

Christianity as Science: Mary Baker Eddy's Unorthodox Vision*

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I'd like to begin with an odd scrap of evidence: an item Mary Baker Eddy clipped from a newspaper and saved in her scrapbook around 1870, well before she came to prominence as the founder and leader of Christian Science.

The item is an article about a then just-published essay entitled "On the Physical Basis of Life" by the English scientist Thomas Huxley. The essay is ostensibly a discussion of developments in cell biology, namely, the discovery of protoplasm. More fundamentally it was a classic expression of Victorian religious *angst*. As the newspaper summary noted, Huxley saw contemporary science driving inexorably toward the conclusion that all "emotional and voluntary activities, are just as much mere properties of matter, as gravity, cohesion, color, (and so on] . The end prospect, the newspaper went on, was a science that "does away with the soul, or spiritual element in man; and makes thought, feeling, moral perception, and the various attributes of the intelligent, immortal part, the results of nothing but a certain arrangement of dead atoms..." Huxley felt that the sense of being caught in a vast mechanism of physical law weighed "like a nightmare" on the best minds of the day.¹

Mary Baker Eddy scarcely approached these issues from Huxley's frame of reference. Her main intellectual fare in these years came from newspapers and the Bible, and she wasn't in the habit of reading academic essays. Nevertheless, the fact that she clipped such an article at all is testimony to the seriousness with which ideas, especially religious ideas, were taken in nineteenth century New England.

Her personal circumstances were extremely unpropitious at the time. She was past middle age, had no permanent home, little income, little or no contact with family. She and her husband had separated. She had begun to teach on what she called the "Science" of the Scriptures but had little following. Like a glancing look through a window into a lighted house, the article from the scrapbook provides a surprising perspective on her thinking and concerns during the period of her teaching's emergence. Without making too much of a single clipping, it's useful to consider the sources of this kind of concern in Eddy's background and the relation of the issues raised in the article to her mature teaching.

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Given the long history of controversy surrounding both her life and her teaching, such an effort is fraught with scholarly peril. It is only in the past three decades that scholars have even begun to sort out the fallacies of apologists and critics alike and consider the Christian Science movement (as a writer in the *American Historical Review* put it “within its full historical and cultural context.”² The evidence brought forward in this recent work has raised serious questions about the adequacy of many conventional perceptions of the subject. It has also made possible a more balanced understanding of the relation between the emergence of Christian Science and the religious situation of Protestantism in the late nineteenth century. My paper today seeks to follow out these leads in examining Eddy’s notion of a “scientific Christianity.”

Eddy was a young widow still many years from founding Christian Science when she informed the man who became her second husband: “I have a fixed feeling that to yield my religion to yours I could not[;] other things compared to this, are but a grain to the universe.”³ The statement points to one of the clearest insights to emerge from the evidence which has come to the surface in recent years: the importance of Eddy’s Protestant roots in the shaping of her thought. This should not be an insight left exclusively to her followers. The biographical sources now available testify overwhelmingly to her religious involvement as a young woman, from her decision to join her parents’ Congregational Church as a teenager during a “season of revival” in 1838 to her deepening struggles with traditional doctrine over the next few decades.⁴ Her oldest brother Albert specifically rejected biblical religion to become an outspoken Deist, Enlightenment-style, but he hastened to write her as one who understood the significance of her feelings when he learned that she “cherished a hope that she had been brought to embrace the doctrines of that religion, the strange influences of which have thus far puzzled philosophy to solve”⁵

She was the only one of the six Baker siblings to join the church. Her existing early letters and notebooks give a vivid impression of a committed evangelical believer – references to the “tears of Gethsemane” and Christ’s “bleeding love;”⁶ extensive passages painstakingly copied from that quintessential expression of Puritan piety, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*;⁷ comments on the protracted revival in the local Methodist and Congregational churches in 1843. During the latter event she wrote to a friend of the transformation of attitudes in the town: “*You* ask if it is so? It is, dear Augusta, almost all of your acquaintances are now rejoicing in the hope set before them of higher aims...Would that you were here to witness with me this changed scene.”⁸

The great German *Evangelische* historian Karl Holl was one of the first to recognize the crucial significance of this evangelical background in Eddy’s later teaching. As a leading Reformation scholar, Holl had a unique perspective on

new religious movements. He was also unusually sensitive to the need for sifting through the surfaces of language to the underlying realities of faith. In an unusually balanced essay on Christian Science published early in the century, he noted that “it is not easy to approach (the teaching] from the generally accepted Christian or religious basis....” But on closer examination, he went on,

judgment becomes uncertain. The fundamental viewpoint of Science would lead one to conclude that there is no place in it for...the view that man has been placed by God into an order to which he has to adjust himself, the concept of suffering as a means of instruction or punishment, the thought of retributive justice by God, the duty as to patience, submission, humility, etc. But opposed to this we have the fact that Mrs. Eddy speaks about all these things in Science and Health, and in part very beautifully.

Holl concluded that these things could not automatically be dismissed as mere “remnants” of her upbringing, for they do have “a certain connection...with the starting point” of her teaching.⁹

This point has simply been lost in conventional assessments of Christian Science. Not until recently have other scholars begun to follow up Holl’s insights with an equally serious look at the specific religious influences in Eddy’s upbringing – most importantly, the Puritan tradition in which she was raised.¹⁰

Like so many of her generation, Eddy rebelled against the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. This fact has tended to obscure the larger fact of her deep spiritual debt to the Puritan heritage, which she herself referred to as “the vestibule of Christian Science.”¹¹ The only startling thing about this influence is that so few historians other than Holl have taken it seriously.

Her pastors in her formative years were New Light Calvinists. Their extant sermons and writings show that they looked to such figures as Jonathan Edwards and Samuel Hopkins as their theological mentors, though they modified some of Edwards’ and Hopkins’ more extreme positions. Eddy’s involvement with these ministers was not superficial. One of them also taught in the local academy that Eddy attended, and as his son later recounted, the two often had long conversations on “deep subjects – frequently [the son added wryly]...too deep for me.”¹² The profound impact of this religious viewpoint on Eddy is evident in many fundamental, though often overlooked, points in her own teaching: her emphasis on the affections, the role of spiritual sense, the need for radical repentance and regeneration in overcoming sin; her conviction that the concerns of biblical religion and the great metaphysical issues of being – a word Edwards scholars will certainly recognize – are inextricably linked.

To point out these continuities is not to minimize the extent of Eddy's departures from Calvinism in both language and doctrine. Nor is it to ignore other factors in her development. It's simply to insist on understanding that development in its primary religious context. Her rationalist brother Albert once wrote in a college essay that "no circumstance [had] exerted so powerful an influence in moulding the character" of his contemporaries as "the peculiar nature of their religion." The result, he added, was that "whatever is thought, or said, or done, must be in reference to the tremendous issues of eternity."¹³ Eddy's concept of a "science" of Christianity evolved directly out of her efforts to come to grips with these issues as framed in the stark logic of Calvinism.

In a statement remarkably similar to Albert's, Harriet Beecher Stowe described the "pathos" of New England life as the "constant wrestling of thought with infinite problems which could not be avoided."¹⁴ Eddy's wrestlings were personal as well as theological, intensified by a string of misfortune – the loss of her first husband, an unhappy second marriage, the breaking up of her family, and her own long, painful breakdown in health, which left her increasingly isolated. As a young woman she accepted the traditional Calvinist position that infirmities were divinely willed for purposes of chastening, but she eventually found it impossible to reconcile such experience with a God who, as she wrote in a letter in 1848, "careth for us, too wise to err, too good to be unkind...a Father and a Friend."¹⁵ It was this apparent contradiction that set many New Englanders searching for an alternative to Calvinism, even some who, like Eddy, saw in the tradition a great deal to hold to and admire.

Her private notebooks reveal the urgency this search came to have for her as her circumstances became bleaker. As she asked in a poem written during a long period of illness and discouragement in the 1850s, for example: "O, did my Saviour's pain/ Waken the slumbering birds on the hushed bough! And I in midnight agony complain?"¹⁶ Or in a long uncompleted poem entitled "The Invalid," where she writes with clear autobiographical reference of "health denied a speck upon the foam...! Reft of its sails and compass..."¹⁷ Eddy recorded what may have been the bleakest moment in an unpublished poem/prayer which went to the heart of the Calvinist dilemma:

O! is this weight of anguish which they bind
 On life, this searing to the quick of mind...
 This crushing out of life, of hope, or love
 Thy will O God? – 'Then stay me from above
 For my sick soul is darkened unto death...
 The strong foundations of my early faith
 Shrink from beneath me, whither shall I flee?
 Hide me O, rock of ages! hide in Thee.¹⁸

These are not the words of a bland apostle of optimism and positive thinking, but of one born a Calvinist confronted by the harshness and inscrutability of human existence, reaching for some present dimension of grace.

The conventional reading of Eddy's teaching as primarily a "science of health" misses the significance of this religious context just as it misstates the title of her book.¹⁹ The actual title – Science and Health – implied a connection between the two concerns, but the science referred to was emphatically the Science of *Christianity*. The very phrase "science and health," as she learned from a student shortly after the book came out, appears in some editions of the Wycliff New Testament for the expression rendered "knowledge of salvation" in the King James.²⁰ Eddy found the conjunction fortuitous, for she regarded healing as a phase – long-neglected, but only a phase – of salvation in a much broader sense. Indeed, she insisted on the moral and spiritual basis of Christian healing from her earliest writings on Christian Science. As she wrote in one manuscript from the late 1860s, the only way to succeed in such healing is "By being like Jesus, by asking yourself am I honest, am I just? am I merciful? am I pure? and being able to respond with your demonstrations to let what you can do for the sick answer this...."²¹

The term "Christian Science" occurs in a variety of early and mid-nineteenth century sources – including once in the manuscripts ascribed to Phineas Quimby, the Portland, Maine magnetic healer from whom she sought help in the early 1860s.²² The controversial question of Quimby's influence has been muddied over the years by polemic versus partisan approaches, and it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the matter in depth. But the controversy does come into clearer focus when considered in the larger perspective of Eddy's evolving religious concerns. Quimby was obviously an important stimulus to her thinking on the relationship between mind and body. Eddy herself spoke freely of her initial enthusiasm for him. But she also held that her approach to healing developed in a fundamentally different direction. Interestingly, Karl Holl agreed, commenting that the Puritan cast of her thinking actually "separated [Eddy and Quimby]...from the beginning."²³

Quimby's practice centered on techniques of willpower and verbal and physical manipulation. As early as 1864, however, even while still considering herself a follower of Quimby, Eddy had begun to raise serious questions about this practice and to consider specifically the relation of healing to Christian regeneration. "What is your truth if it applies only to the evil diseases which show themselves?" she asked Quimby in a letter, referring to the need for conquering such "spiritual foes" as "envy, avarice, malice...."²⁴ As the question implies, this was a dimension not found in Quimby's practice. In the years after

his death in 1866, Eddy came to see an ever sharper contrast between his essentially psychological cures and genuine Christian healing in the New Testament mold – a distinction which paralleled that drawn by Calvinists like Jonathan Edwards between conversions achieved through human persuasion and authentic works of the Spirit.

The Puritan cast of Eddy's thinking was also evident in her response to the most significant scientific issue of the day, Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwinism shocked liberal Protestants less by its contradiction of the creation accounts in Genesis than by its depiction of the natural order as a savage, amoral struggle for survival. This picture challenged sentimental Victorian pieties about God's benevolent superintendence of things, but it only confirmed what Calvinists had always known about the hard facts of earthly life. Eddy, similarly, had no problems with Darwin's theory on these grounds, calling it "more consistent than most theories" in "its history of mortality."²⁵ She took issue not with the specific conclusions Darwin drew from the biological evidence, but with a basic premise of his theory – its reduction of man to a blindly evolving biological organism – which seemed to her to lead inevitably to the negations of scientific materialism. Even so, she had no doubt that both Calvinists and Darwinists were right about the immense waste and tragedy built into the material order.

This was the same dilemma, in broader terms, that was borne in on Eddy by her own life – the difficulty of reconciling the suffering and evil in the world with any coherent divine plan. The problem was older than Job, of course, but the pressure of natural science drew the contradictions pointedly to attention. So, paradoxically, did broadening liberal and evangelical Protestant conceptions of the love of God, which for Eddy simply made it less possible to rest satisfied with traditional theological rationales for evil. As she summarized the issue in *Science and Health*: "It would be contrary to our highest ideas of God to suppose Him capable of first arranging law and causation so as to bring about certain evil results, and then punishing the helpless victims of His volition for doing what they could not avoid doing."²⁶

Her resolution of the issue involved less a modification of existing theological positions than, as it seemed to her, an entirely new vision of reality. Eddy related it to her controversial experience of healing in 1866 – the incident she described as the "falling apple" that led to the "discovery" of Christian Science.²⁷ The description is revealing. The full facts of the incident are still in slight dispute, but for our purposes these are less important than her unusual interpretation of the event and the obvious redirection it produced in her life. Like the legendary falling apple in Newton's case, the experience represented a point of departure, not an endpoint. Eddy sorted out its significance only

gradually, but she felt that the experience included the enabling insight for her teaching: "...a glimpse of the great fact that I have since tried to make plain to others, namely, Life in and of Spirit; this Life being the sole reality of existence."²⁸ The "scientific" aspect of her explanation lay in the conviction that such occurrences are not special dispensations or personal charismatic phenomena but rather evidences of an unvarying spiritual law.

This explanation sought to go beyond what William James later called "piecemeal supernaturalism," which in its cruder manifestations pictured God in the role of a potentate intervening arbitrarily in human affairs and dispensing favors more or less irregularly. "The God whom science recognizes," James insisted, "must be a God of universal laws," not one who "accommodates his processes to the convenience of individuals" or sets aside the very laws of creation He had earlier established.²⁹

Eddy's brother Albert had made strikingly similar statements.³⁰ Her own position did not, as sometimes assumed, carry this emphasis so far as to reduce God to an abstract principle or exclude God's Personhood.³¹ While she questioned popular anthropomorphic depictions, her point was not that God is *less* than personal, but that He *transcends* finite conceptions of personality – that God is the ground of being, in current phrase, as well as "Father and Friend."³² Eddy's strongest emphasis was on God's nature as unchanging Love. And in her "passionate metaphysical logic," as Robert Peel has written, she held that "an infinite love that was also infinite intelligence must operate as law."³³

Her view of prayer and healing followed. Prayer, as she interpreted it, was not a solicitation of favor but a preparation of the heart. Its role was not to intercede with God but to bring human thought and will into accord with the divine order. Likewise she considered healing not supernatural in the usual sense, but "supremely natural" – not an interruption of law, but a phenomenon which "fulfills God's law" (though that "fact at present," she added, "seems more mysterious than the miracle itself").³⁴ This theme had antecedents in Transcendentalism and was later borrowed in a less theistic form by New Thought writers. But fundamentally, Eddy's concept had its roots in the historic Christian doctrine regarding the constancy and immutability of God's will. One of her evangelical critics, A. J. Gordon, reached toward a similar viewpoint when he wrote that experiences of healing are not "abnormal manifestations of divine power," but "lucid intervals granted-to our deranged and suffering humanity." Gordon went on: "We cannot for a moment admit the complaint of sceptics that miracles are an infraction of the laws of nature....Though we call them supernatural, they are not contranatural."³⁵

Such statements presupposed a conviction that had come under challenge

since the Enlightenment – the ultimate unity of religious and scientific truth. The rationalism of Eddy’s older brother had set science in opposition to religion, or at least biblical religion. Albert once kindly assured her that he recognized the need of the comforts of faith for women,³⁶ but that was just the problem! Religion, according to this viewpoint, belonged to the supposedly “feminine” realm of morals and feeling; science, to the province of reason and truth. Puritans had traditionally resisted this division, but advances in the natural sciences placed increasingly narrow limits on the claims, of religion to explain visible phenomena. In defining Christianity as Science, Eddy was reaffirming the older Puritan conviction that Christianity is not merely a poetic truth but in some sense a statement of the laws governing reality – laws which must be grounded ultimately, she held, in the inner consistencies of God’s own nature.

Protestants of nearly all persuasions in the early nineteenth century agreed that the laws of nature were an extension of the divine will. The traditional Christian “argument from design” presumed that the order of the material universe points directly to a controlling intelligence. Hence, reasoned Protestant apologists, scientific inquiry properly understood is just another way to the knowledge of God. Yet it was by no means clear, especially after Darwin, that the laws of matter described by such inquiry reflected the dictates of an infinite intelligence flowing forth in infinite love. Quite the reverse, Eddy contended: “The definitions of material law, as given by natural science, represent a kingdom necessarily divided against itself...”³⁷ To attribute the operation of this law to God “is not only to make Him responsible for all disasters, physical and moral, but to announce Him as their source...”³⁸ From this standpoint, the material order represented not a God-instituted or God-mandated system but a drastic misapprehension, an “erring sense” of the actual divine reality.³⁹

In no respect is the New England lineage of Eddy’s teaching more evident than in this emphasis on a tangible spiritual reality beyond material appearances. A profound sense of spiritual reality rings through New England theology. In general Puritans associated this reality with a heaven hereafter, but they were also accustomed to regarding natural phenomena as images and shadows of divine things, to some extent tokens of present spiritual fact. Jonathan Edwards himself in his late works stretched traditional Calvinism to its limits by distinguishing reality as it is known to God – “eternally, absolutely perfect,” manifesting “no other law than only the law of [His] infinite wisdom” – from reality as it appears to flawed, finite human perception.⁴⁰ Eddy obviously carried these points to far more radical conclusions than Edwards would have drawn or accepted, but the biblical center of her reasoning is plain enough. She saw the healing, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus not only as historic events but also as manifestations of the true eternal order or Science of being, slashing across the whole fabric of physical law.

Ironically, this was a viewpoint far less removed from the cosmology of natural science in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth, when the universe was still predictably Newtonian and undisturbed by relativity, quantum mechanics, or black holes. The militantly agnostic *Popular Science Monthly*, then a vigorous voice in the scientific community, insisted that it was sheer folly to couple “such an epithet as ‘Christian’” with the name of science.⁴¹ Eddy agreed with the *Monthly* at least that the ultimate issue at stake was the credibility of biblical religion: “If Christianity is not scientific,” she wrote, “and Science is not of God, then there is no invariable law, and truth becomes an accident.”^{42 4322}

The thesis that Christianity is scientific required more than theological assertion, however; it required practical demonstration, repeatable results. Eddy stressed in the strongest terms that such a Science could not be grasped merely as dogma or theory or apart from full Christian discipleship with its demands and fruits. The most conspicuous and controversial of these fruits was of course the renewal of spiritual healing. In an increasingly secular culture struggling to come to grips with modern science, Eddy held that Christianity itself could no longer survive without the reinstatement in some measure of Jesus’ works. In this perspective, the Christian dictum “by their fruits ye shall know them” was also a scientific imperative uniquely relevant to the contemporary dilemma of faith.

NOTES

¹ Archives of The Mother Church. Mary Baker Eddy Scrapbook. Clipping, “On Protoplasma” from unidentified newspaper. The essay to which the newspaper clipping refers is Thomas Huxley, “On the Physical Basis of Life,” *The Fortnightly Review* XXXVI, New Series (February 1, 1869), p. 143.

² James Findlay, *American Historical Review* (June, 1975), p. 729.

³ Archives of The Mother Church. L08903. Letter to Dr. Daniel Patterson, March 1853.

⁴ Cf. Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Discovery* (New York, 1966), esp. pp. 3-112.

⁵ Longyear Historical Society 601-217. Albert Baker to Mary Baker, March 27, 1837.

⁶ Archives. Scrapbook, "Stanzas," p. 37; Copybook, p. 50.

⁷ Archives. Copybook.

⁸ Archives. Mary Baker to Mrs. Samuel Swasey, February 12, 1843.

⁹ Translated from Karl Holl, "Szientismus," *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte* (Tubingen, 1921-1928), pp. 478-9.

¹⁰ Cf. Stephen Gottschalk, *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life* (Berkeley, 1973), esp. pp. 47-50, 119-120, 236-237, 277-278. Also Thomas C. Johnsen, *Christian Science and the Puritan Tradition* (Doctoral thesis: Johns Hopkins, 1983).

¹¹ Archives. Vol. LXXXIX, No. 13271, p. 245. Mary Baker Eddy to Mrs. J. N. Patterson, July 10, 1902.

¹² Archives. Vol. LXXVI, No. 10809, p. 33. Bartlett Corser, "To Whom It May Concern."

¹³ Longyear Historical Society 113-1349. Albert Baker, "Circumstances unfavourable to a development of poetry in America as perfect as that in Greece."

¹⁴ Harriett Beecher Stowe, *Old Town Folks* (Boston, 1869), p. 378.

¹⁵ Archives. F00032. M. B. Glover to Miss Martha D. Rand, March 29 [1848].

¹⁶ Archives. Copybook, pp. 46-47. From the poem "The Wife and Widow."

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 5

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁹ For an example of this conventional reading, see Sydney Ahistrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, 1972), pp. 1020-1026.

²⁰ See Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Discovery* (New York, 1966), p. 284.

²¹ Archives. Articles and Manuscripts Vol. 1, No. 10063, pp. 166-7.

²² *The Quimby Manuscripts*, ed. Horatio W. Dresser (New York: Julian Press, 1961), p. 388.

²³ Holl, *op. cit.*, pp. 463-4.

²⁴ Archives. V03350. Letter of April 24, 1864.

²⁵ *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston, 1906), p. 547.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

²⁷ Mary Baker Eddy, *Retrospection and Introspection* (Boston, 1892), p. 24.

²⁸ Mary Baker Eddy, *Miscellaneous Writings 1883-1896* (Boston, 1896), p. 24.

²⁹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Garden City, New York; 1902), pp. 500, 475-6.

³⁰ Cf. his statement about scientific laws: "These laws are fixed, and inherent in the nature of things...they are not to be suspended, nor repealed to suit [one's] convenience." Longyear 134-135. "The Perfectibility of Human Nature."

³¹ See the discussion of this point in the essay "Who Is God?" *Ecumenical Papers: Contributions to Interfaith Dialogue* (Boston, 1969), pp. 26-35.

³² Archives. F00032. M. B. Glover to Miss Martha D. Rand, *op. cit.*

³³ Robert Peel, *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Trial* (New York, 1971), p. 367n52.

³⁴ *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, op. cit.*, pp. xi, 134-5.

³⁵ Adoniram J. Gordon, *The Ministry of Healing, or Miracles of Cure in All Ages* (New York, 1882), pp. 43-44.

³⁶ Longyear. 601-217. Albert Baker to Mary Baker, March 27, 1837: "Though I may differ with you in all these matters of belief, it is far from my wish to discountenance religion. Indeed, in my view, a woman can hardly live without it..."

³⁷ *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, op. cit.*, p. 118.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³⁹ Mary Baker Eddy, *No and Yes* (Boston, 1908), p. 4.

⁴⁰ *The Philosophy of Jonathan Edwards from His Private Notebooks* ed. Harvey G. Townsend (Eugene, Oregon; 1955), p. 46.

⁴¹ “‘Christian Science’ and Science,” Editor’s Table, *Popular Science Monthly* Vol. 5 (August, 1897), p. 555.

⁴² Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, *op. cit.*, p. 342. Emphasis added.