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*Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance*  
(review)

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*Christian Magic: Coptic Texts of Ritual Power* (Princeton University Press, 1994). Collins's Greco-Roman focus in this book thus marginalizes the rich variety of cultures one finds blended or accumulated in Greek texts like the magical papyri. This would not matter so much if Collins had not extended his work to the Roman Empire and late antiquity, appealing in Chapter 5 for a reading of Roman magical practices as essentially "an absorption and adaptation" of Greek ones—that is, arguing for just the kind of contiguities and borrowings that characterized ancient magic of earlier periods. Further, his suggestion that the stereotype among Romans was that the Greeks were adept at magic could usefully be refined by considering how far the suspicion of Greek magic was in fact of Hellenistic Jewish, or "other," magic.

This quibble aside, there is much to be commended and enjoyed in this book. Collins is alert to the manifold problems of approaching a subject whose meaning has all but been exploded by scholars. Despite tantalizingly titling his first chapter "Magic: What Is It and How Does It Work?," Collins sensibly refuses to offer a single comprehensive and crude answer to the first question and focuses on the second. He also avoids being sucked into the ongoing debate over the distinction between magic and religion, which he characterizes damningly as "largely effete," by commandingly relegating it to a different historiography altogether. In offering an array of perspectives on, and ways of reading, magical texts and objects, he goes a long way to fulfilling an ambitious twofold claim to offer something to beginners and *periti* alike.

Gutierrez, Cathy. *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Pp. 232. ISBN 978-0195388350.

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Cathy Gutierrez's *Plato's Ghost: Spiritualism in the American Renaissance* is an important addition to scholarship on nineteenth-century American Spiritualism. While several studies have emphasized the practices of popular Spiritualism, including séances, trance performances, and various notorious cases of fraud, Gutierrez focuses her attention on the common intellectual

heritage underlying this religious movement. She situates Spiritualism within the context of the American Renaissance, a cultural moment marked by a renewed interest in the classics and an ethos that championed the possibility of unlimited discovery and inevitable progress.

At the same time that Americans turned to Greco-Roman and Renaissance ideas to define their newly formed nation, Spiritualists turned to Platonic and Neoplatonic themes to protest against prevailing notions of progress. While others wanted to transcend the past, Spiritualists wanted to embrace it, seeing it as essential to progress. This was most obvious in their efforts to contact the dead for advice about the future, but it also underlay their theories about the afterlife. Spiritualist cosmology, which excluded notions of damnation and hell, portrayed progress as a movement from the material world to increasingly perfect realms of heaven. Indeed, many believed that spirits needed contact with those left behind in order to advance in heaven. Gutierrez argues that this notion of progress reflected Plato's theory of recollection, which posited that the rediscovery of past knowledge was an important component in spiritual ascent.

Gutierrez traces reflections of Platonic and Neoplatonic themes through Spiritualist writings such as those by Andrew Jackson Davis and mediums like Cora Hatch and Emma Hardinge, as well as through transcriptions of nineteenth-century *séances*. She also examines several works by the eighteenth-century mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, whose theories about the spirit world influenced a number of prominent Spiritualist thinkers. In so doing, though, she tends to emphasize the commonalities between different Spiritualist theories rather than their inconsistencies. While some questions remain regarding the extent to which the sources she uses are representative, Gutierrez's effort to pull together the common threads from this diverse religious trend—which was not organized around institutional structures or centralized authorities—is highly commendable.

The book explores the views of Spiritualists on five major concerns of nineteenth-century Americans: memory, machines, marriage, medicine, and the mind. Spiritualists dealt with the rapid changes in technology, social arrangements, and understandings of the human body and mind by embracing multiple temporal modes. The Spiritualists' desire to bring the past into the present connects in various ways to each topic, making this an intriguing study about the relationship between religion and conceptions of time. For example, Gutierrez connects the growing obsession with standardizing and measuring time, necessitated by developments such as the railroad system, to the ways that

Spiritualists conceived of and interacted with time and other invisible forces, including energy and the spirit world. Developments in electricity influenced Spiritualist theories about magnetism and trances, and the telegraph convinced many that it was possible to communicate with those not immediately present. Amid such technological advances, some became interested in creating technology for improving spirit communication in order to bring the dead more efficiently into the present.

The influence of photography on religion is understudied, which makes Gutierrez's discussion of spirit photography an important contribution to the field. Photographs that contained ghostly images grew in popularity in the late nineteenth century. Gutierrez argues that photography changed the way that Spiritualists interacted with the spirit world because the point of contact shifted from mediums and lively séance rooms to still photographs. Instead of having conversations *with* the dead, Spiritualists now had more conversations *about* the dead, people whose stories were limited by the frozen (and often blurry) images in which they seemed to appear. Despite the proven ability of photographers to manipulate images, many Spiritualists accepted the common belief that photography was an objective process of capturing reality. For this reason, Spiritualists' desire to prove scientifically the existence of spirits on earth coincided with efforts to simplify and objectify the spirit world in photographs. Spirit photography was also connected to the growing popularity and commercialization of commemorating the dead. Photographs of dead bodies were common keepsakes and status symbols among middle-class Americans, and this likely fueled the desire to capture and show off the spirits of the dead in photographs.

But Spiritualists were not just concerned with bringing spirits down to earth and holding them up to scrutiny. Many Spiritualists looked to heaven as a model for ideal behavior. Gutierrez provides evidence for this particularly in Chapter 4, which deals with marriage, parts of which were originally published as a chapter titled "Deadly Dates: Bodies and Sex in Spiritualist Heaven" in Wouter Hanegraaff and Jeffrey Kripal's edited collection *Hidden Intercourse: Eros and Sexuality in the History of Western Esotericism* (Brill, 2009). Here, Gutierrez shows that Spiritualists conceived of heaven as the location of true love, or, in Platonic terms, the ideal form of love; earthly love was seen as a mere copy compared to this higher coupling of soul mates. This idealization of love among Spiritualists coincided with larger trends among the middle

class that emphasized marriage as a romantic choice between individuals, rather than as an economic and social partnership between extended families. Gutierrez shows how this concept of heavenly love was used to critique some earthly couples, and to lift other unions to a sacred level. While important discussions about gender and sexuality within Spiritualism are present in this chapter and throughout the work, this book is not primarily a gender study and scholars are still best served on these topics by Ann Braude's seminal work, *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (Beacon, 1989).

Overall, *Plato's Ghost* casts Spiritualism in a favorable light. As a corrective to depictions of Spiritualists as insane or fraudulent, Gutierrez reminds readers that Spiritualism provided many practical benefits to nineteenth-century Americans. Group séances and spirit photography acted as a form of counseling to those who had lost loved ones, especially in the aftermath of the Civil War. Trance healings provided relief to some individuals suffering from stress and uncertainty when professional medical assistance was unavailable, undesirable, or unaffordable. The spirits of the movement are depicted less as haunting ghosts and more as busy individuals striving for post-life spiritual improvement. She suggests that Spiritualism, with its belief that hell did not exist and that all souls progressed after death, was a positive religious option for those who saw Calvinist predestination as incompatible with individualism and democracy. She concludes the work on a highly provocative and somewhat abrupt note by suggesting that Spiritualism's greatest legacy was its rejection of the Protestant "saved or damned" dichotomy, and its replacement with the idea that all people will ascend into heaven. While her assumption seems to be that the Spiritualist view of an egalitarian afterlife led its adherents to be more open to human diversity on earth, the challenge is left to other scholars to study the way these religious ideas directly influenced human interactions.

This work would be particularly useful to those looking for an example of a thoughtful intellectual history of a popular religion. In the way that it skillfully connects Spiritualism to dozens of other contemporary cultural trends, it would be a valuable addition to university-level courses on the United States in the nineteenth century. But more than this, it should be necessary reading for those studying American metaphysical religions and anyone interested in religious concepts of time and progress.