the spiritist phenomena *can* be miraculous, while at the same time stating that these are *not* caused by the spirits of the deceased and that good Catholics should refrain from participating in spiritist activities. It is therefore interesting to note that several Catholic authors *do* think

²²¹ Laenen, *Hedendaagsch spiritisme*. De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*. A.J.H.M. van Baar, *Roomsche-Katholiek spiritisme: naar aanleiding van 'De dooden leven' door Robert Klimsch en Hyacinth Hermans* ('s-Gravenhage 1941) 23. J. Waterreus, *Het spiritisme, een werk des duivels. Eene waarschuwing aan alle christenen* (Utrecht 1909). Draaisma, *Wat is het spiritisme? Anti-Spiritist, Kort begrip van het spiritisme* (Goes 1886).

²²² Waterreus, *Het spiritisme*. Draaisma, *Wat is het spiritisme?*

that communication with the dead is possible, but that it is prohibited by the Bible. After all, in the Bible there are several stories in which spirits are successfully summoned. Some spirits are even reported as confirming the truth of Catholic theology from beyond the grave. It can therefore not be said that communicating with the dead is impossible, but only that it is prohibited by the Mosaic Law and the Roman Catholic Church. Most Catholic authors seem to take a combined stand: some communication is with souls, some with demons, but all communication is sinful.²²³ Spiritism is the work of Satan, the Antichrist, and demonic powers and this can be shown by the way it operates and what it says about religion when interpreted in the light of the Bible and Catholic theology. In the next section, we will see how Church officials have responded to the emergence of modern spiritism.

Decrees on diabolism: official Church ordinances on spiritism

Several Catholic publications make mention of official church decrees prohibiting the practice of spiritism. In this way, they further strengthen their argument that spiritism is prohibited, unethical, delusional and devilish. Initially, the Holy See said relatively little about spiritism, though it certainly did not approve of it. According to the historian Lynn Sharp, the Church was probably reluctant in condemning spiritism because it feared alienating those who had ‘found spiritism exciting, consoling, or simply an extension of the Catholic faith.’²²⁴ This implies that there was a significant number of Catholics practicing spiritism during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1856, two years before Home introduced spiritism in the Netherlands, Pope Pius IX issued a “condemnation of the abuse of magnetism”. Later Catholic thinkers applied this to spiritism as well. However, it was not until 1898 that Pope Leo XIII officially condemned the practice and threatened to excommunicate anyone participating in spiritist activities or acting as a medium. By this time, however, spiritists and Catholics had both gone their own ways and there was little overlap left between the two groups.²²⁵ These condemnations are repeated in several Dutch publications against spiritism. Draaisma and the Catholic canon and archivist Jozef Laenen elaborate on the reasons for the condemnation, which largely correspond to the “diabolical theory” described in the previous section. Spiritism is a form of superstition, leads one away from Catholic beliefs, and

²²³ Draaisma, *Wat is het spiritisme?* 10. De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*. Laenen, *Hedendaagsch spiritisme*.

²²⁴ L.L. Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-century France* (Plymouth 2006) 142.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

strengthens Satan and the enemies of Christ. All the answers to religious and scientific question that spiritists seem to provide are actually provided by the Catholic Church. Therefore, one does not need spiritism for whatever reason. The 1898 condemnation was supposedly repeated in stricter terms by pope Pius XI in 1923.²²⁶ In 1917, a decree against spiritism was published in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, the official gazette of the Holy See.²²⁷ In 1931, Cardinal Alexis Lépicier wrote a book on “the invisible world”, in which he uses theological *and* scientific methods to show that the spirits that spiritists communicate with and the phenomena that these spirits produced could only be the work of devils. For this reason, practicing spiritism can only be harmful to the practitioner and is rightfully condemned by the Church.²²⁸ Also in the Netherlands, Church officials were concerned about spiritism. In the Netherlands, a group of Catholic intellectuals urged the Roman-Catholic State Party (RKSP) to integrate a bill to prohibit the organization of séances into its party program. Altogether, when looking at the condemnations and the motivations for them, it can be stated that the “diabolical theory” was the official Church doctrine on spiritism.²²⁹

There were further complaints that Catholics voiced with regard to spiritism. The Catholic De Veer stated that spiritists claimed to work according to the scientific method, while none of the spiritist case studies had actually followed this method.²³⁰ We will further elaborate on science and spiritists in § IV, but it is important to note that the criticism of the spiritists’ *unscientific* way of working was voiced by all anti-spiritist groups. Another complaint that was heard among all groups opposing spiritists was that the practice of spiritism could be dangerous and damaging to one’s physical and mental health. Draaisma compared the fascination for mysticism and spiritism to alcoholism: one feels a sensation when practicing it, but is never fully satiated.²³¹ Waterreus and Max stated that spiritism had already led to outbreaks of insanity and nervous disorders, and even to people committing suicide.²³² Waterreus accused the spiritists of using the Bible in an arbitrary way, merely promoting verses supporting spiritism while taking them out of their context and ignoring

²²⁶ Draaisma, *Wat wil het spiritisme?*

²²⁷ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis - Commentarium Officiale* (Rome 1917) 268.

²²⁸ A.H.M. Lépicier, *Le monde invisible : le spiritisme en face de la théologie catholique* (Paris 1931).

²²⁹ Laenen, *Hedendaagsch spiritisme*. Draaisma, *Wat wil het spiritisme?*

²³⁰ De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*.

²³¹ Draaisma, *Wat wil het spiritisme?*

²³² Max, *Openbaringen* 38 – 40. Waterreus, *Het spiritisme*.

passages that prohibit or condemn spiritism.²³³ We have already come across this arbitrary exegesis of Scripture in the first chapter and will come across it again in the next section, with the more Bible-oriented Protestant critics. We have also seen that spiritism, with its call to replace contemporary Christianity with spiritism, is seen as a threat and as an enemy of the Catholic Church. Therefore, the Catholic Church *had* to condemn spiritism, because it goes against the Church allegedly installed by Christ Himself.²³⁴ According to the Catholic Van Baar, Pius X was rumored to have stated that ‘one day, initiated by the spiritist proclamations, an attack on the Catholic Church would take place like we have never witnessed before.’²³⁵ This criticism further confirms the hostile Catholic image of spiritism as an evil, anti-Christian, and even unhealthy belief system.

§ II – Non-dogmatic or non-Christian? Spiritists and Dutch Protestants

Now that we have discussed the Catholics’ attitude towards spiritists, we can turn to the Protestants. Naturally, because both groups differ significantly in structure and religious ideology, there were also different attitudes towards spiritists. The Catholics had a more homogenous, centralized and hierarchical religion, with a central institution deciding the dogmas, the official theology, and outlining the prescribed ethical program for its adherents. Though they formed a majority in the Netherlands after 1930, they continued to be discriminated by Protestant elites and were often seen as second-class citizens. Because of this discrimination by a “culturally Calvinist” Dutch society, the Catholic pillar was much more centrally organized and active than the more loosely organized and internally diffuse Protestant pillar. Within Protestantism, there were several autonomous churches that were not controlled by one central organization, but each had their own institution. The fact that the Protestantism consisted of several autonomous churches resulted in a more heterogeneous, fragmented and decentralized pillar. When we speak of Dutch “Protestantism”, we actually refer to a spectrum of very different churches ranging from strictly orthodox to liberal and modernist, which all called themselves Protestant.²³⁶ This should continuously be kept in

²³³ Waterreus, *Het spiritisme*.

²³⁴ Dijkema, *Buitenkerkelijke stromingen* 3.

²³⁵ Van Baar, *Rooms-katholiek spiritisme* 33.

²³⁶ P. van Rooden, *Religieuze regimes: over godsdienst en maatschappij in Nederland 1570 – 1990* (Amsterdam 1996). J.C. Kennedy, *Nieuw Babylon in aanbouw. Nederland in de jaren zestig* (Amsterdam 1995) n25. Righart, *De eindeloze jaren zestig* 42 – 43.

mind when referring to “Protestantism” and “Protestant” objections. This paragraph will deal with the Protestant criticism towards and interaction with spiritists. Despite their differences and the Protestants’ avoidance of adhering to the “diabolical theory” (with the exception of Klaas Schilder), we can also see many similarities in their Christian criticism. We will first go into this criticism and next look at how some Protestant churches dealt with spiritists among their own believers.

‘A long tradition of trying to make the afterlife visible’: Protestant objections to the practice of spiritism

As stated above, Protestants shared a number of objections with the Catholics. The influential Modern Calvinist theologian Klaas Schilder voiced his criticism of and strong opposition towards spiritism in a number of books and articles. First, like Waterreus, he stated that spiritists had a very inconsistent and selective way of interpreting the Bible. One is supposed to critically read, analyze, and interpret every part of Scripture in its own right *and* in the context of the whole, according to Schilder and the Orthodox Protestant tradition he belonged to. Spiritists, however, only adhered to the parts in the Bible that affirmed and strengthened their beliefs and practices. Schilder stated that this is an incorrect way of interpreting the Bible. Spiritists merely used the Bible to their own advantage – and therefore *abuse* and insult the Word of God. For this reason, Schilder calls spiritism and Christianity mutually exclusive.²³⁷ A second objection is that spiritists try to *prove* the existence of spirits and the afterlife. This, according to Schilder and several other Catholic *and* Protestant theologians, was impossible. Christianity and theology simply do not *deal* with the visible realm, which is the domain of natural science. God, Heaven, Hell, and the divine proclamations of how humans should live and worship, are essentially not part of the visible realm and can therefore not be scientifically proven. Trying to do so is applying methods that can only reap reliable results to a research area for which they were not designed and of which they cannot produce reliable information.²³⁸ It was because of this that the famous Dutch neo-Calvinist theologian and politician Abraham Kuiper called spiritism the latest attempt in a long tradition of trying

²³⁷ K. Schilder, ‘Spiritisme en bijgeloof’, in: *Gereformeerde kerkbode van Vlaardingen* (24 februari 1917).

²³⁸ K. Schilder, *Wat is de hel?* (Vlaardingen 1919) 5 – 7. K. Schilder, *Wat is de hel?* (2nd pressing; Kampen 1920) 69 – 75. J.H. Gunning jr., *Het spiritisme: eene voorlezing* (Utrecht 1885) 17. Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*. Dijkema, *Buitenkerkelijke stromingen* 6 – 7, 32. L.W.E. Rauwenhoff, ‘De ontwikkelingsgang van de moderne richting’, in: *De Gids* 53 (Amsterdam 1889) 119 – 120. Van Baar, *Roomsch-Katholiek Spiritisme* 25.

to make the afterlife visible and criticized the spiritists for discarding the Christian tradition and fundamental articles of faith.²³⁹ A third objection was that spiritists were not communicating with the spirits of the deceased, but with demonic spirits. This was the only Protestant reference to the “diabolical theory”, which was more popular within Catholic circles. What distinguished Schilder from his Catholic counterparts is that he strengthens his argument with a citation from the Book of Revelation:

‘And I saw three unclean spirits like frogs come out of the mouth of the dragon, and out of the mouth of the beast, and out of the mouth of the false prophet. For they are the spirits of devils, working miracles, which go forth unto the kings of the earth and of the whole world, to gather them to the battle of that great day of God Almighty.’²⁴⁰ (King James Version, Revelation 16:13 – 14).

In conclusion, Schilder sees spiritism as a sinful, anti-Christian, and uninformed belief system. He states that spiritists use both the Bible and science in an incorrect way and that this leads them to strange and flawed conclusions, such as denying the existence of Hell.²⁴¹ Having discussed Schilder’s relatively extensive analysis of spiritism, we will now turn to criticism voiced by other Protestant authors.

The Remonstrant minister P. Eldering wrote a book on contemporary spiritism in 1917 in which he outlines certain contradictions within spiritism and his objections towards its teaching. His first objection is targeted at the spiritists’ so-called scientific *modus operandi*. Eldering shows that many of the spiritist research results can be explained perfectly through *normal* (as opposed to *paranormal*) phenomena. People who “directly speak” of Hebrew or Latin while they have no knowledge of these languages seems unexplainable, but when one hears others speak these languages, one can unconsciously learn quite a lot about them. Also, a lot of people who were reported as having written or spoken languages that they did not master were never checked for not secretly knowing these languages without telling others. These examples are part of a larger spiritist tendency to often believe stories reporting of spiritist and paranormal phenomena at sight without researching whether the sources, the methods that were used, and the result were at all reliable. This constant claiming of scientific

²³⁹ A. Kuyper, ‘Zesde lezing. Het calvinisme en de toekomst’, in: A. Kuyper, *Het calvinisme. Zes Stone-lezingen* (Amsterdam 1899) 178 – 180.

²⁴⁰ *The Holy Bible. The Authorized King James Version of 1611 now reprinted with the Apocrypha. In three volumes with reproductions of 105 of the sixteenth-century woodcuts of Bernard Salomon* (Three parts; London 1963) 435.

²⁴¹ Schilder, *Wat is de hel?* 5 – 7.

successes while failing to adequately check or even provide the sources leads, according to Eldering, to a whole series of unreliable and speculative stories which only spiritists themselves believe. All spiritist experiments demand strange and unconventional prerequisites, which make them hardly scientific.²⁴² This tendency could be the result of the relatively isolated position in which the spiritists were pushed during this period, where they only had their fellow believers to rely on and converse with about spiritism, whereas every single other belief system was hostile against them. This led Eldering to conclude that only spiritists themselves claim scientific successes and state that the spiritist hypothesis has been scientifically proven. Making these claims without the backing of the professional scientific community is not very scientific in the first place. Making claims that cannot empirically be checked or repeated are not scientific as well. Eldering therefore calls spiritism ‘science for the ignorant masses.’²⁴³

A second objection Eldering has is that spiritists come to their belief through incorrect and flawed motivations. Usually, they come to their beliefs because they have lost someone who was dear to them. Spiritism, in this way, has a consoling function, because the believer still has a way of contacting their beloved ones of which he cannot accept that they are gone for good. Although Eldering understands this consoling function, he states that personal grief can never be a motivation for *believing* in something. One has to come to God through faith alone and not through personal emotions or wishful thinking. Therefore, one should not turn to religion merely because of its consoling function, but because one has a deeply felt faith of the existence of God and the Bible as His Word. The wish to make the afterlife visible and prove it scientifically (which, as we have seen above, is impossible) shows the weakness and corruption of a person’s faith. It is not up to religion to provide scientific evidence for its claims; it is up to the true Christian to have sufficient faith to make this need for evidence obsolete (*Sola Fide*). Eldering also casts doubts on the consoling function of spiritism. He states that the spiritist descriptions of the astral sphere rather make an infernal than a heavenly impression. The knowledge that one is destined to go to this place can hardly be consoling. The knowledge that the believer will be reunited with his beloved ones is also offered by Christianity, which is far more reliable than the spiritist speculations. Finally, also Eldering states that spiritism can lead to nervous disorders, feelings of despair and suicide.²⁴⁴ More

²⁴² Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme*.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁴ Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme*.

Protestant thinkers join him in this warning of the damaging consequences of practicing spiritism.²⁴⁵

The above analysis summarizes the Protestant key objections towards the practice of spiritism. There are some further, minor complaints that can be found in Protestant literature. Wisse states that spiritism is a sign of a selfish and egocentric personality, because spiritists move the central focus from God to man. Therefore, spiritism is a typical example of human pride and shows a lack of faith and Christian humility.²⁴⁶ The Protestant G.W. Mars states that it is a sin to bother the spirits of the dead, because they should not be disturbed or alarmed after death, but rather be left in peace.²⁴⁷ Finally, the Calvinists D. De Pree and D. Rot state that, for the true Christian (with which they mean Calvinist), there is nothing outside the Word. One should solely focus on the Word of God, as written in the Bible, for one's knowledge of God and the afterlife. Participating in spiritist experiments to make the afterlife visible is a corruption of this *Sola Scriptura* ideal and, again, a sign of weak faith.²⁴⁸ We can thus conclude that also the Protestant attitude towards spiritists was a hostile one. There is only one case in Protestant literature where it is not explicitly condemned. Here, the Liberal Protestant minister Dijkema, referring to spiritism, states that 'God can also warm human hearts outside of the church.'²⁴⁹ This, however, is an exception to the large consensus on the hostile and anti-Christian view of spiritism. It would be hard to find sympathy toward spiritists within any Protestant church: Martinus Beversluis was a Protestant minister who was fired when he admitted that he believed in spiritism.²⁵⁰ He is not the only example of this and it is plausible that some Catholic and Protestant clergy believed in (parts of) spiritism without admitting this. With a tiny actively believing group of clergy, we could assume that there was an even larger group who were interested in or curious about spiritism. Altogether, the

²⁴⁵ Wisse, *Het spiritisme*. J.H. Ferguson, *Het kenvermogen van het medegevoel. het instinct van den mensch, verklarende het verband der natuurkrachten met de in den mensch gestelde geesteswerking, voor de wetenschappelijke beschouwing van het idealisme, het spiritisme en aanverwante voorstellingen in verband met galvanisme, magnetisme, electriciteit en andere etherische stroomen, tusschen persoonlijke menselijke geesten met lichamen daarbuiten, onderling* ('s-Gravenhage 1907) 62 – 63.

²⁴⁶ Wisse, *Het spiritisme*.

²⁴⁷ G.W. Mars, *Is het spiritisme een volksgevaar?* (Amsterdam 1935) 19 – 20.

²⁴⁸ D. Rot, *Een waarschuwend woord tegen het Spiritisme* (Apeldoorn 1908) 5 – 8. D. De Pree, *Gods woord en het spiritisme. Leerrede naar aanleiding van Deut. 18.11b. "Onder u zal niet gevonden worden, die de dooden vraagt"* (1886) 24.

²⁴⁹ Dijkema, *Buitenkerkelijke stromingen* 4

²⁵⁰ Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme* 36.

Protestant criticism lies in the fact that spiritists try to prove the afterlife scientifically, which uses scientific methods for a goal for which they were not designed; that it uses the Bible in an inconsistent, selective, and opportunistic way; that spiritism can be damaging to one's mental and physical health; and that spiritism *says* that it works according to the scientific method while in practice this is not the case. This series of objections make spiritism and Protestantism, according to most Protestants that is, mutually exclusive.

§ III – Spiritism, socialism and theosophy

For obvious reasons, the relation between the spiritists and the socialists was much less tense and negative. Although the socialists all subscribed to a common ideology, it would be overstated to call them members of a shared religious doctrine. For this reason, spiritists and socialists interacted much more loosely with each other. Also, there tended to be less hostility towards spiritists, because socialists had no need to feel threatened by the belief system, nor did they have to worry that the souls of their fellow socialists would be corrupted by and lost to spiritism. The hostility that *was* voiced towards spiritists was not targeted at spiritism as such, but was rather part of a larger anticlerical and antireligious socialist assault. This was much less the case with theosophy. This unconventional religious group is included in this chapter for a number of reasons. First, it seems interesting to look at a belief system that was, like spiritism, unconventional, cannot be classified into any of the existing pillars, and was also frowned upon by the public opinion. Second, it seems interesting to see how these belief systems interact and clash with each other. This will enlarge and diversify the general picture of the clash between spiritists and conventional Christianity that we have established so far.

Strange partners in a struggle against hegemonic Christian power: spiritism and socialism

Spiritism was, according to several sources, relatively popular among socialists between 1890 and 1940.²⁵¹ The most well-known spiritist socialists were Henri van Kol and Pieter Jelles Troelstra. There are several reasons for this paradoxical popularity of spiritism. Both systems were unorthodox, egalitarian, non-dogmatic, and had an aversion towards established institutional power. Furthermore, both systems had a progressive and positivist view of

²⁵¹ Attema, *Geen handen af* 4. P.J. Troelstra, *Gedenkschriften. Derde deel. Branding* (Amsterdam 1929) 78 – 79. J. Wulterkens, 'Geloof in daden. Het spiritisme van P.J. Troelstra', in: *Onvoltooid verleden* (juli/augustus 2002).

history. Also, according to Logie Barrow, both socialism and spiritism had the same enemies: the capitalist order (which spiritists equated to materialism) and the established churches (which socialism saw as a “false ideology” defending the capitalist order).²⁵² In a spiritist socialist pamphlet, the socialist Attema literally states that socialism is *not* against religion *per se*, but only against religion serving the capitalist order. Attema saw spiritism not only as a potential and powerful enemy of the established churches, which it could threaten in its power, but also as having a stronger case than conventional Christianity because its hypothesis could be scientifically proven.²⁵³ All these factors make for a plausible explanation of why spiritism could become so popular within socialist milieus. Troelstra, who was the leader of the largest socialist political party (SDAP) between 1897 and 1925, adds another explanation to this. He states that, because socialism was a non-religious and in some respects an anti-religious system, some people missed a powerful factor that could give their lives meaning and certainty and that could give them strength and console them during hard times.²⁵⁴ His biographer adds that Troelstra first came in contact with spiritism during his youth, but that he only revisited it after a difficult time in his life, during which he had gone to prison, faced political unpopularity, faced tensions within the SDAP, and during which his wife went through health problems.²⁵⁵ Troelstra himself notes the stress and insecurity he faced during these years as a possible motivation for his return to spiritism. He and Van Kol organized their own séances, during which the corpulent Van Kol one time levitated several meters above the ground. During several other séances, Troelstra communicated with the spirit of the German politician Karl Liebknecht, who was one of the founders of social democratic politics and the German SPD. Both of the gentlemen’s wives participated in the séances, which further confirms the notion that spiritism was often practiced by couples and entire families.²⁵⁶

We should, however, not take the relation between spiritists and socialism too far. The three SDAP-spiritists Troelstra, Van Kol, and founding member C.H. Kettner all stressed that their spiritism was a *private* matter. They clearly distinguished between their professional

²⁵² Wulterkens, *Geloof in daden*.

²⁵³ Attema, *Geen handen af*.

²⁵⁴ Troelstra, *Gedenkschriften* 78 – 79.

²⁵⁵ Piet Hagen, *Politicus uit hartstocht. Biografie van Pieter Jelles Troelstra* (Amsterdam 2010) 336.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 336 – 339. Troelstra, *Gedenkschriften* 74 – 76.

careers as socialist politicians and their private lives in which they practiced spiritism.²⁵⁷ This seems to hold true for most spiritists, because, apart from Attema, there are no sources available that envision an active position for spiritism in the socialist political system. Because of this, we can conclude that spiritism was often popular among socialists and workers' movements, but that the socialist group as a whole did not feature a significant spiritist element. What was distinctive was that socialists, as opposed to Catholics and Protestants, were not fundamentally hostile towards spiritists. This was, as stated above, because the socialists had no religion to defend against a possible spiritist assault, because they had the same enemies, and simply because they had no reason to quarrel with one another. Now that we have discussed the impact of spiritism within the socialist milieu, we will briefly discuss theosophy in the next section.

Rivals within the unconventional milieu: spiritists and theosophists

Theosophy was an esoteric religious and philosophical set of beliefs which focus on knowledge of the divine and hidden meanings of life, humanity, and nature. It was popular within alternative religious circles towards the end of the nineteenth century, especially through the work of Helena Blavatsky. Theosophy featured some common characteristics with spiritism, yet also actively disassociated itself from the spiritists. Theosophists, like spiritists, also tried to find an ideal alternative to the flawed modernist materialism and the corrupted Christian churches. Theosophists were much more preoccupied with obtaining divine knowledge through mystical and introspective methods and did not share the spiritists' fascination with the scientific method. There were bound to be agreements as well as disagreements. The similarities between theosophy and spiritism lie in the fact that both parties accepted the truth of the spiritist hypothesis and phenomena. There is an astral sphere where the spirits of the deceased dwell. This is as far as the agreement goes. An author who writes under the pseudonym 'Een Leerling' ['A Student'] states that theosophists acknowledge the truth of the spiritist *phenomena*, but reject the spiritist *theories*. He states that spiritism has never contributed any new, valuable knowledge of the universe. He adds that the practice of channeling is *so* susceptible to hallucination, suggestion, and fraud that it can impossibly be said whether one is acquiring reliable information or not. The techniques

²⁵⁷ Christianarchie, 'De tafeldans en het socialisme - spiritisme en anti-spiritisme ter linkerzijde', <http://christianarchie.blogspot.com/2007/01/de-tafeldans-en-het-socialisme.html> (19 June 2012).

used by spiritists are too undeveloped and unprofessional to obtain reliable information from the astral sphere. Theosophists ascribed a lot of spiritist successes to the *unconscious* of the medium. The information that he is receiving and the voices with which he is communicating are actually the unconscious mind of the medium himself. Also, the dark, silent, and motionless atmosphere in which the spiritists operate create the danger of *suggestion* or *autosuggestion*. In such an atmosphere, when all the participants' expectations are focused on getting a sign, the perception of a sound can immediately trigger the idea of established contact and *suggest* that the sound is being caused by a spirit. This is not the result of independent scientific research, but rather the distorted perception that is caused by a tense expectation and a bias of interpreting all phenomena as being caused by spirits. This is called suggestion. Autosuggestion is when nothing happens at all, but the tense anticipation of the medium causes him to hear or see the things that he is expecting. Again, this is rather caused by the tense expectancy than by any real external phenomenon.²⁵⁸ The Dutch parapsychologist Wilhelm Tenhaeff, referring to direct writing, formulated it as such: 'Met een pen in je hand ga je vanzelf schrijven.'²⁵⁹ ['When you have a pen in your hand, you will automatically start to write']

A theosophical author writing under the pseudonym 'Een Leerling' ['A Student'] states that 'the fact that a message is obtained through unusual methods is no guarantee for its higher or worthier origin.' As stated earlier, the reliability of a message obtained through channeling can impossibly be verified. This why spiritism has not contributed anything to our knowledge of humanity, nature, or the divine. Reliable information on these matters can only be obtained through reliable methods, preferably theosophical ones. Helena Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society and arguably the most important theosophist during this period, called apparitions 'psychological deception'.²⁶⁰ She tried to influence the spiritists to find a better belief system to obtain divine truth, but they were, according to Blavatsky, firmly set in their materialist ways. They were a product rather than an opponent of materialism and they did not want to spiritualize life, but materialize the spiritual.²⁶¹ Another non-theosophical author states that theosophists find it beneath human dignity to give oneself to unknown and uncontrollable powers. According to occultists, the medium is merely a slave and a tool for

²⁵⁸ Een Leerling, *Dwaalwegen (Hypnotisme, Clairvoyance, Spiritisme)* (Baarn 1908).

²⁵⁹ Heijster, *Parapsychologie*.

²⁶⁰ Leerling, *Dwaalwegen*.

²⁶¹ Wisse, *Het spiritisme* 109. H.P. Blavatsky and B. De Zirkoff (ed.), *Collected Writings. Volume X. 1888 – 1889* (Madras 1964) 217 – 220.

evil spirits that use the medium for their own, often negative purposes.²⁶² Theosophists reject all forms of black magic and therefore also spiritism, whose contact with the dead is dangerous and illusory.²⁶³ Even the theosophists, who are used to using unorthodox methods to obtain occult, divine, and metaphysical information, note the dangers of practicing spiritism and state that it can cause despair and insanity.²⁶⁴ In conclusion, because theosophy is located within the same milieu of unconventional, alternative religious and mystical movements, it feels the need to disassociate itself from spiritism, to which it is often compared. Theosophists clearly see themselves as superior to spiritists and try to show the latter the true and right path, without actively organizing a hostile campaign against them.

§ IV – ‘An abuse of the good name of science’: the scientific community on spiritism

This section discusses the relation between spiritists and the scientific community and, more specifically, the commentaries of a scientific nature that were voiced against the presumed scientific *modus operandi* and self-image of the spiritists. As we have seen, it was largely the spiritists themselves who claimed that their way of working was scientific and that their research results could count as scientific evidence. It is therefore interesting to see what scientists and people using scientific arguments and discourse had to say about spiritism. It will connect to the subsequent section, dealing with the ways in which spiritists replied to the large number of objections, accusations, and critiques that they faced.

‘Science for the ignorant masses’: scientists and academics on the scientific qualities of spiritism

In the previous chapter, we briefly dealt with the scientific self-image of Dutch spiritists between 1890 and 1940. We saw that spiritism attached great importance to using a reliable, strict scientific methodology, that they derived their identity and self-image from this, that they wanted to scientifically *prove* the spiritist hypothesis, and yet that their actual methodology remained unclear and often did not look scientific at all. This is the general scientific self-perception of spiritists and we do not need to repeat any details that were

²⁶² Draaisma, *Wat is het spiritisme?* 19.

²⁶³ P.D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, ‘Geestelijke machten. Indrukken, denkbeelden, vragen’, in: *Onze Eeuw. Jaargang 3* (1903) 437.

²⁶⁴ Leerling, *Dwaalwegen*.

already discussed in chapter three. We will now go into the objections to spiritism and its presumed scientific *modus operandi* that were voiced by scientists and people using scientific argumentation.

The first and most obvious objection is that spiritism is not scientific at all, does not work according to the scientific method that is defined by scientists, and that the correct use of scientific methodology and argumentation can actually refute the spiritist claims and hypothesis. A lot of this commentary has already been mentioned before by the Catholics, the Protestants, and the theosophists. Most scientists distinguish between deliberate imposters and sincere spiritists suffering from hallucination. The objections to frauds are obvious: it is wrong and unethical to mislead gullible people into thinking what you do is special or paranormal in some way. Spiritism witnessed a lot of this fraud and spiritists themselves admit and regret that this took place. The category that is the target of the scientific critics is that of people sincerely believing in the spiritist hypothesis. Scientists generally agree that the scientific method consists of defining a hypothesis, subjecting this hypothesis to a large series of unbiased and objective scientific experiments, and deciding the success or failure of the specific hypothesis on the basis of these experiments. The hypothesis is only scientifically proven if all experiments confirm the hypothesis and if there is no alternative hypothesis which can explain the research results better or equally well. This is the scientific *method* to which both the spiritists and the scientific community subscribe.

The spiritist execution of this method, however, differs from the above theoretical premises of the scientific method. The spiritist way of working is not scientific at all and the spiritist hypothesis is almost never the only hypothesis that can explain the phenomena deemed paranormal. There are a number of reasons that the scientists mention. I will only name the most important and representative ones and will not go into too much detail regarding objections that we have already discussed in an earlier paragraph. The first objection had to do with the *prerequisites* that spiritists deem necessary. As we have seen, spiritists work with a number of prerequisites that should be met for a séance to be a success, such as darkness, a pleasant conversation or soothing music, and the absence of skeptics and non-believers. The communication with the deceased and other spiritist techniques can only be executed by a gifted and talented medium. The ghosts and certain other spiritist phenomena (such as “od power” and “magnetic power”) are all invisible and cannot be perceived by ungifted individuals. According to scientists, all of the prerequisites that were just mentioned make an independent and objective research impossible and the claims made by spiritists impossible to check. Furthermore, by listing these prerequisites in the first place,

one can barely speak of an unbiased research. The specific prerequisites outlined here actually suspect that they were chosen to make independent and critical observation and analysis of the spiritist phenomena impossible. In fact, the only ones who, according to the spiritist doctrine, can witness and explain these phenomena are talented mediums and uncritical believers. These prerequisites make scientific research impossible and show how biased the research actually is.²⁶⁵

A second scientific objection lies in the fact that the spiritist hypothesis is put forward as the *only* possible hypothesis that can explain the paranormal phenomena. When coming across certain phenomena, spiritists immediately turn to their own theories to account for them. Spiritists had a very simple view of natural phenomena and often ignored the complexity and versatility of reality. According to a range of scientists, most spiritist phenomena can be accounted for through *natural* explanations, as opposed to the spiritist *supernatural* and paranormal ones. We have already mentioned suggestion and autosuggestion above. Although we dealt with these terms in the section on theosophists, most scientists take (auto)suggestion as the primary explanation for why spiritists (as opposed to the far more numerous non-spiritists) experience such unique and unexplainable phenomena which suggests the existence and involvement of spirits. Spiritists experience these things during a séance because they believe that they are going to happen at that moment and are thus actively expecting them. Because of this exalted nervous condition, they are inclined to interpret the occurrence of any sound or phenomenon, real or imagined, as the interaction of spirits. Therefore, the psychological phenomenon known as (auto)suggestion, where a person experiences something different than what is actually happening because of the suggestive atmosphere and circumstances around him, explains the experience of spiritist phenomena in a natural and, because it can be scientifically observed, superior way.²⁶⁶ Another explanation that is mentioned is that of unconscious muscular movements and vibrations. Because of the tense atmosphere, a person can unconsciously start moving the

²⁶⁵ Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*. Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme*. Heijster, *Parapsychologie*. Göbel and Snijders, *Spiritisme*.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Constandse, *Leven de dooden?* Leerling, *Dwaalwegen*. Ferguson, *Het kenvermogen* 61 – 63. Renterghem, ‘De vrije uitoefening’. A.J.R., ‘De suggestie en het bedrog bij mediums’, in: *Psychologische bladen. Nieuwe reeks. Orgaan van den “Nederlandschen Okkultistenkring”*. Gewijd aan de studie van *Okkultisme, Psychische geneeswijze, enz.* (15 januari 1900) 4 – 5. Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme*. L. Deutman, *Mystiek en officieele wetenschap : tevens critiek op Van Rijnberk's "Hedendaagsch mirakelgeloof" in het Ned. Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* (’s-Gravenhage 1915).

séance table by knocking or moving it with his hands or feet. Because this happens without the person causing this noticing, these movements can and often were interpreted as caused by the expected spirits.²⁶⁷ The options of (auto)suggestion, hallucination, and unconscious movements – all caused by the same exalted and expectant tension – are most mentioned as explanations for the perception and experience of paranormal phenomena *and* the spiritists' belief in their astral origin.

A third scientific objection to spiritists has to do with the speculative nature of the spiritist hypothesis. Not only were there other hypotheses that could explain the phenomena under consideration better than the spiritist hypothesis; the latter hypothesis did not seem to be based on any empirical information at all. The formulation of the hypothesis seems to have been motivated by the *desire* to harmoniously unite Christianity and science and, through this merger, be able to answer and explain all the universal and existential questions and mysteries. The problem with this is that the construction of the theory was not motivated by the accumulation of reliable information and research material, but by a *desire* for a theory with infinite explanatory strength. Because the spiritists could not accept the fact that there were no available answers to explain certain phenomena, they started making up their own answers. Sometimes, normal phenomena were interpreted and presented as supernatural, inexplicable events. Something like the astral sphere or the astral body, which had never been seen or heard before, seems to have been invented out of opportunism to make their hypothesis consistent. This is not how one is to construct a reliable scientific theory and for this reason, the spiritist hypothesis has no connection to any worldly phenomena and cannot explain anything. Because of this and the previous arguments, it is safe to say that throughout its entire existence spiritism has never contributed anything to science.²⁶⁸

A fourth objection, which strengthens the scientists' claim that spiritism is speculative and unscientific, is that many claimed spiritist successes and pieces of evidence are not accompanied by any source material or research results. We have seen this earlier in the case of spirit photography and direct writing: there are countless claims of a successful spiritist séance but very few actual photographs, directly written messages, or even detailed reports on what happened. For stories that are supposed to serve as scientific evidence, it is strange to say the least that the evidence material is so often omitted. Also, the actual research methodology that was used to obtain the results remains unknown or vague at best. Proving

²⁶⁷ Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme*. De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*. Max, *Openbaringen*.

²⁶⁸ Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*. Dijkema, *Buitenkerkelijke stromingen*. Zeehandelaar, *Het spiritisme* 13, 25 – 26. Constandse, *Leven de dooden?* Adjutus Drieghe, *Het spiritisme*.

something scientifically involves disclosing the research methods that were used and failing to provide these is, needless to say, a sign of an *unscientific* (and rather an esoteric or mystical) approach.²⁶⁹ An anecdote described by Zeehandelaar adequately shows an example of this lack of enthusiasm for science among spiritists. Dr. C.C. de Jong, a member of *Spiritist Brotherhood Harmonia*, pleaded in 1906 to the Central Committee of *Harmonia* in favor of adding two rules to the charter of the brotherhood. First, *Harmonia* should dissuade members from organizing and engaging in séances that did not use a scientific method. Second, he stated that “paranormal” phenomena that could also be explained through conjuring or magic tricks should be declared worthless as evidence. A vote was held and neither of the propositions could count on a majority.²⁷⁰ Although this is merely an anecdote, this story shows that spiritists were not always as confident about the spiritist hypothesis and the scientific provability of it as they tried to come across in their pamphlets. As we have seen before in the section on Catholic criticism, this lack of confidence and certainty worked both ways. Many non-spiritists were not that sure that *none* of the spiritist phenomena could be ascribed to the work of spirits and some combined their hostility towards spiritists with a belief that communication with the dead could be and sometimes was established.

The above arguments summarize the most important and most frequently voice criticism by scientists or those defending the scientific method. There are some more minor objections that appear in anti-spiritist literature. One critique by the philosopher Wijnaendts Francken seems to repeat the paradigmatic incommensurability mentioned earlier. He discusses the clash between a religious attitude and a scientific attitude, which had different interpretations of the definition and meaning of facts, evidence, metaphysics and what can be known by man. He states that it is useless to try to convince spiritists that their hypothesis is flawed. They have accepted the hypothesis so firmly that they now interpret everything accordingly and continuously see their hypothesis confirmed. This has nothing to do with the phenomena themselves, but solely with the observer and his prejudiced observation and interpretation and his alteration of common logic. Therefore, it is not useful to discuss the hypothesis with the spiritists using logical and rational arguments, because the spiritists have accepted the hypothesis *a priori*, *in spite of* the facts, and have distorted their rational and logical observance. One should simply accept the fact that these people have different thoughts and opinions and only interfere when they are in danger of doing damaging or

²⁶⁹ Eldering, *Het hedendaagsch spiritisme*. De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*.

²⁷⁰ Zeehandelaar, *Het spiritisme* 18.

criminal things.²⁷¹ Another objection was voiced by the atheist and anarchist philosopher Anton Constandse. He responds to the immense lists that were drawn up by spiritists of great and knowledgeable historical figures who believed in spiritism. Not only were some of the people on these lists probably no spiritists at all, the fact that great minds have believed in spiritism is no argument for the truth of the spiritist hypothesis. As was mentioned before, every single religious, political, and mystic tradition has had members who were exceptionally intelligent and one could draw up similar lists of those traditions. In the words of Constandse: one does also not become Catholic because Pasteur was Catholic or Protestant because J.D. van der Waals was Protestant.²⁷² Constandse states that spiritism, like every other religion, was simply a remedy for people's fear of death, for their insecurity, and was symptomatic for man's wish to live forever. It was invented for this reason and envisions a God that is totally preoccupied with the individual believer. Spiritism is thus a sign of the inability to accept one's mortality, as well as a sign of egomania.²⁷³ The Protestant Wisse also noted this focus that the spiritist put on himself. This led Wisse to call spiritism a *religio subjectiva* without a *religio objectiva*, which meant a sentiment without an actual divine revelation.²⁷⁴ Finally, there was also a number of scientists who stated that the practicing of spiritism could damage one's physical and mental health. Wijnaendts Francken names psychological researches that show a positive correlation between spiritism and outbreaks of rage, insanity, depression, nervous disorders, and suicidal tendencies.²⁷⁵

In conclusion, the scientists were no less critical of and negative towards spiritists than the Catholics and Protestants. They argue that spiritists did not operate as scientifically as they claimed to do; that the spiritist hypothesis was empirically unfounded and not based on actual facts; that many natural (as opposed to paranormal) theories could explain the (perceived) occurrence of spiritist phenomena better than the spiritist hypothesis; and that the spiritists often omitted research data when presenting their "evidence". A lot of these criticisms can be found among all the groups that were discussed and it appears that most authors could easily come up with some general objections to what the spiritists were doing. Only some objections, such as the Catholic "diabolical theory", the Protestant call to sticking to the Scripture, and the scientific criticism of religious argumentation in general, were specific to

²⁷¹ Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*.

²⁷² Christianarchie, 'De tafeldans en het socialisme'.

²⁷³ Constandse, *Leven de dooden?*

²⁷⁴ Wisse, *Het spiritisme* 111 – 112.

²⁷⁵ Wijnaendts Francken, *Het spiritisme*.

certain religious or social groups. The Dutch social elites' opinion of spiritism appears to have been negative and denigrating and spiritists were subject to criticism from every part of society. Bearing this in mind, it is not surprising that spiritism gradually became less popular (around 1920) *and* more esoteric, closed, and secretive. This appears to have been a response to the continuing criticism voiced by various groups, most of which spiritists found misplaced. The British "Cottingley Fairies" incident of 1920, as well as the countless unmaskings of both national and international mediums as frauds made spiritism less plausible and credible and led to a decline in adherents. Spiritism has a relatively monotonous and limited doctrine, which could have led to spiritists getting bored or unsatisfied with spiritism and in time deciding to discard it. The post-1920 decline is also a response to the tightening and intensifying pillarized structure, which gave spiritists less and less space to manoeuvre and forced them into their own group *outside* the pillars. Finally, the decline also fit into a wider pattern of religious decline of alternative, non-conventional belief systems, such as theosophy, Christian Science, and the Order of the Star in the East, which set in from the late 1910's and early 1920's onwards.²⁷⁶ In the next and final section, we will look at how spiritists responded to the aforementioned criticism, how they defended what they were doing, and how they countered hostile arguments.

§ V – The prejudice, fear, and dogmatism of the uninformed: in defense of spiritism

As stated before, the spiritists put a lot of effort into responding to and refuting all the criticism they faced. Several minor accusations were ignored, but the most important objections that we have come across were met with strong replies, especially the accusations of suffering from hallucination and being unscientific. Although the responses are usually not as sophisticated as the accusations, it appears that the spiritist did their best to defend their hypothesis against opposing parties. In this final section, we will analyze how spiritists framed and voiced their responses. This will be divided into two parts. The first will deal with commentary that was given by religious and ecclesiastical people, while the second section will go into the responses to accusations of being unscientific.

The struggle against dogmatism I: spiritist remedies for ecclesiastical corruption

²⁷⁶ Dijkema, *Buitenkerkelijke stromingen* 30 – 32.

The key word in the spiritists' responses and objections to their religious and scientific opponents is *dogmatism*. This word is consequently used in a pejorative manner. According to the spiritists, their opponents could not see the truth in the spiritist hypothesis nor could they see that spiritists were capable of answering far more existential and universal questions than their systems, because they were caught in a dogmatic and narrow worldview. Both religion and science were accused of dogmatism and narrow-mindedness in their own way. With regard to religion, we have already come across some examples of this in chapter two. The Christian churches had become corrupt because they were wholly preoccupied with studying dogmatic texts and quarreling over its meaning, instead of actively propagating and living the universal love that Christ had preached. Spiritism offered a superior alternative. It would use the scientific method to study and define the truth about the afterlife, God, and the deceased and it would use the religious and ethical messages from the Gospels to construct a perfect ethical system propagating the universal love that would liberate mankind. This mutually supportive combination of science and religion was, according to spiritists, superior to a Christian religion in which interpreting minor details in the Bible and precisely performing certain rituals had become more important than embodying and spreading the divine love of God.²⁷⁷ This way, by focusing on the message that the Son of God preached, spiritists are already proposing a loving alternative to the Christians' dogmatic loveless attitude.

The accusation of dogmatism goes further than this. It is *because* Christians were set in their ways that they could only do what the Christian tradition had allowed them to do. Therefore, they could not see the truth of the spiritist hypothesis. They were too busy stressing that spiritism was prohibited by the Bible, something which spiritists did not acknowledge because only the *summoning* of spirits was prohibited; and that they were actually communicating with demons, which was a weak and speculative argument coming from people who have never actually engaged in a séance. Göbel saw in the accusation of communication with devils a veiled Christian attempt to prevent the progress of science.²⁷⁸ This shallowness and lack of understanding is what led to the condemnations of spiritism by the Catholic Church and several Protestant denominations. The blind following of these condemnations by contemporary Christians is what keeps the stigma on spiritism in place. If

²⁷⁷ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen*. De Bruijne-Uiterwijk, *Wat wil het spiritisme?* 2 – 16. Van Holthe tot Echten, *De oorlog* 9 – 11.

²⁷⁸ J.S. Göbel, 'Het spiritisme maskeert een uiterst sluwe campagne tegen God en de Kerk', in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 April 1912).

Christians were to broaden their narrow mindset that categorically rejects spiritism without seriously researching it, they would see that spiritism is a beautiful and scientifically valuable thing, which could replace and perfect the corrupted Christian churches. In conclusion, spiritists state that because of their dogmatic approach, which allows no other explanations or theories than those outlined by the Vatican (Catholics) or found in the Bible (Protestants), Christians are not able to see the new and fundamental insights that spiritism has brought. The criticism voiced by Christians must therefore be seen as a blind and categorical denial, rather than disagreement with what the spiritists are *actually* saying and doing.²⁷⁹ This aversion towards dogmatism could explain spiritism's unconventional, unorthodox, and non-dogmatic character.

The spiritists also see a form of self-defense, self-preservation and opportunism in the Christian revolt against their belief system. Spiritists have put forward spiritism as a superior belief system that can reform, modernize, and even replace the conventional Christian churches for the reasons described above. Because of this, according to the spiritists, the Christian churches felt threatened – and rightfully so. If all people would adequately study and see the truth of spiritism, the Christian churches would become irrelevant. The scientific provability of spiritism had already struck conventional Christianity's final hour. Because the churches did not want to lose their power and their hegemonic position, they ushered in a stigmatization of and a witch hunt against this threatening spiritism. This, according to spiritists, is again a sign of dogmatism and narrow-mindedness: the churches *know* that spiritism is (possibly) superior and possesses the truth on matters of science and the afterlife. Yet, in spite of this knowledge they defensively cling to their faith and refuse to acknowledge or even look at the spiritist doctrine.²⁸⁰

The spiritist response entails three things. First, it shows that the Christian churches have never actually researched the spiritist phenomena and that their criticism should be seen in this light. Their objections are motivated by tradition, fear of the unknown, and a dogmatic attitude. This makes them ignorant and places them in no position to comment on spiritism and spiritist research, as they refuse to even look at this. Second, spiritists show that it is not spiritists who are unethical and immoral, but the conventional Christian churches themselves. Again, the Christian accusations are motivated by minor Biblical details – which are often not even interpreted correctly – while they themselves have lost track of the grand message which

²⁷⁹ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 42 – 45. Beversluis, *Spiritualisme en spiritisme*. Attema, *Geen handen af*.

²⁸⁰ Spoon, *Wat is toch dat spiritisme?*

Christ gave to humanity and for which He died on the cross: universal, divine love. Finally, all of the criticism should be seen in the light of the *threat* that spiritism poses to the Christian churches. Spiritism is both ethically and scientifically superior to contemporary Christianity and therefore forms a potential danger to the churches. The unanimously hostile ecclesiastical responses should be seen as defenses of the churches' position of power.

The struggle against dogmatism II: spiritist remedies for scientific dogmatism

Now that we have dealt with the spiritists' defense against the religious accusations, we will turn to their replies to the scientific objections. These are different from the above replies to religious objections, yet follow a similar train of thought. Again, the accusations of dogmatism and narrow-mindedness are central. Spiritists stated that science has been monopolized by those who stated that one can only scientifically research *natural*, visible phenomena and that the research of supernatural phenomena are subject matters for metaphysics to speculate about. In the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein: 'Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muß man schweigen.'²⁸¹ Spiritists, however, stated that the scientific method could also be used to research paranormal phenomena and that something did not have to be visible or physical to be perceived and to be scientifically proven. When séances obey the scientific prerequisites and when they are repeated for a significant number of times, the phenomena that are experienced there can eventually be used as evidence for the spiritist hypothesis. However, according to the spiritists, dogmatic science is unwilling to research any phenomena that fall outside of their visible and Earthly comfort zone. They are not willing to give the scientific investigation of spiritism a change and refuse to look at the ground-breaking insights that spiritists have provided.²⁸² According to Nederburgh, scientists are caught in a materialist slumber from which they refuse to be awoken. They do not even recognize their own total bias towards materialist explanations and therefore reject spiritist and spiritual theories. This is highly dogmatic and unscientific, because it has an in-built materialist preference and bias which hinders the free practice of science.²⁸³ Therefore, it is not *spiritists* that have an unscientific way of working; it is rather the narrow approach

²⁸¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus. Logisch-philosophische Abhandlung* (Frankfurt am Main 1963) 115.

²⁸² Van Veen, *Spiritisme* 5 – 6. E. Sargent, 'Orthodoxe wetenschap', in: *Toekomstig Leven. Halfmaandelijks tijdschrift gewijd aan de studie van het Spiritisme en aanverwante verschijnselen* (15 May 1918).

²⁸³ Nederburgh, *Lichtstralen* 7.

towards science and the biased usage of the scientific method that stands in the way of a *professional* and *total* mode of scientific research. Spiritism is thus not only ethically and religiously superior; it is also trying to correct modern science's narrow and dogmatic view of reality and to show them the way towards a better appliance of the scientific method, of which spiritist research gives an example.

The famous Dutch psychiatrist, novelist, *and* spiritist Frederik van Eeden shows how fear and a feeling of being threatened also motivate the scientific objections towards spiritism in the following citation:

'Spiritisme wordt niet goed onderzocht omdat dogmatische wetenschap het als vijand ziet. De geleerde Braid onderzocht na 50 jaar de verschijnselen van Mesmer en moest de echtheid ervan constateren. Hij werd verketterd in wetenschappelijke kringen. Het lijkt erop dat er steeds meer psychische verschijnselen zijn die niet zomaar door de wetenschap verklaard kunnen worden en dat dit (en het spiritisme) serieus onderzocht moet worden.'²⁸⁴

['Spiritism is not being well researched because dogmatic science sees it as an enemy. The scientist Braid researched the phenomena of Mesmer after 50 years and had to acknowledge their authenticity. He was stigmatized within scientific circles. It seems that there is an increasing amount of psychical phenomena that cannot simply be explained by science and that these (and spiritism) should be seriously researched.']

We can conclude several things from this citation. First, it states that dogmatic science has not researched spiritism really well, if at all. This shows that science has little knowledge at best of the spiritist phenomena and that most research on it has taken place outside the ivory tower of dogmatic science. For this reason, spiritists can be said to possess more knowledge on the spiritist phenomena because they, as opposed to scientists, *had* done extensive research on the phenomena. Second, it showed a case where a scientist did research spiritist phenomena and reaped successful results. This implies that spiritism can be proven scientifically and that research is viable and can reap ground-breaking results. It also implies that the scientific community has a negative stance on researching spiritist phenomena, is unwilling to research these in the future, and excommunicates every scientist that *does* research and believe in spiritism. Van Eeden makes it clear that this attitude will not be able to explain the spiritist phenomena and that another method is necessary. Science must thus be freed of its dogmatism. Also, by stating that science sees spiritism as an *enemy* (in the context of his further commentary) Van Eeden implies that dogmatic science feels threatened by spiritism,

²⁸⁴ F. van Eeden, 'De psychische geneeswijze', in: *De Nieuwe Gids* 3 (Amsterdam 1888) 419 – 420.

because the first cannot explain the paranormal phenomena while the latter can. Again, spiritists think that the hostile scientists' attitude is caused by their lack of understanding and the fear that their materialist theories will be refuted by spiritists. This would explain their hostility and their active unwillingness to research the spiritist phenomena.

These are the replies that spiritists mostly used to debunk their opponents' criticism. Basically, they defended their own findings and repeatedly highlighted how Christians and scientists voiced all kinds of accusations but did not take the effort to research any of the spiritist phenomena. Also, according to spiritists, their opponents behaved the hostile way they did because they felt threatened by spiritism's superior explanatory power. There were also some smaller replies voiced by spiritists. First, Nederburgh responds to the accusation that practicing spiritism could result in insanity. In a work published posthumously, he states that also this accusation came out of the blue and was not supported by any empirical evidence or statistical data. Because of these continuing accusations, Nederburgh collected information on the relation between spiritism and clinical insanity himself. This resulted in the following data. In 1878, out of 14.500 people who were declared insane, 4 of these cases were connected to spiritism. The major causes for insanity were, according to Nederburgh, heredity and alcoholism. Out of the cases of insanity that were *not* attributed to these two causes, only five in 10.000 cases were attributed to spiritism. A research done by Dr. Cromwell in 1927 showed 59 spiritists among 23.328 patients declared insane. As a final part of his research, Nederburgh interviewed twenty-nine wardens of insane asylums and medics on the matter. None of them had ever seen spiritism as the direct cause for lunacy. The only way in which spiritism could lead to insanity (and even this was highly exceptional) was when people with an already very unbalanced state of mind would start practicing spiritism, which would cause tension to their fragile personality and cause them to go insane. Nederburgh states that his research shows that there is no positive correlation between spiritism and insanity. It *also* shows that doing actual empirical research can correct speculative and unfounded theories.²⁸⁵ This, of course, is a remark which is supposed to connect to the larger accusation of the unfounded objections voiced by spiritists' opponents.

A final spiritist reply had to do with the occurrence of fraud among mediums. As has been stated above, there were a lot of imposters within spiritist circles and these were frequently unmasked. Opponents used this argument to associate spiritists with fraud and conjuring. A group of spiritists replied to this accusation. They acknowledged the fact that

²⁸⁵ H.G. Nederburgh, *Leidt Spiritisme tot Krankzinnigheid?* (2nd pressing; Apeldoorn 1935) 3 – 11.

there were many imposters among spiritists who tried to make money out of executing paranormal phenomena. However, *spiritism* was not to blame for the fact that these imposters were there. This was rather due to the fact that people were willing to pay to see paranormal activities and phenomena take place. Moreover, spiritists themselves had the most trouble with these figures and were therefore inclined to dismiss them when they recognized him as an imposter. De Fremery states that spiritism has most extensively been researched by spiritists themselves and that they were already familiar with all the dangers of hallucination, unconscious muscular movements, and (auto)suggestion – and ways of avoiding them to make spiritist research one hundred percent reliable. It was this knowledge that partially motivated the call for a scientific *modus operandi*. The mediums Aksakoff and Hudson Tuttle stated that half or even three quarters of all spiritist phenomena could be of *non*-astral origin, i.e. fraud, suggestion, hallucination, and so on. However, this does not mean that *all* spiritist phenomena are natural. There were a large number of cases where, according to these mediums, it was one hundred percent guaranteed that the phenomena were caused by the spirits of the dead. The number of these accurate occurrences is high enough to consider the spiritist hypothesis to be proven scientifically. The fact that this scientifically proven core is surrounded by a bulk of fraud and hallucination does not disprove the truthfulness of the proven core phenomena. They compare this to Calvinism, which, according to them, also sees the bulk of people calling themselves Christian as not Christian at best and heathen or heretic at worst.²⁸⁶ With this series of replies, it has become clear that spiritists were annoyed and frustrated by the Christians' and scientists' lack of research and their objections that were motivated by fear.

§ VI – Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, the following research question was posed:

In what ways did spiritists interact, clash and overlap with the established religious denominations and with the scientific community in the Netherlands between 1890 and 1940?

²⁸⁶ De Veer sr., *Spiritisme*. De Fremery, *Handleiding*. De Fremery, *Het goed recht* 4 – 24. Göbel and Snijders, *Spiritisme*.

In the above paragraphs, we have seen how spiritists interacted and clashed with Dutch social groups. The Catholics and Protestants were almost unanimously negative and hostile towards spiritism and came up with several ways of accusing spiritists of being un-Christian, sinful, fraudulent, unhealthy, and un-scientific. There were some socialists who were attracted by spiritism, but the socialist milieu as such did not contain any spiritist elements. However, there was also no active hostility towards spiritism, apart from the general criticism towards religion. Scientists saw spiritism as a religious, un-scientific system and accused spiritists of not understanding and maintaining the proper use of the scientific method. Spiritists replied that it was the Christians and the scientists who had done no accurate research of the spiritist phenomena. All of the spiritists' opponents loudly voiced their objections and accusations without so much as doing proper research of the phenomena they were discussing first. This hardly placed them in a position to criticize the spiritists. Spiritists attributed this hostile attitude to the fact that both the churches as well as "dogmatic science" felt threatened by the superior religious, ethical, and scientific components of spiritism. Their objections were thus rather motivated by fear and a feeling of threat than by an actual disagreement over the spiritists' research results. Because of the continuing criticism, the tightening pillarization, and other reasons mentioned above, spiritists would become more esoteric and private from the 1920's onwards. This concludes the fourth chapter. We will now turn to the conclusion of this thesis.

Conclusion

In the previous pages, we discussed the history of spiritism and the construction of the Dutch spiritists' self-image between 1890 and 1940 at length. We discussed many interesting and surprising aspects of spiritism and witnessed how spiritism had a more important and influential place in Dutch history than the virtually non-existent historical research on spiritism implies. The analyses that were given in the chapters will be used to answer the research question and draw a general conclusion of the spiritists' self-image between 1890 and 1940. The research question that was posed at the outset of this thesis was:

How did Dutch spiritists construct their self-image between 1890 and 1940 and which strategies did they use try to maintain their public presence?

The answering the secondary questions, necessary for the answering of the research question, took over one hundred pages, in which many details have been given on the spiritists' beliefs, techniques, self-image, and interaction with other groups in Dutch society. We have analyzed the religious, ethical, and scientific components of spiritism and discussed in what ways the spiritists constructed their self-image. The conclusions and answers to the research question will now be discussed.

In the introduction, we have defined spiritism as 'the teaching that the deceased live on in a material form, that communication is possible between the world of the dead and that of the living, and that both this life after death and that possibility of communication can be proven experientially and scientifically.' One needs to be careful when using the words "teaching", "doctrine", "belief system", or even "spiritism" as such when referring to the spiritist beliefs. This is because of the diffuse and fragmented structure of spiritism. There was no official doctrine of central spiritist church or institution and this non-dogmatic and decentralized structure is a central characteristic of spiritism. Spiritists formed a bottom-up structured collection of different approaches towards the spiritist phenomena. These different and divergent groups are grouped under the common denominator of "spiritism". Despite all their differences, all spiritists subscribe to a common *core* of spiritist beliefs and values. When speak of "spiritism" and discuss the spiritists' self-image, it is this set of common beliefs that we refer to. Besides being fragmentary and diffuse in nature, spiritists often combined their spiritism with other (usually non-conventional) religious beliefs. A spiritist

was usually not merely a spiritist, but also an occultist, a theosophist, an anthroposophist, or a Christian. For this reason, spiritism was not always practiced as an autonomous belief system by its adherents. This should be kept in mind when discussing the spiritist self-image.

What were these core beliefs that connected spiritists and constituted their self-image? We have already given a very minimal definition of a belief in the existence of spirits and the possibility of communicating with them. There was a variety of techniques that could be used to communicate with the spirits, such as séances, Ouija boards, and direct writing. Spirits were seen as the souls of the deceased that had passed to the afterlife, called the astral sphere, and were slowly developing towards spiritual perfection. The place that a spirit would obtain in this afterlife depended on how virtuous he had been during his lifetime and how well he had prepared for eventually changing into this semi-material astral state. For this reason, spiritists deemed the astral sphere as more important than the material sphere and stated that people should actively use their limited time on Earth to prepare for the afterlife. These and other spiritist beliefs and practices have been discussed in the second and third chapters. How did they contribute to the construction of the spiritists' self-image?

First, the central and most important characteristic of Dutch spiritism between 1890 and 1940 is that it saw its propositions as *proven scientifically*. Spiritists thus defined their beliefs as a “scientifically proven religion”. Whenever they would discuss the spiritist phenomena and hypothesis, either in a spiritist periodical or in a discussion with opponents, spiritists would claim that the existence of spirits, the astral sphere, and the possibility to communicate with the deceased had been proven repeatedly by using the scientific method. Although spiritists barely elaborated on how they defined the scientific method and showed very few actual research results, the importance of science for spiritism was seen as paramount. Spiritists perceived this scientific character as that which distinguished them from and made them superior to the established religions. Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Theosophists, and other religions all had their own religious doctrines, none of which had been proven scientifically. Because spiritism was the only religion that was and could be proven scientifically, it was superior to all other established religions, which were speculative and partly correct at best. The reason why only spiritists had managed to prove their beliefs was because both Catholics and Protestants were too dogmatic. The accusation of dogmatism is what spiritists used against all their critics and opponents. Spiritists stated that Catholics and Protestants could not see the truth of the spiritist hypothesis, because they were too stuck in the dogmas of their own religion to look beyond the borders of these dogmas. This orthodoxy was seen as outdated and counter-productive. Only by escaping this Christian

tunnel vision, which categorically condemned any form of spiritism without even examining it, could Catholics and Protestants see the truth of the spiritist hypothesis. This critique also applied to the contemporary scientific community. According to spiritists, scientists were stuck in a dogmatic materialist paradigm in which only material and visible phenomena could be examined, used for explanations, and qualified for scientific theories. According to spiritists, the scientific method could and should also be used to examine paranormal and spiritist phenomena and prove them scientifically. Because scientists refused to participate in such research, while spiritists claimed to have successfully used the scientific method in such research, “dogmatic science” suffered from a narrow vision and was not able to explain certain phenomena because it was stuck in its dogmatic materialist paradigm.

So far, the spiritists saw spiritism as a scientifically proven religion, which was non-dogmatic, superior to other religions, and superior to “dogmatic science”, which was too stuck in its own dogmatic paradigm to explain the spiritist phenomena. Spiritists could therefore be said to have viewed spiritism as a scientifically proven, non-dogmatic religion superior to other, unproven religions. This feeling of superiority does not stop here. Spiritists saw themselves as better believers than adherents of the established religions and as better scientists (at least with regard to research of the spiritist phenomena) than the scientific community. Apart from this religious and scientific superiority, spiritists also saw themselves as *ethically* superior. The spiritists’ ethical critique was mainly targeted at the other established religions. Because these religions had become so dogmatic, they were now too preoccupied with studying rituals and Scripture instead of “loving their neighbors” as Christ had told them to do. It was regular spiritist behavior to use certain aspects of Christianity for their beliefs and values. Spiritists tried to compensate the shortcomings of Dutch Christians by propagating an ethical system where divine and universal love and care were central. Because this, according to spiritists, was the message that Christ had originally propagated and on which Christian should primarily focus rather than on dogmatic details, the spiritists also saw themselves as *ethically* superior to the established religions.

We can see that the spiritists heavily criticized both established religions and the scientific community, yet that they at the same time constructed their belief system with scientific and religious components. This lies in the idea that spiritists wanted to harmoniously unify specific Christian beliefs and values with the achievements of modern science. Both systems had achieved impressive and indispensable results, but had now gone corrupt. Spiritism wanted to preserve correct and benevolent Christian ideas as well as the scientific achievements and scientific method and unite these into one harmonious and

superior system: spiritism. Spiritists thus saw spiritism as a superior belief system that would one day replace outdated and dogmatic Christianity. We can see this idea of spiritism as a superior successor of Christianity in the calls of several spiritists to actively convert people to spiritism, because it was the truth and the religion of the future. The spiritists thus saw spiritism as ethically good and superior and progressively developing until it would replace Christianity and convert and educate all former Christians, and possibly the whole world.

Spiritists also used their views on the history of spiritism to construct their self-image. They saw spiritism as something that had been believed and practiced all over the world, from prehistorical tribal communities all the way up to contemporary modern societies. Spiritism was seen as a continuous phenomenon, that had always been around on every continent. According to spiritists, this gave it a respectable image, because all peoples had at one time found it plausible and important. More specifically, the “Hydesville Knockings” that occurred in the United States in 1848 marked a turning point in the history of spiritism. Here, people tried to scientifically prove the spiritist phenomena and claimed to have succeeded in doing so. After 1848, the number of spiritists, spiritist organizations, and claimed spiritist scientific successes grew impressively. This sparked the spiritists’ confidence and their view of spiritism as a serious, viable belief system that could compete with other religions. This confidence possibly developed into the later feeling of superiority. The spiritists envisioned the growth of their adherents as a progressive and continuous development, because the fact that spiritism was proven scientifically would convince people and keep them firmly in the spiritist camp. The introduction of modern spiritism to the Netherlands in 1858 was interpreted by later spiritists in an *evangelical* way, i.e. as the coming of the final revelatory truth to Dutch soil. The spiritist self-image thus also featured a progressive component.

Of course, the spiritists’ public claims led to interactions and clashes with other groups in Dutch society, most notably with Catholics, Protestants, and scientists. These debates mainly took place in spiritist periodicals and polemic spiritist and anti-spiritist pamphlets, of which quite a few were published. As we have seen, the spiritists mainly accused both Christians and scientists of being dogmatic, of not researching the scientific evidence that spiritists have provided, and of not propagating an ethical system focused on love. Catholics and Protestants responded to these accusations by stating that spiritism was sinful and in violation of the Christian laws, that a lot of mediums were frauds, and that the practice of spiritism was dangerous and unhealthy and could lead to nervous disorders, insanity, and suicidal tendencies. Christians also stated that spiritists tried to use *scientific* methods to prove *religious* phenomena, yet that these methods were not designed to answer religious questions.

Therefore, the scientific method was unfit to explain the spiritist phenomena. Scientists accused spiritists of not understanding what the scientific method was, how to use it, and thus not having scientifically proven anything at all. The spiritists *claimed* to use the scientific method, but they had never shown actually doing so and had not contributed any scientific research results. Also, a lot of the phenomena that spiritists perceived as communication with the dead were actually a form of individual or collective psychosis, caused by hallucination, (auto)suggestion, and the tense and expectant atmosphere at séances. To sum up this criticism, spiritism was un-Christian, un-scientific, and unhealthy.

The spiritists were annoyed and insulted by these accusations and went to great lengths to respond to and refute these critiques. Usually, spiritists replied that their hypothesis *was* proven scientifically and that their opponents simply refused to view the evidence. Spiritist replied to the religious critics that their accusations were based on unfounded rumors and an unjust aversion, and that they were motivated by a fear that spiritism would threaten the power and hegemony of the Dutch Christian churches. They also stated that a correct interpretation of the Bible would show that spiritism, far from being prohibited by Scripture, is actually a prominent Biblical leitmotiv. Usually, both sides kept on repeating their objections until a discussion ended in mutual disagreement. These accusations and discussions did not, however, change the spiritists' self-image. In spite of the wave of accusations, the spiritists continuously saw themselves as the scientific successors of Christianity. The continuing criticism voiced by opponents, the intensification of pillarization, the fear of infiltration in their organizations, and decreasing enthusiasm led to a decline of spiritist organizations and periodicals after 1920, with the remaining spiritists adopting a more introvert and esoteric character. The modern Dutch spiritists, having started out with success and increasing confidence, developing their self-image of religious, scientific, and ethical superiority, eventually diminished and lost their notable place in Dutch society. The spiritist self-image would not change after 1920, but was asserted less frequently and prominently by spiritists

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