

# Christian Science and American Literary History

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## Abstract

The religious turn in American literary studies has produced new interest in religious movements from the turn of the 20th century, and due to the opening of archives, Christian Science is one possible direction that research in this area might turn. Yet until very recently, literary scholarship related to Christian Science has been extremely flawed, due mostly to over-reliance on a few problematic sources. This article offers an overview of the issues that have impacted that research while suggesting that promising work is beginning to emerge.

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In 1899, a Christian Science healer named Josephine Woodbury sparked a nation-wide scandal by suing her former teacher, Mary Baker Eddy, for libel.<sup>1</sup> Eddy founded Christian Science in 1866, claiming to have healed herself from a fatal injury by reading her Bible and meditating on her conviction that sickness, sin, and suffering were illusions. In the decades that followed, she spread her doctrine and her healing methods – which involved helping the patient realize that God created them to be perfect and therefore that they could not be really sick – beyond New England and across the continent. By the end of the century, Christian Science was one of the fastest growing and most controversial religious groups in the United States with a growing transatlantic presence. A variety of people, including European aristocrats, women of modest means looking to make a living, and neurasthenic novelists like Frances Hodgson Burnett and Theodore Dreiser visited Christian Science healers and studied the writings of Mary Baker Eddy, despite (perhaps even because of) the fact that the movement was denounced by religious and medical authorities alike.

Josephine Woodbury was one of many fascinating women to have risen up through the ranks of Christian Science. She traveled throughout the United States and, through the power of her magnetic personality, built a following of her own, a community of Christian Scientists who sometimes practiced asceticism and celibacy (at Woodbury's behest) and had mystic experiences. Due to her unsanctioned cult of personality and outlandish behavior – which included instructing her students to venerate her son as the second coming of Christ – Woodbury was eventually excommunicated from the Mother Church in Boston. Her libel suit against Eddy, rooted in comments made during the Christian Science leader's annual Communion Message, was dismissed for lack of evidence. But this did not stop Woodbury and her lawyer, Frederick Peabody, from becoming prominent anti-Christian Science speakers and pamphleteers, providing information on Christian Science to various notable New Englanders. One of these was Samuel Clemens, whose wife and daughters had been involved with Christian Science and who was working on a set of articles on the religio-medical sect for *Cosmopolitan* and *North American Review*.<sup>2</sup> Peabody and Woodbury also contributed heavily to the work of a group of writers and editors at *McClure's* who were fact-checking a biography of Mary Baker Eddy to be published as a series in 1907 and 1908. At the head of the editing team was Willa Cather.

That Mark Twain once wrote a very strange book about Christian Science and that Willa Cather edited a biography of Mary Baker Eddy has long been a point of curiosity among

scholars of these authors' work. But among those literary critics and biographers who choose to write about it, none seem to be aware of this backstory. Does this matter? Should we care? As discussions about the "religious turn" in literary studies proliferate, one important methodological question emerges: to what degree is the scholar of literature who is interested in religion required to become a religious historian or at the very least to immerse themselves in the historiographies of the religions they study?

This is a question that lurks in the margins of Tracy Fessenden's recent critique of studies of the post-secular under the auspices of *Literature and Religion*. In her article for the special issue of *American Literary History* addressing these developments, Fessenden warns scholars against the easy emancipation narratives and implicit sorting of "good" and "bad" religion, which often emerges – even unintentionally – in disciplinary accounts of religion and the secular. This is reflected in the way that scholars both select and narrativize their objects of study, charting "a path away from a doctrinal definition and toward an expansive, indeterminate space of spiritual power and option" (160). It is a model in which the specific intra-denominational debates of a movement like Christian Science appear parochial and unimportant, and it helps explain why literary scholars have historically been somewhat more interested in New Thought, Christian Science's heretical sibling, than in Eddy herself.<sup>3</sup> Beryl Satter, in her book on the "New Thought novel," *Each Mind a Kingdom* (1999), sets New Thought and its proponents a rung above Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science. She prefers to view Eddy as a "an important contributor to the turn-of-the-century New Thought movement" rather than seeing New Thought as "the long-forgotten context for Eddy's Christian Science" (3). New Thought was a far more diverse and expansive group than the official Church of Christ, Scientist, made up dissenters from Eddy's movement who also sought to learn from other mental healers of the time while incorporating spiritual teachings from Theosophy, Buddhism, spiritualism, transcendentalism, and other "alternative" faiths and philosophies. Satter's narrative, which links New Thought to progressive politics in the early-20th century suggests a teleological narrative in which the tolerant and eclectic New Thought proponents are liberated from Eddy's doctrinaire teachings.

Yet scholars in the field of Religious Studies have revealed not only the uniqueness of Christian Science among other contemporary healing movements but its importance for understanding early-20th century intellectual culture. Indeed, the new accessibility of archives, thanks to the opening of the Mary Baker Eddy Library in 2002, has produced some excellent recent work in a variety of fields, particularly religious and medical history. Gillian Gill's magisterial biography, *Mary Baker Eddy* (1998), is an eminently necessary addition to a long list of biographical treatments written since the founder's death in 1910.<sup>4</sup> Whether written by Christian Scientists or by outsiders, such projects have always tended to be polemical in nature. Gill certainly has a point of view. Her take on Eddy is a kind of feminist recovery project, and her use of primary sources is like that of a forensic investigator trying to get to the bottom of some of the thorniest controversies that surround Eddy's life and work. Stephen Gottschalk's *Rolling Away the Stone: Mary Baker Eddy's Challenge to Materialism* (2007), an analytical biography, uses the final years of Eddy's life as a backdrop for investigating the overall impact of Christian Science on American culture. Rennie B. Schoepflin's *Christian Science on Trial* (2003) examines the movement's long, complicated history of confrontation with the medical profession and the law. Religious historian Catherine Albanese gives Christian Science a prominent place in her magisterial work, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* (2007), which challenges evangelical and denominational histories of American religion by highlighting the important presence of metaphysical religion from the time of the nation's founding until the present day. Anne Harrington's *The Cure Within: A History of Mind-Body Medicine* (2008) does something similar from the perspective of medical history, including Christian Science and Mary Baker Eddy in her narrative of the transnational development of alternative mental healing methods. Excellent dissertations are also being produced on the topic

of Christian Science. Amy Voorhees “Writing Revelation: Mary Baker Eddy and Her Early Editions of *Science and Health*, 1875–1891” (2013) uses a textual studies approach to compare the major editions of the key text of Christian Science, examining how the founder’s theology, healing methodology, and rhetoric evolved over the course of her life in response to her own needs and those of the culture that surrounded her.<sup>5</sup>

These archives have remained rather unexploited, however, by literary scholars, though understanding of Christian Science in this field is improving as more researchers become aware of them. Claudia Stokes’ chapter on Mary Baker Eddy in *The Altar at Home: Sentimental Literature and Nineteenth Century American Religion* (2014) is an excellent example. Stokes uses Eddy’s poetry, theology, and public self-presentation to demonstrate how she was, paradoxically, both the “apotheosis of the late-century New Woman” and a prodigious purveyor of conservative sentimental ideals about womanhood, “marketing herself as the fulfillment of the feminine ideal of a previous generation: modest, domestic, and retiring” (184). In reading Eddy as an exponent of 19th-century sentimental literature, Stokes is participating in a well-established scholarly tradition. Such readings go all the way back to Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960). There, he invokes Mary Baker Eddy as the apotheosis of an American tradition of rejecting spiritual fathers, first the European ones and then ultimately the Puritans, until,

The fatherland abandoned, the Pope rejected, the bishops denied, the king overthrown—only the mother remained as symbol of an authority that was one with love. . . . The symbolic vacuum left by the deposition of the Father is filled by the figure of a woman, as Maiden and Mother; and America remains still the only Christian country in which a major religious denomination was founded by a woman (78–9).

Fiedler’s placement of Eddy at the center of the American “Sentimental Love Religion” has provoked responses up to the present moment. In 1970, Gail Parker took up this theme but focused on the contradictions at the core of Eddy’s theology and life:

Fearing the ambitions that would have made her a superb captain of industry, she had sought the safety and sanctity of sentimental womanhood. But her naked urge to dominate could never be fully clothed in a garment of spiritual superiority tailored for the average American woman, and Mrs. Eddy was fatally tempted to try divinity on for size (5–6).

Later scholars have continued to assess Eddy as a problematic or incomplete feminist figure, given her lack of open public stances on issues of concern to feminists of her day. Susan Hill Lindley’s aptly titled essay, “The Ambiguous Feminism of Mary Baker Eddy” (1984) and Jean McDonald’s “Mary Baker Eddy and the Nineteenth Century Public Woman: A Feminist Reappraisal” (1986) were key contributions to this conversation. Building on that foundation, in *The Altar at Home*, Claudia Stokes ponders the way in which Eddy embodied emergent feminist ideals while doggedly adhering to old ones. Her book argues that,

the medium of sentimental literature, which is both composed and consumed within the confines of the private domestic sphere, enables women writers themselves to exert religious influence, offer scriptural interpretation, and endorse emergent religious theology while complying with the standards of modesty and propriety that they helped circulate (183).

She repeats Gillian Gill’s argument that, “because of Eddy’s remarkable authority, her life ‘rewrites the female plot’” and demonstrates that “precisely because Eddy’s life so diverged from the stereotypical ‘female plot’, she was at great pains to demonstrate her conformity with it” (183).

But for the most part, Christian Science has tended to attract the notice of literary scholars when it is connected to the life or work of some major canonical figure. (Indeed, this is how the author of this article initially became aware of it.) It is likely through Christian Science's myriad connections to literary history that this movement – and many other religious movements – will continue to be discovered by graduate students and advanced researchers in the future, but the study of these connections should ideally include an effort to understand such religious groups on their own terms. To follow Fessenden's warning, it is critical that they be viewed not only as part of a panoply of virtually interchangeable alternative spiritualities that one encounters purely through literature. Their specific histories, doctrines, and distinctions matter if we are to honestly and accurately account for the literature that seeks to represent or critique them, if only because they would have mattered to the people being represented. For,

What end is served in abstracting the glimmer of numinosity, the summons to awe, perhaps even the neural or chemical change identified with the sacred from its place in particular histories, institutions, communities, struggles? (Fessenden 162).

Literary scholars who wish to investigate Christian Science should, first and foremost, be cautious in their use of the Nebraska University Press edition of *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science*, originally published in 1908 and re-issued by Nebraska in 1993. It is thanks to this edition that for two decades, the *McClure's* biography of Mary Baker Eddy has been treated as a lost work of Willa Cather's. Cather is listed as the primary author on its front cover, and Georgine Milmine, who was originally given the by-line in *McClure's*, is listed second. The Cather–Eddy connection is a favorite in the American literature field, but the claims about Cather's authorship and the analysis that has resulted from it are shaky at best.

It is well known that when Cather became a Managing Editor of *McClure's* at the beginning of 1907, her first assignment was editing a biography of Mary Baker Eddy, sold to the magazine by Georgine Milmine, an unknown journalist from New Hampshire. In fact, this project passed through many hands, including those of Ida Tarbell (who acquired it) and Burton Hendrick, who served as the chief editor of the series until he had to be removed due to the questionably sourced and potentially libelous nature of the first two installments. He was replaced by Cather and later went to work for Doubleday, which issued a revised version of the *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy* in book form in 1908, likely without Cather's input. This is the text that is reprinted in the University of Nebraska edition.<sup>6</sup>

Cather was chosen for the project due to her perceived lack of bias, and her name remained tied to it throughout her career despite her efforts to distance herself from it. Once she won a Pulitzer Prize 1922, the rumor that she was the true author of the series – latent ever since she worked at the magazine – began circulating very widely, given oxygen by Andrew Sullivan at the *New Yorker* (“A Well-Known Ghost”). Cather scholars revived it once again in the early 1980s when a letter from Cather to Edwin Anderson was discovered that offered more detail about the project than ever before. And though her language remained cagey, her assertions about authorship ambiguous, Brent Bohlke called for the reconsideration of the biography as part of the Cather canon. In his introduction to the Nebraska edition, David Stouck makes elaborate reference to this letter, supplementing it with evidence from “manuscripts” supposedly contained in the church archives to assert that Cather is the principle author.

Stouck states that one of the documents in question is “the manuscript of the ‘Milmine’ book” and that

Willa Cather's editing is evident on its pages. Cather's handwriting is not only identifiable in edits for the typesetter but in notes on separate pages that continue to query such matters as church membership, the importance of *The Christian Science Journal*, etc. (xvii).

In fact, as Stouck himself admits, he did not actually examine these documents himself. He relied instead on a second-hand report from Kevin Synott of Russell Sage College, who

[E]xamined the 'Milmine Collection' in the Mary Baker Eddy Archives and Library and found three different sets of manuscripts related to the biography. The first, dated at New York 1904, consists of 127 half-pages of typescript signed by Georgine Milmine and appears to represent an early attempt on her part write the biography. The second, a carbon of a typescript for the book, consists of 414 pages with edits by both Milmine and Cather. The third consists of two copies of partial manuscripts with edits by Georgine Milmine. There are no manuscripts or typescripts for the *McClure's* articles. (xxvii–xxviii)

These documents were finally made available to the public in 2011, and suffice it to say that these were *not* proofs of the book but rather early typescripts of the articles, probably produced before Willa Cather arrived on the scene. Her handwriting, which I believe is evident in some places, is not nearly as extensive as Stouck suggests. Indeed, as I have argued in an article for *Studies in the Novel*, my assessment of the evidence makes it very difficult to draw any dramatic conclusions about what impact Cather had on the final form the articles took (indeed there is substantial evidence that many of the ideas credited to Cather actually originated with Milmine or other editors) and that rather than clinging to grandiose claims about Cather's "principle authorship," we are better off viewing this text as a product of collaboration that involved many different writers and editors.

But the weakness of the evidence presented in the Nebraska Edition has not stopped later critics from looking to this biography for evidence of Cather's early development as a writer. David Porter in his essay "Cather Caught in the Eddy," appearing originally in *Violence, the Arts, and Willa Cather* (2005) and eventually in his critical biography, *On the Divide* (2008), finds in *The Life of Mary Baker Eddy* evidence of Cather's evolving psychological sensitivity, characterizing Cather's attitude toward Mary Baker Eddy as "decidedly ambivalent, a mix of penetrating and often scathing criticism with considerable, albeit at times grudging, praise" (*Divide*, 72). Later, he claims that in the chapters concerning Eddy's career following the death of her third husband, Asa,

The more one reads it, the more one detects Cather's distinctive voice, at once sardonic and admiring, and the more one becomes convinced that despite all her assertions to the contrary, she found both the project and its 'heroine' deeply absorbing (*Divide*, 74).

Yet the actual documentary evidence is inadequate for the purposes of sustaining any sweeping argument about what exactly Cather contributed that other writers could not have, and indeed, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this psychological complexity was present in early manuscripts produced by Milmine, who was seeking to emulate Ida Tarbell's masterfully nuanced portrayal of John D. Rockefeller.<sup>7</sup> What exactly Cather thought of Mrs Eddy is really only the stuff of speculation. Porter's work is just one example of how such speculations have been allowed to metastasize.

Furthermore, because the project is connected to Cather, literature scholars have felt free to treat it as if it is a definitive, authoritative history of Christian Science and to excuse themselves from the task of comparing it to any of the more modern, evidence-based histories. *The Life of*



*Mary Baker G. Eddy* was every bit as much of a polemic as Mark Twain's *Christian Science*, and yet the former is often cited as if it corroborates the latter, the scholars who do this are unaware that Twain and the *McClure's* team shared sources (many of them, like Woodbury and Peabody, with polemical purposes of their own) or even that their claims remain controversial.<sup>8</sup>

A particularly striking example of this is the section on Christian Science in Susan Mizruchi's chapter for the Sacvan Bercovitch–edited *Cambridge History of American Literature* (2005). Mizruchi's aim in this section is to explain the presence of religion in the writing of Mark Twain and then to use Mary Baker Eddy in order to pivot from him to Willa Cather. But her summary of these works is full of mistakes, and she cites no sources on Christian Science other than "Cather" and Twain themselves. She begins the section on Twain's *Christian Science* by praising the book for its sensitivity to genuine religious belief along with its recognition of the harms "of those who exploited human vulnerability" (529). She takes Mary Baker Eddy to be one of those exploiters and proceeds through some of the charges leveled against her by Twain as well as unidentified contemporaries. The most significant of these charges is that Mary Baker Eddy plagiarized the key text of Christian Science, *Science and Health*, from the unpublished works of her mentor, Phineas Quimby. Though she describes them as "well-substantiated," most scholars of Eddy's work do not grant these allegations a great deal of credibility. What's more, Mizruchi seems to believe that Twain *agreed* with these allegations. In point of fact, he did not. Rather, he saw her achievement as taking ideas that had been part of the religio-medical ether of the mid-19th century and turning them into something that could be packaged, copyrighted, and sold at a profit: "Whether she took it or invented it, it was—materially—a sawdust mine when she got it, and she has turned it into a Klondike" (*Christian* 102). The section that Mizruchi cites to argue that he accepted the plagiarism allegations is actually about the charge that Eddy had to employ an editor to fix up her prose.

Pivoting from Twain to the *McClure's* biography, Mizruchi describes Willa Cather as "the American writer who was most profoundly conversant with the history and doctrines of Christian Science" and calls the biography "her first long work" (529–30). She then goes on to analyze the very portions of the biography in which Cather likely played no role at all. Cather was brought in, after all, to clean up the mess left by Burton Hendrick, whose controversial take on Eddy's childhood and young adulthood opened up the magazine to accusations of libel. Indeed, Cather denounced these chapters, telling Edward Anderson that this section,

frankly deals with legend—with what envious people and jealous relatives remember of Mrs. Eddy's early youth. It was given for what it was worth, but I always consider such sources dubious (*Cather*, 24 November 1922).

Mistaking Hendrick's editorial work for Cather's is not an error that proceeds from a lack of good sources. The quoted line is from the very same letter used to "prove" that Cather is the real author. Still, Mizruchi briefly dissects this section as if Cather were responsible for every detail, calling her,

comprehensive and precise, filling her narrative with memorable detail: Eddy's overwrought father, Mark Baker, on a tirade against neighbors for violating the Sabbath, when he had mistaken Monday for Sunday; Mary's childhood hysterics, which undermine her widower father's household rule (530).<sup>9</sup>

That literary critics who have wished to say a few things about the various fascinating and often enigmatic points of contact between Christian Science and American literature have failed to become experts on the movement's history is not the problem here. The problem is that said critics want to treat Twain's *Christian Science* and the *McClure's* biography as if they are both

works of literature that tell us something about the (supposed) author's aesthetic, intellectual, and spiritual pre-occupations *and* as credible, objective histories. They want to connect to the writer, but they also want to make sweeping historical judgments about a religious movement and its leader even though they have encountered said religious movement only through the work of literature itself.

This, in my estimation, is precisely what Fessenden warns against: placing "Literature" in a position of authority over spiritual and religious matters in such a way that removes religion's embeddedness in "particular histories, institutions, communities, struggles" (162). Christian Science – along with Seventh Day Adventists, Pentecostals, and Latter-day Saints (to name a few) – is worth understanding for its significance to transatlantic intellectual and cultural life. What to make of J.D. Salinger's spiritual seeking, which included Christian Science? Are the Christian Science beliefs of Mina Loy reflected in her poetry, and how did Christian Science – along with New Thought and Vedanta – shape the modernist scene in Europe?<sup>10</sup> There is also a great deal of room for Christian Science to be placed in conversation with pragmatism and even realism. Gottschalk's work has suggested possibilities along these lines, arguing that,

Christian Science can be best understood as a *pragmatic interpretation of Christian revelation*. It is the pragmatic character of Christian Science which most adequately conveys its distinctiveness as a religious teaching, most clearly illumines its relations with the patterns of American culture, and most fully explains the source of its appeal (*Emergence*, 275).

In any event, the primary and secondary work that is emerging now will also help to create a far more interesting and complete picture of the preoccupations of those who wrote about Mary Baker Eddy, situated in this fascinating moment in debates over medical professionalism, journalistic ethics, and religious and therapeutic freedom. Indeed, it would supply answers where many literary critics only seem capable of expressing confusion.

### *Short Biography*

L. Ashley Squires is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Humanities and Languages at the New Economic School in Moscow, Russia. She received her PhD from the University of Texas in 2012. Her book, *But Now I See: Christian Science and American Literary History*, currently under review, traces the impact of Christian Science on American literature across three literary–historical periods. Her work on this subject also appears in *Book History*, *Studies in the Novel*, and *American Literary Realism*.

### *Notes*

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<sup>1</sup> The following narrative is recounted in most biographies of Mary Baker Eddy. Gill is cited here as the most recent of Eddy's biographers, but Peel's is something of a classic.

<sup>2</sup> Susy, who died in 1896, asked for a Christian Science practitioner during the final illness that killed her. Clara would go on to write a book about her faith, called *Awake to a Perfect Day* (1956), after her father's death.

<sup>3</sup> The same might also be said of spiritualism and Theosophy, also often confused with Christian Science. For example, David Zimmerman explores New Thought, spiritualism, and other psychic phenomena (but not Christian Science) as part of the landscape of early 20th-century market crises and their representation in American literature. Meanwhile, scholars of Frances Hodgson Burnett's work have often placed her in the New Thought camp rather than calling her a Christian Scientist (an argument can be made in either direction). See Keith 119. In her recent article, Anne Stiles adapts

Satter's thesis about the relative importance of New Thought vs. Christian Science to Burnett's work. The flexibility of New Thought ideas has also made it a particularly suitable lens for viewing 20th and 21st century post-secularism. See, for example, Travis's application of New Thought to Oprah's Book Club.

<sup>4</sup> Gill, however, was writing during the nineties, before the library opened, and had to negotiate strenuously for access to every document. Her experience, documented in her book, is a testament to just how difficult this sort of research was prior to 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Gottschalk and Voorhees stand out for their extremely helpful exegesis of Eddy's surprisingly complex theology. Whereas literary scholars tend to be more attracted to New Thought, Gottschalk and Voorhees (as well as Gillian Gill) tend to prefer Eddy's doctrinal rigor and consistency to what they see as the incoherence of New Thought.

<sup>6</sup> For a more comprehensive history of the production of this biography and a thorough analysis of the evidence related to the authorship claims, see Squires, "The Standard Oil Treatment."

<sup>7</sup> Lyman Powell, a New England minister who went on to write his own Eddy biography, had contact with both Milmine and Cather and reports that Milmine was "inspired by the great popularity of such work as Ida Tarbell had done a few years before, as she told me in her home in Auburn, New York ... one day in April 1907" (Powell, 13 January 1933).

<sup>8</sup> According to Gill, Josephine Woodbury was one of Milmine's very first contacts after her request for an interview with Mrs Eddy was rebuffed. As I have confirmed first-hand, many of the affidavits among the research materials in the collection at the Mary Baker Eddy Library are in Frederick Peabody's hand. Though Gill takes the authorship claims of Cather scholars and the Nebraska University Press for granted, she nevertheless characterizes its "claims to be reliable, objective, truthful reporting" as "at best an effective rhetorical strategy, and at worst a deliberate falsification" (564).

<sup>9</sup> In fact, when the articles are compared to the drafts in the Mary Baker Eddy Library, the section on Eddy's childhood shows the most clear evidence of an escalation in tone as the biography moved toward publication. Milmine's initial account of Eddy's family is pathos-ridden but nevertheless sympathetic to both the young Mary Baker and her father Mark. The Hendrick-edited articles are decidedly less so.

<sup>10</sup> Mina Loy's Christian Science beliefs are the subject of an excellent article by Lara Vetter.

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