

Therapeutic Choice or Religious Liberty: Christian Science and American Culture

Review by Arthur N. Patrick

During the past two centuries the United States has hosted numerous alternatives to Western mainstream medicine. Christian Science has, since its 1866 founding, offered a daring experiment in religious healing, aptly illustrating both the potential and the perils of therapeutic alternatives that isolate themselves from the mainstream. While Christian Science has voluntarily put itself on trial within a frequently ambivalent and often hostile American culture, on many occasions the wider society has coercively put Christian Science on trial in its courtrooms.

Forty-seven court cases between 1887 and 1990 form a context for this illuminating book by Rennie B. Schoepflin, a professor of history at La Sierra University who nurtures a special interest in the history of science and medicine. His volume not only meets the criteria expected of Johns Hopkins University Press, it also climaxes a sequence of articles and book chapters that the author has published on this theme over the past two decades.

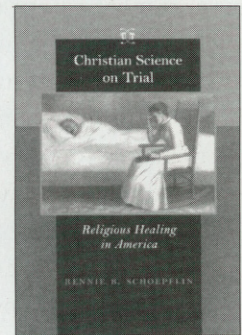
In 1976, Ronald Numbers authored a seminal study of Ellen White as a prophetess of health, endeavoring simply to understand her rather than to praise her or to blame her, as so many others had done up to that time. Now, in similar spirit, Schoepflin seeks to understand Mary Baker Eddy and her movement, avoiding the temptation to offer either praise or damnation.

Thus, Schoepflin's work stands apart from the numerous triumphalistic hagiographies written by and for true believers, while it is decidedly different from the

many censorious attacks made upon Christian Science by religious crusaders and medical critics. The book's irenic tone speaks well of the fairness of its author; its penetrating level of inquiry assures the reader of his competence and thoroughness.

The book is divided into two main sections: the world of Christian Science; then Christian Science healers and their world. Part 1 examines Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) as long-time patient, then as healer and teacher of healing. Next it explores the processes whereby practitioners and teachers were equipped, plied their art, and were categorized as true or false.

Part 2 listens to physicians as they debate Christian Science and analyzes whether the core issue is one of therapeutic choice or religious liberty. Finally, it moves to the disputed arena of responsibility for public health, especially as this relates to the protection of children. Although for Christian Scientists the twentieth century



Rennie B. Schoepflin.
*Christian Science
on Trial: Religious
Healing in America.*
Baltimore, Md.:
The Johns Hopkins
University Press,
2003.

began with considerable promise, before its close they faced significant peril as court cases of the 1980s plowed again the contested ground of seven decades earlier. In a fifteen-year period there was a 52 percent decline in the number of practitioners.

Christian Science on Trial is of particular significance for anyone interested in what H. Richard Neibuhr describes as “the double wrestle of the church with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis.”

A disputed biography circulated privately since 1947, officially released by a financially pressed board of directors in 1991, declared Eddy the equal of Jesus. But other religionists have seriously challenged the claim of the movement to be *Christian*; meanwhile its culture has asked imperiously if it is *science*.

The related questions are many. Christian Science practitioners claim to offer the answer to sin, sickness, and death. Their roots go back in a specific way to Eddy’s 1866 experience of physical recovery and her 1868 claim to “unparalleled success in the most difficult cases.” Was Eddy’s ship caught without an effective rudder by the powerful currents of nineteenth-century Restorationism? What did she offer as unique and what did she borrow in forming her system? What is the exegetical sustainability of her biblical hermeneutics? What message does the constant accommodation of her movement to its culture send to sectarianism as a mode of belief and a way of life?

How does the experience of Christian Science speak to the issues of gender equality and female financial and social viability within a complex society? What is the actual relationship between the human mind and physical wellness? How can a religious movement honor its founder yet ensure relevance by keeping abreast with the development of human knowledge?

Schoepflin identifies not only the “maelstrom of debate over the authority of Eddy,” but also the “smaller whirlpools of contention around matters of belief, practice, and organizational structure” (93). Does ontology indicate dualism or idealism? Is Christian Science *mental* healing or *metaphysical* healing? What standards should healers adopt for their personal and professional lives? How should Christian Scientists relate to their Christian churches: should they remain as reformers or withdraw to form distinct organizations? If the latter, how should they organize and formulate their mission?

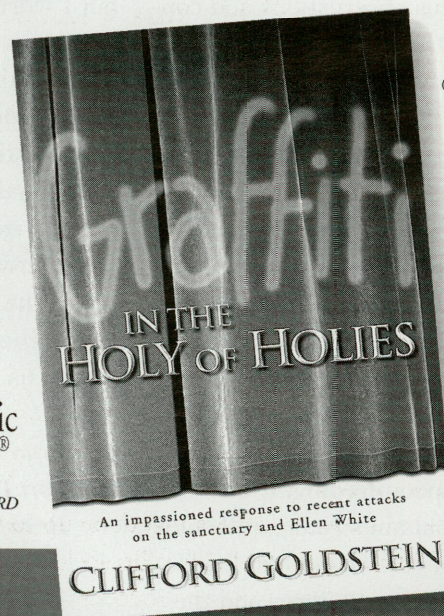
As an historian, Schoepflin has demonstrated a Sherlock Holmes capacity to discover and organize evi-

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dence. But he is also acutely aware of sociological issues, including the routinization of charisma and the tenuous process of sect legitimation in which interior impulses confront the exterior, fragmenting forces of delegitimation.

North America has proven to be fertile soil for new religious movements, as demonstrated by the effervescent experiences of Joseph Smith, Ellen White, Mary Baker Eddy, Charles Taze Russell, and others. Historians who research these founders or their subsequent faith communities help to recreate a context for understanding the origins and development of the others. Schoepflin has performed a commendable service for historians of Christianity as well as for those whose

pendant is American religion and culture.

Schoepflin's book is one of a series focused on "Medicine, Science, and Religion in Historical Context." For this researcher, the perceptive inclusiveness of the bibliographical essay alone is worth the price of the book. Bonus features are, however, many. One of them is a coherent example of how to present winsomely the intense conflicts and the multifaceted variety that characterize the history of healers and healing in American religion.

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Finding Fellowship

I found the article "Whose Church Is It, Anyway" (fall 2003), by Loren Seibold, somewhat disturbing. I agree with his observations and conclusions, but I am bothered that a church committed to keeping "The Truth" is not more interested in testing and discussing ours (and others) understanding of reality.

One would think that a church that puts such value on education would try to provide a framework for interaction among those it has nurtured and educated. When we are young we need the "milk of the Word," but as we mature we need more than spoon-feeding. If our leaders and administrators still enjoy Pabulum, how can we get real food?

I really enjoy *Spectrum* and the healthy interchange it brings. I believe that although we tend as a group to focus on details individual members can be refreshingly accept-

ing. For example, as a member of a small rural church I am not only tolerated, but also accepted as part of the community. I appreciate that, but I worry about my children.

My wife and I grew up within the traditional framework, but we have encouraged our children to test and question. Now they are young adults and they are finding it more difficult to be patient with ready-made answers.

If the Church belongs primarily to traditionalists, then where can the rest of us find fellowship?

*Bruce Rafuse
Port Hardy,
British Columbia, Canada*

Natural Science vs. Religious Faith

Ariel Roth distorts truth somewhat when he asserts the following: "Science cannot find God as long as it

insists on excluding him" ("*Letters, Spectrum* 31.1 [winter 2003]: 75).

Roth knows very well that natural science has nothing to do with questions of religious faith. That is not a question natural science should consider at all. The fact that some scientists have given pronouncements on faith or atheism is something emanating from their private convictions, and such statements are not scientific. They know it, and Ariel Roth knows it.

This whole business is a rhetorical battle between different philosophies among academics, but the nonacademic public does not see the difference and is easily seduced to believe that natural science and religious faith can be mixed.

*Kristen Falch Jakobsen
Ringstad,
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