
Christian Scientists and the Medical Profession: A Historical Perspective

Thomas C. Johnsen

“**T**he Christian Scientists—what shall we do with them?” a South Carolina physician asked at a meeting of the state Medical Association in 1899.¹ Many doctors have echoed this question since—sometimes in exasperation, often in bemusement, occasionally with genuine interest. The religious movement founded by Mary Baker Eddy more than a century ago not only persists, but continues to defy easy categorization. The ministry of spiritual healing for which the movement is most widely known remains controversial, and is still widely misunderstood.

In recent years various mainstream Christian denominations, partly in response to the Christian Scientists’ example, have given fresh consideration to the place of healing in religious life. The upsurge in the last decade of fundamentalist faith healing practices, though differing radically from Christian Science, has aroused serious concerns about the legal basis for toleration of such practices in a religiously diverse and scientifically oriented society. Several highly publicized court cases have drawn attention to these issues. Yet much of the current discussion of these issues, pro and con, has gone on in a historical vacuum, with little attention to the background from which present positions have emerged. Awareness of the evolution and growth of Christian Science healing is useful in understanding the issues being raised today.

Christian Science first came to prominence in the late nineteenth century, when the profession of medicine was in transition. The revolution in medical education, symbolized by the founding of Johns Hopkins Medical School in 1893, was well under way but not yet firmly established. Considerable progress had been made in clinical diagnostic techniques, but there had been much less advancement in actual treatment. Immunology was an emerging discipline, though still suspect in certain quarters; diphtheria antitoxin had come into use in the 1890s but still met with resistance from some doctors. The war the American Medical Association had been waging on competing “irregular” medical sects, primarily homeopaths and eclectics, had reached an uneasy standoff with the granting to the latter of equal representation on state medical boards. The two main irregular sects had risen in protest against the excesses of conventional “heroic” therapies which are today considered useless, if not worse.

In the eyes of the American Medical Association, the rise of Christian Science at that time simply added one more to the list of irregular medical sects with which it was contending. Despite its emphasis on healing, however, the new religious teaching was not primarily a reaction to nineteenth-century medical practices. Christian Science was, and still is, a religion first and foremost. Its primary “mission” has always

been a spiritual and moral one. The healing of the sick is seen as a phase of a more comprehensive religious ministry, a product of spiritual regeneration and communion with God. The founding purpose of the Church of Christ, Scientist, in 1879 reflected this order of priority: to “reinstat[e] primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing.”²

The phrase “primitive Christianity” reflected the denomination’s biblical orientation, but did not mean either a literal approach to Scripture or rejection of modern scientific inquiry. As the name suggests, Christian Science teaches that spiritual healing itself must be understood “scientifically,” and considered more than just an unexplained miracle.

Christian Scientists reject the term “faith healing” as misleading. As the original Boston congregation expanded into a national and international movement, the sociological profile of the membership also belied traditional stereotypes of faith healers: its ranks included physicists, lawyers, Harvard professors—even a sprinkling of defectors from the American Medical Association.

The beginnings of the movement were inauspicious. Mary Baker Eddy, a New England woman of average education but extraordinary religious intensity, attributed the basis for her teaching to an apparent experience of healing following an accidental fall on ice in 1866. Eddy had had a long history of chronic illness dating back to childhood. Family physicians had told her she had “spinal inflammation,” a common medical diagnosis of her time. Like other women of her day driven to their beds by their physical and emotional complaints, she sought relief through a variety of popular remedies—the Graham system bread-and-water diet, homeopathy, mesmerism, hydropathy. In the early 1860s she consulted a “magnetic” healer from Maine named Phineas Quimby, whose methods of suggestion benefitted her only temporarily but whose influence reinforced her already growing convictions about the mental origins of disease.

Her pivotal religious experience came after Quimby’s death and represented a turning point in both her health and her life. Thirty years later, when Eddy recalled how she had recovered from injuries incurred in the fall, the embarrassed homeopathic physician who had attended the case came forward to dispute the severity of her injuries. But the physician’s own recollections proved inconsistent with independent evidence produced by the testimony of witnesses and the account of the accident that had appeared two days afterwards in the local newspaper.³

Whatever the circumstances, Eddy was convinced that she had recovered from her accident because of a spiritual experience quite distinct from suggestion. “The divine hand led me into a new world of light and Life, a fresh universe. . . .”⁴ She interpreted the experience as one of “revelation,” of spiritual “discovery.” But she rejected the conventional religious concept of healing as a personal charisma or gift. Her efforts to understand the nature of the healing process resulted in the first edition of the Christian Science

Thomas C. Jobnsen is an editorial associate at the Church of Christ Scientist, in Boston. He graduated from Harvard and has a PhD in History from Johns Hopkins. He is currently working on an independent scholarly study of the religious and cultural roots of Christian Science.

textbook, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, in 1875. In later editions she offered 100 pages of letters from individuals recovered from accidents or disease through what they considered to be the influence of the new religious understanding they had gained from the book.

From the beginning, relations between Christian Scientists and the established medical community were mixed at best. Clara Barton, the nurse who founded the American Red Cross, was very much the exception in praising Christian Science and calling its leader the nation's "greatest woman."⁵ The medical press in general took the opposite view, and the fact that the movement was led by a female did nothing to enhance it in the profession's esteem. Doctors of the day dismissed Christian Science as merely the maunderings of a maladjusted female, offering an *ad hoc* diagnosis to reinforce the point: "deep-rooted neural instability, fraught with obsessions, phobias, imperative ideas, catalepsies and well-poised megalomania."⁶ Evidence produced in the last twenty-five years presents a more balanced picture of both the woman and the movement, but the temptation to dismiss Eddy as a neurotic has diverted attention from the essential religious nature of her teaching.

Her attitude toward the medical community belied the "faith healer" image. Though frank about her differences with traditional medicine and critical of medical phariseism, she was not in any sense a "doctor-hater." In spite of—or perhaps because of—her strong views on healing, she respected the humanitarianism of physicians and seemed to identify with the motives if not the methods of the profession. Some of her followers took a more dogmatic attitude, but she generally set an example of conciliation rather than confrontation. In 1908, when a neighborhood hospital suffered serious financial difficulties, without fanfare she donated \$500 to help keep the doors open. As a Chicago surgeon, Dr. Edmund Andrews, observed, "For one engaged in a great theologic and medical storm-center [she] seems remarkably free from the spite and animosity common among persons thus situated."⁷

The storms were nevertheless intense. In the thirty years after 1890, medical organizations, alarmed by the growing popularity of Christian Science, crusaded actively for legal suppression of its practice. This was seen partly as a public health issue; partly, one Pennsylvania physician admitted, as a matter of maintaining "professional self respect" in a social environment in which doctors' status and authority were still relatively insecure.⁸ In some respects, the campaign resembled earlier battles waged by physicians against homeopaths and eclectics, but in this case traditional and non-traditional physicians alike readily "joined hands over the chasm and forgot all their differences in the endeavor to stamp out the new school."⁹

At first the legal conflict focused on the issue at the center of the profession's earlier battles—medical licensing. As early as 1887 a Christian Scientist in Dubuque, Iowa, was arrested and twice tried on charges of practicing medicine without a license under the

terms of the state's medical practice act. The sole treatment she had employed was prayer; the case was finally dismissed, but it was the first of a nationwide series of prosecutions brought at the urging of state and local medical societies. Ironically, in the Dubuque trial, the defendant's patient was unmistakably healed according to her own testimony, but unhappily for the defendant the judge ruled this testimony inadmissible as evidence.¹⁰

Medical societies argued that Christian Science was by legal definition the practice of medicine, and that its practitioners could therefore be prosecuted under existing medical quackery laws. Many doctors believed, as one put it, that the Christian Scientist should be dealt with "as a bogus medical practitioner of the worst type."¹¹ Under this assumption, the spread of the movement could be halted by forcing its practitioners to conform to the training and licensing requirements set by state medical boards for conventional physicians. And, if the Christian Scientist did not conform, added the counsel for the New York Medico-Legal Society, "should not he be incarcerated in a prison or a madhouse where the community may be safe from him in the future?"¹²

It was by no means certain to anyone, or to the courts, that Christian Scientists were either criminal or insane. Many who disavowed belief in the denomination's teaching urged tolerance precisely on the ground that its converts were not marginal types but, "as a general thing," responsible and intelligent citizens respected in their communities.¹³ When the Reverend E. M. Buswell, a Christian Science healer in Beatrice, Nebraska, was brought to trial in 1894, the defense attorney called on several of the county's most solid citizens to speak in his behalf and reminded the jurors that they had long known him as a neighbor: "You gentlemen of the jury, know he is a man whose personal character is above reproach; a man who has lived among us for a score of years, identified with the country's growth, with all that is best in the country, morally and every other way, a man against whom naught can be said. . . ."¹⁴

The strategy of aggressive prosecution sometimes backfired and generated public sympathy instead of derision. In one incident, a young woman Christian Scientist was arrested, "dragged to a police station, and disrobed and searched like a thief" after agreeing to pray for a pretended sick man sent as a "spy"—prompting an outraged local newspaper to ask caustically, "What did the police expect to find on Miss R—, dangerous Bible texts . . . ?"¹⁵ Christian Scientists themselves professed no quarrel with doctors over the "legitimate endeavor to repress medical quackery" but considered their religious ministry in an entirely different category.¹⁶ Eddy was content to see her movement "rise or fall on its own merit or demerit," she stated, but not to see the conscientious practice of spiritual healing prohibited on false grounds.¹⁷

Specifically, Christian Scientists held that their ministrations for the sick simply did not constitute the practice of medicine. Healing in Christian Science was—whatever one thought of its merits—a part of

the process of worship. Eddy wrote in *Science and Health* that healing was rooted in "that recognition of infinite Love which alone confers the healing power. . . . If we would open their prison doors for the sick, we must first learn to bind up the broken-hearted."¹⁸

Practitioners of Christian Science used no drugs, performed no surgery or physical manipulations, attempted no medical diagnoses. The heart of their ministry was prayer, which Eddy viewed not as a request for favor or intercession but as a yielding to a deeper, spiritual order of reality. The purpose of prayer was therefore not to "change the Science of being" but to "bring us into harmony with it"¹⁹; not to "change God, nor bring His designs into mortal modes," but to "change our modes and false sense of Life, Love, and Truth, uplifting us to Him."²⁰ Eddy's viewpoint was holistic in its emphasis on the mental constituents of health and disease, but she distinguished between prayer and contemporary "mind cure" techniques. This reflected her interpretation of the New Testament rather than a belief that cure could be attained through the psychology of positive thinking.

The courts in general agreed that the Christian Scientists made no claim to be medical doctors and should not be so charged. The Buswell trial was the exception: The jury decided for acquittal, but the state Supreme Court overturned the verdict with an argument condemning the theology of Christian Science. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* called the decision a "too long deferred blow" at these "irreverent charlatans."²¹ In other states, however, the higher courts dismissed similar charges.

The most important single ruling came in a unanimous opinion handed down in 1898 by the Supreme Court of Rhode Island in *The State v. Mylod*, which affirmed that prayer in Christian Science could not be mistaken for the practice of medicine in any "ordinary sense and meaning" of the term.²² This decision served as a precedent and came to be regarded by the legal community as "more in harmony with the spirit of our institutions" than the earlier judgment in Nebraska.²³

The court rulings in favor of allowing Christian Scientists to continue their practices were troublesome

to medical organizations. The new movement could not be considered comparable to irregular healing sects and there were no other religious groups in precisely the same category. The Christian Scientists were unique in their approach to spiritual healing and they had documented success. Was such healing merely a pious anachronism? What was its place in an increasingly technological age? These questions were not readily answered in a society in love with technology but also deeply grounded in religious ideals.

The immediate question for the medical community in 1910 was how to respond to the nearly 100,000 followers of Christian Science. Public policy was unclear.

Some favored allowing Christian Scientists freedom of practice while others felt they should be unqualifiedly restricted. Opinions differed inside as well as outside the medical profession on the proper dividing line between individual choice and state authority.

The battles over the legal standing of spiritual healing extended from the courts to state legislatures. In some states as in Rhode Island following the Mylod case medical boards lobbied for legislation expressly banning the practice of Christian Science. Others wanted state statutes revised to expand the definition of the "practice of medicine" to include all forms of non-medical healing. This approach had the tactical advantage of appearing less discriminatory toward a particular religious group, though such measures could, in actuality, be almost as restrictive in their ultimate effect as a specific legal injunction. Mark Twain—no friend of Christian Science—noted ironically in 1903 that "if

the Second Advent should happen now," Jesus himself "could not heal the sick in the state of New York" under the medical practice acts then being proposed.²⁴

Medical societies in virtually every state worked vigorously to mobilize support for these enactments. The *Albany Morning Express* reported in 1899 that Philadelphia physicians planned "to commence a national war against the Christian Scientists," with its ultimate goal of persuading Congress to act against the group.²⁵ In New York several hundred physicians and a number of interested lawyers met at the Waldorf-



MARY BAKER EDDY with her book, *Science and Health*, in 1881. The Christian Science leader revised the book continually through many years to give her teaching clearer expression. The final edition counseled: "Students are advised by the author to be charitable and kind, not only towards differing forms of religion and medicine, but to those who hold these differing opinions."



**Excerpt from “Why I Became a Christian Scientist”
by Dr. Edmund Burton**

I was forced by my own healing to the conclusion that there was a power in Christian Science of which I had never taken account. My own changed condition convinced me that there was something in the system, and I was determined to find out what it was, although I had no thought at that time that it could take me out of my profession. I believed it to be a variety of suggestion or hypnotism and that I would be able to incorporate it with my medical knowledge and experience and so bring to others who had come under the same bondage from which I had suffered the relief that I had experienced. Suffice it to say I did not find just what I expected and many times I put *Science and Health* away with a feeling of impatience that the grain of truth which I felt must be there was obscured and buried by what seemed to me a mass of nonsense, but each time there would come back to me the fact that I was alive and well—better mentally than ever in my life—whereas there was the certainty from a medical point of view that I would have been dead and buried except for something told in that book, and I was fairly compelled to go back and search for the secret of the power that had given me not only life instead of death, but a life which seemed of value in place of one which had lost all worth. *DR. EDMUND F. BURTON, a surgeon and member of the AMA, became interested in Christian Science following a healing in 1905 of conditions deriving from severe drug dependency. Contrary to his own initial expectations, he eventually decided to leave his surgical practice after witnessing several further healings, entering the Christian Science practice in Los Angeles.*

Astoria hotel in the summer of 1899 to form a "Medical and Legal Relief Society." Their purpose was to lobby in the state legislature against Christian Scientists. The AMA went on record endorsing a Detroit physician's suggestion that candidates for the legislature be supported or opposed according to their position on the "legal toleration or recognition" of Christian Science—surely one of the more unusual political litmus tests in American history.²⁶

These efforts met with surprisingly little success, considering that the Christian Scientists were hardly a serious political force. Their membership in some states included moderately influential civic leaders, but they had neither the political clout nor the legislative connections of organized medicine. Their chief asset was probably the strength of their convictions about the efficacy of spiritual healing—convictions they defended vigorously.

The American tradition of tolerance worked in the denomination's behalf—and continues to do so—because of what a New York newspaper called the "cumulative" experience of the movement in its healing practice.²⁷ Many non-adherents who had witnessed healings of Christian Scientists in their own communities spoke out strongly against restrictive measures—in 1903 in Eddy's native New Hampshire, a bill outlawing the practice of Christian Science by name was voted down overwhelmingly even "before the Christian Scientists of the state had time to oppose it."²⁸

The issue was rarely settled so quickly in states where Christian Science was less familiar. Nevertheless, nearly every state legislature in the country had specifically rejected proscriptive proposals, sometimes on three or four occasions, by the decade after Eddy's death in 1910. In the few states where such measures were initially passed, governors actually vetoed them or they were revised in subsequent legislative sessions. In the wake of the court cases brought against Christian Science under medical licensing laws, many states incorporated explicit "saving" clauses into their codes affirming the legality of the practice of spiritual healing.

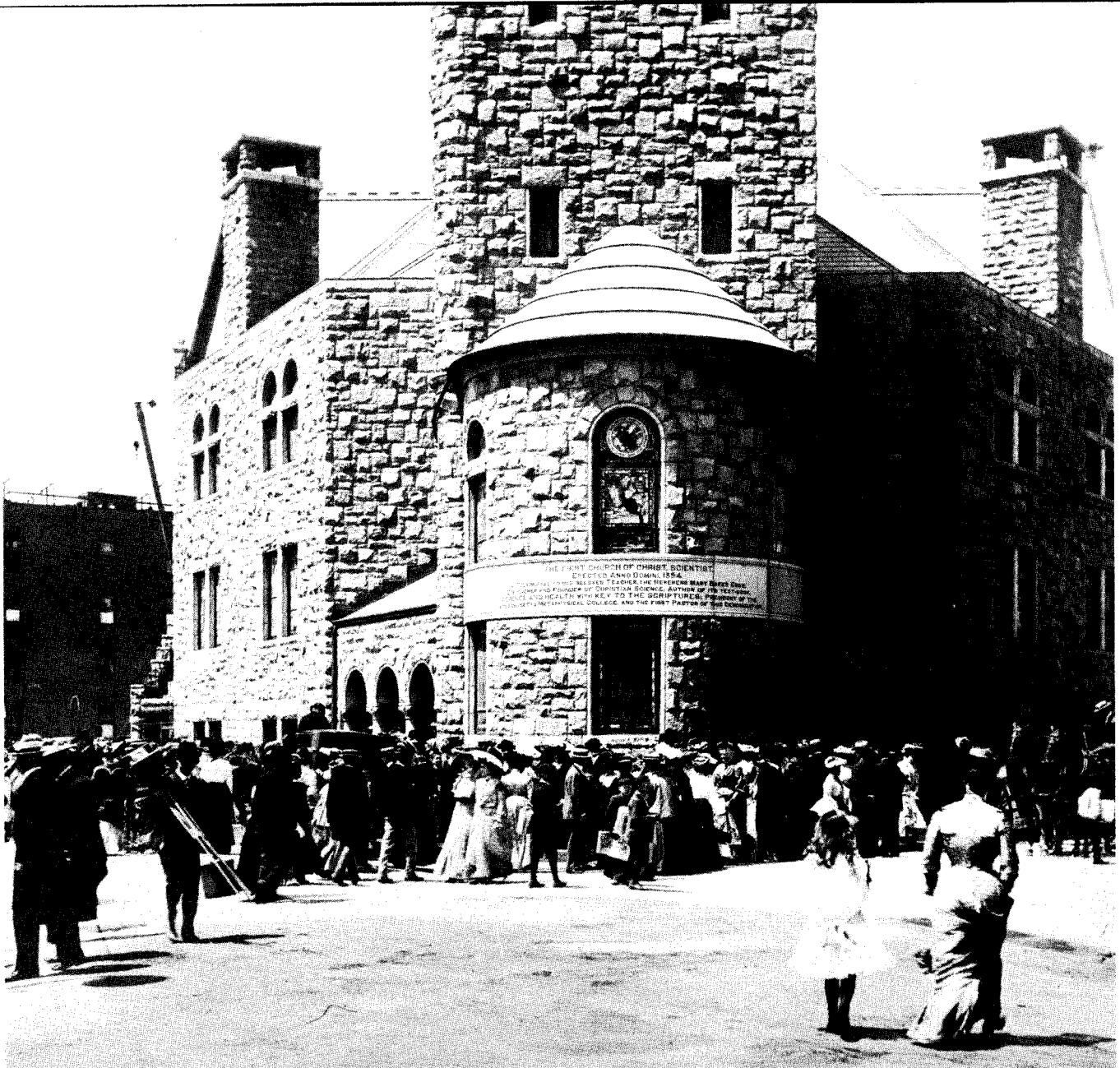
From the Christian Scientists' standpoint, such recognition was a matter of equitable treatment under the law, not of preferential legislation. As former Iowa Judge Clifford Smith explained in 1914, in *Christian Science: Its Legal Status*, they did not seek any "special privilege" or legal establishment of religion, but solely to preserve rights threatened by efforts to prohibit their system of healing.²⁹ The Smith book, probably the denomination's most thorough articulation of its position, was subtitled *A Defense of Human Rights*; the fact that the subtitle did not include the term, "religious rights" was significant, since Christian Scientists saw the issue under consideration as far more than a narrow Constitutional question, or even than merely one of religious freedom. Judge Smith acknowledged, in any case, that such freedom is not absolute, and that it involves not only rights but also responsibilities—what Christian Scientists could properly expect from society and what society could reasonably demand from them.

Christian Scientists saw due regard for public health

as a responsibility. In 1901 Eddy herself issued a statement instructing church members to diligently obey legal requirements on vaccination and reporting of suspected contagious conditions—citing Jesus' injunction to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's."³⁰ While the *JAMA* pronounced this statement an implicit "confession" of the failure of Christian Science, her student Alfred Farlow pointed out that it was consistent with the broad emphasis of her teaching of respect for the rights of others: "I readily concede that Christian Scientists must not attempt to set aside the laws which stand for the general good of any community." Farlow admitted that "there may be unwise and careless Christian Scientists, who do and say unwise things," but insisted that "such people would be unwise and careless" whatever church they belonged to and could not be taken as representative.³¹ In practice, the group's record of cooperation with public health authorities over many years has borne out the latter assertion.³²

The most difficult issues of responsibility then, as now, involved the care of children. Christian Scientists could understand the "honest opinion" of doctors on the necessity for medical treatment—most having earlier shared this opinion themselves.³³ They did not believe, a church official told the *New York Evening Telegram* in 1903, that a parent simply has the right to "sacrifice" a child "to his own belief. . . . I would state without reservation that he has no such right."³⁴ But neither did they feel that conscientious reliance on spiritual instead of medical means for healing should automatically be defined by the law as neglect. Their position, which sought a balance between parental and state responsibilities, received considerable support in the press, and eventually in the law. The newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst, a non-adherent, wrote about one "miracle" in which his own infant son, in critical condition because of a closed pylorus but considered too frail to survive an operation, was healed overnight after a Christian Science practitioner was called in as a last resort.³⁵ Similar experiences led other parents to feel the same kind of gratitude. Rightly or wrongly, Christian Scientists maintained that their overall record in the care of children was comparable to care rendered by others. They held that decisions on treatment of their own children should be left to the children's "natural guardians, who are at the bedside and to whom the little one's life means more than it does to all other persons."³⁶

When the distinguished medically trained philosopher William James broke with his peers to testify against a medical bill targeted at Christian Science in Massachusetts, he confided to a friend that he "never did anything that required as much moral effort" in his life. "Bah! I'm sick of the whole business," he wrote in 1898, "and I well know how all my colleagues at the Medical School, who go only by the label, will view me and my efforts." James found the prevailing "medical materialism" in the orthodox practice of the profession inadequate. He was neither versed in nor drawn to the theories of the Christian Scientists, but as an exponent of pragmatism in medicine as well as



The original edifice of the denomination's "Mother Church" in Boston, shown here not long after its opening.

philosophy he saw their "facts" as "startling" and did not wish to see closed a potential avenue of healing: "Why this mania for more laws? Why seek to stop the really extremely important experiences which these peculiar creatures are rolling up?"³⁷

Few critics charged that testimonies published in the church's periodicals were dishonest, but from a medical perspective they were hardly written with laboratory exactitude. By their nature they involved life situations rather than clinical case studies. Traditional doctors produced a veritable subgenre of popular articles "debunking" these testimonies and attributing the phenomena of healing to a standard litany of causal factors: time, suggestion, *vis medicatrix naturae*, the placebo effect, misdiagnosis, the power of will. The challenge to the profession, Dr. John Chadwick Oliver told colleagues in 1899, was to have charity for the Christian Scientists' superstitions and "educate

and enlighten" them as to the "real foundation" of their experiences.³⁸

The question would not be resolved so easily. Christian Scientists maintained that their practice was often dismissed by the medical profession irrespective of results because it challenged conventional methods. As Clifford Smith remarked, it was often simply assumed "that the drug system is scientific in its practice and certain in its results; that Christian Science does not heal anybody, or if it did, they were not sick; that Christian Scientists are actuated by religious fanaticism and not by reason and convincing experience. . . ."³⁹ The situation was complicated both by the dramatic publicity given individual failures and the frequent misattribution to Christian Science of cases in which it was involved marginally if at all—as in the death of the American novelist Harold Frederic in 1898, which became something of a medical *cause celebre*. On the

other hand, it was undeniable that a large number of those who testified to healings in Christian Science had turned to it in what were to all appearances circumstances in which attending physicians had given up.

Medical practitioners themselves faced an ethical challenge in maintaining objectivity when evaluating a massive body of testimony that ran contrary to their predilections. In 1907, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published a detailed medical history of an unexplained case believed to be the "first instance recorded of recovery from generalized blastomycosis,"⁴⁰ but refused to print a letter from the husband of the patient pointing out that the recovery took place only when a Christian Science practitioner was called.⁴¹

Alfred Farlow noted sensibly enough that "the recitation of Christian Science healings" even with scientific diagnosis does not answer the question of their medical significance, though it points to the breadth of the experience on which Christian Scientists' convictions—and their claim to legal toleration—have been based.⁴² People might differ as to the explanation for these results, Farlow acknowledged, but that there were results not easily explained away he saw as more than a matter of purely subjective faith. As the early controversy over the movement abated, the practice of spiritual healing became less a topic of headlines, but it continued as a quiet way of life in many thousands of Christian Science families—a collective "test" of spiritual healing on an unprecedented scale.

The transformation of medical practice in this century has changed markedly the terrain in which Christian Scientists pursue such healing, but not the nature of their commitment. This commitment runs strikingly counter to the pervasive influence of secular medicine in Western culture—a contrast which clearly places great demands on the Christian Scientists for actual healing results if their claim to toleration is to remain viable. At the same time, the "materialism" that William James saw as underlying conventional medicine has produced its own excesses as well as successes. The dilemmas arising from purely mechanistic approaches have prompted new and serious consideration of the spiritual dimensions of health care—the role of patients in their own recovery, the distinction between healing in the fullest sense and medical engineering, the whole range of concerns deemed "the nonscientific side of medicine."⁴³

If any point of consensus can be found, it may come from this direction. The influence of spiritual factors in well-being is a truism in medical as in religious circles, but in practical terms "most of us," as one Quaker commentator on healing has written, consciously or unconsciously "assume the supremacy of mechanical determination and the helplessness of love."⁴⁴ In no respect was Eddy's teaching more radical than in its insistence that mankind has barely begun to understand the full therapeutic power of love (or as she would have it, of the Love which is God). Eddy saw such understanding as a discipline quite as rigorous, in its own way, as the quest of modern medicine

for scientific legitimacy. The challenge growing out of the experience of Christian Scientists lies in recognizing that the deepest spiritual realities in human life are not peripheral to, but at the center of, any truly scientific mode of healing. ■



The Christian Science Center in Boston, completed in 1975, houses the administrative as well as publishing functions of the denomination. There are about 3000 Christian Science congregations today in over 50 countries.

Notes

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