

Author – Robin Harragin
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Title – The response of Christian Science to the revolution in medicine.

Abstract

At the core of Christian Science is its non-medical spiritual healing practice. Many conversions to Christian Science, past and present, are the result of the experience of healing. The denominational literature is overflowing with healing examples and method. When Mary Baker Eddy started her church in 1875, allopathic medicine was at the stage of identifying and preventing illnesses, but not yet treating and curing infectious diseases. Turning to Christian Science at that time was often the only option for recovery. Since then the revolution in medicine has meant that most physical ills are ordinarily met by recourse to the medical. It is taken for granted that illness is met by allopathic medicine and in Europe socialised medicine is largely free at the point of use. Meanwhile from the mid twentieth century the numbers of Christian Science adherents declined and anecdotal evidence indicates that many Christian Scientists themselves resort to medical help occasionally or permanently. My paper aims to explore the dialectical tension between material and spiritual healing. Using qualitative methodology and from an insider perspective my findings will show that for those who remain in the church, Christian Science healing is seen to be as effective today as it was at the church's inception a century ago. I will outline the methods that the church is using to maintain and advance their religious healing method in the face of the extreme challenge of materialism and secularism. The paper will be of use to researchers in the fields of religious studies, sociology of religion, spirituality, new religious movements, medicine, and alternative medicine.

Introduction

American sociologist, Rodney Stark believed that Christian Science (CS) has failed in part because it cannot compete with the revolution in medicine post World War 11 (Stark 1998, 212). Fifteen years later, however, Stark's prediction of failure has yet to be demonstrated and evidence shows that Christian Scientists are facing this particular issue head on. What Stark, and Bryan Wilson before him, were not particularly interested in, as they counted the declining numbers in the church, was the metaphysical challenge that Christian Scientists are faced with. To take the practice of CS seriously is to be charged with the task of living a life based on the primacy of Spirit (God) in a predominantly material world and to expect to heal and be healed by spiritual means alone.

What does this mean?

Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science, explained it like this: 'Christian Science, ... rests on the conception of God as the only Life, substance and intelligence, and excludes the human mind as a factor in healing work. ¶ Jesus cast out evil and healed the sick, not only without drugs, but without hypnotism, which is the reverse of ethical and pathological Truth-power.'

Those that practice this faith do not use drugs nor 'hypnotism' - by which Eddy meant looking to the personal mental influence of oneself or others - to heal their ills, because to do so is not in line with the healing method of Jesus. It is this 'method' that Eddy claimed to have discovered as the 'science' of the healings that Jesus performed in the Bible. This is where the dichotomy emerges as it patently challenges current pathology. It leaves Christian Scientists at odds with society on many levels. The paradigms of CS and medical science are so different that there is little in common. The language used in material science is cognitive but in CS it is often non-cognitive and words are different. For example, the word 'science' which has the common familiar use as: the systematic study of the natural world using empirical observation and experiment. In CS, the term means the systematic study of 'what God is and what he does for man' (Eddy 1906, 26). In the process of explaining her discovery, Eddy created a new language. Words take on a different meaning in CS and it is knowledge of this that leads Christian Scientists to salvation and healing. CS language is a different language game to that of modern science - in the Wittgensteinian sense (Wittgenstein 1974, Sect 43).

In considering the CS response to the prevalence of the materialistic paradigm, and modern medicine in particular, I review the approach of the institutional church, as well as the practice of individual Christian Scientists. However, it would first be helpful to consider the sociological type of a healing church.

Christian Science: the first healing church

Regis Dericquebourg, the French sociologist, recently identified the CS church as 'the first healing church' in his paper (to be published in the forthcoming *Subsidia special edition on Christian Science*) (Dericquebourg 2015). He writes: "In my opinion, Christian Science is an original reconstitution of Christianity, which is the prototype of healing churches – the first one in fact" (ibid, 6) preceding others such as Divine Science or New Thought. The idea that it is a 'reconstitution' of Christianity signifies that it is a restructuring of existing Christianity and, Dericquebourg points out, it was the first truly organized healing church with a bureaucratic administrative organization to support the healing practice (ibid, 7). Sometimes new religious movements pick up on religious elements that existing faith groups ignore or marginalise such as particular scriptures and practices (Chryssides 1997,123). CS focuses on Jesus' healing ministry because of the belief that it was a direct consequence of his own understanding of the 'kingdom of God' on earth. Dericquebourg is not saying that healing is unique to CS within the Christian church, but while Christian Science regards the healing of both sin and disease as vital aspects of individual and universal salvation, many other churches see physical healing as distinct from, and secondary to, the prime objective of the soul's salvation.

Following Weber's methodology Dericquebourg sets out 12 phenomena he says are common to an ideal type of healing church, which he believes are apposite for

Christian Science.

I agree with him and for the purposes of this paper I will look at nine of these, using his numbers:

1. They publicize their quest for healing and therefore attract sick people or people in psychological distress.
2. There are accredited religious therapists whose healing charisma is legitimized by the movement.
3. They have a broad definition to include all ills.
4. The metaphysical explanation for illness and spiritual treatment is based on the belief system of the movement.
5. This treatment is a stage on the way to salvation.
6. This spiritual treatment is a mystical experience indicating a direct relationship with the divine.
8. They know how to manage failure so as not to question the validity of their doctrine.
9. The creation of an epistemological rupture with biomedicine both in the explanation of the illness and the type of ‘medication’ they propose.
11. The healings are not considered ‘miracles’ in the sense that they are not considered ‘exceptional events through which God reminds men of his presence and power, they are not seen as chance or lottery, the method is what brings about the healing (ibid 3,4).

Dericquebourg stresses that these phenomena were not drawn from his knowledge of CS alone but from multiple religious movements that publicise the desire to heal the sick.

As the sociological type of ‘a healing church’, Dericquebourg identifies the tensions that emerge both within the CS church and between it and society at large. The first of these ‘tensions’ is relevant for this paper – the friction between the biomedical and spiritual conceptions of the treatment. He writes: ‘it (the church) uses non-empirical means to obtain empiric ends’ and this leads to a ‘new birth’ (ibid, 7).

Practicing Christian Scientists are caught in the horns of this dichotomy.

Dericquebourg points out that their healing practice engenders an epistemological split between CS and the mainstream adoption of Western medicine. This is illustrated by occasional discord with the American medical establishment and he litigation in the USA is well outlined in Nawal Issaoui’s paper (Issaoui, 2015).

Mainstream Christianity works hand in hand with Medicine. Eddy wrote that CS ‘subserves the medical enterprise and the relief of suffering by using spiritual healing and in practical ways with Christian Science Nurses and church care committees. There are also many occasions when individual doctors have supported Christian Scientists in their desire not to take medicine, but it is not in their interests to acknowledge it (Peel 1988).

Eddy’s writings endorse the view that healing treatment is best obtained without the use of material means because ‘There is no power apart from God. Omnipotence

has all-power.’ (Eddy 1875, 228). The healing method, as Dericquebourg points out, is a ‘prolongation of the theology’ (Dericquebourg 2015). The healing is based on the belief system and being in tune with the Divine. Nevertheless in cases of severe suffering Eddy says that the use of morphine might be appropriate (Eddy 1906, 464) and when healing is not forthcoming after treatment by oneself or a Christian Science practitioner, resorting to medical means as a temporary measure could be a solution (ibid, 444).

In a recent newspaper article a Christian Science practitioner (a church accredited healer) commented that CS is not dogmatic and does not forbid the use of medical care: “there has long been tension within the faith over what sort of medical care is included. Dental and eye care, for example, are not avoided by Christian Scientists. Childbirth, too, typically happens in hospitals. Broken bones need to be set and deep cuts stitched”. (Parker 2010). However, it is also true that broken bones have been completely healed without being set. Cuts have been quickly sealed without being stitched. Many mothers have reported quick and painless childbirth. This spiritual practice is well described by Robert Peel, a biographer of Mary Baker Eddy in his book on *Christian Science: its encounter with American Culture*, when he writes:

‘...Christian Science (is) a sort of spiritual ultimate, so far at least as active spirituality is concerned. For beyond all the careful calculations of scientific credibility and pragmatic usefulness, our (Christian Scientists’) sense of fitness demands that the highest spiritual values shall have a quality of daring, a total commitment to God regardless of what may be the practical result. Luther expressed it in his demand for a “daring, reckless confidence in the grace of God.” Job said with stark simplicity: “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him’. (Peel, 1958: 202)

Therefore turning to Christian Science in time of health needs is a genuine quest for practical wellbeing and the underlying goal is total trust and faith in God who heals, indicating a religious practice which is ultimately about the worship of God with healing as an outcome.

The Decline in Numbers of Christian Scientists

Another tension outlined by Dericquebourg is the loss of members because people are not prepared to ‘follow the way’ even if they get their healings. Rodney Stark charted the rise and decline of Christian Science. The numbers of CS churches and members decreased in the UK throughout the latter part of the 20th Century. Stark delineates a statistical decline in the USA and UK from the mid 20th century (Stark 1998, 191-194). I looked in the CS Journal Directory and counted 300 churches in UK in 1953, but now (June 2015) there are 101. There were 912 accredited healers (practitioners) in 1953, but now - just 50 (CSJ, 1953, 2015). It is worth noting here that the large numbers of practitioners in 1953 will have in part been due to the lack of work choices for women at that time (Spencer 2005).

Stark suggests that the church lost members for several reasons including inadequate fertility and ineffective socialization but he also includes what he calls ‘a decline in the relative effectiveness of its placebo effect’ (thereby reducing CS healing to a mere psychological replacement for medicine). Stark says the decline goes in tandem with the perceived revolution in medicine since WW 11 with the successful treatment of infections and discoveries in immunology. ‘Armed with a huge array of antibiotics and vaccines’, he writes, doctors can perform what our grandparents would call ‘miraculous cures’, inferring that the CS practitioner cannot keep up. This convinced Stark that the decline of CS coincides with the sudden availability of modern medicine (Stark 1998).

The institutional response to the dialectical tension between biomedicine and spiritual healing.

The church’s response to this decline in numbers is to focus on developing the healing practice of Christian Scientists themselves and not the numbers per se. One such stance was recently expressed by Allison W Phinney, one of the current leaders of the Christian Science church, who said that even if there are very few people at a church service, if a visitor comes in and gets a healing as a result of an insight gained from the service or talking to a member, then the numbers of people in the church is of less concern (CS Sentinel Audio Chat 2015). In line with Dericquebourg’s first characteristic of publicizing their healing work, the stated theme of the last two Annual Meetings of The Mother Church (First Church of Christ, Scientist, Boston) 2014 & 2015 was ‘A Spiritual Foundation of Christ Healing’. This is an annual public event and the invitation this year included the words: ‘We are called of God to join in a special time of coming together and growing together, of continuing to build on the foundation of Christ-healing that is central to this Church’.

For several years the Committee on Publication, which is the office of the church that deals directly with the media and legislatures, and tasked to ‘correct... impositions on the public in regard to Christian Science’ (Eddy 1895,97) has focused on lifting the specific imposition that “health is a condition of matter”. The Manager, Russ Gerber, believes that the ‘elephant in the room’ is this ‘normalization of the biomedical view of man’ which runs directly counter to the CS view that man is spiritual, the idea of God, and so health is a condition of Spirit (God)(Gerber 2015). Gerber has encouraged his team around the world to write and broadcast with specific focus on how the science of Christ healing is an effective health care system. For example, Tony Lobl in the UK maintains a web blog called ‘Mind-healing, Neither Myth nor Miracle’ which deals with issues such as cancer, depression, aging, incurability and so on and his articles have been published more widely by the Independent, the Huffington Post UK, BuzzFeed and The News Hub among others. Some of these pieces receive several thousand hits and indicate considerable interest in spiritual healing.

The Committee’s media approach is repeated in many other parts of the world (Press room) and is the public face of the church. However, what of the practice of

the members who are using CS in the face of the biomedical worldview? Is the institutional stance portrayed in these articles borne out by the experience of its members?

My Survey: Overview of method

To explore this question, I sent out questionnaires to 66 UK churches to distribute to their members. This was not an easy exercise. Some Christian Scientists are not inclined to share their ideas about healing unless it is in one-to-one conversations with interested inquirers, or within the formal channels made available by the church structure - such as spoken accounts in the Wednesday testimony meetings or written statements in church periodicals. Six churches informed me that they declined to distribute the questionnaire, but there may have been others that felt the same way. They gave various reasons such as: it was too personal, not knowing enough about the objectives of the research, not consistent with a church of healing.

In the end I received responses from 30 individuals – 13 men, 16 women, and 1 not revealed. They all indicated that they were practicing Christian Scientists. They were from 16 different churches from all over Great Britain including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I have no evidence as to the numbers of Christian Scientists in the UK; nevertheless it is safe to conclude that this small sample of responders is not representative. Yet their responses are worth considering on their own merit as a group of people who have made the rational decision to follow the exhortation from the Christian Science textbook, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, to ‘come out from the material world and be separate’ (Eddy, 1994: 451) even when dealing with the most severe circumstances of physical and mental illness. The responses illuminate how a group of religious believers externalise their internal awareness or shift in consciousness.

Responses to questions about Christian Science healing and medicine

Question: Do you rely solely on Christian Science for healing those ills that most people would normally treat by medicine?

24/30 affirmed that they did, and one of the six who didn’t affirm it still said ‘almost entirely’.

Question: Have there been times when you have used medicines?

Two thirds (18/30) of responders said that they had used medicine for various ailments including dislocations, breakages, infection, blood thinner, pain relief, dog bite, dental treatment, eye surgery, colds and flu, ear cleansing. Medicine had also been used in childbirth. But one third (12/30) said that they had never used medicines since relying on CS for healing.

Question: Given the advances made in the field of medicine since Mrs. Eddy's day...do you think it is acceptable for Christian Scientists to resort to medical help on occasion?

A similar response to the previous question with 17/30 respondents saying yes it was acceptable for various reasons such as freedom of choice; that the church does not condemn it and on some occasions Eddy allowed for it; because of pressure from families; for extreme suffering; for lack of healing; or in cases of a lack of control over one's own treatment such as in the case of emergency, incapacity or legal requirement (for the elderly or children); due to the difficulty of drawing the line between various material aids – if we wear glasses is it not just a small step to take a drug?

Twelve respondents said that it is not acceptable to use medical treatments. The reasons given were: that healing is not genuine unless it is from God i.e. unless it includes an element of salvation and rebirth; that God is more powerful than medicine; it is the way Jesus demonstrated healing; it doesn't matter how advanced matter is, it is still matter and does not deal with the underlying causes of sickness such as fear, sin, a lack of faith or of spiritual growth; that there is value in sticking to convictions; material and spiritual methods can't be combined as they dilute each other.

Question: Have you encountered other Christian Scientists who use medical help on occasion?

24/30 respondents answered to the affirmative

Is this answer indicative of a change in the practice of Christian Science? Is there a rise in the number of Christian Scientists who use medicine? I know of no other survey of Christian Scientists and their use of medicines. However, these responses do not necessarily undermine the integrity of the faith. Dericquebourg's 8th characteristic of a healing church is that it manages 'failure so as not to question the validity of their faith'.

Put in a more positive way, I would say that Eddy was well aware that adherents might take their time to develop their spiritual practice and consequently their healing work. She writes:

'Emerge gently from matter into Spirit. Think not to thwart the spiritual ultimate of all things, but come naturally into Spirit through better health and morals and as the result of spiritual growth' (Eddy 1906, 485).

The healing practice is a spiritual journey similar to the process of learning any skill.

A recent Wimp.com video called 'This Backwards Bicycle Will Mess With Your Brain' is a useful analogy to use here. Destin Sandlin is presented with a bicycle constructed so that the wheel turns in the opposite direction to that of the handlebars. Contrary to what he first believed as an experienced cyclist, he was unable to ride it. He concluded that his brain and body was so programmed to ride a

normal bicycle that he could not ride this one. In his lectures volunteers from his audience tried but also could not ride the backwards bike. He eventually took eight months of trial and accident to master it. Even then, if he was distracted, he would fall off again as he reverted to his old preconditioning. Sandlin concludes that knowledge does not equal understanding and the truth is the truth no matter what you think about it. It is your own bias that stops you seeing it.

Likewise, a CSist might say, everyone is conditioned through childhood and education to respond empirically to everything, finding material solutions to problems including health care issues. Whereas the truth in CS is that God is the source and foundation of the universe and they access this truth via their spiritual senses. Just like learning to ride the backwards bike, it often takes time and practice to go against the grain of human education and conditioning to respond in a spiritual manner to challenges, with inevitable setbacks along the way. It is a life work and people are on different stages of the journey.

However CS is not a behavioral science, it is a spiritual practice where the baseline is the divine Mind not neurological brain patterns. 'Such theories' Eddy writes, 'have no relationship to Christian Science, which rests on the conception of God as the only Life, substance, and intelligence, and excludes the human mind as a spiritual factor in the healing work' (Eddy 1906, 185).

In spite of difficulties in the healing journey, the responses to the next question in the survey indicate the success that this group has recently had in their own healing practice.

Question: Have you had recent healings using Christian Science treatment of conditions usually treated by medical means?

23 respondents answered to the affirmative. Healings included: effects of being knocked down by a car, joint problems, colds and flu, problems with sight and hearing, falls, lesions, pain, mobility issues, broken bones, chain saw injury, food poisoning (healed within 20-30 mins), stomach/bowel issue, muscular problem in leg, burns, depression, bereavement, relationship problems, skin condition, cuts and abrasions, lumps, tennis elbow, hamstring, back injury (see story), ear infection (see story), dizziness, poisoning, lack, fear, positive tuberculosis test reversed, black widow spider bite, snake bite, sprained ankle (see story), growth under arm (see story), eye injury, finger infection, urinary infection. The responses to the next question explain why they stick with Christian Science.

Question: If you choose Christian Science healing over other healing methods please explain briefly why you would make this choice.

Every respondent answered this question and their answers included such reasons as: its efficacy over many years (in one case eight decades); the truth is that we are

spiritual beings – ('I don't actually choose...I have total conviction that CS is the correct explanation of man and the universe'); permanency of healing rather than managing symptoms; once you have learnt how to do it, it works; it's much more than just a healthcare system; it's part of a spiritual journey, it brings great joy; ultimately it is the best health care system ('even if I find it hard to get healings myself'); medical treatments don't always work.

Conclusion

These last responses include words such as **permanency, efficacy, truth and best health care system**; indicating that once seen and felt, they are left with an abiding personal conviction. Dericquebourg refers to healing as an encounter with God - a religious experience. Scholars in the philosophy of religion will recognise the argument that if it is proved that God is experienced, even on one occasion, then this is proof that God exists, if only for the individual who has had that experience. The accumulation of many experiences makes it hard to refute. My respondents have felt themselves 'touched by God' through their spiritual healing experiences. The science of Christ healing has worked for them.

Perhaps every Christian Scientist is striving for the ideal as described by Peel in these words:

'This is the spirit of Christian Science at its point of departure from the world of the senses. It leaves all for God, all the lesser comforts, all the easy compromises. If a man's spiritual understanding prove unequal to the physical challenge that confronts him, then he may choose to suffer what appears to the world as defeat rather than doubt the omnipotence of Love or its willingness to heal him...And in this very abandonment to the Love of God...a man may find the revelation of a good beyond anything he dared hoped for ...as healing, as resurrection, as victory.' (Peel 1958, 203).

In this world of materialism and reliance on medicine this 'abandonment to the Love of God' is a courageous and profound choice for ordinary people who have chosen to be Christian Scientists, but, as my respondents have shown, for them the reward is not potential, it is actual. Thus the institutional church and Christian Scientists themselves are still rising to the challenge posed by their paradigm shift from a material to a spiritual epistemology, and the religious movement that Stark was ready to write off at the end of the 20th century becomes, in the 21st century, one that Dericquebourg finds appropriate to create a new sociological prototype for - a 'healing church'. One that has found a way to conceptualise the Divine consciousness in such a way that individuals are still using it, with considerable success, to treat their ills without medicine.

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