

Introduction

“Strange Things Happening Every Day”

Oh, we hear church people say
They are in this holy way
There are strange things happening every day

On that last great judgment day
When they drive them all away
There are strange things happening every day
—“Strange Things Happening Every Day,”
Sister Rosetta Tharpe (traditional)

It was too late in the evening for many to see it as it shone across the night sky of Philadelphia in July 1829, but a few lucky night owls caught an extended glimpse. One witness wrote to the editor of *Hazard's Register*, a local almanac and news magazine, to describe the event:

Mr. Editor: –A meteor of rather singular character made its appearance in the heavens last night, between the hours of eleven and twelve o'clock. As a great number of your readers, owing to the lateness of the hour, had not an opportunity observing it, I shall endeavour to give some description of it.¹

The author of the letter went on to give a thorough description of the object, identified as a “rather singular” meteor. The description makes it almost immediately clear that the object seen over Philadelphia that night was not a meteor in any common or contemporary sense of the word.²

“It arose apparently from the neighborhood of the Schuylkill,” wrote the correspondent, referring to the area just west of the city where the Schuylkill River proceeds toward the Delaware after converging with the Wissahickon. “A long trail of light, like that of a shooting star was seen to follow it in the beginning of its ascension.” In addition to its trail, the object emitted “large sparkles” that descended slowly in its wake. In the author’s description, then, the object seems to arise vertically from somewhere in the area of the rivers, emitting both a trail

of light and falling, sparkling objects beneath it. The movement of the object was also very much unlike the linear path of a meteor: “Its motions were rapid, irregular, and wavering, like the fluttering of a kite or the rocking of an air balloon.” The object seemed to tremble and sputter in the air, and the references to kites and balloons seem to suggest a windblown pattern to its movement. Its color was no less extraordinary than its motion: “Its appearance was of a deep red colour, and remarkably brilliant, seemingly of about half the size of the moon.” As it arose, the object passed over the city of Philadelphia and crossed the Delaware before descending in a fashion no less dramatic than its ascension:

It arose until it crossed the Delaware; when it appeared but an inconsiderable speck scarcely discernible, and then descended with astonishing velocity until within short distance the horizon, where it remained ary for a few moments. Suddenly it became exceedingly large and brilliant, sparkles again separated from the main body, and descended as before. It soon after became dim and disappeared behind the trees.³

With its trembling motion, clear pattern of terrestrial ascent and descent, shining displays of arrayed lights and rich color, the nocturnal object of 1829 was not likely a meteor: but it was certainly a beautiful night to be out in Philadelphia.

As extraordinary as the object was, the readers of *Hazard's Register of Pennsylvania* would have been aware of a number of similar events in the skies over Pennsylvania over the previous few years. Just a few months earlier in the year 1829, *Hazard's* ran a description of the aurora borealis for readers. In one column, the author seems to refer to the frequency of such phenomena as common knowledge to a contemporary Pennsylvania audience: “The frequent appearance of these lights . . . so unusual within our latitude, is probably within your recollection.”⁴ The kinds of phenomena that *Hazard's* calls auroras are, perhaps expectedly, just as strange as its “meteors.” Their descriptions include enormous perpendicular columns of white light that arrange and rearrange themselves as they cast themselves across the sky, and shimmering dark clouds that move through sky-wide arches of brilliance. And perhaps most telling of all, the “auroras” of nineteenth-century Philadelphia continued to appear throughout the bright light of day.⁵ Again, it seems unlikely to our contemporary sensibilities and meteorological knowledge that the Northern Lights shone over Passyunk in the broad daylight of the 1820s, but these are the sources we have.

Sources like *Hazard's* can be confounding to the contemporary reader, who might be forgiven for assuming the skies of the twenty-first century are free of such strange brilliance. If one cares to look, celestial phenomena like those reported in *Hazard's Register* can be found throughout early American publications, especially those written for an audience of farmers, who largely based their planting

schedules on close and careful attention to the movements and patterns of the stars, the phases of the moon, and the spinning signs of the zodiac.

The small, rocky, and metallic bodies that pass through the earth's atmosphere and occasionally strike the surface of the planet were a matter of severe scientific debate among the Enlightenment intelligentsia in Europe and the Americas at the turn of the nineteenth century, in the decades leading up to *Hazard's* Philadelphia "meteor." In fact, the acceptance of the meteorite (the rocky body itself, as opposed to the meteor, which is the rather poetic technical term for the far-more-easily-ignored visual event in the sky that accompanies its falling) as a scientific fact dated only to 1803, a few decades before *Hazard's* published its account of the object over Philadelphia.⁶

By 1804, meteors were largely and begrudgingly accepted as fact by the transatlantic scientific community. This rather belated acknowledgment was the subject of an editorial in the *Edinburgh Review*, which reflected on how such a widely witnessed and well-known celestial phenomenon could have been rejected by scientific authorities for so long. Why were "many well-supported testimonies" being "treated by the naturalists . . . with perverse incredulity?" asked the *Review*.⁷ In other words, why did the scientific community seem to willingly blind itself to a phenomenon so obvious—and even the word "obvious" here does not feel obvious enough—after the fact?

As Simon Schaffer has written, scientific acceptance of meteorites was hindered specifically by the low social class of the people who reported them. From the elite perspective of professional scientists, knowledge of meteorites relied on "Plebeians [who] were reckoned superstitious."⁸ In the eighteenth century, as surely as today, there were deep class divisions and outright animosities between forms of knowledge. Enlightenment meteor-denial was the denial of a specific *form* of knowledge rather than a simple factual denial of the reality of lights in the sky. Rare celestial events like meteors required an environmental knowledge: a knowledge that was slow, observational, locally and temporally situated, and thus largely reliant on rural people, who were often poor and thus lacked access to formal education. Hence, meteors were the knowledge domain of "superstitious Plebeians." This kind of environmental knowledge was almost uniquely unsuited to the sciences, especially the localization of observations and the temporal need for a phenomenon to repeat itself in order to be experimentally verified.

Despite its extraordinary appearance and "singular character," the sources documenting the 1829 manifestation over Philadelphia do not suggest that it was an event of religious interest at all—rather, for all its mysterious beauty, it was only ever a "meteor." This interpretation, simple as it was, represented a tectonic change in how modern human beings experienced their environment. An interpretation of a similar event in previous decades can illustrate the significance of



Figure I.1 Daniel Schumacher, “Up to the Judgment” (Auf zum Gericht), 1769. Courtesy of the Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Book Department.

this transformation. One manuscript depiction of a celestial event in southeastern Pennsylvania in 1769 included the following text: “Up to the Judgment; Up, do not miss it. A comet star of very pale color appeared in Pennsylvania in the year 1769 in August. You people, ask yourselves what this star may mean, whether God wants to punish you. O, do penance while there is still time” (Figure I.1).⁹

These two extraordinary celestial events took place in roughly the same area of the world, separated by only about sixty years—but within that separation was a vast gulf of understanding, of knowledge, of the *meaning* that people made of their cosmos. And while it is tempting for a historian to describe this shift as one from simple “religion” to simple “science,” it is worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the operational difference between these two forms of knowing.

The first manifestation, the “pale comet” of 1769, was an event that demanded, above all else, an interpretation. Specifically, the author writes, “Ask yourselves what this star may mean.” The pale comet called for introspection, for personal reflection; it called for an essentially hermeneutic process of knowledge. The meaning of the comet was not a question for the natural sciences: rather, it was an introspective process with a largely personal outcome, in this case, a kind of moral self-determination. The second event, the 1829 manifestation over Philadelphia, was an event that, so far as we can tell from reading *Hazard’s Register*, did not even demand an act of explanation, much less personal reflection, so wide and deep was our understanding of the cosmos. The identity of the

object as a meteor, as an *identified object*, was so embedded in its appearance that it seems the Philadelphians who saw it may have ignored a genuine celestial anomaly. With only sixty years between these events, the separation between the *ways of knowing* that separate them seems vast. Why?

“Phoenomena, Meteors, Stars and Various Colours of the Skei”

This book explores the history of this modern transformation of environmental knowledge. The early modern period was, among many other things, a time of profound change in the human understanding of and relationship with the cosmos. Throughout the pages that follow, I am interested in recovering an early modern sense of the cosmos as a site of hermeneutic knowledge—as a vital, intelligent presence to be communicated with, rather than a passive object to be dissected. In 1699, a Christian ascetic living outside Philadelphia explained the sources of his religious worldview:

No wonder then, if your continual Gazing upon this Supercaelestial Orb and Sphier from whence with her Children, causeth you to observe every new Phoenomena, Meteors, Stars and various Colours of the Skei, if peradventure you may behold at last an Harbinger as an Evidence of that great Jubelee or Restitution of all things.¹⁰

For the author of this letter, celestial phenomena were a window into God’s mind, and the sky itself was a living, animate text that could be read, interpreted, and understood. The author was not a scientist, although he was conversant with the cutting edge of European philosophy and science, having written academic critiques of Descartes and traveling with a copy of Newton’s *Principia Mathematica*. Nor was the author uneducated; in fact, he was university-educated theologian who received the equivalent of a PhD one of the leading German universities of the time. But he was not a noble or even wealthy: he was the son of a country pastor from an impoverished rural region of Europe, the Transylvanian mountains in what is now Romania. Writing from Philadelphia at the turn of the eighteenth century, this author claimed that the environment was God’s first and most reliable text, and literacy in this book yielded a sense of personal meaning and spiritual knowledge that neither the sciences nor orthodox Christianity could hope to match.

In this book, I examine this modern transformation of environmental knowledge, not through a comprehensive history of Enlightenment philosophy or the natural sciences, but through the life and influence of the author of this

letter. Johannes Kelpius (1667–1707) first appeared to me in a dimly lit cave between the covers of Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, which I read as I prepared to apply to graduate school. There he was again in Catherine Albanese's *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*. And again in Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith*. None of these masterful books really attended to this mysterious figure: he was mentioned in passing as an important character, a mysterious presence, and he was variously referred to as a Pietist, an alchemist, a Rosicrucian, a Theosopher, a wizard, and even as the leader of a community of witches. True to his form as a hermit, he never really came up to me and spoke: all those books seemed to offer were fleeting glimpses from between the trees as he retreated further up the cliffs along the Wissahickon River.

In the book where I first spotted Kelpius, Schmidt's *Restless Souls*, the author devoted an entire chapter to the subject of solitude as a religious virtue in American history. In particular, Schmidt pointed out that solitude, both as a literary novelty and as a social virtue, *erupted* in the popular imagination of Americans in the nineteenth century. Including but not limiting his scope to the literary figures of the Transcendentalist movement in New England, Schmidt outlines a burgeoning popular literature on the exploits, suffering, and piety of American hermits. A very early example of an American religious hermit was Kelpius, whom Schmidt points out as being of both “necessarily limited influence” and having “left little by way of an institutional legacy.” This did not impede the appetites of a voracious audience for popular hermit literature in the nineteenth century, and Schmidt describes how a “latter-day chronicler” of Kelpius's community reconstructed a vibrant image of the Wissahickon hermitage out of little more than “wistful memory.”¹¹

In nineteenth-century memory, the pious souls of this Chapter of Perfection [the Kelpius community] became part of a larger dreamscape of mystic lore and solitude. Through the rosy lens of nostalgia, they became the Hermits of the Romantic Wissahickon. Mining this vein, lovers of solitude found their gold.¹²

The “latter-day chronicler” of the Wissahickon hermits that Schmidt refers to was an amateur Philadelphia historian named Julius Sachse (1842–1919), whose 1895 book *The German Pietists of Provincial Pennsylvania* indeed appears to contain as much opinion and embellishment as it does historical detail.¹³ As Schmidt points out, popular hermit literature often straddled the boundary between legend and fact. Although hermit narratives and poems were often based on individuals whose existence is substantiated in historical records, it is usually impossible to tell where history ends and legendary profile begins. Hermits are always hard to find, whether one goes looking for them in the mountains or in the primary sources.

Schmidt is pointing out a more serious problem, however. Our historical understanding of Kelpius and his community has been almost entirely overwritten by enthusiastic antiquarians and amateur historians, whose writings tangle with the primary sources of the period to produce a slush of literature in which Kelpius appears at once enormously legendary in profile and largely invisible as a historical figure. In response to the difficulty of distinguishing legend from historical fact, many scholars have chosen to bypass Kelpius and his community entirely in their analyses of adjacent historical or religious material. In 1999, Arthur Versluis noted that Kelpius's life and work "still awaited a full scholarly examination," and this remains the case today.¹⁴ In 2003, Jeff Bach, perhaps the pre-eminent contemporary historian of early Pennsylvania sectarian and communal groups, simply concluded that "Kelpius is difficult to assess."¹⁵

Some less cautious scholarship has compounded the issue, blending and blurring the historical Kelpius with the more legendary details that have sprung up around him. Rather than point an accusatory finger at a number of otherwise admirable intellectual projects, here is a single example: in the leading undergraduate textbook on American religious history, Catherine Albanese's *America: Religion and Religions*, Kelpius and his companions are described as practicing "witchcraft . . . the religion of nature that had once dominated Europe and had only gradually yielded to Christianity."¹⁶ Albanese's characterization of Kelpius as a witch has appeared in all five editions of *America*.

Our dim historical memory of Kelpius and the hesitation of scholars to cut back against the strata of folklore and legend have turned him into a kind of tabula rasa for an American occult tradition in search of an origin story from the earliest period in American history, a uniquely American spin on Wouter Hanegraaff's suggestion that esotericism is always grounded in a discourse of "ancient wisdom."¹⁷ The Wissahickon hermitage of Kelpius and his followers has been the Edenic blank page in history books where generations of American occultists could write their own legitimizing Genesis story. Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries up until the present day, practicing Rosicrucians, Kabbalists, and occultists of all kinds have rushed to claim Kelpius and his companions as their institutional heritage and, perhaps more interesting, the source of their unique national and religious identity as *American* occultists.

Kelpius and company are a vibrant memory in a number of American esoteric religions. In a creative and endearing twist on the more typical children's pageants commemorating the Pilgrims' arrival at Plymouth Rock, the Church Universal and Triumphant (best known for constructing and inhabiting bunkers in Montana in the 1980s in anticipation of a nuclear war) used to put on an annual children's pageant commemorating the arrival of the Wissahickon hermits in Philadelphia.¹⁸ This was not the only twentieth-century pageant commemorating the Kelpius group—in 1908, a historical pageant commemorating the founding

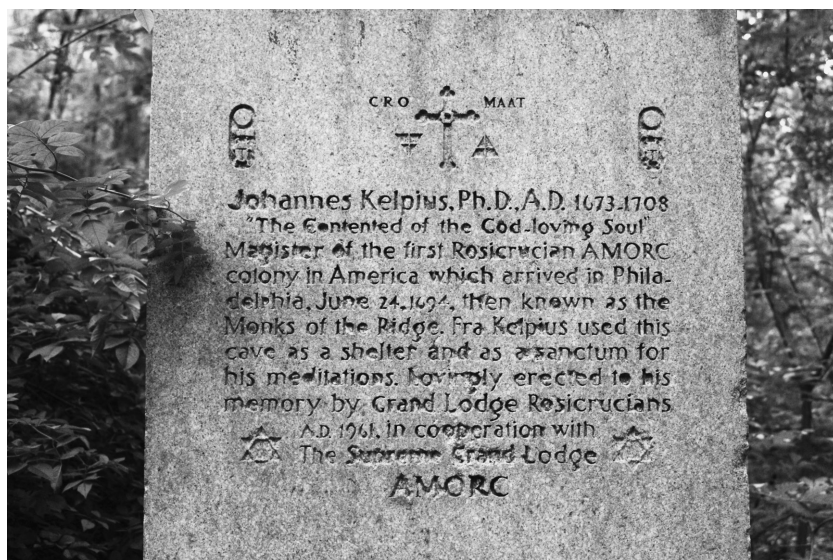


Figure I.2 An engraved stone monument next to a root cellar in Wissahickon Valley Park, erected in 1961 by the AMORC. The information on the stone is largely derived from the work of Julius Sachse. Author's photograph, June 2021.

of Philadelphia included the “German Mystics and Pietists” among other groups like “the Scotch-Irish” and “Lenni Lenape Indians.”¹⁹ In 1961, the modern Rosicrucian Order AMORC (Ancient Mystical Order Rosae Crucis) erected a stone monument outside of a small root-cellar near the original Kelpius site, claiming Kelpius and the site as AMORC’s first arrival in America (Figure I.2). The site itself has since become a location for legend-tripping, as a quick glance at the geotag “Cave of Kelpius” on any social media platform will confirm. The Johannes Kelpius Lodge of AMORC can be visited in Massachusetts today.

I frankly do not blame scholars who have misrepresented Kelpius in their work. The depth of misinformation is so overwhelming and the mixture of legendary and historical literature is so complete that it requires a book-length approach to the material to adequately sort it. But the situation is far from hopeless: despite the overwhelming volume of legendary material that encases the memory of Johannes Kelpius, there is a significant amount of primary source material from his own pen. We have a short diary, mostly in Latin, in which he details the circumstances of his journey to Pennsylvania. We have about ten letters of his correspondence (in Latin, German, and English), in which we can most vividly discern the outline of a brilliant young radical living through the tumult of the seventeenth century. We have a voluminous collection of original hymns and poetry, held in archives throughout Philadelphia. From his time in Europe, we

have his dissertation on natural theology *Natural Theology, or, Metamorphosis of the Metaphysics*, an essay on the church fathers written with his teacher Johannes Fabricius (*Scylla Theologica*), and a long essay on Aristotle, *Pagan Ethics*.

Kelpius's influence and legacy are in fact vast, and the historical evidence from his own hand is far more abundant than it is for figures about whom much more has been written. Jeff Bach is correct when he writes, "Kelpius is difficult to assess," but this assessment should really not be so difficult, especially in a situation where a modern Protestant is portrayed as a witch in a leading textbook survey of the field, despite abundant and available evidence to the contrary. The historical Kelpius was, I think, much stranger and much more interesting than a colonial witch or the original wizard of the American occult tradition. Johannes Kelpius appears so warped and distorted in the lens of history not by accident, or malice, or lack of source material. We misremember Johannes Kelpius because the Enlightenment tradition that shaped our disciplines of knowledge has rendered the form of knowledge that Kelpius practiced profoundly alien to our modern sensibilities. And beneath the strata of wishful thinking, popular occultism, and folk memory, there exists a clear picture of an immensely influential religious ascetic in early America.

The Crisis of Piety

Without foreclosing constructive debate, the historical details of Kelpius's life are fairly straightforward and well documented, especially for a figure who has been the subject of such intense speculation. Johannes Kelpius was a theologian from Transylvania, from an ethnic community of German-speaking Lutherans, the Transylvanian Saxons. He moved to Germany as a young man and received an education in theology (a very broad topic at the time, including training in astronomy, math, and music) and achieved the high rank of Magister, the equivalent of a PhD. He authored numerous academic books and articles, and he could have easily taken on a fairly cushy post as a teacher, scholar, or minister. But at some point around or shortly after 1690, something in his life shifted dramatically.

Kelpius lived in a time and place in which new and fiercely pious forms of Christianity were flourishing, and orthodox church authorities found themselves facing emboldened popular Christian movements and vernacular theologies. In the broader historical scope of the period, Kelpius was born at the height of what historians increasingly recognize as a period of "general crisis," in which extreme climate change in Europe triggered wave after wave of famine, war, disease, and social unrest. The radical Protestantism of the seventeenth century was directly connected to the wider environmental crisis of the period.

“Radical Protestantism” in the seventeenth century is a label with a wide scope. Throughout this book, I use the label “radical Protestant” to refer to truly dissenting Protestant factions, whose religious commitments put them in dangerous opposition to state and orthodox authorities. The early German Pietists, the English Quakers, and the English Philadelphians are the three main radical Protestant groups that appear in this book, but many other factions could be placed under the label. Each of these groups can be understood as responses to what historians call the seventeenth-century interdenominational “crisis of piety,” a deep divide between the Christian life and practice of the laity—everyday people—and the increasingly academic and hierarchical theology of the orthodox church authorities.²⁰

Kelpius was an early adherent of Pietism, which began in the seventeenth century with Kelpius’s own denomination, German Lutheranism. Pietism, which will be explored more fully in the first chapter, was an early evangelical movement that responded to the consolidation of hierarchy and orthodoxy in the Lutheran church by emphasizing a deeply personal and emotional connection to God. By the eighteenth century, later Pietist leaders like Gottfried Arnold would take steps toward a reconciliation with orthodoxy, bringing their evangelical perspective into the ranks of Lutheran theology, where it remained influential right up to the work of major Pietist-educated theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher. But during its origins in the late seventeenth century, Pietism was a truly radical movement that incorporated the alchemical and Hermetic thought of figures like Paracelsus and Jacob Böhme into its own Protestant worldview. During this period, radical Pietists published their criticisms against the church openly, accusing Lutheran leadership of hypocrisy and sin. In the most extreme corners, seventeenth-century radical Pietists accused the Lutheran church of being the Antichrist on earth: an accusation that could result in imprisonment, banishment, or execution. Although the primary record does not preserve all the details of Kelpius’s affiliation with the Pietists, one thing is clear: by 1693, Kelpius was publicly associated with the most extreme Pietists in Europe, with whom he made arrangements to flee the continent under threat from orthodox authorities. Kelpius was a deeply devoted Pietist, a title that he identified with in print and would defend throughout his life and correspondence.²¹

This early stage of Pietist religion and philosophy, during which the influence of alchemical and Hermetic literature was at its height, was a unique period in the history of Protestant Christianity. Many of the figures and texts that centered so prominently in Christian life during the period are studied today under the rubric of Western esotericism, a relatively recent scholarly field that has made great strides in understanding the history and literature of movements typically relegated to the “cultural wastebasket,” as Wouter Hanegraaff puts it. In addition to Platonic and Neoplatonic literatures of the ancient world, Hermetic literature

and ideas, translated and interpreted by Renaissance humanists, along with older European forms of alchemical Hermeticism derived from Arabic sources and Neoplatonic mysticism in the Catholic tradition, proved deeply influential in European popular culture and Protestant thought throughout the early modern period.

Early modern Protestantism was a cultural amalgam of interrelated ancient and contemporary texts and ideas, read and reread through the circumstances of the people who practiced them. And in the seventeenth century, Christians were trying to understand their changing environment. Throughout the period, the effects of what historians now call the Little Ice Age had wrought unprecedented changes to the environment of Europe. Geoffrey Parker, the leading historian of the global cultural impact of climate change in the seventeenth century, summarizes its effects during the period: “Around 1618, when the human population of the northern hemisphere was larger than ever before, the average global temperature started to fall, producing extreme climate events, disastrous harvest failures and frequent disease epidemics.”²² At the very same time, perceptible celestial and earthly phenomena began to change: the century was a period of increased meteor activity in the earth’s atmosphere, and more frequent comets and eclipses. Increased volcanic activity during the period darkened the sky for decades and even changed the color of the sun to pale red.²³ As we might expect, these dramatic environmental phenomena were consistently interpreted in religious frames of reference in sources from the period. For the people who lived through them, the environmental changes of the seventeenth century demanded religious attention.

Hermetic literature and ideas offered a perspective on these environmental changes that prevailing orthodox philosophies often did not. We can understand this Hermetic perspective, in part, by reading the orthodox heresiologists who criticized it. The German Lutheran theologian Jacob Thomasius singled out what he saw as the dangerous influence of Hermetic and Platonic literature, “paganism,” as he called it, on proper Christian thought. The first was the Hermetic belief that God was really present in the cosmos—specifically, that “the world was co-eternal with God, as opposed to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*,” as Wouter Hanegraaff writes. The second error of these Platonic and Hermetic Christians was the belief that God’s presence in the cosmos allowed for a sensory, experiential contact with divinity, both in the cosmos and in the microcosmos of the human body.²⁴ As Hanegraaff points out, Thomasius’s heresiological perspective—biased as it is—was historically and philosophically accurate enough that it “may still furnish us with the fundamentals of what can usefully be called Western esotericism.”²⁵

Wouter Hanegraaff followed the Egyptologist Jan Assman in describing this worldview as *cosmotheism*: the “fundamental assumption,” he writes, of the

Hermetic writings that the “divine is at home in the world.”²⁶ Compared to orthodox Lutheranism, the religious perspective of these ancient pagan sources was decidedly worldly: it was, as the historian Frances Yates called it, a “religion of the world,” in which the cosmos and the body were not excluded from divinity. This religion of the world seemed to land directly “in a Europe devastated by the awful wars and persecutions arising from the conflict between Reformation and Catholic reaction,” as Yates writes. In addition to the wars of religion she describes, we can see how the shifting extreme environmental changes of the period would have made the environmentally attuned religion of the Hermetic literature interesting to people living through the early modern period: “Men were turning to the Hermetic religion of the world to take them above these conflicts,” Yates writes.²⁷

Once the basic resonances are noted, the connections between the environmental circumstances of the seventeenth century and the proliferation of popular Hermetic and alchemical ideas becomes clear. I think this is a missed opportunity for scholars of esotericism, who do not often locate their analyses in the history of environmental thought, since this is exactly where many environmental historians locate the very same subjects. Phillip Blom spends a good deal of time with Giordano Bruno and John Dee in his 2017 book *Nature's Mutiny: How the Little Ice Age of the Long Seventeenth Century Transformed the West and Shaped the Present*, showing how a changing environment shaped novel religious attitudes toward the cosmos. The single most important example of this is Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, a monumental intellectual history of early modern European attitudes toward the environment that relies overwhelmingly on the analysis of leading Renaissance and early modern authors (Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus) who resisted an increasingly mechanistic philosophy on the basis of essentially Hermetic and Platonic ideas. In a period of drastic environmental change and popular suspicion of orthodoxy, it is small wonder that Hermetic ideas became so popular.²⁸

Environment and Apocalypse

This book is not only a history of Kelpius and an analysis of his thought in light of new trends in the study of early modern climate change and Hermetic spirituality. These histories form the basis of a theoretical framework through which I interpret literature from across the early modern Atlantic world, from seventeenth-century Hermetic Protestantism in Europe and Pennsylvania, to the body of American literature centered in and around Philadelphia that tried

to make sense of one particular Hermetic Protestant, Johannes Kelpius, through the centuries that followed.

Throughout this book, I refer to a particular form of knowing that appears in early modern Protestant literature as “environmental knowledge,” an original phrase by which I mean something specific. The concept of “the environment” and the English word we use today were not in use during Kelpius’s lifetime nor for more than a century after.²⁹ I use the anachronistic phrase “environmental knowledge” to refer specifically to these early modern practices of Hermetically inflected contemplation and interpretation of the cosmos, “the world” that Yates sees at the core of Hermetic literature and the Christians who made use of such literature. Although largely elaborated in an alchemical context by authors like Paracelsus and Johann Arndt, this environmental knowledge was distinct from the modern sciences in precisely the ways shown by the difference in interpretation we have seen between the “extraordinary meteor” of *Hazard’s Gazette* and the “pale comet” in the same area a few decades earlier. Hermetic Protestant practices of environmental knowledge treated the cosmos as a vital, sacred thing that contained real knowledge, like a dream inviting interpretation, rather than an object passively inviting one-sided scrutiny in the scientific mode. I will explore the genealogy of this form of knowledge and its use among seventeenth-century German Pietists more thoroughly in the first chapter. For now, it suffices to say that when Kelpius invites his reader “to observe every new Phoenomena, Meteors, Stars and various Colours of the Skei,” he is not asking for scientific observations: he is inviting a process of contemplation of the cosmos, a hermeneutic process that yielded personal meaning and religious insight. I call this Hermetically inflected form of early modern Protestant knowing “environmental knowledge.”

Within this rubric of knowledge and in the writings of Kelpius and his immediate milieu, certain environmental phenomena invited more interpretation than others. In a period when the sun changed color and comets and eclipses blazed in the sky, certain environmental phenomena seemed to *beg* interpretation. The world itself seemed to be trying to communicate. These environmental wonders in the macrocosm of the world had their mirror image in the microcosm of the human body and soul. In one 1699 letter, Kelpius sees the relationship between environmental wonders and inner revelation as an essentially alchemical reflection of the analogous relationship between the human and the cosmos: “As the Miracles wrought by God through the Hand of Moyses was for the main part in the outward Creation or Macrocosm, the Miracles of Jesus the Messia on the Bodys of Man or Microcosm,” he writes, “so these in our days was wrought (much like unto them in the days of the Apostles) on the Soul and more interiour parts by Ectases, Revelations, Inspirations.”³⁰ Kelpius and his radical Pietist colleagues were obsessed with signs of God’s presence and goodwill,

which might take the form of phenomena in the macrocosm of “the Skei” just as they might ripple through the microcosm: the human body, and the “interiour parts” like the soul.

The experience and interpretation of miraculous phenomena is a central theme in Kelpius’s own writings and the writings of later American authors who would try to make sense of his memory and legacy. The early Pietists appeared during a period in which the very existence of the supernatural (a concept codified by medieval scholastics with an interest in visible confirmations of phenomena beyond the order of nature for the purposes of verifying beatific claims) was in question in some corners of Enlightenment Europe.³¹ On one end of the spectrum were Protestants who saw all supernatural manifestations as signs of demonic influence. Cotton Mather argued as much in *Wonders of the Invisible World* in 1693, published the same year Kelpius left Europe for Pennsylvania.

Early radical Pietists had a completely different perspective on supernatural phenomena, both environmental and interior, which they interpreted as meaningful signals of divine attention, intervention, and goodwill. Their reasons for doing so were simple: they noticed that such phenomena were of deep personal significance to the earliest Christians, whom they saw as practicing a form of Christianity uncorrupted by orthodoxy. Early Christian histories like the Acts of the Apostles were relatively clear in their sanction of miraculous phenomena. As Kelpius wrote of his own experience among the early Pietists, not “since the days of the Apostles” have “such Miraculous Powers and operations . . . been manifested as in a matter of 3½ years among [the early Pietists].”³²

The early Pietists were by no means unique in paying special attention to these phenomena. During my research for this book, I noticed a consistent refrain among the major historians of this particular period regarding the sheer volume of primary source material on supernatural phenomena. C. V. Wedgwood saw such phenomena as a crucial backdrop to early modern Europe in *The Thirty Years War*: “Miracles once again made the life of everyday bright with hope,” she writes of seventeenth-century Europe. “The changes of the material world, the breakdown of old tradition and the insufficiency of dying conventions drove men and women to the spiritual and the inexplicable.”³³ Bernard Bailyn notes the same of seventeenth-century colonial sources generally: “The environment, human and physical, was unpredictable, threatening, and miraculous.” Life in the seventeenth century was a “struggle against hidden, occult forces,” a struggle that cut across boundaries of nation-state and class.³⁴ Jill Lepore’s history of King Philip’s War, *The Name of War*, finds New England colonists overwhelmingly concerned with interpreting supernatural patterns in the world around them as their war with the Algonquins persisted. The only reliable source of knowledge for many of these colonists came through “the world of the occult,” as Lepore writes. “Supernatural messages in the natural world,” Lepore finds, were the

only legible clues to the meaning of their sufferings. As war and climate change persisted, extraordinary environmental phenomena were crucial reservoirs of meaning and relation in the seventeenth century. As one of her colonial sources, Mary Pray, wrote: “We . . . know not what to do; but our eyes are upward.”³⁵ Kelpius would have known *exactly* what Mary meant.

I could go on and on, but the major historians of the period have already confirmed this phenomenon abundantly in their sources. In a period when elite perspectives and interpretations of such phenomena ranged from the infernal to outright denial, common people were surprisingly consistent, taking extraordinary environmental phenomena seriously as a matter of religious interpretation and personal reflection. Amitav Ghosh has recently pointed out this exact phenomenon during the seventeenth century in his 2019 novel *Gun Island*: “It would seem that the intellectual titans of the Enlightenment had no inkling of what was getting under way. And yet, strangely, all around the earth, ordinary people appear to have sensed the stirring of something momentous.”³⁶ Wedgwood, Lepore, and Bailyn’s archives seem to confirm Ghosh’s claim: intellectual trends in orthodoxy and Enlightenment had little bearing on the attitudes of ordinary people, who overwhelmingly interpreted extraordinary environmental phenomena as “supernatural messages,” as meaningful signals to be interpreted and understood. The cosmos was animate, intelligent, and ready to talk: people like Mary Pray and Johannes Kelpius were listening.

We see a variety of perspectives on such phenomena throughout this book, and the medieval and modern taxonomies of the miracle, wonder, supernatural, preternatural, and anomaly are on vivid display.³⁷ Without erasing the meaningful differences between these ways of understanding these events, I use the word “paranormal” to describe them when they arise in my sources. Like my use of the word “environment,” my use of the word “paranormal” is an intentionally anachronistic analytical category, meant to reflect the real ambiguity of these phenomena in the sources. I do so following the scholar of medieval Icelandic literature Ármann Jakobsson, who argues that “the term *paranormal* is fitting precisely . . . because it cannot be taken for granted, dismissed as a traditional or conventional term that can be deployed without intense scrutiny.”³⁸ As the findings of historians like Wedgwood, Lepore, and Bailyn make abundantly clear, paranormal phenomena may have been common in the early modern period, but they were *never* mundane, everyday, or taken for granted, especially by the common people who found in them such deep wells of meaning. The line between a miracle, an anomaly, and a yet-to-be-understood natural phenomenon was blurry in the early modern period, and a harsh anachronism like “paranormal” preserves those ambiguities while still describing the basic content of the phenomena for those who experienced and wrote about them. It also helps to relate to later cultural trends some of the phenomena that Kelpius and his colleagues describe: as

we will see, the very earliest descriptions of what would later be known as telepathy appear in the writings of Kelpius and his closest friends.

Even as Kelpius uses the word “miracle” when describing such events in English, his overwhelmingly interpretive approach to the subject strains a straightforward understanding of such events as “miracles.” Biblical miracles, as a rule, were *rarely* ambiguous. A biblical miracle was self-evident: the Son of God feeding the multitude, calming the storm, or healing the sick does not require much introspection. These New Testament miracles carried no interpretive challenge; indeed, their lack of ambiguity was the whole point: they presented Jesus Christ wielding an unambiguously divine power over the environment.

The appearance of, say, a comet, or an apparition of any kind, was more complicated. The event itself is phenomenologically abundant and yet the meaning is secret, embedded in the text of the Book of Nature rather than some other scripture. The environmental phenomena in this archive of early modern Protestantism are often ambiguous. As Daniel Schuhamacher recommended to his readers after describing the pale comet over Pennsylvania in 1769: “ask yourselves what this star may mean.” There is a deep difference between meaning presented on an ancient page and meaning presented in waking life. In the interpretative challenge of paranormal phenomena in early modernity, we can see how the environment functions like text or art: it comes alive in the connection between event and witness, phenomenon and observation, performance and critique, object and subject.

This interpretive act is the basis for the third and final aspect of my theoretical framework in this book. Kelpius and his colleagues have often been remembered as “apocalyptic” in their attitudes: that is, they were concerned with the decline of the cosmos and the end of history. While popular retellings of Kelpius’s life drastically overstate the precision of their expectation for this event, Kelpius was certainly motivated by an understanding that his period in history was, in some sense, an ultimate period in history, and that a climax of some kind was approaching. But Kelpius shared this perspective with almost every living Christian since Paul the apostle. Kelpius’s eschatology is much too complex to suggest that he simply expected the world to end imminently; instead, he openly hoped for a universal restoration of creation, a “great Jubilee or Restitution of all things,” as he called it, following the Pietist author and visionary Johanna Eleonora Petersen.

There is another, more accurate way of describing Kelpius’s religion and philosophy as essentially apocalyptic. The early Pietist and Hermetic Protestant milieu of the late seventeenth century was overwhelmingly concerned with the interpretation and understanding of the environment, particularly paranormal environmental phenomena, as a meaningful source of divine knowledge. Its participants also prized special states of revelatory consciousness in which such knowledge

required no environmental sign: special states they called “ecstasies” in which the body and mind became a vessel for direct communion with God. As we will see, many of Kelpius’s closest friends and colleagues were well known as ecstasies with paranormal powers among the early Pietists. This form of revelatory knowledge is, historically, the basis for the biblical genre of *apocalyptic*, special discourses of secret divine knowledge acquired in revelatory states of consciousness. As the author of the biblical book of Revelation, wrote: “I John . . . was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet.”³⁹ John connects his knowledge directly to this special state of awareness, to being “in the spirit,” in which he could hear the trumpet-voice.

The historian and scholar of mysticism Eliot Wolfson defines “apocalyptic” as “the revelation of divine mysteries through the agency of visions, dreams, and other paranormal states of consciousness.”⁴⁰ In this book, I follow Wolfson’s definition, but I supplement his useful definition with Kelpius’s own understanding: that such “visions, dreams, and other paranormal states of consciousness” are one side of the apocalyptic coin. For Kelpius, the revelations in the Hermetic microcosm of the body and soul were reflected in the macrocosm of the environment, the cosmos itself, plants, animals, and the sky, in which Kelpius and company found an equal source of special knowledge, of profound personal meaning, of a waking dream inviting contemplation and understanding: the world was a living apocalyptic text that demanded interpretation.

These interlocking themes of environment and apocalypse, interpretation of the cosmos through special hermeneutic attention to those extraordinary events that seem to call for it, form the basis of my analysis in this book. As we will see, these themes occur and recur throughout the milieu, life, and legacy of Kelpius and his immediate colleagues. As the seventeenth century closed and the Little Ice Age ended, the eighteenth century would bring entirely new disciplines of knowledge to the forefront of intellectual culture: disciplines that often demand the excision not only of paranormal phenomena but of *any* form of ambiguity or hermeneutic interpretation. This tectonic shift in the human understanding of and approach to the environment is, I argue, the central reason that Kelpius—and the form of knowledge that he practiced—remains so stubbornly “difficult to assess,” as Jeff Bach writes, why he continues to thwart clear scholarly understanding despite his active pen and straightforward biography.

Global Crisis

It is difficult to avoid reading echoes of our present moment into the environmental and social conditions of the seventeenth century and the life of Johannes

Kelpius. As Geoffrey Parker and others have shown, the seventeenth century was a period of “general crisis,” in which extreme climatic conditions led to economic collapse, social unrest, and global conflict.⁴¹ I will explore some of the more specific manifestations of this general crisis in southwestern Germany in the first chapter, in particular how the devastation of southwestern Germany (the Palatinate and Württemberg) led to a surge in Pietism, the radical devotional movement within Protestantism in which Kelpius was swept up. But as Kelpius himself notes, Pietism was one manifestation of a much more general religious awakening throughout Europe during the period: “If now this late Revolution in Europe,” he wrote in 1699, “which in the Roman Church goes under the Name of Quietism, in the Protestant Church under the Name of Pietism, Chiliasm, and Philadelphianism.”⁴² Even for those living through it, the specific manifestations of the seventeenth-century crisis felt like moving parts of something much bigger, an ambient state of unsettlement that shook human institutions even as it shook the firmament of the earth and the stars out of the sky.

Kyle Harper notes a similar pattern during a completely different period in his 2017 book *The Fate of Rome*, in which he points to hints of a changing climate in connection with economic collapse, religious fervor, and a global pandemic. As Harper writes, “A precociously global world, where the revenge of nature begins to make itself felt, despite persistent illusions of control . . . this might feel not so unfamiliar.”⁴³ Indeed, it certainly would not have felt unfamiliar to Johannes Kelpius, who consistently noted environmental and cultural phenomena as signs of the general crisis unfolding around him.

The connections between these periods and our own seem so simple that my instincts tell me that it *must* be more complicated. It *is* more complicated. Andreas Malm, writing in 2020, warns us against such simple historical arithmetic, pointing out that “this time is qualitatively different,” because “non-anthropogenic climate change cannot be compared to global heating, any more than a pub crawl to a genocide.”⁴⁴ And Malm is right: the scale of historical, technological, and climatological difference between these periods seems almost to defy comparison.

Malm is right to caution us that this time is different, and yet we might still see something of ourselves in Kelpius: a refugee, a radical, a desperate individual working to hold a community together while the climate changed, institutions failed, and both global and local crises multiplied. As I write this introduction, I am reminded of C. V. Wedgwood’s remark at the beginning of *The Thirty Years War*:

History reflects the period in which it was written as much as any other branch of literature. Although the historian’s material is much more rigidly

circumscribed than that of the novelist or poet, he, like them, has to bring to the understanding of presentation of his material his own experience of life and the imaginative equipment peculiar to him and his time.⁴⁵

It likely is not a coincidence, then, that as I turned to this particular archive while living through catastrophes like Hurricane Harvey in Houston, and first wrote the bulk of the material here under lockdown in Texas during the coronavirus pandemic, that the themes of environment and apocalypse loomed large in my thought and writing. But the opposite is true, too. As I pursued topics for research, one of the things that kept bringing me back to Kelpius was precisely his particular attention to themes of such contemporary relevance: environmental catastrophe, institutional decline, and the looming sense that one is living through a transitional period in history, to put it mildly.

None of this is to say that Kelpius's particular environmental knowledge is directly applicable to the current ecological crisis. I am interested in reading Kelpius today not because reading him might lead us to strategies for mitigating catastrophic climate change—we already have those, and merely lack the political will to implement them. I am interested in reading Kelpius to see what he might tell us about living through the end of a particular world, and what comes after.

This book is divided into six chapters and three shorter sections each called a “vita,” which offer supplementary biographical information about Kelpius. These vitae appear between Chapters 1 and 2, 2 and 3, and 4 and 5, sketching out and filling in the details of the life of Kelpius amid my broader analysis of his world. These shorter sections let me scratch the itch of writing simple biography without letting the narrative of Kelpius's life overwhelm the analyses that take place in the main chapters.

The first two chapters serve as literature reviews and contextual analysis that offer their own arguments. The first chapter, “‘No Wisdom in Nature’: Ecology, Enthusiasm, and Esotericism in Early Modern Europe,” sketches the history of German Pietism in the wake of the Thirty Years War and the general crisis of the seventeenth century before turning directly to a series of authors whose work forms the basis of what I call Hermetic Protestantism in Europe: Paracelsus, Johann Arndt, Jacob Böhme, Johann Zimmerman, and Johannes Kelpius. This chapter argues, simply but originally, that early modern authors sought out Hermetic ideas and teachings for their insight on their environment during a period when the cosmos itself seemed to be subject to inexorable decline.

The second chapter, “‘Gone into the Ancient Forest’: Hermetic Protestantism and Environmental Knowledge in Early Pennsylvania,” follows these texts across the Atlantic to the English Quaker colony in Lenape territory that became Penn's

Woods in the seventeenth century. Drawing on a deep archive of colonial literature including manuscripts, almanacs, and the writings of public figures like Francis Pastorius and Daniel Leeds, this chapter argues that a vernacular undercurrent of Hermetic Protestantism flourished in Pennsylvania beneath the elite religious and philosophical trends of the period.

The third chapter, “‘The Woman in the Wilderness’: Kelpius and Company on the Ridge of the Wissahickon, 1694–1707,” is an analysis of the surviving primary record of Kelpius, his companions, and their lives in Pennsylvania at the end of the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century. This chapter does not offer a single argument like the previous two, but rather serves as a sustained response to the centuries of speculative scholarship, antiquarian reconstruction, and occult enthusiasm surrounding the life of Kelpius and his community in Pennsylvania. In this chapter I simply read the primary sources, locate them in context, and try to let them speak for themselves.

The fourth chapter, “‘The Threefold Wilderness State’: Ascetic Alchemy and the Technology of Self-Negation,” is a deep dive into the late theology of Johannes Kelpius through a close reading of a 1706 letter in which he outlines a tripartite system of spiritual development he calls “the Threefold Wilderness State.” This text, which was copied, reprinted, and distributed among the more radical scenes of Philadelphia Quakerdom during the eighteenth century, reveals Kelpius’s mature religious thought, the culmination of more than a decade of ascetic labor on the cliff of the Wissahickon, a deeply alchemical and ascetic reading of the Bible, his body, and his environment, with an eye toward spiritual and bodily transformation and eventually self-negation. As the great nineteenth-century scholar of German literature Oswald Seidensticker noted, Kelpius’s late religious thought was at times “more reminiscent of Plotinus than Christianity.”

The last two chapters turn a corner in the narrative, attending to the memory of Kelpius in the decades following his death in the eighteenth century, following his legendary and historical profile as it swells and distorts beneath layers of folklore, fiction, and memory. The fifth chapter, “The Long Shadow of the Enlightenment: Memories of Kelpius in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland* (1798),” focuses entirely on what I consider to be the most robust and influential posthumous appearance of Johannes Kelpius: the Philadelphia Quaker novelist Charles Brockden Brown’s 1798 novel *Wieland; or, The Transformation: An American Tale*. This chapter explores the ways in which Brown recovers and portrays Kelpius’s memory in his novel, a profound twofold critique of traditional religion and the hubristic excesses of Enlightenment rationality in the eighteenth century, in which the challenge of interpreting paranormal phenomena was placed at the center of early American life.

The sixth and final chapter, “‘Weird as a Wizard’: History and Literature in the Emergence of the American Kelpius Legend,” is a genealogy of Kelpius’s afterlife

in print, excavating his posthumous appearances in religious literature, popular fiction, and poetry, and by the nineteenth century, popular occult literature in which Kelpius and his companions were portrayed as the founders of and legitimation for an American occult tradition. This chapter shows how the historical sources remain remarkably accurate and consistent until they collide and blur with a more imaginative literature in the nineteenth century, leaving us with the image of Kelpius we meet today in popular *and* scholarly literature: at once a Pietist and a witch, a Christian and a wizard, a character in Romantic poetry who really existed: ultimately, an ambient, spectral presence in the city of Philadelphia and the historiography of American religion.

Johannes Kelpius identified and advanced a consistent religious and philosophical position throughout his body of work, a position that is as worthy of consideration by contemporary readers as it was to early modern religious radicals. One does not need to commit to an ascetic regimen, witness miracles, or even be a Christian to identify with the basic impulse behind much of Johannes Kelpius's life and thought, a way of knowledge that he derived from ancient pagan sources and from texts of the Christian tradition, like the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul: that the cosmos encloses and discloses real hermeneutic content, that contemplation of the environment can yield moral and metaphysical meaning for the human subject, *that the world is actually communicating right now*.

Today, human minds are the only location where meaning is created, from which we distribute this finite resource throughout our lives, works of art, and in our experience of the world. In the cosmotheist Christianity of Johannes Kelpius and his colleagues, meaning flowed in the opposite direction, *originating* in the cosmos—where the observations and interpretations of human beings could locate and understand it. Following the Enlightenment's location of the human intellect as the source of meaning and knowledge, this kind of knowledge has fallen so far out of vogue as to be incomprehensible. But it was never entirely lost. As the work of Brett Grainger makes clear, early American Protestants retained a strong capacity for environmental knowledge through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, inspired in part by many of the same authors who inspired Kelpius and his colleagues: Paracelsus, Arndt, and Böhme.⁴⁶

In the same way that Freud, centuries later, saw the content of dreams and the practice of dream interpretation as a "royal road" to insights and wisdom locked in the unconscious, Kelpius, his colleagues, and his intellectual forebears saw the waking world, the cosmos, their own environments, as a book *meant for us to read*, and as a source of knowledge, beauty, wisdom, solace, and meaning. The stations of the stars and the paths of the planets, the eruptions of comets and pale terror of the eclipse, the potency of plants, the behavior of animals, the physical

sensations and awareness of the body, and especially those special phenomena or experiences that seemed to be beyond the ordinary course of nature, were all moments that merited special attention, contemplation, and introspection as sources of knowledge. Following the Egyptologist Jan Assman, I cannot help but wonder: “Perhaps the ancients not only saw much that is important to us today but also knew much that we, in the meantime, have forgotten.”⁴⁷