

Exploring Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy's Exotic Brand of Christianity. What makes Christian Science unique in the religious landscape of Christian America?

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Born in the early XIX century on a farm in New England, Mary Baker Eddy, which will come to be known both a distinguished Christian scholar, and one of the few prominent female religious leaders from history, she will embark early-on on a quest for seeking the greater truth in regard to how faith and healing are interconnected, and how does a Christian need to act in order to benefit from their works. Christian Science aligns itself with the traditional tenets associated with Christianity, but it also introduced some novel ideas and practices that were rapidly enhanced by some, and were classed as heresy by others. Through her works, Ms. Baker Eddy tried to redefine the role of the Church, and of Christ Himself, in the physical wellbeing of the faithful, but in the same time she challenged century-old doctrines that emphasized more the role of the Church as a social disciplinarian, rather than that of a force that will militate for the forgiveness of the sinners, and the reconciliation between former enemies. The current paper aims at analyzing the particularities of Christian Science, its rather "exotic elements", and the various controversies that arose from the claims that the practices popularized by the church were, in fact, rooted in science. As it is today, Christian Science is still holding own strongly to its original tenets, no major doctrinal reforms being made along the way. Unlike other American Christians, Christian Scientists tend to be overrepresented in urban settings, as indicated by the available data.

Scholarly works concerning the rich tradition of American Christianity are more visible within academia. This may be in correlation with the fact that our current society, especially if we are talking about Europe and North America, is shifting away from the traditional of religiosity that we inherited from our forefathers, and is more in favor of a church that is more committed to the wellbeing of its members, and to society as a whole. But it is important to keep in mind that certain shifts in paradigm already occurred within certain Christian groups, as we have the case of the Catholic Church in the post-Second Vatican Council era, which was marked by some visible changes in the way in which the Church presented itself in relation to its adherence, and to its general mission (Maslin 1951). Being labeled as a pastoral council, there were not changes made in relation to issues that were more strongly connected to Church dogma. Another noticeable influence that left their mark on the XX century in terms of religious novelty is represented by the rise of the Charismatic Movement, which influenced Protestant and Catholic congregations alike. The '70s were marked by the rise of the New 66 | Page

Age Movement which diverged from almost any other existing religious tradition, but in the same time having roots in several Western and Oriental religions, being essentially an eclectic construction that was keen on using multiple concepts reinterpreting them in such a manner to be easily understood and accepted by those living in the industrialized world.

Christian Science represents a particularly interesting case within the wider tradition of American Protestantism, from its very beginning the movement was devoted to bring faith and healing together in a universally coherent theological framework. Even so, Christian Science, or the Church of Christ, Scientist – as it is known in its organized form, is not by any means the only “American Religion” to emphasize the strong bond between faith and healing, but it remains the only, or the most mainstream out of all, to have it as its core theology up to this day. The beginning of the XX century witnessed the rise of Pentecostalism which, a little bit more marginally, put emphasis on the works of the Holy Spirit, faith healing becoming popular among its adherence. The founder of the Christian Science movement, Mary Baker Eddy, remains up to this day one of the most influential women in Western theology, being actually one of the few female figures that left a persistent mark on the history of the Universal Church up to this day (Feuerbach 1881). Even so, the church often found itself in the middle of controversy, being accused of, mainly by other Christian churches, that its interpretations of the Bible and Scriptures are deeply tainted due to the lack of consideration that it gives to the Biblical tradition, subsequently to the historical context to each writing is linked.

Mary Baker Eddy and the early influence of New England Congregationalism

Mary Baker Eddy was born on a farmhouse in rural New Hampshire in the early XIX century, both parents were practicing Christians, her father, Mark Baker, was a devout Congregationalist which held on tightly to the Calvinist views of the church. For most of her life, Mary Baker Eddy was a practicing Congregationalist Christian. Her newly founded movement inherited a consistent part of the hierarchical and theological framework of the XIX century Congregationalist Church of New England. Up to this day, there are numerous discussions and controversies that revolve around the specific role that Protestantism played in early America, and how much did it actually contribute to the coming into being of the legal and institutional framework of the United States (Hedrick 2008). This debate is even more controversial if we acknowledge that there is a global shift toward less formalized forms of religious practices, stating that the Protestants had from early on a decisive role in building what will constitute the moral core of the American ethos is highly problematic and controversial.

America, a protestant nation – would rather refer to a specific outlook on communal life, work, and human relations, that is indigenous to the American way of life. Mary Baker Eddy’s theology was built, brick by brick, on an already existing congregationalist foundation, this having visible effects on both the theology itself, but also on the manner in which the *Eddy Church* will be later organized. As we

have the case with the traditional congregationalist churches, within the Church of Christ, Scientist the congregations are self-governed but are subordinated to the Mother Church, which is located in Boston. The Church has a Board of Directors, their sole purpose is that of overlooking administrative tasks and making sure that the organization is run smoothly.

Unlike in other religious organizations, the Board is not empowered with authority over the dogmatic heritage of the Church, their primary role is not one that can be labeled as being solely missionary in essence. Congregationalism is one of the three main governing models that various churches adopted, the other two putting a greater emphasis on centralized authority and bodies of representatives. Congregationalist churches are self-governing, the Lordship of Christ is strong emphasized both in doctrine and daily practice. Even so, we cannot radically label the Church of Christian Science as being congregationalist, in the most traditional meaning, as the Mother Church acts as a hub which prescribes both the adequate literature and the local congregations have the status of branches, which have a great level of autonomy, but all branches should retain the same set of primary points of doctrine and practices, which are looked on by the *gatekeepers* from the Mother Church (Mary Baker Eddy 1895). From this perspective alone, the Church of Christian Science is somewhat leaning to a more Presbyterian structure, which mainly manifests itself through the presence of the Board, we cannot talk about a purely congregationalist structure, as this were to be, no central or semi-central hub would had existed. We also need to take into consideration a few basic facts, it would be almost impossible for a new religious movement to maintain a coherent doctrinal core with such a fragmented framework as that of the Congregationalists.

Going on from matters that are more closely linked to church governance to ones that are centered around theology, it is crucial to point out some of the key resemblances and differences that are noticeable when putting the two churches side by side. First of all, Congregationalists tend to lean heavily toward a Calvinists theology, one that stresses elements such as predestination – *the elect*, those that were chosen by God to obtain Eternal Salvation, and *the damned*, those that were predestined to Eternal Damnation. A very distinctive mark of this doctrine is given its rigidity, if we can call it this way, mainly the fact that no matter what one may do during his earthly life. This is also known as Unconditional Election, *unconditional* being here quite self-explanatory. If we were to take this point alone, Christian Science is quite divergent from the Congregationalist-Calvinist doctrine of Salvation, as, first of all, the Church denies that there will be no Final Judgement (Branch 2010). Salvation is guaranteed to all of mankind as a result of God's kindness, also we need to point out that Christian Science presence human suffering as an error, an illusion, and that the world, essentially, is benevolent. When comparing the two dogmas here, we can notice very clearly that the *Eddyian* take is more leaned toward forgiveness, at a first glimpse, but if we look closer we can find some quite surprising aspects. First of all, even though Eddy's theology seems to be more forgiving towards lost

souls, at the same time it clearly states that some people *live in error*, and are not able to correct their errors in order to obtain healing, and a better life, generally. This means that Eddy suggests that through our free will, which is never denied within Christian Science, we can decide between a life of fulfillment and health, or one that is dominated by error, bodily and spiritual illness. On the other hand, Calvinism forwards the idea that men is incapable of changing *God's plan*, as a result there is not particular judgment towards one's capacity to obtain Salvation, or not, due to the fact that Salvation is beyond men's reach if he was not predestined. Even if predestination sounds extremely harsh and unforgiving, at first, it also creates an atmosphere less dominated by the judgment of failure. With this being said, it is far from men's reach to know who is elected and who is damned. This creates quite a paradox, as one may ask "Why would the damned even bother any longer to worship a God that has no mercy?"

Science and Health with a Key to the Scriptures encompasses the core theology of the Church, as the name already suggests, the work is heavily focused on the correlation between faith and healing.

Healing and Salvation from an *Eddyian* perspective

From the perspective of Eddy's theology, there is no need for Salvation, as men is not damned to eternal suffering. Besides the points that were previously discussed, Christian Science and Calvinism diverge so much that, at one point, many start to question the Christianity from within the *Eddyian Church*. This criticism is mainly motivated by the fact that the Church downplays, or to a certain, denies, some of the universal Christian doctrines that are commonly acknowledge throughout Christendom. One very interesting viewpoint that is more coherently, or incoherently, suggested through Mrs. Eddy's writings is a pantheist view of God, as God is not particularized as a free-standing being, this is quite foolish to state in this manner, as God is generally regarded as the creator of everything that is, He usually is regarded as existing in everything that is to see, feel, understand, experience. The issue comes more from the idea that God is presented diffusely, without particularizing Him. Pantheism is more indigenous to Eastern Religions, especially Hinduism, as they do not strictly confine the concept of god, or goddess, with the image of an anthropomorphic being (Branch 2010). Another interesting topic that needs to be brought forward is the views regarding the Holy Trinity, unlike the traditional protestant churches, which share the same doctrinal views on the issue as the Catholics and the Oriental Christians, the Church of Christian Science is rather emptied from its traditional meaning, and it is filled with an ambiguous meaning.

In her writings on Christian. Science, why does Mary Baker Eddy refer to the trinity as Life, Truth, and Love instead of using other synonyms for God—such as Mind,

*Soul, Spirit, or Principle? Wouldn't these be just as accurate in defining the trinity?—
from a reader in Dorset, England*

Mary Baker Eddy uses many synonyms, or names, for God throughout her writings. The seven she uses most prominently are Life, Truth, Love, Mind, Soul, Spirit, and Principle. Each synonym is useful in bringing to thought certain aspects of God's nature. These synonyms are wholly interchangeable, however, since they refer to the one God.

“What about the trinity?” - January 1998 issue of The Christian Science Journal

An article from the Journal of Christian Science, published in 1998, was dedicated entirely to the issue of the Trinity within the theological framework of the Church. It would be very harsh to directly state the Christian Scientist totally reject the Trinity, but we can rather see an almost lack of interest towards it. A key characteristic of the *Eddyian theology* is that there seems to be a fluid perception of reality, God, perception, and experience. As pantheism, as strong influence, is well present within the doctrinal core, both the relevance of the Trinity – God, Son, Holy Spirit; fade away into a realm where the borders between perception and knowledge outside the senses are quickly lost.

On the outskirts of Christendom

Unlike the other “traditional Christian Churches”, the Church of Christ, Scientist finds some of its core teachings to be highly divergent from the tenets associated with the universally accepted theology associated with Christian organizations. In a weird way, Christian Science shares a common struggle with two other religious groups, namely the Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses. We are not suggesting that the Church of Christian Science emerged from the same movements as the other two, or that they share a similar theological ground. What we are suggesting is that all three are groups that have a theology mainly based on a Christian framework, but on the other hand, it encompasses a lot of non-Christian, or highly exoticized versions of Christian dogmas. As a result, sometimes it is very difficult to find them a place within Christendom, or to have a “special box” for them, some place them within a branch of religious organization generally referred to as *Nontrinitarian Churches*.

Christian Science and Radical Atheist Scientism

The future of Christian Science in our era is quite uncertain, there already is a slight decline in membership in Africa, where it used to have a steady ground. It is even more difficult under the influence of Radical Atheism which is an ardent militant of scientism, dismissing any experience, or claim, that is incapable of being scientifically proven. More so, just associating the Christian tradition with the idea of science is highly inflammatory and unpopular nowadays, as the general public is more educated in matters that relate to science, and its postulates.

Conclusion

We can briefly conclude that the Church of Christian Science truly marked a unique chapter within the history of Christianity, as it is the only church to strongly emphasize the bound between faith and healing. Other groups, such as the Pentecostals, took this tradition to another level, but the Church of Christian Science remains the first Christian movement that sought to bridge the gap between healing, faith and scientific rigorousness.

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