The Church of Christ, Scientist: An Overview

In *Love and Consequences*, author Margaret B. Jones details her gritty life as a half Native American, brought up in foster care, following foster brothers into Los Angeles gang life and selling drugs to eke out a living. Great story. Unfortunately, it's not true. In reality, Margaret "Peggy" Seltzer is from a wealthy white family and attended a private school. Her sister outed her after reading a story about Margaret and her book in *The New York Times*. The scandal, like previous literary hoaxes involving best-selling author James Frey (*A Million Little Pieces*) and others, easily could have been avoided if her publishers had conducted a simple background check.

Compelling stories attract attention. This is no less true in religion than in street life. Consider the story of Mary Baker Eddy. Born Mary Baker in 1821 to humble but strict Congregationalists, she was a sickly child given to fits of depression and extreme temper. She married at 22 only to see her husband die seven months later and leave her pregnant and emotionally unstable, depending from time to time throughout her life on morphine. After a second marriage, which ended in divorce, she married a third time at age 56 to Asa Eddy, who died five years later. This much is true. But the rest of the story of Mary Baker Eddy and the religion she founded – the Church of Christ, Scientist – mixes half truths and plagiarism. As Fritz Ridenour explains in *So What's the Difference: A Look at 20 Worldviews, Faiths and Religions and How They Compare to Christianity*, "Eddy is heralded as the discoverer and founder of Christian Science, but her claims to originality and truthfulness do not hold up" (p. 166).

For starters, her teachings borrow heavily from those of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, a metaphysical healer from Maine who treated Eddy. In fact, Quimby used the term "Christian Science" years before Eddy adopted it. Her book *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, the authoritative text of Christian Science, lifts passages almost verbatim from Quimby's own writings, as well as from a dissertation by Dr. Francis Lieber. Modern historians further have proven that Eddy plagiarized other books. Even worse, Eddy's claim of her own miraculous healing from a near-fatal fall was exposed as an incredible exaggeration – if not an outright falsehood – by her own physician. But perhaps most significantly, Eddy did not, and could not, heal as she claimed. In fact, she succumbed to medical care and medication for her various ailments in later years.

Despite all this, Eddy was a charismatic leader who founded the Church of Christ, Scientist in Boston in 1879. She displayed an uncanny ability to leverage Christian Science into a money making venture. Writes Walter Martin, "At death she had amassed several million dollars, of which not one cent was given to charity" (*Rise of the Cults*, p.80). Even so, her followers were loyal, numbering roughly 1 million by the time she died in 1910. Today, Christian Science is foremost of the mind-sciences family of religions that emerged from 19th century religious and intellectual fervor, including the adaptation of Hindu beliefs, the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, occult practices, experimentation with hypnotism, mental healings, and attempts to contact the dead and other spirits through séances. Christian Science today claims 2,000 churches in 60 countries and boasts 3,000 "practitioners," or full-time healers. The organization is headquartered in Boston.

Key teachings

Overview. "Christian Science has offered (to the followers of Mary Baker Eddy) a sanctuary from the preaching of the gospel of Christ, which points out the terrible reality of sin and evil in man's nature and strips from the soul every vestige of self-righteousness. Mrs. Eddy's religion, on the other hand, offers no such hazards, denying as it does the existence of evil, sin, sickness, and even death itself…. The theology of Christian Science prohibits any acceptance whatsoever of the vicarious atonement of our Lord, and blatantly denies eternal retribution for those who willfully reject Jesus Christ as 'the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world' (John 1:29)" (Walter Martin, *Rise of the Cults*, p. 76).

God. Christian Science rejects the idea of a personal, good and infinite God who is distinct from His creation. Eddy taught in *Science and Health* that God "is not a person. God is a principle." The Trinity is redefined as life, truth, and love.

Jesus. Christian Science distinguishes between Jesus the man and the "Christ Principle." The Bible, in contrast, makes it clear that there is no distinction between Jesus the man and His divine office as the Christ.

Creation. There is no reality to the physical world, according to the Christian Science worldview. It is all an illusion.

Man. Eddy taught that "man is not material; he is spiritual." People are in fact divine spirits.

Sin, suffering, death. Since the physical world is not real, evil, sin, sickness and death are illusions of the mortal mind.

Salvation. Since sin and death are false beliefs (illusions), salvation involves overcoming the false idea that they exist with the realization of our divine spirit and mind.

Bible. Christian Science says the Bible must be interpreted through the higher and final revelation of Mary Baker Eddy's *Science and Health*.

Death and the afterlife. Since God and man are immortal spirit, death also is only an illusion. It is a transition from the illusion of the material world to the ultimate reality of immortal spirit life.

Summary

Dr. Rick Cornish, in *5 Minute Apologist*, writes, "Like the cereal Grape-Nuts, which is neither grapes nor nuts, Christian Science is neither Christian nor science. It has nothing in common with Christianity, renouncing every major Christian doctrine, or science, which it rejects just as easily. This religious movement may be on the decline, but it still poses a threat to the spiritually unwary" (p. 295).

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