

Swedenborgian Anti-Vaccinationism and Conspiritoriality

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Abstract

The late nineteenth century saw the emergence of a popular campaign against compulsory vaccination in Britain. For obvious reasons, this campaign has attracted the attention of historians in recent years. Some scholars have pointed to the class dynamics which informed the growth of the movement. Others have pointed to the influence of evangelical Christianity within the movement. Still others have identified anti-vaccinationism as a liberal cause. This article identifies one overlooked factor in the development of nineteenth-century vaccine skepticism: the influence of esotericism. A surprising number of prominent anti-vaccination campaigners were also promoters of Swedenborgian thought and Swedenborgian ideas influenced their writing on the subject of vaccination. Drawing on contemporary analysis of the phenomenon of “conspiritoriality,” I argue that conspiritoriality existed far earlier than some scholars suggest and that—in fact—conspiritoriality was a facet of vaccination skepticism during the nineteenth century.

Keywords: Esotericism; Victorian; Vaccination; Swedenborgianism; medical history

Introduction

In 1871, William Hume-Rothery was called before the Select Committee on the Vaccination Act. Part of the function of the Select Committee was—in the words of John Simon, the Chief Medical Officer—to “afford to the anti-vaccinationists the full public hearing, long ago promised them, for all they could urge against vaccination and the vaccination law.”¹ Hume-Rothery took advantage of this opportunity, explaining his position to the committee members in the following terms:

There is no principle to be found in nature, human nature or Revelation, which underlies or justifies the practice of vaccination. By principle, I mean a leading truth, an eternal law of life.

There is no such truth, there is no such law, ultimating or illustrating itself in vaccination.²

The campaign against compulsory smallpox vaccination in nineteenth century England attracted the support of clergymen, trade unionists and parliamentarians.³ It could count, amongst its sympathizers, Herbert Spencer, Charles Bradlaugh, F.W. Newman, George Bernard Shaw, Alfred Russell Wallace and many others.⁴ Different—complementary and competing—explanations have been offered for the rise of nineteenth-century anti-vaccination agitation. Some have argued that compulsory vaccination provided the forum for a showdown between advocates of germ theory and the defenders of miasmatic theory.⁵ Others have described anti-vaccinationism as a liberal cause, which drew support from those who argued that the compulsory aspects of the law represented an over-reach by the state and by a newly empowered medical establishment. Some have pointed to the influence which scriptural arguments held within the anti-

1. Simon, *English Sanitary Institutions*, 311.

2. Foster, *Report from the Select Committee on the Vaccination Act*, 141.

3. Colley, *Vaccination a Moral Evil*, 6; Turner, *About Myself*, 71–73; Hansard, *House of Commons Debate* 326 (1 June 1888), cc. 930.

4. Wallace, *The Wonderful Century: Its Successes and Its Failures*, 232; *Authoritative Opinions Adverse to Vaccination*, 12, 14; Shaw, *Collected Letters*, 448.

5. MacLeod, “Law, Medicine and Public Opinion,” 211.

vaccinationist milieu and particularly amongst Nonconformists.⁶ In more recent years, scholars have noted the important role that class played in the emergence of anti-vaccinationism. Nadja Durbach identifies vaccination as an example—along with conscription and the Anatomy Act of 1832 which allowed medical men to dissect the bodies of unclaimed corpses—of the state usurping control over the bodies of working class men and women. Working class people were disproportionately penalised under the compulsory vaccination laws.⁷ Logie Barrow notes that public administration of vaccination under the auspices of the Poor Law Guardians, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, created a connection between public vaccination and destitution which—along with the substandard services provided by the state—created resentment among working class communities.⁸ As a result, the popular movement against vaccination was largely populated by working class men and women.⁹ Lastly, Rob Boddice demonstrated that the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a gulf between those who held traditional notions of sympathy and those who espoused a new theory of sympathy based on Darwinian principles. The latter were more likely to be scientists with “access to specialized knowledge,” and some were moved by this new sympathy to support vivisection, eugenics and compulsory vaccination.¹⁰

One aspect of the phenomenon of anti-vaccinationism in the nineteenth century, which has drawn slightly attention from scholars, is the connection between the movement and esoteric currents. Specifically: a notable number of prominent anti-vaccinationists subscribed to a worldview which was shaped by exposure to the writing of Emanuel Swedenborg.¹¹ Amongst this number we can include William and Mary Hume-Rothery, James John Garth Wilkinson,

6. Swales, “The Leicester Anti-vaccination Movement,” 1019–21.

7. Durbach, *Bodily Matters*, 6; Durbach, “They Might as Well Brand Us,” 45–62.

8. Barrow, “In the Beginning was the Lymph,” 205–23.

9. Brunton, *The Politics of Vaccination*, 40, 92.

10. Boddice, *The Science of Sympathy*, 109.

11. Williamson, *The Vaccination Controversy*, 184–186; Durbach, *Bodily Matters*, 45.

William Tebb and William White. In an article concerning Alfred Russel Wallace’s objection to vaccination, Martin Fichman and Jennifer Keelan briefly refer to the Swedenborgian theory of “spirituous fluid” as a factor in the evolution of Wallace’s beliefs.¹² However, it seems that the esoteric aspects of these Swedenborgians’ beliefs were more profoundly interlinked with Victorian anti-vaccinationism. Their shared belief in a system of cosmological correspondences, and in the human capacity to transcend the physical realm, placed them at odds with the science of their day. Many Swedenborgians objected to aspects of the germ-theory of smallpox transmission and they further disputed the validity of vaccination as a response to the disease, calling “infection and contagion by germs” a “chimera.”¹³ They sought explanations for the prevalence of smallpox which were more conducive to Swedenborgian thought. The Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists were more likely to espouse homeopathic treatments and to reject allopathic medicine.¹⁴ They often subscribed to sanitarian theories as opposed to germ theory.¹⁵ It is also notable that many Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists explained the rise of vaccinationism in conspiracist terms: arguing that powerful interests within the medical establishment were exerting control over a quiescent political class.¹⁶

Many prominent figures within the fold of the anti-vaccination movement during the nineteenth century, in short, expressed their arguments in terms which combined alternative medical science, conspiracy theory and esoteric spirituality. Precisely this combination of concerns has been noted by several scholars of religion in recent years. So-called “conspirituality”—a coinage of Charlotte Ward and David Voas—has emerged as an influential concept over the course of the last decade.¹⁷ Indeed, the phenomenon of “conspirituality”

12. Fichman and Keelan, “Resister’s logic,” 595.

13. *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination Reporter* 7, no. 10 (1 July 1882): 172.

14. Hume-Rothery, *Women and Doctors*, 2.

15. White, *The Story of a Great Delusion*, 450.

16. Hume-Rothery, *The Exceeding Wickedness of the Compulsory Vaccination Law*, 1–8.

17. Ward and Voas, “The Emergence of Conspirituality,” 103–21.

is so recognizable in contemporary Anglophone culture that the term has moved into popular usage. The main points of disagreement, among observers of this phenomenon, centre on its origins. Ward and Voas contend—in their original article—that conspиритuality is a product of distinctly twentieth and twenty-first century cultural currents.¹⁸ Aspren and Dyrendal, meanwhile, argue that the phenomenon is simply an efflorescence of epistemological tendencies, long observable within esoteric circles.¹⁹ The expressions of conspиритuality which we find in the writing of William Hume-Rothery, Mary Hume-Rothery, Garth Wilkinson, William White and others, therefore, are germane to this broader discussion.

In what follows, I argue that the literature produced by those prominent Swedenborgians who participated in the anti-vaccination campaign can be aptly described as conspiracist in tenor. This is certainly not the case with all anti-vaccinationist literature produced during this period. Secondly, I argue that the esoteric worldview which these figures shared equipped them with a tendency towards conspiracism. For these reasons, I argue that conspиритuality should be added to the range of factors—alongside Biblicism, “Old liberalism” and class solidarity—that led to the rise of anti-vaccinationist agitation in the nineteenth century.

Swedenborgians and Anti-Vaccinationism

The practice of vaccination—using cowpox to inoculate against smallpox—was pioneered in 1796 by Edward Jenner, and the practice rapidly spread. Following an epidemic of smallpox in the early years of Victoria’s reign, the British government began to legislate in order to promote the practice, passing successive vaccination acts. Vaccination, as a method for dealing with the scourge of smallpox in the nineteenth century, arose in tandem with the professionalization of medicine and with the success of germ theory. Medical men in Britain had typically held low social status and were forced to compete

18. Ward and Voas, “The Emergence of Conspиритuality,” 109.

19. Aspren and Dyrendal, “Conspиритuality Reconsidered,” 375.

in a marketplace with “unorthodox” and traditional practitioners. But, helped by the activism of new professional bodies, periodicals and individual campaigners, the Victorian era saw the emergence of a professional class of medical men. The 1858 Medical Act, whilst it did not go so far as to outlaw “quackery,” created the category of a qualified medical professional with accompanying regulative bodies (in particular the General Medical Council). For some, this attempt to create a special place, separate from the marketplace, appeared to contravene principles of market liberalism.²⁰ In the 1860s, the improving status of medical professionals allowed them to take on a greater role in the administration of public health.²¹ Up to this point public health had largely been overseen by lay civil servants. The most prominent of these was Edwin Chadwick. In 1842, Chadwick published his *Report into the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*. The report triggered a cultural shift in Britain, stimulating government projects for providing continuous water supply as well as a change in understanding about the nature of disease. The basis of Chadwick’s sanitarianism was his belief in miasmatic theory. Chadwick summarized his belief succinctly: “all smell is disease.”²² Cleanliness was therefore seen as the principle weapon in the arsenal of public health. Chadwick remained steadfast in his belief in miasma, even as germ theory began to supplant miasmatic theory in the late nineteenth century. The latter theory, however, would soon become dominant and would provide the impetus for vaccination research and ultimately legislation.

Germ theory, as Nancy Tomes, John Harley Warner and Michael Worboys have demonstrated, was not a monolith. Rather, the nineteenth century saw the emergence of many germ *theories*.²³ Germs were variously conceived of as “chemical

20. Brown, *Performing Medicine*, 212.

21. Roberts, “The Politics of Professionalization,” 37-56; Digby, *Making a Medical Living*, 136; Peterson, *The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian London*, 133.

22. Parliamentary Papers, *Report from the Select Committee on Metropolitan Sewage Manure* (London, 1846), 108-9.

23. Worboys, *Spreading Germs*, 11, 97; Tomes and Harley-Warner, “Introduction to Special Issue on Rethinking the Reception of the Germ Theory of Disease,” 10.

poisons, ferments, degraded cells, fungi, bacteria.”²⁴ Most scientists coalesced around the specific claim that disease was ontological rather than physiological in nature. Room for doubt was perennially sustained during this period by a lack of clarity regarding the nature of germs in general and about the precise nature of the germ which caused smallpox. Scientists were disappointed in their hunt for the specific germ of the disease. Despite this, they continued to support vaccination, deferring arguments regarding the science which supported its efficacy. It is not strictly true—as Macleod suggested—that germ theory provided the wedge issue separating anti-vaccinationists from pro-vaccinationists.²⁵ Many anti-vaccinationists were happy to accommodate germ theory in their arguments.²⁶ However, this was not the case with the prominent Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists. As we shall see, they saw the emphasis on germs—and hence vaccination—over miasma—and hence sanitation—as disruptive to their broader world view.

Successive acts of parliament, passed between 1853 and 1871, introduced increasing levels of state compulsion in the interests of ensuring that all subjects be vaccinated against smallpox. In 1840, the state guaranteed the right for all newborns to be vaccinated without charge. Legislators were disappointed, however, by the failure of many parents to take up this opportunity.²⁷ They proposed, by way of a solution, that vaccination against smallpox be made mandatory. In 1853, a second Act was passed which required that all newborn babies be vaccinated. Failure by parents to vaccinate their children would result in a fine of up to twenty shillings.²⁸ The success of the second Act was also limited.²⁹ The Poor Law authorities were ill-equipped to enforce such penalties, doctors were ill-incentivized to become vaccinators and the population remained

24. Worboys, *Spreading Germs*, 2.

25. MacLeod, “Law, Medicine and Public Opinion,” 211.

26. Crookshank, *Manual of Bacteriology*, 235; Crookshank, *History and Pathology of Vaccination*, 1:vii-xii.

27. Brunton, *The Politics of Vaccination*, 43.

28. Hart, “Report to the Parliamentary Bills Committee of the British Medical Association on Vaccination Penalties,” 3.

29. Brunton, *The Politics of Vaccination*, 50.

hostile to vaccination particularly when it was “stamp[ed] with pauperism.”³⁰ A third Act, passed in 1867, sought to remedy these shortcomings and, in so doing, “extended to an unprecedented degree state powers of compulsion.”³¹ Whilst the 1853 Act had required that newborn babies be vaccinated, the 1867 Act required that all children under the age of fourteen be vaccinated. Added to this, the Act introduced cumulative fines for habitual refusers. Poor Law Guardians were now required by law to compile records of vaccinations. As a result, prosecutions for refusal became far more frequent.³² The powers of compulsion were further advanced in 1871, when Poor Law Guardians were instructed to appoint Vaccination Officers for every district.³³ With each increase in the severity and the stringency of the laws governing smallpox vaccination, opposition to the vaccination itself increased. A range of campaign organizations emerged, each with their own newspapers and publishing imprints. At the same time, mass protests filled the streets of the cities of England: particularly in Leicester, Liverpool, Manchester and London.³⁴ A strategy of conscientious objection led to many anti-vaccinationists being imprisoned, thereby attaining for themselves the status of martyrdom and attracting more attention to the apparent inequity of the vaccination laws.³⁵

A notable number of those who led the movement against compulsory vaccination during this period, were immersed in the cultural and religious milieu of Swedenborgianism. English Swedenborgianism was one hundred years old by the time of the anti-vaccination agitation. John Clowes founded the

30. Williamson, *The Vaccination Controversy*, 124; Hansard, *House of Lords Debate* 125 (12 April 1853), c. 1008.

31. Porter and Porter, “The Politics of Prevention,” 233.

32. Durbach, *Bodily Matters*, 8.

33. Porter and Porter, “The Politics of Prevention,” 233.

34. *Wolverhampton Express and Star* 4, no. 477 (17 May 1876), 2; *Edinburgh Evening News*, no. 2307 (29 September 1880), 3; *Morpeth Herald*, no. 1420 (14 July 1883), 2; *Leeds Mercury* 122, no. 14651 (24 March 1885), 7.

35. *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League Occasional Circular*, no. 6 (1 October 1875), 5; Pitman, *Prison Thoughts on Vaccination*, 1; *Dundee Courier*, no. 9630 (26 May 1884), 4.

Society of Gentlemen for the Printing, Publishing and Circulating the Works of Emanuel Swedenborg in Manchester in 1782. Robert Hindmarsh established the Theosophical Society for the Purpose of the Promoting the Heavenly Doctrines of New Jerusalem in London in the same year. Hindmarsh would later create a schism within the ranks of the Swedenborgian community when he helped to form a Swedenborgian Church: the New Jerusalem Church. One of Hindmarsh's earliest collaborators was John Augustus Tulk. In 1810, Tulk and his family sponsored the establishment of the Swedenborg Society which initially met at 31 Essex Street, off the Strand. Two years later, John Tulk's son Charles—with the help of Samuel Noble—began publishing a Swedenborgian periodical entitled *The Intellectual Repository*.³⁶ The younger Tulk soon developed a heterodox reading of Swedenborg. His exegesis proved to be contentious within Swedenborgian circles.³⁷ Swedenborg had described heaven and hell as “two gates . . . within every man.”³⁸ Most Swedenborgians understood this to mean that the experiences of the afterlife were subjective “outbirths” of the mind.³⁹ Tulk, on the other hand, argued that Swedenborg's claims concerning the subjective nature of the afterlife also pertained to the natural world. As such, he interpreted Swedenborgian epistemology as a form of Berkleyan idealism.⁴⁰ One challenging coda of his position was that it seemed to suggest that the Incarnation was a subjective phenomenal event. This, in particular, led many Swedenborgians to disown Tulk altogether. “No more complete inversion of the truth was ever produced by the perversity of the human intellect,” wrote one.⁴¹ Nevertheless, “Tulkism” apparently found its audience in America. In 1889, a strident defence of Tulkism was published in the *New Church Messenger*,

36. Lines, *A History of the Swedenborg Society*, 1–13.

37. Odhner, *Annals of the New Church*, 559.

38. Swedenborg, *Heaven and Hell*, 298.

39. Swedenborg, *A Compendium of the Doctrines of Spiritual Christianity*, 223.

40. Tulk, *Spiritual Christianity*, 120.

41. *The New Jerusalem Magazine* 25, no. 293 (1 May 1878), 232.

a New York publication.⁴² Tulk’s theories seem to have had some long lasting influence amongst the Swedenborgian advocates of New Thought in the United States. Phineas Quimby and Warren Felt Evans—who pioneered the belief that mental states manifest in reality and can bring about physical wellbeing—seem to have “read Swedenborg from the Tulkite interpretation.”⁴³ For both, the Tulkite reading of Swedenborg appeared to provide a link between the seer’s work and the more occultist practices of mind cure.

In the meantime, Charles Tulk had been elected to the House of Commons for the constituency of Sudbury and had befriended the radical MP Joseph Hume. Tulk also established a friendship with Hume’s daughter Mary. Under his tutelage, Mary Hume became convinced of the truth of Swedenborgian teaching.⁴⁴ In her semi-hagiographical biography of Tulk, she acknowledged the idiosyncratic, though (she claimed) orthodox elements of Tulk’s Swedenborgianism which had been left “undiscovered or unacknowledged by previous readers of Swedenborg.” Following Tulk, she claimed that “the world of the senses” was “an outbirth of the internal mind.”⁴⁵ In 1864 Mary Hume married a fellow Swedenborgian, William Rothery, and changed her name to Mary Hume-Rothery. Throughout her life, Hume-Rothery wrote, producing poetry and children’s stories alongside works on Swedenborgianism. In the 1870s she began to produce work on the subject of “medical despotism.”⁴⁶ This interest reached full expression in 1874 when she helped to form the National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League (NACVL). She was joined in this enterprise by her husband. William Hume-Rothery had been trained at St Bees seminary as an Anglican priest and ordained by the Bishop of Manchester in 1849 before being appointed to the cures of Mossley (in Ashton under Lyne),

42. *New Church Life* 10, no. 6 (June 1890): 91.

43. Odhner, *Faith and Falsity*, 12; Evans, *The Divine Law of Cure*, 160.

44. Hume-Rothery, *A Brief Sketch of the Life of C. A. Tulk*, 30.

45. Hume-Rothery, *A Brief Sketch of the Life of C. A. Tulk*, 38.

46. Hume-Rothery, *Women and Doctors*, 1.

Holm Cultram (in Cumbria) and Hexham.⁴⁷ However, he was “driven from his position in the establishment on account of his unorthodox views.”⁴⁸ In 1866, he left the ministry and was appointed pastor of the New Church in Middleton.⁴⁹ He remained in this role until the early 1870s when he and Mary moved to Cheltenham in order to devote themselves to running the NACVL.

Mary Hume-Rothery’s prominent role in the anti-vaccination movement was assured by the strident nature of her writing and speechmaking on the subject. During the period of her leadership of the NACVL, it published a newspaper, initially called the *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League Occasional Circular*, and later the *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination Reporter*. Mary Hume-Rothery considered the programme of compulsory vaccination to be among the greatest abuses of “medical despotism.” She believed “allopathic medicine” to be a system of “deadly materialistic oppression,” which “threaten[ed] the utter extinction of the true art of healing.”⁵⁰ She called upon the mothers of Britain to “stand up in one phalanx, to hold their babes to their bosoms, and to refuse to let them be torn away from them to submit to this unnatural and unholy thing.”⁵¹

Mary Hume-Rothery and her husband were not the only avowed Swedenborgians to join the fight against compulsory vaccination. Sir Isaac Pitman was a pioneer of the shorthand system and of vegetarianism, and was a dedicated member of the New Church. He helped found a congregation of the New Church at Bath, and financed the publication and distribution of Swedenborgian texts. Pitman also served as president of the London Society for the Abolition of Compulsory Vaccination (LSACV) which would later become the National Anti-Vaccination League (NAVL).⁵² His brother, Henry Pitman, was

47. Crockford, *Crockford’s Clerical Directory for 1868*, 345.

48. *The Autographic Mirror* 4 (17 February 1866), 21.

49. *The Intellectual Repository* 12, no. 134 (1 February 1865), 84.

50. Hume-Rothery, *Women and Doctors*, 1.

51. *The Leicester Chronicle* 64, no. 3503 (30 September 1876), 2.

52. Baker, *The Life of Sir Isaac Pitman*, 267.

also a Swedenborgian and was also a convinced anti-Vaccinationist. In 1876 he was imprisoned for refusing to have his children vaccinated. During the fourteen days of his imprisonment he compiled his own reflections, along with correspondence that he had received from prominent well-wishers, into two volumes entitled *Prison Thoughts*. Amongst those who wrote to encourage Pitman were Edward Craig (founder of the Ralahine utopian community), F.W. Newman (brother of John Henry Newman) and the Swedenborgian publisher William White.⁵³

William White's career as a prominent figure in the Swedenborgian Society was controversial. He was appointed as a librarian and bookseller by the Society and was allowed to conduct this work from premises that the Society owned in Bloomsbury. In 1860 White was ejected from this position by the board after he was discovered to be selling works by the spiritualist Thomas Lake Harris alongside those of Swedenborg.⁵⁴ Thus White—like Tulk—can be seen as an important agent in the construction of the bridge which linked Swedenborgian thought with occultism in the mid-nineteenth century. In 1885, he wrote a long treatise on the subject of vaccination, entitled *The Story of a Great Delusion*. White described vaccination as a “remarkable survival of superstition in hygiene.”⁵⁵ With William Tebb and William Young, White was an architect of the LSACV. Tebb was also imprisoned for his refusal to have his daughter, Beatrice, vaccinated.⁵⁶ When the LSACV began publishing pamphlets and a journal (*The Vaccination Inquirer*) they often included the following dictum of Swedenborg's in the front-matter: “Thought from the eye closes up the understanding but thought from the understanding opens the eye.”⁵⁷

Perhaps the most high-profile Swedenborgian to take up cudgels in the campaign against compulsory vaccination was J.J. Garth Wilkinson. He was the foremost commentator and translator of Swedenborg's work in England

53. Pitman, *Prison Thoughts*, 7, 14, 21.

54. Lines, *A History of the Swedenborg Society*, 53–63.

55. White, *The Story of a Great Delusion*, 358.

56. Tebb, *Government Prosecutions for Medical Heresy*, 5.

57. *Disease by Law: An Indictment of Compulsory Vaccination*, 1.

during this period. Such was Wilkinson's prestige that Henry James Snr—Swedenborgian and father of Henry and William James—named his third son after him. In a letter to John Ruskin of 1878, Wilkinson wrote that he was “concerned to protect the prime stream of all, the blood of children, from pollution; and the prime air of all, the liberty . . . of conscience . . . from suffocation.”⁵⁸ He described his fight as “the holy cause of anti-vaccination.”⁵⁹ During the late 1870s, with the help of William Young, Wilkinson released a number of *Vaccination Tracts*. In the seventh tract, Wilkinson's objections to “blood corruption” are explained with the addendum that “Swedenborg has shown these truths in his *Animal Kingdom*.”⁶⁰ In 1881, he published a handbill with the lurid title *The Vaccination Vampire*. Vaccination, according to this text, was the “grand Apollyon or destroyer of the Human Race.”⁶¹

Understanding the relevance of these individual stories to the broader question of the definition of “conspiratoriness” requires an understanding of the relationship between Swedenborgian thought and the wider culture of esotericism. Esotericism is often defined with reference to a family of characteristics. Each of these characteristics find expression in the anti-vaccination writings of figures like Mary Hume-Rothery, William Hume-Rothery, William White, William Tebb and others.

Swedenborgian Esotericism in Victorian England

Recent decades have seen the emergence of a number of critical perspectives on the definition of esotericism, many of them linked with salience or otherwise of the claim that modernity brought about a process of “disenchantment.” Max Weber proposed a narrative of disenchantment in which science and religion retreated into separate areas of influence: the former governing the natural world and the latter governing values and beliefs. In what follows, I draw on

58. Wilkinson, *James John Garth Wilkinson*, 270.

59. Wilkinson, *James John Garth Wilkinson*, 274.

60. Wilkinson, *Vaccination a Sign of the Decay*, 6.

61. *National Anti-compulsory Vaccination Reporter* 5, no. 8 (May 1881), 127.

Egil Asprem’s critique of the disenchantment hypothesis. Asprem argues that a host of nineteenth-century figures and movements have been overlooked by those who advance the disenchantment hypothesis. These were characterised by a shared disregard (or even ignorance) of the now accepted boundaries separating science and religion. Asprem notes that science is often associated with “axiological skepticism.” This is defined by Asprem as “a sharp separation between facts and values.” The disenchantment model of secularization presupposes that modernity saw the erection and reinforcement of this separation, but as Asprem shows, many nineteenth-century figures refused to accept it, instead seeking evidence that the best science would mirror revealed values.⁶² Asprem defines this “open-ended” approach to naturalism as one of “epistemic optimism.” Foremost among the “epistemic optimists” were those engaged in new, esoteric forms of religion. Asprem identifies three “problem areas” of the Western esoteric tradition, encompassing the “social dimension,” the “epistemic dimension” and the “worldview dimension.”⁶³

Any description of esotericism as a “social” phenomenon centres on a conceptualization of the latter as a system of “rejected,” “stigmatized,” “underground” or “counter-cultural” knowledge.⁶⁴ This understanding has its roots in the scholarship of twentieth-century authors like Frances Yates, James Webb, Edward Tiryakian and Marcello Truzzi. In different ways, these scholars identified a lineage of esoteric and occult tradition, which was formed in opposition to mainstream anti-Pagan and anti-irrationalist discourse in (respectively) Scholastic and Enlightenment cultures.⁶⁵ In the 1990s, within the scholarship of Wouter Hanegraaff and others, this understanding of

62. Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 32–36.

63. Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 421.

64. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 13; Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy*, 12; Webb, *The Occult Underground*, 2; Shepherd, “Religion and the Counter Culture,” 8.

65. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, 405, 415; Webb, *The Occult Underground*, 2; Truzzi, “Definition and Dimensions of the Occult,” 635–46; Tiryakian, “Preliminary Considerations,” 1–3.

esotericism was criticized as reductive or even as contributing to the process it professed to describe. Hanegraaff further suggested that a previous generation of scholars had sought to “invent” a forgotten or repressed “tradition,” motivated by “dissatisfaction with the religious or spiritual situation of contemporary western society.”⁶⁶ Nevertheless, Hanegraaff has continued to maintain and refine elements of the “rejected knowledge” hypothesis, identifying historians as the principal agents in the marginalization of esotericism. As such, Hanegraaff suggests that esotericism is an historiographical construct rather than a historical reality. Esoteric thought is therefore a category which “contains precisely everything that has been consigned to the dustbin of history,” by “Enlightenment ideologues.” Whilst this may be a defining characteristic of esotericism, Hanegraaff nonetheless rejects the idea that esotericism is, by extension, “a random collection of discarded materials without any further connection.” According to Hanegraaff, Western esotericism is defined by its role as “the other” of “mainstream religious and intellectual culture,” and is therefore “characterized by a strong emphasis on specific worldviews and epistemologies which are at odds with normative post-Enlightenment intellectual culture.”⁶⁷ This perpetuation of the “rejected knowledge” hypothesis has been revisited anew in recent years by Asprem, Marco Pasi, and Olav Hammer. These scholars argue that the “rejected knowledge” theory is overly negative, and risks the erasure of “positively” defined and historically situated phenomena.⁶⁸ Michael Stausberg points to a further limitation of the “rejected knowledge” hypothesis in that it fails to account for those other marginalized systems of knowledge which are not—and never have—been associated with esotericism.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the significance of “deviance,” and “marginality,” in the self-definition of

66. Hanegraaff, “On the Construction of ‘Esoteric Traditions,’” 17.

67. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 13–14.

68. Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered,” 126–46; Pasi, “The Problems of Rejected Knowledge,” 201–212; Hammer, “Deconstructing ‘Western Esotericism,’” 241–51.

69. Stausberg, “What is it all about?” 219–30.

many traditions which are categorized as “esoteric,” remains pertinent. Asprem makes the case that “elected marginality”—the “self-conscious embrace of the heretical”—rather than “imposed marginality,” serves an important role in the construction of identity within these groups.⁷⁰

This final point is of relevance to the study of these particular Swedenborgian writers of the nineteenth century. Swedenborg himself rejected the authority of established Churches and dogmatic religion. In the nineteenth century, Charles Tulk classified “ratiocination” as a new form of dogmatism, and one which had brought the human mind to “the lowest state of degradation into which it could possible have fallen.”⁷¹ This anti-establishment mentality informed the writing of these late nineteenth-century Swedenborgians. They styled themselves as dissenters, speaking out against the might of the scientific and medical establishment. According to Hume-Rothery, doctors sought to enthrall the poor and credulous in a web of self-serving deceit. Doctors sought to “subjugate souls . . . by their assumption of infallibility.”⁷² She celebrated the popularity within working class communities of “homeopaths, hydropaths, herbalists,” and decried the marginalization of these therapeutic practices as “a tyranny.”⁷³ She suggested that “common sense” medical solutions were being suppressed by the medical class, who had adopted an intermediary position between the people and a body of commonly owned wisdom.⁷⁴ In part this can be seen as a response to the professionalization of medicine and the marginalization of “quackery” which the reformist campaigns of the mid-nineteenth century (and specifically the Medical Act of 1858) had brought about. This period saw a widening of opposition between so-called orthodox and unorthodox medical

70. Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered,” 140–41.

71. Tulk, *A Letter Containing a Few Plain Observations*, 1.

72. Hume-Rothery, *Women and Doctors*, 1.

73. Hume-Rothery, *Women and Doctors*, 2.

74. Hume Rothery, *Women and Doctors*, 8.

traditions.⁷⁵ But the characterization of the medical dissenters as an oppressed minority, persecuted by a powerful elite of medical professionals, was not entirely reflective of reality. Figures like the Hume-Rotherys, and the Pitmans, Wilkinson and Williams held relatively high status. They were all highly educated and middle class. Conversely, the status of medical men remained stubbornly low throughout this period and their remuneration was correspondingly paltry.⁷⁶ Nowhere was this more evident than in the case of public health practitioners who were widely distrusted by the public and who were paid haphazardly and poorly.⁷⁷ This did not discourage Swedenborgians from categorizing themselves as anti-establishment outsiders. This “self-conscious embrace of the heretical” seems to have motivated the participation of these figures in their opposition to vaccination.⁷⁸

Aside from the identification of esotericism with “rejected knowledge” and “elected marginality,” many scholars have sought to create a taxonomy of esoteric “worldviews.” The most influential contribution to this discussion can be found in the writing of Antoine Faivre. Faivre identified several primary characteristics of esotericism, including themes relating to correspondence (the belief that all things in nature are connected regardless of causation), living nature (the belief in a vitalistic or non-mechanistic life source), imagination (a Platonic emphasis on the reality of ideas), and transmutation (the belief that human beings can be transformed by spiritual enlightenment).⁷⁹ Many scholars have observed the continuity of these concerns across several centuries of European culture, tracing them from the emergence of the “Hermetic tradition,” through the development of Rosicrucianism, Mesmerism and Swedenborgianism and up to the occult and New Age traditions of the twentieth century. This historiography

75. Cooter, “Bones of Contentions?” 153-83; Barrow, “An Imponderable Liberator,” 89-90.

76. Roberts, “The Politics of Professionalization,” 37-56; Digby, *Making a Medical Living*, 136; Peterson, *The Medical Profession in Mid-Victorian London*, 133.

77. Rogers and Quinan, “Poor Law Medical Officers’ Association of England and Wales,” 25

78. Asprey, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered,” 140-41.

79. Faivre, “Questions of Terminology,” 1-10.

has been called into question in recent years, not least by Wouter Hanegraaff. In particular, Hanegraaff questions the ease with which Swedenborgian thought is accommodated within this narrative. There are clear comparisons to be drawn between the astrological and alchemical traditions of the early modern period, and the theory of correspondences as expressed in Swedenborg's writing. However, Hanegraaff writes that the Swedenborgian theory of correspondence actually marks a significant departure from previous generations of esoteric scholarship. Unlike its predecessors, Swedenborg's theory proposed a complete separation of the spiritual and physical spheres whilst proposing that the two were linked "analogically." According to Hanegraaff's analysis, this theory thereby safeguarded Swedenborgian metaphysics from empirical disconfirmation.⁸⁰ It has been noted—by Asprem amongst others—that this innovation was not necessarily as influential as Hanegraaff suggests. Many of Swedenborg's most influential readers—including Andrew Jackson Davies, who helped to promote the Spiritualist cosmology—did not apparently subscribe to the Swedenborgian belief in an intraversable gulf between the spiritual and physical spheres. Using this example, Asprem writes that, for many of those influenced by Swedenborg, during the nineteenth century, "this divide got entirely blurred."⁸¹

It could be argued that for the protagonists of this study the divide was indeed blurred. William White actively sought to introduce Spiritualist writings to Swedenborgians in England.⁸² The Tulkean Swedenborgianism which the Hume-Rotherys espoused was no less heterodox. It too was born of an attempt to mitigate the more radically dualist aspects of the seer's epistemology.⁸³ In 1861, Mary Hume-Rothery wrote a text of Swedenborgian theology, entitled *Twelve Obscure Texts of Scripture Illustrated According to the Spiritual Sense*. The debt to Tulk is evident and avowed in this text. Hume-Rothery described "the law

80. Hanegraaff, *Western Esotericism*, 126.

81. Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 558.

82. Lines, *A History of the Swedenborg Society*, 53–63.

83. Hume-Rothery, *A Brief Sketch of the Life of C. A. Tulk*, 40.

of correspondences,” as “the law of the relation between natural effects and their spiritual causes.” “All things in the natural world,” she wrote “are created by Divine influx through the medium of the spiritual world; the beings and objects of which latter stand therefore in the position of mediate or secondary causes.”⁸⁴ Mary and William Hume-Rothery believed that all natural processes—of life and death—emerged “from the action of spiritual living forces or causes pervading and informing all seemingly dead material.” As such, they argued that “the invisible things in souls, in which creation commences, may be understood by means of the things externally seen and perceived in which creation terminates.”⁸⁵ William Hume-Rothery expounded on this claim in an article written for the *Spiritual Magazine*, writing that:

... all mundane things are the products and manifestations of spiritual things [and] every sensuous world is created by the Lord through the souls of its inhabitants and is, therefore, a mirror in which their voluntary and intellectual condition is faithfully reflected . . . The good and evil in nature . . . are the effects and expositions of good and evil in human minds.⁸⁶

Belief in “transmutation,” or “regeneration,” was also prominent in the thought of Mary Hume-Rothery and of her co-religionists. Swedenborg described a process whereby the regenerated individual’s will is brought into conformity with the will of God. In particular, he saw the regenerated man as antithetical to the “natural man.”⁸⁷ The religion of natural man was the result of humanity’s forgetfulness of the truth of correspondence. As such, regeneration had both a soteriological and a social dimension. This much was acknowledged in Mary Hume-Rothery’s eschatological claims regarding the dawning of a new post-mechanistic age. She characterised the “era of human degradation” as one in which men can “believe in nothing but what their eyes could see and their hands [can] touch.”⁸⁸

84. Hume-Rothery, *Twelve Obscure Texts of Scripture*, 41.

85. Hume-Rothery and Hume-Rothery, *Divine Unity, Trinity and At-One-Ment*, 20.

86. *The Spiritual Magazine* 3, no. 5 (May 1868), 232.

87. Swedenborg, *An Account of the Last Judgment*, 19.

88. Hume-Rothery, *Twelve Obscure Texts of Scripture Illustrated*, 217.

Finally, recent scholarship has cast new light on the “epistemic dimension” of nineteenth-century esotericism. In the past, scholars have presented esotericism as an irredentist revolt against the inexorable march of modernity. More recently, Egil Asprem and others have argued that this account relies on “ideal types” of science and religion rather than on historical evidence. In the nineteenth century, an ethos of “boundlessly extended reason” prevailed across a spectrum of nominally scientific and religious thought.⁸⁹ Figures who would otherwise be considered members of the “scientific establishment” continued to pursue interests which apparently traversed the Kantian distinction between science and values. For example, Asprem points to the Society for Psychical Research which, in the late nineteenth century, counted among its members physicists like Oliver Lodge and William Barrett. These men saw the afterlife as a further frontier of scientific research, a perception which Asprem describes as “open-ended naturalism.” Natural theology, ether metaphysics and parapsychology also fall into this category. During this era, Asprem claims “axiological skepticism” was abandoned by many men and women of a seemingly scientific disposition. The reverse process took place within the esoteric milieu. Asprem points to the example of “occult chemistry,” a practice promoted by Theosophists who claimed that the chemical composition of elements could be divined through the use of the clairvoyant third eye. There are clear echoes of this approach in both contemporary esotericism and contemporary conspiracism. David G. Robertson identifies attempts made by figures within the UFO-watching community to cross-reference and corroborate knowledge gained through seemingly gnostic (that is to say unique, non-communicable or verifiable) sources with knowledge established through scientific method.⁹⁰ This “strategic mobilization of the scientific strategy” is also noted in the work of Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers on the subject of conspiracy theory. These authors

89. Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 531.

90. Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age*, 203.

find that conspiracy theorists not only “mimic modern science in order to augment epistemic authority,” but more profoundly that they express the “wish to purify [science],” by (for example) purporting to uncover systemic corruption in the scientific peer review process.⁹¹ Thus, revealed value systems become the basis for adjudging the value of empirical truth claims. Scientific explanations are employed only insofar as they correlate with beliefs. In this “blurring” of epistemological boundaries, the “re-enchantment” of the world is not achieved nor is it attempted. Weber famously suggested that an “intellectual sacrifice” was required of the “religious man.” But in the nineteenth—as in the twenty-first century—many refused to make this sacrifice, instead seeking to demonstrate the inseparability of the scientific and axiological spheres.⁹²

Precisely this tendency is evident in the writing of Swedenborgians like William White, Mary Hume-Rothery, William Hume-Rothery and others. Like the spokespeople of “popular millennialism” observed in Robertson’s study, these figures did not seek to invoke metaphysical causes for empirical events or to reject wholesale the scientific epistemic strategy. They did not—as those in the pre-disenchanted past did—expect nature to be capricious. Rather they believed that empirically verifiable laws would prove the veracity of gnostic or revelatory truths. This much is clearly and explicitly stated in Mary and William Hume-Rothery’s *Divinity, Unity, Trinity and At-One-Ment*:

That which is a Divine truth will unquestionably be confirmed by, never found at variance with, true reason or true science. We need never, therefore, blindly accept any religious doctrine as if fearing that investigation would overthrow it.⁹³

As such, in their work, the Hume-Rotherys and their co-religionists steadfastly refused to make the “intellectual sacrifice” which Weber presumed to be the basis of religious belief.⁹⁴ Their beliefs and their arguments clearly represent

91. Harambam and Aupers, “Contesting Epistemic Authority,” 466–480.

92. Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 31.

93. Hume-Rothery and Hume-Rothery, *Divine Unity, Trinity and At-One-Ment*, 17.

94. Weber, *The Vocation Lectures*, 31.

an attempt to straddle the boundary between the axiological and the scientific. As such, they represent not an attempt to re-enchant the world but rather an expression of “epistemic optimism” and “open ended naturalism.”⁹⁵ They sought out scientifically proven facts that would support divine truth. This formed the basis of their anti-vaccinationist position.

The Esoteric Dimensions of Swedenborgian Anti-Vaccinationism

It is clear, in short, that these Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists exemplified a worldview which incorporated many elements conventionally classified as esoteric—including belief in transmutation and correspondence. Moreover they exemplified an attitude of “elected marginality,” which scholars have identified as central to the esoteric tradition.⁹⁶ Their epistemology, also, can be characterized as a synthesis of revealed and rational knowledge of the kind which Asprem identifies in his study of the “esoteric hermeneutics” of the post-Enlightenment.⁹⁷

Self-definition through an attitude of “elected marginality” informed the attitude of these Swedenborgian authors to the vaccination question as it did their broader attitude to the medical establishment. The fine levied for failure to vaccinate children would have been a paltry sum for a member of Mary Hume-Rothery’s class. Nevertheless, she equated the anti-vaccinationists with the “English men and women who died at the stake for conscience’s sake.”⁹⁸ William Tebb also cast himself in the role of a martyr in the aftermath of his trial for vaccination refusal.⁹⁹ Refusal to comply was—in this way—defined as heroic. In the face of tyranny and barbarism, a small and marginalized minority were given the opportunity afforded by intellectual enlightenment to resist. “It has been said that the days of martyrdom . . . have ceased,” William White wrote,

95. Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 9–12.

96. Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered,” 140–41.

97. Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment*, 443.

98. *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League Occasional Circular*, no. 1 (19 December 1874), 3.

99. Tebb, *Government Prosecutions for Medical Heresy*, 36.

but “the record of humble English folk who ... have withstood the infamous Vaccination Acts, bear witness to the contrary.”¹⁰⁰

Secondly, Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationism can be seen as an expression of a belief in the esoteric concepts of regeneration and correspondence. William Hume-Rothery argued that the anti-vaccination campaign heralded the dawning of a new age of enlightenment and the interment of the age of ratiocinating tyranny. His aim in writing against compulsory vaccination was to

... assist in the spiritual, physical and political purification of humanity. The Church [is] ... selfish, worldly and unprincipled and [is] therefore ... the prolific mother of all the abominations upon earth among which must be included the loathsome practice of vaccination ... When an old Church or dispensation comes to its end, a new one is vouchsafed in its stead. Accordingly, as old sacerdotal religion is dead, the foundation of a new religious life is being laid in the souls of men. This new Church will in due course give birth to a new State ... The vaccination movement, raised to the height of principle ... is religious as well as political ...¹⁰¹

According to Swedenborgian thought, the physical world as experienced through the senses is analogically linked to the spiritual world. As such, spiritual truths are analogically linked with physical phenomena. Like many of their contemporaries, Swedenborgians believed that blood was the seat of health. This commonplace presupposition was informed—in addition—by Swedenborg’s own theories and therefore by Swedenborgians.¹⁰² Unlike others, however Swedenborgians claimed that damage to the body corresponded with damage to the soul. Mary Hume-Rothery saw vaccination as an abrogation of divine law not only in that it caused damage to the physical body. “The body corresponds to the soul,” she declared, “because the soul is the spiritual cause of the body’s existence, and the body is the form which manifests the soul.” As such, the

100. White, *The Story of a Great Delusion*, 591.

101. Hume-Rothery, *Vaccination and the Vaccination Laws*, i.

102. Swedenborg, *The Economy of the Animal Kingdom*, 33, 40, 48, 246, 290; *The Ipswich Journal*, no. 7247 (29 August 1874), 9; Williamson, *The Vaccination Controversy*, 184–86.

corruption of the blood through vaccination could be understood as an *a priori* evil, regardless of the evidence in support of its utility. The “blood in the veins of the body,” according to Mary Hume-Rothery, “signifies the living Divine Truth which nourishes and forms all life in the soul.”¹⁰³ But the influence of Swedenborgian correspondence was more pervasive than this. According to Swedenborgian correspondence “all diseases in man have correspondence with the spiritual world.”¹⁰⁴ The corruption of the blood which the vaccinators intended, itself corresponded to the spiritual corruption of the population. In this respect, the otherwise seemingly disconnected religious and political valences of anti-vaccinationism—which William Hume-Rothery so vehemently affirmed—were connected. “The physical organism in its health and in its corruption,” Wilkinson wrote “is the form that determines the presence of every higher faculty in the body, the higher being according to the lower.” He believed that vaccination could extend diseases “to the very doors of the mind and the soul and inject them into the human race through the whole compass and complex of its nature.”¹⁰⁵ Physiological corruption and political corruption were therefore understood to be manifestations of the same impurity. “How can we assist in purifying the world from this pollution?” asked William Hume-Rothery. “If the despotism were destroyed and the people could act freely,” he claimed, “the physical defilement might rapidly decrease.” Belief in the theory of correspondences therefore informed the emphasis on Chadwickean sanitarianism that we find throughout the writing of the most prominent Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists. Germ theory—insofar as it formed part of the basis for vaccination—was deemed “repugnant to common sense.”¹⁰⁶ According to the logic of Swedenborgian correspondence, “diseases in themselves

103. Hume-Rothery, *Twelve Obscure Texts of Scripture*, 41, 56.

104. Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, 7: 4098.

105. Wilkinson, *Vaccination a Sign of the Decay*, 8.

106. *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League Occasional Circular*, no. 6 (1 October 1875), 5.

are unclean because . . . they spring from unclean things.”¹⁰⁷ Sanitarianism was, therefore, considered to be a reasonable theory, drawn from the “divine laws of health,” because it was predicated on the principle that the removal of filth (a moral responsibility) would increase the health of the population.¹⁰⁸ The same could not be said for germ theory and vaccinationism. Germs, unlike filth, were invisible and during this period scientists were not in any agreement with regards to their nature. Nor did doctors have any precise explanation as to the reasons for the efficacy of vaccination.¹⁰⁹ Most importantly, vaccination appeared to use filth and disease in order to prevent disease. Germ theory was “quackery and superstition.” The Vaccination Acts, spawned by germ theory, had “inaugurated a worship of and faith in filth, as opposed to cleanliness.”¹¹⁰ Vaccination was “an unscientific and unprincipled practice,” which “did not touch or diminish the cause of smallpox which was filth.”¹¹¹ As such, Swedenborgians saw vaccination—and the abandonment of sanitarian policies which they feared it would precipitate—as unscrupulous. They described it as an attempt by the powerful to—at very least—circumvent their obligations to provide sanitation and cleanliness to the poor. Wilkinson deemed “landlorded putrefaction” to be the cause of “smallpox, scarlatina, diphtheria, typhus, typhoid and nearly every disease.” He encouraged his reader to lobby “those who can be made to grasp and purify their own Augean slums out of which their brazen palaces now rise.”¹¹² William White agreed that the deprivations of the urban poor were a moral outrage with a scientifically observable outcome. It was “natural” that smallpox would erupt from such conditions.¹¹³ Vaccination “was an infraction of the deeper sanctity of

107. Swedenborg, *Arcana Coelestia*, 7: 4099.

108. *The Ipswich Journal*, no. 7247 (29 August 1874), 9.

109. Worboys, *Spreading Germs*, 11, 97, 237.

110. Hume-Rothery, *What Smallpox and Vaccination Acts Really Are*, 11-12.

111. *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League Occasional Circular*, no. 13 (1 April 1876), 9-10.

112. Wilkinson, *Smallpox and Vaccination*, 24-25.

113. White, *The Story of a Great Delusion*, 546.

Nature.”¹¹⁴ According to William Hume-Rothery, vaccination was informed by a desire to “sin with impunity.”¹¹⁵ Smallpox, White wrote, “can only be avoided through compliance with the old-fashioned prescription, ‘Wash you, make you clean; cease to do evil, learn to do well.’”¹¹⁶

Thirdly, and most fundamentally, anti-vaccination was informed by the particular epistemic dimension of mid-nineteenth century esotericism that Asprem explores in his work. Asprem writes that “esoteric spokespersons” typically reject the “call for an intellectual sacrifice,” insisting rather that scientific discoveries must be measured against an axiological yardstick. Many Swedenborgians balked at the fundamental premise of vaccinationism, which they saw as an attempt to “do evil that good might come.”¹¹⁷ This asymmetry was seen to confound the logic of correspondence. “I take my stand upon this eternal principle,” William Hume-Rothery declared, “that you must do good to get good since it is only from good that good can flow.”¹¹⁸ Vaccination, through which the vaccinator intentionally infected the patient with a disease was, in other words, unprincipled. The Swedenborgian belief that all human experiences corresponded with spiritual absolutes had two ramifications: it allowed Swedenborgians to claim that they had unique insights into the scientific world and it meant that *a priori* principles were privileged over empirical evidence. As Swedenborg himself had written:

Knowledge unless derived from first principles is but a beggarly and palliative science, sensual in its nature . . . animal and without reason.¹¹⁹

His nineteenth-century readers hoped that empirical inquiry would eventually dovetail with Swedenborg’s theories in a way which complemented both

114. White, *The Story of a Great Delusion*, 42.

115. *The Ipswich Journal*, no. 7247 (29 August 1874), 9.

116. White, *The Story of a Great Delusion*, 595.

117. Hume-Rothery, *150 Reasons for Disobeying the Vaccination Law*, 11.

118. Foster, *Report from the Select Committee on the Vaccination Act*, 145.

119. Wilkinson, *Emanuel Swedenborg*, 83.

its ethical and physiological claims. Nothing seemed beyond the reach of experimental science, even the axiological claims of the Swedenborgian revelation. Hume-Rothery, Wilkinson, Tebb, White and others, did not expect the best science to be in conflict with revealed truths. Indeed, Mary Hume-Rothery was prepared to state that “the whole system of Swedenborg rests for its foundation in the rational convictions of the mind.”¹²⁰ She believed that the former would eventually confirm—and indeed *was* confirming—the latter. “The day is not far distant,” she wrote,

when the scientific world will recognise the truth that as all organisation is from him who is a spirit and the father of the spirits of all flesh it must always be essentially spiritual and that consequently there are spiritual no less than natural or material organisms.¹²¹

The belief that good science would always support “divine truth,” motivated Swedenborgians to support those scientific spokespersons whose pronouncements best fitted with the “divine truth,” even while elsewhere they decried the fundamental corruption of “materialism.”¹²² Indeed, the literature of Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationism is littered with testimony from lavishly credentialed medical authorities—from Dr Joseph Herman, “principal physician at the imperial hospital in Vienna,” to the early nineteenth-century physician Robert Watt, to Alfred Russell Wallace.¹²³ As we shall see, it also provided the motivation to find explanations for the apparent success of those techniques and theories which appeared to fly in the face of “divine truth.” As such, the revolt against vaccination was never couched as a revolt against science but rather as a revolt against impure science, where the revealed truths of Swedenborgianism provided the metric for measuring purity. This tendency was shared by many who combined esoteric belief with support for unorthodox medicine. Many during this period supported alternative therapies on the basis

120. Hume-Rothery, *A Brief Sketch of the Life of C. A. Tulk*, 38.

121. Hume-Rothery, *Twelve Obscure Texts of Scripture*, 44.

122. Hume-Rothery, *Women and Doctors*, 1.

123. Wilkinson, *Letters and Opinions of Medical Men*, 11.

that they provided a more holistic explanation for physical maladies (especially when compared with germ theory).¹²⁴ As von Stuckrad observes, esoteric discourses are often identifiable with a “strive for an absolute knowledge.” As such, the latter is often critiqued by spokespersons within the esoteric milieu precisely for its “evolving” nature.¹²⁵ For some Swedenborgians, the evolving nature of experimental science was sufficient to label it impure. In the seventh of Wilkinson’s *Vaccination Tracts*, the Reverend George Cardew (author of *Think Before you Vaccinate*) is quoted as saying that “vaccination is the fashion . . . but fashion is not immortal.”¹²⁶ William Hume-Rothery was scornful of those who put faith in the constantly shifting opinions of the medical cognoscenti:

Our innocent medical writer thinks we ought to trust in doctors. The history of the previous efforts of the medical profession for the public good warrants much confidence. Does it? Inoculation, bleeding, salivation &c, &c, &c answer—No!¹²⁷

Experimental science seemed to offer few cast-iron principles, they complained. Vaccination was simply another example of “unprincipled practice.” “By principle,” William Hume-Rothery explained to the select committee in 1871, “I mean a leading truth, an eternal law of life. There is no such truth, there is no such law, ultimating or illustrating itself in vaccination.”¹²⁸

In making these claims, the Swedenborgians were renouncing their obligation—as determined by Weber—to make an “intellectual sacrifice.” Their beliefs were thus set on a collision course with the findings of medical scientists, health officials and statisticians. It was incumbent upon them, therefore, to explain the apparent fork in the road which had led their own esoteric beliefs and the evidence of medical science in opposite directions. In order to provide this explanation, therefore, they resorted to the language and theory of conspiracism.

124. Barrow, “An Imponderable Liberator,” 165–67.

125. Stuckrad, *Western Esotericism*, 99.

126. Wilkinson, *The Vaccination Laws*, 3.

127. *The National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination Reporter* 2, no. 12 (1 September 1877), 16.

128. Foster, *Report from the Select Committee on the Vaccination Act*, 141.

Conspiritoriality and Swedenborgian Anti-Vaccinationism

Given the close connection between the esoteric elements of Swedenborgian thought and the Swedenborgian objection to vaccination in the nineteenth century, it is perhaps unsurprising that the latter objections were couched in conspiracist terms. Unsurprising because—as a range of scholars, in recent years, have noted—there exists a close connection between the epistemology of esotericism and epistemologies observed within conspiracist culture. This connection was first observed in Ward and Voas’ influential article on the subject of “conspiritoriality.” Ward and Voas suggest that the “female dominated New Age” community and the “male dominated realm of conspiracy theory,” have latterly converged. “A hybrid of conspiracy theory and alternative spirituality” seems to have emerged across a range of different “web-based” fora. Voas and Ward provide an explanation for this phenomenon. They note that the production and circulation of conspiracy theories often allows groups to “revamp and recoup from losses, close ranks, staunch losses, overcome collective action problems, and sensitize minds to vulnerabilities.” In the mid-twentieth century, large numbers of people anticipated the advent of a transformational New Age. Voas and Ward suggest that members of this community might be able to allay the crushing disappointment of the failure of the New Age to materialise with reference to conspiracist narratives. Conspiritoriality, in other words, serves as a form of theodicy for those who subscribe to beliefs which are associated with New Age movements.¹²⁹ David G. Robertson’s work, in some ways, complements Ward and Voas’ hypothesis whilst recognizing its limitations. Robertson describes the utility of the UFO in popular millennialist discourse as a “discursive object.” Reference to the UFO in the literature of these groups serves to “symbolize the perceived limitations of scientific and traditional epistemic strategies.” These narratives posit the existence of “occluded agencies,” which remain “not readily interrogable through scientific means.” Readiness to accept the existence of

129. Ward and Voas “The Emergence of Conspiritoriality,” 103–21.

these unidentified and (by definition) unidentifiable agents corresponds with a readiness to accept the existence of equally occluded political forces.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, aspects of Ward and Voas' explanation for the phenomenon has been critiqued. In an article entitled "Conspiratorship Reconsidered," Egil Asprem and Asbjørn Dyrendal disputed the "theodicy" explanation for conspiratorship. Asprem and Dyrendal object, fundamentally, to the claim that the link between conspiratorship and New Age thought is a recent phenomenon. Drawing on the work of Hanegraaff, Faivre and Campbell, Asprem and Dyrendal urge deeper consideration of the historical roots of the phenomenon New Age conspiratorship. After all, Asprem and Dyrendal note that "claims about vivisectionism, the medical profession, scientists, the Jesuits, the Jews, and rivaling secret brotherhoods all circulated in nineteenth-century occult milieus."¹³¹ Asprem and Dyrendal suggest that "esoteric epistemology... has consequences that connect esotericism and conspiracy theory," and that it also "puts the allegedly new synthesis between occulture and conspiracy theory into considerably older contexts." Other scholars, writing recently, have gone further, arguing that "conspiracy theory is inherently esoteric in its epistemology."¹³² This epistemology has a social dimension, as both conspiratorship and esoteric traditions appear to foster a tripartite division of people, separating the enlightened, the malign and the unenlightened; the good, the bad and the ovine.¹³³

If Asprem, Dyrendal and others are correct, the epistemology at the heart of the Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists' belief system was conducive to a conspiratorship worldview. By extension, elements of the anti-vaccination discourse can be described as inherently esoteric. If so, this adds to the claim that popular anti-vaccination conspiratorship in the nineteenth century was not simply a result

130. Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age*, 15.

131. Robertson, *UFOs, Conspiracy Theories and the New Age*, 209; Dyrendal, "Conspiratorship Reconsidered," 375.

132. Thejls, "MISA and Natha," 72-73.

133. Robertson, "The Counter-Elite," 239.

of class dynamics or a response to medical professionalization. Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists believed in the existence of higher and hidden knowledge. They were inclined to believe that figures with epistemic authority were likely to be concealing the truth. Moreover, they situated themselves in a position of “elected marginality,” deriving epistemic capital from their proposition that political authorities were too blinkered, and the majority of the population too ovine, to see the truth. The majority of people—after all—had been “coaxed or forced . . . like sheep or cattle,” into accepting vaccination.¹³⁴

Occluded agency plays a prominent role in the emic narrativization of the anti-vaccination movement. Images of clandestine power were martialled to explain the limited successes of their campaign. One example of this can be found in the following claim, made by William Hume-Rothery when he was called to testify before the Select Committee on the Vaccination Act:

Many parties would give evidence against vaccination but they are afraid of speaking . . . They are . . . afraid of incurring the displeasure of the doctors.¹³⁵

Mary Hume-Rothery, meanwhile, proposed that “the bribers and the bribed now sway the political balance.”¹³⁶ Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists described doctors as venal, primarily concerned with self-enrichment and self-empowerment rather than with their Hippocratic duties. The nefarious nature of the vaccination conspiracy, however, extended beyond the disbursement of the public by the vaccinators.¹³⁷ Swedenborgian anti-vaccinators believed that the doctors were intentionally and knowingly involved in the spreading of disease among the population in order to maintain the captivity of their market. This charge was repeated over and over in the speeches and publications of the Hume-Rotherys, the Pitmans and others. In her treatise on medical despotism,

134. White, *The Story of a Great Delusion*, 479.

135. Foster, *Report from the Select Committee on the Vaccination Act*, 149.

136. Hume-Rothery, *Women and Doctors*, 15.

137. *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League Occasional Circular*, no. 6 (1 October 1875), 4.

Mary Hume-Rothery proposed the following:

Doctors want fever and smallpox hospitals to try their various systems in (say also to afford remunerative posts for some of their brethren and you will not be altogether in the wrong) and if the people will not come to them of their own accord their houses shall be entered, and the sick dragged thence by force as to prison!¹³⁸

At an anti-vaccination rally in Leicester in 1876, she accused doctors of “arrogat[ing] to themselves the diabolical right of creating diseases in healthy beings.”¹³⁹ Once again, in *The Exceeding Wickedness of the Compulsory Vaccination Law and of Other Medical Legislation Connected with It*, Hume-Rothery wrote that the “infection scare,” was “a lie palmed off upon the public to keep them by fear in . . . subjection to medical authority.”¹⁴⁰ The Swedenborgian anti-vaccinators called into question the use of statistical evidence as the basis for promoting the vaccination programme. In fact, they argued that the statistical arguments *for* vaccination themselves rested on unfalsifiable claims. “The arguments in favour of [vaccination] are mainly supported by figures,” William Hume-Rothery told his audience at a rally in Lewes in April 1876 “and they all knew that figures could be made to prove anything either for falsehood or truth.”¹⁴¹ In 1875, the *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League Occasional Circular* proposed the same argument in the following terms:

But suppose they . . . asked [the doctors] to show that because a person has been vaccinated and has not smallpox he was saved from smallpox by vaccination. There is no earthly power that can prove this and for this reason: there is no rational connection which anti-vaccinators affirm between the putting of disease into the blood and escape from blood poisoning.¹⁴²

138. Hume-Rothery, *Women and Doctors*, 15.

139. *The Leicester Chronicle* 64, no. 3503 (30 September 1876), 2.

140. Hume-Rothery, *The Exceeding Wickedness of the Compulsory Vaccination Law*, 4.

141. *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League Occasional Circular*, no. 13 (1 April 1876), 9–10.

142. *National Anti-Compulsory Vaccination League Occasional Circular*, no. 8 (1 December 1875), 5.

Garth Wilkinson also pressed the issue. “Plague has declined,” he noted:

the sweating sickness has disappeared, syphilis is constantly on the decline . . . but medical prowess is not to thank for it. Why should it be assumed if Smallpox declines . . . that it alone would have been a fixture but for Vaccination?¹⁴³

Mary Hume-Rothery denounced the use of statistics by the Swedish authorities to support compulsory vaccination, arguing that the data had “again and again been handled by pro-vaccination statisticians.” The decline in smallpox during the mid-nineteenth century, she suggested, could just as easily be attributed to “the sun, moon, and stars which like it have looked down on the ever-recurring increase as well as decrease of that dreaded malady.” More likely, it was attributable to “the millions spent upon sanitation.”¹⁴⁴

Wilkinson and Hume-Rothery were aided in their skepticism—it is important to note—by the flawed utility of compulsory vaccination. The most damaging of these shortcomings was the accidental transmission of syphilis via vaccination. In the same year that William Hume-Rothery spoke to the select committee, Jonathan Hutchinson was forced to report to parliament that there had indeed been incidents of “vaccinal syphilis.”¹⁴⁵ Scarcity of calf lymph meant that vaccinators were encouraged to use arm-to-arm vaccination, a process which required vaccinated children to incubate diseased matter. Vaccinators were seldom trained in the technique of vaccination and some brazenly confessed to using unsterilized equipment.¹⁴⁶ Added to this, the statistical basis which the government referred to in defense of compulsory vaccination was patchy even by the standards of the day. Vaccination status was commonly not recorded on the death certificates of smallpox fatalities.¹⁴⁷ Particularly towards the end of the century—as smallpox became less common—the disease was

143. Wilkinson, *Smallpox and Vaccination*, 24.

144. Hume-Rothery, *The Swedish Smallpox Statistics Fraud*, 14.

145. “Vaccino-Syphilis,” *British Medical Journal* 2, no. 548 (1 July 1871), 15.

146. Smith, *The People's Health*, 163.

147. *Final Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Subject of Vaccination* (HM Stationery Office, 1896), 179.

often misdiagnosed.¹⁴⁸ Furthermore, data-gatherers were often forced to guess whether victims were vaccinated or not, based on the visibility or otherwise of a vaccination scar. All of this, combined with the confusion which inevitably resulted from any outbreak of epidemic smallpox, was sufficient to convince Dr George Birdwood—a physician of the Metropolitan Asylum Board Smallpox Hospitals in the 1870s and 1880s—that “the evidence of primary vaccination collected in smallpox hospitals should not be relied upon.”¹⁴⁹ In this context, Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists were perhaps justified in their claim that there was scant evidence for the efficacy of vaccination. In their response to the policy, however, they were content to claim that it was actually impossible to prove that vaccination worked. Before the select committee, Hume-Rothery did not claim that the statistical evidence demonstrated the inefficacy of vaccination. When asked whether his principled stand against vaccination was “anterior and superior to all statistics and figures,” Hume-Rothery replied that “true statistics will never be found to oppose true principle.” When asked if the consensus testimony of medical experts would sway his opinion, he declared that it would not.¹⁵⁰ Rendering the claim as unfalsifiable they, by extension, were able to create an intractable binary, separating believers and non-believers, the enlightened and unenlightened. In terms which echo the language of twenty-first century conspiracy theorists, Mary Hume-Rothery’s writing explicitly and implicitly identified those who were skeptical of vaccination with an enlightened and heretical elite. She presented a tripartite division of society, distinguishing between an enlightened and moral minority, a nefarious and worldly minority, and a cowed and terrified majority:

Doctors, legislators and magistrates . . . compel men to violate their consciences to aid and abet the possible murder of their own children in order to gratify the lust of dominion of one class and pacify the craven terrors of another.¹⁵¹

148. Hardy, “Smallpox in London,” 118.

149. *Final Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Inquire into the Subject of Vaccination* (HM Stationery Office, 1896), 179.

150. Foster, *Report from the Select Committee on the Vaccination Act*, 145.

151. Hume-Rothery, *150 Reasons for Disobeying the Vaccination Law*, 16.

“Even learned men of science,” she wrote “are prone to follow their leader like sheep.”¹⁵²

The esoteric aspects of Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationism—self-identification with a marginalized elite, the esoteric hermeneutic which blurred scientific and revealed knowledge, the claims of correspondence between axiological and empirical truth—all served to facilitate the emergence of a conspiracist attitude within this group. At the same time, the confrontation which their epistemological position provoked with the scientific establishment simultaneously provoked a necessity for explanation of the failure of their own predictions. When statistical evidence did not support their axiological claims, in other words, Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationists were forced to argue that the actions of those charged with vaccinating the public were more secretive and more nefarious than they had previously thought.

Conclusion

It is undoubtable that other factors motivated participation, for many, in the anti-vaccination agitation of the Victorian era. Many objected to the practice on solely scriptural grounds. Others objected to the compulsory elements of legislation on solely political grounds. It is equally undoubtable that many were recruited to the ranks of anti-vaccinationism because of class dynamics and because they believed that working people were being disenfranchised or even exploited by an aristocratic medical class. It is, also clear—I have argued—that a form of “conspirituality” provided the motivation for many of its key leaders, many of whom were highly educated and held high social status. Esoteric ideas created a bridge, allowing the axiological commitments which these figures held, to be expressed in scientific terms. By refusing to make the “intellectual sacrifice,” Swedenborgians found themselves in conflict with the prevailing—if flawed—scientific arguments of their day. In order to circumvent this conflict,

152. Hume-Rothery, *The Swedish Smallpox Statistics Fraud*, 4.

they resorted to conspiracist claims regarding the self-interested actions of “pro-vaccinationist” doctors, scientists and statisticians. As other scholars have noted, it is likely that their worldview, itself informed by esoteric thought, allowed them to slip more easily into the conspiracist mode of thinking.

There are clearly startling similarities to be drawn between the discourse of nineteenth-century Swedenborgian anti-vaccinationism and the discourse of twenty-first century conspirituality. Figures like Mary Hume-Rothery, William Hume-Rothery, William White, James John Garth Wilkinson and others adopted an attitude of resistance to—what they perceived to be—the medical despotism of Victorian Britain. They gravitated towards other causes—homeopathy, anti-mourning, anti-vivisection, vegetarianism—which allowed them to inhabit the role of elected marginality. As such they occupied a counter-epistemic milieu. They believed that the fundamental nature of vaccination was at odds with an holistic and divine laws of health and therefore could not be accommodated within their own system of absolute knowledge. Deliberately causing infection—especially in an infant—could never be justified morally and therefore could never lead to a good end. Defending this position they adopted a synthesis of epistemic strategies—combining revealed knowledge and scientific knowledge. This allowed them to accrue some epistemic capital. In so doing they were successful in forming a “counter-elite,” influential enough to attract crowds, to encourage individuals to undergo imprisonment for the cause and to eventually—in 1898—contribute to the changing of legislation and the recognition of anti-vaccinationism as a protected expression of conscience. In arguing that esoteric currents played a role in the emergence of conspiracist anti-vaccinationism in the nineteenth century, this article adds to the scholarship of those who argue that conspirituality is far from a twentieth- or twenty-first-century phenomenon but rather has deeper roots in our religious and political culture.

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