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This lovely bellshelter stands at Weston Priory in Vermont; the bell sounds daily, calling all to prayer. We thought it an apt symbol for this, our vocation issue, for the very word vocation comes from a Latin word meaning a summons or call. Traditionally, the Church has used the word to mean both the call each of us has to serve God, and the more specialized call to the priesthood and religious life. Our issue this month features articles about that second meaning—seminarians preparing for priesthood in Miami, monks in Vermont and Sisters who serve round the world. Their lives are reminders that the Church still needs men and women to serve as priests and in religious life; in addition, they challenge us to examine our own ways of serving Christ.

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Mary Baker Eddy founded neither a faith-healing cult nor a Protestant sect but a system to right our relationship with God

FOR THOSE WHO stand outside it, Christian Science is a religion shrouded by mysterious metaphysics and obscured by two major misconceptions: that it is a faith-healing cult and/or that it is one more branch on the tree of Protestantism.

In reality, it is neither. And while it is radically different from Catholicism (and from Protestantism as well) in both form and content, it can teach us much about the endless possibilities that exist for human beings who seek—and find—God.

Ecumenical dialogue is usually undertaken by those traditions which are closest and whose divisions are therefore less radical (such as the current, very fruitful Catholic-Lutheran and Catholic-Anglican dialogues). It is easy for those in the mainstream to relate to each other, since they begin with so much already in common.

It is a far greater challenge to attempt to discover the bases for dialogue with the very unusual forms of Christianity. Upon examination, we find the unusual churches have unusual gifts of great potential value for us all. This very introductory look at Christian Science is a simple beginning response to the very demanding challenge of the potential ecumenical interrelation of Science with the other churches.

With her initial realization of Christian Science in 1866, Mary Baker Eddy synthesized many and varied elements in her life to formulate a religion, eventually so well integrated that it has stood virtually unaltered since her death in 1910. Its survival is especially noteworthy in light of the controversy and opposition it engendered from its inception. People often mistrust what they do not understand, and Christian Science, with its emphasis on the spiritual and negation of the physical, its patent refusal to rely on medicine, and its departure from traditional Christian positions, seemed to some an enigma and a threat.

Over the past century, Christian Science has earned respect, first by sheer longevity (time tends to lend respectability to the most radical

movements and philosophies), by the journalistic world leadership exercised by Mrs. Eddy's best known undertaking, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and by the simple, quiet dignity of its churches, its publications and its members' lives.

Still, it is fair to say that, across the board, Christian Science is little understood and, worse, often misunderstood. Its truths are neither easily synopsized nor quickly communicated. Yet, Mrs. Eddy's scientific system of faith is precisely a *system*, capable of being intellectually grasped. A Scientist, or active member, is always thought of as a *student*, and reads and studies daily, confident that God is knowable, as revealed through the Bible as interpreted by Mrs. Eddy's textbook, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*.

She herself writes, "Christian Science requires understanding instead of belief; it is based on a fixed eternal and divine principle, wholly apart from mortal conjecture, and it must be understood, otherwise it cannot be correctly accepted and demonstrated."

For non-Scientists, any attempt to understand the system is, in a sense, hampered by its very cohesion. Just as one does not expect to find options in nuclear physics, one cannot expect to find them here. The structure of this religion, aptly called Science, parallels the structure of any other science; it lacks flexibility because each piece is closely linked to others and makes sense only in conjunction with the other pieces.

A New Hampshire native, raised by strict Congregationalist parents, the young Mary Baker was never a stranger to spiritual interests or physical distress. Shortly after marriage, she lost her husband while expecting their first child and was so ill after the baby's birth that his care had to be undertaken by another woman who subsequently raised him as her own. Acquainted with grief and disappointments and prone to chronic ailments, Mrs. Eddy sought physical healing through various channels, including the then-popular homeopathic medicine. But when

she was spontaneously healed following a serious fall in 1866, she constructed a religious system based on an understanding of healing unlike any other. Christian Science regards healing not as a cure for bodily ills, but as spiritual regeneration, a setting aright of man's relationship with God. To call Christian Science a "faith healing" is supremely ironic, for it has nothing to do with the faith—or lack of it—of either the subject or the healer. These are not healings grounded in power of suggestion, hypnosis, or the strength of one human will or personality exerted over another. The subject need not express belief in the healer's power in order to be healed. If he seeks help from a Christian Science practitioner, "it is the healer's understanding of the operations of the divine principle, and his application thereof" which heals him. The subject need only realize that physical sickness is an illusion of the mind, an error; for man, as God created him, is spirit just as God is spirit, and so is "incapable of sickness." To recognize the error of materiality and grasp the truth of the "allness of spirit" puts an end to the error and, so, the sickness.

It is for this reason that Scientists disdain the use of medicine—because for them the root of all sickness is fear and error. To treat the illness is to acknowledge it as real and to defeat oneself by prolonging the material misconception of reality.

This view of healing has nothing to do with *faith* as we commonly think of it. It has to do with *understanding*, and living, the truth.

"Truth is immortal," writes Mrs. Eddy, "error is mortal. Truth is limitless; error is limited. Truth is intelligent; error is nonintelligent. Moreover, truth is real and error is unreal. This last statement contains the point you will most reluctantly admit, although first and last it is the most important to understand."

The entire issue of reality versus unreality is the crux of Christian Science, and the root of its confusion for those outside it. It is important to understand that Scientists do not close their eyes to what *is*, but see beyond it. They believe that there is a vast differ-

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ence between "God's man and Adam's man"; that human nature can be improved, evil is not inevitable, spiritual resources are boundless; that the "real man" as God created him is perfect, upright and free, and need only arrive at and live out that realization of spiritual selfhood.

None of this is easy to grasp. Much of it flies in the face of our common understanding. Yet we must realize that there is nothing fanatical about the Christian Science position. It is aligned with the basic alternative position in Western philosophy for thousands of years.

From Mrs. Eddy's viewpoint, the apparent materiality of the world is simply not real, but a form of error or illusion. This stance is reminiscent of eighteenth-century idealism, schools of neo-Platonism, and nineteenth-century American transcendentalism, as well as echoing elements of the traditions of India. These philosophies, espoused by respectable thinkers, have failed to take hold in the West (either in general intellectual circles or the market place). Yet they are valid views. Christian Science is radically antimaterialist, denying a materialist interpretation of existence, because all reality comes from one cause, God, who is not matter.

Even the empirical sciences, it should be noted, are not dealing with matter as *reality*, but only with observed *appearances*, and all statements are approximations about those appearances. The double helix model of DNA, for example, is not an actual



The first church, built in 1886, Oconto, Wisconsin, is still used

and Christian Scientists raise the issue anew, as they deny the existence of evil, of matter itself—asserting that the spiritual order of being is the only one and that what we perceive as the material order (our own "model construct") is merely a misapprehension of it. This is not escapism or insanity; this is a rigorously defined philosophical stance.

Mrs. Eddy taught that God is Spirit and his creation is Spiritual. He made us in his own image and likeness, as Genesis recounts. The Genesis story also refers to Adam's deep sleep, a reference, Mrs. Eddy says, to our false

comes from God which is not God-like. Divine Mind produces divine idea; a true human being is a divine idea and must reflect in all things appropriately human only that which is appropriate to God.

Evil, sickness, death and deceit are not products of a perfect God. If he did not create them, if they cannot be ascribed to him, it follows that they do not exist, for he created everything that is. But, Mrs. Eddy stressed, this is not to say that they do not seem real. The "only reality of sin, sickness or death," she writes, "is the awful fact that unrealities seem real to human, erring belief, until God strips off their disguises."

We tend to see aspects of humanness that are erroneous, she claims, such as three-dimensional reality. St. Paul himself said, perhaps with exasperation, "Flesh and blood have no part in that kingdom." When the error ceases—imagining that flesh and blood are the human condition—we can glimpse man as the immortal image of God. When early Christians were fed to the lions, it hurt. The romanticized Bible-movie versions of such events are absurd: it takes x number of minutes to die in such a way and it is agony. But on a deeper level of perception, the Christians transcended merely physical death, for they knew they were even then coming into the fullness of their resurrected life.

The people who seek Christian Sci-

Christianity, says Mrs. Eddy,
was not a creed, a gift from a ritualistic God,
but a system to overcome the false claims of matter

replica. If one could see DNA under a microscope, it would not look like the model, for the model is a mathematical construct.

Even in the most precise of sciences, then, things are not always what they seem. Mrs. Eddy is saying that what we see may not be what *is*. The Hindus ponder the idea that the dreamer dreams the dream, yet the dreamer himself may be a dream. Is what we call waking actually a dream? Philosophers, East and West, have wrestled with that conundrum for centuries;

concept of creation, that of sinful mortals in a matter world, not "real" man as made by God. Scientists point out that nowhere is it mentioned that Adam awoke, and perhaps we are all still dreaming the "Adam-dream" and will until awakened by the Christ, the living Truth!

Mrs. Eddy also taught that it is not possible to ascribe anything of disharmony to the author of harmony, who is God. Everything that comes forth from God, the one and only Cause, is directly reflective of God. Nothing

ence healing do so because they experience pain; but the pain is not reality, and when they recognize its unreality, it ceases to hurt them. This is not auto-suggestion, they maintain. This is understanding that God created man minus a capacity for sickness and when one fully grasps that, he is exempt from it.

As the Scientist principle of healing sets it apart from faith healing, so does its fundamental theology set it apart from mainstream Christianity. Indeed, Christian Science does not even fit comfortably under the wide umbrella of Protestantism, for it conflicts with tenets shared by most denominations.

Christian orthodoxy generally holds that God created man; man fell from grace, but was redeemed by Jesus Christ and can now work out salvation and attain eternal life.

Christian Science teaches that God created man, not as body and soul, but as eternal spirit. "Adam's man," mortal man living in a matter world, is a misapprehension of this real man, who is incapable of sinning. Mrs. Eddy was convinced God would not create man capable of sinning, then punish him for doing so.

On the subject of Jesus, Scientists hold an unusual view. They separate Jesus and the Christ. Mrs. Eddy rejected the idea of a trinitarian God (at least as popularly misunderstood as three separate entities), but ascribed to Divine Principle three offices—Life, Truth and Love. As Catholics, we might equate those with belief in Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but they are

not identical viewpoints. Mrs. Eddy defined God as "incorporeal, divine, supreme, Infinite Mind, Spirit, Soul, Principle, Truth, Love." For her, the Christ was the Truth, always present to us, needing only to be recognized and tapped. Jesus of Nazareth best exemplified the Christ, so well, in fact, that the names are linked forever, but Jesus was not divine, she said.

Mrs. Eddy taught that he was a man, born of a virgin, "the offspring of Mary's self-conscious communion with God." He was "born of a woman" and "partook partly of Mary's earthly condition, although he was endowed with the Christ, the divine Spirit, without measure. This accounts for his struggles in Gethsemane and on Calvary and this enabled him to be the mediator or way-shower between God and man."

Mrs. Eddy also stressed that it was not what Jesus said, but what he did that challenges us to emulate him. Christian Scientists emphasize the works of Jesus, because they believe his triumph is possible to all.

"Jesus," writes Mrs. Eddy, "walked on the waters, fed the multitude, healed the sick and raised the dead in direct opposition to material laws. His acts were the demonstration of science, overcoming the false claims of material sense or law."

She rejects the belief that Jesus lived, suffered and died as a surrogate or delegate, a sacrificial lamb who ransomed us. Each person must "take up the cross" and follow Christ, she maintained, finding his own spiritual self-

hood and doing what Jesus did.

"Christianity as Jesus taught it," Mrs. Eddy points out, "was not a Creed, not a system of ceremonies, not a special gift from a ritualistic Jehovah; but it was the demonstration of divine love casting out error and healing the sick, not merely in the name of Christ or Truth, but in demonstration of Truth: . . ." These words are significant when we consider the religion she founded and the organized church she finally, reluctantly, formed.

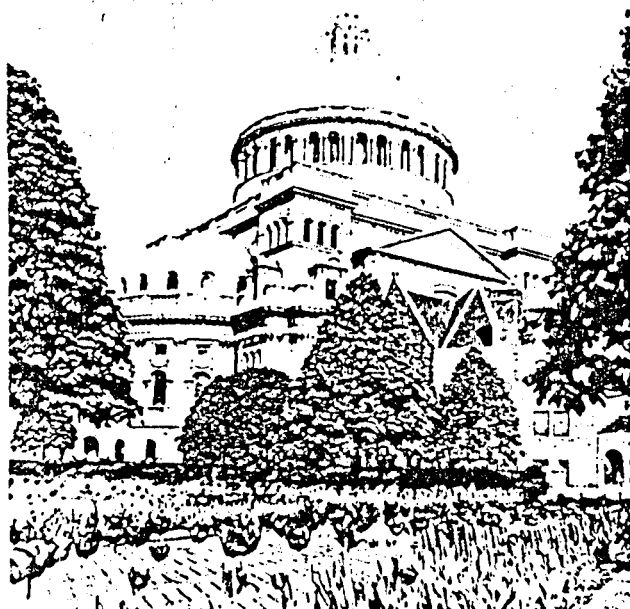
Hesitant to institutionalize Christian Science, she did so only because it was necessary for its survival; but she felt strongly that the institution must serve the ideal.

She defined church as "the structure of Truth and Love; whatever rests upon and proceeds from Divine Principle." The Church, she said further, "is that institution which affords proof of its utility and is found elevating the race, rousing the dormant understanding from material beliefs to the apprehension of spiritual ideas and the demonstration of divine science, thereby casting out devils, or error, and healing the sick."

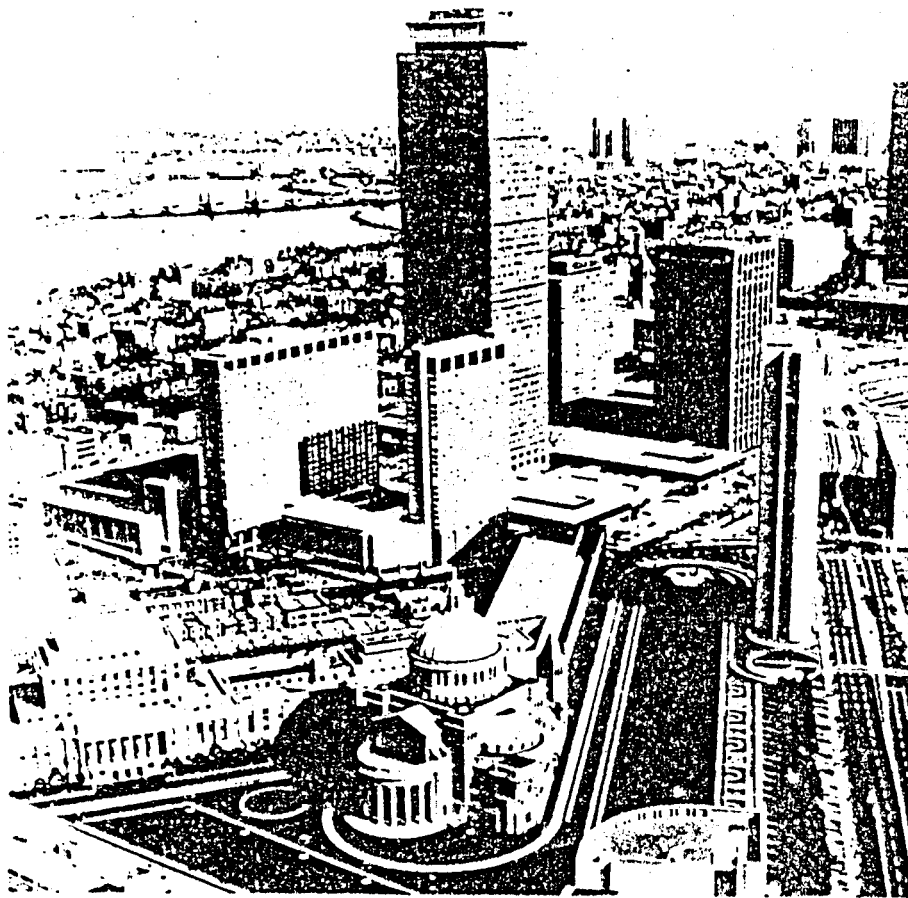
Elsewhere she observed, somewhat tartly, "Our proper reason for church edifices is that in them Christians may worship God—not that Christians may worship church edifices."

Reluctant though she was to organize Christian Science into a denomination, once she decided it was necessary, she did it so thoroughly that it continues to function seventy years after she herself "passed to realms of higher understanding." It is governed by a board of directors which fills its own ranks. Membership numbers are impossible to obtain, for no public statistics are made available, but the ranks of Scientists remain strong enough to support such major undertakings as *The Christian Science Monitor*.

Christian Science has no ordained ministry, no ritual, no ceremony. We might think of it as a very austere form of worship. The active Scientist daily reads and prayerfully considers a Lesson-Sermon (set forth from selections from the Bible and correlated portions of *Science and Health* by Mrs. Eddy)—human mind reflecting Divine Mind. On Sunday mornings, in simple but handsome churches, Scientists come together for a solemn reading aloud of the materials in which they



Boston is the headquarters of Christian Science. The Mother Church was completed in 1896. The Extension—the domed building—was dedicated in 1906.



The publishing center (left) and the Sunday School building (lower right)

have immersed themselves. There is no personal preaching and but a modicum of group prayer. Mrs. Eddy believed that communion takes place in the heart and that baptism is an ongoing process of regeneration. "Healing is the best sermon, the best lecture, and the entire demonstration of Christian Science," she wrote at one point. At another, she said, "To my sense, the Sermon on the Mount, read each Sunday without comment and obeyed throughout the week, would be enough for Christian practice."

There is in Science a rigid prohibition against proliferating church organizations, which serves to "keep the church lean" and to draw Scientists into active participation in appropriate social movements outside the Church. Sunday School children learn the Lord's Prayer (and its meaning according to Christian Science) and the Ten Commandments, but they then go straight into children's versions of the Lesson-Sermon. There is thus no traumatic transition from the child's faith-world to that of the adult.

Despite her steadfast opposition to any personal devotion to her, Christian

Scientists still adhere to the rules and regulations laid down by Mrs. Eddy, a testimony to her organizational skill and her influence. Yet, as in anything human, there must be continuing progress and development or stagnation. Mrs. Eddy herself was revising her textbook to the very end, but today's Scientists must grapple with the question: How to authentically enhance the tight coherence of Science, yet find ways for reaching out and updating?

The first century of its existence has indicated that Christian Science is not a universal call, and its adherents must explore ways in which they can leaven society and maximize their influence and impact. It is important for us as Catholics (and, ecumenically, to all Christians) that they do, lest we be deprived of what they have to offer—and they have much to offer us.

First of all, as with all other religious systems, there is the gift of heightened perspective that comes from taking a long look at something different. Regardless of how unexpected some stances are, at the very least they help us to see what divergent possibilities exist. A system like Christian Science,

so pragmatic, so scientific—and so fascinatingly American—can prod us to rethink what we believe, not that we might reject or revise it, but that we might invest it with richer meanings, and see it in new dimensions.

All of that would be true, even if it were discovered that there was nothing directly pertinent in Christian Science, nothing we could relate to our own experience. But, in fact, there are areas in which there are positive points of contact between Science and Catholicism. One is the perspective on mysticism which Science provides us. The word itself too often connotes a nebulous subjectivity (and so Mrs. Eddy rejected the word lest it be misleading); but Christian Science offers a mysticism devoid of mistiness. Scientists build their spiritual life on a foundation of faith as the derivative of experience. Many Christians tend to confuse faith with trust; they trust that the *apostles experienced* what they said they did and told the truth about it. Scientists test themselves to see if they are in the faith by whether they *experience* Christ in themselves (as St. Paul insists, 2 Cor. 13:5). For them, faith is not to be a security blanket; it does not mean there are no questions, but rather that there is a solid rock of experience beneath their feet. Faith is not a jump into the dark, with fingers crossed and the hope somebody is going to be there; it is grounded on experience. They measure their growth in faith by how well they demonstrate what they understand.

Interestingly, if a medieval monk were to meet a modern Christian Scientist as the latter studied his weekly Lesson-Sermon, the monk would identify immediately with him. The Scientist's daily reflective study resembles that of the monk's daily meditation of sacred texts, called *lectio divina* ("divine study"). Both meditate on the words, hoping to reach beyond them to the reality they signify. This is a point of contact historically, perhaps; but it is also a reminder that for a Christian in search of God, intellect is a tool not to be feared or exalted, for beyond intellectual knowledge there is the insight that comes with prayer. While Mrs. Eddy called her system Science, and organized it in a logical, coherent fashion, it is first of all a religion, and as such, it affords another valuable view of prayer.

The Scientist prays in willing depen-

dence on God, seeking not to change God's mind but to bring human mind into accord with Divine Mind, to reach an understanding of Truth. He prays in a spirit of surrender, never asking for specific things or solutions. Even in healing, the Scientist does not pray for a "cure" but, rather, recognizes and acknowledges the will of God, that all be in harmony, and embraces it. If their prayers are "answered," then it is no surprise, no oddity, but only the natural order of things. "Miracles," as Mrs. Eddy points out, "are no infraction of God's laws; on the contrary, they fulfill his laws; for they are the signs following Christianity, whereby matter is proven powerless and subordinate to Mind."

In addition to these insights into mysticism and prayer, Christian Scientists offer us their example, as people living out their beliefs in a difficult setting. Active members shun alcohol and tobacco, seeking to free themselves from all forms of materialism. They reject gambling, believing in a divine law in which accidents or "chance" are unknown. They strive daily to grow in knowledge of God.

One of the difficulties with Christian Science today is some of its vocabulary. Essentially it is the English used at a particular period in time and, as such, its meanings are sometimes not evident. It is, in a way, like any scientific jargon, with definitions being arbitrarily assigned, to the exclusion of others. The terms "animal magnetism"

Mary Baker Eddy developed her system in 1866, after a spontaneous healing



or "chemicalization," for instance, are so tied to certain nineteenth-century interests that they are difficult to grasp.

The fact is that Mrs. Eddy was known to spend hours, even days, seeking to phrase a point precisely; and she was endlessly revising the textbook, which went through numerous editions. Yet, this same vocabulary enriches us in our understanding of our own faith, as in the use of the phrase—

*Peel
III
p. 95*

"Healing is the best sermon, the best lecture, and the entire demonstration of Christian Science," wrote Mary Baker Eddy

"Father-Mother God." Designed to express the tenderness of God, the term reminds us in the twentieth century that we cannot cling to the image of a purely paternalistic deity. (Mrs. Eddy also notes that "God made them, male and female," and they were "in his image and likeness.")

For Catholics, who weigh celibacy against marriage, Mrs. Eddy's teaching offers more food for thought. She called marriage "the legal and moral provision for generation among humankind" and viewed it as a human, not a spiritual institution. Marriages are not performed by the Christian Science church, since there are no ordained ministers; but she did stipulate that members be wed by ordained clergymen of other denominations. She recognized the potential of marriage for enriching human experience, and she never said or implied that celibates were in any way "superior" to their married counterparts. In this she reminds us of the Catholic position that both states are holy. But Jesus said that in the resurrection there would be neither marrying nor giving in marriage; there would be a life different from the one we have now. Those who embrace celibacy here and now (chosen celibacy, not simple bachelorhood or spinsterhood) are supposed to be doing so for everyone, not just themselves. Their unusual gift is to witness to the fullness of resurrected life. Mrs. Eddy recognized that, and her views on marriage offer a provocative look at the issue of how to relate different levels of spirituality to life, sexuality, death and transfiguration.

Whatever else a religion offers its

people, perhaps its greatest measure is how it equips and prepares them to meet life's final crisis—*death*. Cynics might ask how Scientists can persist in their belief that they can overcome sickness and death, when even their foundress died. But Mrs. Eddy never expected that she would not pass through the transition we call death. She felt that mankind collectively had not achieved sufficient spiritual perfection to conquer that ultimate ene-

my, although that is not to say it will never be conquered. Indeed, she taught that the person lives on, continuing to strive for perfection after "death" and that what appears to be an ending is merely a passing, ascending to a realm of higher understanding.

"Life is deathless," she wrote: "Life is the origin and ultimate of man, never attainable through death, but gained by walking in the pathway of Truth, both before and after that which is called death."

No sketchy analysis of Christian Science, however respectful or well-intentioned, can communicate it adequately, any more than the nuances of Catholicism could be captured for non-Catholics in a single written effort. But even an overview can suggest some of the uniqueness of the faith and an awareness of the amazing gift that was Mary Baker Eddy's. A simple New Englander of eclectic education, she set forth truths she believed were divinely revealed to her through intense study and reflection, and articulated them with such care and thoroughness that they bear fruit a century later.

Much maligned in her lifetime, she is remembered today for the words she wrote and the Church she founded. Whatever the present and future state of Christian Science, Mrs. Eddy's contributions cannot be underestimated. If she changed a single life, she may have changed thousands of lives, and in either case, who can say she did not change the world? As she said herself, "It is of comparatively little importance what a man thinks or believes he knows; the good that a man does is the . . . sole proof of rightness." ■