

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NEW THOUGHT MOVEMENT

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The term "New Thought" as descriptive of a movement, which had its rise near the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century came largely as the result of three divergent outlooks upon the world current in New England during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They are:

- Orthodox Christianity (Calvinistic interpretation)
- Unitarian Sensationalism (John Locke's theory of knowledge)
- Transcendentalism (Intuition as a basic source of knowledge)

Strong liberal reaction against traditional orthodox Christianity, primarily in its Calvinistic interpretation, which held the majority of the field in that time had given rise to the Unitarian-Trinitarian controversy. This split in the Congregational Church, the strongest of the New England denominations, gave rise to the new Unitarian Church, and was the prevailing faith of the intellectuals of the period.

Unitarians did not consider the Bible as the infallible book, equally inspired by God in all its parts, but felt rather it be used as the primary source of Christian faith and be used with reason and discretion, as people would be obliged to consider any idea, thought or invention with such reason and discretion.

The dominant philosophical influence underlying their revolt came from John Locke, and his theory of knowledge. He believed the single avenue of certain knowledge was through the senses, whose system became characterized as sensationalism. This concept of thinking came into direct conflict with idealism, which held that knowledge could also come by way of intuition.

This was merely evidence of the early struggle between the emerging new scientific discovery and traditional religious belief.

As a reaction to the sensationalism of the Unitarians, an extremely vocal group emerged in New England known as the Transcendentalists. Its peculiar concept of intuition as a basic source of the knowledge of reality; its teaching of the nature of man as essentially being divine or possessing divine qualities; and its fundamentally idealistic view of reality and the universe are thought to have been highly influential on the earliest figures in New Thought.

George Ripley, one of the more illustrious of the group, calls the Transcendentalists persons who "believe in an order of truths which transcend the sphere of external sense," whose leading idea is "the supremacy of mind over matter"; who maintain that "the truth of religion does not depend on tradition or historical facts, but has an unerring witness in the human soul."

The Transcendentalists (they did not refer to themselves such) were a very small group who had a far-reaching influence because of "Who" they were. Early meetings included George Ripley, Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Orestes A. Brownson, Dr. Hodges, Theodore Parker, James Freeman Clarke, William H. Channing and others.

The only concerted action by them, as a group was to found a magazine called the "Dial".

According to Octavius Brooks Frothingham, in his writing "Transcendentalism in New England, The Transcendentalist philosophy had its origin from Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason", received its impulse towards mysticism from Jacobi, and from Fichte, an impulse toward heroism. It was through the literature of Germany that the philosophy chiefly communicated itself, through the writings of

Goethe, Richter and Novalis and these works were mediated to the English world largely through Thomas Carlyle.

Although the philosophy found itself in England and other parts of Europe, where it influenced poetry and art, it was in New England where it had a chance to show what it was and what it proposed through the experiences of the daily lives of men and women.

Transcendentalism claimed for all men and women what Protestant Christianity claimed for the elect.

Said to be the greatest of the Transcendentalists, Emerson was reported to have spoken of sickness as the result of mental imperfection and a failure to think soundly and give the mind control over the body, though he never followed theory with actual practice.

In an article by Dr. Frederic Bailes, we learn that Emerson, who had been tubercular as a young man, was not expected to outlive the disease, yet was completely healed of the disease and lived to nearly eighty years old. Bailes admits that the healing was not likely consciously effected.

Transcendentalists in general never saw the logical implications for healing that P.P. Quimby and later New Thought saw and practically demonstrated.

### **THE HEALING WORKS...**

It is interesting that the philosophy of the New Thought Movement came as a result of the reaction of conscious thinking people revolting from a rigid religious doctrine, towards a blending of scientific and philosophic ideals, and would then be rejected by the scientists and physicians because of the dominant modes of the scientific and philosophic thought of the day.

Centuries before the Christian era, Socrates quotes a Thracian physician saying: "You ought not to attempt...to cure the body without the soul... This is the reason why the cure of many diseases is unknown to the physicians of Hellas, because they are ignorant of the whole which ought to be studied also; for the part can never be well unless the whole is well." "Let no one" he adds, "persuade you to cure the head, until he has first given you his soul to be cured...For this...is the great error of our day in the treatment of the human body, that physicians separate the soul from the body."

A 16<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, Petrus Pomponatius, tried to prove that disease could be cured without the use of drugs through the medium of "magnetism," which gifted persons seemed to possess. By employing the force of imagination and will, this force affected the blood and spirit, which produced the intended result.

John Baptist Von Helmut also proclaimed the curative power of imagination, which he described as an invisible fluid called forth and directed by the power of the human will.

In 1658, Sir Kenneth Digby published a book of cases of cures by non-medical means, laying hold of the idea of the power of the imagination to not only heal, but also to cause disease.

Evidence seemed to reveal these events, but there were no answers as to how, and thus, the scientific community was not receptive to accepting the ideas.

Over a century later, a medical student in Vienna, Anton Mesmer became interested in the work of Von Helmut and earlier users of what later become known as hypnotism. Mesmer set out to either establish or disprove the existence of the unusual force those persons had claimed to employ in healing. Mesmer called it "animal magnetism."

Mesmer and his followers explained this unusual phenomenon theoretically as a mysterious fluid, but others began to suspect that the actual explanation lay in what is now called "suggestion."

A learned Portuguese cleric, Faria, demonstrated in 1815 that some external fluid was unnecessary to explain it, and that the cause of the trance lay within the patient, not outside. All that was necessary was to provoke a high state of expectancy in the patient.

In 1841 an English physician, James Braid experimented with the effect and came to the same conclusion as Faria that the effect was the result of suggestion. To distinguish his system from the crude theorizing of the “mesmerists”, he employed to describe the phenomenon with the word “hypnotism.” He continued to use hypnosis as a therapeutic agent in the healing of disease. This may well be the beginning of scientific psychotherapy. He was however, not well accepted by his fellow physicians either.

In and around 1860, Dr. A. A. Liebault of Nancy, France, and workers under the eminent Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot in Paris, were able to build a solid and respectable foundation using hypnosis that finally attracted more widespread acceptance and use by other doctors in Europe.

Perhaps the most important result of the investigations of the phenomenon was the discovery of the “unconscious” or the “subconscious”, where stored memories and impressions long since forgotten could still influence the mental and physical health of the individual. The conclusion was that many physical disorders were mental, and could therefore be cured by nonphysical, non-chemical and non-medicinal means.

The physician investigators began to labor into finding which diseases were caused by mental disturbances and could be treated with hypnosis, and it is here where they branched away from the religious healers who did not need a diagnosis, for if all disease was unreal then it did not matter what unreal disease required a mental healing.

As a result of specific scientific experimentation and discovery, the practical men of science were able to accept the use of mental therapy.

Proof of its validity was not necessary for the mental healers of the time, and it is likely that P. P. Quimby, considered perhaps the founder of not only the New Thought Movement but perhaps the whole Metaphysical Movement in America, may not have even been aware initially of the unconscious mind or the research being conducted on the subject. Perhaps not at first. It was not necessary to have labels for that which he and others were able to garner specific results.

### **Phineas Parkhurst Quimby**

Phineas Parkhurst Quimby was born in Lebanon, New Hampshire, Feb. 16, 1802, one of seven children of the village blacksmith. When he was two the family moved to Belfast, Maine where he spent the greater part of his life. This is where he lived when he passed away on January 16, 1866.

In 1838, a Dr. Collyer came to town and gave a lecture and demonstration of a curious phenomenon called mesmerism, which had been introduced to America two years earlier by a Frenchman named Charles Poyan.

Quimby used mesmerism in his early healing work, but discrepancies in his observations led him to believe that there was a greater power that required neither trance nor medium.

His basic premise was “The trouble is in the mind, for the body is only the house for the mind to dwell in... Therefore, if your mind had been deceived by some invisible enemy into a belief, you have out into it the form of a disease, with or without your knowledge. By my theory or truth, I come in contact with your enemy, and restore you to health and happiness. This I do partly mentally, and partly by talking till I correct the wrong impression and establish the Truth, and the Truth is the cure.”

As the nature of his works and ideas became better known, so did the nature of how he believed.

Initially, he operated using mesmerism through a medium named Lucius. Later he eliminated this and used his own clairvoyance to do mental treatment. From his writings came an understanding of his religious beliefs. He believed in the Truth and called it Wisdom, which was pure, whole and complete. He said his work consisted of simply clearing an error in mind so that the natural Wisdom could be revealed.

The spread of Quimby's ideas came largely from four of his patients. They were Annetta G. Seabury, Julius A. Dresser, Mary Baker Glover Patterson (later Mary Baker Eddy), and Warren Felt Evans.

### **Warren Felt Evans**

Warren Felt Evans, born in Vermont in 1817, became a Methodist Minister in 1839 and converted to the Church of New Jerusalem (Swedenborgian) in 1863 as a result of his reading of the great Swedish seer, Emanuel Swedenborg. He also began attending events where Quimby appeared in the same year, and his own affliction was healed. He met with Quimby and expressed that he thought he too could heal. Quimby encouraged him to do so, and in 1867, Evans and his wife opened an office in Boston where they practiced and taught for over 20 years. Evans was the first to bring these teachings to the public in written form, and wrote several books on the science of mental healing during his career. He was a wide reader and in his own writings was the evidence of how he met the theoretical and practical problems in his own practice related to the fields of philosophy, psychology, science and medicine.

He may well have been the originator of the "Mental Equivalent", as indicated by his charting of the brain phrenologically, and referred to in his book, "Mental Medicine". He did make use of the laying of hands in his work.

They created no institution to perpetuate his teachings and he died in 1889.

### **Horatio W. Dresser**

Julius A. Dresser and Annetta G. Seabury were husband and wife, and were the first to effectively teach the principles of healing and organize what has since become what is called New Thought. Their work, begun in Boston in 1882, was based on what they referred to as "The Quimby System of Mental Treatment of Diseases". Unlike Quimby, who wrote down his ideas on how his treatment worked, and then let a very few people read for themselves, the Dressers, beginning in 1883, began teaching classes by making use of the manuscripts written by Quimby. Their son, Horatio W. Dresser published the "The Quimby Manuscripts" in 1921.

### **Mary Baker Eddy**

Mary Baker Eddy, healed by Quimby was the first to organize a healing ministry and eventually organized the movement known as Christian Science. In 1875 she published "Science and Health" in which she set forth a philosophy of healing of which she claimed to be the discoverer.

A small group of which she was the minister had been organized in Lynn, Massachusetts and in 1881 they moved to Boston where the foundations of Christian Science were laid.

There was a great deal of controversy regarding Mrs. Eddy's claims of being the discoverer of mental science. However, it is generally believed, if not for Mrs. Eddy's work at organizing the movement, there may not have been a New Thought Movement, for many of her students broke from the organization to begin new works.

Two of the most important of these were Ursula Gestefeld and Emma Curtis Hopkins.

Ursula Gestefeld, born April 22, 1845 in Augusta, Maine as able to bring herself to a remarkable state of health after receiving a copy of "Science and Health". She became a member and took classes begin-

ning in 1884. Soon a teacher herself, she had a very respectable following. She published “Ursula N. Gestefeld’s Statement of Christian Science”, and although she gave full credit to Mrs. Eddy, Mrs. Eddy denounced her publicly.

This launched Ms. Gestefeld into an independent career in Chicago where she developed a teaching called the “Science of Being” and eventually a church called the “Church of New Thought”.

### **Emma Curtis Hopkins**

Emma Curtis Hopkins, more than any other single teacher, influenced New Thought.

She first took class with Mrs. Eddy in 1883. By September 1884, she was the editor of the Christian Science Journal, and by November 1885, her name was not to be found in the Journal. It is not clear why she was dismissed, but it is said that she began reading other metaphysical books besides Mrs. Eddy’s writings. She was an independent thinker with a clear understanding and an ability to effectively communicate to others.

She opened her own headquarters in Chicago, although it is not clear when, probably in 1886.

In 1888, she placed an ad that said she would receive patients for mental cure at her residence. It was also announced she would speak at Kimball Hall.

Mrs. Eddy denounced her again, and bracketed her with Julius Dresser, A.J. Swartz and Mary Plunkett, saying they had stolen her teachings. Mrs. Eddy called them Mind Quacks.

### **Successors to Emma Curtis Hopkins**

Emma Curtis Hopkins was known as the teacher of teachers. The list of persons who sat under her teachings in Chicago at the Christian Science Theological Seminary and other classes she taught includes: Frances Lord; Annie Rix Militz (Home of Truth) and Harriet Rix; Malinda E. Cramer, co-founder of Divine Science; Mrs. Bingham, teacher of Nona L. Brooks, co-founder of Divine Science; Helen Wilmans; Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, founders of Unity School of Christianity; Charles and Josephine Barton; Dr. Emily Cady, writer of the Unity textbook “Lessons in Truth”; Ella Wheeler Wilcox, New thought poetess; Elizabeth Towne; and considerably later, Ernest Holmes, founder of the Church of Religious Science.

She lived until 1925.

Other groups that evolved out of these teachers include: Society of the Healing Christ, organized by Dr. Thomas Parker Boyd; Christian Assembly from out of the work by William Farwell; The Christ Truth League, under the leadership of Alden and Neil Truesdell; the Church of Truth, founded by former Universalist minister Albert C. Grier in Spokane, Washington and whose New York center is under the ministry of Dr. Ervin Seale; Psychiana founder and director, Frank B. Robinson who during the 30’s and 40’s published and sold through ads in the newspaper, magazine, even on match book covers, his series of lessons. He was known as the mail order prophet.