‘Where all things are pure and of good report’: The doctrinal theology, religious practice, and media manipulation of the Christian Science Church

Douglas J. Swanson, Ed.D APR
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The Doctrinal Theology, Religious Practice, and Media Manipulation
of the Christian Science Church

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Abstract

The Church of Christ, Scientist, is a 21st century religious movement that is facing considerable challenges to its existence on many fronts. The church is morally bound to the unalterable religious theology of its 19th century founder, Mary Baker Eddy. The church is legally obligated to an intractable management structure Mrs. Eddy proscribed in the church Manual. For more than a century, church leadership has been able to follow Mrs. Eddy’s example and successfully manipulate the media to control dissemination of information about the church’s theology and practice. At the same time, the church has presented a pleasing public image of “rectitude and spiritual understanding” (Eddy, 1906, p. 403). But recent financial crises and legal action against the church have generated unprecedented dissent, both inside and outside Christian Science. Examining how church leadership is struggling to address current issues with its 19th century frameworks could be indicative of the future success or failure of the Christian Science movement.
My heart has many rooms: one of these is sacred to the memory of my students. Into this upper chamber, where all things are pure and of good report, — into this sanctuary of love, — I often retreat, sit silently, and ponder. (Eddy, 1924, p. 159)

Introduction

The Church of Christ, Scientist, better known as the Christian Science Church, is a worldwide religious organization established in Boston, Mass., in 1879 by Mary Baker Eddy to “reinstate primitive Christianity and its lost element of healing” (Eddy, 1936, p. 17). The church was founded as part of Mrs. Eddy’s quest to present biblical truths she credited for her physical and moral salvation after a life-threatening accident in 1866. The theology of Christian Science is built around Mrs. Eddy’s book, Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures, first published in 1875. Science and Health serves as Scientists’ legitimizing guide for life. It assigns reality – and denies reality – according to Mrs. Eddy’s understandings.

Christian Science sustains with immortal proof the impossibility of any material sense, and defines these so-called senses as mortal beliefs, the testimony of which cannot be true either of man or of his Maker. (Eddy, 1906, p. 488, italics in the original)

At its most basic level, the theology of Christian Science demands that followers maintain “an almost constant state of denial” to actions and events of the physical world (Kramer, 2000). It is expected that a practicing Scientist will study Science and Health daily and memorize significant passages to build a defense against the worldly thinking which is believed to precipitate sin, disease, and death.

In practice, the leadership of the church adheres to rules established by Mrs. Eddy’s subsequent work, Manual of the Mother Church, first published in 1895. The Manual contains a legally intractable, eternally unchangeable structure for church administration, the content of worship services, requirements for membership, and other individual and collective requirements for believers.

Together, the books known by followers simply as ‘the textbook’ and ‘the manual’ outline a system of worship which has been characterized as “a pragmatic interpretation of Christian revelation” (Gottschalk, 1973, p. 275) because its focus is on practicality of purpose. Christian Science was developed to support those who “wished to cling to cherished values and ideals in a rapidly changing America” of the 19th century (Thomas, 1994, p. 295)
and it retains its focus today. The religion uses a rhetorical strategy Kramer calls "the absolute in the relative" (2000, p. 186). It allows followers to address worldly concerns while denying all reality of existence to those concerns.

Problem

"Stand porter at the door of thought. Admitting only such conclusions as you wish realized in bodily results, you will control yourself harmoniously." (Eddy, 1906, p. 391)

Recognizing the inflexibility of Christian Science theology and practice, humorist Mark Twain wrote that Scientists had no more say in the management of their church than audience members would have in the management of a theater (Twain, 1907). This has been a commonly expressed complaint since the beginning of the movement. Over the years, dissident Scientists have criticized church leadership for denying church members the right to revise doctrine, engage in debate, or openly publish literature not approved by the church.

For more than a hundred years, church leadership has kept most of these grievances out of the public spotlight by manipulating media content about Christian Science and controlling believers' access to publications which address church theology. Church leadership has methodically acquired as much historical documentation as possible about Christian Science (Silberger, 1980), restricted access to this collection (Gill, 1998), and has threatened malcontents with excommunication or legal action if they oppose the policies (Beals, 2000a; Fraser, 1999). These strategies, together with an army of local observers feeding "vital intelligence" back to church headquarters in Boston (Brenneman, 1990, p. 69) has kept most dissent private. But, beginning in the 1980s, as membership continued to drop and Christian Science was identified as "a graying, dwindling religion" (Brenneman, 1990, p. 77), the church found its public position threatened on a number of fronts.

A financial and management crisis almost bankrupted The Mother Church (Fraser, 1999) and forced the sale of church broadcast units at a huge financial loss. In order to qualify for a huge financial gift, the church authorized publication of a biography which deifies Mrs. Eddy and is seen by many Scientists as "blasphemous" (Fraser, 1999, p. 371). Church leadership was named in a spate of lawsuits accusing The Mother Church of responsibility in connection with the deaths of children who died while under Christian Science prayer treatment.
Numerous break-away groups surfaced to openly challenge the authority of The Mother Church, its interpretation of Christian Science theology, and leadership’s control of written work about the faith.

As these controversies developed, church leadership found it could no longer fall back on traditional censorship strategies that Kramer summarized as “quiet attempts to silence opposition” (Kramer, 2000, p. 100). The international news media focused voluminous attention on the church’s troubles, and Christian Science dissenters found numerous opportunities to unite and share their complaints through traditional media and via the World Wide Web.

As a result, Mrs. Eddy’s church is faced today with innumerable threats its founder did not foresee. These threats are growing in number and complexity. The church needs to present a positive image to the public, stabilize its financial footing, re-energize its organizational structure, add new members, and stem a rising tide of branch church closings. But because the church’s theology and practice cannot be adapted to changing expectations of a contemporary world, it is difficult to imagine how the church will address the challenges it faces.

Investigation

This research uses the case study method to illustrate the heretofore unexplored relationship between the religious theology and practice of the Church of Christ, Scientist, and the practice of media manipulation used by its leadership. The investigation is pertinent because church leadership is obligated to adhere to an intransient theology which is more than a century old. The church organizational structure, hierarchy, and worship guidelines are equally unalterable and dated. Scholars who have studied the movement contend it is out of step with the expectations of contemporary society (Kramer, 2000; Fraser, 1999; Brenneman, 1990). At the very least, Mrs. Eddy’s strategies for dealing with critical newspaper editorials of the 1800s can hardly be considered applicable for issues management in the multi-media environment in which Christian Science must now promote and defend itself. Examining how church leadership addresses these and other 21st century issues with Mrs. Eddy’s 19th century frameworks could be indicative of the future success or failure of the Christian Science movement.

The case study method has been chosen because it is consistent with qualitative investigation in the social sciences and in business (Stake, 1995). The method is advantageous because “an entire organization or entity can be
investigated in depth and with meticulous attention to detail" (Zikmund, 1997, p. 108). Case study research addresses relationships among individuals, entities and functions while taking into account professional culture and expectations (Becher, 1989). The method allows for a problem to be told in story form, addressing actual events and opportunities for decision-making (Megginson, 1980). It allows the scholar to translate experience into concepts which can then be used as a decision-making guide in similar situations in the future (Hoag, Brickley, & Cawley, 2001).

The current study of Christian Science is qualitative in nature. It was carried out to make broad general observations about Christian Science, the leadership of the church, and opportunities for future growth of Christian Science as a religious organization. It first examines Christian Science theology, to see how Mrs. Eddy’s puritan upbringing allowed her “to quite literally institutionalize her personality” in her church and its belief system (Brenneman, 1990, p. 43). The focus then shifts to Christian Science practice, to see how the church conducts its business and regulates social activity of its membership. Efforts by church leadership to enforce solidarity among the faithful are discussed. The study then summarizes successes and failures of church leadership in regard to prior restraint and censorship of Christian Science theological literature, and manipulation of other media content about the religion and its followers. The study ends with a discussion of recent positive developments and future challenges.

Doctrinal theology

All individual and group activity of Christian Scientists is regulated by the theological tenets contained in Science and Health. The book was published initially in 1875 and revised dozens of times during Mrs. Eddy’s lifetime. The final edition was published in 1906. Mrs. Eddy makes it clear in Science and Health and in her other works that Christian Scientists must have “radical reliance” (1936, p. 167) on the truths the textbook contains. Scientists are also expected to know they “must follow Mrs. Eddy’s teachings without addition or deviation” (Kramer, 2000, p. 24) and that her words carry as much weight today as they did when she was alive.

The textbook

As with the rest of Mrs. Eddy’s writings, the textbook is both detailed and vague in wording and intent. Comprised of more than 700 pages, the book deliberately lays out Mrs. Eddy’s thoughts on prayer, marriage,
medicine, and "mental malpractice"—"the injurious action of one mortal mind controlling another from wrong motives" (1906, p. 451). It ends with a glossary of terms, a "Key to the Scriptures" interpreting biblical passages according to Christian Science theology, and dozens of testimonies from 19th century students healed of gout, rheumatism, consumption, and other maladies of the time period.

Though detailed in subject, the book focuses more on the 'why' than the 'how to' of Christian Science practice. A 14-page chapter on marriage, for example, includes no discussion of dispute resolution, family planning, household finances, or sex. To be specific about such topics would be contrary to the philosophy of filtering out the material elements of the world and replacing them with spiritual interpretations (Kramer, 2000).

**Testimonies of healing**

It is not uncommon for people of any religious background who claim to have been healed by prayer to talk about their experiences (Dossey, 1993). But the experiences of Christian Scientists are unique because the religion's primary focus as an entity is physical healing. In fact, Mrs. Eddy makes healing conditional for "any sincere seeker of Truth" (1906, p. x). Therefore, testimonies of healing are a key element of Christian Science theology, a 'litmus test' of the spirituality of its followers, and the main link between Christian Science theology and practice.

Testimonies of Christian Science healing are published in the periodicals, spoken privately among Scientists, and voiced publicly in Wednesday testimony meetings. Testimonies provide confirmation for Scientists that vanquished diseases and illnesses were "unreal" to begin with (Eddy, 1924, p. 12) and that even the thought of discord cannot exist in a reality where "God is All-in-all" (Eddy, 1936, p. 468).

Testimonies are almost always "anecdotal" in nature (DesAutels, Battin, & May, 1999, p. 3), frame the healing as a 'challenge overcome,' and cite the event as evidence of the believer's spiritual authority over a material reality that seemed to be but was not. Testimonies do not detail medical diagnosis, symptoms, or suffering because to do so would be to admit facts of a discordant reality vehemently denied by Christian Science theology. Scientists do not testify about any healing with resulted from a combination of prayer with medical methods because Mrs. Eddy declared that in most situations "[t]he hypotheses of mortals are antagonistic to Science and cannot mix with it. (Eddy, 1936, p. 182). Nevertheless, even Mrs. Eddy recognized that some medical conditions would not expediently be dealt with through prayer. "Until the advancing age admits the efficacy and supremacy of Mind," she
wrote, “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” (1936, p. 401). In any event, to Christian Scientists, testimonies of healing allow the
sharing of their deliverance from “a dominant medical paradigm” which when unchecked can allow followers “to
catch society’s fear and concern” about disease and, by association, create its reality (DesAutels, Battin, & May,
1999, p. 45).

Testimonies have their own positive and uplifting rhetoric. An illness or diseases is a ‘suggestion,’ a
‘challenge,’ or at the very worst, a ‘problem’ which comes from ‘moral mind.’ The Christian Scientist does not call
attention to a condition, and in most cases will not refer to it by name. When the condition is successfully healed, a
‘demonstration’ has taken place. Failure is not acknowledged. A healing delayed is only evidence that the believer
has not yet ‘worked things out.’ A Christian Scientist who dies as a result of a medical complication ‘had a problem
he/she could not overcome.’

Typically, the devout Christian Scientist personally identifies with the healing that brought him or her to
the fold of the faithful, and will re-tell the story regularly to other Scientists and to non-believers. Consistent with
Mrs. Eddy’s own testimony of healing from 1866, the testimony of modern-day believers is a conversion experience
which almost always follows the same pattern: An instantaneous or almost instantaneous healing of a disease,
ilness, or injury rendered ‘incurable’ by traditional medical experts, as the result of the initially doubtful victim’s
reading of all or part of Science and Health (See Kramer, 2000; Fraser, 1999). As a result, the theology of Christian
Scientists and the organizational practice of their church is regulated by- and through testimonies of healing – just as
the theology and organizational practice of other religious groups is regulated by- and through their rhetoric and
organizational rituals (Sass, 2000; Appelrouth, 1999; Dehler & Welsh, 1994; Neck & Millman, 1994).
Religious practice

All successful individuals have become such by hard work; by improving moments before they pass into hours, and hours that other people may occupy in the pursuit of pleasure. They spend no time in sheer idleness, in talking when they have nothing to say, in building air-castles or floating off on the wings of sense: all of which drop human life into the ditch of nonsense, and worse than waste its years (Eddy, 1924, p. 230).

When Christian Science burst on the scene at the close of the Civil War, the attractiveness of Mrs. Eddy’s philosophy allowed her to quickly build the nation’s fastest-growing religious movement (Gill, 1998). Many of the most prominent Americans, including socialites, politicians, and entertainers were among the faithful.

Focused and determined, strong in organizational skill and with “a genius for fund-raising” (Gill, 1998, p. 469), Mrs. Eddy spent little time socializing and in fact was often “inaccessible to anyone except members of her household and her selected church officials” (Gill, 1998, p. 350). She was constantly at work, writing and revising her publications and building a foundation for her religious movement. As a result, Mary Baker Eddy’s displayed personality and work ethic is, now and forever, the model for Christian Scientists.

Faithful workers

Mrs. Eddy felt that an appropriate follower of Christian Science “gives little time to society manners or matters, and benefits society by his example and usefulness” (Eddy, 1900, p. 2). This philosophy is reflected by a church organization which has no paid clergy and no church-sanctioned social functions or charitable causes.

The order and content of Christian Science church services are dictated by the Manual. Sunday services are conducted by lay ‘readers’ who read selections from the Bible and Science and Health. Selections are chosen by The Mother Church based on a revolving set of topics selected by Mrs. Eddy. All citations read are identical in all branch churches each Sunday, and no elaboration or extemporaneous speaking is authorized. The Manual establishes specific time limits for music, and allows only a piano or organ accompaniment. Audience members remain silent except during hymns and reader-led audible prayer. Presumably because of the sedate nature of the services, Christian Scientists are discouraged from bringing children to church. Children are welcomed at Sunday
School, which has classes for youth through age 20. Wednesday evening meetings include selected readings followed by healing testimonials offered by audience members.

Each Christian Science church will employ a clerk, a treasurer, and occasionally will have service positions for others. Outside the church, Mrs. Eddy allowed for a small number of ‘professional’ Christian Scientists who are allowed to carry out specific service occupations but are not employed by the church. These professionals include Christian Science practitioners, who work full- or part-time and offer prayer healing services for a fee as an alternative to medical care. Practitioners are not allowed to diagnose illnesses, offer medication, or provide any type of physical comfort. When an ailing Christian Scientist needs additional care, a Christian Science nurse may be called in to bathe the patient, dress wounds, or assist in making the sufferer more comfortable, as long as no medications are being used. Seriously ill Christian Scientists are welcomed to rest and pray at private Christian Science nursing home facilities.

Church membership

Scientists who confess their faith and secure written recommendations from other members may join a branch church at age 12, following an oral interview and an affirmative vote of the membership. Branch church members may also join The Mother Church, provided they secure similar endorsement and are approved by a vote of the Board.

While it is somewhat difficult to get into the membership, it is very easy to get out. The Manual painstakingly lists 83 different requirements and prohibitions for members. Requirements include daily prayer and study of the Bible and Science and Health, payment of an annual tax to the church, and purchase of subscriptions to church periodicals.

Social prohibitions

The Manual’s guidelines prohibit the Church of Christ, Scientist, from having any of the social activities which are a traditional part of American protestant church life. No parties are held. No meals are served. There are no prayer groups, sewing circles, or youth activities. There are no baptisms, weddings, or funerals. With the exception of the occasional business assembly or committee meeting, Scientists do not gather at their churches other than for worship. What social activity does exist for Christian Scientists is outside the church structure and is
focused through, and constrained by, the interrelationships of the religion's textbook and stories of physical healing.

**Enforced loyalties**

Throughout the history of the movement, there have been concerns that "quick, effective, convincing activist-converts might lead the Church off into new directions of their own contriving; even, perhaps that they might move her Church right out from under Mrs. Eddy" (Silberger, 1980, p. 186). For that reason, the Board enforces trust and solidarity of the faithful through a variety of individual and collective tests of loyalty. All are in keeping with the organization's style of quiet, behind-the-scenes manipulation.

One of the most important events in the developmental history of the Church of Christ, Scientist, took place between 1919 and 1921. What Scientists call The Great Litigation was a power struggle between the Board of Directors and the Trustees. Because the Board was not given specific power-sharing directives in the Manual, the Board attempted to gain organizational power by forcing the Publishing Society to acknowledge Board authority in greater ways. As part of its strategy, the Board carried out a collective test of member loyalty by asking Christian Scientists to cancel their subscriptions to church publications (Kramer, 2000). Church members who refused were quickly branded as disloyal to the cause. In some cases, they were shunned by other church members. After the Massachusetts Supreme Court ended the dispute by ruling in favor of the Board, the Board mailed a questionnaire to Christian Science Journal-listed practitioners, requiring that they disclose whether or not they were loyal to the board during the years of legal turmoil. Practitioners identified as loyal to the Board were allowed to renew their professional listings.

During the upheavals at The Mother Church in the 1980s and 90s, a time characterized by Fraser as "a massive institutional nervous breakdown" (1999, p. 394), church leadership conducted further collective tests of loyalty. The church was ""[i]n desperate need of money" (Kramer, 2000, p. 31) as a result of the leveraging of pension funds to establish a radio and television broadcast network. The network failed, its equipment was sold at a tremendous financial loss (Nieber, 2000), and church leadership ended up defending itself against a lawsuit filed by members who claimed $450 million was "recklessly and wrongfully" spent in the endeavor. As a consequence of the lawsuit, some critical Mother Church staff were fired and others excommunicated (Fraser, 1999). The church clerk "personally contacted those suspected by the Board of subversive activities and officially rebuked them for not
being supportive" (Fraser, 1999, p. 374).

'Authorized' publications

The Christian Science Publishing Society publishes all religious periodicals of the church, including the Christian Science Journal, Christian Science Sentinel, bible lesson booklets known as the Quarterly, and other publications in a variety of languages. The Publishing Society also publishes all of Mrs. Eddy's manuscript works.

It is the position of church leadership that only these 'authorized' publications should be marketed to represent Christian Science. The leadership bases its authority claim on an a written request made to the church by Mrs. Eddy in the final year of her life. In response to inquiries about other publications, Mrs. Eddy wrote: "I recommend nothing but what is published or sold by The Christian Science Publishing Society" (Eddy, 1924, p. 354). Upon Mrs. Eddy's death, the Board of Directors legally acquired all copyright protections for her published and unpublished works. Those works which the leadership wished to remain in circulation were offered for sale in Christian Science Reading Rooms. The other works were deposited in the inaccessible archives of The Mother Church. The leadership staunchly defends its prior restraint protections, helped in great measure by a legal extension of copyright which was shepherded to approval during the Nixon administration by Christian Scientist H.R. (Bob) Haldeman.

Those who oppose the policy of leadership argue that the recommendation of April, 1909, was not a blanket indictment of outside works, but instead resulted from specific incidents in which Mrs. Eddy's name was used to promote sales of outside publications. This argument is further supported by a July, 1891 admonishment by Mrs. Eddy. Published on a card which was inserted into issues of the Christian Science Journal, it reads: "I consider my students as capable, individually, of selecting their own reading material and circulating it, as a committee would be which is chosen for this purpose" (Eddy, as quoted in Beals, 2000a, p. 9). But because this card was inserted into the magazines and not published in text, it has been lost from many collections and many Scientists are said to be unaware of its existence.

In practice, the general legal counsel for the Board contacts writers and publishers directly to prevent them from creating works not approved by the Publishing Society. Beals characterizes the activity as "Boston's untiring effort to control the members through depriving them of the deeper teachings that enabled them to better understand
and demonstrate Christian Science” (2000a, p. 11). The effort is polite, but firm (Swanson, 1997) and is based on a simple fact: Christian Science teachings cannot be expressed in any detail without quoting Mrs. Eddy. Since the Board of Directors owns and houses all her published and unpublished works, rigidly restricts access and defends its copyright ownership, writers who wish to quote Mrs. Eddy without the Board’s approval must do so illegally and at their own risk. Some authors who have gone to press with unauthorized works have been released from Publishing Society authorized literature writing assignments and forced to remove their professional listings from the Journal. Others have been excommunicated (Beals, 2000a).

**Debate**

The Mother Church employs a small number of Board-approved spokespersons known as Christian Science Lecturers. These men and women travel the world and speak publicly about the religion and its benefits. It is usually expected that each branch church will host at least one lecture annually. Often these gatherings are held in other public accommodations to boost attendance. While lecturers will promote Christian Science, they never engage in debate about it, as per the Manual.

Within the past ten years, church leadership based in Boston began participating in secular and ecumenical religious conferences to explain Christian Science in its broader social contexts. By all indications, presentations have been explanatory in nature and have not violated the Manual’s stipulations about debate. Reports of the proceedings have been carried in the Journal and other church periodicals.

**Media Manipulation**

The Publishing Society manipulates media content about Christian Science primarily through the Committees on Publication (COPs). These groups work locally to promote Christian Science, defend it from attack, censor critical commentary, gather information for the Mother Church, and raise funds to support legal battles. There are 52 COPs in the U.S. and more than a hundred overseas, and at least one member of each branch church participates.
In keeping with Mrs. Eddy’s “standard of acceptability” (Silberger, 1980, p. 232) the COPs intervene to keep news coverage about Christian Science informative, uplifting and positive. The COPs monitor the news media and react to provide denials or corrections in accordance with Mrs. Eddy’s demands in the Manual.

It shall be the duty of the Committee on Publication to correct in a Christian manner impositions on the public in regard to Christian Science, injustices done Mrs. Eddy or members of this Church by the daily press, by periodicals or circulated literature of any sort... Furthermore, the Committee on Publication shall read the last proof sheet of such an article and see that it is published according to copy; he shall circulate in large quantities the papers containing such an article, sending a copy to the Clerk of the Church. (Eddy, 1936, p. 97, italics in the original)

At the same time, COPs work pro-actively to keep unpleasant information out of the media whenever possible. In an instance cited by Brenneman (1990), a COP member working with a practitioner successfully persuaded a newspaper reporter covering a sexual abuse case not to report that the accused was a Christian Science Sunday School teacher. The male defendant had been arrested and charged with sexually abusing and photographing young children. Thanks to the persuasive effort on the part of church officials, the newspaper stories did not mention the suspect’s religion or church involvement.

COPs also attempt to influence the media by working through the Publishing Society’s Committee on Business. This committee “uses advertiser ‘muscle’ to intimidate editors and publishers” (Brenneman, 1990, p. 73). The result is a two-pronged effort to influence media content journalistically and economically.

COPs also help raise money from the faithful to fund legal battles by parents whose children have died while under Christian Science prayer treatment – an increasingly large task, since there have been dozens of such cases in recent years (Kramer, 2000; DesAutels, Battin & May, 1999; Brenneman, 1990). Because of this and other work that goes on behind the scenes, COPs are seen as “the most powerful figures in the church in many respects” (Brenneman, 1990, p. 69).

**New media**

By early 2001, there were at least ten organizations offering Christian Science-like religious services, evangelizing in the name of Christian Science, publicizing Mrs. Eddy’s works and writing, or selling unauthorized
literature about Christian Science. Some of the groups promote theology which appears consistent with that of The Mother Church, but the groups differ with Boston on leadership and doctrinal control issues. Other groups promote theology which is at odds with that of The Mother Church’s interpretation of Mrs. Eddy’s Christian Science.

Several of these organizations have detailed World Wide Web sites and appear to use these sites as the basis for theological promotion and circulation of publications. Appearances give some indication that the Board and the Publishing Society are trying to prevent the electronic publication of religious materials by these organizations, but the extent of this interference is difficult to verify.

Perhaps the most well-known of the theologically consistent dissident groups is The Bookmark, a California-based operation established in 1980 which offers a catalog of Christian Science literature. Its Web site states that the publications include “familiar works of Mrs. Eddy, many reminiscences, memoirs of early workers, lectures, Biblical study aids, and other items of interest” (The Bookmark, 2001). A printed catalog offers bound works, including bound photocopied reprints of out of print books. The Bookmark claims adherence to traditional Christian Science theology but strongly disagrees with church leadership’s exclusive publication and control of its so-called authorized works. Founder Ann Beals, in a letter to customers, reported that she had been accused by the Board of copyright infringement for selling copies of out of print literature about Christian Science. Beals “agreed to the Church’s request to remove these writings from my website and my publication list until I could determine what steps to take in meeting this challenge” (Beals, 2000b). Her letter seeks donations for a legal defense fund.

At least two other organizations whose beliefs appear to be theologically-consistent with The Mother Church also reported legal challenges from the Board. The Modesto, California-based Christian Science University claims to offer 56 online degree programs, all based on Christian Science theology and practice. David James Nolan, who identifies himself as chancellor of the institution, states that his goal to establish an institution of higher learning to coordinate education with Christian Science practice is being jeopardized by threatened legal action for use of the trademarked term “Christian Science” (The Christian Science University, 2001).

One of Nolan’s former associates is Helen Marie Wright, founder of The Mary Baker Eddy Institute. This organization publishes pamphlets and audio tape lectures which also appear mostly consistent with Christian Science theology. It also offers more than a dozen books profiling Mrs. Eddy or criticizing church leadership. The
Institute claims that the 88th edition of Mrs. Eddy’s Manual was the last version she authorized. It seeks to have this version legally “acknowledged as law by law” (Mary Baker Eddy Institute, 2001), an action which the organization claims would free the branch churches from Boston’s control, allowing them to be self-governed. The Institute is soliciting donations for its Mary Baker Eddy Obedience Fund to engage its legal challenge to the authority of The Mother Church, and to defend against legal threats by the Board for use of Mary Baker Eddy’s name (Mary Baker Eddy Institute, 2001).

Other organizations claim fidelity to some of the official theology of Christian Science, but differ with other aspects of the religion as proselytized in Science and Health and structured in the Manual. Among these groups is the Christian Science Endtime Center of Denver, Colorado. Established in 1995, the Endtime Center is supported by the Christian Science Church of Transfiguration, which adheres to the belief that at some future point people will be transfigured into spiritual beings as the Earth is destroyed. Also differing somewhat from traditional Christian Science theology is Emergence International of Phoenix, Arizona, which provides “spiritual and educational support to lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals as they deal with homophobia and heterosexism” (Emergence International, 2001). While both groups report significant theological differences with leadership and, occasionally, conflicts with Boston. But the extent of any current action by the Board against these groups is difficult to determine.

Conclusion

The future of The Church of Christ, Scientist, seems tremendously limited by its theological and organizational structure. The church came into being at the turn of the last century. Its philosophy, teachings, and the constitution of its worship services were created to meet the needs of a slower-paced, rhetoric-based, horse and buggy society which no longer exists. The theological and pragmatic requirements created and sustained by Mrs. Eddy and the writings which have taken her place as the religion’s ‘figurehead’ have not changed and for the most part, cannot change to keep pace with a post-modern interactive multi-media world.

A primary value of Christian Science—physical healing—has been displaced somewhat through the advance of medical science and technology. Many of the medical maladies for which there was no treatment option other
than Christian Science in the 1870s—polio and tuberculosis, for example—have been eradicated from society, or are quickly and easily treated upon diagnosis.

Working within the structure of the Manual, church leadership has been able to take some positive initiatives, but each initiative is shadowed by potential negative implications. In the late 1990s, church periodicals were redesigned and made more contemporary. At the same time, the Publishing Society began an unprecedented marketing and public relations campaign. The Publishing Society published Science and Health on the World Wide Web, and wrapped it in a new contemporary cover for sale in popular bookstores. Radio commercials for the book focused on its help for sufferers of stress and downplayed its association with the church. While reports indicated that annual sales had exceeded 100,000 copies (Kramer, 2000; Fraser, 1999), critics charged that the marketing campaign was designed to divert attention from the theology of Christian Science and package the religion as a “self help” philosophy (Kramer, 2000, p. 202).

The growth of the World Wide Web through the 1990s and into the new century presents a bountiful opportunity to spread the gospel of Christian Science to an electronically connected world. Although the Christian Science Publishing Society maintains a large interactive Web site containing full-text version of Science and Health and articles from publications, the Quarterly bible lessons which Mrs. Eddy designed for daily study are not online. These lessons, which would be key to attracting and retaining new followers, can only be obtained through purchase from the Publishing Society or in a church Reading Room. In addition to not taking full advantage of its own Web site as a medium for promotion of the faith and recruitment of new converts, Mother Church leadership appears poised to battle other entities which do proselytize on the Web, even to the extent of pursuing those who dare to use the words Christian Science. Such a strategy may be legally appropriate, but is at best questionable when the public relations impact is considered.

Meanwhile, church leadership remains on alert in the event of future legal action regarding children’s health care. In the 1980s and 90s, The Mother Church was forced to legally defend itself in several U.S. states for complicity in the deaths of children who died while under prayer healing treatment of Christian Science practitioners. Though the church won most of the lawsuits, the actions further harmed the public reputation of the church (DesAutels, Battin, & May, 1999), set legal precedent for such actions, and resulted in the establishment of
at least one public interest legal affairs entity specifically aimed at opposing Christian Science treatment (Kramer, 2000).

An extensive renovation is taking place within the 14-acre Mother Church complex in Boston. The project includes a $25 million museum, approved for construction by the Board to house some of Mrs. Eddy’s writings and artifacts (Nieber, 2000) which had never before been publicly available (Gill, 1998). But at the same time, office space within the complex that the church is unable to fill has been rented out to secular groups. As a result of a continuing difficulty finding working-age job applicants within the faith, Mother Church leadership has begun hiring non-Christian Scientists to fill staff positions in Boston (Kramer, 2000).

While church membership totals remain secret, at least two percent of branch churches close each year, and one estimate suggests fewer than 600,000 Mother Church members remained at the end of the 1990s (Fraser, 1999). As branch churches close, assets revert to the Mother Church—which, essentially, feeds off the demise of its faithful.

In summary, the Church of Christ, Scientist, finds itself in a very difficult situation as it enters the third century of its existence. The church is theologically and structurally ill-prepared to deal with worldly concerns that must be addressed if members are to unite with the organization, call it their own, and develop their own spirituality according to its tenets. Perhaps most troubling is the fact that several of the controversies church leadership has been involved in are controversies that leadership itself caused, or exacerbated by a strategy characterized as that of “loving condescension” toward non-believers (Kramer, 2000, p. 190).

Because this research effort is the first of its kind to focus specifically on the Church of Christ, Scientist, and its theology, practice, and media manipulation, the study was broad-based and general in nature. Much more research work needs to be done in each of these subject areas. These could include an examination of strategies taken by leadership to adapt ‘the letter’ of Christian Science to ‘the spirit’ of contemporary life, an in-depth look at the apostate groups to learn more about what triggered their separation from The Mother Church, and a detailed examination of how church leadership’s media manipulation strategies address Web-based content.
References


