

Channelling for Salvation: The History and Beliefs of the Dutch Spiritual Church-Society (NSK, 1945–1993)

Lotje Elisabeth Vermeulen

Dutch Foundation Stichting Het Johan Borgman Fonds

info@hjbfnl.nl

ABSTRACT: Based on previously inaccessible documents, the article traces the history and beliefs of 20th century Dutch Spiritualist medium Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus (K.H.G.) Spee and the secretive esoteric society he founded in 1945, the Nederlands Spiritueel Kerkgenootschap, “Dutch Spiritual Church-Society,” better known by its abbreviation NSK, up until its demise in 1993 and resurgence in 2013. The NSK is discussed within the larger context of Dutch Spiritualism/Spiritism. A contrast is noted between NSK’s theoretical “democratic” approach, proclaiming that each bona fide member can potentially communicate with the spirits, and archival documents evidencing that, at least within the Amsterdam chapter, Spee served as almost the sole medium, and the content of his channeled messages was regarded as normative.

KEYWORDS: Nederlands Spiritueel Kerkgenootschap, NSK, K.H.G. Spee, Spiritism, Spiritualism, Spiritualism in The Netherlands.

Introduction

Modern Spiritualism emerged in the 19th century as a movement in the United States, and spread over Europe within a decade. In general, it is assumed that its starting point was in Hydesville, New York, in the year 1848, when the Fox sisters, Leah (1814–1890), Maggie (1833–1893), and Kate (1837–1892), produced “rappings,” i.e. sounds that were believed to be communicative signals from spirits. Even though the question regarding whether the phenomena were genuine remains until today, there is little doubt that these events instigated a widespread movement that still exists in the present. In 1889, a world conference about Spiritualism was organized in Paris, and by that time, an estimated 15

million people around the world adhered to some form of Spiritualism—or Spiritism, as the French version was more often called (Sommer 1991, 53).

A well-known and popular branch of Spiritism was “Kardecist Spiritism,” named after Frenchman Hippolyte Léon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869), better known under his pen name Allan Kardec, who defined Spiritism in his significant work, *The Book of the Spirits* (1857; it remains in print in Dutch, see Kardec 2006). In the introduction to his book, Kardec states that Spiritism is a new phenomenon and that this term needs to be distinguished from “Spiritualism,” which he defines as a broader anti-materialistic philosophy. Although Spiritism contains elements of this philosophy, adhering to Spiritualism, Kardec argued, does not mean that one is also adhering to the Spiritist belief in the existence of an invisible world of spirits and their communication with the physical world. Another important part of Kardec’s Spiritism is reincarnation. According to him, the purpose of reincarnation is the spiritual development of the soul throughout multiple lives (Kardec 2006, ix-xxviii).

Despite the widespread adherence to Kardec and his definition of Spiritism among Continental European Spiritualists/Spiritists, discussions about the exact meaning of the term and how it differs from Spiritualism continued for decades, and not all agreed with him. For example, in the Netherlands, the variable use within the same movement of the terms “Spiritists” and “Spiritualists” covered many internal differences on the subject, a fact that becomes very clear when reading the bi-weekly magazine on Spiritism *Het Toekomstig Leven*, also known by its abbreviation HTL. A section of the magazine was managed by the Dutch Association of Spiritualists “Harmonia,” which was founded on 27 December 1888 in an attempt to unite several independent Spiritualist groups on the basis of their shared beliefs (Fremery 1912, 300). Nonetheless, when reading the discussions in HTL, the impression remains that the existing differences were not solved by this union. An example is the discussion in the edition of August 1904, in which a section was dedicated to whether “Spiritism” or “Spiritualism” is the right term to use for the movement, and what exactly these terms should mean (Ortt 1904, 245).

One of the leading Dutch thinkers that was quoted in the discussion was Reformed pastor Martinus Beversluis (1856–1948). In his comments, he stated that he was “disappointed by how Kardec involves the aspect of reincarnation in Spiritualist thought.” Beversluis’ ideas were significantly influenced by Elise van Calcar (1822–1904), an author who later in life started to adhere to the

principles of “Christian Spiritualism,” a system that combined Spiritism with the Christian faith (Jansen 1994, 204). Her opinion was also quoted in HTL, stating that “there are the ‘Spiritualists,’ who reject the notion of reincarnation, and the ‘Spiritists’ who accept and embrace this idea” (“Hephata” 1904, 214).

Another matter that hints at an ongoing struggle is that the original subtitle of HTL since 1897, “The Study of Spiritualism and related phenomena,” was changed in 1903 by replacing the word “Spiritualism” with “Spiritism.” That struggle has played a role ever since, and almost a century later, in 1997, the Dutch Spiritist Association “Harmonia” changed its name back to the original “Dutch Association of Spiritualists ‘Harmonia.’”

By the end of the 1930s, a new dispute arose within Harmonia, started by the chairperson of its Amsterdam chapter, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus (K.H.G.) Spee (1901–1972), who was a professional astrologist, clairvoyant and medium, and Harmonia’s Secretary, Gerard van El (1903–1989). On July 20, 2019, I and my colleague Wim Kramer from the Dutch Foundation Stichting Het Johan Borgman Fonds visited Spee’s oldest son, Arthur. According to him, Spee was a self-made man. Arthur told us that his father went to primary school until the age of twelve and after that, he self-educated himself. Spee and van El were both unemployed before World War II, like many others at that time, but Spee became a full-time medium after the war ended (A. Spee, pers. comm.). Spee’s son still kept significant material from his father, including the notes for several courses on astrology, esoteric philosophy and parapsychology, as well as many books on spiritual self-development. After our visit, Arthur donated the material to us.

The dispute arose because Spee and van El felt that Harmonia was not placing enough emphasis on the purely spiritual aspect of Christianity and the importance of good mediumship, and was too busy trying to convince the public with scientific proofs of Spiritism (Spee 1937, 160). They expressed their discontent by writing articles on the issue, which then appeared (although not always) on the *Spiritische Bladen*, another bi-weekly magazine published by Harmonia. The disagreement eventually led them to establish a new group in 1941, called the Nederlandse Stichting voor Buitenkerkelijke Religie (NSVBR), translated as the “Dutch Foundation for Religions Out of the Established Church.” The NSVBR started out with roughly 250 members, but they supposedly had to stop their activities during the war because it was too dangerous to continue. In fact, the Germans who occupied the Netherlands had

promulgated a ban against everything that they considered occult, including Spiritism and Spiritualism (NSVBR, letter to members, August 3, 1941). The Germans even confiscated books and pamphlets or other sources of information on these occult subjects.



Figure 1. Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus Spee (1901–1972).
Circa 1955. HJBF/ Stadsarchief Amsterdam.

Immediately after the World War II's armistice, Spee, his second wife, Fien Sporre (1902–?), and van El founded a new group called the Nederlands Spiritueel Kerkgenootschap, translated as the “Dutch Spiritual Church-Society,” also known by its abbreviation NSK. The founding happened on May 25, 1945. Spee was the spiritual leader of the church-society and van El was the administrator. The NSK was founded as a federation, with Amsterdam as its head chapter and other fairly independent groups joining this federation (some already existed, such as the chapter in Delft).

With the prohibition on Spiritism and Spiritualism of the war still fresh in mind, and also the relative infancy of their syncretic Christian-Spiritualist system, in a Dutch religious landscape consisting of mainly Christian denominations and old-fashioned Spiritualists, significant opposition arose when the NSK held its first few meetings. Despite this initial resistance, the NSK decided to keep organizing its gatherings.

An article about the national field day of the NSK in 1950, reported that around 1,200 members showed up that year, while the year before, in 1949, roughly 800 members were present. This indicates that the number of members throughout the Netherlands increased quickly over the first few years (van El 1950a, 5). In 1954, the magazine *Psychic News* mentioned that there were 1,500 members nationwide and around 250 in the Amsterdam chapter. The NSK was also a church-society recognized by the Dutch government, and one of the officially registered religions in the population register of Amsterdam.

The NSK organization had a hierarchical structure, consisting of regular members, members with a silver mark, with a silver star, and with a golden star. The latter group automatically became part of the church council. Before acquiring official membership, those who had expressed an interest had to nominate themselves as candidate-members. Curiously, in order to nominate themselves, candidate-members had to pass on personal information, such as the date and place of birth, so that K.H.G. Spee could then draw the candidate's horoscope.

As mentioned earlier, there were multiple chapters throughout the Netherlands and globally, they formed a federation. Besides Amsterdam, there were active groups in Delft, Dordrecht, Haarlem, Hilversum, Den Haag, Rotterdam, Rijswijk, and Zuilen, and beyond the Dutch border in Switzerland, Israel, and Belgium, but it is still unclear how many chapters and how many

practitioners there were exactly. The chapters operated in a situation of relative independence from each other.

The NSK was also a member of the International Spiritualist Federation (ISF). According to the website of this still existing federation (ISF 2019), member organizations are united around the principle that people survive their bodily death via their spirit, and that there is communication between this world and the spirit world. In 1954, they held their annual congress in Amsterdam, and Spee and van El were actively involved with its preparation.

Between September 2014 and August 2015, we paid four visits to the last living member of the NSK, Ms. Ida de Winter. During these visits, we gained a large amount of information on the NSK. One detail she shared with us was that, despite the fact that the NSK survived the initial resistance by the Dutch religious milieu, it kept facing opposition throughout the years. The friction with the outside world is one of the major reasons that led Spee to close the circle of NSK in the early 1960s. This, and the aging of the members, resulted in a decrease in membership throughout the years, until there were only a dozen members left by 1992. In early 1993, Amsterdam was the last chapter of the NSK that decided to close down.

It needs to be noted that we are not fully certain about this. The absence of material after that date indicates the shutting down of the last chapter in 1993, but in 2008 the Dutch historian E. Gerard Hoekstra (1931–2012) referred to a still existing chapter in The Hague (Hoekstra and Ipenburg 2008, 382). We don't know how active they were, nor if they are still continuing to meet, but apart from this reference we did not find any other trace of this or other chapters been active in the twenty years between 1993 and 2013. One chapter that has arisen from its ashes, in 2013, is the one in Delft, now led by André van der Helm (b. 1942: *Dienende Liefde* 2019). We spoke to him, and found out that he was somewhat unfamiliar with the history of the NSK and Spee's leadership (van der Helm, pers. comm.). On June 29, 2019, he paid a visit to us learn more about NSK history, and expressed his ambition to follow in the footsteps of Spee's religious ideas and leadership. The possible revival of the chapter in The Hague and the renewed activities of the one in Delft show that the religious worldview of the NSK has not ceased to exist completely, and still has a relevance in the present day.

But what exactly did the NSK stand for? In the following sections, the role of K.H.G. Spee, his visions, and the key-elements of NSK Christian and Spiritualist beliefs will be explored. In particular, we will attempt to summarize the belief system to give a general impression of the NSK faith.

Most findings of this article are based on material from the original NSK archive. It was preserved and catalogued by the Dutch Foundation Het Johan Borgman Fonds, which has been actively archiving materials relevant for the history of 20th century Dutch Spiritualism and parapsychology. The archive was handed over in 2018 to the City Archive of Amsterdam (Stadsarchief Amsterdam) and is publicly accessible.

The Religious and Cosmic Vision of the NSK and K.H.G. Spee

Hoekstra described the NSK in his book, and wrote that its members believed in an evolution of the soul, continuing after their death in the physical world. The soul lives on in the afterlife, where it will be reunited with its loved ones and will be received by “helping” spirits. The NSK also believes in ongoing communication between the earthly world and the spirit world, and that these spirits function as “protectors, helpers and mentors” during our lives. These spirits are described as belonging to “the (eternal) light and ultimate wisdom, guiding ‘lost’, ‘dark’, ‘suffering’ and ‘weak’ souls on earth” (Hoekstra and Ipenburg 2008, 382).

At the time of the founding of the NSK, the goal of the society was determined in the by-laws, in which it was stated that the foundation would represent the spiritual interest of all that recognize and adhere to Christian principles, but feel that the usual Christian framework lacks the knowledge needed for their Spiritualist quest. Furthermore, it states that the foundation will actively support the advancement of scientific knowledge concerning human religious principles.

In 1962, the magazine *Discours*, a publication of the NSK chapter of Amsterdam, summarized one of the core principles of the NSK by stating that Spiritualism is an essential element of the Christian doctrine and the early original tenets of Christianity, because the Bible supposedly makes clear that this should be the case (Spee 1962, 1). Hoekstra also mentions in his book that, “The teaching of Jesus Christ, as presented in the New Testament, is essential for the

salvation of humanity” (Hoekstra and Ipenburg 2008, 381). Clearly emphasized is the element of charity, and the love of one’s neighbour. This can be seen when looking at the name of the chapter of Amsterdam, “Dienende Liefde,” which translates into the willingness to devote oneself to the environment (humans, animals, nature, etc.). Also, once a year the different NSK chapters meet at the event that is called “Landdag,” and held on the Dutch countryside, where the members endorse the promise to eliminate hate, to “love thy neighbour,” and above all love God (van El 1950b, 7).

The above mentioned beliefs and core principles of the NSK are reflections of the religious visions of K.H.G. Spee, as elaborated in his written work, *Volg den Hiërarchieken weg: een Levensphilosophie voor den Modernen Mensch* (1938), translated as “Follow the Hierarchic Road: a Life Philosophy for the Modern Men.” In this publication, he explains his vision on the earthly and cosmic realm, and the place of God and human beings within these spheres. The publication was also translated into German by the NSK and published in Weinfelden, Switzerland.

Spee states that God is present in, and one with, the higher universe, which is also called “the Esoteric.” Typical synonyms used by Spee for this word are: “the source,” “the Perfect,” “the Absolute Truth,” “the Good,” “Love,” “the Purity,” “the All-encompassing wisdom,” “the Aesthetic,” and “the Universal.” Paradoxically, Spee’s universe is a “place” where time and space do not play a role. The spirits/souls of the deceased are present here too, and they are part of this world. Between the Esoteric and the earth there is a connection, especially between the Esoteric and human beings. Spirits can pass on messages from the Esoteric to humans, who are in turn capable of receiving these messages, because of their capability to think and reason, and because their bodies are inhabited by an individual soul. This is where humans differ from animals, which are driven by a “collective instinct” rather than from the will that comes from an individual soul.

About the human body (i.e the exoteric body), what Spee has to say is that it is a materialistic “form” without spiritual value in itself. It is capable of perceiving, through the senses, but it is also capable of thinking. Thinking is an important concept in the view of Spee, because thoughts are a powerful tool that can either disrupt the cosmic order, or keep it in balance. One could focus on earthly goals, like gaining materialistic profit, earning money and satisfying the tendencies of the ego, or on somewhat less egotistical concepts such as solidarity, brotherhood,

art, oneness, and hard work. These attributes translate into deeds that can ultimately contribute to either cosmic chaos or balance.

Thinking also has a significant influence on the human individual soul, because it can make the soul either receptive to the Esoteric (by focusing on the less egotistical pursuits, as mentioned above) or cause a blockage, so that the mind and the soul will be stuck in “Maya.” Maya is explained by Spee as an earthly illusion, the cause of evil and chaos, and the reason why human beings are facing the decomposition of the “higher” morality. This explanation corresponds somewhat with the concept of Maya in Hindu philosophy (the word Maya means “illusion” in Sanskrit), which refers to a force that “creates the cosmic illusion that the phenomenal world is real.” Maya causes people to suffer and to feel lost and clueless in this life on earth. Spee also notes that religious dogma and, in contrast, the adamant belief in the absolute truth of science, are products of this earthly illusion, implying that most religions are misguided in their truth claims, even when it comes to esoteric schools that have fallen into the trap of creating hierarchical structures and proclaiming they teach the only valid truth. This criticism is rather remarkable, since Spee followed courses between 1924–1930 of the International Association of Christian Mystics “Rosicrucian Fellowship,” that was based in Oceanside, California. We found these courses among the material that Arthur Spee donated to us. Spee might have found aspects of the dogma and organization of this esoteric group objectionable when he followed these courses.

Spee calls the opposite of Maya “het Zomerland,” which is translated as “the Summerland.” While researching this concept, it became clear that Summerland is described in many different ways, i.e. by Spiritualists, Theosophists, and Wiccans, but that there are some similarities in how the it is used. For example, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891), the co-founder of the Theosophical Society, explains that Summerland is

a fancy name given by the Spiritualists to the abode of their disembodied “Spirits,” which they locate somewhere in the Milky Way. It is described on the authority of returning “Spirits” as a lovely land, having beautiful cities and buildings, a Congress Hall, Museums, etc. (Blavatsky 1892, 312).

The idea of a blissful realm where the human soul reaches after death, is something that is widely recognized by religious and esoteric groups. Yet, Blavatsky’s personal attitude towards the concept was rather negative, stating that

to believe that a pure spirit would be finding happiness in a “Summerland” while witnessing the misery of all on earth, was regarded by her as nothing less than an insult (Blavatsky 1889, 149).

The way Spee uses the concept, is that the Summerland is reached when the soul sees through Maya and reaches a “God-like” state where there is no suffering or chaos. Here, the soul arrives in a higher sphere, which is either the Esoteric, or some sphere between the Esoteric and the earth. This could be a possibility for every human soul, when one frees the thinking from the ego and makes oneself receptive to the Esoteric.

The lack of ego, and the inability to reason, also implies that animals are considered to stand closer to God than human beings. Although the Esoteric is described as “the Perfect,” Maya maintains a presence in this sphere too, but the difference with us humans is that God and the spirits see right through this force, which makes Maya powerless. Once the soul is attuned to the Esoteric, it can bi-locate, and the body will experience trance-like states and be inhabited by spirits, so that knowledge from the Esoteric can be transferred to the human sphere. When this happens to human beings, they function as “mediums.” According to Spee’s theory, every human being should be able to reach this state, but in reality, most people never achieve the goal, and his writings do not make clear what conditions are exactly necessary.

The body, the individual soul, and God, together are forming the holy trinity and one should focus on this inseparable unit, if one wants to take part in God’s “plan.” But what happens to the soul when we die? There is no such thing as Hell, Spee declares, but the presence of Maya in the mind does cause the soul to be captured in some kind of cosmic purgatory after the bodily death. In this case, the soul struggles to make the transition from the earthly sphere to the Esoteric, where the great wisdom and the ultimate love await. Spee states that, for the trapped soul to transcend into the next stage, it is necessary that it frees itself from Maya. Just like the spirits, the human soul has to see through Maya and realize that, as well as having a non-egotistical focus, the soul just has to “be,” which for example happens when we devote ourselves to creating art or perceiving aesthetics. Besides describing ways in which human beings can free themselves from Maya, Spee elaborates a complete theodicy, by stating that human suffering is not created or permitted by God, because even though God is all-wise, he is certainly not omnipotent. The use of Spiritualist concepts like Maya and the

Summerland, and a visual scheme we found in the archive seemingly portraying a cycle, indicates that reincarnation was also part of the cosmic vision of the NSK.

Many of NSK's activities hint towards Spee's personal beliefs. This can be seen when one studies the original NSK archive, where transcriptions and material of the services and activities are being preserved. A major part of the material that is left contains transcribed words or content relating to Spee and his visions. His sermons and lectures were all written down in shorthand and then typed out. The chapter in Switzerland even used the German translations of these transcriptions during their gatherings and services. These German translations are also part of the NSK archive. The unique and extensive collection of these transcriptions show that the role of Spee within the NSK was decisive.

One of the reasons for Spee's position in the NSK might be that members recognized him as a medium. Even before he founded the NSK, Spee had his own practice, where he offered mediumistic and astrological advice. One clue to his early mediumship was found in the autobiography of Dutch musician Eddy Christiani (1918–2016). In this book, Christiani mentions that at the age of twelve (which in that case should have been around 1930), his mom made him visit Spee, who predicted his career as a famous guitarist.

Paradoxically, despite Spee's mediumship and the central position that he gained, he always preached that this did not position him "above others" and that people should not worship him. As can be read in his "Hierarchical Road," he states that hierarchical structures are false, because no human has more true wisdom than any other human (Spee 1938, 15). Everyone with the right use and state of mind should have the ability to develop the same spiritual level. To corroborate this statement, Spee quotes the New Testament, where Jesus says something similar.

As mentioned earlier, almost all sermons and materials that are found in the NSK archive consist of Spee's words and no new material was produced after he died. The NSK continued to use and repeat the transcriptions of the words of Spee after his death during the services (de Winter, pers. comm.). Whether he wanted it or not, the NSK members attributed key significance to the literal words of Spee, giving him a spiritual authority that had the effect of creating a hierarchical structure.

Spiritualist Christianity in the Activities and Religious Practice of the NSK

The by-laws of the NSK stated that to reach the goal of the foundation, several activities would be organized, i.e. church gatherings, healing services, readings, etc. Also, the creation of a spiritualist knowledge collection and the spreading of this knowledge was mentioned.

These objectives resulted in a variety of activities, including the founding of the “Free Esoteric School,” where Spee taught courses in esotericism and astrology, while parapsychology courses were given by Dr. Karel Hendrik Eduard de Jong (1872–1960), a well-known and respected teacher in the Netherlands in those days. The other activities were organized in a rented building called “La Paix” in Amsterdam, and in a rented congress room the NSK called “Rita,” located in Amsterdam’s Albertcuypstraat.



Figure 2. Shrine at the Amsterdam chapter of the NSK, circa 1970s.
HJBF/ Stadsarchief Amsterdam.

On Tuesdays and Fridays, members gathered for “saving séances” or “ethical nights,” which means that they would organize gatherings to “save” the spirits of people who had died all too sudden and had not yet understood that they were deceased. The confused spirit would be guided by the members into the hand of the “helpers” of the world beyond the veil. The medium, presumably Spee, would go into a state of trance and transfer messages to these helpers. These messages would help calming the confused and anxious spirits, leading them to surrender to their fate, also described as “the next step.”

Translating it into the cosmic vision of the NSK, these souls seem to be trapped in what Spee calls “cosmic purgatory,” the state where Maya still dominates the mind and where one has to clear the mind from Maya in order to blend into the Esoteric. Remarkably, members of the NSK ceased to hold these gatherings after Spee died, because without his guidance, the saving séances were considered too risky. This is another sign that Spee’s mediumship was seen to be of utmost importance to the NSK members.

Another gathering held on Tuesdays and Fridays was the “healing service,” where people would hold hands to combine their healing powers and sing religious hymns for sick relatives. In order to properly focus on these relatives, members would bring photos of them so they could channel their healing energy to them through these pictures (de Winter, pers. comm.) The singing would be guided by an organist, and the songs were commonly based on the hymnal by Johannes de Heer (1866–1961), a book traditionally used in Dutch Protestant circles. Another important aspect of the service would be the reading and singing of poetry, especially the ones “transferred” by “Sister Rita.”

Sister Rita supposedly was a 17th century nun, who had been accused of witchcraft and burned at the stake, and was now channelled by Spee. She was referred to as “a helper” of the German Jesuit priest Friedrich Spee (1591–1635) by Ms. de Winter. As far as we know, Friedrich Spee was a distant relative of K.H.G. Spee, and was famous as an opponent of the witch trials that took place during his lifetime (Hellyer, vii–xv). However, when we did some research on the possible identity of Sister Rita, we did not find any Rita in the circle of Friedrich Spee, nor a nun burned at stake. One possibility is that the NSK was alluding to the well-known Italian Saint Rita of Cascia (1381–1457), perhaps because there was indeed a link between this Catholic saint and Friedrich Spee. Friedrich-Spee-Straße in Würzburg was where the Kongregation der Ritaschwestern, i.e. the

female monastic order of the Sisters of Saint Rita, had its convent. Of course, this is a rather tenuous connection.

Two volumes of “Sister Rita’s” poetry were published by the NSK, which were called *Licht: Een bundel gedichten door Rita*, translated as “Light: a Bundle of Poems by Rita.” When one reads the poetry that was passed on by Rita, it’s noticeable that the messages implied in the words are corresponding with the cosmic vision explained in Spee’s “Hierarchical Road.” A similar use of concepts can be found when Rita speaks about notions such as eternal life; the lack of space and time; “the light” being the absolute Truth on the “other side”; the lack of knowledge within humans; the absence of Hell; the all-encompassing power of God as “love”; Jesus as a guide for the human spirit; and even the use of the concept “Summerland.”

Another key figure among the spirits who came through in the séances was “Dr. van Deurne.” Ms. de Winter spoke to us about Dr. van Deurne in such a way as if he was a living human instead of a spiritual being. This shows how deeply and seriously the members believed that Spee would “become” those teachers when he was in a state of trance. Interestingly, she also mentioned to us that one could barely notice when Spee was in a state of trance, which she considered as a sign of extremely skilled mediumship.

During his lifetime, Dr. van Deurne was supposedly a medical doctor in The Hague, and through Spee he passed on medical knowledge, gave advice about health issues, delivered recipes for medicine and even gave his advice on the products of Zonnegoud, translated as “Gold-from-the-sun,” a Dutch herbal medicine brand. It is unclear whether these spirits, also called “teachers,” came through at specific moments, or whether they randomly showed up as advisors during any given activity.

In his “Hierarchical Road,” Spee states that the idea of the absolute truth of science is a delusion (a form of Maya), because science has been invented by humans, who inherently lack knowledge compared to the absolute Truth that reigns in the Esoteric. In his vision, this also applies to medical science, and if one wishes to be truly healed, or cannot be cured by human doctors, one should turn to the “Grote Geneesheer,” freely translated as “the Grand Healing Master.”

In one of the transcriptions of his healing services, Spee refers to a completely spiritual town in Brazil, called “Palemo,” where doctors have to possess the

power of magnetism next to their academic background, otherwise they are not permitted to treat patients. He speaks about this town as a sort of utopia, and wishes for the medical world in the Netherlands to take an example from it. He also refers to Jesus and his spiritual healing powers (Spee 1954a).

Sometimes, healing services would be performed directly on sick patients in the homes of NSK members, outside of official NSK gatherings. During these services, patients would sit in the middle of the room while the members would form two lines on each side, ready to perform the service on them directly. The laying of hands was also mentioned as a healing method. As we were told, healing services organized by the NSK attracted approximately 80 people each week (de Winter, pers. comm.). In one transcript of a healing service, it becomes clear that the service starts with a sermon, after which a “ritual” is held. In this specific transcript, Spee calls for a meditation on his words about “spirituality” and “love thy neighbour” at the end of the sermon, so that people can “enable themselves for a few minutes to experience what we really are, spirits of God, children of the light, and eternal followers of the delightful path of God” (Spee 1950).

On the first Friday of the month (and sometimes on the first Tuesday), an esoteric course would be conducted by Spee, where he would transmit esoteric knowledge from teachers of the spiritual world. During these sessions, Spee would basically pass on the NSK philosophy (according to Spee’s “Hierarchical Road”), and teach the participants all the details of his, and the NSK’s, cosmic vision. Finally, on Sunday morning, consecration services were held that attracted an average of 125–150 people (*The National Spiritualist* 1950, 7). The remaining time of the week was, as we were told by Ms. de Winter, used to visit several places throughout the Netherlands to propagate Spiritism and give public psychometric demonstrations.

It is remarkable that the transcriptions of the different services resemble one another significantly, differing on only a few minor points. As for the healing services, Spee would reflect on the subject of disease and medical sciences from a spiritual point of view, whereas during the consecration services, Spee reflected on current events and how to deal with them according to the religious vision of the NSK. As can be seen from the examples given, Jesus’ statements were broadly used by Spee as a tool to confirm his visions and to show to his followers that Spiritualism and Christianity were undeniably connected with each other. We even found a typed note in the NSK archive, where Bible verses are listed under

various Spiritualist subjects like healings, materialization, trance, etc. This could mean that they were actively looking for proof of Spiritualist theories in the New Testament.

The research from the NSK archive provides a glimpse at just how central Spee's position was to the religious group, and the teachings and rituals were mainly centered around his visions and mediumship.

Mediumship is a major theme in the vision of Spee. Hoekstra mentions the condemnation by the NSK of a so-called "lower mediumship," as denounced in *Deuteronomy* 18:10-11; *1 Samuel* 28:3-20; and *Isaiah* 8:19 (Hoekstra and Ipenburg 2008, 382). These verses all emphasise that the Bible forbids to turn to a wonder-worker, fortune teller, or a medium asking questions to the spirits of the dead. This is a somewhat contradictory information pointed out by Hoekstra, as consulting the wisdom of spirits and fortune telling (at least, in the case of Eddy Christiani) was exactly what Spee did. Although, it is correct to say that Spee did condemn a certain type of mediumship, he also emphasized in one of his sermons,

And you would ask me: is there a difference? There is my friends, maybe not factually, but certainly ideologically. [...] Reverend Buskens could have a point when he says that Spiritism carried out by the unqualified could lead to all kinds of excesses and to things that daylight couldn't bear and would be a curse for this world, rather than beneficial (Spee 1954b).

The emphasis on ideology, also called "the intention," seems to be an important aspect for Spee. In one of his lectures, Spee argues that mediumship is one of the most important tools to lead people and their souls to the salvation from Maya. He states that mediumship without the right intentions (i.e. mediumship that is meant to entertain people) is dangerous, because it is not spiritually helpful. In his vision, mediumship is supposed to contribute to spiritual development. Mediumship that does not meet this standard is considered "lower mediumship" (Spee 1951). Jesus is mentioned as an example of a "higher" medium, because after all he stated that "the Father" spoke through him.

There is, however, a paradox. Spee states that everyone is potentially a medium; that he does not want to be seen as a chosen person; and that good intentions are what makes for a good medium. Then, why is he practically the only medium in the NSK (or at least in NSK's Amsterdam chapter), and his messages are regarded as normative by all other members? His mediumship seems to be the

one feature that actually gives him a special position and spiritual authority. It is also interesting to note that, before he died, Spee signed a statement, declaring that he was not going to be available as a “helper” for mediums after his death, and that whoever would claim that he was receiving messages from Spee, would be a deceiver (Spee 1969). The exact reason for this statement is unknown, but it might have been an attempt to prevent any other medium from using his name falsely and gaining the kind of authority that Spee achieved during his lifetime.

The apparent paradox of Spee’s mediumship and authority are not the only inconsistencies that can be found in his teachings. Ms. de Winter felt initially reluctant to tell us about the NSK and its beliefs, because Spee did not want “outsiders” to know too much about their special knowledge and group. The reason was that outsiders, he believed, would not understand the NSK and could potentially respond in a negative way. A confirmation is that she told us that the NSK closed its circle to new members after Spee decided that influence from the outside world was unwanted or even a threat to the group. This decision had the effect of turning the NSK into a secretive esoteric group, which is at odds with the NSK’s initial goal of spreading its Spiritism. One could think that such a closed circle was even contrary to the notions of brotherhood and “loving thy neighbour,” because closing the circle means depriving other people of the spiritual knowledge that was so valued by the NSK, eventually excluding outsiders from spiritual salvation.

An explanation for the closing up of the NSK circle could be that the group experienced significant opposition from outsiders, mainly coming from people opposing the Spiritualist part of the NSK doctrine and the activities that came with it (séances, magnetism, etc.). Among the opponents were members of the Roman Catholic Church, as well as of other Spiritualist groups that disagreed with the main tenets of their beliefs. One of those groups was the Dutch Association of Spiritualists “*Harmonia*,” of which Spee had once been a board member together with his NSK companion Gerard van El. During the NSK’s peak years, when it had its highest number of members, there was a rivalry between the two groups. It is not surprising that NSK chose to protect itself from negative influences, holding firmly on the beliefs and practices it considered to be true. In one of his sermons, Spee elaborated on the struggle with a Roman Catholic priest, implying that a lot of energy was spent on trying to defend the

NSK from this opposition, which accordingly to Spee was “entangled in Maya” (Spee 1951).

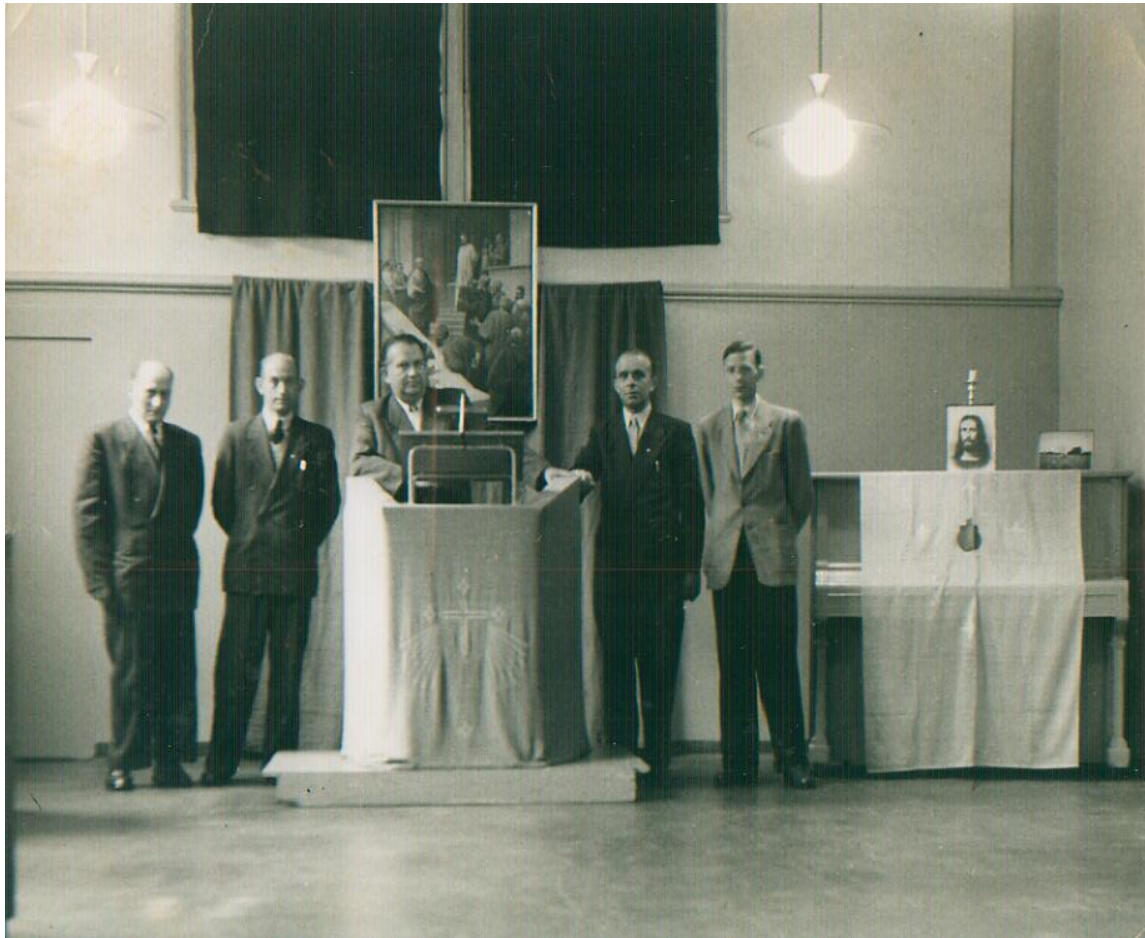


Figure 3. Presidency of the Amsterdam chapter of the NSK. Circa 1960.
HJBF/ Stadsarchief Amsterdam.

Conclusion

Based on our research in its archive, we noticed some remarkable features of the NSK. The NSK regards itself as a liberal and free-thinking Christian Spiritualist group (de Winter, pers. comm.). Our findings confirm this to a certain extent. It seems that Spee intended to avoid a hierarchical structure in the group, and tried to spread Spiritualist knowledge via an almost evangelical-fundamentalist, but certainly unorthodox, approach to the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. The philosophy and sermons of Spee, including the list of New Testament verses that he tried to use as proof-texts for his theories, show

that the NSK sought to support its Spiritualist vision with the Christian teachings of Jesus.

A sign that the NSK could be considered progressive is the way in which they were virtually “cherry-picking” elements from a variety of global religions and movements (i.e. “Maya” from Hindu philosophy, “Summerland” from the Theosophists, notions from Spiritualism/Spiritism) and integrating them into their own belief system. This phenomenon was not uncommon in the Netherlands during the mid-twentieth century due to an ongoing secularization process that drastically changed the religious landscape of the country. During this phase, the number of adherents to traditional, institutionalized religion declined, paving the way for an increase in atheism and agnosticism, as well as non-traditional religions and alternative belief systems. The NSK is a perfect example of a religious group experimenting with new religious forms and knowledge, at the same time trying to remain within the existing theological framework that stemmed from traditional (Protestant) Christianity.

That said, Spee encouraged his followers to let go of traditional dogma provided by Christian church fathers and theologians, and instead focus on what he believed to be the Christian (Spiritualist) core values provided by the New Testament, regardless of what particular denominations believe (Spee 1952). According to him, true knowledge and wisdom belongs to the Esoteric sphere (and God). With this, he positioned God far away from the earthly, materialistic sphere, i.e. from life on earth. However, it seems that with the right focus and state of mind, human souls can ascend to a higher level of spirituality during their earthly life. Quoting the New Testament sentence “The kingdom of heaven is within you,” Spee tried to emphasize that it is indeed possible for human beings to reach a kind of Platonic state, reflecting Summerland on earth.

Spee is mainly referring to core Christian values like “loving thy neighbour,” but also to critical attitudes towards materialism, where the fleshy and earthly materialistic goals are regarded as secondary. To reach a higher level of spirituality, one needs to refrain from the lesser materialistic and egoistic goals. Spee even stated that it is wise to emotionally detach from our own children (Spee 1952). Matter is only temporary and subject to time and space, making it inferior to the Eternal. The human body, or “the flesh,” is part of this material “inferior” world, as can be seen by the negative way human beings are described. Humans are seen as lost, dark, and suffering, while every word that is used to describe the

higher spheres is strictly positive. When it comes to Christian practices, there is no sign that Christian rituals were practiced, although feasts like All Saints, Easter, and Christmas were celebrated. The structure of the NSK also seems to strongly resemble a traditional Protestant organization regarding their services, sermons, the use of a hymnal book for singing, and the existence of a church council.

One of the major elements of the NSK that most Protestants would describe as unorthodox is the emphasis placed on mediumship, which is believed to enable contacts between the earthly and Esoteric sphere, under the guidance of spirits, or so-called “helpers.” It is a part of the cosmic vision that most resembles classic Spiritualism, while also being one of the most controversial aspects of the group. So controversial in fact that, under its influence, the original evangelical and liberal character of NSK evolved into something more sectarian. Spee became a leader that exercised his spiritual authority by making the NSK a closed, secretive circle, in an attempt to keep the faith pure from negative outside influences.

References

- Blavatsky, Helena. 1892. *The Theosophical Glossary*. London: The Theosophy Company.
- Dienende Liefde. 2019. “Welkom.” Accessed April 26. <https://www.dienendeliefdedelft.nl>.
- El, Gerard van. 1950a. “Landdag” *Licht* 2/3(6):5.
- El, Gerard van. 1950b. “Spiritualism in Holland.” *The National Spiritualist* 32:7.
- Fremery, Henry de. 1912. “Van Hier en Ginds.” *Het Toekomstig Leven* 18(16):300.
- Hellyer, Marcus. 2003. “Introduction.” In Friedrich Spee, S.J., *Cautio Criminalis, or a Book on Witch Trials*, vii–xxxvi. English translation, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- “Hephata.” 1904. “Korte Aanteekeningen.” *Het Toekomstig Leven* 14(8):213–14.
- Hoekstra, E. Gerard, and Rien (M.H.) Ipenburg. 2008. *Handboek christelijk Nederland: kerken, gemeenten, samenkomsten en vergaderingen*. Kampen: Kok.

- ISF. 2019. "A Brief History." Accessed May 20. <https://www.theisf.com/about/history>.
- Jansen, Derk. 1994. "Op zoek naar nieuwe zekerheid: Negentiende-eeuwse Protestanten en het Spiritisme." PhD diss., University of Groningen.
- Kardec, Allan. 2006. *Het Boek der Geesten*. Translated by Jean Guillaume Plate. Amsterdam: Spiritische Vereeniging "Veritas."
- Ortt, Felix Louis. 1904. "Spiritualisme en Spiritisme." *Het Toekomstig Leven* 16(8):245.
- Sommer, Jan Hendrik. 1991. "Uw overleden Moeder vertoont zich achter u: impressies van spiritistische groepering in Nederland." *Religieuze Bewegingen in Nederland* 22:45–74.
- Spee, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus. 1937. "Ingezonden: Over de ervaringen." *Spiritische Bladen* 10(12):160.
- Spee, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus. 1938. *Volg den Hiërarchieken weg: een Levensphilosophie voor den Modernen Mensch*. Amsterdam: The Author.
- Spee, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus. 1950. Sermon at a healing service, Amsterdam. June 9. Stadsarchief Amsterdam.
- Spee, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus. 1951. Lecture at an esoteric course, Amsterdam. December 11. Stadsarchief Amsterdam.
- Spee, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus. 1952. Sermon at a consecration service, Amsterdam. May 11. Stadsarchief Amsterdam.
- Spee, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus. 1954a. Sermon at a healing service, Amsterdam. February 5. Stadsarchief Amsterdam.
- Spee, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus. 1954b. Sermon at a healing service, Amsterdam. December 10. Stadsarchief Amsterdam.
- Spee, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus. 1962. "Waarom vormen wij een Kerkgenootschap?" *Discours* 1(4):1–7.
- Spee, Koenraad Hendrik Gerardus. 1969. Declaration of spiritual unavailability after death. Signed declaration, Amsterdam. March 27. Stadsarchief Amsterdam.