

# *Christian Science and the Course*

by Richard Smoley

Many people have noted remarkable similarities between *A Course in Miracles* and Christian Science. Both were inaugurated by women; both lay heavy emphasis on healing; and most strikingly, their doctrines seem almost identical. They are even connected by a coincidence of chronology: *Science and Health*, the key Christian Science text, was first published in 1875 — exactly a hundred years before the *Course*.

Of course there are differences as well. To appreciate these, it's necessary to step back and take a look at the history of Christian Science. Although this teaching is indissolubly linked with the name of Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), who called herself “the Discoverer and Founder of Christian Science,” perhaps the real claimant to that honor is a figure who is much more obscure: a New England healer named Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–66).

Quimby, like many men of his time, was a jack of all trades. He started as a clockmaker, but eventually became fascinated with alternative methods of healing and learned the art of mesmerism or animal magnetism, a forerunner of hypnosis. Quimby found that if he put an assistant into a trance, the assistant could diagnose and prescribe a remedy for a patient's disease (much like Edgar Cayce, the celebrated “sleeping prophet” who lived a couple of generations later).

Quimby built up a successful practice this way, but soon he came to a startling conclusion: it didn't matter what remedy was prescribed; it was the faith of the patient that made the difference. So Quimby dismissed his assistant and began to practice his own radical method of healing, in which he would simply convince the patient that he or she was already well. Quimby's warm and gentle nature aroused a sense of trust and confidence. His office filled with patients, and many came away from his treatments feeling great relief or even fully cured. He often treated people for free when they could not pay.

A self-taught man, Quimby was not a systematic thinker. But around 1859, he began to formulate his teachings in writing. He believed he had discovered the secret of the miracles performed by Jesus Christ, and he wished to make this knowledge available to all. “My philosophy,” he said, “will make man free and independent of all creeds and laws of man, and subject him to his own agreement, he being free from the laws of sin, sickness, and death.”

The teaching was simple. In each human being resides Truth, Wisdom, and Goodness. This is our natural birthright. But there is also another aspect: the mortal, material mind that is subject to error. And the chief error to which this material mind is subject is disease. “Disease,” Quimby wrote, “is false reasoning. True scientific wisdom is health and happiness. False reasoning is sickness and death.” Quimby never really gave a name to his teaching, though he usually called it the “Science of Health.” Once or twice in his writings he referred to it as “Christian Science.”

In 1862 Quimby was visited by a woman who sought his help for spinal complaints. Her husband, a dentist, was in a Confederate prison camp (this being the time of the Civil War). Penniless and with few friends, she became fascinated with Quimby's teachings and would soon become one of his most ardent followers. Her name was Mary Baker Glover Patterson. (In 1877, after her marriage to Asa Eddy, she would become known as Mary Baker Eddy.)

Mary Patterson was a peculiar figure. She had had two marriages, neither of them happy (she would separate permanently from Dr. Patterson after his return from the war). She had no profession and no apparent interest in one, although, as the composer of some occasional writings, she allowed herself to be known as an “authoress.” Generally of poor health, she was also afflicted with high-strung nerves; her father had sometimes had to strew hay on the road in front of their house to dull the noise of passing carts. But she was also gifted with a powerful personality and an indomitable will. Her encounter with Quimby’s teachings was to mark the decisive moment of her life.

Quimby was generous with his ideas; indeed he wearied his family and friends with them. He had written down his teachings in a number of manuscripts and was gratified whenever a student took enough interest to copy them out. This Mrs. Patterson did. Over the next four years, she would become one of Quimby’s most ardent students and admirers. She defended him against his adversaries and even wrote a sonnet to him, calling him “the self-taught man walking in wisdom’s ways.”

I must point out here that the story as I have recounted it above is at variance with what Mrs. Eddy would say later. Though she did not deny her association with the man whom she would later call “the magnetic doctor,” she insisted that she discovered Christian Science for herself after a fall on an icy sidewalk in February 1866.

It would take too much here to recount the problems with this story, as well as the differing and contradictory versions of it that Mrs. Eddy would tell over the years; I can only refer readers to the source of my material, a biography of Mrs. Eddy written by the great novelist Willa Cather with a journalist named Georgine Milmine and published in 1909 (see bibliography).

And yet there is a sense in which Mrs. Eddy may have “discovered” Christian Science in February 1866. This date is significant, for Quimby died in January. It could be that while during the previous four years she felt the need to run to Quimby whenever her own symptoms assailed her, after his death she was thrown upon her own resources and was forced to “discover” the truth of Christian Science on her own.

At any rate after this time Mrs. Eddy no longer complained of ill health. Moreover she took it upon herself to teach Christian Science. Though often high-handed and quarrelsome — she would break with large numbers of her followers on more than one occasion — she possessed a gift for leadership and organization that Quimby never had and never cared to cultivate. She made Christian Science into a religion. In so doing she found it expedient to dissociate herself from her old mentor.

This helps explain the denunciations of animal magnetism in her magnum opus, *Science and Health* (later editions would be known as *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*). In various of her writings Mrs. Eddy said Quimby had practiced animal magnetism — even though she herself had defended him against this charge while he was alive.

Mrs. Eddy began teaching her own version of Christian Science in Lynn, Massachusetts, around 1867. From this time until her death in 1910, she worked to establish a religion and created an organization to perpetuate it. In 1879 she incorporated the Church of Christ, Scientist. By the turn of the century, Christian Science was so powerful that Mark Twain would prophesy:

*It is a reasonably safe guess that in America in 1920 there will be ten million Christian Scientists, and three millions in Great Britain; that these figures will be trebled in 1920; that in America in 1920 the Christian Scientists will be a major political force, in 1930 politically formidable, and in 1940 the governing power in the Republic — to remain that, permanently.*

Mark Twain was wrong. Christian Science today is not a burgeoning denomination. Membership peaked around 1950, and current estimates of the number of adherents worldwide range from 250,000 to 400,000 (the church does not release membership figures). Moreover the closing of branch churches nationwide suggest that attrition is a major problem for the denomination. Nonetheless Christian Science remains a presence on the American spiritual landscape, as its numerous surviving churches and Reading Rooms attest. Its greatest prestige in the mainstream world comes from its daily newspaper, *The Christian Science Monitor*, which has often been praised for its accuracy and objectivity.

As for the doctrines of Christian Science, the fundamental one is quite simple. It is stated over and over in *Science and Health*:

*Christian Science . . . claims God as the only absolute Life and Soul, and man to be His idea — that is, His image. It should be added that this is claimed to represent the normal, healthful, and sinless condition of man in divine Science, and that this claim is made because the Scriptures say that God has created man in His own image and likeness. Is it sacrilegious to assume that God’s likeness is not found in matter, sin, sickness, and death?* (Science and Health, p. 344.)

The truth about the human condition, according to Mrs. Eddy, is that we are spirit, that the physical body is the result of an error, of belief in matter. Matter as such does not exist. To recognize this, and to acknowledge the sole and complete authority of Mind, is to achieve all health, soundness, and prosperity.

Compare this to the following passage from the *Course*:

*The statement “God created man in his own image and likeness” needs reinterpretation. “Image” can be understood as “thought,” and “likeness” as “of a like quality.” God did create spirit in His Own Thought and of a quality like to His Own. There is nothing else* (Text, p. 40).

Both the *Course* and Christian Science famously teach that healing is of the mind and has nothing to do with physical remedies. The *Course* chides, “*You really think a small round pellet or some fluid pushed into your veins through a sharpened needle will ward off disease and death. . . . It is insanity that thinks these things*” (Workbook, p. 132). Mrs. Eddy writes: “*Physicians examine the pulse, tongue, lungs, to discover the condition of matter, when in fact all is Mind*” (Science and Health, pp. 370-71); and, later, “*The only effect produced by medicine is dependent upon mental action*” (Science and Health, p. 401).

One difference between these teachings would seem to have to do with the value of conventional medicine. The *Course* does not necessarily recommend abandoning such remedies:

*Magic is the mindless or the miscreative use of mind. Physical medications are forms of “spells,” but if you are afraid to use the mind to heal, you should not attempt to do so. . . . Under these conditions it is safer for you to rely temporarily on physical healing devices* (Text, p. 21).

Yet modern Christian Science does repudiate all conventional medicine. The film *Gray’s Anatomy* gives Spaulding Gray’s amusing narration of his experiences with a Christian Science practitioner who refuses to treat him for an eye problem unless he relies solely on her. Mrs. Eddy herself was not so unyielding. Like the *Course*, she avoids rejecting medical practice in its entirety:

*Until the advancing age admits the efficacy and supremacy of Mind, it is better for Christian Scientists to leave surgery and the adjustment of broken bones and dislocations to the fingers of a surgeon, while the mental healer confines himself chiefly to mental reconstruction and to the prevention of inflammation* (Science and Health, p. 401).

James Henry Wiggin, an urbane Unitarian minister who ghost-wrote several editions of *Science and Health*, tells a parallel story about Mrs. Eddy and obstetrics:

“What if I find a breech presentation in childbirth?” asked a pupil.  
“You will not, if you are in Christian Science,” replied Mrs. Eddy.  
“But if I do?”  
“Then send for the nearest regular practitioner!”

And yet there are differences too between the *Course* and Christian Science. In the first place, Mrs. Eddy, like Quimby before her, was not a systematic thinker. She was concerned to expound her theory that Truth is all and that error is unreal, but the elaborate spiritual cosmology that one finds in the *Course* is absent from her writings. It is not that Christian Science is inconsistent with itself; it is not. It is simply that Mrs. Eddy tends to content herself with restating a few basic ideas rather than exploring their ramifications in detail, as the *Course* does.

There is another small point of difference between the two teachings. Mrs. Eddy believed that animal magnetism could actually have harmful effects; indeed she spent much of her life in anxiety about the “malicious animal magnetism” that was supposedly being projected upon her by disgruntled ex-followers. In the *Course*, however, there is no indication that any form of treatment could be harmful. Even the most monstrous miscreations of the separated mind are harmless illusions; that is all.

But the most profound difference between the two teachings for me has nothing to do with doctrine or philosophy. Instead it is a matter of tone. Usually when I pick up the *Course* I find some passage that inspires me and enables me, however briefly, to lay aside the fears that constitute so much of the content of the ordinary mind. When I pick up *Science and Health*, I feel as if I am being lectured to by an elderly schoolmarm. It is not so much that I disagree with what she is saying; but the very tone of it, the often pompous language and posing high-mindedness, is generally alienating and sometimes depressing. Nor is this merely a matter of nineteenth-century language; many of Mrs. Eddy’s contemporaries, including Mark Twain, made similar complaints.

In the end, the transmitters of the *Course*, Helen Schucman and Bill Thetford, remind me more of Quimby than they do of Mrs. Eddy. There is little in the *Course* — or in their actions in regard to the *Course* — that suggest institutionalizing, slapping copyrights all over the material, and insisting it is somehow “theirs.” Indeed I remember Judith Skutch, who was instrumental in publication of the *Course*, once saying that they were initially not going to copyright the work at all, but changed their minds when the Voice that dictated the *Course* instructed them to do it.

Mrs. Eddy was quite the opposite. As Mark Twain dryly remarked, “She copyrights everything. If she should say, ‘Good morning; how do you do?’ she would copyright it.”

I first became familiar with the *Course* in 1981. At that time it was, as a movement, still in its infancy; there were no Miracles churches or organizations (except for the Foundation for Inner Peace, which was set up as the *Course*’s publisher and distributor). The books were simply available; sometimes people got together to study them, and that was that. In the nearly twenty years since then, as the *Course* has become a mass phenomenon, all this has changed. There are organizations, teachers, teachings, even sects and schisms. The new Viking edition of the *Course* assigns each sentence a verse number, giving the book a dismayingly ecclesiastical flavor.

My own tastes, I must admit, lean away from institutional religion and toward small, informal groups that do not call themselves churches at all. I must also concede that this is a matter of personal preference,

and that there are of course others who see things differently. And yet I feel some regret to think that, as far as the *Course* is concerned, we have passed from the era of Quimby to that of Mrs. Eddy. It is quite possible that the *Course*, as great as it is, may become the nucleus of what is just another religious movement, and that allegiance to it will increase even as the strength of the initial insight wanes. When it has run its gamut, then a new revelation, phrased in the language of a era yet to come, will be given to us, and the process will start all over again.

**Richard Smoley** is the author of *Inner Christianity: A Guide to the Esoteric Tradition* and coauthor of *Hidden Wisdom: A Guide to the Western Inner Traditions*. He is currently writing a book about Nostradamus.