



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 10, Issue 08, 2021: 01-06

Article Received: 17-08-2021

Accepted: 23-08-2021

Available Online: 10-09-2021

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18533/jah.v10i07.2156>

Christian Science Responses to Major Public Health Crises

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ABSTRACT

Christian Science is a protestant church founded by Mary Baker Eddy in the late 19th century. It emphasizes spiritual healing, the use of non-medical force to cure various diseases and the rejection the efficacy of modern medicine. The Christian Science community responded to the Spanish Flu, H1N1, and the COVID-19 pandemic uniquely, with its focus on the cleansing of fear to cure physical symptoms instead of medical treatments. This paper reviews Eddy's publications and summarizes her opinions towards treating contagious diseases, compares and analyzes the respective responses from the Christian Science community towards the pandemics, and identifies a shift in the church's attitude on vaccination. The paper concludes on the importance of religious literacy among policymakers and the public in order to better implement public health initiatives.

Keywords: Christian Science, Spiritual healing, the Spanish Flu, H1N1, COVID-19, Mary Eddy, Public health.

JEL classification: I18, N30, N32, Z12, Z18.

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1. Introduction

Through Christian Science, religion and medicine are inspired with a diviner nature and essence; fresh pinions are given to faith and understanding, and thoughts acquaint themselves intelligently with God. (Eddy, 1930)

Christian Science is a protestant church that values “spiritual healing,” the complete reliance on faith in God to heal spiritual as well as physical pain, which implies the rejection of modern medicine. It was discovered in 1879 by Mary Baker Eddy, who popularized the belief that all beings are governed by the spiritual law derived from Jesus' teachings. It is a church rather minor in size, with 2000 churches worldwide in 2002 (The Association of Religion Data Archives).

Mary Morse Baker was born in a strict Calvinist family in 1821, New Hampshire. With the early death of her mother, Baker shared a lot of time with her father, who was a Calvinist with a strict emphasis on punishment and judgment day. American Calvinism was referred to by sociologist Ehrenreich as “a system of socially imposed depression” with the image of God who “reveals his hatred of his creatures, not his love for them.” (Ehrenreich, 2009). With unpleasant childhood experiences

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with Calvinism, Mary Baker Eddy strongly repelled its doctrine and searched the meaning of God. She was later married to Asa Gilbert Eddy and renamed Mary Eddy. She experienced eight years of poor health starting from 1853. During the time, she studied traditional medicine, mesmerism (hypnotic appeal to magnetism in attempt to heal various diseases), and homeopathy (using dilute substances which produce similar symptoms in healthy people to combat illnesses). The most influential figure to Eddy was Dr. Phineas P. Quimby, who promoted the New Thought movement and advocated for a mental cause to every disease. His idea that diseases and their cures both originate from the human mind had a profound influence on Eddy, and the latter became a student of Quimby between 1862 and 1865. Eddy collaborated with Quimby to investigate mental causations of various diseases, after which she claimed to discover Christian Science by being empowered by Jesus' teachings. According to Eddy, she discovered the "scientific laws of God," which inspired her to compose her book *Science and Health* to detail the Christian Science belief.

One important significance of Christian Science during its early years is the emphasis on female identity. During the late 19th century, women were seen as the 'weaker sex' (BBC) and the prevailing Victorian gender roles undermined the psychosocial functioning of a proportion of middle-class women. Doctors, who were exclusively male, claimed that women's health conditions, in general, were deteriorating countrywide. In *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness*, Catharine Beecher toured around America and concluded "a terrible decay of female health all over the land," regardless of social status. Some physicians proposed that simply being a female was a kind of disease (Ehrenreich, 2009). Christian Science provided women with autonomy and independence in treating their discomforts. By building a personal relationship with God and following the Christian Science teachings, according to Eddy, women in households could be healed out of God's benevolence without the participation of a physician. Such belief is seen by some scholars as a rejection of patriarchal structures. Another aspect of female significance is the Christian Science construct of God's image. In *Science and Health*, Eddy wrote repeatedly that "God is love," and "To suppose that God forgives or punishes sin according to as His mercy is sought or unsought, is to misunderstand Love and to make prayer the safety-valve for wrong-doing" (Eddy, 1930). Eddy depicted God as benevolent, loving, and forgiving, all of which are common elements of maternity in the 19th century, as opposed to the punishing and supervising God in Calvinism which represents a fraternal image.

In many ways, Christian Science presents a unique attitude towards public health issues. However, little published research examines how the Christian Science community developed its responses to pandemic outbreaks. Given the uniqueness of their emphasis on spiritual healing, more empirical work should be done to comprehend the church. With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, this paper allows the public and policy makers to understand the mentality of Christian Scientists, which could potentially inspire different framing of government health initiatives. The paper summarizes the church's responses to the Spanish Flu, H1N1, and COVID-19 by analyzing existing literature, and compare them with Eddy's attitude on contagious diseases. It concludes that rejecting fear of disease is central to healing pandemic symptoms, and the church's attitude towards vaccination has become more flexible and dependent on individual believers over the past century. I hope this essay can contribute to the existing body of research on the role of religiosity in historical and ongoing pandemics.

2. Methodology

This paper seeks to analyze the Christian Science responses towards the Spanish Flu (1918-1919), H1N1 (2009), and COVID-19 (2019-) primarily by examining primary sources. Major sources of information include letters and publications by Mary Baker Eddy, Christian Science Monitor, Christian Science Sentinel, and official websites of the church. The author will first review Eddy's writings on the matter of healing contagious diseases and vaccination, then review Christian Scientists' attitude towards various public health measures during the three pandemics. The paper also delves into the societal and historical context of the United States during which the pandemics took place and identifies a shift in Christian Scientists' attitude towards vaccination.

The author does not comment on the efficiency of spiritual healing towards various pandemics. Rather, the paper exclusively focuses on analyzing textual evidence and summarizing the Christian Science theology in response to the three major pandemics in the United States with the intention to

increase religious literacy among policymakers and social workers to better implement public health rhetorics.

3. Eddy's attitude towards contagious diseases

"The human thought must free itself from self-imposed materiality and bondage." (191:16-17)

Despite the faith-healing approach promoted by Eddy, she was never arguing against law, or public health initiatives endorsed by government officials. In *Rights and Duties*, Eddy (1902) advised her followers to adhere to public health policies and one's legal duty. This does not imply that Christian Science does not heal. In the following edition, however, she encouraged: "until the public thought becomes better acquainted with Christian Science, the Christian Scientists shall decline to doctor infectious or contagious diseases." It appears as if her attitude is quite conflicted.

In *Science and Health*, Eddy wrote, "Many a hopeless case of disease is induced ... not from infection nor from contact with material virus, but from the fear of the disease and from the image brought before the mind." (196:25-28) Clearing the mentality of fear is central for Christian Scientists to combat various diseases. When fear is conquered and images in mind are effaced, the mental state from which sickness originates is destroyed, thus provides cure to the symptoms "outlined on the body." (196:30)

The presence of physicians or doctors harms the patient by increasing fear of the disease. Eddy interprets two harms done by going to a physician. First, doctors' belief in the reality and fatality of the disease, despite these symptoms are mere phantoms of one's ill mind according to the Christian Science theology, harms the patients. Second, "A patient hears the doctor's verdict as a criminal hears his death-sentence." (198:3-5) Receiving diagnoses increases one's fear of the disease, which cannot be sustained by the patient's fortitude. Hence, Eddy believes a physician always fails to release his patients from any illnesses because they fail to comprehend the spiritual essence of the disease and exaggerate fear experienced by the patient. As Eddy wrote in *The Christian Science Journal*, "Common consent is the only contagion that can make disease catching." (Eddy, 1883) A similar warrant is found in *Science and Health*, where Eddy stated: "Efface the images and thoughts of disease, instead of impressing them with forcible descriptions and medical details, - will help to abate sickness and to destroy it" (196:21-24).

Praying and worshipping God is the cure of the mind, thus the cure of all contagious diseases. Believers should understand the law of Love and embrace the omnipotence and benevolence of God. "If God were understood instead of being merely believed, this understanding would establish health." (203:7-8) In many cases, if one adheres to all the above teachings, demonstrates admirable faith, and refuses to receive medical treatment, yet fails to be healed, the Christian Science community distances themselves from the patient because they are considered irredeemable. The community could believe the person has weak faith or has heavily sinned thus cannot be healed, that he or she no longer deserves the position in the Christian Science community.

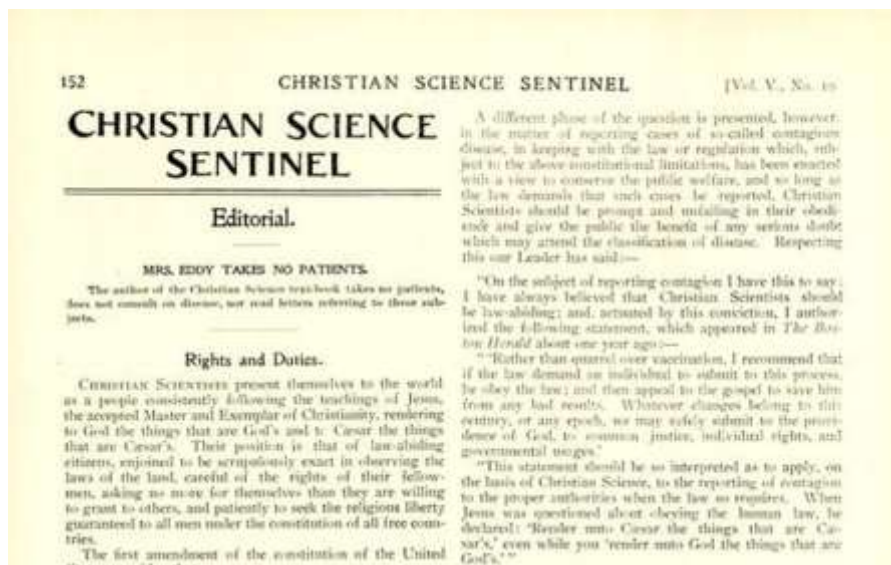


Figure 1. *Rights and Duties*, Archibald McLellan, 1902.

4. Christian Science response to the Spanish Flu (1918-1919)

The Spanish Flu infected around 500 million people worldwide, making it one of the most infectious and deadly pandemics in the world. In response to the pandemic, *Christian Science Monitor*, the official journal of the church (although it has become a general news agency and has won several Pulitzer Prize in the more recent years), published “Architects of Disease” on August 13, 1919. Consistent with Eddy’s attitude, the article mentioned: “that mind and not germs are the root of the evil.” The proposed cure of the Spanish Flu is, first, refuse to be frightened by the flu and firmly maintain their stance of courage among the “torrent of suggestion”; second, one shall substitute mental pictures of sickness with health and rejoice. The article critiqued a physician who advised Christian Science practitioners to take medicine against the virus. It writes, “when a disease does disappear, it is not because the germ has been exterminated, but because, for some reason or another, the human mind has lost the fear of it, and rejected it.” The loss of fear is a recurring theme in the spiritual healing of the Spanish Flu.

Indeed, one Christian Science newspaper used an anecdote to prove the efficiency of abandoning fear in curing the pandemic. In an experiment carried out by Navy doctors at Goat Island, California, fifty young sailors volunteered to be placed with flu patients, breath the air from jars of flu germs, and inject flu germs into their bodies. According to *Christian Science Sentinel*, no case was reported among these fifty men despite their repeated contact with flu patients, because the lack of fear protected them against the germs (Enquirer, 1919).

The sense of community was central to the Christian Science response to the pandemic. Christian Scientists volunteers, regardless of age, devoted themselves to the church. *Christian Science Wartime Activities* reported a teenage boy healing high fevers for another boy by reading the 91st Psalm (Christian Science Wartime Activities, 1922).

5. Christian Science response to H1N1 (2009)

Quiet, prayerful listening for God’s inspiration removed the fear and mental disturbance. I found I could be calm in tribulation, and experience healing, too. (Simpson, 2020)

The (H1N1) pdm09 virus was highly infectious and influenced people age over 65 disproportionately. Center for Disease Control and Prevention estimated there were 60.8 million cases between April 12, 2009, and April 10, 2010 (Center for Disease Control and Prevention). The analysis of Christian Science’s response towards H1N1 is carried out mainly through reviewing articles written by practitioners during the influenza pandemic. Elaina Simpson, a Christian Scientist who caught H1N1, detailed her experience of spiritual healing in *Christian Science Monitor*:

As God’s creation, we are made free from fear... When frightening situations present themselves, we can affirm this to be true about ourselves and let God’s healing love bring us the comfort and peace of yielding to what is spiritually true. I felt that divine peace and comfort firsthand, lifting my fear... The symptoms disappeared more quickly than was usually expected and did not return. (Simpson, 2020)

Here, the importance of refraining from fear is again elaborated. However, something new is present aside from rejecting fear in response to H1N1. Church officials further elaborated the connection between fear and God. It is because humans are “God’s creation” and have “God’s infinite goodness” that they are shielded from fear and all germs. As Douglass stated in the article “Catching good health, not swine flu”:

When we understand that we live within God’s infinite goodness, we no longer need to be afraid. All we can truly expect to catch is what’s real to God: goodness, health, well-being. (Douglass, 2009)

Because the H1N1 vaccine was not compulsory, some Christian Scientists’ refusal to receive the vaccine did not pose public health challenges. As *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported:

Church spokesman Davis said there had never been a need to compromise between Eddy’s beliefs and healing prayer.” (Townsend, 2009)

There was little conflict on vaccination between the belief and public health policy.

6. Christian Science response to COVID-19 (2019-)

COVID-19 is a respiratory disease that emerged in December 2019 and has caused millions of deaths globally. A hotly debated topic surrounding COVID-19 is wearing masks and vaccination. Individual Christian Scientists vary in their opinions towards public health measures like social distancing, masking, and vaccination. Here, I will be covering suggestions given by official Christian Science websites instead of analysis and summary of individual variations.

Christian Science churches recommend individual practitioners make their decisions based on their preferences. Here is a quote from christianscience.com:

Church members are free to make their own choices on all life decisions, in obedience to the law, including whether or not to vaccinate their children. These aren't decisions imposed by their church. (Christian Science Board of Directors)

The quote seems inconsistent with the initial solutions proposed by Eddy, which involves following public health policies regardless of individual preferences. Over time, this could be interpreted as an evolution of preferences within the community instead of digression from Eddy's thoughts. The UK Church of Christian Science states:

Within the boundaries of the law and official guidelines, individual Christian Scientists make their own decisions about health matters. Nevertheless, as Christians who place a high value on the Golden Rule, Christian Scientists are mindful of public health concerns.

This principle is consistent with the previous quote. However, the UK church leans towards the encouragement of following public health policies. The "Golden Rule" involves making their decision that is appropriate for their family, friends, coworkers, and their communities. As stated in the Bible, one should "love thy neighbor as thyself," and the principles apply to Christian Scientists who evaluate decisions on vaccination, masking, and social distancing. Their participation in response to the COVID-19 pandemic is acknowledging while rejecting biomedical findings of the pandemic, practising faith healing to combat the virus, while accepting vaccination for the psychological well-being of non-believers around them. As the following quote demonstrates:

We are willing to follow these rules—to give up some personal freedom—out of love for our neighbors (Luke 6:31)... But we agree that the core scientific findings are valid and should not be rejected. We know all truth is God's truth, including the truths that biomedical researchers are discovering about the virus, how it spreads, and how to fight it. (Haarsma, 2020)

Thus, receiving the vaccination is practitioners' demonstration of "treating others as you want to be treated," to show love for others by abiding by national health regulations.

7. Conclusion and policy implications

Overall, Christian Scientists have very different ways of thinking about public health. Their belief in spiritual healing makes believers vary in their attitude towards various national health policies. With an ongoing pandemic, public health affairs have been brought to the attention of many. However, very few researchers have studied the religious responses surrounding public health policies. This lack of religious literacy has led to the impediment of launching various health protocols. For example, some anti-vaxxers of the Christian community made theological arguments to support their vaccine hesitancy. One of them being vaccine ingredients defiles the body, which is God's temple, by using chemical substances in the vaccine such as formaldehyde (a component of blood that assists the construct of proteins in the human body) and thimerosal (a mercury-based preservative). Other common arguments include vaccine production involves the use of aborted stem cells, and vaccines intrude with God's providence by interfering with body immunity. By directly responding to these theological concerns, society can implement various health initiatives more effectively. Policy makers should also employ religious rhetoric to frame health campaigns in acceptable and agreeable ways to believers.

Even within the Christian Science community, a lot of nuances surrounds their attitudes on public health. It is crucial to understand believers' mentality and their responses to historical and ongoing pandemics and the complexity of their arguments, which serves as a reminder of the importance of religious literacy for health workers. For example, when designing a poster for vaccination within a Christian Science neighborhood, health workers can campaign the importance of

making non-believers in the neighborhood feel secure by vaccinating the entire community, which demonstrates love towards others. This could be a more acceptable reason for Christian Scientists to follow national health policies compared to making vaccination mandatory. I further suggest that workers in the health industry should receive education on religious diversity and religious responses to major public health events (for example, a pandemic). This could facilitate the effective implements of health policies.

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