

## CHAPTER ONE

# MYSTIC CLUB



**ONE-TIME SPY FOR THE DANISH** military, Carl H. A. Bjerregaard (1845–1922) hastily left Denmark in 1873, a twenty-eight-year-old lieutenant absent without leave, and headed for New York. In the United States Bjerregaard started a new life, first as a factory worker in New Jersey, and then through employment at the Astor Library (soon to form the core of the New York Public Library). In Denmark he had briefly helped curate a natural history museum, so his joining the library staff in 1879 to classify books and recatalog them was not wholly out of character. Soon his military service faded into the past; he spent the rest of his career with the New York Public, eventually heading up the main reading room. That was only his day job, though. In his spare time, with all the library's resources at his fingertips, Bjerregaard fashioned himself into a philosopher, artist, and mystic.

By the 1890s, he was lecturing widely on mysticism, nature worship, and kindred topics. “I address you as Pilgrims of the Infinite,” Bjerregaard told an audience in Chicago in 1896, “for you are pilgrims; I can see that on your faces. You are not pilgrims either *from* or *to* the Infinite, but you are *of* the Infinite. *From* and *to* indicate space

and time relations, but in the Infinite we recognize neither time nor space; there is no to-day and to-morrow; no here and no there. Eternity is no farther off from the Mystic, than the moment in which he speaks. You are Pilgrims OF the Infinite.” Bjerregaard’s summons to explore the “Mystic Life” was heady stuff. It was, among other things, an affirmation of the supreme freedom of spiritual aspirants to seek the truth for themselves and within themselves. The call seemed to resound everywhere: Bible passages, Taoist sayings, pine trees and cones, Jewish Kabbalah, Zoroastrian fire imagery, yoga, Sufi poetry, American Transcendentalism, and the Christian mythology of the Holy Grail.<sup>1</sup>

Bjerregaard’s spirituality, like the faith of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), was especially in synchrony with the American lecture



Sarah Farmer’s Greenacre community in Maine, with its tent village surrounding a large inn on the shore of the Piscataqua River, provided the setting for C. H. A. Bjerregaard’s lectures on mysticism and spirituality in the 1890s. (Eliot Bahá’í Archives, Eliot, Maine.)

circuit. Bjerregaard's favorite place to speak was Greenacre, the summer community that the visionary Sarah Farmer (1847–1916) founded in Eliot, Maine, in 1894. He saw Farmer's experiment as a realization of his ideas about a universal mysticism and was lavish in his praise of its design. When he gave personal examples of his own exalted experiences, they almost always circled back to Greenacre, whether to a sunrise worship service led by the Zoroastrian Jehanghier Cola or to barefoot walks on the dew-drenched grass. "Greenacre is a revelation," Bjerregaard remarked. "When you rise from the cool waves of the Piscataqua [River], you rise out of the quiet place of your own soul." As a lecturer, Bjerregaard believed in presentations that were personal and experiential; like Emerson, he did not want to offer secondhand news or disinterested scholarship. Make lecturers, he said, "give their own experiences and not something they have read in books and only poorly digested.... In soul life no abstract teachings are worth much."<sup>2</sup>

His time at Greenacre in the 1890s provided him with that first-hand material. Of one glistening experience there in 1896, Bjerregaard was especially jubilant:

*The first evening I spent at Greenacre, I watched the sunset from "Sunrise Camp," and it happened to me as it did to Wm. Blake, I did not see with my eyes, but through my eyes came to my soul the essence of that Golden Ball, and I heard it as "Glory to God on High" — "Peace on Earth" — "Good-will among Men." It was July 5th, 1896, never to be forgotten. It was a gorgeous sunset. All the heavens and the earth were still; the fleeting colors of roseate hues and ashen gray played in incalculable series of mutations. Behind the passing scenes, the glorious orb, incomparable emblem of Being, sank majestically down behind the distant White Hills, and before the scenes, as if in midair, I felt the Becoming. My reason could not arrest the movement, my understanding could not declare what it perceived. The glorious tints, the melting into one another, the lack*

*of fixedness or duration, the deep, yet eloquent and sonorous silence spoke from Heaven and whispered Eternal Harmony.*

His lone epiphanies at sunset converged with the corporate prayers of the gathered seekers as they all softly chanted together a newly minted mantra, “the now famous Greenacre Uplift”: “Omnipresence manifest Thyself in me.” There on the banks of the Piscataqua River in a tent village, surrounded by fellow Pilgrims of the Infinite, Bjerregaard found his spiritual element.<sup>3</sup>

Mysticism mattered in the 1890s, as Bjerregaard’s eager audiences in Chicago and at Greenacre made plain. Across a wide swath of religious liberalism, mystical experience had become a hallmark of religion at its most awesome, profound, and desirable. The new universal mysticism (to which Bjerregaard gave representative expression) served, in turn, as the foundation upon which the contemporary love of spirituality would be constructed. “The mother sea and fountain head of all religions,” the psychologist William James (1842–1910) wrote in a letter in June 1901, “lies in the mystical experiences of the individual, taking the word mystical in a very wide sense.” Understanding how mysticism took on such a wide significance over the course of the nineteenth century is an important step in fathoming how spirituality became such an expansive part of America’s religious vernacular in the twentieth century. As Bjerregaard concluded in another series of lectures on mysticism in 1896, “A study of the mystics will prove a key by which you can open the doors that lead to Universal Consciousness and Cosmic Emotion, to everything of the New Spirituality, revealed in our day.” Bjerregaard’s very nomenclature makes plain that the “new spirituality,” talked up so much as a recent development, is more venerable than novel. He himself stood right in the middle of this transformation, a bridge figure who joined nineteenth-century “mysticism” to twentieth-century “spirituality.”<sup>4</sup>

As a matter of course, Bjerregaard saw the mysticism he was preaching as timelessly true. By the 1890s, it had become common in-

tellectual fare to imagine the mystical writers as part of an everlasting coterie, essentially unaffected by “clime or creed.” Their writings sparkled with eternal verities and ineffable insights into the Absolute; ageless classics, they had “neither birthday nor native land.” “Mysticism has no genealogy,” Robert Alfred Vaughan (1823–1857) commented in his influential *Hours with the Mystics* in 1856. “It is no tradition conveyed ... down the course of generations as a ready-made commodity. It is a state of thinking and feeling, to which minds of a certain temperament are liable at any time or place, in occident and orient, whether Romanist or Protestant, Jew, Turk, or Infidel.”<sup>5</sup>

Such claims only got bolder with time. “A history of Mysticism is an impossibility,” one writer remarked in 1918 with startling assurance. “It has no history.” Mysticism as monotony—it was so universally the same that it was almost boring: “When you see [mysticism] here or there, early or late, you feel perfectly at home with it. You say, ‘Here is the same old thing.’ It suffers a little, perhaps, from sameness.” It would come closer to the truth simply to stand such antihistorical suppositions on their head. The kind of timeless mysticism that Bjerregaard was trumpeting, one could say with a playful contrariness, actually had a very precise American birthday. In May 1896, when Bjerregaard published his first series of lectures on the subject, mysticism would have celebrated its fifty-eighth birthday, its nativity seven years (almost to the day) before Bjerregaard’s own birth.<sup>6</sup>

So, when and where was “mysticism” born in the United States? On May 20, 1838, in Medford, Massachusetts, in the old parsonage of Caleb Stetson (1793–1870), a seasoned pastor of high ambitions and modest achievements. On that day the Transcendental Club, a symposium of liberal Christian ministers and New England intellectuals in its third year of existence, met specifically to take up, in Ralph Waldo Emerson’s phrase, “the question of Mysticism.” In addition to Emerson, on hand for this late-into-the-night discussion were such illuminati in the making as Theodore Parker (1810–1860), Jones Very (1813–1880), and George Ripley (1802–1880). Within months of the

Amos Bronson Alcott, an enthusiastic member of the Transcendental Club, went on to found his own Mystic Club as a successor.  
(Concord Free Public Library.)



gathering, Very, as poet and oracle, would take off on his own distinct mystical flight, roaming from Cambridge to Concord, offering to baptize people with the Holy Ghost and with fire, much to the dismay of his friends and colleagues. Three years later Ripley would leave his pastorate over the Purchase Street Church in Boston and found one of Transcendentalism's most visionary enterprises, the community experiment known as Brook Farm. Parker, just out of Harvard Divinity School in 1836 and with a congregation in West Roxbury, had already been drawn in his voracious studies to "the writings of the Mystics," "the voluptuaries of the soul." As Parker noted of the

precious flora he had gathered from this literature during his student days, “I was much attracted to this class of men, who developed the element of piety, regardless of the theological ritualism of the church.” Emerson, Very, Ripley, and Parker were all well primed to take up the question of mysticism as they gathered at Stetson’s home on High Street in Medford.

Perhaps the most expectant of all, though, was Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888), another key member present for this spirited meeting of the Transcendental Club. By turns vilified and celebrated—Emerson saw him as an almost unrivaled genius; many others thought he was insane—Alcott has had some of his quirks sanded down over the years through the culture’s enduring fondness for his daughter, Louisa May Alcott, the author of *Little Women*. Even if many of his projects sputtered, including his vegetarian commune Fruitlands (which lasted all of six months in 1843), Alcott was a creative and compelling force, a down-on-his-luck Yankee peddler turned self-taught Transcendentalist with a mission to educate and inspire. He was, not surprisingly, effusive about the conversation the assembled intellectuals enjoyed that evening: “On the main topic of conversation, much was said,” Alcott noted in his journal. “Was Jesus a mystic? Most deemed him such, in the widest sense. He was spiritual.... He used the universal tongue, and was intelligible to all men of simple soul.” Here was one good measure of Alcott’s excited and enduring preoccupation with the evening’s topic: years later he would organize his own Mystic Club as the aptly named successor to this famed group of Transcendental associates.

Alcott was not one to curb impulsive utterances. He had already become a lightning rod for controversy because of his educational experiments at the Temple School in Boston in which he treated the spontaneity of children as a likely conduit of divine revelation. Rather than catechizing his young pupils, he led them in free-form conversations on the Gospels, confident that spiritual wisdom would well up naturally from their own unspoiled intuitions. Predictably, then, on

the topic of mysticism Alcott proved voluble, even inspired. That night at Stetson's parsonage he even feared that he had "overstepped the bounds of true courtesy" by talking too much (certainly a danger to the well-being of any salon). Still, he was unbridled: "A vision was vouchsafed, and I could but declare it." Emerson, by contrast, was fearful that he had been "a bad associate" at the gathering, "since for all the wit & talent that was there, I had not one thought nor one aspiration." Trying to quiet this pang of intellectual insecurity, Emerson offered an excuse: "It is true I had not slept the night before." Alcott's

Ralph Waldo Emerson appears in this portrait in a pose for the lecture circuit, a main medium for him after he left the ministry. (Concord Free Public Library.)



ardor on that spring evening, rather than Emerson's sluggishness, was a better measure of the impact that this Transcendentalist turn to mysticism would have on American religious life.<sup>7</sup>

Two months later, on July 15, 1838, Emerson proved much more inspired when he addressed the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School. Having left the full-time ministry in 1832 over his inability to perform the sacrament of the Lord's Supper with sincere conviction, he had grown only more restive under the sleepy preaching of the New England pulpit over the next six years. Unitarian liberals were mired in doctrinal debates with traditional Calvinists—and often with each other as well—about everything from Original Sin to Christ's divinity to biblical miracles, and Emerson found the whole scene dispiriting. The address to the senior class of the divinity school provided him with the opportunity to declare the emancipation of human curiosity in the realm of religion, the freedom from dogmatic and canonical constrictions, and the awakening of spiritual intuition and individuality. "Truly speaking," Emerson exhorted, "it is not instruction, but provocation that I can receive from another soul. What he announces, I must find true in me, or wholly reject." Refuse the old path of imitative piety; throw off "secondary knowledge"; eschew "hollow, dry, creaking formality." "Yourself a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost," Emerson cajoled, "cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at first hand with Deity."<sup>8</sup>

Though his address ended on a cautious note in self-contradictory praise of breathing new life into the old institutions of the Sabbath and regular preaching, the oration nonetheless created a considerable stir. More controversy followed upon its publication the next month, and, since nothing vended quite so well in antebellum America as a religious hullabaloo, Emerson's goading of his alma mater quickly sold out. The rise of religious liberalism had many milestones and monuments in the first half of the nineteenth century: The election of Henry Ware, a theological liberal, as Hollis Professor at Harvard in 1805 pointed ahead to the movement's dominance over religious education