

Spiritualism and Community in Antebellum America: The Mountain Cove Episode

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IN JULY 1851, as a young American spiritualist movement was approaching its antebellum crescendo, James L. Scott experienced what he believed was an inspiration given him by disembodied spirits. His experience and his belief that it had originated in the world of spirits were, of course, normative among spiritualists. Nor was the content of the "spirit message" he received on this occasion unusual in the context of strong if waning antebellum American reform and communitarian impulses. He was told, so he claimed, to search out an appropriate location for a colony of spiritualists searching for a communal alternative to the selfishness and moral corruption of contemporary American life. By October, he and about a hundred spiritualist followers had migrated from Auburn, New York, an early hotbed of spiritualist activity, to the mountains of Fayette County, Virginia to establish a cooperative agricultural community. They were convinced that the spirits, using Scott as their medium, had issued a "call to the mountain." The Mountain Cove community, as their short-lived attempt at utopia came to be called, was the result.¹

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1. My information about the Mountain Cove community is derived from a number of sources, the principal one being E.W. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism: Its Facts and Fanaticisms, its Consistencies and Contradictions* (Boston and New York, 1855), 117-31. Other useful sources include John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (New York, 1870), 568-76; Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism* (New York, 1872), 207-17; *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*, 1984 ed., s.v. "Mountain Cove;" *ibid.*, s.v. "Apostolic Circle." Any student of the community must also consult the *Mountain Cove Journal and Spiritual Harbinger*, a weekly periodical issued from 12 August 1852 through 20 October 1853; it seems to be quite scarce, and I have not seen a complete run. The only significant recent treatment of this obscure community is Ernest Isaacs' brief discussion in "A History of Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism as a Religious and Social Movement" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1975), 243-47.

While the spiritualist and communitarian movements were prominent and familiar features of the antebellum cultural landscape, the direct joining of the two phenomena was a relative rarity. To be sure, many spiritualists had close connections with Utopian experimentation. They were as apt as any of their reform-minded contemporaries to join such ventures, and they did so for the same reasons as other communitarians. Like other religious participants in what Michael Fellman has called the "communitarian culture" of the nineteenth century, they intended to help establish bastions of moral and spiritual virtue apart from and as examples to the larger competitive society.² It is well known that many spiritualists, conceiving of the spiritual universe in socially interactive and communal terms, drew heavily on the ideas of the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg and the Utopian theorist Charles Fourier, and had supported the latter's plan of "associationism" since its American vogue of the 1840s.³ Spiritualists commingled with nonspiritualist communitarians, furthermore, in such communities as Hopedale and Modern Times during the early 1850s.

In fact, Utopian activity and belief in spirit communication had been closely intertwined even before the advent of a distinct spiritualist movement in the years after 1848. Claims of spirit contact constituted an important part of the communitarian experiences of such nonspiritualist religious groups as the early Mormons, the Shakers, and the followers of John Humphrey Noyes during the 1830s and 1840s. But the Mountain Cove community, lasting from 1851 to 1853, was different from these others not only in that spirit communication was a defining aspect of the members' religion, but also in that spirit communication was both a central and a continual element of community experience and bonding (unlike communities of Shakers or Mormons, where spirit communication was important and sometimes central but not continual). At Mountain Cove, contact with the spirits was uniquely essential to the communitarian method. Mountain Cove, then, was an example of a specifically 'spiritualist communitarianism,' both reflective of and distinct within the larger Utopian culture of which it was a part.⁴

2. On the "communitarian culture" of nineteenth-century America, see Michael Fellman, *The Unbounded Frame: Freedom and Community in Nineteenth Century American Utopianism* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1973).

3. See Isaacs, "Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism," 238 *it.*, and Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 348-53.

4. Mountain Cove was not the only such episode. There was at least one other well known spiritualist community during the antebellum period, started in the 1850s by

The purpose of this essay is to study the interface between spiritualism and communitarianism, to place the Mountain Cove episode within the larger framework of antebellum communitarianism. More specifically, it will explore the tensions within spiritualist communitarianism. Embracing both an ideology of individual sovereignty and a belief that spiritual mediums exercise a religious authority derived from their presumed special contact with spirits, spiritualists found the establishment of viable religious institutions generally, and Utopian communities specifically, to be highly problematic. The classic tension between freedom and authority, so amply reflected in antebellum American religion, reform, and communitarianism, was clearly illustrated in the Mountain Cove episode. In the process of exploring the meaning of the Mountain Cove community, it will be rescued from its present obscurity.

The emphasis by recent scholars on spiritualism's individualistic and anti-institutional character might lead one to wonder how it is that spiritualists formed communities at all. Reflecting an increasing emphasis in nineteenth-century American religion on the subjective nature of religious experience and authority, they frequently advocated what they called individual sovereignty or "radical individualism." They believed, that is, that the individual conscience was a locus of divine moral law and thus a valid source of religious authority. This conviction often proved antithetical to formal institutional and structural religious arrangements. Their religious individualism made them wary of human pretensions to authority over others, and their personal religious histories often included "coming out" of churches and denominations deemed spiritually stifling or excessively rigid. Warnings against the dangers of institutionalized religion and authority abound in spiritualist writings of the 1850s. They were, then, averse to what was often an important element of communitarian practice.⁵ Yet the Mountain Cove episode, not only a

John Murray Spear at Kiantone in western Pennsylvania. See Neil B. Lehman, "The Life of John Murray Spear: Spiritualism and Reform in Antebellum America" (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, 1973), 206-19; Lewis Perry, *Radical Abolitionism: Anarchy and the Government of God in Antislavery Thought* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), 221; Russell Duino, "Utopian Theme with Variations: John Murray Spear and his Kiantone Domain," *Pennsylvania History* 29 (1962), 140-50; Ernest C. Miller, "Utopian Communities in Warren County, Pennsylvania," *The Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine* 49 (1966), 301-17; and Isaacs, "Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism," 249-54.

5. See Isaacs, "Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism," 260. The two major anti-institutional interpretations of the American spiritualist movement are R. Laurence Moore, *In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology, and American Culture* (New

communitarian experiment but one with markedly authoritarian features, was a fact of antebellum American life. How could spiritualists, often thought to be so strongly anti-institutional and antiauthoritarian, embark on such an experiment?

The basis of spiritualist communitarianism lay in the often overlooked conservative obverse of its "radical" religious anti-institutionalism. Like other antebellum Americans restless under traditional structures of religious authority, spiritualists cast off these forms only as an expression of the desire for a suitable replacement. Their search for spiritual freedom, in other words, was also a search for reliable spiritual authority. While some of their contemporaries turned for such authority to the Bible, or to such charismatic religious leaders as Joseph Smith or John Humphrey Noyes, spiritualists' basic mistrust of mortal human beings led them to look to spirits for moral and spiritual guidance. The spirits with whom most spiritualists claimed to be in contact were regarded as morally and spiritually superior if still human and therefore limited beings, far more worthy of spiritualists' respect than mere mortals. Belief in spirit authority provided spiritualists with a theoretical (if not practical) stabilizing counterweight to the anarchic potential of religious subjectivism. Regarded as representatives of absolute truth by many of them, spirits provided a measure of the religious certainty that they needed without demanding a sacrifice of the spiritual freedom they wanted. Most spiritualists considered their spirit contacts basically reliable if also fallible, looking to them for both advice and confirmation of one's own previously held beliefs while continually counseling against overconfidence in them.

For members of the movement, such advice and beliefs often involved a rejection of the moral status quo and an emphasis on cooperative modes of living. The spirits, spiritualists believed, both preached and practiced the virtues of community. As suggested above, belief in spirits' moral authority and communitarian leanings had been important to American communitarians for many years, long before the advent of the spiritualist movement and the establishment of Mountain Cove. Joseph Smith, for example, claimed to have received his ideas concerning the economy and politics of the kingdom of God, which he tried to implement in Kirtland, Ohio, during

York: Oxford University Press, 1977), esp. pp. 41-46, and Ann Braude, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989), esp. pp. 56-81. Significantly, neither of these authors devotes much attention to spiritualist communitarianism.

the 1830s, in revelations from the invisible world. That the dedication of the Mormon temple in Kirtland, the first Mormon attempt to establish a community separate from the larger society, was said to have been accompanied by an outburst of spiritual manifestations suggests the Mormons' desire for spirit confirmation and approval of their communitarian practices. The well known spiritual manifestations among Shakers during the late 1830s, meanwhile, appeared in part as a response to the erosion of social and moral order in Shaker communities. They functioned to strengthen group bonds and to reaffirm and revitalize the spiritual commitment of some believers to Shaker ideas and ideals. The spirits were believed to urge increased dedication to the requirements of moral order, and the Shaker leadership used the idea of spirit authority in encouraging this function of the manifestations. And John Humphrey Noyes, leader of the Oneida Community established in the following decade, considered a broadly defined "spiritualism," or belief in communication with the spirit world, to be an important part of the "religious theory" of community. He considered "communication with the heavens" a principle to be placed "on high, above all others, as the palladium of conservatism in the introduction of the new social order." Finally, spiritualists Adin Ballou and Josiah Warren, founders of the Hopedale and Modern Times communities respectively, recognized spirit authority and looked to the spirits for advice, approval, and confidence in their communitarian experimentation.⁶ In making the spirits an important element of their communitarianism, the spiritualists of Mountain Cove both highlighted and brought to a focus the larger cultural connection between spirit communication

6. See Klaus Hansen, *Mormonism and the American Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 32, 113-46; Noyes, *American Socialisms*, 617, 636-8; Lawrence Foster, "Had Prophecy Failed? Contrasting Perspectives of the Millerites and Shakers," in Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler, eds., *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1987), 178; Priscilla J. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986), 115-35; Adin Ballou, *History of the Hopedale Community*, ed. William S. Heywood (Lowell, Mass., 1897), 228; Adin Ballou, *An Exposition of Views Respecting the Principal Facts, Causes and Peculiarities Involved in Spirit Manifestations*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1853), 49, 220-21, 225; idem, "Spiritual Communications: Purporting To Have Come from the Spirit of Adin Augustus Ballou," *Spiritual Telegraph* 1, no. 3 (22 May 1852): 3rd page; idem, *Practical Christian Socialism: A Conversational Exposition of the True System of Human Society* (Hopedale, 1854), ix, 108; Philip Sidney Padelord, "Adin Ballou and the Hopedale Community" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1942), 277-80; Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 63-4; John C. Spurlock, *Free Love: Marriage and Middle-Class Radicalism in America, 1825-1860* (New York: New York University Press, 1988), 108, 113.

and the religious Utopian endeavor during the decades before the Civil War.⁷

However important a belief in the spirits was to spiritualists' religion and utopianism, "mere" morals nevertheless occupied essential authority-bearing roles in their religious and communitarian practices. Human mediums, spiritualists believed, served as the necessary spiritual conduits between relatively pure spirits and their morally wanting mortal communicants, providing tainted humanity with both confirmation of existing spiritual truths and access to newer and higher ones. Ultimately, the medium was believed to express the divine truth and divine will which had descended from God through the spirits. This aspect of spiritualist belief rendered the religious authority of the medium susceptible to extremism and abuse, as spiritualists constantly warned each other.

Many members of the movement believed that one medium's moral level and sensitivity to spiritual influences could be superior to another's, thus encouraging spiritualists to seek out favored channels to the spirit world. Spiritualists often gathered around particular mediums, forming "circles." Although such circles were usually informal, the very term connotes a modicum of structure, and spiritualist mediums in fact often became not only religious authorities but nuclei of alternative religious practices and structures.⁸ Indeed, some spiritualists even spoke of the spiritual universe, populated so they believed by a well defined social and spiritual hierarchy of spirits and mortals, as a "church" in which advanced beings, acting as mediums for those higher still, interacted with and "ministered" to lower ones.⁹ Significantly, they retained the language of formal religious structure and institutionalized religious authority, apparently requiring a conservative and stabilizing intellectual offset to spiritualism's anarchic possibilities. It was by no means a long theoretical step from the spiritualist "circle," itself a kind of structured religious community, to a spiritualist Utopian community based on spirit authority

7. Moore has correctly pointed out that "spiritualism was not a formative influence" on most of those communitarians who welcomed it, but he neglects the distinct spiritualist variety of communitarian activity. See *White Crows*, 97.

8. Ann Braude has pointed out that spiritualist mediums could become religious authorities; see *Radical Spirits*, 84. The "structural" nature of the spiritualist circle and spiritualist religious practice is suggested in Isaacs, "Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism," 111, 211 ff.

9. See, for example, J.S. Adams, *A Letter to the Chestnut Street Congregational Church* (Boston, 1854), 18, 26-7, and Emma Hardinge, *Six Lectures on Theology and Nature* ([Chicago?] n.p., 1860), 52.

and the charismatic, even authoritarian, leadership of the spiritualist medium. Centralized authoritarian communities like Mountain Cove, then, were potential byproducts and hence legitimate expressions of spiritualist belief.¹⁰

The Mountain Cove episode suggests that the movement from medium-centered spiritualist "circle" to medium-centered spiritualist community was as short a practical as it was a theoretical step, for it was a direct outgrowth of a group of Auburn, New York, spiritualists known as the "Auburn circle" or "apostolic circle." The circle took shape in the late 1840s and early 1850s, gathering at first around Ann Benedict, a medium who claimed to be in communication with the spirits of the apostles. In 1850, these exalted spirits called James L. Scott to leave his position as a Seventh-Day Baptist minister in Brooklyn and remove to Auburn. He obeyed what he regarded as spirit instructions, and by 1851 had established himself as the leader of the circle, his leadership being based on his professed special contact through Benedict with the circle's spirit directors. Sharing the leadership of the circle with Scott was Thomas Lake Harris, an ex-Universalist minister (like many spiritualists) who had left that denomination to lead a liberal independent Christian congregation in New York City before receiving "spirit instructions" to go to Auburn.

While Harris remained only briefly before returning to the metropolis, Scott stayed and used belief in spirit communication and authority to establish a firm control over the Auburn group. He insisted that any advice, command, or doctrine received through any medium other than Benedict be legitimized by the sanction of the spirit of the apostle Paul, whose secret sign only he knew. Similarly, both men maintained a tight editorial control over *Disclosures from the Interior and Superior Care for Mortals*, a periodical established in February 1851 as a voice for the "apostolic movement."¹¹ They claimed that it was "dictated by spirits out of the flesh, and by them edited,

10. Michael Fellman has argued that centralized authoritarianism and libertarian individualism constituted the theoretical "boundaries" of nineteenth-century American Utopian culture; see *The Unbounded Frame*, 3-19. As "radical individualists," many spiritualists not surprisingly were attracted to such libertarian communities as Modern Times. Indeed, spiritualists participated in Fellman's entire spectrum of communitarian practice. Still, it is significant that both well known spiritualist communities of the 1850s, namely Mountain Cove and Kiantone, were dominated by the leadership of charismatic mediums.

11. Published semi-monthly, the paper ran from 20 February 1851 through 23 September 1851.

superintended, and controlled."¹² They declared of the paper, furthermore, that "the circle of apostles and prophets are its conductors in the interior, holding control over its columns, and permitting no article to find place therein, unless originated, dictated or admitted by them,—they acting under direction of the Lord Supreme."¹³ These practices were only the earliest signs of the autocratic attitude and behavior which the two leaders of the circle would later manifest more fully. Their authority, which they claimed was grounded in the spirit world, was well established by the time Scott experienced his "call to the mountain" in July 1851 and began to spread the word of an impending hegira.

Mountain Cove, the details of whose institutions remain unknown, was supposed to become, quite literally, a new Eden. Ira S. Hitchcock, one of the one hundred people who followed Scott to Virginia, wrote in a letter published in the *Oneida Circular* that the group had found the actual garden of Eden, and that the place was to form the center of the redemption of the human race. Scott and his spiritualist disciples were told by Scott's spirit contact to "flee to the mountains whither I direct" in order to "come out" of a sinful society.¹⁴ The community was to be the moral reverse of an unpalatable social order, an attempt to establish a Utopia under the direction of spirits exercising their divinely sanctioned authority through the mediums Scott and Harris.

A pair of articles in the *Mountain Cove Journal and Spiritual Harbinger*, a closely controlled periodical which began to appear in 1852 as the institutional mouthpiece of the Mountain Cove movement, set forth the intended purposes of the new community. The explanation differed little from those underlying other communitarian ventures of the period, except in the important roles assigned to spirits as communitarian activists and moral exemplars. According to the author of the articles (probably Scott or Harris), Christian principles "have no binding and legal recognition" in American society but would serve as the basis of his "MORAL COMMONWEALTH." The "true" social order, it was asserted, "can only be established through institutional organization and practical operation of the law of love. . . . The call to the Mountain," the piece continued, "is the invitation to the Christian Man to co-operate with Holy Angels in practically

12. Quoted in *Spirit Rapping in England and America: Its Origin and History* (London, 1853), 103.

13. Quoted in Capron, *Modern Spiritualism*, 118.

14. Noyes, *American Socialisms*, 568-71.

founding Society on Earth according to that form in which Society is organized in Heaven."¹⁵

The role of spirit communication in spiritualist communitarianism can be best understood through a brief glimpse into Harris's spiritual philosophy, one shared in its fundamental features by most adherents of spiritualist religion. According to Harris,

The primal law of God's celestial kingdom is impartation,—each living not for selfish ends, but for the highest good of all. Thus are all the good and true made members of one body, in which each receives wisdom, goodness, beauty and energy of life from the ministry of those above, and in turn imparts of his fulness [sic] to those below.

Central to this process of spiritual "impartation" was what Harris called the "Authority of the Ideal" in an 1852 article in the *Spiritual Telegraph*. By "divine necessity," he said, the "omnipotent" ideal flows into and shapes the actual. Harris believed that the "ideal" was always and by definition closer to realization in the world of spirits than in the world of mortals, and that human history was continually "moving forth under the pressure of Spiritual Forces, and in obedience to Spiritual Laws." "Ideas of truth and principles of wisdom," Harris said, "descend from the world of Glorified and Redeemed Spirits to outer expression on our terrestrial globe." Two aspects of this belief had important implications for communitarianism. First, his concept of spirit as the fundamentally real and causal force of the universe (shared by spiritualists generally), his belief that spiritual forces acted to mold the material world, reinforced the basic communitarian idea that social life and organization should be patterned after a perception of absolute truth. Secondly, and more importantly for present purposes, spirits, as intermediaries between the divine "Ideal" and the imperfect or "actual" world of mortals, were active inspirations for the communitarian. More than merely passive exemplars of community, spirits were thought to point out and even lead mortals along the pathway to Utopia. Mediums Scott and Harris claimed to act, and to have established the Mountain Cove community, under the influence ultimately of the "Ideal" and more directly of the spirits who acted in its behalf.¹⁶

15. "Mammon Worship and Christianity: Opposite and Irreconcilable," *Mountain Cove Journal* 1:16 (30 December 1852): 63; "True Principle of Human Association," *Mountain Cove Journal* 1:17 (13 January 1853): 67. Most pieces in the *Mountain Cove Journal* were not signed. I am working under the assumption that most of its unsigned material was written either by Scott or Harris, or had at least been approved by them for publication.

16. Thomas Lake Harris, *The Morality of Religion* (New York, 1850), 4; idem, "The Authority of the Ideal," *Spiritual Telegraph* 1:2 (15 May 1852): 1; idem, "Spiritual Mani-

Upon arrival at the 'new Eden/ the state of spiritual affairs changed considerably from what it had been at Auburn. Scott dispensed with Benedict's mediumistic services, claiming for himself the status of a divinely inspired medium especially chosen and directed by highly advanced spirits as God's instrument.¹⁷ As the community's sole medium and religious leader, Scott was to reveal the will of the spirits and of God in all matters moral, intellectual, social, and temporal. Like other charismatic religious leaders, he established his authority on his alleged special contact with the spiritual world. He declared himself "*the* chosen medium for inspiration" and added a warning designed to assert his divinely sanctioned authority over community affairs and to preserve community order: "Whoso seeketh the destruction of this medium, appointed of Heaven . . . *warreth with God*, and not the medium."¹⁸ Every individual in the community, then, was expected to submit to established community authority as embodied and focused in God's and the spirits' chosen representative.¹⁹ Scott's claim to divinely and spiritually authorized leadership (independent of any formal church organization) was acknowledged, at least at first, by most if not all of those who answered his "call to the mountain." The unmistakably defensive tone of his warning suggests, however, that trouble was afoot.

When Harris joined the group in Virginia in the spring of 1852, after helping Scott to overcome a financial crisis in the community, he too laid claim to a divinely inspired mediumship and to authority

festations, Past, Present, and Future," *Mountain Cove Journal* 1:24 (21 April 1853): 99; "The Origin of Ideas," *Mountain Cove Journal* 1:6 (23 September 1852): 23. Fellman has argued that a movement from idealistic conceptions of absolute truth to attempts to realize those conceptions in practice is an integral part of the substance of communitarian culture; see *The Unbounded Frame*, xv, 3.

17. This development suggests that mediumship, while effectively used for the religious empowerment of women (see Braude, *Radical Spirits*, 82-116), could be used as much to reinforce traditional gender roles as to shape new ones, especially in a communitarian setting. Once the Auburn "circle" became transformed into the Mountain Cove community, and a purely religious leadership began to merge with a kind of "public" authority considered by many mid-nineteenth-century Americans to be properly exercised only by men, Benedict's religious authority was undermined. Religious Utopias in antebellum America were usually led by men, and the spiritualist community of Mountain Cove proved to be no exception. Significantly, the other major spiritualist communitarian effort of the period, Kiantone, was also dominated by a male medium.

18. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism*, 121; I.S. Hyatt, "Modern Inspiration, at Mountain Cove," *Spiritual Telegraph* 1:24 (16 October 1852): 4. Emphasis in original.

19. John Murray Spear, the charismatic medium who led the Kiantone spiritualist community, made similar claims to authority; see Perry, *Radical Abolitionism*, 220-21.

over community life. For Harris, the control exercised by him and Scott over affairs at Mountain Cove was based on the hierarchical structure of mediumistic moral authority characteristic of the spiritual universe. In a *Mountain Cove Journal* article of late April, he advocated "the due dependence of the inferior on the superior, as the child to the parent, the governed to the governor in authority of right." Such a statement would not have shocked their followers, for the idea of dependence and obedience within a spiritual hierarchy was a recurrent feature in spiritualist writings. But in May, the two men issued a joint "epistle" exceeding the limits of what most spiritualists would have considered acceptable mediumistic practice. They claimed to be perfect and infallible mediums transmitting "truth absolute," Harris explaining in lectures given around the time that spiritualism provided access to "an interior source that never errs, that never falsifies, that never misjudges, never misconceives, never mistakes, and never misdirects." All other mediums were to be stripped of their authority by being either silenced or given over to evil spirits. Such suggestions that spirit communication and mediumistic practice involved infallible authority, and the autocratic behavior that these suggestions were being used to justify, would have been troubling to most members of the movement.²⁰

Scott and Harris sometimes claimed, moreover, not only to communicate with the "circle of apostles" but to be in direct contact with God. In so doing, they overstepped the definitional boundaries of spiritualism and became virtually indistinguishable from other charismatic religious figures of the period. Such a claim, after all, bypasses the spirit mediation through which most spiritualists believed divine communion with humanity to occur. Indeed, the claim to contact with the spirits of the apostles made the Mountain Cove spiritualists somewhat atypical of the movement from the start. While a large segment of the movement self-consciously defended Christianity and the Bible against an equally salient anti-Christian element, only a small (if highly significant) minority even of Christian spiritualists claimed communication with such lofty beings. Most spiritualists believed their spirit contacts to be of much humbler spiritual status. In their beliefs and practices, then, the spiritualists of Mountain Cove were much closer than their peers to the other charismatically led religious movements and communitarian movements of the antebellum period. Still, they were certainly within the bounds

20. "Spiritual Manifestations, Past, Present, and Future," 95. See Harris, *Lecture on Spiritual Manifestations, Past, Present, and Future, Delivered in the People's Theater, Saint Louis, Mo., Sunday Evening, March 24, 1853* (Boston: George C. Rand, 1853).

of spiritualism, representing an illuminating exaggeration of the movement's defining features and highlighting its potential to assume the authoritarian forms which characterized so many other contemporary religious and Utopian movements. Significantly, the Kiantone spiritualist community, led by a spiritualist far less Biblically and "apostolically" inclined than Scott and Harris, proved susceptible to similar ideological tensions and mediumistic extremism.²¹

Reactions by more typical spiritualists to those who occupied or moved beyond the movement's definitional "fringe" were usually negative, and the excesses of Scott and Harris made it possible for more sober members of the movement to dismiss the whole Mountain Cove affair as an illegitimate expression of spiritualism. But because spirits were considered to be only links between human beings and the deity in spiritualist theology, and because a medium could aspire to contact with increasingly advanced spiritual beings in proportion to his or her own moral development, it was not at all inconceivable for a spiritualist to carry the idea of mediumship so far as to make it practically identical with the kind of direct divine inspiration commonly claimed by leaders of religious movements and communities. Spiritualism's authoritarian potential, apparent especially (but not only) near the movement's theoretical borders and amply illustrated by the Mountain Cove episode, was evident even during the Auburn phase of the community's brief history. In Virginia, as we shall see, this exaggerated tendency reinforced the authoritarian elements already present in communitarian culture to produce explosive results.

Whatever the excesses of the two mediums, existing evidence strongly indicates that the community retained its defining spiritualist features, that spirits below the deity were still believed by community members to occupy important positions of intermediary and representative authority in its operations, and that belief in the spirits was still important to community bonding. For example, Scott and Harris claimed that their epistle of May 1852 had been issued by "The Circle of Apostles and Prophets to the Auburn Circle of Disciples." It opened with the following declaration, suggestive of spirit authority:

The especially appointed and commissioned spirits, through whom superior wisdom has approached and instructed mortals, dictate unto you the present

21. Some Spiritualist writers of the period, portraying the movement more as they wished it to be than as it actually was, tried to marginalize the Mountain Cove episode (and Spear's activities) as uncharacteristically authoritarian; see, for example, Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 207-13, and Charles Partridge, "Religious Fanaticism," *Spiritual Telegraph* 7:29 (13 November 1858): 286. My argument against such attempts is similar to that offered by Neil Lehman in "The Life of John Murray Spear," 18.

epistle in the light of understanding, in the purpose of counsel, and in the desire of harmonious interprocedure of love. They review your works, declare their directed purposes, and seek to guide your feet in the way of peace.

The spirits then proceeded to review their role as messengers of God in the establishment of the community. Scott's instructions to issue a "call to the mountain," community members were reminded, came "by direction absolute from the interior through the appointed vehicles therefor." After the group had reached Virginia, the spirits, through whom the *Disclosures from the Interior* had descended, were authorized "to resume the disclosure of his truth" in the *Mountain Cove Journal*, which institutionalized the authority of spirits and human mediums in the community.²²

The theocratic, "spiritocratic," and autocratic nature of authority at Mountain Cove extended to the community's property arrangements. Soon after assuming complete control of affairs there, Scott demanded that believers relinquish all their possessions to the direction of God through himself. Addressing his requirement to believing spiritualists everywhere, he also issued a number of individual epistles to the same effect to known sympathizers with his movement throughout the country. All members of the new community, it was understood, were to resign their property to the control of God, Scott's spirit directors, and their earthly representative "James, the medium."

Not every community member approved of Scott's new policy, at least one person later claiming that members of the Auburn circle had been promised individual property and businesses before the migration.²³ The vigorous defense of the policy in the pages of the *Mountain Cove Journal* suggests that the opposition may have been considerable. It certainly indicates the existence of tension between individualism and centralized community authority. Describing the "True Principle of Human Association," one writer (again, probably either Scott or Harris) expressed the idea, not uncommon among antebellum communitarian thinkers, that all human beings hold their possessions in stewardship for the Lord:

The Christian Man acknowledges that the Savior is his Lord, Lawgiver and Director. He claims no exemption. His time, talents, influence, possessions, are all held in trust. He lives as one who must finally render account of his stewardship. In this his motive and his movement is the opposite or inversion of that of the Man of the World. The latter has one maxim, namely, "to do as he likes with his own." Virtually and practically he is in a state of

22. The text of the May 1852 epistle appears in Capron, *Modern Spiritualism*, 124-7.

23. I.S. Hyatt, "Mountain Cove Community," *Spiritual Telegraph* 2:9 (2 July 1853): 35.

rebellion against his Lord. He usurps control of his Master's goods. He denies his accountability to the Ruler of the Universe. He is a traitor to the Law of Love.²⁴

Clearly, according to Scott and Harris, the divine social order that the spirits were working to establish through them could tolerate no such "rebellious" institution as individual property.

Rather, declared another *Journal* article, the keynote of that order was a spirit-inspired mutualism. "Angels, spirits of just men made perfect, have and desire no individual and isolated possessions; but harmoniously existing in, are members of, and inheritors to, the universe of God." Such "unfallen intelligences" were believed to be "mutual in existence, mutual in inheritance." It was only "fallen beings" who, "by reason of sin, in virtue and moral purity detached from the universe of spirituality, individualize themselves, and seek independent and separate possessions."²⁵ Thus morally advanced spirits, as advocates, representatives, and exemplars of an alternative communal economic and social order (as symbols, in short, of community), held out the promise of social, economic, and spiritual security to those who may have found the individualistic and competitive aspects of the existing order troubling. Living communally, like their spirit contacts, would strengthen community members' "spiritual relations to the universe of embodied and disembodied spirits." Feeling alienated by the status quo and looking to Mountain Cove as "a city of refuge," "a hiding place and a shelter," and "an asylum for the afflicted," spiritualist communitarians found in their beliefs and practices a needed source of social and spiritual bonding.²⁶ According to the leaders of Mountain Cove, then, the ideal of community was to be realized and preserved by submitting to the authority of divine social principles, by following the moral example of advanced spirits, and, most immediately, by obeying Scott's spirit-given orders requiring an angelic mutualism.²⁷

24. "True Principle of Human Association," 67.

25. "Sin the Cause of Human Discordance," *Mountain Cove Journal* 1:25 (5 May 1853): 98-9.

26. *Ibid.*; Noyes, *American Socialisms*, 568-71.

27. Similarly, John Humphrey Noyes instructed his followers at Oneida that the communal spirit, or "afflatus," orchestrated by a "medium" (a strong leader representative of social unity and God's authority), was essential to the success of his Utopian experiment. "All assertions of individualism," says Michael Fellman, "had to be subordinated to this collective spirit. Only the agreed upon primacy of the group will could guarantee communal survival. . . . Those who entered Noyes' communities had to surrender all claims to self-governance and to submit to the discipline of the dictatorially led group." For Noyes as for Scott and Harris, "spiritual relations" were to be substituted for "merely natural ones." See Fellman, *The Unbounded Frame*, 50-51.

In fact, however, life in this new Eden was characterized by anything but harmonious and angelic social relations. Discord, decreasing confidence in Scott and Harris, and diminishing membership were the hallmarks of community life. Indeed, it is evident that not all of those who had supported the movement back in Auburn had a strong enough faith in its leaders to follow Scott to Virginia. Only about one hundred of what had been "as many as two or three hundred" open "supporters of the cause" answered the "call to the mountain."²⁸ Those who did migrate to Mountain Cove found their faith subject to trial and strain almost from the start.

Three factors seem to have been paramount in triggering dissent and disaffection among some of the faithful. The first was an accusation of "licentiousness and adultery" brought against Scott by December 1851, less than two months after the first of the group arrived. A public meeting, attended by only a few, was called to explore the matter. Although Scott evaded the charges and no further investigation was made, his accusers continued their agitation. Spiritualist publicist Eliab W. Capron, writing an early history of the movement, reported that "strife and contention" became characteristic of "the 'harmonious' mount" from this time forward. Financial weakness, too, corroded the bonds of community at Mountain Cove. In February 1852 the land originally purchased for the community was returned to its seller because payments on it could not be met. The result was that "several families" left "on account of the contention and want of confidence in the movement." At this juncture Scott called an emergency meeting, only the second known community meeting in what was becoming an autocracy, and was directed by the spirits while in a trance to go to New York. There he received the aid of Harris in persuading several prosperous people to join the venture. These new community members, among them Harris, augmented the "some half a dozen families" which remained by the spring of 1852. The third source of dissent and weakness lay in a lack of consistency among the alleged revelations, and a resulting erosion of faith in the authority of Scott and Harris. Inconsistencies were detected by some "before the lapse of many weeks," and "a number of families" withdrew "in about three months," or in the early months of 1852.²⁹

Faced with declining respect for their mediumistic authority, Scott and Harris proved unable to salvage their control over the community and resorted to increasingly forceful measures to retain it.

28. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism*, 119.

29. *Ibid.*, 123-4, 128-9.

Scott's banishment of dissenters early in 1852 only hints at the lengths to which he was willing to go to ensure what he considered social harmony and to secure the obedience to God, the spirits, and their earthly medium which he considered necessary to the maintenance of community. After Scott and Harris reported in the summer of 1852 the spirits' announcement that the land containing the community buildings must be leased to them in God's name, thus underscoring the human element in the spiritualist community's structure of authority and attempting to strengthen their own power, they began to persecute those who disagreed with them. E.W. Capron, relying on an "informant" for the facts about life in the community, reported that "slander, discord and contention" were the result of the mediums' latest efforts to consolidate and intensify their authority. Attempts by Scott and Harris to maintain their control, curb dissent, and bring order to the community culminated in thinly veiled threats: they declared in the autumn of 1852 that they were the two witnesses spoken of in the eleventh chapter of Revelation, and that they possessed the power described there.³⁰ Such continual and increasingly forceful attempts by the community leaders to assert and retain their authority, suggestive as they were of instability, probably only served further to undermine the confidence of wavering community members and to accelerate a dynamic of dissent. Not all, to be sure, ceased to believe in and submit to Scott and Harris. One skeptical community resident reported that those still accepting their authority "were kept in awe of these self-appointed 'anointed of the Lord' by the constant asserting of the awful power" described in the book of Revelation. Discord continued nevertheless, and the community folded in 1853.³¹

The published expose of one disaffected follower provides a rare if unfriendly glimpse into the authoritarian experience at Mountain Cove, and highlights some of the reasons for the outbreak of dissent and the community's resulting demise. I.S. Hyatt³² had been the editor of a short-lived and closely monitored Auburn paper dedicated

30. These powers are described in Revelation 11:5-6 (King James version) as follows: "And if any man will hurt them, fire proceedeth out of their mouth, and devoureth their enemies: and if any man will hurt them, he must in this manner be killed. These have power to shut heaven, that it rain not in the days of their prophecy: and have power over waters to turn them to blood, and to smite the earth with plagues, as often as they will."

31. Capron, *Modern Spiritualism*, 130-31.

32. Hyatt was Capron's "informant." See Charles Partridge's article in the *Spiritual Telegraph* 8:43 (18 February 1860), reprinted in Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, 214-6.

to the "apostolic movement" and entitled the *Spiritual and Moral Instructor*.³³ He arrived from Auburn, "unwavering in my faith," in December 1851, as Scott faced charges of immoral behavior. It was he, in fact, who suggested that the charges be investigated. He soon began to question Scott's claims to divine authority and infallibility. He left the community, according to his own account, in the spring of 1852, "about four months" after his arrival. This was at about the time that Scott issued orders that dissenters leave. Scott, then, was probably acting in response to dissent in the community as represented by Hyatt, whose attempt to publish his expose in the *Mountain Cove Journal* suggests that he was an outspoken challenger to Scott's authority and that he was a leading voice of the dissenting forces. Hyatt tried to air his views in the *Mountain Cove Journal* in May 1852, but this paper, like those published at Auburn before the migration, was controlled by Scott, Harris, and (they claimed) their movement's directing spirits. Not surprisingly, Hyatt's article, presumably considered by the Mountain Cove spiritual establishment to be subversive of community authority, was suppressed. The New York based *Spiritual Telegraph*, on the other hand, the most widely circulated and long-lived spiritualist periodical of the 1850's, had established itself as a defender of a free press and published the piece in October. Hyatt wrote a second article for the *Journal of Progress* (it also appeared in the *Telegraph*) the following summer as the Mountain Cove episode was drawing to its unhappy close.

Hyatt made it clear in his articles that Scott had gone too far and threatened individual sovereignty. Instruction by advanced apostolic spirits had been supplanted and caution in dealing with the spirits jettisoned, he pointed out, the medium claiming "entire infallibility . . . as well as Divine inspiration, in its most unequivocal sense." Questioning Scott's claim to direct contact with God, he linked what he considered this authoritarian abuse of mediumistic authority with a felt lack of individual freedom in the community. "All the principles and rules of practice—whether of a spiritual or temporal nature—which govern the believers in that place," he remonstrated, were "dictated" by Scott and Harris. Appealing to spiritualists' devotion to freedom of conscience, he argued that the Mountain Cove "disciples . . . are forbid the privilege of having any reason or conscience at all, except that which is prescribed to them by this oracle. The most unlimited demands of the controlling influence [who, he suspected, was a mere mortal] must be acceded to by its followers."

33. This periodical appeared semi-monthly between June 5, 1851 and November 11, 1851.

Hyatt not only defended the freedom and authority of individual reason against the "mere" human authority of another, but encouraged its exercise by other members of the community. It had been the use of his own reason that led him to detect inconsistencies in Scott's communications, and to conclude that "the controlling power

. . . which I had believed to be Divine, originated in a source perhaps partly spiritual and partly human, but which in no case was entitled to absolute confidence." That "the 'inspiration' conformed itself to

. . . the opinions of those whose support was most requisite for external success," namely the movement's wealthier members, further undermined Hyatt's confidence in Scott. This individualist also attacked the community's centralistic property policy. Hyatt, then, can be regarded as being in some ways representative of spiritualism's anti-authoritarian impulse, just as Harris and Scott reflected the opposite impulse which was no less significant an element in the movement. The dispute, in other words, reflected the larger ideological divisions and tensions which characterized and plagued both antebellum spiritualism and communitarianism. Significantly, Hyatt reaffirmed his belief in spiritualism, which he considered compatible with individual sovereignty, even as he repudiated its authoritarian manifestation at Mountain Cove. He continued to look to spirits for religious authority, complaining to Capron that it was "understood that there was to be no dictator in the movement; but the whole was to be under the direction of the spirits."³⁴

Hyatt was not alone in his skepticism concerning the claims of Harris and Scott; he reported that the dictatorial actions of the community's leaders had

awakened, in the minds of more reasoning and reflective members, distrust and unbelief, which has caused some, with great pecuniary loss, to withdraw from the community, and with others, who remain, has ripened into disaffection and violent opposition; and the present condition of the "holy mountain" is any thing but that of divine harmony.

The editors of the *Telegraph*, meanwhile, defenders of "radical individualism" and therefore anxious to marginalize this authoritarian episode, were no more friendly to the Mountain Cove movement. In introducing Hyatt's second article, they remarked that they had "never regarded the claims of Messrs. Scott and Harris with favor." They went on to comment that those continuing to reside in the community were "deluded" by Scott's "absurd pretensions." Scott denied Hyatt's charges in a published "counter-statement," also ap-

34. Hyatt, "Modern Inspiration, at Mountain Cove," 4; idem, "Mountain Cove Community," 35.

pearing in the *Telegraph*, but he seems to have changed few minds about the nature of the episode. John Humphrey Noyes, himself a major authoritarian figure in antebellum communitarianism, would later judge in the capacity of historian that Scott's rebuttal "has the air of special pleading, and all the information that we have obtained by communication with various ex-members of the Mountain Cove community, goes to confirm the substance of the preceding charges."³⁵ Hyatt's experience at Mountain Cove, then, was by no means unique. Other members of this spiritualist community, too, found the externally imposed authority of its mediumistic leaders unacceptably incompatible with the ideal of individual sovereignty.

The Mountain Cove episode suggests that spiritualist communitarians were no less vexed by the tension between individual freedom and centralized authority than other antebellum Utopians. Spiritualist religion, itself characterized by a similar tension between liberty and order during the 1850s and subject like other religious movements to human abuse, could easily exacerbate this basic dilemma and proved unable at the time to generate sustainable communities. The problem lay not, however, in the unique features of spiritualist theology. Spiritualist communitarians were dedicated to their particular balance between the conflicting desires for religious freedom and religious certainty, and they considered spirit authority and spirit communication to be integral, even essential, aspects of communitarian life. Hyatt himself suggested as much by reaffirming his belief in spirit authority even as he complained about Scott's excesses. Nor was their trouble the practical tendency which spiritualism shared with other alternative religious and Utopian movements of the antebellum period, which often proved troublesome to those movements, and which individualists like Hyatt resisted: the potential to nurture charismatic, centralistically inclined, sometimes overbearing, and all-too-human authority figures like Scott and Harris through the concept of mediumship. The fact that some members of the community remained loyal to Scott and Harris long after dissent broke out suggests that spiritualist communities based on belief in spirit communication or the leadership of charismatic mediums had the potential for long life. The problem was that the spiritualists' conflicting desires for spiritual freedom and security found practical expression in conflicting and irreconcilable ideological forces and factions. If spiritualist communitarians were to use notions of spirit

35. Hyatt, "Modern Inspiration, at Mountain Cove," 4; idem, "Mountain Cove Community," 128, 129; Scott, "Mountain Cove—Counter Statement," *Spiritual Telegraph* 2:14 (6 August 1853): 55; Noyes, *American Socialisms*, 576.

contact, spirit authority, and human mediumship to crystallize the bonds of community while preserving the spiritual freedom of the individual, they would have to protect that freedom by containing excesses in mediumistic practice.³⁶

Understanding spiritualist communitarianism requires a recognition of the counteracting antiauthoritarian and authoritarian tendencies which characterized both antebellum American life generally and spiritualism in particular. The potency of the former explains the failure of spiritualists to create viable religious institutions of any kind, including Utopian communities, during the antebellum period. The neglected latter, meanwhile, explains why such institutional manifestations of spiritualism as the Mountain Cove community appeared in antebellum America in the first place despite the power of "radical individualism." It is probably no coincidence that as the intensity of individual sovereignty within the spiritualist movement declined later in the nineteenth century, viable spiritualist communities began to appear.³⁷

The same concern with the dangers of spiritualist despotism that sundered the Mountain Cove community would soon lead Harris himself, whose later communitarian endeavors were to be far more successful, to renounce his involvement in the episode. Speaking to an audience of spiritualists in May 1854, he warned about the dangers involved in allowing spirits and mediums "to become our spiritual rulers." He had once, he confessed, been an overzealous advocate of the claims of advanced spirits and their mortal vehicles, but he now regarded his earlier position as "untenable." "In admitting, therefore, a ministry of the spirit, we must see that it is kept free from a dogmatic element, free from absolutism. . . . Not even the angels," he concluded, "are infallible."³⁸

36. Certainly medium John Murray Spear, similarly given to excess, proved no better able to hold Kiantone together. Neil Lehman has pointed to Spear's authoritarian tendencies and to the tension at Kiantone between these tendencies and the ideal of individual sovereignty; see "The Life of John Murray Spear," 358, 370, 383, 404, 456.

37. On the changing ideological content of spiritualism, see *Radical Spirits*, 162-91. Spiritualist communities during the post-Civil War years are discussed in Robert S. Fogarty, *All Things New: American Communes and Utopian Movements, 1860-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

38. Harris, "The Christian Pulpit Considered in its Relation to the Present Age," *Spiritual Telegraph* 3:5 (3 June 1854): 17.