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Church vs. State and Life vs. Death: Traditional Christian Science Healing in the Modern Context

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"Every man thinks God is on his side. The rich and powerful know He is."

— *Jean Anouilh*

Each person possesses the "right to adopt a religion, to employ a physician, to live or to die according to the dictates of his own rational conscience and enlightened understanding." So writes Mary Baker Eddy, founder and spiritual leader of the Christian Science church (Miscellany 222). While many agree with this position, the issue becomes muddled when the person in question is an ailing child. Should Christian Science parents be allowed to rely solely upon spiritual healing for their children, or are the rights of the young to receive the best possible medical treatment being unfairly denied? The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution does guarantee the separation between church and state, but recent court cases have demonstrated that modern society is not altogether comfortable with allowing religious parents to make martyrs of their sick children. The current controversy over Christian Science healing is rooted in an historical understanding of church tenets and practices, and its moral intensity will have a resounding impact on traditional conceptions of the church-state relationship.

Mary Baker Eddy founded the Church of Christ, Scientist, in the late nineteenth century, and an examination of her life reveals just why she created a religion concerned with spiritual healing. Reared in New England by devoutly religious parents, Eddy was chronically afflicted with periodic seizures, usually followed by a complete collapse of her nervous system. This condition made her a practical invalid for many years. During Eddy's first two marriages, illness continued to frustrate her already fragile constitution. In light of these relentless health problems, one historian reasonably asserts that it is "therefore not surprising that she became preoccupied with the question of health" (Hoekema 172).

Contemporary medicinal practices proved ineffective for Eddy, so in 1862 she traveled northward in search of something to ease her painful, omnipresent afflictions. In Maine she linked up with Phineas P. Quimby, a man who was known for bringing about cures without the use of medicine. Eddy accepted Quimby's claim that he had rediscovered the ancient healing techniques of Jesus, and she enthusiastically began to try out his methods for herself. Eddy later denied that any of her ideas concerning spiritual healing came from Quimby, but parallels between his practices and her writings are too similar to ignore; regardless, Eddy's contact with Quimby's nonmedicinal healing style had a great impact on the ailing woman, and she was soon ready to mold his teachings into her own brand of "scientific" spirituality (Hoekema 173).

The religious turning point for Mary Baker Eddy came in February of 1866, when a nasty fall left her severely injured. The doctor's bleak prognosis offered little hope for her survival, but she soon turned to the Bible in Matthew 9:28, which relates an incident of Jesus' healing. Miraculously, Eddy was cured, and she claimed she was in better shape than ever before. Based on this curative experience, Eddy developed a unique spiritual healing craft. Not only did she begin practicing this new method around the New England area, but she also charged people $300 for a set of twelve lessons for those interested in learning her healing system (Hoekema 174).

In 1875, Eddy completed work on what has continued to be the central text for the Christian Science church, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures.* After experiencing a life of pain and suffering, it is perhaps not surprising that Eddy lists "sickness" as a synonym for "Hell" in the Science glossary (588). She concluded that illness is not a tangible reality, but instead is simply an illusion induced by the senses. She is quite firm on this point, asserting that any "evidence of the senses is not to be accepted in the case of sickness" (386). Thus for the Christian Scientist, sickness should not be perceived as a condition of human reality; according to Eddy, "the cause of all so-called disease is mental, a mortal fear, a mistaken belief or conviction of the necessity and power of ill-health" (377). True to the metaphysical nature of Christian Science, Eddy further states that "Man is never sick, for Mind is not sick and matter cannot be" (393). Church members still allow Eddy's text and its ideas to supersede all others, including the Bible, since they believe that Eddy received her insights through divine revelation (Hoekema 183-4).

Since she perceived sickness as a purely mental condition, Eddy developed a unique form of therapy for herself and her Christian Science followers. If, as Eddy asserts, disease is only an illusion forced upon the body by an inadequate mental state, then traditional medicine could hardly offer a legitimate cure. Thus "Christianity requires neither hygiene nor drugs wherewith to heal both mind and body; or, lacking these, to show its helplessness" (Eddy, *Healing* 3). Instead, the "foundations of metaphysical healing" lie within the "Mind, divine Science, the truth of being that casts out error and thus heals the sick" (Eddy, *Healing* 13). Doctors, then, are not consulted; healing is achieved through an individually tailored program of mental realization and prayer. Divine Love is actually what accomplishes the restoration health, and Christian Science practitioners exist to facilitate the process by which the patient comes to realize his false beliefs—the cause of his sickness—and the curative power of ultimate Truth. So metaphysical is the process, in fact, that a great deal of healing can occur through 'long distance' prayer—a sort of telepathic mental concentration, without the actual physical presence of the practitioner with the patient (Gottschalk 248-9).

Such firm beliefs about the efficacy of spiritual healing radically differs from the Protestant mainstream, and Eddy's system generated controversy even in the initial years of the Church of Christ, Scientist. Following the institution's official incorporation in August of 1879, Mary Baker Eddy had to make occasional court appearances to "defend her interests" against Christian Science critics (Hoekema 177). One Boston newspaper ridiculed the church's method by describing it as "a simple one and likely to try the faith of the patient to the utmost. It consists in sitting quiet and doing nothing" (qtd. in Gottschalk 226). Some critics remained so unconvinced by Christian Science healing claims that they put practitioners on trial. In 1887, an Iowa healer went to court three times before he was finally acquitted of negligence in a patient's death. Similar legal incidents occurred in California and Boston, and a few practitioners were even tried in court following an apparent healing success. The Christian Science church characteristically responded to such conflicts by relying on the First Amendment guarantee of religious freedom (Gottschalk 247-8). Even from the outset, the Christian Science church and the state clashed over the legitimacy of the spiritual healing craft.

While occasional legal difficulties concerning Christian Science healing marked the first century of Mary Baker Eddy's religion, the last decade has shown a noteworthy increase in the number of state challenges to the spiritual faith. Perhaps the most celebrated challenge to Christian Science came during the summer of 1990 in Boston, headquarters of the Church of Christ, Scientist. Parents David and Ginger Twitchell were accused of manslaughter and neglect in the death of their two-month-old son Robyn, who died of a curable bowel obstruction in April of 1986. the prosecution alleged that the parents deliberately ignored Robyn's noticeable symptoms, including vomiting, high fever, and extreme pain, concerns that warranted medical attention. The state's chief attorney, while acknowledging the importance of religious freedom, said that the state must act in order to protect the safety of children in such cases. In defense, the Twitchells asserted that Robyn's condition really was not that bad, and that his symptoms became serious only near the end. The Christian Science spokesman at the trial, Nathan Talbot, summed up the church's position that differs little from Eddy's defense of a century earlier: "We have never asked for the right to neglect children. We have asked for the right to practice spiritual healing. That for us is what the free exercise of religion is all about" (qtd. in "Trial" 15). Two days later the Twitchells were convicted of manslaughter, yet some of the jurors were in tears as the verdict was read ("Boston" 12).

This mixed message flowing from the jurors' eyes hinted at the eventual sentence. Though the Twitchells faced up to ten years in jail and a $1000 fine, the prosecution recommended and obtained a sentence of ten years probation. Additionally, the parents must take their remaining three children to a pediatrician for regular examinations ("Christian" 8). This verdict was similar to those in three other recent cases. One instance in Sacramento, California, resulted in probation with 600 hours of community service for a

Christian Science mother, following her involuntary manslaughter conviction in the death of her four-year-old daughter ("Trial" 15). In each case, Christian Scientists were convicted of neglect or manslaughter, but all were spared time in jail.

Such a compromise clearly indicates what journalist David Margolick identifies as a "clash of absolutes: of religious liberty and parental autonomy on the one hand and the right of the states to protect children—and the rights of the children themselves—on the other" (1). The notion of children's rights is key, since parents are the ones who choose when to submit to a doctor's care, while children are at the mercy of their parent's fallible judgment. Some critics say that the spiritual healing practice encourages parents to make their kids' suffering a testimony to their faith. This recent upsurge in concern about children's rights has been due partially to the efforts of Rita Swan, a former Christian Science church member who left the sect following the 1976 death of her child. Convinced that spiritual healing is a farce, Swan formed Children's Healthcare Is a Legal Duty (CHILD), an organization dedicated to advancing child healthcare over religious freedom. However, despite the efforts of CHILD, the American Pediatric Association, the American Medical Association and other groups, Christian Science cases continue to couple a conviction with a lenient sentence, leaving the issue open for more intense debate.

While perhaps representative of the court's sympathy to religious freedom, the lenient sentencing in these cases is also a testimony to the pervasive social power of the modern Christian Science church. While members of other sects such as the True Followers of Christ, the Faith Assembly, and the Church of the First Born have all gone to jail for the same reliance on spiritual healing, Christian Scientists have yet to see life behind bars. Although the sect claims over 500,000 members in the United States (a claim which church critics say is greatly exaggerated), its actual power lies in the immense influence it wields. Church members are mostly middle or upper class, and they are extremely active and successful American citizens. Christian Scientists number among their group a Congressman, a federal appeals court judge, former U.S. Central Intelligence Agency director Stansfield Turner, and current CIA chief William Webster. With such a prominent and wealthy membership—one quite unlike the lower class composition of other Christian sects—it is hardly surprising that the Christian Science church is extremely well-financed. It has ample money to advance its cause for religious freedom, often with costly, full-page newspaper advertisements (Margolick 1). Additionally, the church can afford skilled, high-price lawyers to defend Scientist interests in court, an option not open to churches like the Faith Assembly. These factors may help explain why Christian Scientists receive lighter sentences than others for similar negligence convictions; certainly, the Christian Science church's unique composition makes it a more powerful voice in the debate between religious freedom and child care standards.

The debate shows few signs of resolution in the near future. The courts have consistently ruled that religious freedom does not allow parents to withhold life-saving medicine from their children, yet recent legislation in Louisiana, Texas, and Colorado seem to provide Christian Science healing with status equivalent to modern medicine. The Internal Revenue Service allows Christian Scientists to deduct the costs of spiritual healing as medical expenses on their income taxes, and Blue Cross/Blue Shield, Medicare, and various insurance companies also cover the cost of prayer therapy. In some states Christian Science practitioners are allowed to sign sick leave and disability authorizations (Skolnick, "Religious" 1227). Thus, society seems to validate Christian Science healing, at least through these tacit institutional recognitions, as a legitimate alternative to modern medicine. However, a hypocritical duality exists that has yet to be addressed. Though wielding some of the same authority as regular doctors, spiritual healers are not required by law to have a license. More importantly, the efficacy of Christian Science methods is dubious at best. The church claims to have ample documentation of healing successes, but it refuses outside requests to examine the data. One Scientist 'researcher' claims that the child death rate (up to age 14) is only 23 in 100,000 within the church, a rate far lower than that of the national population as a whole. But the church admits that it cannot pinpoint just how many Christian Science children there are in the United States, nor does it have records of total child deaths. This 'evidence' becomes further questionable in the face of two genuinely scientific studies, which concluded that the death rate for Christian Science church members is significantly higher than that of the entire population (Skolnick, "Efficacy" 1380). With respect to the statistical facts, Christian Scientists appear to be hiding something, and they are becoming less and less able to do so. With ever-increasing scrutiny because of child care concerns and the church-state debate, the Christian Science veil is slowly being lifted. As long as the welfare of this nation's children is at stake, this emotional debate will not disappear. Entangled with this concern for American youngsters is the traditional notion of separation between church and state. How free are the Christian Scientists to practice the central tenet of their faith? When—and should—the state intervene? Though the support of the medical community and judicial opinion is clearly in favor of requiring modern medicine for all children, regardless of their parents' religion, the powerful, monied lobbying force of the Christian Science church has generally succeeded in maintaining its healing autonomy. Whether or not a strict preservation of religious freedom is beneficial for society is becoming more uncertain with each new Christian Science child's death.

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