

Twenty Years and More: Research into Minority Religions, New Religious Movements and 'the New Spirituality'

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Christian Science and cultural trends: past and present. By Daniel R.D. Scott, Ph.D

Abstract:

The public's reaction to and engagement with religious belief and religious movements is in many ways shaped by cultural and philosophical trends, including pluralism, multiculturalism, post-modernism, dogmatism, extremism, secularism, materialism, and scientism. While some of these trends present opportunities, many present challenges to religious practice in a rapidly changing world.

This paper explores how one specific movement, Christian Science, has weathered these challenges. It compares and contrasts the public's engagement and reaction to Christian Science in its early years, with the situation today. It explores the steps the movement's founder, Mary Baker Eddy, took to preserve and protect her discovery, as well as the ways in which the movement is responding to societal change today.

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Introduction

This paper explores how the Christian Science Movement has responded to some of the cultural and philosophical trends that affect all religious movements. Since this response is inevitably guided by its theology, and cannot be understood without making reference to it, I'd like to begin with a very quick overview of Christian Science and its origins for those of you who may not be familiar with it.

As the programme indicates, in the context of this conference Christian Science is considered an “*old-new religion*”, although Christian Scientists have always seen it as a new-old religion.

Mary Baker Eddy who discovered Christian Science didn't see it as a new religion, but as a fuller understanding of original Christianity -- the discovery of the practical healing Science that had always lain behind Christianity, but which until that time had not been recognised. Eddy dates her discovery of Christian Science to 1866; and the pivotal event, which galvanised her and brought her research into clearer focus, was a healing - her own immediate recovery from injuries that were considered life-threatening. In a reference to Newton, she described this event as “*the falling apple that led me to the discovery how to be well myself, and how to make others so.*”ⁱ

In an earlier age, if someone had witnessed the kind of seemingly miraculous healing that Mary Baker Eddy did, they would probably have left it at that – a miraculous event, something to thank God for, but not something that demanded explanation and investigation.

However, given the dawning age of science in which Mary Baker Eddy was immersed, it is natural that she sought a *scientific* explanation for her sudden and immediate recovery. Writing later of her thought at this time she said: “*... I must know the Science of this healing, and I won my way to absolute conclusions through divine revelation, reason, and demonstration.*”ⁱⁱ

((BTW: Those three can be considered a spiritual version of the scientific method.))

Eddy didn't set out to form a new religious movement, but initially hoped that her revolutionary reassessment of Biblical Christianity would be embraced by the mainstream churchesⁱⁱⁱ. Her main concern was to share the spiritual and scientific insights she had gained. She published her insights in a book, “*Science and Health*” in 1875, and she spent the rest of her life revising this work (later adding “*with Key to the Scriptures*” to the title). To protect and preserve her discovery, Eddy founded a church in 1879 with the explicit purpose to “*reinstate primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing*”^{iv}

Growth of CS - then ...

After some initial fits and starts, the Christian Science movement grew very rapidly as knowledge of Christian Science spread across the United States and the world. In recent decades the situation has been somewhat reversed, although today there are very promising signs that the Christian Science Movement is beginning to grow and flourish again. The rest of this paper explores the extent to which cultural and philosophical trends are factors in this and how Christian Science has weathered these changes.

But before I begin I would like to caveat this somewhat:

Historically sociologists have tended to dismiss the validity of religious understanding and

experience and instead have sought explanations of religious movements in *totally* sociological terms. But this bias is *itself* the result of the changing landscape of thought we're exploring today. A social scientist quoted in Huston Smith's excellent book "Why Religion Matters", Robert Bellah explains "*The assumptions underlying mainstream social science can be briefly listed: positivism, reductionism, relativism and determinism.*"^v And Huston Smith is quick to point out the narrowness of this view.

So, while sociologists are inclined to seek sociological explanations for the rapid growth of Christian Science in its early years, Christian Scientists (and I included myself here) are far more likely to attribute the rapid acceptance of Christian Science to its internal Truth and its efficacy as a practical healing science.

This isn't to say other factors didn't come into play – for of course they did. Mary Baker Eddy acknowledged that popularity and fashion had a part in its quick rise – and she saw the dangers of this^{vi}. In fact, she felt that the movement was growing *too* rapidly – hence she put in place By-laws prohibiting "numbering the people"^{vii}.

Although she grew up in obscurity, Mary Baker Eddy was catapulted into fame by Christian Science and at the end of her career she was recognized as one of the most well-known women in America, and beyond. And some have tried to attribute the growth of Christian Science to its "charismatic" leader. But Mary Baker Eddy *never* wanted to be viewed this way, made every effort to turn her students away from her personality to the Principle or Science which she taught.

Another factor in the astounding early growth of Christian Science was probably society's willingness to accept the idea that there could be a Science of Christianity. Modern science was still relatively young and held great promise and there was a feeling it could explain the spiritual as well as the physical realm. Indeed, leading scientists in Europe and America were openly thinking outside of the box and considering the more spiritual side of existence^{viii}.

So the willingness to accept that there could be a science of Christianity was certainly a factor, but the "bugle call" that brought newcomers to this science was healing. Indeed throughout the history of Christian Science the majority of new adherents are those that have either been healed themselves or have witnessed the remarkable cures of others.

My own family's introduction to CS

My mother's family came into Christian Science through the experiences of my great uncle Theo Tite, who was healed by Christian Science in 1914^{ix}. "*Struck down by crippling illness and great weakness*" as he put it, he spent two years trying all kinds of treatments with no improvement until finding Christian Science. At that time, he wasn't expected to live long; however, through studying Eddy's book *Science and Health* (by the light from the lamp of his pony and trap) he was restored to health and lived well into his nineties. His healing and interest in Christian Science led his family to take up the study of this Science.

Healing conversions of this kind were extremely common in the early decades of Christian Science and are the simplest explanation for the movement's rapid growth at this time.

The last 100 pages of Eddy's 700-page primary work *Science and Health* are filled with first person accounts of healing, from those who had read the book and who attributed their healings to the Science of Christianity the book expounds.

...and now

So given this explanation for the early success of Christian Science, how can its numerical decline in the decades since the war be accounted for?

Has Christian Science stopped healing? Like all those who are still consistently experiencing its effectiveness today, I would say of course not! But it is fair to say, changes in public perceptions have in some cases made it harder for Christian Scientists to practice their religion, and the public more sceptical about putting it to the test.

Moreover, materialism has much more of a hold on public thought in recent decades, than it did in Eddy's day.

Another factor is the proliferation of other spiritual healing modalities. In Eddy's day Christian Science healing was almost the only game in town, whereas in recent decades there have been many more individuals and groups practising various forms of spiritual healing.

Several new religious movements that sprung up in Eddy's day have been heavily influenced by Christian Science. Emma Curtis Hopkins^x, who took a primary class in Christian Science with Mary Baker Eddy in 1883 and who was for a short time Editor of *The Christian Science Journal* broke away from Christian Science toward the end of 1885, and was to become very influential in the fledgling new thought movement. Later gaining the epithet - "teacher of teachers" having taught Charles and Myrtle Fillmore founders of Unity, Earnest Holmes founder of Religious Science, Melinda Cramer and Nona Books founders of Divine Science.

While imitation may be the highest form of flattery, Mary Baker Eddy was concerned that these break away movements, while using much of the same language of Christian Science, were misstating divine Science as she understood it^{xi}. Indeed Mary Baker Eddy felt some of these early break away students had been too influenced by other philosophical teachings. Indeed, the question of how to protect and preserve the purity of her discovery constantly exercised her thought. And this led her in September 1895 to publish the by-laws of the Mother Church, in a short Manual that still governs all the activities of the Christian Science Movement today.

Pluralism and multiculturalism -

While Mary Baker Eddy and other early Christian Scientists were aware of at least some of the world's other religions, there is no doubt things are much more multicultural today. And Christian Scientists, like others, must consider how to view other religious teachings. Christian Scientists value interfaith dialogue, and fervently support the pluralist agenda with regard to the free practice of religion. However, Christian Science is not compatible with a relativist philosophy of religious or spiritual truth – in which all religious truth is seen as equally valid.

Instead Christian Science upholds the general scientific view that there is only one absolute Truth and that both science and religion are engaged in a search to determine and expound this one ultimate Truth. This explains why Mary Baker Eddy was convinced the healing practice of Christian Science would eventually be adopted by all of Christendom^{xii}, but at the same time was keen to distance her movement from teachings (like Hopkins') that might appear close, but which Eddy saw as deviations of pure Christian Science. The further divergence of these movements from Christian Science in the twentieth century points to the

wisdom of Eddy's decision.

What distinguishes Christian Science from many other healing methods is that God alone is seen as the healer and the human mind plays no part in the healing activity^{xiii}. Christian Science is not the *human mind over matter*, but is essentially *divine Mind instead of matter*. It is this practical theology that makes Christian Science unique^{xiv}, for it teaches the allness of good and the nothingness of evil. It shows how the harmony and reality of good can be brought into human experience through the healing activity of the Christ or Truth.

Science and scientism

In my view, one of the greatest challenges but also greatest opportunities is the changing perception of science since Eddy's day.

On the one hand, the rise of *scientism* (the suggestion that the physical sciences are the only way to understand the world and that physical entities are the only entities with ontological significance) and *positivism* (the belief that the scientific method replaces metaphysics) have closed people's minds to the power and perception of the spiritual realm. And in many ways led to a medicalisation of our culture that has made it harder to practice Christian Science.

On the other hand, philosophical advances in the understanding of the nature of science, many of which remain controversial and have yet to filter through into the public thought, look set to open new ground for spiritual and scientific study.

Post-modernism.

Post-modernism, the philosophical and cultural reaction to (and successor of) modernism, has undoubtedly changed the landscape of public thought, and in many ways undermined the absolute certainty of science. This movement is the final stage in a gradual eroding of truth that has been taking place in intellectual circles during the last century. The erosion began with the discrediting of dogmatic religious belief, and the doubt thrown upon metaphysical assertions of truth, but this erosion of truth has extended to undermine the certainty of the physical sciences. While these later claims are still hotly debated, there is a growing recognition that the enlightenment project has failed. This recognition presents both challenges and opportunities. It leads to an *unhealthy scepticism* about all truth claims, it also provides a welcome balance to the *unhealthy certainty* of scientism.

There is nothing wrong with certainty if it is well-founded, and scepticism too has an important role to play, but they need to be balanced and it is necessary to learn when to be certain and when to be sceptical.

In Christian Science, true certainty is the result of spiritual understanding, whereas as Eddy herself put it: "*Nothing is more antagonistic to Christian Science than a blind belief without understanding, for such a belief hides Truth and builds on error.*"^{xv} This gives us a clear understanding of how Christian Scientists generally view extremism, dogmatism and fundamentalism. And how we see the solution to these in more enlightened faith.

Conclusion

To conclude, the Bible contains a parable that likens the coming of the kingdom of heaven to “leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened.”^{xvi} And with this in mind, is it not possible that the cultural and philosophical trends that we have been discussing, far from shaping religious experience, are actually themselves being leavened and transformed by mankind's growing yearning for and understanding of divine reality.

I believe there is a sense in which Christ, Truth, is breaking down materialism and dogmatism^{xvii}. I believe that Tony Blair^{xviii} is right in saying that religious movements old and new do need to work together.

I believe we do need to build on commonalities, rather than letting differences divide us.

I believe that Christian Science with its open, inclusive, unique, scientific approach to religion has much to bring to the table.

And finally, I believe the future is bright for spirituality and religious understanding not just in the next twenty years but also in the coming millennium.

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- i *Retrospection and Introspection* by Mary Baker Eddy p24:14
- ii *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy p109:19-22
- iii Mary Baker Eddy initially hoped her discovery would be embraced by the existing churches, and only founded her own church when it became apparent this was not to be the case. See e.g. *Science and Health* p330:2
- iv *Manual of the Mother Church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, in Boston Massachusetts* p17:19
- v Robert Bellah quoted in *Why Religion Matters* by Huston Smith. Smith's book is an excellent expose of the dangers of scientism and the marginalisation of religious belief.
- vi For example Eddy observed that “*that Christianity has withstood less the temptation of popularity than of persecution.*” *Retrospection and Introspection* p45:23
- vii Although at first Eddy referred to the large numbers entering her church (see e.g. *Message to The Mother Church* for 1901 p2:3), she came to see this as unwise and introduce a by-law prohibiting this in future, see *The Manual of the Mother Church* Article 8 Section 23.
- viii Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937), Alexander Graham Bell (1847-1922) and John Logie Baird (1888-1946) all had an interest in spiritualism. See e.g. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4185356.stm>
Marconi also knew of Christian Science though he was never a Christian Scientist, his daughter was a class taught student of Christian Science.
- ix Testimony of Carol Theobald Tite, *Christian Science Sentinel*. February 7, 1970
- x Emma Curtis Hopkins took a primary class in Christian Science with Mary Baker Eddy in December 1883. Shortly thereafter, Mrs. Hopkins lived and worked in the Massachusetts Metaphysical College, where Mrs. Eddy was teaching classes in Christian Science. Eddy appointed her editor of the *The Journal of Christian Science* from September 1884 until March 1885. She was assistant editor from April 1885 until October 1885. After being removed from the assistant editorship of the *Journal*, she resigned her membership in the Christian Scientist Association and moved to Chicago, where she taught her own version of Christian Science. Ultimately she broke away from Christian Science completely and was one of the founders of the New Thought movement. For Further details and background see for example: Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Trial*, pp. 177-80 and the notes 49,74 & 77 on pages 373-4.
- xi Peel *Years of Trail*, pp. 225-9, 259-60
- xii See e.g. *Pulpit and Press* by Mary Baker Eddy p 22:9
- xiii *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* preface x:3
“The first edition of SCIENCE AND HEALTH was published in 1875. Various books on mental healing have since been issued, most of them incorrect in theory and filled with plagiarisms from SCIENCE AND HEALTH. They regard the human mind as a healing agent, whereas this mind is not a factor in the Principle of Christian Science. A few books, however, which are based on this book, are useful.”
- xiv *Unity of Good* Mary Baker Eddy p9:27

“What is the cardinal point of the difference in my metaphysical system? This: that *by knowing the unreality of disease, sin, and death*, you demonstrate the allness of God. This difference wholly separates my system from all others. The reality of these so-called existences I deny, because they are not to be found in God, and this system is built on Him as the sole cause. It would be difficult to name any previous teachers, save Jesus and his apostles, who have thus taught.”

xv *Science and Health* p83:9

xvi See The Gospel of Luke 13:31 And the Gospel of Matthew 13:33.

xvii I mean this is universal and not sectarian terms as MBE explains “*God is universal; confined to no spot, defined by no dogma, appropriated by no sect. Not more to one than to all, is God demonstrable as divine Life, Truth, and Love; and His people are they that reflect Him — that reflect Love.*” **Miscellaneous Writings p150:25-29**

xviii Tony Blair, Thursday 3rd April 2008. <http://www.rcdow.org.uk/lectures/>