TABLE OF CONTENTS

Part I
1. Introduction
2. The Pure Logic of Theology
3. Theological Background - Aquinian Christian Science with Unitarians, and Pentecostal Leanings
4. Unitarians
5. Enter Pope Francis
6. The Substance of the Email I Sent on Muslims
   a. Apostate Europe
   b. Lessons from Francis
   c. Lessons from St. Dominic
   d. Muslims as the Blessed of Ishmael
   e. Lessons from Jews for Jesus
   f. Regarding Theological Divergence
   g. Note on Neopaganism
7. French Pears
8. An Ecumenical Rosetta Stone
9. Speaking of Ecumenism, My Parents
10. My Christian Ethos
11. The Christian Science Church, Not a Cult, but Who Cares?
12. Innovation? or Willful Naïveté?
13. Mary Baker Eddy’s Contribution, Christus Viktor
14. Eugenic Pseudo Science
15. Two Mary Baker Eddies, the Legend and the Church Lady
16. Where Am I Going with All This?
17. The Viewpoint Problem in Explanation
18. Theology, What You Don’t Know Can Hurt You
19. Was Mary Baker Eddy a Heretic?
20. The Ambitious Mary Baker Eddy
21. Mary Baker Eddy’s Sola Scriptura
22. Historical Pendula in Intellectual Christianity
23. Pendula in Nominal Change
24. I Am a Heretic Too
25. Editorial Bias
26. Working Backwards from Calvin
27. Theological Update Needed in the Christian Science Church, like in the Muslim Faith
28. All Seriousness Aside, My Great Disappointment
29. Spiritualizing Them Bones, Christian Scientists Versus Jehovah’s Witnesses
30. Updates for the Christian Science Church

**Part II**

1. But Seriously, Does Belief in the Trinity Make us Christian?
2. Trinitarianism and Unitarianism in the Doctrine of the Trinity - An Alternate History of the Doctrine and the Unitarian Church
3. WWJD, Freedom of Conscience and Epistemology in the Enlightenment
4. Free Churches
5. Bonhoeffer’s “god who could Be Proved”
6. The Christian Scientists as a Free Church
7. “Unitarian Trinitarianism” a Free Choice, like in 12 Step Programs
8. The Doctrine of No Doctrines
9. The Doctrine of No Doctrines in Practice
10. Revival of Parts of Apostolic Tradition and Monastic Practices
11. What is the Straight Gate?
12. Submission to God and No One Else, Neither Bowing before the Crown, Nor Kissing the Ring
13. Adolph Von Harnack on Catholicism
14. Freedom qua Authenticity in Religion
15. Arminianism vs. Calvinism, Remonstrants vs. the Dutch Reformed Church, Wesley, vs. Whitfield, Mary Baker Eddy Vs. Calvin, Unitarian vs. Calvinist, NeoCalvinism vs. Billy Graham, Old Calvinism vs. New Calvinism
16. The Mischief Rule Hermeneutic
17. Old Calvinist TULIP vs. NeoCalvinist Evangelical-TULIP
18. Again, All Seriousness Aside: Spicy Ketchup
19. Protestant Christology and Catholic Mariology
20. Water Baptism
21. Who Decides which Churches Are Trinitarian?
22. Christian Science Marriages
23. Hyper-Egalitarian Trinitarianists In-Depth
24. Popery in the Christian Science Church
25. Two Bits of Theology, Census and Pain-Free Birth of Jesus
26. Mark Twain’s Criticism, as Endorsed by Val Kilmer
27. CS Lewis’ Literary Sola Scriptura
28. The Emperor Has No Clothes, but You Will Be Beaten if You Say So
29. Oppression and Scapegoating in the Christian Church
30. Two More Associated Problems, the Missing Christians and the Disturbed
31. The Status of Christians as the Status of Persons
32. Pragmatism in Theology
33. Phillip Yancey on Eastern Reaction to Jesus’ Crucifixion
34. The Safest Place on Earth, Mary’s Crypt
35. Peter Kreeft, a Modern Thomist's Example, and Bonhoeffer
36. Athanasius and the Athanasian Heresy

3 | Ecumenism, Trinity, Unity, Christian Science
Reed Troutman
37. John Henry Newman’s Criticism of Protestant Trinitarianism
38. Heresy’s Etymology
39. First Century Christianity According to St. Peter and Harnack
40. Textual Criticism of the Koran, Embellishment vs. Simplification
41. The Psychological Angle - Please Understand Me II
42. The Five Love Languages of Gary Chapman
43. Feminist Literature’s Standpoint Epistemology
44. Jesus the “Mass Man” According to Atheists and Popular Science
45. Mary the “Mass Woman” According to Protestants
46. Heuristic Theology
47. The Ecumenical Lesson of My Father
48. Theological Mistakes, Failures
49. Missing the Joke
50. God is Silly, Taking Giddiness Back
51. But All Seriousness Aside, Blaise Pascal
What got me thinking seriously about ecumenism was an email I sent to a friend on my view of the Christian mission to Muslims. I sent it a couple months ago while thinking about Muslim-Christian ecumenism and it got some wheels turning in my head over what needs to be said in general about ecumenism within the Christian community. I am glad the topic occurred to me a couple months earlier, as I was able to get my thoughts on Muslims out without the cognitive dissonance of watching the escalation of the refugee crisis in Europe and the violence of the Paris attacks in France, which now we Californians have seen erupt in San Bernardino as well. Of course, as a Christian I see some major issues where the Koran needs to be reconciled with the Christian faith. The most important of these is that they see it as blasphemy to say that Jesus is God, but I think there is a functional equivalent between the Christian view of the docetic heresy, and the Muslim view that the statement “Jesus is God” is blasphemous, because Muslims fail to understand what is meant by unity of “essence” rather than “persons” of the Trinity. So I think it is a reconcilable point.

Some might wonder about the sagacity of studying ecumenism at this time though, in the context of so much religious extremism in the news, and I would counter that this is the perfect time to be studying ecumenism. Though ecumenism and religious violence need not be studied together, the ecumenical impulse can be viewed as a polar opposite of the impulse to religious violence and is a way of circumventing religious hostility. Ecumenism is animated by ongoing give-and-take engagement, while religious violence issues from a place of judgment where we dare to place ourselves alongside God in deciding ultimate questions for others. The religiously motivated violence that we see emanating from extremist Muslims or anti-abortion activists, is a problem that contrasts with ecumenism and may be amenable to the philosophical/theological dialogue, making this discussion timely considering the urgency of dialogue that is increased by crises of violence.

And now we see Professor Larycia Hawkins has her tenured teaching position at Wheaton put in jeopardy for being an ecumenical Christian who dares to agree with Pope Francis in her understanding of God, as both the monotheistic God of Abraham and Muhammad, and as being the same as the Christian deity, which makes her doctrinally a theologically misspoken evangelical in Wheaton’s eyes. Incidentally, when Muslims say we are all people of the Book, they are referring to Moses’ Book of the Law, that we are people of the Torah, which Jesus said He came to uphold rather than abolish. So in quoting the Jewish and Muslim way of identifying with God’s law, Professor Hawkins was not necessarily being un-Christian, and while the
question of whether we worship the same God as Muslims is slightly more complicated, many think she is correct on this point too. Her understanding may not be going against the majority view within Christianity, but against a specific version of protestant orthodoxy. By saying that there is only One God that Christians and Muslims both worship, and from Whom we are blessed with our universal human dignity by being created in the image of God, she may be only starting from a different point in understanding of the Trinity than Wheaton college is, resulting in mere terminological difference.

We could joke that starting from a different theological angle is too much popery for Wheaton. But we should actually admire Wheaton for sticking to their theological guns and making an issue out of theology, which people too often think of as a dead letter and throw out the window in favor of go-along to get-along attitudes about what are actually the most important questions in the intellectual side of religion. Though we hope they will be receptive to Professor Hawkins’ desire for reconciliation as well. This is a great chance for Professor Hawkins and Wheaton to give the world an example of theological debate and reconciliation. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, the gospel makes room for itself on earth, even and precisely when no such opportunity is offered to it, and in her suspension we see both Professor Hawkins and the theological decision makers at Wheaton carrying their crosses. As a discreet theological question, one of them has to be correct. Either Christians and Muslims worship God or they don’t. Understanding Jesus divinity correctly is either required as a precondition of God’s hearing our prayers, or it isn’t. But rather than a novel question, this is one that has plagued Christians for our entire history. Who is a Christian, who is saved? Oftentimes in history the question has revolved, as at Wheaton, around how the Godhead is defined. Wheaton and Professor Hawkins are now set to rehash the same arguments that divided Arians from Athanasians during the council of Nicaea, and which remain controverted among various Christian groups, not to mention among Muslims, Jewish, and secular groups. Perhaps the examination shared here of differing conceptions of the Trinity within Christendom can be helpful to anyone trying to understand the conflict at Wheaton, in history and as a matter of ecclesiology.

Prepared here is an in-depth discussion of ecumenism focused around the issues that divide Christians, and focused around the perceptions of these issues I had growing up in the Christian Science church. Though in favor of ecumenism in the abstract, this is not an attempt to put forward what some call “false ecumenism” that seeks to brush past differences. In talking about our differences rather than swashbuckling things out in the streets, or in sharing why we think about theology in a certain way rather than communicating in terse street signs, this does not mean differences cease to exist entirely. We all walk in the direction we see God guiding us toward. And for those of us who believe in divine revelation, everyone has to admit that direct revelation trumps the best reasoning, whether from some way of reading scriptures or from mystical encounters with the Almighty. Hypothetically, if God puts a winnowing fork in His hand and sends Gabriel to us tomorrow with the message that we were never again to speak to religiously different neighbors, or maintain some point of orthodoxy over heterodoxy, of course we would cease to be ecumenical in those points. And this is “honest” ecumenism requires that we admit that different belief sets among religions are often incompatible. The controversy between Professor Hawkins and Wheaton, where they have discovered a point of disagreement
in their way of reading Christian dogma, at least in the interim, is only one example. But ecumenism has to be accomplished like this, if at all, by examining theological differences honestly, alongside any real agreement that we find on the surface, or that can be worked out after digging deeper into the semantics and syntax of exactly what is being disagreed on. Ecumenism is merely an exercise in frustration if we fail to understand how important our differences are to different religious peoples. To focus only on what we share in common can hazard stepping on theological landmines.

(Back to Top)

The Pure Logic of Theology

To shift gears and think in terms of the pure logic of theology, it is important that we categorize what is essential and necessary about the nature of Christianity and how we group some people inside and outside of it as heretics, heterodox or “other”/heathen. Now that Christians have become associated in the news with religious violence against abortionists, and Muslims have become associated with terrorism, there are some problems of hypocrisy lurking in our houses of worship that claim to teach peace. Who would Jesus do violence against? Is “just war theory” unjust and non-pacific, or do we simply not follow it? It is certainly possible to identify religion only with its worst members and the logic of extremism, so religion has gotten a bad name that is mostly undeserved, but for which we need to take responsibility and reiterate our theologies of peace.

Hitler was a vegetarian, though I don’t know any vegetarians who want to be associated with him, and indeed some say Hitler’s association with meatlessness is a weak argument against vegetarianism. Logically speaking, pointing out that something is associated with Hitler is the inverse of an appeal to authority. It is a third party ad hominem attack. Is it fair in the case of vegetarianism? Maybe, depending on if there is an essential moral hubris underpinning it. Ad hominem is not always a logical fallacy if the attack points to some principle or idea that the person being identified with it holds. And when religion becomes associated with acts perceived as bad ones -- like the Spanish Inquisition, violent jihad, Methodist support for prohibition or the controversy over Wheaton’s suspension of Professor Hawkins -- religious people and bodies can accrue negative baggage. It may not approach anything like what irreligious types, like Stalin, Pol Pot and Robespierre have, but hypocrisy is nevertheless stigmatizing and those who would otherwise be drawn to communities claiming a relationship with the divine, will look elsewhere for a solution to their problems. Unnecessary division, questionable callings, violent jihad and misplaced messianic assurance within our communities can dash peoples hopes in religion, rather than turning people to God as it is meant to do.

The greatest mover in any Christian church is supposed to be the Holy Spirit, which is never hateful or violent, but always asks what would Jesus do? Who would Jesus forgive? How would Jesus heal? Who would Jesus accept? We can forget too easily that the ancient scarlet letter was the cross, which rather than being a symbol of all the good people in the world, was a symbol of the criminal, the ruled and the oppressed. As we see Mosques around the country being the
objects of criminal arson and vandalism, we have to ask the question alongside Professor Hawkins, what scarlet letter or hijab would Jesus put on today? We have to ask alongside Dietrich Bonhoeffer, if the mosques burn today, will it be our churches tomorrow?

And a desire to avoid conflict and theological discussion can be even worse than engaging in civil argument about our honest disagreements, because conflict avoidance can lead to *modus vivendi* Christianity; where we sit next to each other in church with theological differences sticking in our livers, rather than working them out with each other in mutually supportive Christian community. This leads some to accuse religious ecumenists of being insincere in their ecumenism when such a high priority is placed on religious acceptance that ecumenists fail to recognize theological difference. Stigmatizing history and real differences between the beliefs of religious groups must therefore be dealt with proactively. We desperately want peace, like Lord Chamberlain, so we search out peripheral similarities and gloss over places where our core convictions might differ. Sometimes, as in Lord Chamberlain’s case, this can have the effect of letting the fox into the henhouse, or cause us to be delusional and fail to see any differences whatsoever among Christians or other religious groups. This is what we always accuse our Universalist friends of doing, so perhaps their experience can inform us about what extreme ecumenism looks like. But I think we owe it to ourselves and to God, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer might say, to avoid any “cheap” ecumenical peace in favor of “costly” hard won ecumenism. We should be creating a searched understanding of ourselves, our theological positions and of those around us. Neither can we Christians abandon our conviction that God so loved the world He sent his only begotten Son to save us, or that Jesus is the Way the Truth and the Life. And in discussing theology ecumenically, we have more respect for people who openly disagree with us rather than skirting these divisive issues. Communicating our logic is a good starting place. It is something better than just a *modus vivendi*, because it sends us back to our textbooks, and allows a space in our lives for God to work things out.

The desperate Lord Chamberlain type ecumenism has the internal hazard of a natural desire for cheap peace, which tempts us to become disingenuous about our goals for ecumenism. We want everything to be hunky-dory, or we want everyone to come around to our way of thinking. This can lead not only to brushing theological divergence under the rug, but to a failure to straightforwardly address divergence that might call our own misconceptions or unexamined positions into question. Whether it is Christian Scientists suggesting that the most important criterion for being a Christian is acknowledging that God is Life, Truth and Love, or whether it is a neo-Calvinist insisting that there are a variety of doctrines that Christians have “always” taught, these points of divergence -- or misperceptions, depending on your viewpoint -- are sometimes due to mere communication problems, and I am writing in part to remedy this lack of forthrightness about theological divergence, both where it is real and just a failure of terminological understanding.

At the outset, let us note a philosophical line between understandings of Universalism and Christian Ecumenism, which Universalists are free to take issue with. Where even Universalism can be examined honestly for why it disagrees with Christian soteriology, anthropology, epistemology, etc., Universalists can be seen as a Western type of Jainist. And no one has ever
met a universalist they did not like and find to be of “good will,” since they are so good at loving their fellow man as themselves, but the basis for Christian ecumenism is rooted in the primacy and exclusivity of the Christian Gospel of Jesus Christ and His Church, with acknowledgment of the sovereignty of at least God; though some like the Catholics require additional submission to St. Peter’s authority as His surrogates and some protestant churches require submission to doctrinal statements, as we see at Wheaton, or to veneration of a saint etc. One example of the requirement for veneration of a saint from a protestant church comes from the Christian Science church I grew up in, where reverence for Saint Mary Baker Eddy is always seen as appropriate, though Christian Scientists being good protestants might argue that venerating a saint is not what they are doing. But Catholics are less bashful about the saints they venerate, and are happy to share why they think St. Anthony, for instance, is seated around the thrown of God, interceding for us and helping us to find our misplaced car keys. Dare we speak of Saint Calvin or Saint Wesley? Saint Muhammad or Saint Rashi? But to the extent that these problems evidence religious views exclusive to different churches within nominal Christianity or Abrahamic faiths, we see non-shared beliefs, or “cultus” in the old sense, as leading to charges of “cult” status in the modern vernacular, and/or heathen, heterodox and heresy, which is a problem always in the back of our minds as we consider ecumenism.

There is a bit of spiritual autobiography here as well. These are ecumenical “confessions,” to borrow the phrase from Augustine. The Ecumenical Confessions of Saint Reedistine. In pig-latin that would be Confessionis Ecumene Trauttmannis. But seriously, in sharing on ecumenism, the purpose is to acknowledge that ecumenism is something that Jesus called all Christians to in His desire that we be unified in Spirit and let Him sort the wheat from the chaff. While we are to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves in recognizing the possibility that ecumenism is itself a doctrine that must always be called into question, we still have to pursue unity. St. Peter endorsed ecumenism in saying that God is not willing that anyone should perish, and some have suggested that Jesus words from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” have application to theological ecumenism, since theological ecumenism is such a difficult subject. The best minds have agreed that only God’s theology is ever beyond reproach. We think of the scope of Jesus’ words as reaching to every last sinner, but we forget that that group includes us when we do theology with “pharisaical” ineptitude (or “sadduceical” for that matter).

If you choose to read on, please do so critically and prayerfully, since the goal is to illustrate some problems in ecumenism rather than pretend to solve them completely. Some instances might be the problem of good Calvinists drawing a line between saving grace and the regular kind, which allows them to sort justified Christians from the unregenerate; and Catholic churches denying communion to those outside of its authority; and good Lutherans seeing the spirit of the anti-Christ arising from any type of legalism; and other Christians seeing Lutherans as apostate for this, etc. We have to honestly acknowledge all these differences and associated historical difficulties if we are to be honestly engaged in the ecumenical discussion. Failing to do so would be using an ecumenical guise as an opportunity to take theological pop shots at each other.

Below you will find an ecumenical way of seeing the history of the Church, of the Trinity and of the Reformation, as well as a few other bits of history and analytical angles on ecumenism. The
Christian Science Church, the doctrine of the Trinity and Unitarian churches have been topics of special interest. This was not, however, prepared by a school trained theologian.

If anyone is able to discern a comprehensible organization herein, please inform me at your earliest convenience as I have been searching for one. I have been disappointed so far in my desire to make sense of what I have written. This essay was not planned at all. Clarity and accuracy have been sacrificed, along with a comprehensiveness of treatment, as much as has been possible, has not been accomplished. The author is a teacher of no rank in the field of which he writes, or in any other field for that matter. The result is a volume of questionable merit.¹

(Back to Top)

Theological Background - Aquinian Christian Science with Unitarians, and Pentecostal Leanings

If religion were a sporting event, some of us would be its Christian Science football-bat. And it is not easy to be a football bat, because one is always out of season and not knowing what to do with oneself on Sunday mornings. But I for one am grateful for the diversity of my church background, for giving me some natural insight into the desire for ecumenism and also the problems of ecumenism, since wide experience with different religious traditions makes plain where certain religious logic becomes inconsistent with others. Theology is a very complicated and difficult subject for many to master, but for the regular visitor to many different churches theology has a way of slowly becoming more intuitive. After a while, the visitor to a new church realizes that, pretty much anytime someone insists you believe something that the last church you visited told you was a heresy, you have encountered inconsistent religious logic.

Most of my formal initiation into theological discussion comes from Peter Kreeft's explanation of Aquinas, my upbringing in Christian Science Sunday Schools, and more recently on the ethical/logical side, going through law school, where I spent more time in the philosophy department than is usually recommended. I have also set out to read everything of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, including comments on his work, which is a project still in progress, and for which I would like to learn German someday. A secondary formal interest I have in religion, is as a way of gaining insight into history, especially the Unitarian’s effect on the development of American law.

(Back to Top)

Unitarians

My interest in historical Unitarians is unique among religious groups, because I have very little personal experience with Unitarian Christians, as most people don’t since Unitarian Christians

are something of a dodo-bird historical church. Those who might otherwise be Unitarian Christians have more or less become identified with Universalists or been absorbed into other Christian churches. To the extent that Freemasonry shares some common viewpoints with Unitarians, seeing Jesus as the Great Architect, it too is something to be seen alongside the history of Unitarians. Though there are fewer Thomas Jeffersons out there to talk natural philosophy with, or Thomas Paines to examine religious epistemology, the theological work that Unitarian Christians left behind remains influential. We can take notice as we study our history textbooks that many great American figures either happened to be members of this odd church, or were considered as precursors to the way they came to think, like transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson, etc.; so their contributions remain culturally important, and important for religion in the influence they had on other churches.

Though Unitarians are among the hardest in Protestant history to understand, yet they were very influential for many American churches, and in their impact on American philosophy. But today Unitarians are widely misunderstood by those of us in the Christian church. The primary reason for this is we often fail to identify them now as Christians at all, since they don’t pass muster with our litmus tests for who is a Christian, i.e. belief in the Trinity, etc. And religious people generally have this problem with historical figures, of superimposing our overly demanding notions of what constitutes religion. For instance, Thomas Paine is often misunderstood as an atheist rather than a deist. These misunderstandings result from change in our modern understanding of theology, as well as less interest from the general public in historical theology, leading to shallower understanding of minute distinctions therein. Which is not to say that Paine’s religious views were not extreme in his time, but that we have a shallow modern understanding of them. It has become much more convenient in our “soundbite,” “bullet point,” theologies to say that Thomas Jefferson was a deist simpliciter, than to explain that he was a “humanitarianist” Christian, which no longer passes our modern basic tests for Christianity, but which we also don’t take the time to explain in depth. And it is easier to see Paine as an atheist than to explain that, like Jefferson, he was a kalam argument deist, who was skeptical of revealed theology only.

Deism, having jettisoned revealed theology, starts to look a lot like pantheism, so whether Paine and Jefferson were pantheists seems like a more intelligent question than whether they were atheists. But in a history debate over Jefferson’s religion, we let the deists have him unqualifiedly, and Paine becomes a “filthy little atheist” to Teddy Roosevelt. Jefferson certainly was a deist, but not in the way that Voltaire or some more cynical were. Indeed, Jefferson could have as easily have been the butt of Voltaire’s satire as Leibniz. And though Paine certainly was not a faithful adherent of the whole truth of the Bible, but neither was he an antitheist or even atheist as we understand the terms today. Being anti-church qua anti-authoritarianism is sometimes equated with being anti-theist, and again we don’t take the time to explain this failure of distinction to the theologically uninitiated. And Paine also saw himself as a follower of the historical demythologized Jesus of Nazareth, so it is difficult to categorize these early American religious wingnuts.
A proper label for Jefferson and Paine’s religious beliefs would need at least three hyphens. Jefferson and Paine were free thinking Humanitarianist-Christian-Unitarian-Deists, which Jefferson spelled out plainly at the end of his life to a few close friends in his *Syllabus of the Doctrines of Jesus*, and Paine in his more public *Age of Reason*. Importantly for the impact of their careers, during much of the most impactful parts of their careers, Paine was known as a political philosopher and Jefferson maintained a much more open mind about orthodox Christian beliefs, and never departed from a Christian persona publicly. And what we think of as their liberal stances on religious freedom were shared by more orthodox faithful as well, so at least their understandings of the relationship of church and state, the spheres “spiritual” and “temporal,” were mainstream Christian views, as can be seen in the interchange between Jefferson and the Danbury Baptists.²

(Back to Top)

Enter Pope Francis

And going off recent statements from the Pope, ironically, more than we protestants, the Vatican seems to understand early American Christianity and Unitarians to a large degree, or at least their standpoint on religious tolerance. The desire for religious freedom in early America was shared widely by nearly all Christians in public life, and this has been very much written into the laws of our nation and the fabric of American religious life. For me this has led to a lifelong interest in Unitarians and religious tolerance, alongside the religious thinking of groups that I have more personal experience with. And when the Pope says there is too much religious extremism in the world, we should pay attention. I have learned some things about my own personal sense of Christianity from Muslims. For instance, the Muslim dedication to prayer is something I find inspiring. This does not make me 100% Muslim, but neither am I 100% Calvinist or Wesleyan. Maybe I am 10% Muslim and 70% Wesleyan? We can take this ecumenical step that Professor Hawkins did, saying she saw Christians alongside Muslims as children of Abraham, or “of the Book” as Muslims and Jewish people say. I would identify myself with Muslims where, like Jefferson, they tell me they are doing their best to follow Jesus, and if Muslims are correct in telling me that God has called them to be His people, then I cannot distance myself entirely from them without distancing myself from Jesus, from God. We orthodox Christians have so much more in common with Muslim faithful than with many much more popular figures like Jefferson. Where I am 50% Jeffersonian, in that I agree with Jefferson that the teachings of Jesus need greater emphasis, I see Muslims supporting this proposition as well. Muslims agree that we must overcome evil with good. And if we agree with Paine and Kant some percentage, that the enlightenment was correct that we should not kill each other. And with Jewish people in seeing Jesus as a great Rabbi. This is not to align ourselves with any of these theological perspectives perfectly, but to say that it is not ours to excommunicate people if they are claiming to follow Jesus or are looking to the will of God.

Theological difference is only of penultimate importance, as Bonhoeffer says, because what God ultimately joins together is up to God. Recently we have seen fires in mosques become the targets of arson investigations, calling to mind Bonhoeffer’s view of Nazi pogroms. We have to identify with Muslim people for any essential religious agreement we have with them, for the same reason that Bonhoeffer identified with Jews. Bonhoeffer said Jesus was a Jew, and if the synagogues burn today tomorrow the churches. If he were with us today, Bonhoeffer would say something similar about Muslims I am sure. Muslims are an Abrahamic religion, and Jesus was a child of Mary of the line of Rebecca. If the mosques burn today, tomorrow the churches. Will Christians identifying with Muslims result in excommunication? I hope not. But I understand Jefferson and Muslims differently than most Christians do, though I am not a Universalist and my personal approach to theology is not demythologized and is Christo-centric. But I see some fruits of the Spirit in Jefferson’s life, and I can’t tell any essential difference between Muslims and the non-demythologizing faithful among Unitarian Christians, other than Islam’s historical lack of religious tolerance, which it shares with every other Abrahamic religion excepting Quakers, and a few others in early America, like Roger Williams’ type Baptists (not to mention Eastern Jainists.).

Enter Pope Francis, where the Pope recently came to the District of Columbia and quoted from the opening lines of the Declaration of Independence, which comes to us from Locke, the royalist Anglican, through Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin, two revolutionary statesmen who we might consider to be formative Unitarian Christians on some level, perhaps in part for the way that Freemasonry influenced their thinking about religion as well. But the Pope is now reading Locke’s protestant iteration of Natural Theology back to us American philosophers in our own revolutionary Jeffersonian terms, reminding us of the common dignity of all mankind that we share as created children of God in the American “pursuit of happiness” version. The Pope can certainly quote Jefferson, the American political theologian, a little more easily than Locke the Anglican, since the Americans changed Locke’s already progressive tolerance to be inclusive of Catholics, Hindoos, Jews, and Muslims. Meticulous historians will find that Locke's final stance on tolerance stopped short of the reach of the American (Masonic?) version, though we do rightly credit Locke for being as tolerant as he thought tenable in his monarchical situation.

Whether the experiment with our democratic republic has been as successful at maintaining the religious tolerance we began with is a question that calls Ben Franklin's famously conditioned description of the United States to mind, “a republic, if you can keep it.” We should acknowledge though, if our post-Vatican II Pope is willing to use Jefferson's verbiage, that there is something to the Unitarian Jefferson's ethico-religious message that remains crucially influential to religious life to this day, at least on the level that religion relates to tolerance. So the Pope's visit adds some fuel to the fire of our interest in, not only the historical Unitarians and their impact on our modern life, but on ecumenism and tolerance also, as timely topics that we can learn from the Unitarian’s perspective on, which is an even more pressing concern now that we see continuing religious violence around the world.

In part, like the ethics of Immanuel Kant, the American Unitarian’s ideas grew out of their historical context. The wars of religion in Europe and religious persecution of minority groups

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13 | Ecumenism, Trinity, Unity, Christian Science

Reed Troutman
was leading them to a perception that religious conflict needed to be reexamined in a way that departed from bloodshed at the very least. Enlightenment Europe was redefining the fundamental bases for philosophical “reciprocity” away from church authority; and as a religious matter, their thinking can be seen as a reaction to the ecumenical problems they were facing. Kant’s formulation in a nutshell might be: Human beings deserve the right to live because they have God-given reason, in contrast to the historical test for human rights, being whether one was in good standing with the church. But Kant came along only after hundreds of years of post-reformation religious warring, and a thousand years before that of violence against heretics. We no longer recognize Kant and the enlightenment as being reactionaries against religious intolerance though. We view them as secular philosophers and forget the religious component to their thinking, that their philosophy was a reaction to violent religion.

And the reverse is true of the American Unitarians the enlightenment inspired. Though we remember them for being a religious body, yet we rarely listen to their enlightenment message of tolerance, perhaps since they offer their voices to us mostly from dusty letters, there not being many Unitarian churchgoers left when compared with more robust denominations, so all we see is the historical church buildings. Yet theirs was the Lockean, hopeful and tolerant era that gave rise to the American experiment and the fertile religious ground that American churches grew out of. And theirs was the era that the Christian Science church grew out of, alongside other “free churches.” For me this is the most personal reason that I am interested in the Unitarians, because the Christian Science Church was influenced by them, which has been so important to my Christian Scientist friends, teachers and family. So understanding the Unitarians helps me to feel that I understand blank-slate American churches more generally, and American philosophy in public life and in the law. It could be argued that Unitarian litmus tests for Christianity became too relaxed, where anyone who believed that Jesus’ teachings were unsurpassed in the history of the world could be called a Unitarian Christian. And the opposite argument is that Unitarian followers of Jesus offer what is, analytically at least, an alternative way of being Christian.

To the extent that American churches are influencing the rest of the world today, i.e. to the extent that Mormon LDS are evangelizing in South America, the tolerant American “kind” of Christianity continues to thrive and may be worthwhile to take the time to understand on its own. It is the tolerant kind of Christianity that grew out of the American 17th Century celebration of religious freedom, at a time when the Catholics of Germany were pitted against the Lutherans and the Reformed, and vice versa. America was shining like a city on a hill for those seeking religious tolerance. The American “kind” of Christianity that grew out of this, the “kind” we find while leafing through historical American Christian beginnings, from the Puritans to the Pentecostals, is what grew out of these times. My own German surname, Troutman, comes down to me from immigrants who are supposed to have been fleeing the hundred years’ fallout of the Thirty Years war. I have trouble with people who view the history of religious conflict as ending with the enlightenment though, since I tend to agree with process theologians that claiming to be “non-religious” is often disingenuous if you make a religion out of something else, like materialism or science, etc.. So I see things like Jacobinism, Nazism or Communism as religions also.
But the effect that the history of religious violence had on American churches, and the tolerant legacy these churches leave behind should fascinate us. Americans were effectively solving some of the ecumenical hurdles we face today, and were giving us what has become a minority view within Christianity on the extremes of tolerance. Though we are not anything like staunch Unitarian demythologizers, like Jefferson or Paine, we can see where Unitarian remonstrance may help us examine modern points of difference, and may point to ways we are failing to engage our mission fields as effectively as we should. If Unitarian tests for who is a Christian became arguably too relaxed, perhaps our modern litmus tests for who is a Christian have become arguably too exacting. Perhaps we need to see the Jeffersons and Paines more charitably, taken with a theological antacid, because it may not be ours to judge anyway, particularly people who claim to be following the Great Architect. We come upon people worshiping God, we come upon people following in Jesus footsteps, and rather than do as King Solomon and ask that God hear and provide for them, 1 Kings 8:41, we ask that they change their worship and understanding to be exactly like ours.

So I don’t think it is too idiosyncratic to hold that a solid history of the Unitarian Church, including its universalist/transcendentalist element and free church corollaries is important, because it brings American Christian Church history down to us standing upon two legs. We are left scratching our head how America stands up so straight if we only see the Trinitarian Christian leg underneath. History, alongside tradition and obviously scripture, is a great basis for discussing Christian ecumenism, both “intrafaith” and as we approach our brothers and sisters outside of nominal Christianity. How did we get where we are?

(Back to Top)

The Substance of the Email I Sent on Muslims

Here let me share the substance of the email I sent a couple months ago on Christian ecumenism toward Muslims. I have taken out the specifics particular to the friend to whom it was addressed.

I'm afraid I have written a small manifesto on ecumenism. Last week, our Rev. Carpenter preached on theological reconciliation needed among Christians, which as we all know is currently causing some splintering in the Presbyterian and other churches over how to react to recent marriage legislation. His sermon is probably in part affecting how I am thinking about things this week.

Rev. Carpenter's sermon from last week may be of interest to you if you have time. The sermon on reconciliation is labeled "A Most Embarrassing Sermon": [http://www.bpcusacoonnect.org/sundays/archives/](http://www.bpcusacoonnect.org/sundays/archives/) It addresses some of the frustrations we all share regarding divergent theology.

His sermon had the ring of Barth or Bonhoeffer, pointing out that at the end of the day, we can do theology as best as we know how, but we are still awaiting the grace of God, humbly hoping to be
counted with the sheep. Or as Aquinas put it at the end of his career, all the theology we can write is like straw in the face of actual beatification.

(Back to Top)

**Apostate Europe**

So all that said, and back to the question of why I think Christians need to reference a broader mission field, I think the mission we have to European Muslims is very important, but I see the problem of an increasingly apostate Europe as the more pressing concern. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said of Germany that its punishment would be worse as an apostate nation, than if it had never been Christian to begin with. That is a problem that much of the Western world, and our own nation may be facing. My objection to missions to Muslims was not that we plan to share a more complete version of the Good News of Jesus Christ with Muslims who may be blessed by it, but that we should more importantly have an eye for apostate Europe also. Shine the Light into every corner. Poet Baudelaire said that the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was to convince the world he did not exist, but isn't that more true of apostate Europe than Muslim Europe?

Far from being ashamed that Muslims might hear the Gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, I was saying we should share it with Richard Dawkins while we are at it as well. Haha. Or, if we have a special call to help Muslims, we might share why we feel this way, even if it is just as simple as that God has placed a special call on our hearts to mainly preach to them instead of all the rest of the dying world.

I have always personally felt called to help the irreligious, so maybe I read the mission field with a biased eye. I see religious Muslims as less lost than apostates, atheists and agnostics. Can they be blessed by sharing a robust Christology with them? Absolutely. But I would rather meet St. Peter as a devout Muslim who had never had the chance to hear and reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ as we have it, than as an atheist who has neglected religion in general. As Paul says, atheists are without excuse, or as the psalmist says, the fool says in their heart there is no God.

(Back to Top)

**Lessons from Francis**

Two lessons I have learned on ecumenism come from the life of Francis of Assisi. After famously meeting the Sultan, according to Julien Green, Francis changed his view of Muslims and non-Christians. Green says "the notion he had of Islam had to be modified: The essence of faith--belief in God--could be found outside Christianity."

The second lesson, is that though Francis changed his view of Muslims, he did not pretend that the Gospel of Jesus Christ was any less exclusive. Francis still celebrated that some of his Franciscan brothers went preaching against the Koran, were tortured and martyred. So Francis gives an honest example of being ecumenical, while maintaining the exclusivity of the Christian gospel at the same time. The ecumenical view can extend to non-Abrahamic religions, where we may conclude that Buddhists are better off than irreligious. For instance I would rather live in Buddhist pre-revolution Cambodia than PolPot's Killing Fields.
Lessons from St Dominic

When Dominic saw how heretics were having their beliefs tortured out of them in Christian Europe, he decided to go on what Quakers would call a “convincement” campaign. If we conclude that Muslims have heretical theology that we find untenable, we might follow Dominic’s example, and approach Muslims with the understanding that they are rational human beings who can be reasoned with. Jesus came into the world not to condemn it, but so that it could be said that God is not willing that any should perish. Some have the spiritual gift of being a teacher, but some of us take so much of our character from St John the Baptist, that I worry our more hot-headed brethren may need this lesson from St. Dominic. Many people don’t know this about St. Francis, but he too had John the Baptist for his patron saint. His Christian name was Giovanni, after John the Baptist, which some point to as engendering his own temper.

Our reaction to perceived heresy is no small matter, and some perceptions of Islam and Muhammad have seen it as the extreme of all heresies. In traditional Catholic theology, as seen in Dante’s Inferno, the lowest rung of hell was reserved for Muhammad, for being a heretic and leading people astray. It is possible to take a more moderate view though, but often this leads away from Christian orthodoxy to a milquetoast universalism. My solution is to see Muhammad as heterodox Christian, rather than heretical; the way that we see Jehovah’s witnesses or LDS.

Muhammad did not see himself this way. Muhammad saw himself as consciously creating a religion that superceded Christianity. The problem with his view, was that he did not have a clear vision on what he was doing. Like if I say I don’t like pizza, without ever having tried it. Muhammad knew Christians, but he was not one, and he did not appear to have access to a copy of the gospels. For me, this lumps Muhammad in with those of whom Jesus said, "do not forbid" their preaching, since those who are not against us are for us. Jesus was speaking of what many today would call heretical Christians.

The dialectic counterpoint might be that Jesus also said that those who are not with us are against us, but this was toward a more hostile group than those who were just not preaching according to orthodoxy. At any rate, if we take the lesson from St. Dominic, we might consider the mission field as starting with exactly what is being preached by imams, and if we cannot convince them, we might do best to heed Jesus call to at least not forbid them. By approaching imams directly and trying to change their views of what Muhammad failed to see about Christianity, we would be respecting their religious conscience as we would want ours respected. When I read scripture wrong and someone points it out to me, I may be embarrassed at first, but I'm glad to be apprised of my mistake.

Muslims as the Blessed of Ishmael

There is another sticking point with Christian exclusivity. Not only did Muhammad fail to see that Christianity was the universal religion, that needed no supression, but that there are competing versions of exclusivity, which we may still struggle to understand ourselves. When it comes to Jews and Muslims especially, we need to have the splinter out of our own eye if we
want to see clearly to help our brothers and sisters in other houses of worship. The competing versions of exclusivity range from the Unitarian Universalist (not really Christian), to Dual Covenant theories, Natural Theology etc.

I feel strongly that the blessings given to Isaac and Ischmael in Genesis 17-21 remain in effect. Bryn Jones' book "The Radical Church" reiterates this traditional view of Ishmael's blessing. Whether these blessings are to be interpreted as coming through Jesus Christ the only Mediator exclusively, or as blessings of God the Father that Christ's coming into the world did not contramand, are both arguable.

I think it is important also, when we think of Jesus words to those who were hostile to His ministry, that 'you have Satan for your father," that we limit the context of those words to people who are like those face to face with Jesus, when He was trying to preach in the Temple. Violent opponents of Christianity, of the Invisible Church and of Jesus Christ certainly have the devil for their father. There is no question about that, but not all or even many Jews and Muslims fall into this category. In fact, many "Messianic Jews" and Muslims follow Jesus as a prophet, and might better be said to be Christians of a special type. At the very least Muslims are Humanitarianist Unitarian Christians, who revere and follow Jesus example. It is common for Muslims who hear people from the West take His name in vain to be shocked.

Jesus knew how important His work on the cross was, so much so that when Peter suggested they find a new way, he recognized the devil's work and called even St Peter satan as well as the Jews who were hostile to His ministry. We have to carry the burden of our theological cross for what it is, bringing out things new and old from our store of scripture. I think some within the Christian church do us a disservice by claiming that there are certain doctrines that Christians have "always" taught and believed, without respecting the difficult work of theological reconciliation that is desperately needed in the church. We can't just plant a theological flag and declare jingoistic victory. As Bonhoeffer implied, we should wonder if our desire to have a truly Catholic Church should ever cause us to lose our fear of the word catholic.

It is a shame that the Unitarian Church has become so "Universalist," because when Unitarian Christians used to fill parishes in substantial numbers, they gave the world a better grounding in what Muslim objections to trinitarian views look like, while still remaining Christian themselves. The Christian Unitarians were not unschooled in theology, they just looked more like modern complimentarians today, who insist that Jesus role remains being the Messiah, though some beliefs varied as in any church, based on different measures of faith.

I consider, at least some Muslims to be like Unitarian Christians. Not those in ISIS obviously -- who as Rev. Carpenter puts it are a disgrace to Muslims everywhere-- but some Muslims are like Unitarian Christians used to be. Some have a measure of faith in Jesus that may border on orthodox Christology, and others consider themselves to be His disciples, so much so that the Parable of the Two Sons applies. If we are polemical to those Muslims, we too could be called opponents of Christ, and we would have the devil for our father. I consider Ben Franklin and even some arguable Christian Deists, like Thomas Jefferson or Ghandi, to be in this boat as well. I see the mission we have, therefore, as a "reconciliation ministry" more than a "conversion" ministry. This is at least as true of Muslims who celebrate the anointed, messianic, prophetic life of Jesus, and await His return at the end of time, as far as it is true of many Messianic Jews and potentially Deists or Buddhists who have some concept of who Jesus is.
Lessons from Jews for Jesus

"Jews for Jesus," are a subset of Messianic Jews who are exceptional for their agreement with orthodox Christian theology. But even they, the Jews for Jesus, say that it takes special evangelical methods to reach Jewish people who are dismissive of the supersession of the new covenant. This is that much more true of Muslims, who accept Jesus, but who believe they have a supersession of their own in the Koran.

As I am sure you are aware, Muslims view Jesus as a prophet equal with Mohammed, Moses and Abraham. But Jesus is also seen as the messiah of the Jews who will bring about the end of time for Muslims as well, born of a Virgin and ascended to Heaven. In some ways, we should think of converting Muslims to Christianity as too easy, since they already accept so much of Christology. Orthodox theology, while I don't want to argue against it, neither am I willing to argue against egalitarian notions of the Trinity, hellinistic Christian thinking etc. The real problem with Muslim Christology is that it views Jesus as a created being, rather than from everlasting. But here again, what if we are only looking at a terminological difference, where Jesus was created from that which is everlasting, just another way of phrasing the condescension of Christ.

If we are honest about the different ways of thinking about God among Christians, we should admit that the Complimentarian/Egalitarian and Unitarian/Trinitarian divides bear great resemblance to the Roman/Orthodox divide that led to the Schism. If we consider some Unitarian verses from the Bible, like that Jesus said His Father was greater than He and that we are made kin of Jesus if we do the will of God, we can see that there are different ways of approaching the Godhead without robbing Jesus of His Divinity. Jesus, according to tradition and Jim Bishop, at the Last Supper Jesus would have ended His officiating by yelling "There is One God!" to which there was a ritual reply from those eating the feast day meal. Can we really nitpick the monotheism of Muslims without also seeing the need to reconcile these problems within our own Christian Trinitarian/Unitarian theologies? This is why CS Lewis and the reformers always insisted that we go back to the actual text of the Bible, because creeds and doctrines inevitably simplify its message. If an imam has a copy of the new testament in their hands, they are instantly in a better place to decided between Christian views of Jesus and Muhammad's views, because Muhammad did not even have a copy of the bible to know what he was deciding against.

But, Muhammad did know that Trinitarian Christians equated Jesus with God, and this went against his monotheistic sensibilities. But can we blame him without also blaming Christians who do the same thing? There are at least three theological maneuvers we Christians use for getting around the paradoxes of trinitarian monotheism. The first 1) is to resolve the issue in favor of monotheism, as Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin did, with their doubts about Jesus "divinity," though particularly Franklin never said anything conclusive on this, just that he had doubts. Next, 2) Catholic churches regularly reference the "mystery" of faith, which Bonhoeffer echoes in his assertion that we must accept our inability to understand everything about God all at once, since God is unlimited, while we are "infinity incapax." Lastly, 3) some like the Christian Scientists in Mary Baker Eddy's address in Tremont Temple, or modern complimentarian trinitarians, and the Pentecostal "oneness" trinitarians, have sought to sidestep the debate by renaming the doctrine of the Trinity, so as not to import what they find controversial in it. Today, that leaves
the Christian Scientists, and Oneness Pentacostals on the one hand, with complimentarianist trinitarianism being the more modern neologisms for the relationship of the Godhead. So-called "Free Churches" also sidestep the problem, but instead of renaming the doctrines, they just don't require anyone to subscribe to them, allowing the religious conscience of each person to govern their beliefs.

So the Muslim resolution to the problem of monotheism is not entirely dissimilar from the Unitarian or Complimentarian Christian's, and perhaps some other heterodox Christian interpretations. If Unitarian Christians fall within the "reconciliation" framework, that we would use to bring Franklin or Sarah Flower Adams back to an orthodox Christology, then we should do the same with Muslims. We should also humbly admit that orthodox theology itself still falls back on the mystery of our faith and our need of God's univocal power to overcome our equivocal and limited understanding.

It comes back to the golden rule I think too. Even PBS travel show Rick Steves has a good example for us. Beginning at minute 17 here, Rick has a convivial exchange with a Turkish Imam. [https://www.ricksteves.com/watch-read-listen/video/tv-show/season-8/central-turkey](https://www.ricksteves.com/watch-read-listen/video/tv-show/season-8/central-turkey) We would have liked to hear the discussion continued of course. :) Perhaps we can get some discussion going of how many angels fit on the head of a pin to break the ice?

(Back to Top)

Regarding Theological Divergence

Let me bring up a few problems that may lurk beneath the surface. To the extent that Muslims...

a) Reject the Doctrine of the Trinity

Muslims reject the Trinity, but as I mentioned it is possible to say the same of divergent Christian interpretations. Muslims could fit their beliefs into the Unitarian Christian mold, or the Messianic Jewish molds. Even Thomas Jefferson is a Christian of a humanitarianist type, so it may be helpful to see Muslims as a type of Unitarian Christian in need of "reconciliation" rather than conversion. As we are "going forth to baptize in the name of the Father the Son and the Holy Ghost," we should see where the "mind that was in Christ Jesus" may be at work in Muslim communities.

I think some withholding of judgment on the Muslim tradition is appropriate where they have followed Jesus and are trying their best to "overcome evil with good." Their measure of faith should be added to, rather than seeing it as a start from scratch.

b) Reject Jesus as Son of God and Messiah

Muhammad really splits a hair on this, and if you read the Koran itself, it is hard to wonder if Muslims have not misinterpreted Muhammad's position somewhat. In fact, some of the parts of Christian theology that many Christians struggle with, Muslims take for granted, like the Virgin Birth and the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Again, I think Muslims could benefit from a more robust Christology vis a vis Jesus Uniqueness as the Eternal Son of God, or as St Augustine says, the Ensample, the Way we all must go, but I can't agree that Muslims entirely reject Jesus as the
Son of God, since the Koran records He had no Human father, and it is certainly not true that they reject Him as Messiah. They see all prophets as anointed of God, but particularly they see Jesus as the prophet of the end of time, which could lend itself to a too humanitarianist interpretation, but not a rejection of His messiahship. Muslims object to Jesus being equal to God, but this is also true of humanitarianist Christians, and to some extent true of Complimentarians, Unitarians and Orthodox traditions.

The Koran is very surprising, to find how much of orthodox Christology is shared by Islam though, so we should take time to read for ourselves, and remember that even Muslims may not know everything that is in there, just as we Christians cannot recite every verse of the Bible by rote. For instance, the Koran says "Jesus is as Adam in the sight of God," setting us up to share on how Jesus was not only the second Adam but how that leads us to believe in his blemish free sacrifice. The Koran should also be read with a sense of humor, since Muhammad explicitly makes fun of unbelievers on points like the virgin birth. It is kindof funny, in a millenium and half stale joke kindof way.

c) Reject Atonement (Jesus didn't die on the cross)

Jesus message of turning the other cheek led Him in an extreme way to give His life for us on the cross. Muslims fail to record the work of the cross in a complete way, but they accept His method in practice, a version of this in that they see Jesus message as that we must "overcome evil with good," which is a theme throughout the Koran.

This is what some philosophers would call a "functional equivalent." Also, what the Koran explicitly says about Jesus Crucifixion, could be interpreted as a change of the ending to make it a happier one for people who don't understand that the cross was Jesus' glory. Kindof like how Greeks culturally adapted the story of Jesus forgiveness of St Peter's denials by three opportunities to affirm his love for Jesus, became a more culturally available narrative with the special Greek word for love, agape. I suspect that the Arabs culturally had trouble with the metaphor of the cross. I know people within the Christian Science church that have the same trouble. They will do mental acrobatics to not have to think about it, and orthodox Christians are also quick to point to Hebrews in affirming that Jesus' work of the cross is in fact completed. The Koran, nevertheless, still has a record of the crucifixion and that Jesus cheated death and was taken up into heaven. Further, the Koran sees the murders of Zacharias, John the Baptist and Jesus as being punished by the Roman sacking of the Second Temple. So there is some approximation of Jesus crucifixion, an affirmation that He did in fact cheat death and ascend to His Father. Can this be taken as an implication that He escapes with the keys to return to the glory that He had from the beginning?

Again, I think the Koranic change to the ending of Jesus biography may best be seen as an apology for the disgraceful way that Jesus died. Like the agape story when the meaning was lost in translation. Crucifixion was such an embarrassment, that even the apostles would not discuss the cross for a long time. Being crucified was like being sentenced to cellblock six today, and we should not be surprised that the Arabic honor culture, who loved Jesus so much would not try and hedge the disgrace and shame of the cross. For me, this is precisely why Jesus said "forbid them not," because people think about theology in different ways, and have different cultural stumbling blocks to faith.
It came naturally to St Peter and Paul to understand that the Cross was the glory of God's Love, in the Person of Jesus Christ, but we can't fault the Muslims for this, anymore than we fault the Women of Jerusalem for offering Jesus some opiate, in the hopes that He would take it and help Him expire more quickly. Some have pointed out that Muhammad's misunderstanding is dissimilar from either adoptionist or docetic heresies. Maybe Muhammad just could not bring himself to look at the stripes of Christ. I know some Christians who struggle with this, and just can't bring themselves to bear the thought of Jesus passion or watch the Mel Gibson version. It is like they are so sensitive to His suffering, that it short circuits their ability to grasp it. This is not the same failing that leads to docetism though. I don't think it amounts to the docetic spirit of Antichrist either, that says Jesus never came in the flesh. It is a confusing topic though, and I am not sure about it entirely.

But whether they know it or not, Muslims receive the same historical benefit that all mankind does from Jesus sacrifice. Muslims don't have to make animal sacrifices. Having torn the veil and made atonement for mankind once and for all, all peoples as a matter of history, according to Adolf von Harnack, have stopped doing animal sacrifices wherever the Christian message has penetrated. Muslims may not know it, but by not sacrificing to God, they implicitly accept that something gives them the grace to enter God's presence in prayer. They are accepting Solomon's invitation to all nations to come and worship the One True God, and we should wonder if this is not made possible by the atoning work of Jesus, Who Muslims revere as a prophet, and whose example they follow in trying to overcome evil with good.

d) Works based righteousness for salvation

This can be said equally of many Catholics as well, and some say results from mere terminological difference. We are arguing about whether we do good or God does good through us, which is the same argument that the reformation continues to have with Catholicism. There may be a Humean is/ought distinction at the root of the disagreement, which may also just result from the infinity incapax that we have when trying to keep two competing ideas in our heads at the same time.

e) Reject Christian scriptures as we currently have them ("they've been corrupted")

Many Christians do this also, in the extreme humanitarianist demythologizers like Thomas Jefferson, but also many theologically liberal Christians who believe that the Bible must be read by an inspired reader. They say the problem with the reformation was that it tended to make an idol of the Bible. I believe that the Bible in the abstract is the infallable word of God, but, for instance, a comparison of the genealogies of Jesus in the Gospels can't be reconciled without resort to some reasoning. Not necessarily corruption, but failure in record or something. Anyone who goes that far, has to go the extra mile with the Muslim Koran, which also has plenty for historians and textual critics to think on. Here, textual criticism is the friend of the evangelist, since so much work has been done on both the Bible and the Koran, that it should be easy to show imam's who can benefit from knowing what the best sources are for this and that piece of Gospel truth.

(Back to Top)
Note on neopaganism.

Finally, alongside apostate Europe and the special place of Muslims as an Abrahamic religion, please consider the dangers of neopaganism especially. I think we commonly confuse the cultural and neopagan influences of Islamic peoples with Islam itself. For instance, the Nazi’s revival of the pagan emperor cult came to an embattled modernist Germany that was ready to dabble in sun worship, ergo the Apollonian swastika. I think it is unfair to blame this on Islam, anymore than we would want rampant divorce and materialism in America blamed on Christianity.

(Back to Top)

French Pears

It was writing this email to my friend that got me thinking about the philosophy of ecumenism, and left me thinking very deeply about God as Trinity, and the doctrines of the Trinity in our Christian faith. About a week after expressing myself on the ecumenical problem of where Muslims fit in as arguably non-Trinitarian Christians, and how I see them as a type of Unitarian Christian group, I woke up having had something of a mystical dream about the Trinity. One of the pieces of iconography the French use to symbolize the Fruit of Mary’s Womb is the pear, and it came to me in a dream that some people had sliced the pear from different sides. In my dream I ate some pear from one of the sides, and I was asked what I had eaten. The answer of course was pear. I had eaten pear. It did not matter what side it was sliced from, I had “eaten of” the pear in the grammarian’s superlatively complete sense. However you sliced it, it was still pear that I had eaten. I did not need to eat the whole pear or an additional bite from the other side of the pear or the core and seeds to have eaten pear. I understood that there was more that could be eaten of the pear, but the flesh was the easiest part to digest.

The way the flesh was cut off the core had an important meaning to my dream also, because I could see three seeds exposed but not sliced out, and in my dream it represented the doctrine of the Trinity as unappetizing for most or all (who wants to eat the seeds of a pear?), but still true and in there, though not what most hungry people are in need of or able to digest. The night before I had this dream, I went to bed with theology on the brain, thinking of how plebeian Julien of Norwich’s hazelnut was, so I guess it serves me right for thinking someone else’s revealed metaphor was silly. God repaid me in my own coin, a pear fruit. I read once that Eric Metaxas, the Christian journalist, once had the same meeting with a fish in a dream, so I won't feel uniquely humbled.

Aside from the tares and the wheat problem though, I guess this is how I see heterodox or doctrinally non-Trinitarian Christians. They have taken communion without having eaten the whole pear in one bite. Having had their feet washed their whole bodies have been made clean. Some are like the Samaritan who Jesus called the “good” Samaritan, and some are like the parable of the two sons, where the good son ultimately obeyed, though initially saying he would
not. And some may find a soteriological loophole in having given a cup of cold water to one of the least of Jesus’ followers.

Incidentally, giving out cups of water to thirsty people is highly recommended as the easiest route to heaven. Jesus joked about it in the parable of The Shrewd Servant. That parable is also highly recommended, though if anyone can figure out the one correct way to read it please let me know, since I count about four readings at least. But what is clear from the ministry of Jesus is that everyone should give out as much water as possible in the hope of being saved, though many of us in the reformed Christian church ironically have forgotten about what a free gift grace is, though there it is in red letters. We will be surprised when we get to heaven to find it filled with those in “public works” and cafeteria servers and people who passed out Gatorade at marathons.

(Back to Top)

An Ecumenical Rosetta Stone

But this dream of a Godhead pear reinforced my sense of the importance of Trinitarian doctrine as a source of theological disunity, and why we need to appreciate each other’s service to God however we “slice” it. Most people who think about the Trinity at all probably think of the doctrine as a uniting factor in the Christian church; as one of the things that Christians agree on and as something that needs to be defended as the most sacred of doctrines. And I admit that among the nominally Christian faithful there is an overwhelming majority of Christians who at least call themselves Trinitarian. And if there were near universal agreement on this doctrine, we should wonder when we find people calling themselves Christian, but not subscribing to the doctrine of the Trinity, if they were mistaken or disingenuous. Like if we meet someone who calls themselves a vegetarian but does not eat vegetables. Are “non-Trinitarian” Christians mad, bad or crazy?

My view, however, is that there is not actually a universal acceptance of one doctrine of the Trinity among Christians, or even a near universal acceptance, so lumping non-Trinitarians outside of Christianity is unfair unless we are also willing to lump Trinitarians of difference outside of Christianity. For instance, to be consistent, a person who believes there is one right way to correctly believe in the Trinity, especially the complementarianism way, should also maintain that Egalitarians, Unitarians, Sola Scriptura and Oneness are not really Christians also. This is especially true, since what the “non-Trinitarians” are saying can oftentimes be searched successfully for agreement with different so-called Trinitarian beliefs. This conclusion rests on the belief that there is not actually one unifying doctrine of the Trinity, which can be seen even among nominal Trinitarians who are thought of as theologically mainstream. There are discernible philosophical differences. But more importantly for taking ecumenism as far as it can go, the intuition is that the small percentage of Christians who fail, or refuse, to identify as Trinitarian have as much to say to us as those who continue to dominate the definition of what it means to be a Christian with over-simplified nominalist Trinitarian litmus tests.
It may be as proper to say “dumbed-down” as over-simplified, because while Trinitarians are coming to different conclusions on exactly how to define the doctrine of the Trinity, they nevertheless treat nominal identification with the concept as a necessary precondition of being called a Christian. And this Pablum Trinitarianism suffers from the same problem that all “Predicate Nominalism” does. If there is no excuse for the over-simplification among theologians claiming to be authorities on the matter, then they are dumbing down the gospel. If simply calling oneself Trinitarian settled the matter entirely, then all we would be agreeing on is a name and not the underlying meaning of the term. This can be followed down analytically for the ecumenical usefulness it has, because it points to the inappropriateness of litmus tests that put a cognitive load on Christians that only the theologians among us can understand, and which can be leveraged to divide Christians where Jesus desired us to be united (i.e. you are a Christian if you believe in vertical, complimentarian, egalitarian, or hypostatic Trinitarianism etc.). Nominal Trinitarianism just becomes another term for nominal Christianity.

My dream about the Trinitarian pear arrived as I was thinking through some of these problems as they related to Muslims. But if, like charity, ecumenism starts at home, then discussing the Muslim world was an ambitious place to start. But then, not as much for me, because as a Christian Scientist, I am used to dealing in the outer reaches of ecumenical thought. My Christian Science background is considered as extreme as a Muslim background by some theological schools. So my ecumenical vision results from having examined disunity and theological divergence in the Christian church from this personal necessity.

The result of occasionally being called a “cult” member during my youth, for attending Christian Science services with my family, is that I got used to the theological barbs that church folk throw around. But I have been more dissatisfied, I think, than most Christian Scientists with the response to theological criticism that the Christian Science church offered in return for these charges of cult status or heresy. The Christian Science church’s responses suffered in my opinion from an understandable desire to avoid conflict, a failure to speak along mainstream theological lines and a structural inability to move beyond the 19th Century framework that Mary Baker Eddy assumed would be adequate “forever,” as the Manual of the Mother Church puts it. Most Christian Scientists may not care, but I think after 100 plus years, it may be incumbent upon us 21st Century Christian Scientists to reevaluate how we stay true to Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian vision, even if this can seem to depart from the letter of the Manual. Conditions have changed in religious life as a matter of the culture we are set in, if not in religion per se. Certainly God is the same yesterday, today and forever, but while conditions have not changed in the Spirit of church life, it is always timely to reconsider the artifice of Christianity, doing away with anything we find to hinder our following Jesus instruction to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. As an ecumenical problem though, examining theological difficulties in the Christian Science church has made it easy for me personally to see why other churches, let alone mosques, also struggle to engage in contemporary dialogue. Maybe God has allowed all these failures in mutual

understanding to take place for some divine purpose, so that we would not build a Tower of Babel to the sky or something. But this failure in understanding is quickly vanishing.

In our modern computerized times, with research libraries electronically available, what a great opportunity we have for parsing between theological jargon, and what a great responsibility we have to do it guided by the Spirit rather than hubris. Is examining disunity a poor end in itself? Is it necessary if we desire honest engagement? There is an apt metaphor in the Rosetta stone, the discovery of which helped linguists translate dead languages that opened up new texts for aiding them in understanding dead languages and history. And that is the program we modern religious have embarked upon in creating a religious Rosetta stone of theological terms and discrepancies. The lexical task of fleshing out ecumenical logic is what I hope to provide here, the balance of my ecumenical Rosetta stone. Like any tool though, a Rosetta Stone can be used for good or evil, so I trust in sharing that everyone will prayerfully consider how best to engage ecumenism.

(Back to Top)

Speaking of Ecumenism, My Parents

My sense for ecumenism sprouted prior to my initiation into theological debate, and even before understanding what was meant by people frowning upon the Christian Science church as heterodox or heretical. Call me a phenomenologist, but my sense for ecumenism started by watching my parents. I received a stern look from my father once for being sectarian when I was a child. We were going past a church with parishioners streaming in and I, being superior and proud of my bookish and learned Christian Science church membership commented, something to the effect that we were passing a much simpler church than I and my family were proud to attend. “The time for thinkers had come,” I thought loftily, and yet so many were tragically missing the Christian Science boat. My dad looked at me with one of those looks like I had grown Martian antenna. He asked, “Don't you think that is a nice family over there? Aren't you glad that they have that church to go into?” Apparently my father did not share my sense of superiority.

He had been a reluctant convert to Christian Science, knowing that Mary Baker Eddy had a different starting point than the Christian churches that he grew up in. Oh well, I guess being sectarian was not as cool as I thought. Hellfire and brimstone. If we are not Christian Scientists because it is superior, why am I a Christian Scientist anyway? That question is ultimately why I cannot be a dyed-in-the-wool “denominational” Christian of any stripe, be it Christian Scientist or anything else. Though I understand the problems with a lack of church structure and organization too, and see the necessity of it this side of Heaven, but since encountering my father’s disapproval of sectarianism, I have never been able to keep a straight face in a sectarian discussion, and this is an attitude I adopted from him.

Philosophically, I understand the principle behind ecumenism as being so basic that it can go sometimes without discussion. It is the fact of imago Dei. The source of all Christian understanding of human dignity is that God created each and every person, and every person is a
person that God loves as His children. St. Paul had a slightly different, but still simple way of putting it, when he warned his audience not to confuse our struggles against the evil we see in the world with being a struggle against flesh and blood. Christians have forgotten these points at different instances in history, but they always rise back to the surface after whatever crusade, inquisition or pogrom results in evil burning itself out. As Mary Baker Eddy put it, error is unreal and temporal. As Jesus put it, a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Though my father was a “class taught” Christian Scientist as an adult, married to a Christian Scientist and raising a Christian Science family, my father was raised bouncing between churches in the 1930's and 40's, so denominational rivalry was lost on him. When we lost him to failing health, I treasured for a while a tape with his voice on it that he had recorded some Christian Science and Bible verses on to play back to himself. I lost the tape, but having had it still reminds me of his enduring faith to the end of his earthly life.

He had been raised in a combination of Methodist and Episcopalian churches among others, with Christian Scientist neighbors, and singing in the boys’ choir of Christ Church Cathedral in Louisville. He went to the Lutheran Wittenberg University for two years, before being drafted into the Air Force to fly bombers during the Korean War. He had a bad habit for a good Puritan of celebrating midnight mass at Christmas time. This was in contrast to his sometimes refusal to attend Easter services, when all Christian churches become crowded with infrequent attendees.

At Christmastime though he would string white lights in the shape of a cross on our house, and pious passersby would occasionally stop and thank him for reminding them of the birth of Jesus. My mother also, who remains a Christian Scientist and a Journal listed Christian Science practitioner had a Presbyterian and Lutheran background. So I was raised by two parents in a Christian Science home, with lots of wider theological backgrounding and lots of discussion about relative belief systems. It was a religious education in itself to be brought up around their lively dinner table.

My parents discussed Christian Science and the beliefs held by our neighbors and relatives growing up, and we would go to different churches sometimes. They would comment how different beliefs held by different church communities led to funny social phenomena, like the aloofness of some Christian Scientists from regular Christian fellowship, the inclination of Lutherans to be somber before Easter, the preoccupation that Baptists had with the uncertainty of the moment of death. The family tradition, when traveling on Sunday and not knowing where to find a Christian Science church was to stop at whatever church was first spotted while going down the road. Any church would do.

(Back to Top)

My Christian Ethos

And now I find that being a non-denominational Christian as an adult, and having been raised by the denominational Christian Scientists -- in their Sunday Schools and by Christian Scientist
parents -- I have often found myself in the awkward position of having to speak and defend the protestant, and specifically the Christian Science tradition, to people who would lump Christian Scientists or certain other protestants outside of Christianity, just as Muslims have to explain their faith traditions to those in the West. Like I imagine Muslims must feel ostracized from religious discussion.

Some of my Christian friends want me to admit that Christian Scientists are not Christian, or else my orthodoxy as a Christian comes under suspicion. By contrast, some of my Christian Scientist friends want me to admit that Christian Scientists are not only Christian but have the highest and most spiritual form of Christianity. The truth of the matter, or the way I see it, is somewhere in the middle. Before I can examine and explain who Christian Scientists really are though, I have to start by disabusing people of the many stereotypes of who a Christian Scientist is and what they are held to believe. The first stereotype might be that Christian Scientists never go to doctors. The second might be that we are never willing to disagree with Mary Baker Eddy. The third notion is that we are Scientologists or any of the other religions that sound like Christian Science.

This problem of misperceptions of Christian Scientists makes it very easy for me to identify with liberal Muslims. After the recent violence in France perpetrated by Islamic Extremists, it was heartwarming for me to see Muslims carrying signs through the street saying “I am a Muslim and I am not a terrorist.” The liberal Muslims were holding these signs and giving out hugs to people in the streets of France, and it made me think that I would like to have had a sign that read, “I am a Christian Scientist and I am critical of Mary Baker Eddy’s theology.”

And this is a problem that all Christian Science youth have faced. A presenter at a Christian Science youth conference I went to as a child introduced himself humorously as though making a confession of being an alcoholic, “Hello, my name is so-and-so, and I (dramatic pause) am a Christian Scientist.” If we fail to disavow Christian Science as a “cult,” or fail to admit to our skeptical friends that the church is ignorant of material science, we are repeatedly confronted with curiosity from other Christians and skeptics. The question is whether Christian Scientists are heretical or misunderstood, cult or Christian, metaphysical genius or coocoo “faith hillers,” and one thing I repeatedly come back to in my explanation is that, either way, Christian Scientists either misunderstand their own place within Christendom and within the history of science, or if any of them understand where they fit in, they have trouble explaining it. The cause of this trouble in explanation is easy to identify but slightly harder to fix.

 Basically, the Christian Science discussion of theology and Church History has been impeded by denominational constraints. In my experience at least, Christian Scientists fail to move in regular Christian circles, and when they do, they are often surprised by, for instance, how much Christian Scientists have in common with other mainline Christians, or that the metaphysics they discuss is not unique to their conversation, nor is it the invention of Mary Baker Eddy. They are surprised also, and more importantly for ecumenism, by what is counted as heresy by other modern churches. Some Christian Scientists seem to think simply -- dare I say “nominally” -- that calling oneself Christian settles the question. Christian Scientists can be surprised to find
that, for instance, neo-Calvinist orthodoxy requires some very particular proofs of Christianity, in excess of the simpler believing that Jesus was the Messiah and the Ensample, and doing one’s utmost to follow His lead and direction.

But failing to recognize the complexity and intricacy of what is important to the theologies of other churches, Christian Scientists cannot imagine why anyone would be so sectarian as to call them non-Christian, not to mention the problem of Christian Scientists constant extolling of the virtues of Mary Baker Eddy, which acts as an impediment to anyone who could be interested in having a theological discussion with them, who are not themselves devotees of Eddy. And there is some lack of insight into the way that Christian Science’s history and theology can cause its members to look down on less “spiritual” churches who they can see as having theologies based in “materialism,” again missing why certain material facts of the incarnation are so important to, for instance Catholic beliefs about transubstantiation. But if Christian Scientists were more adept at theological discussion, they might be able to explain that their “metaphysics” are substantially in line with Augustine’s, but they can’t bring themselves to do this because they would have to admit that Augustine was the great revelator of their faith instead of Mary Baker Eddy. And they are not the only church that has trouble tracing their beliefs back to historical origins.

But like all ecumenical Christians this leaves them in a bind, because they desire greater unity, but have trouble getting there. Their church history needs an update for ecumenical purposes, but they have trouble leaving behind some points that are very important to them. In my view, all churches may benefit from a better grounding in Church history, theology and the philosophy of religion, to discover what the sticking points are with our theologies that cause some to question whether this or that church or belief is truly Christian or only nominally so, minority view or heresy, cultus or cult, saint or usurper, while some churches need this more than others. The discussion of church history may be especially beneficial to American protestant churches like Christian Scientists, as Church history in the American experiment is so short and given to enthusiastic variety in its expression. I.e. among Unitarian, Quaker, Methodist, Puritan, Baptist, Lutheran and every other Christian group.

My Christian ethos is grounded in all this. Having had to recreate a vision of what it means to be Christian after growing up in Christian Science Sunday Schools and being called a cult member, I have come upon theology by necessity. Where many Christian Scientists have failed to see the ebb and flow of theological discourse as it has changed from the time of their inception in the 19th Century and don’t care what other people think because they are happy to stay within their denominational circles. If we move beyond these, are we then Christian, Christian Scientists or both, Christian-Christian Scientist? Raised by Christian Science parents, if I were forced personally to define my religious identity in terms of agreement with some theologian it would not be Mary Baker Eddy alone, or even chiefly. I always find myself thinking along the post-modern lines of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Where everyone agrees with all theologians to some extent, and none of them perfectly, yet Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I find it very hard to disagree with him on anything. Does that make me the last member of Germany’s Confessing Church? At least it makes me a Bonhoefferian-Christian even more than a Christian Scientist-Christian. Though reading through Bonhoeffer for his agreement with Mary Baker Eddy is easy enough to do, since
there is always so much agreement between most theologians on most topics, so I don’t see this as separating me from Christian Scientists entirely.

I think of Bonhoeffer as the greatest modern or post-modern theologian, though I would be happy to entertain the notion that Peter Kreeft or someone is as good on paper. But we all naturally have some extra receptivity towards those whom God has singled out among us as martyrs. As Eberhard Bethge says of the martyrs of Plotzensee, God has allowed them a place beyond the reach of our human judgment; we cannot judge them, while they judge and mark us. But since no one has perfect agreement with any theologian usually, even with the theologies of the church leaders where they participate in Christian community, everyone should admit that they are “Christian” qualified by their own interpretation of what that means.

I, for instance, have now qualified myself as a Christian-Scientist-Christian-Bonhoefferian. But for ecumenical purposes, we can start viewing all Christians this way, as heterodox with appropriate appended epithets. A Methodist church member may belong because they admire John Wesley, but they may lean in Whitfield’s direction, making them a Calvinist-Methodist. Or I may not like the way my Presbyterian church is set up, thinking that the communion table should emphasize some Christological point preferentially treated by the Episcopal church, making me an Episcopalian-Presbyterian at heart.

And alongside individual difference, there is temporal flux in corporate belief. All people from historical churches face this problem of theological change over time. Catholics, whose theologies predate Newtonian physics, no longer see “nature abhorring a vacuum” as the metaphor it once was. And the Catholic church has reformed its position on, for instance, Galileo and whether secular science should have to ask permission of the church before making new discoveries. Theological change occurs like this over time, within institutions, though individuals or groups within a church may not agree with the changes. For instance, the 19th Century temperance movement, or the view of equality of the sexes that would wipe out gender difference, etc. These changes have come and gone within Protestantism in only the last 100 years, with the 19th Century itself being the product of 1900 years of ebb and flow Anno Domini, and thousands of years before then since Abraham. My personal history being with Christian Scientists can testify to this, since my earliest experiences with theology seemed to be set in stone by the Christian Science church’s adoption of Science and Health, which makes the theology of the Christian Scientists highly resistant to change, not to mention mainstream interpretation. But they are not the only ones who have denominational thinking stuck in the past or other refractive myopias vis a vis the problem of theological clarity. Though I believe these structural factors for Christian Scientists make historical criticism more difficult for them than many other churches, it is by no means a problem that only they have, sharing it to lesser degrees with all other churches.

Indeed, being a sola scriptura church, Christian Scientists tend to have a great grounding in Old Testament history, but because Mary Baker Eddy was a jolly-old New Inglander, Christian Scientists are somewhat blind to the histories of the Catholic Church and the broader Reformation, as 19th Century America was generally. America was glad to be rid of the
problems of the old countries, and sometimes this meant not caring to learn about theological history. Not to mention their blindness to the impact of 19th Century’s industrialist philosophy on their theology, which contemporaneously is sometimes difficult to discern in the midst of unexamined prejudices and presuppositions. But every church has these different historical blind spots and myopias that we would like to see past: caves we would like to escape; whether more pronounced as the Christian Scientists due to institutional rigidity, or subtle as where older denominational texts, though strongly persuasive, are not as built-into the fabric of the church.

Effectively, the failures of churches to ground parts of their history is confounded by the fact that modern church scholars who could help churches like the Christian Scientists are either not interested in helping or have not been invited to do so. Everyone wants to leave well enough alone. But Christian Scientists and their American ilk need to gain a better understanding of church history if they want to be taken seriously in mainstream ecumenical discussions. But how do we accomplish this and set them in history when there are low interest levels for American 19th Century Christianity, and when many find the theology of Christian Scientists, Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons etc., to be either too abstruse or off-putting to give them an incentive to help with the research that could clear matters up. For example, why are many of those who are interested in the history of Christian Science either lay people who are Christian Scientists, or students interested in the 19th Century for some other reason, i.e., because of Mary Baker Eddy's biography or her relationship to Mark Twain's literature, etc. In the case of Christian Scientists, the lack of interest in their theology, and the denominational nature of the church has historically stymied the ecumenical conversation, though they are currently doing more to clear up the fog by participating in the World Council of Churches, encouraging local engagement in ecumenical circles and sharing information on the web.

(Back to Top)

The Christian Science Church, Not a Cult, but Who Cares?

But historically, the opacity of Christian Science theology has led many to write the church off as a cult. And if anyone understood Christian Science theology, where they may stop calling them a cult, they still would not know how to place them in church history, because outside of academia the average person who has no seminary training has little ability to deal with Church history. Even mainstream Christian publications claiming to be theological discussion grounds can make glaring historical errors. For instance, people who have a bare initiation into Bonhoeffer’s complex thinking can be seen taking stabs at who he was or what he thought. More irksome is that sometimes these novices get him more accurately than supposed experts on his work.

Incidentally, if anyone is interested in Bonhoeffer there are many great books and a few bad ones. I recommend Georg Huntemann's *The Other Bonhoeffer* as a good “guided tour” of his work. The anthology *“No Rusty Swords,”* is another good starting place. And a caution in reading comments on Bonhoeffer is that twisting a dialectic theologian’s words to your agenda is the easiest thing in the world, since the dialectic theologian always gives you a back-and-forth from
which to pick from if you are intellectually dishonest. Huntemman is attuned to this hazard and comments on it, albeit with a slightly conservative way of seeing things himself.

But history is full of sticking points. When historical theological points are brought up in ecumenical engagement, they are too often brought up divisively; so the people who want to bring people together on our common ground have an incentive to skip over history as a perceived barrier to ecumenism, because history is full of disagreements, theological errors, criticism and disunity. We therefore leave history too much alone, or we leave it to the sectarian few who would look through history to divide rather than unite us in the mutual support of carrying the cross of theological work. And this is again confounded by the anti-intellectual bias that many of us protestants pretend to have, and have pretended to have for centuries. Like St. Francis who once excoriated a brother who wanted to have his own copy of some religious texts, many protestants place greater value on immediate religious experience, corporate gathering and literal reading of the Bible than on historical or theological religious learning.

This was especially true of American up-from-your-bootstraps theology that sometimes celebrated ingenuity over “edumacation” during the 19th Century. Has anyone ever visited a Quaker meeting house? It is such an odd mix to see who goes to Quaker meeting houses, because you have extremely well-read educated people, sitting around with uneducated people being moved to speak, sometimes by the Holy Spirit or by the writings of George Fox, and occasionally just moved to speak in all directions, like by something they saw in George Lucas’ Star Wars Trilogy.

Ironically for the Christian Science church, which is otherwise so highbrow and bookish, they have this problem in spades. We might call it a problem of over-inclusivity in theological discussion among lay churches. When you have a priesthood of all believers, everyone is empowered to speak on behalf of protestant Christianity. While everyone should be encouraged to have an intellectual understanding of why they are protestants, this leads to there being a lot of mavericks within lay protestant churches (lay churches, i.e. Christian Scientist, Quaker, Mormon). Which raises the question of who speaks for the Christian Science church now that Mary Baker Eddy is long dead? And when even during her life-time, she failed to speak along what would today be considered mainstream theological lines? To some extent, both the problems of abstruse theology and a cold shoulder to church history are due to the preference among lay churches for individual religious experience, or in the case of Christian Scientists, for Mary Baker Eddy’s religious experience, which can cause a willful naïveté on the part of lay church members for theology that is linearly articulable along mainstream theological lines. This serves to exclude them from discussions that are based in developed orthodoxy. But Christian Scientists, Mormons and Quakers have their own reasons for avoiding this route. But Christian Scientists, for example, would rather not waste their time learning the theology of other churches, or how it differs from theirs, as long as everyone agrees that God is Love, and they, like the Quakers, trust that this will best lead to God’s working organically in the lives of their church members (“friends” as the Quakers call each other). But does remaining innocent as lambs cause us to fail in being wise as serpents? At least in so far as Church history is concerned I think it does.
And this presents the ecumenical problem that they face when dealing with other churches, and when trying to explain themselves. To be ecumenical on some levels of engagement, we have to learn to care about what others see as important, or at least understand why they place value on something, whether we ultimately place the same value on it or not. That is why understanding Christian history is so important, in the hopes that it lance the boils of history and theology that so many are isolated by. And hopefully also to inure these wonderful communities of faithful people to the arguments that sectarian people make based on the same historical sticking points.

(Back to Top)

**Innovation? or Willful Naivete?**

In the process of being realistic about history, I am forced to make some defense and some critique of the Christian Science church. Though theologically I am Bonhoefferian, insofar as I appreciate his reinvigoration of the communitarian nature of protestant churchgoing, and insofar as he is first among equals in “post-modern” theology, nevertheless I don’t depart from Christian Scientists entirely in their appreciation of Mary Baker Eddy’s theological contribution. I especially appreciate also that Christian Scientists try their best to follow Jesus and see God as Love, appreciating the radical love that God has for all His people, and where they are keenly aware that we are not at war with flesh and blood as St Paul warned against. Christian Scientists may fail to parade what are modernly considered the outward signs of being God-fearing, as more robustly Pauline churches excel at, but they are among the nicest most brotherly and God-loving people on the face of the earth. Is it better to emphasize fearing God or loving God if they both have the same end? Christian Scientists are supposed to be God-fearing also, according to Mary Baker Eddy’s reference to St. Paul’s admonition that we “work out our salvation with fear and trembling,” but modern Christian Scientists in my experience do not emphasize this point. As a group they frown upon fear in general and emphasize the loving nature of God. Their theology has forgotten that the fear of God that other churches are talking about has the univocal quality of fear with a capital F, that makes the fear of God a different and righteous thing, in contrast to the vernacular understanding of fear as a negative emotion. So Christian Scientists have stopped emphasizing the Fear of God, as Mary Baker Eddy did, for reasons of theological forgetfulness perhaps. But they nevertheless sit around pooling their mustard seeds of faith until moving mountains becomes something for beginners, which is something that Jesus said would happen. And when they are not moving mountains they are writing blank checks of love, forgiveness and healing, like Jesus jokes about in the parable of the shrewd servant.

In the reign of King David, when David crossed God and conducted a census for worldly purposes, God gave David the choice to either fall into the hands of men or undergo a scourge from God Himself, and David chose to count on God’s mercy over the enemies of Israel. But for Christians, in light of the parable of the shrewd servant, the decision may be less clear in our new covenant times. It is still clear in terms of falling into the hands of God over the hands of your enemies. But if you had to choose between falling into the hands of God or one of His shrewd servants, which would you pick? Jesus seems to imply in the Christian dispensation that you are
better off seeking forgiveness from those to whom He has lent the keys to the kingdom. He implies that if God so loved the world that He sent His Only Begotten Son, for a variety of reasons, all soteriological, none easy or cheap, then we need to appreciate Jesus’ loving actions of divine sacrifice and kindness by gratefully receiving it ourselves and welcoming others to “the banquet” of grace, as Jesus put it in another parable. This is the understanding on which Christian Scientists and much of the “Amazing Grace” 19th Century operated. We depreciate this gift if we celebrate Jesus exclusivity as something that we ourselves are not also in need of grace to attain to. As the Catholics remind themselves weekly, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” This is the problem that arises with judgmental types of Christianity, which can bully people with the gospel of the sinner, rather than confessing their own need of grace. This is why I can’t help loving Christian Scientists, because they can be accused of being one of the best examples, alongside Wesleyans and Roman Catholics, of being extremely “shrewd” servants in the grace and love they extend to their fellow man. These all try to be more Christ-like, and the refrain is a love-ridden “forgive them Father, they know not what they do,” and an optimistic “we will come rejoicing bringing in the sheaves.” Or as Padre Pio said, “how blessed are the facultys of the soul, when they obey so wise a King.”

Of course, out here in California there are no sheaves, but bails of citrus fruit and artichokes, but the metaphor is the same. And as a matter of being schooled in theological debate, we Christian scientists have been a little too house-proud, and remiss in not taking our studies of other theologies seriously, but this has in part the Franciscan prophylactic effect as well, against the hazard of the damnable offense of being “pharisaical” as the term is understood in the vernacular pejorative.

A favorite theologian Bonhoeffer, who was the opposite of unedumacated, who indeed was one of the most decorated theologians of his day, he came to this same conclusion regarding naïve American Christianity. He had to reconcile his continental learnedness with an awareness that the American Christians he met were schooled very differently. Bonhoeffer learned to both appreciate and be critical of American naïveté. But explaining American naiveté creates a problem when we try and interact with Christian Scientist relations who are startled to think of Mary Baker Eddy as being naive of other theology, since they credit her instead with putting aside broken theologies, and with forgetting worldly knowledge among other accomplishments.

But we cannot help but conclude that she was a creature of her Victorian American time, as well as a conflict-avoidance type naïve theologian. During the 19th Century it was de rigueur to shine a new light, rather than a dim old one. These Americans were not naïve, in the sense of the word meaning “dumb,” but they contrasted with those schooled along orthodox lines. By contrast Bonhoeffer, as a modern German scholastic, visited America with a continental knowledge of where all the theological toes were that could be stepped on. When trained theologians speak, we can be sure they are trying to hit or miss every theological point, depending on their view or this or that particular point. The critical type of Christian philosophy goes three rounds with all comers before pointing out, as Thomas Aquinas does, that theology is all a bunch of straw until

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God blesses it. So even schoolhouse theology ends up functionally equivalent to just not doing theology at all, as the Quakers and Christian Scientists claim they are not doing.

But terminological difference in the appropriate place of theology aside, American Protestantism and the Christian Science church for example, contrasted heavily with the way that critical theologians engage in debate. Perhaps from John Bunyan's powerful influence, we tended to see theology very differently than a German's boxing match. Theology for the New English was a slow and steady climb to a pinnacle of thought, following lightly the steps that Jesus trod, harmless and trusting; guided by the Bible until we saw the Cross alongside our brother Pilgrim. The punchline to Flannery O’Connor’s famous joke says, “I answer that the light being eternal and limitless cannot be turned off. Shut your eyes.” O’Connor is pointing to the Aquinian analog to this Pilgrim’s Progress way of doing theology, where the form of the Aquinian article had somewhat tamed the debate, until we had all sides neatly wrapped up, with the accepted proposition in the middle for meditating on. Or like Franciscans and Quakers, the theological motto of naïve American Christianity might be, “love everyone and let God sort it out.” New English optimistic American theology, and Mary Baker Eddy’s theology, was not what Bonhoeffer would call a standard “gospel to the sinner.” Though this also existed in early Christian America and obviously among the schooled American at Yale or Princeton. But Lockean Christianity was more like a gospel to the sick, of which Eddy distinguished sin as a subtype of ephemeral error, as St. Augustine’s privative theory of evil implied a millennium and a half earlier.

And this Lockean tabula rasa Christianity angle, where the 19th Century American was happy to see the good in God’s creation and was attempting to put St. Paul’s “sin nature” back into Pandora’s box, was consciously distinguishing itself from Calvin’s TULIP and siding more with Wesleyan evangelical optimism. This distinction is not only with Calvin, but with Thomas Hobbes, St. Paul and St. Augustine perhaps, who respectively had theologies that fixed “depravity,” “brutish[ness],” “sin nature,” and “env[y]” as core features of their Christian anthropologies, alongside ideas about predestination, where tabula rasa Christianity tended to see God’s creation as basically good, but corruptible by the sin that had gotten into the world, reflecting perhaps some Hellenized ways of thinking about Pandora’s box and the philosophical truth of that Grecian myth as operable within a Christian framework. This debate of where to start with our anthropologies continues to divide Christians today, where the hopeful Grecian framework has divided optimists and pessimists since classical times, and anthropologists might say can be viewed as leading to a modal personality of this or that group.

In Christian ecclesiology, this might roughly put people in certain additional categories like conservative or liberal, etc., where the Pauline/Johannine-complimentarian/egalitarian divides may have their roots in the same viewpoints that fractured the Hobbes/Locke divide of yesteryear. This leads to some funny consequences though for Johannine John Bunyan type Christians like Christian Scientists, because they don’t like to engage in polemical debate and have short memories for what is being argued about. Conservative Hobbesians are initially better at argumentation, because Lockeans are forever forgetting the argument, assuming that people are basically good natured and could not possibly hold a theological grudge. Lockeans are too
optimistic, and forever, as the joke goes, are being unpleasantly surprised. When they try and deal in theological dispute, it is like watching a body builder get attacked from behind by a karate master. The styles of theological engagement are mismatched, and while the body builder may be strong enough to withstand the blow, they are left reeling. Jesus also engaged his accusers like this sometimes, making Him the Man of Silence alongside His being the Man of Sorrows. Padre Pio gives a 20th Century Catholic example of this type of silent engagement with one’s accusers, where “in the face of unjust accusations and calumnies he remained silent, trusting always in the judgement of God, of his immediate superiors and of his own conscience.” And of course Pio can be seen as following faithfully in St. Francis and his Franciscan brothers’ footsteps in this manner.

This is at least somewhat metaphorical for how the Christian Science church people I know react to theological barbs, alongside other Lockean Christians generally, like Quakers. When confronted with polemical criticism, or sarcastic nuance placing them at the butt end of some joke that runs on theological machinery, they just stand there not knowing what to do. Especially when the polemics are from other Christians, it is beyond comprehension that Christian people would engage in theological mud-slinging, so there must be some other explanation. While problematic for dealing with theology proactively, at least this is an innocent reaction to mud-slinging. For those of us looking for some authentic sign of faith in the world to inspire us and give us hope, here are these wonderful people who when attacked, rather than hit back, they look up to God and expect everlasting arms of love to protect them. To paraphrase Padre Pio, they place the outcome of their desires “in God’s arms, like a child.” And we have to admit, being initiated into the theological discussion, even if we come to enjoy the tit-for-tat parts of theological debate, these wonderful Lockean and Franciscan Christians have found a safe harbor from theological shenanigans by simply not engaging in the debates.

St. Paul’s metaphors for the Christian life of ministry are slightly different from each other, “running the race” is a slightly different metaphor from “fighting the good fight,” and I think it has slightly different effects on the churches that are inclined toward one or the other, engendering different strengths and weaknesses. For instance, in distance running you will see competitors encourage each other more regularly than in ball sports like hockey and football, where teams wage a tamed kind of war on each other. Churches that see themselves more exclusively as proclaimers of an evangelical message can take more to the “running a race” metaphor, while those who see themselves as defenders of the faith can incline toward “fighting the good fight” in a world they see as hostile. This is an oversimplification, but it at least points to what is essentially different in the expression of Johannine and Pauline churches. While both are Christian, there are nevertheless discernable differences in style of expression.

Or, maybe we should all be a little more naïve and humble in our approaches to theology and both Pauline and Johannine churches have the potential for this failing. Bonhoeffer was known

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6 Pio, fn. 4 above.
to have thought this way, that theology was like a necessary evil. Theology had to be done, but was only of penultimate importance, and he was known to throw off doctrinal disagreements with his peers in seminary with a laugh. Maybe the Lockean New English were correct, or at least as correct in the way they saw theology from the Puritan vantage point, as a slow and steady climb, as those of us who enjoy the boxing match. But it has led them to be somewhat disengaged from the theological debate in a time when their voices may be desperately needed. They see no need for polemics, because as long as they stay simply, dare I say naïvely in the positive sense, in lockstep with Jesus’ way of silence in the face of unjust accusation, God will send angels to walk them to the Puritan top.

This may be the correct way, and I am inclined to think they are onto something, but as a point of responsibility for theology, they may want to consider getting reengaged if they can. Disengagement from polemics may be the best way to do business, and is not being the bully on the playground at least. And here again we see cause to attach a positive connotation to what is meant by the word “naïve” in describing Christian Science theology. Not in the caustic sense, but coming with the strength of faith, along with whatever problems it engenders for ecumenism, not knowing the punches that could be thrown. And it is by no means Christian Scientists who are the only naïve Americans, since the whole of Protestantism has something of this willful naïveté, with half of Protestantism also having a Lockean angle. Not to mention American philosophy that is seen broadly throughout the history of our expansion and industrialization, as in the Wright brothers, Edison and Ford; who loved to accomplish what the academy had proven could not be done. That is the way we liked our preachers back then too, simple and ruggedly daring to trek up the hill.

(The evangelist Charles B. Templeton, before he sadly lost his faith, famously shared an anecdote about this type of American Christian. “A visiting preacher from Scotland said recently, after a tour of the nation, ‘I don’t know how I would preach to this people. I would be afraid to say to Americans, “You can’t save yourself,” for fear someone would stand up, spit on his hands, and say, “Oh, can’t I?”’”)

Because of such great accomplishments by naïve people, naïveté, and the willful “can-do” naïveté of Americans, is an ironic thing to have to defend. As Henry Ford said, whether you think you can or you think you can’t, you are right. But they are placed somewhat at odds with the academy by this, where the “can-do” American attitude also appropriated to itself a suspicion of academic achievements; just as Franciscans are sometimes at odds with their Dominican brothers in their view of how much scholarship is appropriate. Ford would say, “a man’s college and university degrees mean nothing to me until I see what he is able to do with them.” He was only echoing the American understanding that naïveté could be an asset. Like the folk art portrait of George Washington Crossing the Delaware, American ingenuity, “Yankee” ingenuity, needs no defense. It speaks for itself as a pretty good accomplishment, though any school-master would shudder at the technique. Like John Bunyan’s Christian Pilgrim, we see these naïve American Christian pastors take the Puritan road. As Mary Baker Eddy says, to “kiss the cross and wake to know, a world more bright.” But America has somewhat departed from these unschooled roots, with the majority of us now holding at least a bachelor’s degree in something or other, which
reframes the debate slightly over whether we should belong to the “Cult of the Amateur” or the “Cult of the Experts?” And are there even any amateurs or experts left, as increased schooling makes every amateur an expert, and every expert less specially privileged in their schooling, closing the gap between the learned and the naive.

So as a historical problem, because of all this willful American naiveté, the perception of which has changed over time, it is both easier and harder to defend Mary Baker Eddy’s naiveté. She had no divinity degree in a time when that degree set American preachers apart in their black frocks and schoolmaster caps. And like the way Muslims see Muhammad, or Pentecostals see those gifted with speaking in tongues or Quakers see someone moved by the Spirit, Eddy’s devotees point to her spontaneous understandings of metaphysics as being therefore divine.

As an aside, it should be noted that Eddy had some schooled help with the editing of Science and Health. She leaned on a Unitarian minister's editorial input for multiple revisions to Science and Health, though it is tough to say how much of the schooled theology of Science and Health comes from his editorial input. It should be noted also that she had little to do with his selection as editor. It might be more accurate to say the Unitarian editor was assigned to her simply because he was the religion editor used by her publisher. But it is possible to conclude that some of Mary Baker Eddy’s refinement came from these schooled sources around her. Though like John Bunyan, she herself was at first only superficially initiated into some problems of Christian theology, though she managed to study her way to being a competent theologian. And indeed, like any good Quaker of her time, where the schoolmaster shudders at the lack of technique, the Quaker shudders at the thought of going to school. Of course there is nothing new under the sun, and 19th Century America was not the first to see the problem of scholastic theology. They were like St. Francis in the Catholic church, perceiving the violence that institutionalization of religious knowledge can cause if it is allowed to descend into legalism. This perception evolved until schoolmasters came to be seen in a dim light, and it became fashionable to be, or pretend to be, unsophisticated. And now the pendulum swings back and the M.Div., with an accompanying familiarity with Hebrew, and an appreciation that borders on reverence for the theological academy is a la mode. The same reverence for academia that is now in vogue was anathema to many early American protestants though.

I wonder if Mary Baker Eddy knew what theological problems she would be creating for her church in adopting minority Lockean views, common in New England in her time, when they fell out of fashion modernly. Ultimately I suspect the Unitarian editor she used had a theological impact on Christian Science only in peripheral matters, though his presence points to the prevalence of Unitarian ideas within New English Christian circles. More rich and deep Christian influences on Eddy come from those like J. R. Macduff, Thomas Jefferson, Transcendentalists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Locke and Quakers. But this leads us to see the larger impact that those early Americans have had on all naïve American churches of the 19th Century. Notions of equality that Jefferson shared with Locke, Milton and Cromwell have been written into the theological fabric of many American churches; in opposition to the homologically based theologies of those like Hobbes, which undergird monarchical Christianity.
In the practical matter of answering questions about the Christian Science Church, the naïveté that Mary Baker Eddy had makes explanation of her ideas easier, because theological naïveté explains the disengagement from theological debates. But it also makes explanation more difficult because when the church or its representatives are asked some theological question, they can fail to answer it along mainstream lines. So if I answer for them to my curious friends along mainstream lines, some think I am putting words in their mouth disingenuously. And there is some editorializing entailed in word swapping. Which is to say, I think that they should stop speaking only in their subculture’s jargon. Rephrasing their theology using mainstream terminology is necessary, because to the schooled bystander, the non-sequitur responses that Christian Scientists make when asked, for instance, if they believe in the Trinity, a somewhat straightforward theological question, leaves the peanut gallery baffled about where they are coming from. And if the inquiry were not complex enough, doubly confounding the naïveté, which leaves people scratching their heads, is the special quality of the 19th Century feminine theological voice that Mary Baker Eddy spoke with. I wonder if the need to “code switch” as linguists say, is truly a result of Eddy being theologically naive in the full sense of the American naïveté, or if, like Hildegarde of Bingen, her feminine voice seems to come out of left field with gadfly questions that the masculine mainstream had not taken time to consider. Like when Hildegarde wondered whether flagellation is really what God desires, or is it mercy and that we be like the good Samaritan? Theology should be learning to listen more to its feminine voices as well maybe.

All this must be seen alongside broader 19th Century church history, which had theological quarks of its own, and the unique political flavor of the Victorian era's feminine voice. Mary Baker Eddy, as a historical figure in the church, spoke powerfully; perhaps as powerfully as any woman since Hildegard of Bingen, but like Hildegard, Eddy’s power was wielded in the way that women tend to exert their influence. Eddy spoke somewhat softly and let someone else carry the big stick. Sometimes this meant letters to the editor sent on her behalf and sometimes lawyers and lawsuits. And as a church figure, this makes understanding Eddy’s career more of a work in progress to this day. She was lacking the monastic finesse and polish that Hildegarde's exposure to the Catholic tradition gave her, though even the Catholic Hildegard is forever needing to be parsed back into the masculine dialogue.⁷ (Vice versa in the case of the Christian Science church, which is a femininely voiced church that needs to parse masculine?) But Catholics are much more up front about this, seeing religious women as becoming “like” men in their callings. Whether this is the proper way of viewing religiously called women in light of modern feminist ideas, or whether we should say that women remain women even in their theologies is something that I think deserves consideration, but that there is a feminine voice to theology is something that I feel viscerally as a person who grew up in Mary Baker Eddy’s church. The theological frame of reference that she started from is itself somehow steeped in midwifery and 19th Century women’s issues.

⁷ See Vision - From the Life of Hildegard von Bingen (Zeitgeist Films 2011) (motion picture).
Mary Baker Eddy's Contribution, Christus Viktor

In Mary Baker Eddy's case, she started out her healing career as a homeopath and what some would refer to today as a “patient expert,” learning about sickness by being a sickly person. But she saw that if we base our healing metaphysics around God's plan for the world through inspired interpretation of the Bible, the metaphysics of eternity become powerful beyond the wildest imaginations of the mind healers, her areligious contemporaries. Her contemporary homeopaths were practicing mesmeric mind-healing without appeal to God and out of line with the Bible, and Eddy saw the problem with this from her Christian vantage point.

A lot of Mary Baker Eddy's writing had this sentiment. She wanted the world to wake up to the resurgence of occult practices that were emerging in the guise of “hypnotism, alias mesmerism,” while sending a message to the Christian church that we needed to get back to the metaphysical work, the intercessory prayer work, we had left unattended. Wake up, watch, bless. And she saw this as an evangelical message. “Dreamer leave thy dream for joyful waking.” Basically, she had a scientifically archaic, 19th Century, femininely voiced, Christus Viktor theology. It was progressive, with Quaker/Puritan/Lockean influences. It was a Christian theology seeing the “undeniable” self-sacrifice of Jesus as beyond the suffering he endured in His body, but to the depths of His Soul, where His Spirit was more powerful than any soothsayer could possibly imagine, and that we Christians should be calling ourselves to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect. And theology and philosophy were going by the new-old term “metaphysics” during this naïve period, so we are baffled to find that *Science and Health* is a hundreds-of-pages-long theological work, that purports to be something else. As the term “theology” had fallen out of fashion, *Science and Health* purports to not be such, but a work of spiritual “metaphysics” providing a purer form of the pure milk of the word. This made Eddy’s contemporary Calvinist's heads shoot off, because it was theology spoken in a different way, by a different name, from a different gender, and because it flew in the face of what Dominic had said about not being able to say to the sick “take up thy bed and walk.” Eddy was against the “them bones” theology that was prevalent in older Calvinism, and against the associated point that the end of the apostolic era brought with it the end of Christian healing. Not to be forgotten, a few generations before Eddy was born, you could get tried as a witch for practicing spiritual medicine.

And complicating matters, if Eddy’s theological schema was non-standard, it is less from being non-Christian as some accuse her of, and more because she arrived at her conclusions as much from trying to think through what the hypnotists were doing. She was Christianizing the work of her old mentor Phineas Quimby, the “Father of New Thought.” She discovered that she did not agree with the hypnotists and condemned their non-Christian spirituality, but she converted their framework into her own Christian understanding. But along the way, the novelty of her theology, at least somewhat novel to 19th Century naïve America, was that she pointed out a few problems with “them bones” theology that charismatics of all stripes continue to echo to this day. Like Pentacostal's, Hassidic Jews and pilgrims to the waters of Lourdes, Eddy was saying that God still gives Christians the power to say “take up thy bed and walk.” And that we have a responsibility to be healing people. To my mind, this reinvigoration of the charismatic gift of
Christian healing in the face of opposition from mainstream theology is her greatest theological accomplishment.

Christendom had been under the thrall of Dominic’s assertion that we cannot say “take up your bed and walk.” but suddenly with a Christian Science church doing just that, there was suddenly people calling themselves Christians, and not just witches and hypnotists who were playing mind healer. Eddy’s literary contemporary Mark Twain used to comment on this accomplishment, while mercilessly tearing into Mary Baker Eddy for his perception that she plagiarized Quimby and was ruthlessly ambitious, etc.. But he appeared to think that she did a competent job of Christianizing Quimby’s work and getting some of the tyranny of theological orthodoxy off the backs of Christian Scientists. Though since Twain was not a professed Christian, let alone a schooled theologian, I wonder if he is any less naive of a judge than she, though again with compliments to that brand of naiveté.

Incidentally, I don't entirely understand why Twain highlights her mentor Quimby only, since there was a vast number of mind healers publishing at the time and homeopaths she learned from, and any of them could have served as the template from which she cast her metaphysics. I suspect Chaz Townsend from the American Phrenological Journal as another philosophical influence. Notwithstanding Twain’s criticism of Eddy, Twain thought that Christian Science was great for its adherents who could be Christian and mind-healers at the same time, but he thought Eddy was a fraud for pretending to have come up with it out of whole cloth. Probably a little correct on both counts, though she could retort that what she meant by taking credit for her works was not that she had no influences, but that she discovered for modernity that Christian theology was amenable to the terms the hypnotists were using, which if you go back far enough, come from Aristotle through the dark ages and then Aquinas.

Eddy’s early mentor, Phineas Quimby, was like a 19th Century Quantum healer, like Deepak Chopra or Amit Goswami are today. Mary Baker Eddy differed with them slightly by pointing out that God’s law, not the laws of physics, are the only ones that ultimately matter. There is a layer of difficulty added by trying to discern the extent of the academic plagiarism or borrowing she did in this different 19th Century era. We have trouble reconciling different views of academic honesty during this time, because it seems to have existed in some colleges already, though some “adoption” of ideas could be made without reference back then. And the definition of plagiarism remains open to some debate to this day. But what may have incensed Twain so much that he dedicated some pretty scathing remarks to the leader of the Christian Science church, was that Eddy seems to have been highly hypocritical about plagiarism. She later demanded that no one plagiarize her work, defining plagiarism in a way that is broad enough that her use of ideas from Quimby, etc., would necessitate charges of plagiarism. She writes: “Then, is compiling and delivering that sermon for which you pay nothing, and which you deliver without the author’s consent, and receive pay therefor, the precedent for preaching Christian

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Science,—and are you doing to the author of the above-named book as you would have others do unto you?"  

But if she thought that her Christianization of the mesmerist’s framework made it entirely novel and worthy of being credited to her, then that would explain why she termed her work a “discovery” on an academic level, alongside the revelatory claims she made. And she may have felt entitled to publish her notes from her days with Quimby as her own work or something. Though it is not an extreme to conclude that she was simply a hypocrite on the point of plagiarism. This may seem too harsh a criticism for many of her devotees to stomach, but I think her angle was only novel insofar as the framework of the homeopaths was made different by her Christian slant on its metaphysics, she having borrowed all the schema of the mind healers. If she violated her own definition of plagiarism in doing so, then she was a hypocrite. My Christian Science friends and relations plug their ears when I voice this potential for agreement with Twain on Eddy’s being a plagiarist. In the grand scheme of things though, plagiarism is a small peccadillo compared with, for instance, Martin Luther’s anti-semitism and endorsement of slaughter during the Peasants Rebellion. So I do not have a desire to “bury” Mary Baker Eddy, as the term is understood, and see no reason to speak ill of the 19th Century, except that as a Christian Scientist, I feel no one will take me serious outside the “ghetto” if my appraisal of Eddy is not realistic. So I both appreciate her contribution and find it necessary to leave her open to criticism when it is fair.

At any rate, my Christian Science relations are so loathe to agree with Twain, that I have had to develop a slightly irreverent way of pointing out the ineluctable conclusion that Twain was to some extent correct in his charges of plagiarism. I call the game “Did Mary Baker Eddy say that?” The game is very simple. Begin by quoting some 19th Century bit sounding with Victorian era grandeur and pretention, something ambitious and high minded, philosophy or science, written by one of her contemporaries or predecessors that sounds like Eddy, and then ask if they think it is Phineas Quimby or Mary Baker Eddy. For instance, if I take Phineas Quimby, (admittedly out of context,) he and Mary Baker Eddy can be seen to have the same form, structure, diction and in his and Chaz Townsend’s case, exactly the same philosophical content of Mary Baker Eddy. The Christian content is different, but one sentence at a time, the philosophical content is indistinguishable. For those not familiar with Quimby, today we might think of him as a Quantum physicist healer, believing that Jesus was the great Quantum Physicist, so even Quimby himself had a humanitarianist Christian content that cast Jesus in the image of the Great Physicist. Some have questioned Quimby’s authorship, but it does not matter, because there are others that corroborate the preexistence of Eddy’s supposedly novel framework.

Quimby thought Jesus was like the great Deepak Chopra of First Century Israel, who came to liberate humanity from our ignorance of Quantum physics. But taken out of Eddy's arguably

\[9\text{id.}\]

\[10\text{Phineas Quimby, Jesus Healing and His Mission (May 1860) (available at http://www.phineasquimby.com/jesus_healing_&_mission.html).}\]
more biblical New English-Christian context, you can’t tell one sentence of the philosophical mumbo jumbo apart from Eddy’s. Quimby writes, “If truth (or science) reigns - all goes well. If error reigns - the wages is death; for all the acts of error lead to death.” Mary Baker Eddy writes, “Truth stirs man to a better, or, temporarily, to a worse condition that afterwards leaves him better; it affects error the same as it does sickness, causing it to intermit before it yields and is destroyed.” Chaz Townsend writes, “materialistic philosophers (so called) assume the non-Immortality of mind, on the supposed logical basis that the observed forces of nature, inherent in matter—the known co-existing forces necessarily inseparable from matter—are the ultimate cause of all things.” John Bovee Dods, “the apostolic power was far greater, and in the same ratio, their results were more splendid and glorious. But they still had not the power of Christ.”

If you take away the names you have a fun party game to guess who said what. And if you are familiar with Aristotle’s theology of “nous” (mind), then you can run the history of these ideas from the ancient Greek pagans, through the Patristic fathers, the Scholastics, the Reformation and Enlightenment, to what was considered occult in the 19th Century. We now often call these ideas inaccurately “non-theistic” Quantum physics, there being often a theological component.

But this phrenological/homeopathic milieu is what was being reacted against by the protestant Christian Mary Baker Eddy, the same way that Aquinas and Augustine might be said to have bounced their Catholic theology off of ancient Greece and the Manichees. Would Twain say that Aquinas plagiarized Aristotle and Augustine plagiarized the Manichees? In Aquinas’ case, Aquinas usually noted respectfully where he was quoting “the philosopher,” but Augustine had a more antagonistic relationship to his Manichean schooling, like Eddy had with her days as a homeopath learning from Quimby. For both Augustine and Eddy, there was a philosophical turn in their lives that led them to what they perceived as their Christian worldviews, while also having something of their pre-Christian thinking in “memory” as Augustine says.

Should the Christian Science church give more credit to the 19th Century’s version of quantum physicists for having borrowed their framework? Should the Catholics credit the Manicheans for having been so useful a departure point for Augustine, though ultimately disagreeing with them on the primacy of the Christian faith? Should Jewish people credit Balaam with accidentally blessing Israel? This is the bind that Christian Scientists have found themselves in. Certainly it was easier for Aquinas to credit Aristotle with the invention of syllogistic logic than it was for Eddy to admit she adopted the framework of the mesmerists, since Aristotle was not around to sue Áquinas for plagiarism, and his era was pre-Christian, so he could not be accused of being occult. But Aristotle was not much less a pagan than the Manicheans, who take a bad rap, where Aristotle is more lionized within Christendom. Perhaps this is because Aristotle was writing before Christ, where the Manichean heresies persisted in the face of the gospel. But another difference for Aquinas and Augustine, was that the pastorate of the Christian Science church was not at stake their originality. On the contrary, unlike Mary Baker Eddy’s willfully naïve New England, Aquinas lived in a time that was so in favor of anciently derived schoolhouse scholasticism, to which Aristotle had leant syllogistic logic, that the theological era is now

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11 John Bovee Dods, Six Lectures on the Philosophy of Mesmerism, Delivered in the Marlboro Chapel, Boston, Reported by a Hearer (Fowlers and Wells 1850).
eponymous. To trace one’s ideas to the historically learned was a point of strength for Aquinas, which had somewhat fallen out of fashion by the protestant’s 19th Century. But most people don’t take the time to trace the theological “history of ideas,” as Arthur O. Lovejoy would have us do, having popularized the phrase as a prism through which to view history.

As a matter of the philosophy of science though, the 19th Century had everyone talking about progress and philosophical-scientific stuff, and while it was all the rage to pretend at novelty in one’s work, it was also fashionable to pretend at being a “renaissance man,” which was a special type of a know-it-all. So all these 19th Century characters were trying to publish a Hegelian theory of the entire universe, explaining “mind, matter and forces,” as Townsend's framework had it. And we see people doing the same thing today in “philosophy of science” circles, especially among Quantum physicists, like Amit Goswami. Even Einstein and Stephen Hawking, while we don’t think of them as theologians, they make these same Hegelian attempts to explain absolutely everything, putting them is a position to necessarily deal with God and creation. So Mary Baker Eddy was not alone in following the renaissance man’s footsteps. Her contribution was therefore not to be the most highly minded and most original quantum physicist of the 19th Century. And neither does it appear to have been academic honesty that was her strongest suit. But it was her Christianizing influence on all these things, on “new thought,” which was so profound. She Christianized homeopathy and the 19th Century renaissance man. The way that Christian decorators Christianize the Christmas Tree, she got people to start trying to see through God’s loving eyes, as she saw Jesus as having done. Along the way, as I mentioned, this had the effect of pointing to problems with “them bones” theology, which I hesitatingly admit must be credited to her as an important contribution to theology per se. Though she was not the only one in history to reinvigorate the tradition of Christian healing, she was unique in her place in modern Christian history.

Even more enlightening on Eddy’s influences as a church leader, rather than just looking at her homeopathic mentor Quimby and his version of quantum physics, is to play the same parlor game with Eddy's theological content. I tread a bit more lightly here, more reverently, since the Christian religious content of Mary Baker Eddy deserves, perhaps, more respect than the philosophy of science she had. Though whether theology and science are actually separable can be left up to better minds. But for Lovejoy’s “history of ideas” purposes, the same “Did Mary Baker Eddy say that?” game can be played with her contemporary Christian writers. JR MacDuff writes, “Oh, that each individual Christian were more Saviour-like that, in the manifestation of holy character and heavenly demeanor, it might be said in some feeble measure of the faint and imperfect reflection. Such was Jesus! How far short we are of such criterion, mournful experience can testify.” Mary Baker Eddy writes, “Then wherefore make long prayers about it, and ask to become Christ-like, when these are the footsteps of our dear Master; if unwilling to drink his cup, wherefore pray with the lips to be partakers of it?” Eddy's tone, diction, rhetorical device and forms in her Christian content all have so much in common with MacDuff that I sometimes wonder if, on the occasion when her original manuscript was rejected for publication, she did not look up what was “selling” at the time and do her best to conform her work to MacDuff. Again, potentially hypocritically violating her later definition of plagiarism, which was very broad.
For those not familiar with MacDuff, he was a 19th Century Christian bestselling author whose name would have been on the tip of every Christian's tongue, like Billy Graham or the Kendrick Brothers are today. That is why I suspect he may have had a tremendous impact on the Christian Science church's theology. Even if Twain saw Eddy as plagiarizing Quimby most directly, rather than Townsend, Burkmar, Dods, etc. why does Twain fail to accuse Eddy of plagiarizing any Christian writers like MacDuff then? I think because Twain was not a Christian he may not have picked up on this influence. Even if she did not consciously design her work to conform to MacDuff’s style, MacDuff was shaping the protestant Christian dialogue so much that there were many other avenues for his impact to get into her work. Perhaps the impact was from sermons she heard, or from her Unitarian editor, from a discussion with a Quaker friend, or any combination of these. Any could serve as a vessel for MacDuff’s input. The “how” is a question I have not been able to answer, though someone at the Mary Baker Eddy library may know off the top of their heard. But there is no question that MacDuff was important to early Christian Scientists, since the Christian Science church includes some of his work in its hymnal; and more importantly, the Church Manual includes the “tenet” of Christian Scientists, that they are to pray to have the “Mind that was in Christ Jesus,” which was a Bible verse that MacDuff had popularized in his “Mind and Words of Jesus.” And I suspect that the “Cross and Crown,” the trademark symbol of Christian Science, though it may have been a popular motif for 19th Century Christians to begin with, and as used by Freemasons, yet I suspect it was popularized by MacDuff as well, who wrote that we “can glorify Him with the cross and the prospect of the crown together!” Mary Baker Eddy, “your good will be evil spoken of. This is the cross. Take it up and bear it, for through it you win and wear the crown.” Others have suggested that Eddy borrowed the cross and crown emblem from the Masons, but if you know how New English protestants think, placing immeasurable value on the written word, it inclines the argument equally toward MacDuff I think.

This also elucidates why Mary Baker Eddy always saw herself as in the mainstream of Christianity, because she had adopted, not only a mainstream of philosophy of science from Quimby, etc., but much of the mainstream of Christianity as well from sources like MacDuff, and she never departed from her Congregationalist church membership. And what we see today as heterodox in the Christian Science church is sometimes an echo of what was mainstream Christianity from a different era, from which the rest of us have departed.

Though I can’t escape the conclusion that Eddy was at least somewhat hypocritical on her conception of plagiarism, what was mainstream or “common knowledge” at the time is important for ameliorating charges of plagiarism as well. When she referenced these things without citing her sources, was it always necessarily because she was plagiarizing, or was it sometimes because everyone knew who these bestseller sources were? Like if I pray around Christmastime, “God bless us everyone,” everyone knows I am quoting Dickens. Does anyone need a citation? Early Christian Scientists probably knew she was reacting against occult mind healers, and partially aligning herself with MacDuff’s Christian message, though keeping her distinctly feminine and Quaker-Puritan-Congregationalist “spiritualizing” voice in everything. (The dichotomy between
“spiritual” and “material” is one that has firm roots in Augustine’s reinterpretation of the Manichee’s also.)

Outside of her philosophy of science and religious content, the same game can again be played with popular literature from her day. Emerson, Bronson Alcott or John Greenleaf Whittier, who we remember as literary giants, we can easily forget that poets were looked to for their ability to plumb the depths of metaphysical reality, like the Lake Poets of jolly old England. In early America, transcendentalism was having a profound impact on philosophy and religion. Should we therefore remember Emerson as a philosopher and theologian as well? I am not sure, but Christian Scientists wishing to highlight the seminal nature of Eddy's work are forever brushing past any influences she may have had, scientific, theological and literary. While Christian Scientists immerse themselves in Mary Baker Eddy’s prolific stack of 19th Century literature, some labor under the delusion that she came up with it out of whole cloth, as Twain accuses her of pretending with Quimby’s science. Alternatively, I wonder sometimes if Twain may have thought that some of it was original to her, but that she should just be crediting Quimby partially. My alternate reading of Twain is that his statements that she stole the whole thing from Quimby can be read as humorous hyperbole. But she was definitely a creature of the intellectual, theological and literary time she was born into.

I don't want to apologize for 19th Century apostate, occult, materialist American philosophy, but maybe something good has come of their non-theistic discussions. Just like Balaam accidentally blessed Israel, if Quimby was the father of “new thought,” from which we have such comic relief as Stuart Smiley's “I'm good enough, I'm smart enough and doggone it, people like me!,” we can at least get a laugh out of it. If Mary Baker Eddy and later Pentecostals have succeeded in being the new thought movement's Christianizing influences, then perhaps the occultists and materialist scientists can accidentally bless us by reminding us of Christianity's first principles; to give to God what is God's and keep praying for miracles. If there is anything to it, like Aquinas thought there was something to Aristotle, perhaps there is no reason to scrap it entirely. And we should hold Eddy to the same standard we hold other historical figures, not being upset at Aquinas that Newtonian physics were yet unknown, or Hildegarde that mitosis had not yet been discovered.

(Back to Top)

Eugenic Pseudo Science

Incidentally, if you read the chapter in Science and Health titled “Marriage,” it reflects the 19th Century's sense of procreative responsibility, which would later lead to disastrous eugenic pseudo-science. The ideas of eugenics had not yet been able to be examined in the terrible light of the 20th Century abuses of the ideas from Davenport and Hitler to Margaret Sanger and Planned Parenthood. Naive of what the eugenic line of thinking would lead to, Eddy wrote “is not the propagation of the human species a greater responsibility, a more solemn charge, than the culture of your garden or the raising of stock to increase your flocks and herds?” History buffs may recall that Margaret Sanger and Hildegarde of Bingen had similar problems with the science
of procreation. Though in Sanger's case, forgivable pseudo-science aside, she approved of abortion.

How can we read 19th Century literature without alternating between busting a gut laughing and getting queasy. It is so Victorian and stodgy, and so optimistically naive of the consequences. Another dated thing about Science and Health’s chapter on marriage is actually a theological conclusion that may be worth reconsidering. Oddly enough, Eddy had a converse solution to the egalitarian/complementarian debate that we have today of how the sexes should relate to each other. Today, some complementarians insist that men and women must complement each other in the home and in church, while some egalitarians say women and men must be equal in home and in church. But Mary Baker Eddy saw parity in church as best, with complementarian home life. Very progressive on the one hand, and very conservative at home. I think she saw this as based Biblically out of the idea that Church should reflect something of heaven, where at the resurrection there will be no giving or taking in marriage; so an ideal of parity was fine in church, though inapposite for home life. Her belief in parity in church, that women should be allowed in the pastorate, whether sincere or calculated, was obviously self-serving, since she herself became a pastor.

(Back to Top)

Two Mary Baker Eddies, the Legend and the Church Lady

Growing up in this lady's church, this lady who hung the moon, and who some zealous author was claiming was the “dragon lady” of the apocalypse, with every Wednesday evening meeting given over to testimonies about “how grateful” we all were for Christian Science’s discovery by Eddy, she occupies a place in my early memories, like you might have an uncle who everyone told fish stories about how great they are, though as an adult you may question whether these extolments of your uncle’s virtues were not at least somewhat overstated. And to this day her poetic work remains an indelible part of my life. Recently I sang my daughter a hymn written by Eddy as a lullaby trying to put her back to sleep, as I had been sung to as a child. And my daughter has learned a few Christian Science hymns from my Christian Science mother and from going to Sunday School on occasion. Walking through the store she will burst into a rendition of “Oh gentle presence….” So Eddy is, whether I like it or not, a big part of my personal history and family life. In my mind there are these two or three caricatures of Mary Baker Eddy. First, there is the historical Mary Baker Eddy, who was an ambitious lady from New England, who happened upon an early form of either occult or Quantum physics’ mind-healing that she then turned into an immensely popular Christian movement. She was a mix of homeopathic doctor and prophet of the church.

Whether Christian Science is orthodox, heterodox or heretic, she honestly perceived what she was doing as a Christian reaction and revelation; and we can see it charitably in the light of what was mainstream in Christian protestant thought in America at the time, i.e. annihilationism; and that she was unschooled, so she may not have had a basis to appreciate what theological lines she was crossing. Or perhaps she thought crossing them was entirely appropriate given the American
preference for innovation, and some of the lines she crossed was resurrecting a different orthodoxy, e.g. Aquinian orthodoxy over reformation Calvinist orthodoxy.

This first Eddy, the historical Eddy was probably a nice lady who loved God, and who also wanted to sell books and get credit for her “discovery,” and who became too controlling as wild success and megalomania predispose people to sometimes. She disapproved of what the hypnotist mind-healers were doing, because of its godlessness. She thought they were all playing warlock-Balaams, alongside spiritualists who she saw as pretending at being necromancer. And a few of these mind-healers and spiritualists seem to have been openly hostile to God, like her abracadabra contemporary Aleister Crowley. But she saw the framework that the experimental side of medical psychiatry/homeopathy/mind-healers was laying out as amenable to Christian interpolation; though she saw even these academic psychiatric hypnotists/mesmerists more as wolves in sheep’s clothing than we tend to see material medicine today. She would have said that Freud, as a hypnotist, was a Balaam of a sort, and perhaps that Jung was a mesmerist of another, but both were tempting the wrath of God. And she seemed to agree with the Catholics on their cosmology of the afterlife, in contrast to the way that spiritualists saw it.

If she were alive today, we would like to have a beer with her and ask her some questions about why she thought these interpolations of the 19th Century homeopath’s parapsychological framework and of the Catholic’s cosmology of the afterlife was necessary. But of course, being a 19th century protestant woman, she would not drink beer with us. But we could ask St. Dominic the same question. Why engage the subject matter of heretics at all? If we have become sola scriptura protestants, why have a revival of apostolic tradition ever? We could ask Aquinas and Henry of Ghent, why study ancient Greek philosophy? We could point out to all these theological sages what Jesus said, that we must enter the kingdom like children, with simplicity. And Aquinas may have made this point most succinctly among theologians, that theology is so much straw until God blesses it. Theology is, as Bonhoeffer might put it, always a penultimate undertaking, for which we have to find some usefulness. If there are no boils to be lanced, we can just stop. But theologically Mary Baker Eddy was more progressive, and far less humble about the theology she gifted the world. She was very happy to have rediscovered what she saw as the mechanisms of Christian healing, something she thought would and should be lasting in its impact, and credited to her during the 19th Century and forever. Unfortunately for this view, she was not actually original in everything, but more like a link in a chain.

But there was some hedging of this pride in her work when it came to ultimate soteriological questions. It is possible to be critical of Mary Baker Eddy, while also taking a positive view of any theological steps she took to ameliorate the hubris she saw in mesmerism, and find a similar soteriological maneuver to Aquinas’ view of theology as “straw” awaiting beatification. Eddy pointed to Saint Paul’s direction, saying “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” which functionally accomplishes the same thing. She recognized our continuing need of grace. She shared this fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom for all theologians, and maintained a reverence for the Bible. These factors in combination with the oppressed state of women in the church throughout history may be cause for a reexamination and charitable reading of Eddy’s biographical information. This is also why she should not be lumped outside of Christianity.
Better to say she was a flawed Christian church lady with an inflated martyr complex, and a Victorian set of peccadilloes.

Whatever her philosophical starting points, she managed to maintain Jesus unique place as the Son of God in her Christology, and took the Aquinian view of the essential “oneness” of Father, Jesus and Holy Spirit, and a healthy fear of God, trying to incorporate the essence of John Ross MacDuff, who was among the best Christian writers of that time, while she also dealt head on with the problems that occultists and psychiatric hypnosis was bringing to the surface. She adopted so much of Augustine’s Christology and cosmology, it is possible to see the Christian Science church as an Augustinian church, the way that some see the Desert Fathers, like Daniel the Stylite. So if I were a theology teacher, she would get passing grades from my class, with a few demerits, and the charitable assumption that there are things about her historical time and feminine voice that we don't come naturally to see as jiving with the mainstream of history or orthodoxy. Of course, it is not for us to judge her or anyone, except insofar as we are trying to make sense of how to best carry our own theological crosses. Ultimately Eddy had a theology centered on what she saw as her Christian mission. And that sums up the historical, and flawed-like-the-rest-of-us, Mary Baker Eddy.

The second and third caricatures of Mary Baker Eddy, which occasionally take flight in imagination, are the terrifying mythical ones. Both the Eddy of the imaginations of those who adore her as the 19th century boon of mankind, and of those who fear her, that she might be a boogeyman of a sort or the Antichrist. Some Christian Scientists want to deify her and forever express their “gratitude” to her for her discovery. She knew about this type of devotee and cautioned everyone that gratitude was ok, but no Christian Scientists were to be deified. And Mark Twain knew about the Christian Scientists who were mythologizing Eddy as well, and used to pillory this type of sycophant, saying “Mother Eddy deserves a place in the Trinity as much as any member of it.”12 Sadly, many Christian Scientists fail to see the sardonic edge to Twain’s joke, and presume he was serious in his praise of Eddy as a saint/member of the Trinity, when in my opinion he was being doubly derisive by at once running Eddy through with his joke, while being patronizing to an audience that did not get his joke. Elsewhere Mark Twain lampooned Eddy from a dystopic angle, imagining a mythical Mary Baker Eddy who was terrifyingly powerful and commanded an empire in which there was no beer or pipe tobacco. Like the Ice Queen in CS Lewis Lion Witch and the Wardrobe rationing out Turkish delights only to snatch them away. Boo! Incidentally, I heard a rumor once that Albert Einstein, when asked why he did not join the Christian Science church, would say that he did not want to give up his pipe.

Hopefully this last Mary Baker Eddy has been chased away by the 21st Amendment to the Constitution ending Prohibition. But where Twain was always having a good laugh about these things, not everyone thought the Christian Scientists were being funny. A favorite theologically driven polemic against the Christian Science Church is Henry Varley’s Christian Science

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Examined. It was contemporary with the formation of the Christian Science church, though it has some lack of insight into Eddy’s Christian theology, it lobbed most of the charges of heresy that ever could be against her or the New English, though done in an unstudied way that failed to attempt at escaping its own cave of Baptist theology.

One historical anecdote illustrates the extent to which the mythical/heretical Mary Baker Eddy has been taken seriously by the theological academy. I may be the only one that knows about it, because I can’t find a citation for it. During the testing of sonar off the coast of Massachusetts, one of the first, or the first thing, on land ever “pinged” was the “Mother Church” dome. If successful the message sent back to testing headquarters was to read “Mary Baker Eddy has one eye,” implying, I assume, that someone involved with the invention of sonar was calling Eddy the Antichrist. I looked into the biography of the inventor of sonar, and Reginald Aubrey Fessenden was the son of an Anglican minister, so I am not sure if this is where the reference comes from, but just a guess. And there are other popular theological references to Christian Science as suffering from heretical views. I have written about these elsewhere in a paper I wrote on the history of the King James Version of the Bible in the Christian Science Church. If anyone is interested, Anne Harwood’s criticism can be seen alongside Varley’s, and if I am correct about my assumption that Fessenden was criticizing Eddy, then his as well.13

But the charge of being the Antichrist is pretty extreme. It is understandable though, since during the height of “Mrs. Eddy’s” popularity, she was so famous, like Joel Osteen, Oprah Winfrey and Dr. Oz rolled together, that many people were getting popstar fever around her. And the effect of her feminine religious voice, unintelligible to the mainstream of theology, was to see her as taking “souls” away from the church, like Muhammad and Arius had done. So she really was viewed by many as a damnable heretic, and by a few as the Antichrist, at least in their jesting, if that is what it was, which Christian Scientists to this day have trouble getting their heads around, because they are so far apart in their hagiographed understanding of her life and work. This is similar to the problems that Catholics face when confronting reformation thinking; that Rome was the seat of the Antichrist. How could anyone say that about our beloved Pope, the Holy Father, or our saints, from Santa Monica to Mother Theresa?

The middle road, and how I see Mary Baker Eddy, is how Catholics see saints as God’s people shining down on us from heaven, and Popes as surrogates for St. Peter, spiritual figures in our ultimately spiritual but erstwhile temporal world, alongside how we protestants view the sainthood and priesthood “of all believers.” I see Eddy the same way I would see any proposed saint who shows fruit of the Spirit in their lives, and we presume goes to heaven where they can pray for and bless us, as they sit around the throne of God in His eternity, reigning from the

13 Anne Harwood, An English View of Christian Science: An Exposure, 25,59,81 (Fleming H. Revell Co.1899)(noting theological difficulties leveled against Christian Scientists.) Whether the theological criticisms Harwood notes are generally fair, if against New England Free Churches or “Hellenized” scholasticism depending on the claim, or whether charges of heresy remain unanswered, or answered in a vocabulary inaccessible to mainstream theologians, was and remains an ongoing debate; see also Henry Varley, Christian Science Examined (Fleming H. Revell Co.1899)(polemic, condemning Christian Science theology).
heaven of heavens. And during Eddy’s life, she was clearly a Christian priest, or rabbi or church lady, or whathaveyou. Most Christian Scientists probably see her this way, since they have more or less the same cosmology of saints that the Catholics do, though the attention they pay to her seems to exclude every other saint. Some of this is only appearances though. But this was against Eddy’s own view which would keep Jesus as “our saint” always, and suggests the need to reform the Christian Science church to be less centered around celebrating the life of Mary Baker Eddy.

If we would just put Jesus back, or more accurately, put Eddy in a lesser place, we would be so near a Catholic church that the Pope might grant Christian Scientists a new communion, assuming we would be allowed to take it “in memory of.” Like Catholics, Christian Scientists believe that blessings can flow from the prayers of saints in heaven,¹⁴ though this is obviously heretical for many non-charismatic protestants who disagree with Catholics on how and when souls enter heaven. So the real Eddy is like Therese of Lisieux,¹⁵ who we can imagine is alongside Eddy now sitting up in heaven throwing flowers down on us, and probably disapproving equally of any would-be deification or vilification, since after all both Eddy and Therese are both mere church ladies. Eddy and the Little Flower of Lisieux have joined forces and are sending down flowers together. We don’t have to claim she was perfect during her life to believe this. During Eddy’s life, and that of Popes and saints, no one is suggesting that they were without all the trappings and failings of humanity. Indeed, their humanity is that common bond that we philosophically minded Christians are all surprised to find that God has condescended to. And whatever God did do in their lives, as Gamiliel pointed out in the First Century, if it is of God, we can't stop it.

(Back to Top)

Where Am I Going with All This?

If Stuart Chase was correct, that “the world always turns aside to let one pass who knows where they are going,” yet I am not sure where I am going with any of this. And I don't want to be the blind leading the blind. But understanding the theological standpoint of Christian Scientists, some of whom I know personally and love dearly, including my mother, my late father and little sister, has helped me understand all religions better, and helped me see the importance of sharing our common Christian history as a basis for ecumenical discussion.

When we see how Muslims and Jewish people have been historically marginalized from the so-called “Christian” conversation (who would Jesus marginalize? “Forgive them Father, they know not what they do.”), we have available to us the problem of the Christian Scientist’s experience as well. Obviously, it is not theoretical to me that we have “ghettos” within Christian thought. Sometimes there has been serious theological disagreement causing sectarian divides, as between Henry Varley and Mary Baker Eddy, but more often just mere communication problems, e.g.

¹⁵ See Who Cares about the Saints (Loyola Productions 2009)[motion picture].
“terminological” inconsistency. We also suspect sadly that we have sectarian pride going before we fall into disunity. But since unity of Spirit was so important to Jesus, it is incumbent upon all Christians to hammer out whatever common ground we can, while remaining faithful to whatever individual callings we have from God.

Ironically for Christian Scientists, some of the rules that Mary Baker Eddy laid down, i.e. that Christian Scientists may not join other churches, debate Christian Science without church approval, or be sectarian rather than Christian; have served to increase rather than decrease the view of Christian Scientists as a sectarian body, and potentially serve to create a sub-culture environment that can reinforce denominational pride and isolation. Contemporary Christian Scientists are doing more to express themselves to the ecumenical community, but some of the old barriers remain in the Church Manual, though the recent move toward ecumenical communication may have the fundamental effect of allowing Christian Scientists to debate Christian Science publicly, something that the Church Manual has always previously reserved for those with prior authorization. Now, all Christian Scientists have been somewhat authorized.

But the historical irony is that by trying to avoid conflict with other denominations and thereby avoid disunity, the Christian Science church walked down a road to theological martyr-syndrome-isolation, which is a disengaged form of disunity. Not wanting to fight for a hard won unity, we can forfeit. Barnabas goes his separate way from Paul, but perhaps now we have been blessed with an opportunity to make up for this. To my mind, and I mean this statement to ring philosophically “feminist,” there has been the coincident failing in communication between masculine and feminine theology, for which Christian Scientists are not solely to blame, but which is a failure of everyone to take the time to understand each other’s viewpoints.

Venturing a guess, it is also more typical of feminine modes of intellectual engagement to walk around the problems of disagreement rather than tackling them head on. So where Eddy was happy to disavow hypnotists who she wanted no part with, she had more trouble dealing with her fellow Christians who wanted her to be more orthodox. For long periods of their history, since Mary Baker Eddy's passing, and somewhat in keeping with her style, Christian Scientists have apparently continued avoiding conflict as the best way to achieve harmonious agreement. But there is a growing recognition that lack of discord has not led to the resonant harmony they hoped for. We could joke that for a long time it led to the sound of one hand clapping, though this puts too much of the blame for Christian ghettos particularly on this minority voiced church. Perhaps the responsibility is more than equally shared by those in mainstream theology to be more welcoming to those who speak from a different place. We could reverse the question. Are we masculinely voiced Christians theologically naive of the feminine voice? Are we doing a good job of listening to our sons and daughters as they prophesy?

Recent years have seen more attention to the need to explain Christian Science to the world outside the “ghetto,” but the difficulties in the explanation remain, because Christian Scientists are forever trying to explain to a theologically modern and masculine audience using an out of date feminine theological voice. There is also a tacit refusal to move beyond the naïve framework that Eddy operated under. There are exceptions to this rule, notably Christian Science
historian Stephen Gottschalk, but none have really escaped the cave of Christian Science “speak” as it relates to theology per se. Gottschalk is a very good historian, but he is more of a church historian than a theologian. Eddy’s recent biographer Gillian Gill is a very good biographer, going 99% of the way with Eddy's biography, but as a biographer, she stops short of doing theology per se. The objectivity of a theological historian of the Christian Church is what is needed, rather than the objectivity of a biographer of Mary Baker Eddy or the chronicler of the acts of the Christian Science Church particularly. Hopefully I am providing this here with my theological “Rosetta stone,” which has Christian Science and New English theological terms as one of its “languages.”

And here we find yet another reason why 19th Century American Christianity is important as a historical study, because treating one church at a time while listening only to its greatest enthusiasts or detractors, without seeing the common theological ground that all these churches grew out of, from Christian Scientists to Seventh-Day Adventists, makes our broader church history poorer. So maybe there is something that can increase our ecumenical understandings generally that can grow out of understanding the Christian Science church’s experience. If the theology was shaky, it was also sincere, and one person’s shaky theology is another person’s different way of viewing the same thing. Conservative, Progressive, Platonic, Aristotelean, Incarnational, Spiritual, Lockean, Calvinist, Lutheran, Catholic, etc.

(Back to Top)

The Viewpoint Problem in Explanation

All denominational church histories have this problem of viewpoint, which can cause them to be non-objective to some degree. The Christian Science church is again exemplary in this aspect; as most major Christian denominations don't have the problem to the level that Christians Scientists do. Speaking from the more common masculine voice and in the masculine mode, they don't have a problem juggling the mainstream church histories that are out there. Most major churches tend to start from the same place, often the same place that secular historians would. If we asked someone, for instance, to tell us the place of Southern Baptists within the Christian world, they might say, Southern Baptists are now the largest Protestant denomination in America, and are a “great commission” church, with historical roots in post-reformation England. Historically Baptists have been influenced by both Arminianism and Calvinism, though today the Southern Baptist Convention churches tend to hold predominantly Calvinist or neo-Calvinist beliefs, though this is not true of all Baptists, and can differ depending on the pastorate of the church you attend, etc.. Modernly, like C. H. Spurgeon, Baptists split the Wesley/Toplady hair by expecting themselves to be both Calvinist and evangelical at the same time. Whatever that means. But this response would be relatively straightforward compared to a Christian Scientist's, and place
Baptists in mainstream historical context and show where they stand on theological controversies. 16

This is what we should be trying to do for the Christian Science viewpoint. We need to reroute it through a discernible mainstream. But if you asked the same question to Christian Scientists, what is their place in the Christian world, they might begin in medias res by saying that Mary Baker Eddy slipped and fell on some ice, and recovered after her prayers were divinely answered, and when she was miraculously healed she then sprung fully formed into theology to pen Science and Health, not a studied comment on the Bible with lots of influences, but a revelation from the experience of being healed and “discovering.”17 And this simplified history, as with all American innovators who we like to see as a product of Yankee ingenuity, will be shared as if she had no theological influences from Quakers, her Congregationalist upbringing, American Transcendentalism or the philosophy of the occult phrenology movement, of which she was a onetime practitioner and patient. Essentially, this is a narrative method that hides the theological ball that is so important to masculine theology. Christian Scientists conveniently forget to mention that Mary Baker Eddy was influenced, not only by the Bible and the Christian people she agreed with, but also that her theology was a reaction against the occult problems she saw running amok through 19th Century America. Instead of seeing her like Augustine, reared in the Manichean pagan school and reacting against it, Eddy's greatest admirers and the exponents of her theology insist that she was Christian from the beginning and deny the extent of the influence of her time with Quimby. We Christian Scientists would be taken more seriously though if we took a more direct approach to the problem of history, rather than the conflict avoidance route, which while it may be faithful to Eddy's feminine mode of passive engagement with the larger community, erects the walls that keep us in the ghetto of Christian thinking. People outside of Christian Science circles will much more readily understand her theology when explained as a reaction against Quimby. As Augustine can be seen this way against the Manicheans, or Dominic against European pagan philosophy. And the Mary Baker Eddy Library is doing a good job of sharing the biographical pieces of the puzzle, especially with its “Timeline” of Eddy’s life.18

If I had one sentence with which to clear up the historical problems with the theology of the Christian Science church I would joke that, “The church was inspired by Mary Baker Eddy, and founded by rogue 19th Century New English Christians, who tried to outdo Methodists in their methodologies.” A Christian Science friend of my family’s when I was growing up used to joke that Christian Scientists are a special type of Christian hypochondriacs who don’t like needles.

18 Mary Baker Eddy Library, Timeline (available at http://www.marybakereddylibrary.org/mary-baker-eddy/timeline/)
But for most people, the Christian Science story is neither funny nor comprehensible. Too inchoate and too uninteresting, the Christian Science church neither affirms a specific Christian tradition, like the American Congregationalists or MacDuff’s, nor does it admit that the innovations in Mary Baker Eddy’s theology were largely in response to then-prevalent 19th Century mind healing. Christian Scientists feel like ingratiates if they fail to highlight Mary Baker Eddy’s contributions as innovative, and thereby allow themselves to be defined by their critics, like Mark Twain and Henry Varley, where it would be more fair to be defined by the traditions we sprang out of. It is understandable though, to not want to be associated with the occult mind healing that Eddy was reacting against. Just as Jewish people don’t want to be defined by Balaam, the spiritual enemy of Israel. And we should credit Eddy for the prescient view she had that hypnotism was a product of occult thinking. This is a lesson we modern Christians have forgotten. We often give a free pass to psychology and material science, presuming that they have no theological bias or machinery, both of which often go too far in their explanations of everything, until they too become religions of a type, requiring devotion and leaps of faith from their adherents.

So we modern Christians have the same problem that Eddy faced during the 19th Century, of convincing even our fellow Christians that psychology on its own can become essentially an alternate religion, which today we might refer to it as either “new thought,” or similar to the Quantum physics of religious scientists like Amit Goswami. And when theories of evolution often wax into explanations of everything religious as well, including visitation from space aliens and alternate universes, at what point should science have to admit it suffers from the same epistemic limits as religion is accused of? But the Christian Scientist’s want to forever point only to Mary Baker Eddy’s insistence that only Christian Science could heal, which though laudable in the face of the occult, is not a battle that she has been unique in fighting in the Christian world. And she died of old age, not making the ultimate sacrifice or anything, so people wonder why Christian Scientists insist she was such a martyr. This has some explanation from her biography as a feminine church figure in the 19th Century, but not so much as actual martyrs.

Our story is more believable as we portray Eddy standing on the shoulders that helped her to see as far as she did. By celebrating her as a trailblazing martyr who went unknown for her unique faithfulness, and by Christian Scientists’ continuing tendency to obfuscate her theological influences, pressing the idea that what she was doing in the 19th Century was entirely novel to her, we obfuscate the real Mary Baker Eddy to a point where people question our credibility. But this is your basic hagiographical ambiance about this otherwise flawed but lovable lady, so it may be something of a venial failing on the part of the Christian Scientists who want everyone to appreciate their saint, to whom they are especially devoted. But another motivation for such obfuscations was even more imminently understandable from a legal perspective, that some have historically feared legal charges of plagiarism and copyright, most of which are now past their usefulness in maintaining, but which have roots in Mary Baker Eddy's being sued for incompetence among other things. This could easily be explained if anyone took the time. And some of it no longer matters anyway, since so much has changed in the last 100 years that many of the arguments that Christian Scientists might think are important are no longer debated or even understood by the rest of the world, e.g. should Mary Baker Eddy as a woman be held...
competent to own property and manage her own affairs? Are the humours of women too phlegmatic for the pastorate? Is malicious animal magnetism a cause of action properly sounding in tort law?

And those initiated in the historical dialogue about academic honesty will have no problem discerning that *Science and Health* was not necessarily plagiarized by the standards of her day. Writing in the 19th Century, everyone may have known what hot topics she was writing about, and academia had not gone head long into citation happiness, as the legal philosopher Karl Llewellyn has criticized modern academic writing for. To the extent that Twain accused her of having ghost writers, it is not the same as being a plagiarizer, so everyone can see this bit of funny hyperbole for what it was: a joke. Since she was writing in a time and to an audience for whom certain Bible knowledge and history could be assumed, her work will be read with charity whatever her sources.

This has become less true since the opening of the Mary Baker Eddy library, and since the Christian Science Church's publishing of Gillian Gill's thoughtfully critical biography, which does not shy away from recording Mary Baker Eddy's many peccadilloes or the Christian Science church's idiosyncrasies. And thanks to recent publication of some of her sources (can we call it her bibliography?), it becomes suddenly much easier to put the theological pieces together. A list of what was on Mary Baker Eddy's bookshelf, for anyone interested is available from the Mary Baker Eddy Library.19 Thanks MBE Library!

(Back to Top)

**Theology, What You Don't Know Can Hurt You**

We theologians can become too set in our ways. For this reason, theological naïveté can hurt because failure to express your beliefs along commonly understood lines can cause you to be called heretic unnecessarily. When people speak from a different theological voice, whether feminine or from other places of difference (i.e. color, oppression, personality, unique experience), they can say things that strike mainstream theology as problematic. Problematic and sometimes heretical or sometimes just terminologically different, or other times obviously naive but not irreconcilable. And now that so much of the world is philosophically post-modern and feminist, we should wonder if even the male voice cannot be thought of as a place of difference. We are all a little naive of each other and fail to take the time to communicate.

Problematic statements made from naïveté and miscommunication might be the easiest to reconcile. If we see naïveté as forgivable, it is like a universal solvent. One hallmark of naïve or miscommunicated theology may be that it alternates between being spoken in a conjectural way, or being overly sure of itself like Don Quixote and charging off with messianic assurance. Naïve or misunderstood theologies come from being simply uninitiated into the mainstream of the

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“craft” known as theology, as a Mason might say. Another hallmark to look for historically is the purposeful naïveté of the American experiment, with its dim view of the academy and the concomitant religious refusal to bow before the Roman goddess Minerva, by refusing to speak from learned knowledge, and speaking instead as moved by the Spirit. But being naïve can cause these to not know where the snakes are hiding in the grass. The questions that this raises for ecumenism may be best examined by looking at a particular instance of divergent theology.

One 19th Century instance of divergent theology is “annihilationist” thinking, i.e. among the Millerites. If we modern Christians are now more prone to a robust theology of damnation, does this mean the Seventh Day Adventists are now heretic or naïve? If it is vital to Christianity that we believe in hell, are Adventists then not Christian? Is “heterodox” a euphemism for heretical, which connotes the naïve forgivable quality as opposed to being a recalcitrant heretic? If mainstream theology has moved on from some discussion and no longer thinks it is debatable, or worth debating as non-critical, maybe it just makes Seventh-Day Adventists stand out as heterodox where the same divergence would have made them heretic in the past, alongside Quakers, and Mormons. (How does the joke go? Mormons are not annihilationist exactly. They are the reverse of Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's witnesses believe heaven has only a few people in it, Mormons believe hell has only a few people in it, a semi-annihilationist view.)

All this complexity is a problem that lay churches and “free” churches have from this era. Their theologies have, to some extent like the Christian Science church’s, not kept pace with the changes that larger churches have undergone in their thinking. Lay churches are often managed by people without seminary training, and their members being without seminary degrees or creedal statements, individual free church members have to make their own way in theology, while having missed the unfolding of church scholarship over the last 100 years. This sometimes leads to being divergent, or more often chasing down a conclusion that has already been drawn by those who have taken the time to examine the problem or the scriptures with a Berean eye. In the case of the Christian Scientists who have important guiding texts written in this different time, we forever find ourselves departing from a 19th Century framework and being called heterodox or heretic for it.

(Back to Top)

Was Mary Baker Eddy a Heretic?

Absolutely. By some standards Mary Baker Eddy was certainly a heretic, but that is not saying much, since by some standards everyone is a heretic. The most important failure of her theology may have been ecclesiological in nature, where she may have abused her pastorate for pecuniary advantage, but to be consistent we would have to say the same thing of many “successful” pastors from her era and every other time period. To my mind, the greatest heresy of the Christian Science church then, was that Mary Baker Eddy saw the need for a revolution in theology during the 19th Century, and while her solution to the problem of materialistic and occult theology may have been laudable, the biggest problem with her is that she claimed to have nailed theology down once and for all into the practice of Christian Science; into a system, which
she then took credit for. The name for her “discovery,” “Christian Science,” can be alternatively defined as the “sum of all Christian knowledge,” or “the working of the Holy Spirit,” neither of which are heretical, since many Churches are so named, i.e. “Trinity Baptist,” “Cathedral of the Holy Spirit,” etc., but the fact that what she wanted was functionally a “patent” on the Christian healing process, that she claimed this was new to her, rather than say having been instantiated by Daniel the Stylite, to name just one Christian healer, I think this amounts by some measures to abuse of her pastorate.

And the Christian Science church, to the extent that it is focused around this “practice” and “cause” of Christian Science, is it not as much what we would call today a para-church organization as it is a church? But crediting this “discovery” to Mary Baker Eddy is a problem of heresy from some viewpoints. It gives her too much of the glory potentially, not because she had this revelation, but because we expect everyone to acknowledge her for it, rather than God for being so generous in His outpouring of the Spirit on her. Like if the Kendrick brothers’ movie production company started lauding them for discovering the sum of Christian knowledge and putting it once and for all into cinematic format to combat the scourge of worldly film, and forever after we made all Christian filmmakers pay homage to them, forgetting that Christian film is a product of Christianity with origins in the life of Christ first and foremost, but instantiated by every other Christian artist from Church designers to James Stewart in “It’s a Wonderful Life,” even though back then a lot of arguably Christian film was just called film. In its proper sphere, praise for our Christian brothers and sisters is entirely appropriate, but it gets out of hand if we start praising these saints more than following Jesus ourselves, or insist that others appreciate our mother superior, over say Hildegarde of Bingen.

But conversely and equally disturbing to us should be the historical lack of interest from mainstream theological circles in why the 19th Century came to think in the puritanical ways that they did. Failing to have this conversation with Christian Scientists directly about the problems that might be seen in their theology is a mistake, because it cuts us off from what we can learn from them. Perhaps we assume an impregnable ignorance on their part. But the acquisitiveness of Mary Baker Eddy in her desire to get credit and remuneration and the power of the Christian Science pastorate -- peccadilloes which the Church in Boston now acknowledges as arguable, and has published on through the work of Gillian Gill -- there is not really too much objectionable about Mary Baker Eddy that could not be said of any other New English-liberal Wesleyan Christian church of the 19th century. And it could be seen as a common practice back then to desire a career as a great churchman. Hanging on to her platform may also have been considered effective for lending her “star” power to the movement she founded, as we see Oprah Winfrey do now in getting certain projects she endorses off the ground. Eddy’s desire to be a great “churchman” is shaded by this desire to promote her cause, like an Oprah Winfrey-meets-Phillip Brooks, and is more forgivable from the capitalistic ecclesiology of early American Protestantism at the time; as well as from the “attacked” position she was in, trying to hold on to her pastorate as a female in the 19th Century where such right was imperiled. So the martyr status she was in was not entirely imagined. And we may have to say all 19th Century Protestant pastors were heretic, since they tended to believe “a workman is worth their wage” was a
scriptural passage readily applied to the pastorate, as well as every other guild during that gilded age of capitalism.

Protestantism tended to think that, while greediness was bad, there was no reason to give priority to poverty, as St. Francis had. To wit, the 19th Century saw the hand of Providence in all economic affairs. And even today we find that American pastors are trying to “sell books” with controversial effect, so are they heretics as well? While Eddy may have been too mercenary, like so many others, yet we should not be willing to throw her contribution out entirely, anymore than we would toss any modern megachurch pastors for collecting six figures (seven?), since there is an integrity in the way that Eddy used her lofty platform to further Christian calling.

(Back to Top)

The Ambitious Mary Baker Eddy

If her ambition was to be a great churchman like Phillip Brooks, and to the extent that she wanted a living for herself from this, it is more forgivable also if we see the penury she had suffered prior to the time she “discovered” Christian Science. I wonder also if we can blame her for needing to make a career out of the “practice” of Christian Science, since she had to give up the living she might have known as a homeopath, but from some theologies the answer is yes. But she lived at a time when being a churchman was a profession for the ambitious, and American theology supported the providential way that God uses capitalism to provide for His people. So if we are to be consistent about Mary Baker Eddy's ambition, we have to decry the entire American pastorate for not taking the Franciscan's vow of poverty. I am not arguing that Francis' vow might not be preferable, though I am too American to not understand the “blessings of liberty” that our forebears were so adamant about, only that to be consistent we should only decry Mary Baker Eddy if we also honestly frown on Joel Osteen and his kind of megachurch, but not if we support the capitalist nature of the American pastorate. It is not an extreme to take a dim view of Mary Baker Eddy for her desire to sell books or be remunerated for the practice of Christian Science, but it is not an extreme to note that she had a right in a free market to sell her books either and some theological cover from the American view of capitalism as providential.

These naive Christians missed their friend Francis' discovery that there was a promise to poverty, as a way of uniting themselves to Christ's poverty, at least in the material sense. Ironically, the anti-intellectual bent of the naive American Christians, including Quakers, was a type of love of intellectual poverty, which Christian Scientists share with them and with St. Francis. All these unite themselves to the intellectual simplicity of Christ and early reformers, though only some unite with St. Francis, Sister Clare and the Holy Family in their meager finances. If we were to make sport of the theology of it, we might say the 19th Century Christian had a disinterest in worldly knowledge that was “nonspiritual,” while simultaneously seeing an ample bank account through the eyes of a First Century Sadducee as a blessing, while an ample bookshelf of learned theology became suspect as Pharisaical.
(I think this points to another ironic anomaly of theological history, that with all His criticism of pharisaical hypocrisy, we fail to see that Jesus may have had more in common with the Pharisees of his day than with the Sadducees. Many of the ethical and philosophical statements that we ascribe to Jesus are not original to him, but adopted from the great Pharisee theologians of his time. For instance, Adolph von Harnack notes that Jesus sum of the commandments being “love God and your fellow man as yourself,” was in common use, which Jesus was happy to adopt and give sanction to.)

Peccadilloes aside, as a theologian Mary Baker Eddy was essentially a reformer, who saw the need to reinvigorate the Christian tradition of spiritual healing, which had fallen out of fashion since the Salem Witch trials; and she saw this as necessary to combat the monopoly that occultists and homeopaths had on claims of spiritual healing. She was like the other reformers before her. St Francis, at the beginning of the second millennium saw the need to rebuild the church, following Hildegarde, Dominic and Peter Waldo. In the middle of the second millennium, Luther and Tyndale saw the need to reform the church from its fixed and hierarchical structure. And today we see echoes of all these reformers, with the advent of new forms of media, from Twitter to Instagram, we are awash with reformers that we might identify her with, as the theological waves are smaller, but come crashing faster and faster.

In some ways, Mary Baker Eddy set a good example as a reformer. If modern Christian Scientists followed her example rather than her direction, they too would be always reforming. “Ecclesia semper reformanda est” should be a Christian Scientist's motto if they did as she did and not as she attempted to “patent,” looking into our Bibles to make our own discovery of God’s word. But then, as a church leader Mary Baker Eddy also maintained a strong sola scriptura posture with regards to the Bible, and if we read all the rest of her valuable interpretive guides from her bookshelf, we could see that she gleaned a great deal from the reformation thinking of her time. Though the Christian Science church, of which she remains “pastor emeritus” from the grave, is a lay church, she herself became a semi-competent theologian through self-study and exchange with her contemporaries.

(Back to Top)

Mary Baker Eddy's Sola Scriptura

Having suggested that Mary Baker Eddy may be more subject to criticism than some of her admirers would like, I should emphasize her sola scriptura liturgy. Being sola scriptura is like a free pass on heresy for protestants. You almost can't be both a heretic and a sola scriptura Christian at the same time. To the extent that Science and Health guides Christian Science practice, it is supposed to be secondary to the Bible. Or is it? Sitting through a Christian Science church service, it is tough to tell whether the two are on equal footing or if one is made out as superior to the other, the second reader being given the role of Science and Health reading. So perhaps this is a bit up in the air. But while I join Twain in pointing out that Eddy was an ambitious person, one thing that she stopped short of was directly related to sola scriptura, and probably alienated a lot of “free-thinking” people from her church. She insisted that, rather than
put out weekly bible lessons in full text, she insisted that people mark their *Science and Health* and Bibles with chalk each week to spell out the Bible lesson. I am sure it would have been far more lucrative in Mrs. Eddy’s day to print weekly Bible lessons in full, as is done by the church today (though having lost any pecuniary incentive), but Eddy’s church initially forbade this as it would mean the lessons would be read out of context. The church has reversed its position on this in recent decades, no longer worrying that people will take the lessons out of context.

I assume, rather than that they have forgotten the sola scriptura rationale, the Christian Science church has found it to be obsolete with so many study aids for understanding the Bible available online. But for the longest time the characteristic visible sign that a Christian Scientist had been in your Bible was blue chalk and page markers. Everyone was supposed to read the Bible and *Science and Health* in context for about an hour a day, which the faithful did religiously. An hour to mark the books on Sunday evenings and an hour of reading each morning.

And once a quarter, the committee on Bible lesson would issue a “Christian Science Quarterly,” which was a special type of decoder ring that allowed people to read the same lesson in preparation for church. It is tough to call Mary Baker Eddy heretical when she was trying to get people to study the whole Bible deeply, while merely super-imposing her comment on it for what she believed was a revealed interpretive guide; where rather than imposing her comment “instead of” the Bible, which people often accuse Mary Baker Eddy of doing. Whether some Christian Scientists go too far in their adoration of her and her book, the church is not supposed to be doing so, and I would say most of the Christian Scientists I know appreciate this *sola scriptura* point, with also a substantial minority of Christian Scientists who strike me as too zealous for *Science and Health* or liberal on this point. There is also the difficulty in reading her theology from a masculine voice perspective, in which she is probably only a C- student, but if we grade with the equity that Carol Gilligan and modern perspectives on history have taught us, maybe she gets a B+ to A- for her 19th Century theology.

(Historical Pendula in Intellectual Christianity)

Another example of pendulum-swinging is between intellectual and experiential practices in Christianity. When John Wesley got off the boat in Georgia, he had a raft of theological bullet points he wanted to share with the Native Americans, but found himself perplexed by their preexisting knowledge of the Great Spirit, most readily accepting the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This shook his courage and made him wonder if many of these less learned people were not closer to God than he. Wesley’s experience was similar to John Bunyan’s discovery that some people just seemed to know and love Jesus without understanding theology. Wesley had also stumbled upon a meeting with members of the Moravian church, where he met spiritual descendants of Peter Waldo and the Waldensians of Piedmont fame. We forget that Protestantism did not begin with the reformation of Luther; but has a history in many earlier heretics and schematics as well. Like Luther, we all get too intellectual sometimes, and then too anti-intellectual in our theologies. Should we remember St. Francis here, who also had a Catholic
brand of *sola scriptura*, not to mention Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, which had some of that effect?

(Back to Top)

**Pendula in Nominal Change**

One of the most commonly known changes in church history, that I would argue was only a nominal change, was the nominal change from Jesuit Catholicism during the 19th Century to Franciscan, when all Jesuits were removed from their positions of authority, but then where their replacements continued the old Jesuit way of doing things. The Apostle to California, Junipero Sera, was one such, a Franciscan who acted like a Jesuit. Conversely today, we see Pope Francis, who is a Jesuit by background, but conducts his papacy more as Francis might have.

Similarly, the older *sola scriptura* Quakers of England and early transplants may not entirely recognize their theologically liberal American cousins, who more rarely peer into the Good Book. The Quakers of the old country might argue that American Quakers are such in name only, etc.

(Back to Top)

**I Am a Heretic Too**

And I am not happy about being a heretic myself, but the only person who can escape the cave of heresy on their own is the Pope, since only he has the keys to the magisterium left by St. Peter. As a matter of mainstream church history, everyone else has to either agree and “submit” to him, or “choose” heretically to go their own way. Churches that have split from Roman Catholicism have historically pretended to do away with doctrines of infallibility, and then hypocratically find backdoors for suppressing the freedom of their member’s religious conscience. Already I am a heretic for not being Catholic, and many would judge me so for sharing as much as I have said so far about Mary Baker Eddy and the 19th Century. Already I can hear critical voices pronouncing my excommunications, even though I am not presently a member of any church, which is also probably heretical. I have gone too far for some and not far enough for others. Cardinal Richelieu was reputed to have said, “give me eight lines of something a person has written and I will have them arrested.” So I am sure I have written enough here that every Christian church on earth could now excommunicate me if they wanted to, or “round-file” my membership application should I submit one. “Heretic, rebel, thing to flout,” as the poem goes.

But by pointing out that heresy is a near universal condition, I don't mean to apologize for Mary Baker Eddy or 19th Century liberal theology, nor to attack it from our very different vantage point.

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point. Nor do I hope to apologize for any unexamined modern theological myopia that we have. And I hope for charity in judgment on what I have said so far. To me, the debates between John Wesley and Reverend Toplady are not some arcane piece of history, but remain a sad and ongoing piece of our struggle to understand each other. These are all old sectarian arguments that seem to have died of old age, but come back to life wearing different clothing, and we need to be wise as serpents to understand them, while at the same time innocent as lambs in supporting each other in our common Christian ecumenical inquiry. If someone says, I am a Christian and am looking into comparative theology, we have to see them as a brother or sister. This is really tough, especially when that person may be a Quaker Christian whose tabula rasa mysticism makes them need a start from scratch in figuring things out. Or worse, if they have Universalist acquaintances who do not use the Bible as their exclusive data, and see live alternatives to Christian cosmology, like reincarnation or something.

Universalists remain a puzzle to me, because they are so honest in their belief that every human being deserves respect for their religious conscience that they refuse to prioritize values. Effectively, this ends up making respect for conscience the prioritized value. They are in a sense following Jesus commandment to “judge not” in an extreme way, so we can't call them anti-Christian for this, though I can't bring myself to go to their services either, because I am not quite as good at listening in a non-judgmental way as they are. I would have trouble, for instance, sitting through a talk delivered by a Wiccan pantheist, where Universalists reserve judgment, appreciating that everyone has “their” truth which deserves an airing. The charitable way to view this is that they are still searching for truth, and viewing truth as being strong enough to stand up to the cockamamie.

Universalists aside, who are sometime Christian but not necessarily so, for most 19th Century religious there is so much agreement on everything theological that looking for the disagreement causing misunderstanding is like panning for gold; like mining for one nugget of something in a whole mountain. For instance, if we were looking for agreement on the life of John the Baptist, did he eat locusts and honey or lamb-chops, everyone agrees about John's diet and asceticism; from Presbyterians, to Catholics to Jehovah's Witnesses, there has never been a controversy over John's diet. Agreement, agreement and agreement on locusts and honey, whoever you ask. And we all probably agree that this is supported by Jesus' complaint that He and His disciples were being accused of “eating and drinking” in contrast with John.

So when looking for heresy, the devil does not need to be exorcised from every detail, but from the details that Christians are divided about, or were historically.

(Back to Top)

Editorial Bias

If Christian Science affiliations have led me to keep tabs on these “nuggets” of heresy in a way that skews the theological debates between different Christian traditions, it is not my intent. I am trying to be as objective as possible, while realizing that no one can entirely escape the cave of
the perspective they are born into. But the Christian usefulness of examining disunity is to understand what is at the root of it, since we all find disunity so regrettable. Though I consider myself to be on some level a non-denominational, post-denominational or omni-denominational Christian today, I still sometimes reflexively comment from the Christian Science perspective, so if it seems that this is my bias, it is not entirely imagined.

I hope sharing some of what I have learned over the last few years, and how it has shaped the way I see ecumenism can help everyone else solve the puzzle, or at least see where it is indissoluble.

(Back to Top)

Working Backwards from Calvin

Another place to start in our desire to understand the place of heterodox 19th Century American Christians within modern Christendom, is with those beliefs that neo-Calvinists hold as the center of modern orthodoxy, since the neo-Calvinists are presently such a force in Christian thought. In law Latin we might say that, for Calvinists at least, the doctrines they hold as core beliefs might be the "sine qua non," or indispensable preconditions to being Christian. Of these Christian beliefs, the doctrine of the Trinity stands out as the most obvious, and as we would expect that is where most of the controversy comes from when classifying who is inside and outside of Christian orthodoxy, though the soteriological function of belief or practice seems a close second. It is possible though to be more broad in the litmus tests we use for Christianity; like the historical test of “anyone who follows Jesus Christ” or a “fruits” based test, or even tests that look to historical time, like “anyone who lives” in the Christian world in our Anno Domini time and shows any fruit of God's Spirit (i.e. the good Samaritan.), may be a Christian according to some.

None of these tests necessarily contradicts any orthodox Catholic or Calvinist teachings, though some might be inclusive of Socianists, etc. As William Stingfellow says, “in the Biblical accounts, the repentance that John the Baptist preaches is no private or individualistic effort, but the disposition of a person is related to the reconciliation of the whole of creation.” To the extent that the Gospel is radically political as a matter of history, we are all living in a Christian world, and are therefore in Christian time.

(Back to Top)

Theological Update Needed in the Christian Science Church, like in the Muslim Faith

The removal of religious education from state schools may have had an unexpected effect on the Christian Science church and other lay churches, which could rely on basic Christian knowledge
among those in attendance. This may be ameliorated by increased ecumenical activity, which is a good thing in itself, but where the church’s recent moves to more publicly participate in Christian ecumenical circles can be an impetus for reengaging the mainstream of Christian thought. What are other churches doing to succeed in their mission fields? The Christian Science church has such a wealth of resources, both theological and organizational, that they should be the envy of many other church denominations, yet their evangelical mission is failing to connect as well as it might. We could brainstorm what the reasons might be. Are Christian Science sheep being stolen by polemical preachers with better rhetoric? Is the tacit Eddy worship alienating would-be church members? As the Christian Science church numbers have fallen, are we left with only the more zealous “true” believers now, who scare thinking people away? Are there universalists hiding out in a nominally Christian church? Has something of the “Christian” gone out of the message of the Christian Scientists, as it has out of the Unitarian Universalist church? Has a focus on the contribution of Mary Baker Eddy resulted in an inflexible and dumbed down gospel which she would not approve of? These are just questions, and I am speaking of the church at large, not of the headquarters in Boston.

Of the few people who still attend Christian Science churches now, like Quaker and Unitarian churches, many feel quite at home with Buddhist visitors without qualification. This is less from a watering down of Christian Science’s Christian message as it is a desire to welcome all comers like the Shrewd Servant in Jesus parable, like some evangelical megachurches are accused of not wanting to offend “seekers” with something offensive like the Cross. But it may have the opposite of the intended effect, that no one wants to attend a church that does not stand by its beliefs. Christian Scientists may want to start reminding the world of what a Christian “free church” looks like, or go down trying to. What a tremendous theological gift this could be to our time that is so divided by overly strict dogmas. But avoiding the extreme of dogmatism, they should insist on the tenets, that people at least acknowledge their importance. And that when Mary Baker Eddy says we should be “spiritual,” she meant Christianly Spiritual, like Jesus. Otherwise we should remove “Christ” from our name, in favor of “Universalist.” And I don’t mean this derisively, because I think honest Universalists should stand up for universalism. If they think all roads lead to heaven or there is no heaven, they should stick to their guns too.

In the email on ecumenism with regard to Muslims, I was keen on the idea that imams are as approachable as any other theologians. The ecumenical starting place for my belief, or at least where it evolves from, is that I see Christian Scientists, with whom I am much more familiar, as very much in the same predicament, with the same need for the same fix. My studies in theology have led me to believe that we Christian Scientists need to do a theological overhaul in our church, and update our Church Manual, not because we are dumb or our theology is the worst, but because it needs to be parsed out of 19th century jargon and corrected where it retains any of the 19th Century’s myopia; while remaining mindful of the feminine theological voice, and potential controversies that may need to be resolved in favor of today's understanding, where such understanding is the result of better available evidence or new archaeology, etc. Dead questions can be laid to rest and live questions may give way to modern understanding. The historical/textual criticism for Muslims is then a snap to solve, since Islam has the same problem as Christian Scientists, just greater in scope, since the Koran arguably did not benefit from an
update since the 7th Century, while the Christian Science Church arguably is only about 100 years since its last update. Reasonable minds could disagree with me though.

If Mary Baker Eddy and Mohammed were with us today, they would certainly do the update. Like Abraham and David, whose graves are with us, Eddy and Mohammed are not available to do the job. And the religions they founded, we should wonder if their founders would agree with the directions they have taken. Unfortunately, there is an institutional inertia created by the failure to update with the theological times, and this results from Christian Scientists and Muslims forever standing in the shadows of their founders, and those who institutionalized Christian Science and Islam following the passing of their founding prophets. It is not a problem entirely unknown to other corners of Christendom though, where we see the shadow of Calvin, Spurgeon and Wesley also. And the shadows of St. Dominic in Rome and Empress Theodora in the Eastern Catholic churches. The Muslims believe there is One God and Muhammad is His prophet. Christian Scientists believe there is One God and Mary Baker Eddy is His prophet. Catholics believe there is One God and Pope Francis is His prophet (at least they have a live one). Protestants believe there is One God and, depending, Luther, St. Paul, Calvin, Spurgeon, Wesley or etc. is His prophet. And there are arguments within the field of theology filed away under the term “exclusivity,” that Muhammad was the “last” prophet who ascended to heaven and led the other prophets in prayer, that Mary Baker Eddy was the prophet of healing to the 19th Century and who established the order of services “forever,” that Pope Francis in his official capacity is the inerrant voice of God, that Luther tore down what cannot be built back up, that Paul the Apostle was THE prophet to the gentiles (forgetting St. Photina), that Calvin's ministry showed THE fruit of right doctrine, that Spurgeon got the right doctrine even more right, and that Wesley resurrected evangelicalism from its torpor.

We all have our reasons for hesitance to change these time honored traditions within our churches. In the case of Christian Scientists, the perceived vulnerability seen in themselves has made them, until recently, particularly defensive of the framework left by Mary Baker Eddy. Their institutional memory includes formative hours in which the dramatic vulnerability of Mary Baker Eddy as a person, as a woman church leader, was important in shaping the insulated structure of the church. (Some attempted to have her committed, she was a wealthy megachurch pastor in a time when women's property rights were inferior to men's, some of her students rivaled her megachurch pastor popularity, etc), so there has been a defensiveness on the part of Christian Scientists that the Church in Boston now acknowledges.

(Not to mention that Christian Scientists have been charged with steering people away from lifesaving medicine in favor of Christian “faith hilling,” as if praying for miracles and casting out evil was a leprous sore. “Stupid” as atheists say, rather than vice versa as the Bible says, 2 Chronicles 16:12. In part I think the Christian Scientists being isolated on this issue is less due to differences with mainstream Christian theology, and more to the failure of most Christians to make more than a tepid defense of why we believe in “miracles,” and that miracles are happening all the time, but no one wants to say so because we will be called lunatic superstitious like the Christian Scientists, Pentecostals and Catholics, who put the rest of the church to shame.
on this score. If nothing else, they get A+s for their faith in God's call to intercessory prayer, where our enlightened view of God filling in the gaps tames the Man until our God is too small.)

But this is what leads me to conclude that it is not too much to ask Muslims to update their theology on, for instance, the inclusion of St. Joseph in the holy family, a fact of which the Koran does not apprise its readers. Could you imagine celebrating Christmas without our glad memories of St. Joseph? Having made the similar gargantuan request of Christian Scientists with regard to modernizing their Christian theology, I would only be holding Muslim imams to the same standard. I ask Christian Scientists to, rather than going on insisting that Mary Baker Eddy was the first person to chase after “primitive” Christianity, to place Eddy alongside her fellow Christian reformers. Could we potentially see Mohammad as a reformer like Peter Waldo? He saw himself as faithful to Jesus, however myopic his vision was from AD 500s Arabia. Islam perpetuates a form of Christian following, even though Mohammad is not generally recognized as a Christian, he could accurately be called a heterodox Christian.

Much more than their present day devotees would acknowledge, both Eddy and Mohammad, like Ghandi and Thomas Jefferson, were trying their best to follow in Jesus footsteps, loving “Christ,” not necessarily your “Christians.” Some modern Indians, Americans, Muslims and Christian Scientists spend so much time defending the originality and exclusivity of their prophets, they miss this point entirely. So asking that Mohammed be taken down from a hagiographed state comes naturally, since many Christian Scientists have been in this back-and-forth for so long about Mary Baker Eddy, and since Christians tend not to ascribe sainthood to Ghandi, though he probably deserves it as much as many who are ascribed sainthood. Some charge Ghandi with complete insincerity about his love of the historical Jesus, seeing Ghandi’s turning the other cheek on the British Empire as self-righteous, rather than taken directly from the Quaker interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount. And here we find another indication of this age old debate of what pleases God? Is it our prayers, our faith, our actions, or all three as Bonhoeffer implies in his famous phrase the “polyphony of life?” We find among these prophetic voices theologies of action, where building a wall like Nehemiah is a way of expressing faith, or a theology of the heart in treasuring something of God’s like Mary did, the Mother of God, who treasured the announcement or where the knobs on James knees showed devotion.

The point for ecumenism is, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer would say, when we judge others, it falls back on ourselves, because we too are merely human and incapable of living out every way of expressing faith and understanding everything all at once. The self-righteousness that Gandhi is accused of may become the self-righteousness of those who judge him. Who are we to judge? He may be outside of God’s grace in Christ, but many of us suspect otherwise, and at any rate it is not for us to judge. The sovereignty of God makes our judgments, at best, ever only a penultimate quantity, for Bonhoefferian protestants at least.

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My reasoning that Gandhi was a good Christian comes from what was indelibly Christian about Gandhi’s march to the sea to make salt, just as with Martin Luther King’s march to Montgomery was Christian. And this is an easy conclusion to draw, since we all know that nominal Christianity is worth the paper it is written on. People calling themselves Christian include those like the nominally Christian “German Christians,” happily supporting Hitler’s would-be thousand year Reich. But taking up a cross and following Jesus like Gandhi did is always much more difficult when compared with hailing the popular dictator as the second coming. And yet we forget that Gandhi was a disciple of Christ Jesus. We may not be sure what the proper litmus test is for Christianity, but we can be sure it is not just declaring oneself Christian nominally.

We should suspect that declaring oneself to not be a “Christian” has the same problem of nominal non-Christanity if one then goes on to follow in Jesus footsteps. Jesus parable of the two sons implies this. We in the theologically modern Christian church have realized that you cannot love Christ without loving His church, and I am not disputing this point, I am just saying I am not sure that Gandhi and Mohammad are outside of the historical Christian church. Gandhi looked square in the eye of an Anglican church minister one time and said, “you are a politician disguised as a man of God, I am a man of God disguised as a politician.” Very similar to the protestant message that Luther nailed to the door, Gandhi was just protesting against what he saw as nominal Christianity in the Protestant church, while doing the work he saw his Father having for him, in following in Jesus nonviolent footsteps.

(Back to Top)

All Seriousness Aside, My Great Disappointment

I sometimes joke that, truth be told, I might need to update my own beliefs, since I consider myself a Latter-Day Millerite. I am the last member of the fundamentalist group known as orthodox LDM. I am the only one left still suffering from the Great Disappointment. I have been trying to reconvert Seventh Day Adventists back to my position of being let-down, but they remain cheery as ever. It is not easy to be the last and only Latter-Day Millerite.

This is one of those jokes that is only funny to those with Masters of Divinity degrees. Some require a concentration in church history to get the punchline. And we suppose even the premise of the joke is flawed, since we are all still disappointed that Jesus has not returned yet, but how funny that even a hundred years of church history is so rich with goings on. The Seventh-Day Adventists are a case in point, but just think of how much richer we are today for having the voice of Harlem sung spirituals in our ears, and the oratory of Martin Luther King Jr. (a Christian student of Ghandi, and thus of Quakers secondhand by the way), and you get an idea of what might be needed for updating in the Christian Science churches. A century of history is needed to go with their century of healing. Like the historical person of St. Joseph is missing from the Koran, the Christian Science church's theological inertia has caused it to miss many of the revelations and innovations of the 20th Century. For instance, the “community” church’s realization that in our modern world we can no longer take community for granted. The problem of Bible literacy has also become more pronounced, where much of the preexisting bible
knowledge that could be assumed during the 19th Century has to be inculcated from scratch now. Where the 19th Century Christian Scientists saw the challenge to “spiritualize” Christian believers away from the juggernaut of materialism, (and we are poorer if we cast their contribution aside,) they need to stay in touch with how modern church theology is dealing with problems of basic lack of bible knowledge, where “spiritualization” may only result in an other-worldliness if it lacks its Christian underpinnings that could be presupposed during the 19th Century.

(Back to Top)

Spiritualizing Them Bones, Christian Scientists Versus Jehovah’s Witnesses

One funny coincidence in the theologies of Christian Scientists and Jehovah’s Witnesses has an amazing explanatory power for what exactly is the difference between “them bones” theologians, who don’t want to be cremated, and liberal Christians who believe in a more mystical link to heaven than is evidenced by the this-worldly incarnational schools of thought. Both Christian Scientists and Jehovah’s witnesses who are bleeding out in emergency rooms will sometimes refuse a blood transfusion, but for polar opposite reasons. Christian Scientists believe that God can heal them without the use of “brain, blood, bones or other material elements.” By contrast, Jehovah’s witnesses believe that the life of the body is in the blood, so to accept blood products intravenously contravenes the Levitical law against consuming blood.

The polar opposition is that Christian Scientists see blood as totally ineffective, or at least unnecessary, in the face of the Mind that was in Christ Jesus. That they would somehow be corrupted by material blood does not even enter their minds. Blood may as well not even exist. Jehovah’s witnesses, on the other hand, have a theology in which blood, and crucially the sacrificial blood of the Lamb of God is opposed to the tainted blood that flows within ourselves and others. Who is right? Is the truth in the middle?

(Back to Top)

Updates for the Christian Science Church

But in other ways the Christian Science church has tinkered with updates, like its youth initiatives with “Adventures Unlimited,” and in its contemporary publications. And at different times the church has been more cognizant of mainstream theology. For instance, Jim Bishop's 1950's Christian classics The Day Christ was Born and The Day Christ Died, were heartily received by the Christian Science Church. While not sure what percent of Christian Scientists have read Jim Bishop from that generation, we might suspect it would be a majority. Harry Fosdick’s The Meaning of Prayer was also a classic that was popular. Fosdick's assertion that prayer is the soul of religion echoes for Christian Scientists what Mary Baker Eddy knew, which caused Jesus to turn money changers out of the temple. This standpoint shared by Christian Scientists may be in contrast somewhat with, for instance, N.T. Wright's view of Jesus turning
the money changers out of the temple. Wright must not know any religious zealots, because it is obvious to anyone who knows charismatics and mystics that when the Bible says the zeal for His Father's house consumed Him, Jesus was not playing a part. He was demanding that His Father's house be a house of prayer. But these waves of theological interest and consonance with the mainstream recede from the Christian Science practice over time and lack the permanence of Eddy's works. A theological update might start by giving these authors some official church sanction; republishing or reselling their works. Since they were widely read by whole generations of Christian Scientists, the cognitive load on church members would be minimal.

And for that matter, forget the works that have been published in the 20th Century, what about the works that are sitting on Mary Baker Eddy's bookshelf. Like J. R. MacDuff's *The Mind and Words of Jesus*. MacDuff’s works are not only 19th Century classics that had a tremendous influence on the founding of the Christian Science church, but are now out of copyright, so churches are free to print and distribute as many copies as they like. There is no excuse for these not being available in Christian Science Reading Rooms.

These names, particularly Bishop's, might be surprising to people not familiar with Christian Scientists, but they point to an extreme theological conservatism that Christian Scientists have on many points, often resonating more on theological issues with Catholics than reformation or enlightenment thinkers who would sometimes simplify or demythologize the life of Christ. I just don't think Christian Scientists have gone far enough in their theological tinkering in updates so far, or been able to hold onto the good updates that have been attempted, since tinkering around the edges does not go to the heart of their religious life in church, or during weekly Bible lessons.

(Back to Top)

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22 *See Jesus the New Way* (Vision Video 2005)(motion picture).
Part II

But Seriously, Does Belief in the Trinity Make Us Christian?

Back to the doctrinal question, another problem that marginalizes 19th Century free churches is their failure to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. Does that make them not Christian? The answer is no. As Bonhoeffer said, only the believer obeys, and only the obedient believe, but he later broadened his view to include those who hunger for righteousness, in light of his reading of the Sermon on the Mount, and how he saw it reflected in his compatriots resisting Hitler, who he believed would receive a heavenly reward, though they included everyone from Christians to atheists. These hungry souls, like the Maccabees who Bonhoeffer thought so much of, were not nominally Christians. But he agreed with what James the Just said, show me your Christianity by your faith, and I will show you my Christianity by my works. So while reformation thinking paints it into a corner usually, “works”-based righteousness does have some powerful arguments behind it, both biblical and historical. The free churches understood this, and for this reason did not want to set up doctrinal statements that would proscribe their fellowship to specific believers only.

But in thinking through what is it that usually makes a person a “Christian” in modern eyes, as opposed to a “no religious preference” or Unitarian Universalist, we can start by analyzing the beliefs of the doctrine of the Trinity among different Christian churches, since so many churches have “Trinitarian” views in their creedal statements. What we find though leads us to broader conclusions about who are Christians, and even about multiple belief sets that compete for being the litmus test of Trinitarian belief structures among Christians, and to find that there are indeed alternate tests for who is a Christian that don’t even involve the Trinity (as noted above with Ghandi for instance). Some might conclude that the Trinity should not be thought of as an exclusive test, or even as one core belief, since there are multiple versions of the doctrine of the Trinity, which some say are incommensurate with each other. Linguistically, the semantics are that Complimentarian Trinitarianism, or C-Trinitarianism, is not the same as, or “incommensurable” with Egalitarian Trinitarianism, or E-Trinitarianism. The et ceteras would include Oneness, O-trinitarianism, and potentially halves like, Semi C, Semi E, Super C, Super E Trinitarianism, potentially not being commensurable. If it is a single belief that must be exactly held or subscribed to as a precondition of being a Christian, then maybe there are only 144000 saints in heaven, as some have it. Or else maybe those who properly submit to the judgment of their superior intellects on the matter also get installed, i.e. the Catholic way. Thanks Thomas Aquinas! That makes it easy. Being Catholic becomes the easiest road to orthodoxy, and with Aquinas, the best theologian in history at their helm, can we say that it may not be the correct way? Perhaps there is something to Catholic submission, but not if we wish to remain Protestant.
Trinitarianism and Unitarianism in the Doctrine of the Trinity - An Alternate History of the Doctrine and the Unitarian Church

Complicating our history of the “doctrinal” church is the misunderstanding that Christians are necessarily Trinitarian but not Unitarian. What if in addition to being Trinitarian, you had to be Unitarian also to be considered a Christian? How many Christians do you know who would pass both tests? Most people don't know this, but Unitarians are not necessarily at odds with Trinitarianism, many just come at the Trinity from a different angle. Perhaps Unitarians have what might be called a Lockean angle on the Trinity. We are so quick to disregard the enlightenment because of its excesses and Robespierre's Jacobinism, we forget that for Christians the great Christian theologian John Locke was at the center of the Enlightenment. Not only his tolerance and natural theology, but his epistemology stemming from respect for God-given reason. But the term “enlightenment” is given to many different ideas over time, where understanding Christian history during the enlightenment means weeding out Robespierre, while seeing Locke, not to mention Leibniz and Newton, through the fog of history. These are the 18th and 19th Centuries, when we see American Unitarians emerge, who may be thought of as Christians gone feral. Or Lockean tabula rasa and sola scriptura Christians. The “natural man,” like Ben Franklin in a fur cap, but who knows about Jesus Christ. And yes, sometimes they agreed with demytholigizers or Socianists, but as often they were just in agreement with John Locke.

Our stereotype of the enlightenment and of Unitarians is that they are all deists and universalists, which may be influenced by our having listened to modern Unitarian Universalists describe themselves. As Garrison Keillor's Prairie Home Companion laughingly referred to Universalists, they are people who enjoy going to church, but who don't really believe anything. But aside from the stereotypical Unitarian Universalist, there are a few remaining, and historically there was a majority of Unitarians holding surprisingly orthodox views. But their epistemology was different, and they tore up doctrinal statements to support greater “freedom of conscience” within their churches. And outside of capital U Unitarians, in fact, according to Thomas Aquinas -- who postdated St. Paul, but predated Locke in his love for God-given reason -- all Trinitarians must necessarily be lowercase u-unitarian to some extent, though not vice versa. Like all squares are rectangles, but not all rectangles are squares. To be a unitarian means that we accept the unity of God. To be a trinitarian, usually means that we accept the revealed nature of God as the three persons of the Trinity. So just as there have been the paradox of unitarian-trinitarianists, we trinitarian Christians are also paradoxically lowercase unitarian Christians, insofar as we are monotheists, believing in God's unity of essence, as Aquinas says.

As regards the epistemology of Catholic Trinitarianism, per Thomas Aquinas article 32, the Unity of God can be known by natural reason, and the Trinity of the Persons of God, by faith in the revelation of the Bible. By the time Aquinas gets to article four of Question 32, he has summed this up concisely as an example of direct revelation of divine science. Using trinity and unity as adjectives, he refers to “the trinity and unity of God.” So Roman Catholics, and the protestant churches that grew out of Roman Catholicism, like Tyndale's free churches and Calvin's Presbyterians, Wesley's Methodists and the Calvinist-Wesleyan Anglicans and Baptists,
are to some extent all trinitarian and unitarian at the same time. Epistemologically, we are trinitarian by faith, and unitarian by both reason and/or faith, though just like Muslims do not identify as Christians while holding some orthodox Christological beliefs, Aquinian Catholics don't nominally identify as unitarians, though they believe in the unity of God.

There is an irony that the arguments from Aquinas are used to exclude heretics, since they were made in the footsteps of St. Dominic's reconciliation campaign with heretics. They were originally tools to convince people of orthodoxy, but are too often today used to define an us-verse-them Christianity. The Trinitarian doctrine has become a stumbling block to Christian Church unity, rather than Dominic's purpose, which was toward what Quaker's later called “convincement.” We have become more Athanasian than Aquinian in our approach to suppressing heresy. Aquinas meant his *Summa* to be a hand up for anyone trying to understand the hidden things of God, instead of the way that some use it today, as a smack down for heretics; it was never meant to be a game of whack-a-mole. It would be like if I wrote a textbook on beginner's calculus and then every time someone got their x mixed up with their y I threw the book at them; even at naive people who had not had the benefit of schoolhouse training. Then, if they persisted in their inability to do calculus and failed to get the right answer, I conclude they hate math and should be expelled, rather than accepting the arithmetic and algebra that they were accomplished at as evidence of their love for math. But all this fancy theology then becomes fertile ground for John Wesley to mount his horse and go ask people in the vernacular if they want to make “a decision for Christ,” leading the pendulum to swing backwards to the Gospel simpliciter.

Of course, someone can pick through Aquinas for his disagreement with the reformation and see that he would have put Luther, Tyndale and every other protestant to death if he thought it would save the Catholic church from disintegration. We forget that if Dante had written the Inferno in the 16th Century instead of the 14th Century, Martin Luther, Calvin and Tyndale would almost certainly be in the lowest rung of hell alongside Arius and Mohammad. Or if in the 17th Century, add to that list Hobbes, Locke, Milton and every other protestant. In the 21st Century us protestants too, I hope not. We might paraphrase Kant, “let theology be done though the protestant world perish.” Maybe we would all be better off if the Scholastics had been able to stop the schismatics. But the Catholic church has slowly incorporated many of the reforms of protestantism, very notably the vernacular homiletic since Vatican II, though some conservative Catholics still refer to this change as a move to the lowest common denominator of vulgar tongues, including the Catholic literary giant J. R. R. Tolkien, who was so staunchly in favor of Latin that when his parish went vernacular he persisted in responding to the vernacular promptings in very loud Latin, to the amusement or consternation of his parish priest I am sure. Does anyone want to revive Latin in the Protestant church? I am afraid Latin rite Protestantism would be an oxymoron. The Presbyterian church I attend sang Kyrie a couple weeks ago, and I think I faintly heard conservative Calvinists in Scotland role over in their graves and gasp in vernacular Gaelic.

(Back to Top)
WWJD, Freedom of Conscience and Epistemology in the Enlightenment

But as in any subject, whether math, theoretical physics or social sciences, sometimes new theories do develop that are worthy of consideration by honest scholars in the divine sciences; and old practices can be revived without the problems that once stigmatized them coming back to haunt us. Jesus endorsed the role of a good scribe as bringing new and old out of our store of scriptures, so *semper reformanda* is arguably a direction that comes from Christ’s own ministry.

While it is true that, during the enlightenment “age of reason,” some Christians came to disagree with orthodox theology on the divinity of Jesus, and we can all agree this was a sad type of heresy or semi-apostasy, it is possible to see what they were doing in the charitable light that no one was rejecting Jesus the Man, just claims they saw as apocryphal. Educated as Thomas Jefferson was though, he should have been able to see the King of Kings for the Son of God, shining down on us now from the right hand of the Father, but Jefferson fell in with the intelligentsia who wanted to demythologize. He had the influence of Franklin, who was also a skeptic, though of the hopeful variety. Jefferson still went about doing what he saw as his Father’s business though, trying to live out the life that he thought Jesus would have wanted. What we might call “Jeffersonian Pacifism” is all a result of Jefferson’s looking down at his WWJD wristband and then turning the other cheek.

Jefferson saw himself as a follower of Jesus of Nazareth, so I am always loathe to agree with those that say he was just a deist and not Christian. Judge not or you will be judged is what Jesus said, and it informs my withholding of judgment on Jefferson, where we do see Christian fruit in his life, in that he was a “peacemaker” following Jesus example of turning the other cheek. Not that he was perfect in this, but he did try during his presidency to keep America out of war, and follow Washington's advice to avoid playing God by getting involved in entangling alliances. Like it or not, we are left not only with Jeffersonian democracy, but a form of Jeffersonian Christianity as well, that has influenced American engagement with the world and respect for individual rights that could be taken directly from Locke, though expanded upon by Americans. I think reasonable Christians can disagree on whether or not Jefferson's Christian works have the soteriological function of obtaining him an eternal reward, given that he failed to glorify our Risen Lord in other ways, but I personally think the parable of the two sons applies.

If Jefferson had a wristband on that read wwjd, even though most people don't consider him now to have been a Christian, he considered himself so and accused us of being the heretics for trying to get to heaven with our beliefs rather than humanitarian actions. Maybe his and Gandhi’s lives do more to glorify Christ than we can imagine into our creedal statements. For me, Jefferson’s mistakes are also more forgivable, considering that lots of ideas from the eastern Brahmans, translations of the Koran and a fad among enlightenment thinkers to demythologize the Bible all led many to doubts about Jesus “divinity;” including Jefferson's mentor, Ben Franklin, who seemed to have a combination of Socianist and orthodox leanings. So it is a “there but for the grace of God go I” approach that we should take when considering these poor souls, who nevertheless did their utmost to follow Jesus in the ways they knew how. If Pope Francis can see the societal pitfalls that have made abortion seem acceptable to so many poor souls in our times,
I say it should be a year of Jubilee for Jefferson as well. Even Adolph von Harnack at the turn of the 19th Century was sharing doubts about certain of Jesus' miracles, for instance, stopping the waves and the storm, though I would not call Harnack an apostate or classify him as a demythologizer in the full sense of the word. Nor would I even classify Ben Franklin, since so many other beliefs of theirs were devout. Franklin's theology inclined toward some humanitarianist Unitarian ideas, but of the divine humanitarian variety, making him potentially heterodox or heretic, but not an apostate entirely. Franklin had an Augustinian turn in his young life while sailing back from England, and when he wrote his epitaph as a young man, he referred to the Resurrection at the end of time. He was at least something of a "them bones" Unitarian Christian, and believed he would go to heaven and meet Jesus as the best way to discover about His divinity. It was an open question for him.

But history is forever being whitewashed and made uniform so that it fits easily into a bullet point format in our power point timelines. Until recently, for instance, following Roger Williams example, “freedom of conscience” was a more robust concept in the American Baptist church. Some may know that until recently, many Baptists were pro-choice on the issue of abortion. Today, the Baptist church is very much pro-life I think, but there is a revisionist sensibility that makes many want to forget the pro-choice rationale, because it remains shameful to most. But we do the same thing today with the Baptist church being doctrinally Trinitarian, though at times in its past this too was left up to individual conscience. And all of these wrinkles are smoothed out to show that the church has “always” taught this or that.23 If the Trinity were taught from the “very first” as this article claims, why don't we see the word Trinity used in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, or any of Paul and Peter's writings? I guess most people point to “hellinization” here, but just because the doctrine was established by the time of Athanasius does not mean it was “from the very first,” or that some did not dissent or at least comprehend things differently.

The added historical wrinkle comes from the simplification of Trinitarianism, as though it were one doctrine, rather than a series with different content but the same name. Nominal Trinitarianism is rooted in Hellenized Christianity, but there have been different versions of it, such that I count at least three to four major doctrines, plural, of the Trinity. This is seen by comparing whether egalitarian, complimentarian or sola scriptura are all commensurate with each other. Or if I say of Baptists in a particular Baptist church that I know to be “egalitarian” Trinitarianist, I may still be only speaking of the leadership in the full sense of the word, where the leadership both understand and accept that specific doctrine of the Trinity, while parishioners may only have to consent to not argue against it, whether they fully agree with it, or even understand it. So even if we accept that the doctrines, plural, of the Trinity have been taught since the Hellenized beginnings around Anselm's day, we still do not have the, definite article, Trinity being taught from the beginning.

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This is a lot of cognitive dissonance for historians or theological quant geeks to sort through in the space of a PowerPoint slide. It is much easier to make it simple, but this has the unintended revisionist effects. When we judge it too complicated to outline what percent of Christians are egalitarian, complementarian or simpliciter Trinitarians, and what their reasons might be, latent, patent, overt and covert, we groan under the heavy cognitive load. It is much easier to simplify the historical message, but this is a temptation we have to resist when trying to understand each other ecumenically. The analytical problem has a further logical side of overstatement, simplification and generalization, which are even more pronounced when we are speaking of people without a clear sense of their context, like 19th century Unitarian Christians, who don't even exist anymore. They cannot be polled or emailed. So there is a problem with the history from Unitarians, in that we listen to Unitarians of today telling us about how their church is and was, when they may not be entirely trustworthy narrators.

(Back to Top)

Free Churches

If I am jumping past the deistic, humanitarianist and universalist elements of Unitarian history, it is not an attempt to muddy the waters on the humanitarianist deistic set, just that that is how we stereotype American Unitarians, as if they were of one mind on theology, when in fact they prioritized freedom of conscience as a free church. The difficulty is to see that they were a far more complicated group than just Christian monotheists. Unitarians included precursors to Unitarianism like those who may not have identified as Unitarians, but who were Freemasons like Franklin, because the term was not in common usage until shortly after his passing. And then the pendulum swung back, and later American Unitarian beliefs were closer to Trinitarian orthodoxy. But if we are willing to examine their beliefs they shared potentially a lot in common with everyone from Arius to Peter Waldo.

It is certainly true that some more skeptical doubters did become Christian Deists, like Thomas Jefferson etc., but the group that was known as Unitarian Christians in America included many also who did not doubt Jesus divinity at all. Counter-intuitive though it may be, if you look for functional equivalents, the Unitarian church contained the gamut of 19th Century Trinitarian ideas. This has been simplified out of our present history of Unitarians, which says that everyone thought that Jesus was not x, y or z, when in fact many just thought that to be a Christian in good standing you should not be forced to think or understand and sign a creedal statement that Jesus was x, y or z. Similar to today's so-called “Bible Churches.”

The logic of some Unitarians was that understanding that there is One God and that Jesus was his Son was sufficient and necessary, but understanding the doctrines of the Trinity was unnecessary. But even this oversimplifies, because Unitarians were a very independent group of thinkers, and many may have disagreed with theological formulations of the Trinity, though not the sola scriptural basis. If we draw an analogy from modern politics, to the extent that we could say Republicans or Democrats hold to certain beliefs, it becomes harder with more minority groups like the Green Party or Libertarians, or over time, like what did Republicans believe at the turn of the 20th Century. What about the Whig Party? What part does regionalism play?
A republican or democrat might be so because that is the town or family they live in, and different in the South than the North, and where green party or libertarians might be more like “herding cats” in trying to figure out why they stubbornly hold to extreme or minority views. Was it the influence of the Masonic lodge for instance? Or natural theology? It was all these influences, alongside the Polish Calvinist Schism. Why did the Poles schism? Was it disagreement with the doctrine of the Trinity or with Calvinist theology in general? Which of these were important to the people at the time? Did later Unitarians care about the Polish schism, or were they just celebrating the freedom of religion in the New World, and rejecting the benevolent dictatorship of Thomas Hobbes? Any of these questions could take a book to answer.

Bonhoeffer’s “god who could Be Proved.”

Regarding the protestant objection to creedal orthodoxy, I think Bonhoeffer put it best when catechizing his youth group. “A god who could be proved by us would be an idol.” This defines the limit of both theologies of doctrine and theologies of action or any other theology. We can only spin out straw, as Aquinas said, and hope that God is faithful to bless it, as He blessed Aquinas writings. And of course ultimately we hope to be blessed with His presence. The Unitarians and American protestants generally, were often polemical toward the Catholic Church during this 19th Century period, out of both a sense of national sovereign patriotism and from the sensibility of iconoclasm. Being a young nation Americans thought they had more cause for optimism back then, and it was understood that as long as everyone was free, it was hoped that everyone would freely choose Christianity, keeping America a Christian nation God willing.

One important disagreement with Aquinas that I have already spoken to briefly though, is that in American Christian enlightenment thinking, there was a metaphysical-epistemological gap that had opened between Locke and Aquinas on the place of faith. The positive light to view this in, is that the Christian Unitarians held that Jesus can stand up to anything, so why not make the Gospel of Jesus’ divinity stand to reason. They did not see the Bonhoefferian problem with this. They thought we could know of Jesus divinity by natural reason. Bonhoeffer’s later criticism that a god who could be proved without faith was a false idol, was entirely lost on these enlightenment Lockean Christians. Though I wonder how Doubting Thomas, the patron saint of all those of us who need a little proof, would feel about Bonhoeffer’s criticism.

But again, the American Unitarians were so enamored of reason, like St. Paul and Thomas Aquinas before them, as a gift from God that they saw the possibility of arriving at a knowledge of God, including through inductive reasoning, by copying the actions of Jesus Christ through faith, and thereby proving His example. This was puritanical, Lockean, enlightenment Christianity at its extremity (best or worst? I withhold judgment on either conclusion), but it has fallen out of fashion in our neo-Calvinist orthodoxy, except if a functional equivalent could be discerned in the movement of Christian “formation” to the person of Christ. As our contemporary friends at Biblica put it, the “story of the Bible is a drama. The key to a drama is
that it has to be acted out.” The 19th Century Lockeans were doing just that, hoping to prove their faith, as best they could, by following His divine example over and over again as a way of making John Bunyan's “spiritual” Pilgrim's Progress. Very puritanical in some senses of the word, and likewise very free-spirited in other ways. The American religious people of the 19th Century had influences from Increase Mather and Roger Williams; from John Locke and George Whitfield; from Junipero Serra and Ignatius Loyola; not to mention American transcendentalists like Emerson, Alcott and Thoreau; and the syncretic understanding that came from intimate contact with Native Americans, and newly available Sanskrit “Hindoo” writings, etc..

(Back to Top)

The Christian Scientists as a Free Church

Christian Scientists are one such 19th Century Church. They are a quintessential “free church,” if among the most idiosyncratic. They are a “free church,” not only in the sense of being a non-state-sponsored church, as all churches in America are, thanks especially to James Madison, but also in the sense that many early free churches came to jettison creeds and dogmatic statements, allowing freedom of conscience to take hold. This can be seen in the very general nature of the tenets of Christian Science, which were highly influenced by the Congregationalists, Puritans, Methodists and Quakers, not to mention Unitarians; and other popular 19th century theologians, like John R. MacDuff.

And the free church movement’s coincident popularity with the organization of the Christian Science church has effectively thrown a fog over what those theological roots were. By and large, Christian Scientists could probably be thought of as a mix of egalitarian or complimentarian Trinitarianists today, if they had not been a free church in their Tenets. Some members might fall into that seemingly paradoxical category of Unitarian-Trinitarianist, but that is why the Tenets are written to be milquetoast, because the free churches did not want to exclude from communion, fellowship or membership those that had not converged specifically on orthodox points of some specific conception of Trinitarianism. But among Christian Scientists who might be termed Unitarian, you would find no Thomas Jefferson type deists, you would find only the variety that did not doubt Jesus divinity at all. Those Christian Scientists would be in that special Unitarian category that not only believes Jesus walked on water, but expected to follow in his divine footsteps themselves through puritanical “demonstration.” Of course, there are also criticisms of Christian Science theology, but I wonder if Mary Baker Eddy even knew what theological lines she was crossing, with regards to her theology or “spirituality.”

On a different score, some reformed have criticized the Christian Scientists, alongside Catholics, for the focus on works and spiritual progress, but their works are meant to be in keeping with Jesus example and direction. For Christian Scientists the words of Jesus are very important, “he that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father.” I could see the place of the Trinity for most Christian Scientists as being resolved into either the complimentarian or egalitarian frameworks, though some of Mary Baker Eddy's most specific words on the Trinity come from her address at
Tremont Temple, and seem to confound the issue, especially for those not familiar with scholastic views. But more than that, Eddy felt entitled to completely rearrange what most people think of as the doctrine of the Trinity, leading her to speak of “Life, Truth and Love” as commensurate with a Trinitarian Christianity. She was making an egalitarianist’s claim in the extreme. I have coined a neologism for my own purposes of keeping things straight in my head, to describe exactly what this type of Trinitarianism is, which I term “hyper-egalitarian trinitarianism” for lack of a better term. It is my own neologism, so if you can’t find it in your theological dictionary, don’t be alarmed.

This “hyper-egalitarianism” could be seen to regard the subject of women in positions of church leadership as well, since Christian Scientists are decidedly egalitarian and the spiritual descendants of Anne Hutchison, with a view that ideal leadership should be half men and half women, which is very Victorian. Or as the Mary Poppins Musical had it in parody of parity, “Well done! Sister suffragettes!” Agree or disagree, this is something of a high watermark in equality for the reformed protestant Christian church, though any good complementarian will find the topic an interesting one for critique rather than praise (This time I admit the reservation of judgment is not a courageous one in standing up for the oppressed minority, but the cowards' way out of this hot topic. I am not sure which view is more marginalized.). But mainly the term “hyper-egalitarian” is necessary to describe people who see God as Love so imminently that they prefer to approach God from that perspective, which may have been another way of saying they don’t want to have Christianity be a personality cult, and seeing the standard doctrine of the Trinity as being unnecessary to being Christian.

But Mary Baker Eddy was basically a Complimentarian Trinitarianist, except not in the way that Complimentarians believe that only men should be in church leadership, obviously. But she could not come out and put any of her beliefs into a doctrinal creedal form, because of the doctrine of no doctrines, and perhaps also out of the correlative desire to not alienate people of lesser faith, the “honest seekers of truth.” So she held fast with the seemingly paradoxical group of Unitarian Trinitarianists, against the doctrinal statements of Calvinism, while not actually rejecting any of their substance.

Her Aquinian influence is why I always joke that Mary Baker Eddy was a late scholastic. But not like fashionably late, but like, the party is already over late, so what are you doing here? Hildegarde of Bingen is calling and wants her habit back.

(Back to Top)

“Unitarian Trinitarianism” a Free Choice, like in 12 Step Programs

Christian Scientists were following in the wake of many different free churches. Unitarians, as American free churches honestly at least tried to do away with “orthodoxy.” Unlike Socianism in the Unitarian Church of Transylvania, American Unitarians did not have a well-defined system of doctrines. It is therefore impossible to nail down what American Unitarians believed into a system, except insofar as we can define what a system of no systems looks like, when the only
direction is love and follow Jesus. Christian Scientists jump off from this starting point that is highly appreciative of individual freedom of conscience. The writings of Mary Baker Eddy came to become so systematic, that it is hard to say that Christian Scientists are like Unitarians in being impossible to tell what is their orthodoxy, but the logic that animated free churches is still at the core of their Christian being. And this relates to all doctrines, including the doctrine of the Trinity, because Christian Scientists should be seen as free to disagree with anything but the Tenets of Christian Science. Whether this is true in practice if you walk into a Christian Science branch church and announce that Mary Baker Eddy was incorrect to jettison the established doctrine of the Trinity in favor of one that would admit of univocal attributes, I am not sure. But at least in their beginnings and very much in the individual Berean walk that Christian Scientists take, everyone is free to think critically about doctrine.

But what is this doctrine of the Trinity that Unitarians did not want to force on people? For a comparison to what is orthodox Trinitarian doctrine, since if we are going to classify what is unorthodox about Unitarians and potentially Christian Scientists, we still have to depart from something orthodox as a standard. To my mind, Thomas Aquinas is the greatest and most widely accepted “theologian” in history, so I have come to use his theology as my starting point for what is Trinitarian “orthodox,” and while the reformation claimed to have cut away apostolic tradition in favor of the sola's, most protestant theologies remain derivative of Aquinas. His theology also seems to have God's approval, since God praised Aquinas for having “written well” of Him. So the question becomes, if Unitarians, Transylvanian or American actually disagreed with Aquinas, how far did they go, and was the disagreement important enough to say that Unitarians are not Christians. I currently attend a Presbyterian church, where some might argue that the Westminster confession is another standard for orthodoxy, but it adopts roughly the same conclusion about the Trinity as Aquinas, and sola scriptura objections to Aquinas ring hollow, since Aquinas too was using scripture as his “revealed” data.

I am less interested in Transylvania, so let me stick to American Unitarians. For their part, the disagreement Americans had with Aquinas may begin, as I mentioned before, not with ontology, but with mere epistemological angling on how we can know God. How we could know of, and/or demonstrate Jesus divinity. All of this epistemological wrangling gets confused with cultural, political and ecclesiastical issues as well. In addition to Unitarians having very Johannine puritanical leanings, the confusing bit about “free churches” when examining them for orthodoxy is that they reject doctrines in toto, making it appear that they reject really important bedrock Christian truths, like all the doctrines of Thomas Aquinas and the Council of Nicaea. But if you stand back from the problem, what you find is that they reject forcing doctrines on people outside of their measure of faith. They then believe it is courageous to stand up to those who are standing up for doctrines, as though what they were accomplishing was the smashing of a false idol. Whatever we think of the Oxford Group or Alcoholics Anonymous, the idea to meet “the God of our understanding” was not meant by these people to reduce God to the position of a psychological construct, or to neuter God, but to meet the One True God as best as we can understand Him in our limited capacity. The sinner’s prayer, or the skeptic’s prayer or the serenity prayer are all meant to minimize the cognitive load on people seeking to enter the presence of God, to just get people to start praying. In neo-Calvinism we accomplish the same
goal by welcoming “Seekers,” and in churches who share communion with people of partial faith by not enforcing the doctrinal decisions we have come to one those whose measure of faith we see as lesser.

But 12-Step programs have one of the most famous formulations of this idea, and can be seen as a modern corollary of the early American Unitarian church. There are people in AA from every type of Christian background, many we assume pray to the God of their understanding, Who we Trinitarians agree they see rightly as Father, Son and Holy Ghost. They don't stop being Trinitarian when they go to an AA meeting. Of course, this milquetoast prayer is abused by atheists and many universalists who use it for a religious high, and unsuccessfully try to reduce God to a purely psychological notion (or ontological notion as Anselm might say). For Unitarians though, it was the sincere objection to dogmatism and perhaps an accusation against Trinitarian churches of being doctrinaire in the face of Lockean religious optimism. The same objection that had energized the Quakers and Unitarians against doctrines and creeds in their departure from Europe to the religious freedom of the New World, energized their descendants to insist on freedom of conscience for anyone who was following Jesus, or their God-given religious conscience in Jewish Synagogue, Hindoo Temple, Masonic Lodge, Muslim Mosque, or Catholic Mass. And there is a Quaker/Wesleyan/Moravian/Syncretic/Iconoclastic arm to this ecumenical stance on things.

We understand that the parable of the unmerciful servant applies to sin generally, and I think we should be charitable to those who see God differently than we ourselves do. That is why I think Unitarians, Christian Scientists, Jewish and Muslims are too often written off as not Christian, because we judge them deficient in some crucial doctrine, when they may just have an inclination away from something like Docetism, which the mainstream agrees is heresy, but they use some maneuver to avoid the Docetic extreme, like closing their eyes to the necessity of some doctrine or averting their eyes from something they fear would demean God.

*Back to Top*

**The Doctrine of No Doctrines**

Essentially, the Unitarians thought that if we make people subscribe to certain doctrines, it is like making people bow before icons. Similar to Quakers and Christian Scientists, Unitarians purported to not subscribe to doctrines for the same reason they don't paint their walls or wear fancy clothes. “We thus throw out of view the agency and love of the Living God, whose children we are, and claim relationship to inanimate abstractions.” The doctrine of no doctrines, as Unitarian minister Henry Ware Jr. put it. This was really just another way of being iconoclastic. Of course, hundreds of years earlier, when the Roman Catholics considered the problem of icons and the iconoclasts (incidentally the iconoclasts were influenced by contact with Muslims), they said that anything can be a false idol, so being against icons is not out of keeping with Catholic orthodoxy necessarily; though the Catholics ultimately resolved this issue by pointing out that being iconoclastic can also be a false idol! An icon of iconoclasm!
Modern theology takes the middle road, not wanting to abandon artistry and miss out on the blessings that God has given us in being His image bearers, being co-creators to some extent of our world. In Genesis God is seen even enjoying what names Adam would create for the animals, so why not art, so long as we don’t bow down to it? But don’t tell this to Quakers, Orthodox Jewish, Spurgeon or Muslims. But wherever we land on the issue of icons, we are all waiting on grace and have to follow St. Paul's advice from 1 Corinthians and mind the straight and narrow path between excess of “liberty of conscience” and “legalism,” either of which can be a stumbling block in our walk with God. Older Baptist theology tended more toward the revival of the iconoclastic heterodox point, which led to the doctrine of no doctrines.

So instead of a Trinitarian belief statement as the litmus test for “good standing” within the faith, Unitarians preferred the “you will know them by their fruits” test. Famously both Franklin and Jefferson alluded to this test by quoting Jesus’ saying, “many will say to me on that day Lord, Lord....” But since Calvinist churches see the fruit of the Spirit as including convergence on right doctrine, the “you will know them by their fruits” test has a very different meaning for Calvinist churches. The doctrine of fruits becomes recursive onto doctrine of faith, so the soteriological function of fruit qua “works” is impotent. By contrast, many 19th Century New English Christians saw the fruit as having nothing to do with doctrines, like James the Just, though some also saw both; seeing fruits as leading to correct doctrine and works.

Whether we are waiting on the blessed assurance of Isaac Watts, etc. or exclaiming the Joy to the World, since the Lord has come!, etc. It comes down to divergent answers to the question of what is “conversion?” What are the fruits of the Spirit? The old Wesley and Whitfield divide, where Unitarians tend much more to the Wesleyan evangelical side and puritanical works, or “progress” angle. I think both are true, that we have a blessed assurance from God that we see in history, and that this should mean joy to us since the Lord has come. John Jackman, better known perhaps for directing “Wesley,” has a one man play “Hymns of Praise,” centered around the history and life of Charles Wesley, which he uses to illustrate these points as they appear in the history of Protestant music.  

(Back to Top)

The Doctrine of No Doctrines in Practice

Many other free churches used to be like this in allowing everyone to understand fruits doctrine, belief doctrine, or either or both, but eventually the free church rationale was forgotten, because it was no longer seen as necessary or perhaps it hurt the ability of churches to stay organized and led too often to schisms. Has this hurt the Christian Scientists and Unitarian churches that remain with us? If their litmus tests revolved more around praxis than fide perhaps it is less important. Maybe it is time for historically “free churches” to reconsider, if a lack of Christian doctrines has led to conflict in their organizations. Or perhaps it is time for doctrinally strict churches to return

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to a more robust understanding of the need for freedom of conscience as one more way that we should be thoughtfully considering how to do unto others as we would have done to us.

And doctrines are not only of internal importance, but shape how churches interact and are viewed from the outside. The effect that not having doctrines has on those outside of the hallowed halls of Christian ghettos, can leave outsiders baffled by the incoherence of the certain doctrinally driven messages. The “doctrine of no doctrines” for instance often leads the Christian Science church to become misunderstood for need of an update to modern theological usage. Most problematic is that many people who visit a branch church today may not have the Christian background that could be presumed in 19th Century America, so the doctrine of no doctrines may become more unwieldy in our increasingly apostate time, when people don’t remember what doctrines we are departing from.

But the 19th Century had followers of the antecedents of today's universalists as well, perhaps like Emerson and Bronson Alcott, so the problems that Christianity has seen from transcendentalism was not unknown back then. I am not sure if transcendentalists are the tares Jesus warned about, growing with the wheat, but I know that is the other point of concern that materialized as a problem with the doctrine of no doctrines. Was Bronson Alcott a tare? Maybe not, but I find his poetry both powerful and unnerving at the same time. “Thou art my heart a soul flower, facing ever and following the motions of thy sun. Thou dost the live long day, dial on time thine own eternity.” Beautiful poetry, very profound, but kind of too Zen to be Christian in the linear sense. But then, these men were Christian, but having had such a powerful appreciation of Eastern mysticism that they came to see Jesus as the greatest most transcendent man in history. Transcendentalists were the precursors to American Universalists to my mind, because they would be happy to have poetic atheists over to discuss the relative merits of pantheism as seen in the poetic “arc” of nature, where “worm mounts manward.”

We theistic religious flatter ourselves to think we have a monopoly in our houses of worship on psychological religiosity, where Universalists are similar to modern atheists, in that they love to take audiences to religious highs of pantheism. But here again, I may not be being fair to Emerson, since this is essentially a difference with atheists and pantheists, that Emerson and Alcott both saw this ultimate value in the human soul. Emerson, Alcott and Thoreau were like Quakers who saw the divine spark that God placed in nature, and that there is meaning to life. However much they incorporated from Hinduism, they saw that rather than evolution being a cold process, it was evidence of a poetic arc to creation, the final end of which was this highest of all men, Jesus Christ. And they were reacting to the fresh Darwinian turn in thinking about creation, as well as the new scholarship in Eastern religious tradition.

If you look at Mary Baker Eddy, she in turn was trying to split a hair with even the Trinitarian Christians, where she prioritized the Aquinian word “oneness” in her understanding of trinitarianist/unitarianist theology. I think that is why she used the term “oneness” to describe the relationship between Jesus and God, rather than just come out and say Christian Science embraces the Trinity, but admits of approaching God from understandings of His univocal attributes also. Is it the heresy of homoeusia that drove her to latch onto the unity of essence that
Aquinas talked about, and then run with the ball in the direction of Aquinian metaphor? Probably not, but she is not around to ask. It sounds more like just plain agreement with Aquinas though, and like a sola scriptura reference, since Jesus said “I and My Father are One,” and she may have been speaking in an impromptu manner, while not wanting to violate the doctrine of no doctrines. I'm not sure, but I suspect Mary Baker Eddy's words may have been the source for the name of the Pentecostal Oneness Trinitarianism, though the name may be the extent of what is shared by Pentecostals as far as I know.

Interestingly, a Wikipedia article on non-Trinitarianism lists Oneness Pentacostals as non-trinitarian, even though their theology is more accurately viewed as heterodox or heretical modalist Trinitarian or something like that. It is so easy to mistake categorization for understanding in theology. There are so many sacred and profane labels that everyone wants to carve out for themselves or run from like the plague. Call me anything but a homoeusian or a modalist! I split Arius’ hair this way, you split Athanasius’ hair that way. At any rate, Mary Baker Eddy's formulation goes back to Aquinas Article 32, and refers to the essential unity between God and His Son. So Mary Baker Eddy at least seems to have wanted to both affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, while not throwing free thinking Christians like Emerson out, and trying to find a neutral word so as to not join in with the doctrinaire who would police Christian beliefs dogmatically.

(Back to Top)

Revival of Parts of Apostolic Tradition and Monastic Practices

Another way of seeing the “Unitarian” church, when distanced from the Trinitarian/Unitarian controversy, is as a revival of some apostolic traditions from the Catholic Church that were lost during the first and second waves of the reformation. Pretty much anything that Luther and Calvin did not subscribe to they threw out the window, sometimes the baby with the bathwater. The big sacrament of marriage, for instance, which Jesus referred to as one of God’s mysteries, is one thing that I scratch my head to understand how Luther saw it as extra-biblical. I guess that divorcing himself from his monastic call inclined him to see the sacrament of marriage as no sacrament at all, but then he hypocritically went and followed the calling to marriage by being a family man.

The Christian Scientists saw themselves as trying to reinvigorate the primitive practice of Christian healing, after Dominic said that we can no longer say “take up thy bed and walk.” I am not trying to start a fight with Dominicans, but Dominic’s statement may have been one of the biggest mistakes in theological history, and led historically to very tepid defenses of miracles on the part of many Christians to this day, leaving us with our gloves off against demythologizers and deists. Though anti-intellectual to an extent, as all good Quakers must be, the Unitarians were in their own sola scriptura way a very studied group also, and occasionally revived Catholic, Patristic and Monastic tradition, creating a protestant third order, in the likeness sometimes of Daniel the Stylite, Peter Waldo and St Francis. They took the biblical direction to be in the world but not of it. That is why the Quakers were so instrumental in the abolition
movements to end slavery in the 19th Century. They ran the “underground railroad” for runaway
slaves because they saw the divine spark that God had placed in the life of every human being,
and felt compelled to pay the Golden Rule its due. I wonder if for some, the term “Unitarian”
became so divorced from its doctrinal origin, that eventually people heard just the “unity” in the
term, implying the “catholic” semantic in its “universal” sense, instead of “Unitarian” referring
to the doctrine of the Trinity at all, let alone whether anyone ever really thought of the Polish
controversy. I am a Unitarian came to mean, I am not a modalist or docetic, seeing Jesus as a real
historical person, whose example I have to follow. Of course this lobs the charge of heresy in all
other directions. So while we can become naive of scholastic theology that someone departed
from a century ago, the sola scriptura bend in the road brings people back to many of the same
conclusions that the scholastics drew anyways. Second generation naiveté can be naier than the
first, but naiveté is not the same as stupidity or meanness.

What is the Straight Gate?

There are so many divergent answers to the question of “what is the straight gate?,” that people
were tripping over each other to get not only the right protestant doctrine, but to revive the right
Catholic doctrine, without getting rid of the doctrine of no doctrines, or admitting that the
disintegration of the Christian church was regrettable; a necessary evil at best. Some of what
these protestants came up with is just irreconcilable with other Christian doctrine.

For instance, if the Roman Catholic Church sees the straight gate as running through the Apostle
Peter, anyone who tries to become a Christian by hopping the protestant fence is a thief.
Universalist Christians say that Jesus’ coming made a place for all people in His Father’s house.
Some believe this grace has to be accepted by repentant hearts though. Calvinists insist that the
straight gate is Jesus Christ, but that the fruits of the Spirit must include convergence on “right
doctrine” which is logically recursive, but not illogical if they are correct. You are Christian if
you are Roman Catholic and the Pope admits you to communion, or you are Christian because
Christ has come into our world and we presume you accept the grace of God, or you are
Christian as long as you are Calvinist, which requires convergence on right doctrine.

While Christian Scientists, Unitarians, 19th Century Baptists, Evangelical Lutherans, Methodists
and Quakers fall into that wildly optimistic category that says Jesus came to save everyone and
expects something like a universal salvation based on some pretty extreme expectations of God’s
mercy, they also wanted to be known by their fruits, but were generally much more liberal in
their doctrines of what these fruits might include, including any “fruits of the Spirit.” This has
the effect of opening up their communion. Calvin emphasized the total depravity of unregenerate
mankind, while these Lockean optimists looked for any sign of goodness in a person to justify
some faith that God was at work in their lives. The problem is, we free churches have historically
been seen by Catholics and Calvinists as thieves for this, entering in by a back gate. I don't know
how to resolve this. Perhaps praying to God is a good place to start, and asking Christian
forgiveness of each other for our mutually broken theologies, except in the case of the Pope,
whose aforementioned magisterium requires no apology. Historically though, protestants had a much bigger problem acknowledging the authority of Christian clergy.

(Back to Top)

Submission to God and No One Else, Neither Bowing before the Crown, Nor Kissing the Ring

American protestants, like the Scots, Irish and Dutch, all had a mix of libertarian political ideas in their heads as they did theology. They did not want to submit to political or ecclesiastical authority, and maintained the right of each other not to have to do so as long as no one broke the Lockean social contract. They were conscious that what they were doing was considered criminal by the monarchs of Europe and heretical by the official churches, so their motto became “hang together or hang separately,” and this played out in the Madisonian 1st Amendment to the U.S. Constitution proscribing the establishment of religion, and also as a matter of ecclesiology in the way religious leaders put their churches together. Not the Puritans, obviously, but William Penn and Roger Williams types, and of course Ben Franklin, were all committed to the rights of the free person and the religious conscience of the penitent bowing before God alone.

This stance had its grounding against the homological romance history of Europe, and the five centuries of history since the rights of free men in the magna carta were successfully asserted by the British nobility. There is a related point that comes up as the reason for the reformation initially that was since abandoned by Lutherans, Anglicans and Calvinists that has had a continuing role in other protestant churches, which is that the “doctrine of no doctrines” runs alongside the idea of Luther and Tyndale’s “priesthood of all believers.” Tyndale sounded a lot like our modern pop song, “Gotta Have a Friend in Jesus.” When Tyndale translated the Bible into the English vernacular, he went so far as to not even see God as wanting our subservience, but becoming a “Thou,” a familiar God through the work of Christ Jesus. This had roots in Martin Luther’s ideas also, which Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes as a turn in our relationship with God, for the formal to the familiar “du” in German. It is possible to say that Protestants want to not even submit to God, in the sense of bowing and scraping before an oriental despot, but saw God as wanting something very different, like the close relationship of a parent and child, and having won their repentance over in a way that left them standing on their feet. Jesus had stooped down Himself, washed their feet, taught them His business and expected them to be carrying it on.

Heart broken at what their Friend Jesus had suffered, but left in the full strength and vigor that He had found them in, and then ready to dash off and build a wall like Nehemiah or lift up a fallen soul like the good Samaritan. The egalitarian nature of Quakers, Christian Scientists, Seventh Day Adventists, and the LDS church all grew naturally out of this thinking. Where other churches believed in submission to church authority, like the Catholics, Anglicans and Calvinists, the hierarchy of the priesthood, or to greater extents the democratic decisions of

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church councils, there were these other dualistic or individualistic churches that recognized we all stand alone before God (not that Catholics, Calvinists and Lutherans don't accept this too, just that it was a conscious prioritization in American protestant church organization). They embraced democratic decision making processes, but with nuanced reasoning depending on the church. They thought that since no one can do certain things for us, like stand before God at judgment, the underlying idea of “inalienable rights” was that there are rights that if we allow them to be alienated from us without a fight, God will judge us for that. The idea in ethics is that for every right there can be a claim of an associated duty. In church governance, these might be termed republican “checks” on our confidence in majority rule democratic decision making processes, which different protestant churches had more and less faith in.

The big three we think of today as “inalienable” rights are “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” per the Declaration of Independence, but these ideas had their origin in John Locke's writings of practical religious life for the Christian government, and were widely endorsed by religious thinkers of the enlightenment. Wide endorsement, but not universal endorsement, as can be seen from Locke's ideological opponents, i.e. Hobbes, Calvin, Cardinal Richelieu, etc. But the question posed would be, if someone seeks to take my life, liberty or pursuit of happiness from me, and I allow them to do that, and I go to meet my Maker later, I will stand guilty before God for having failed to put up a fight. Ergo, Franklin and Jefferson's famous saying, “Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.” The Baptist minister John Leland had this motto engraved on a “mammoth” presentation cheese. They saw this as applicable to religion as much as to government. So if I gave up my “inalienable” right to pray directly to God, I was shirking my “inalienable” duty also, and the blessing of my superiors may not help when I get to the pearly gates.

Ergo, freedom of religious conscience in the American church held the same underpinnings as political freedom generally. Our priest or pastor cannot stand before God on our behalf, so the thinking went. If we alienate our right to form our own religious conscience, we alienate the duty to draw near to God. In the extremes, some churches see value in the church per se as a community, and individualistic churches see value in individual relationships between individuals and God, while most churches tend to see value in both. With regards to church hierarchy, I think it is self-explanatory that some churches are more given to hierarchy than others, most notably the Roman Catholic church, but that all churches that claim not to have a hierarchy, except for maybe Quakers, still organize around the necessary evil of hierarchy, and only try to approach an egalitarian ideal. The problem with this failure to maintain freedom of conscience among protestants is that we have torn at the ex-Officio authority of the Bishop of Rome, only to set up a new bishorpic of our own. If neo-Calvinism is neo-orthodoxy, we have a new protestant “catholic” church, which is as paradoxical in terms, as Unitarian-Trinitarianism seems to be, until we continue digging, and hopefully find common Christianity hidden under the terminological difference. And yet, anyone who is a Bible believer has to admit that there is also a priestly office implied from Melchizedek, to Job, to Jesus Ascension, so the truth has to be

somewhere, not necessarily in the middle, but counterintuitive. As Jesus said, whoever will be the greatest among you will be servant of all.

I once saw N. T. Wright respond to criticism of his interpretation of scripture, by pointing out the irony of supposedly sola scriptura Christians criticizing his reading of scripture by quoting neo-Apostolic tradition. It may only be theological name calling, but he was saying they were neo-Protestant-Catholics. Wright, at least, was claiming to maintain his protestant logic as more consistent with the sola's. Would anyone join a Calvinist Catholic church? It would seem an impossibility to set one up, and yet that is what neo-orthodoxy has the effect of doing.

(Back to Top)

Adolph Von Harnack on Catholicism

Just as the New English Churches can be seen as a reactionary movement against the religious environment of 19th Century America (e.g. as answering John Locke’s question of how should Christian government be run), many other churches and philosophies have grown out of reactions to specific problems. For instance, the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, which drives me up a wall on most days, I find it more palatable when I consider that Kant was trying to find a way to argue against the “wars of religion” that were plaguing Europe. And even the structure of the Roman Catholic Church, according to the great historian of Christianity, Adolph Von Harnack, can be seen as arising out of an early century's reaction against the problem of Gnosticism, where Catholic orthodoxy was a reaction against Gnostic heresy. A few choice quotes from his chapter on Catholicism are illustrative:

Harnack says “the struggle with Gnosticism compelled the Church to put its teaching, its worship, and its discipline, into fixed forms and ordinances, and to exclude everyone who would not yield them obedience.” Here, Harnack is not condemning the Catholic church for this, though he notes that there are many problems that later stem from the necessity of some amount of church structure. What he is saying is that theology can be seen as a form of legalism, which just like every other necessary evil or even unnecessary sin, we have to be forgiving of each other for. As Bonhoeffer says, the lex talionis in the hands of man can only cause chaos. If we go around faulting each other for legalism in our church order, the judgment will fall back on ourselves. We should be forgiving of each other, while trying to allow the Spirit to shape our churches, and if we feel we need to point out someone else’s legalism, it should be done with an understanding that it is a universal human failing.

Harnack continues saying that “if by ‘Catholic’ we mean the church of doctrine and of law, then the Catholic church had its origin in the struggle with Gnosticism.” Of course Harnack is only referring to one side of Catholic history here. The Roman Catholics are the church of St. Peter and the other apostles, but there is an undeniable history of problems with ambition in theology, which we find from the very beginning with differences between Jesus’ disciples wanting to be
the greatest of his followers. When we Protestant Christians think of legalism, we usually do so in the context of things that “other” people do, like Jewish, Muslims, Catholics etc, without first looking for the splinter in our own eye. Of course we would never be legalists. We have been perfected and wear lily white gloves around as proof, cut from the cloth of Calvin or Arminius, we are sure that our church structures are harmless and helpful.

We think instead of the apostles’ experience with Cornelius, for instance. The apostles were initially reluctant to let go of their Jewish limits on who they would interact with, until the Spirit started working in the pagan world, and they realized their theology to that time was being expanded by the hand of God. But this is one of those extreme Theophonic confrontations with legalism, where legalism might better be served by a capital L, or denoted with a rainbow in the sky or something, since it was the Levitical law of God that was being suspended for Christian Jews by God. We should spend our time considering, perhaps, the more run of the mill legalism that just takes the form of sacred cows we make of all sorts of things, and the religious haberdashery we wear.

Being a good Lutheran, Harnack cannot help but have some fun with creedal Christianity as it descends into legalism. He says jokingly that “it is only by mediation that a man can approach God at all, by the mediation of right doctrine, right ordinance, and a sacred book.” If we protestants have ceased to laugh with Harnack, we should live out our faith quite differently, perhaps by joining the Roman Catholic church and submitting to the spiritual descendant of St. Peter. Though I am a protestant and continue to think that we have some witness left in us, I don't fault anyone for wanting to join the Catholic Church. It makes more sense than just about anything else, but then we would have to give up our own sacred cows, our icons of iconoclasm. To put it another way, I am not sure it is right to fail to submit to the Pope, but I am definitely sure that I don't want to submit to a new-fangled doctrinally “catholic” protestant church instead. Doesn't that defeat the whole purpose of Protestantism? And if I don't want to submit to the Pope in Rome, who is at least the descendant of St. Peter, why would I want to submit to some state church, based on divine monarchy or a Herr Pastor, after having escaped to the freedom of American Christianity. The freedom of conscience that we enjoy is a great gift that perhaps we should all be more grateful for, as the Pope implied in his recent visit.

But moving past formal doctrinal submission, Harnack seems to have viewed every “revival” within Christian history as being meant to restore the church from “technical exegesis and theological learning” to “prophecy,” from laity to brotherhood, from “clerics” to “ministers,” from “priestly devices” to “miracles and miraculous cures.” Harnack saw this true religion within Catholicism as well, like “sap allowed to rise” through the protective bark of the church's organization and laws.

The funny thing is that today, many of these laws and ordinances that the Catholic Church was so widely known for arguing about, are now seen by the Catholics as mere terminological differences, except for submission to the Pope as the surrogate of St. Peter, and even that is

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27 See St. Peter (Lions Gate 2005)(motion picture).

89 | Ecumenism, Trinity, Unity, Christian Science

Reed Troutman
something that Vatican II mollifies. So the last “rule” based churches may not really be Catholics anymore, but some in the reformation may have surpassed the Catholics in that sense of the word “catholic,” as Harnack used it.

(Back to Top)

**Freedom qua Authenticity in Religion**

There was a tangent on this idea that was very important for 19th Century Christian thinkers, that something is inauthentic about religion that is not freely arrived at; that God would prefer a noble savage, or a Billy Budd, to the indoctrinated religion of civilization. It was a half-hearted return to natural religion that kept Jesus and the Christian faith, but agreed with the logic of Luther in fleeing the monastery and its authority. As Henry W. Holmes said about 100 years ago during his lecture at the Phillip Brooks house, “to make a child religious is a contradiction in terms.” This was a very American idea. It was very free and New English. It was very hopeful and *tabula rasa*. Freedom of conscience was not understood to lead to disorder, but to best lead to authentic religion. Too often we worry that it leads to pantheism and irreligion, which may also be the case in our apostate times, but the rationale is that in “education and religion alike, liberty implies the development of individual responsibility.” The American experiment with liberty, included thoughtful consideration of the importance of religious liberty as a means to better religion.

That is why in the Bill of Rights James Madison was so adamant that three pence not be spent on religious “establishment,” because he saw state sponsored religion as imminently inauthentic and coercive. And he was not out in theological left field at the time, this was just good protestant theology. Everyone having fled Britain for religious freedom, they were not about to give it up, though today many people now mistakenly think that the framers did not want to support religion with taxes because they were not supporters of religion in general. But the opposite was true, they wanted to not support governmental establishment of religion because they were supporters of *authentic* religion. They felt that for religion to be authentic organization should be accomplished by private will. This authenticity that the early Americans were aiming at was a further reason for the doctrine of no doctrines as well, because even at the level of the local church, they wanted every individual to come to their own authentic conclusions about religion, and they thought doctrines could be a low-level form of coercive pressure.

(Back to Top)

**Arminianism vs. Calvinism, Remonstrants vs. the Dutch Reformed Church, Wesley, vs. Whitfield, Mary Baker Eddy Vs. Calvin, Unitarian vs. Calvinist, NeoCalvinism vs. Billy Graham, Old Calvinism vs. New Calvinism**

Like the Trinitarian divide, the soteriological divide between Wesleyans, Unitarians, Quakers, Christian Scientists and Calvinists has an ancient history that goes back to before Calvin was even born, and can be seen in theoretical divides between Christians, perhaps as far back as the split between St. Paul and St. Barnabas. Is it irresistible grace or really hard to resist grace? Is it
by works or by faith, election or acceptance? A close second to the doctrine of the Trinity that divides Christians is the set of ideas that are soteriological. How are we saved from sin, disease, death and damnation? The history of the controversy is brushed under the carpet too readily by modern church leaders, when in our own time we can see so clearly the disconnect between neo-Calvinists and evangelical leaders. The problem is easily lampooned though, by anyone who stops to see who we would have to throw out if we insist on some meticulous orthodoxy. If we are going to throw out Christians who are not neo-orthodox, it has been suggested we get rid of Luther, Graham, Stott, Barclay, CS Lewis and St. Augustine. I have seen RC Sproul attacked for being too Aquinian as well, and I would like to add Christian Scientists, Quakers, Unitarians, LDS and many others to the list, not to mention now famously Professor Hawkins and anyone who supports her syncretic, heterodox or heretic point of view, depending on your position on the controversy.

The soteriological angle on the American New English protestants are that they were often, to my mind, on the side of Armenian Remonstrants and anti-Calvinists from jolly old England. Mary Baker Eddy's biography includes an anecdote showing what a precocious student she was of Arminius, since she was raised in a good Calvinist family, but when her father demanded she accept the doctrine of predestination she glowingly overcame the curse of Calvin by appealing to God's Love. So popular was Arminianism in 19th Century America, and so hot was the controversy with “old-timey” dogmatism, that Eddy’s liberal views of soteriology helped win her later widespread popularity. We see the popularity of Arminianist views in Methodist America as well, where Wesley is the more remembered Methodist, even though it was Whitfield who brought about the American awakening. The Unitarians fought more among themselves to decide whether annihilationism, universalism or Arminianism made more sense, but none really wanted to keep the five points of Calvin's TULIP. At least to my mind they were all Armenians if they believed in damnation at all. All of these anti-Calvinists thought that faith without works was dead, and preferred Charles Wesley's evangelical “Joy to the World,” to the implicit irresistible grace of Fannie Mae Crosby's “Blessed Assurance.” Ideally we would all have both, but in our modern day of neo-Calvinism, it is no wonder that Unitarian history goes somewhat misunderstood, since there is ongoing controversy over Calvinism and Arminianism to this day. Maybe there always will be, until Christ returns.

There were precursors of this in Catholic Europe, which for generations before Luther had celebrated the friar tucks over the “princes” of the church, which can be seen in the Canterbury tales, legends of Robin Hood, etc. The good friar is always taking up against the corrupt church leader, so the story goes. This is how some Armenians saw Calvinism, through the old prism of a resurrection of the princely state sponsored church. So the debate is actually older than protestant thought, but runs through protestant thought, rather than being a new controversy.

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Another pitfall when looking at the anti-Calvinism of Mary Baker Eddy, John Wesley or Unitarian Christians is to conflate their statements that were meant to be anti-Calvinist with their theology generally. We might think of it that they were 10% anti-Calvinist and 90% Christian. Like we might think that Luther was 10% anti-Catholic and 90% Christian. Where we might otherwise find more agreement than difference, the reactionaries may be overstating their case to get attention for their cause, or focusing only on the problem at hand, unable to take a holistic view. A lot of what Mary Baker Eddy wrote about was in response to the occult intelligentsia of her time, so rather than trying to make Calvin's head explode in every instance of perceived heterodoxy, she was often trying to argue with the “phrenology” movement's view of pantheistic mind healing, and perhaps maintain her status as someone who was learned in phrenology rather than someone learned in theology. When she used the phrenologist’s terms in what she avowed was a Christian way, she may not have been thinking of Calvin at all. And that is how we remember her, as mostly being famous for Christianizing Franz Mesmer's Animal Magnetism, rather than for Arminianizing Calvin’s TULIP.

If you are not initiated into the theological debate about how Christianity is defined, you can think that Mary Baker Eddy or some other figure is controversial for the wrong reasons. Theology is very complex. As far as Arminianism went, Eddy was in line with her Johannine New English contemporaries, and in opposition to her detractors like Henry Varley. Eddy’s positions have fallen out of favor, while Varley’s have surged in relative popularity among nominal Christians in our modern neo-Calvinist times. But the neophyte to theological discussion does not necessarily understand this shift, and if they find that Eddy is an unpopular historical figure within Christendom, they may conclude that it is because she believed in intercessory prayer or something more apparent on the surface of Christian Science practices, rather than seeing the real culprit being soteriological and potentially Christological.

And sometimes the audiences that Christian Science’s Eddy, the Methodist Wesley, and the Unitarian Henry Ware Jr. were preaching to were not faithful Calvinists, Catholics or Baptists, but skeptical neopagans. Eddy was trying to convince pantheists to see that, apart from God, all the metaphysics in the world is impotent. Wesley was trying to reach people who had the “gin sickness.” Ware was trying to maintain the “Christian” in Unitarian Christianity.

(Back to Top)

The Mischief Rule Hermeneutic

Defending the points New English Christians made is sometimes best done from the “mischief rule” hermeneutic. If you look at the problems that New English Christians were trying to solve by chasing after “primitive” Christianity, you come away with a sense that they were all trying to fix some of the same problems in other Christian Churches that James the Just was at the beginning of Church history, in showing faith by works, “nearer my God to thee.” They were trying to follow St. Francis, Martin Luther and Peter Waldo in preferring a jaundiced view of theology and a literal interpretation of the Gospels. They were trying to follow their calling, and to hold Protestantism to its principles. In Mary Baker Eddy's case, she was trying to combat the
mischief of occult practices and materialism in medicine and psychiatry, and the godlessness of those who saw the spiritual side of healing, but rejected the gospel (i.e. Quimby, those at the American Phrenological Journal); who were off away from the Bible and into nontheistic mind-healing.

But Mary Baker Eddy also agreed with Wesley, that the problem of Calvinism was that it could lead to writing people off too easily as unregenerate heathen. As noted above, she grew up in a Calvinist church, and rebelled against the idea of predestination, which made her theology become very evangelical and Wesleyan. It also may have influenced her progressive views of scripture and disagreements with “them bones” theologies based in material history, allowing her to interpolate the ideas of early Quantum physicists without appreciating that some of what they were saying was heretical to the “them bones” theological set. Did this leave her in the position later of having to defend heresy she unwittingly arrived at? Again, this goes to the thesis that Christian Scientists, and many other Christian churches misunderstand their place in Christian history. If you ask a Christian Scientist whether Mary Baker Eddy incorporated ideas popularized by Methodism, John R. MacDuff and Phrenologists into her work, they may not have the foggiest who you were talking about. Some know of the consonance Christian Scientists share with Methodists, where the Methodist revival of America was of consequence to Eddy’s biography, but MacDuff, to Christian Scientists, is just the author of one of the hymns in the Christian Scientist’s hymnal, and we fail to recognize his likely influence on Mary Baker Eddy's style and specifically the tenets of Christian Science. And even though Mary Baker Eddy was antagonistic to the phrenological “mind-healing” movement, we fail to see how we are defined by what we are fighting against. This is true throughout theological history. Acknowledging that we have incorporated these modes of thinking, like Aquinas and Aristotle, while giving them their Christian content, we would be in a better place to dialogue with other traditions, and especially those that are antagonistic toward the perceived shortcomings of Johannine Christianity. When Christian scientists talk wistfully about the halcyon days of triumph over mesmerism, hypnotism and animal magnetism, this is what they are referring to. There is a firm historical basis for their enthusiasm. What she was saying in a nutshell was: "Yes spiritual warfare exists, so get on the right side!" where she viewed the occult side as on a path leading to a dead end or worse. Her Christian response to phrenology's "mesmerism" was not only popular among Christians, but some like Stephen Gottschalk have said innovative.

Another problem the 19th Century faced generally was the juggernaut of modernism taking root out of enlightenment thinking. This problem was common to the entire Christian church. The New English just lent their special witness. So much progress was being made in industry that many were already beginning to think that industry would be able to invent a machine to kill God, if it had not already. As the popular interpretation of Nietchze has it, “God is dead” was a mantra that many pantheists hoped to adopt, and Christians everywhere were seeing the world go headlong toward godlessness. Some faithful Unitarian Christians were screaming their heads off to try and stop that stampede toward pantheism. Jacobins had taken Rome.

The Catholic Church was decrying modernism at this same time, so those in the Unitarian Christian church might be seen as part of the protestant response to get people to see that
spiritual reality was as demonstrable as mechanical sciences. Just one little known instance of this wrestling match between enlightenment thinking and Christian argument, which I always like to consider alongside Bonhoeffer's later pillorying of Immanuel Kant, was the very American refutation of Kant's theory of moral autonomy from Christian Science's Mary Baker Eddy. As Eddy put it “proper self-government -- like our nation, Christian Science has its Declaration of Independence. God has endowed man with inalienable rights, among which are self-government, reason, and conscience. Man is properly self-governed only when he is guided rightly and governed by his Maker, divine Truth and Love.” As opposed to Kant, who said we are only acting rightly if in accord with “autonomous” conscience/reason, which does not necessarily bring God into it, except perhaps as the Giver of reason. But I try not to be too hard on Kant, since he in turn was trying to fix the mischief of the “wars of religion.” But Mary Baker Eddy's formulation has the ring of Kierkegaard who, like Bonhoeffer, would have us understand the existential-situated nature of Christian life; seeing us as human beings who are Christians, rather than Christian robots or automatons; that we must walk as individuals with God from wherever we are.

Another point is the perennial problem of gender and sex difference in society, as it shapes our views and prejudices in theology. As Pope Francis finished his American tour, we saw critics wondering if the Catholic church is egalitarian enough as the term relates to gender equality, while complimentarian support for the Catholic stance on traditional gender roles is somewhat muted. Allowing the feminine theological voice to be heard is important, but how this is grounded biblically or is a taking of cultural sides is a discussion that Complimentarians and Egalitarians are continuing to hash out. One thing that I think is always missed in the discussion though, is the uncanny comparison between Mary Baker Eddy and Julien of Norwich and Hildegard of Bingen, for just three instances of feminine theology “in a different voice,” as Carol Gilligan says. As Christian historians, one thing we can learn is that there are lots of theological and ecclesiological pendulums swinging through different churches at different times. Many Methodists today might be surprised to find that the “alter call” now associated with Southern Baptists and revival tents, was a Wesleyan mode of preaching. Methodists have done away with it for the criticism of manipulative preaching that it sustains, but it is fun to imagine Wesley riding through the country-side of jolly old England to give an alter call. But it seems with regard to the expression of feminine theological voice, we see it crop up at different times during history and then recede into the background. The ancient roots are in the women of the Bible, from Sarah and Rebekah to the Virgin Mary and St. Photina, but the feminine voice was also allowed to flourish to differing degrees in the convents of the Roman Catholic church, and then in Protestant spheres.

A funny tidbit of Christian Science history is that after Eddy died, a great big pyramid shaped memorial was erected, and then subsequently torn down when the Board of the church, rightly I think, pointed out that such monuments were out of keeping with Mary Baker Eddy's wishes and theology. There was a slow forgetfulness on this point though, and there have always been zealous members of the church who insist on going overboard and placing her in the pantheon of gods. Famously someone equated her with the dragon lady of the apocalypse, and the Christian
Science church had to deal with a controversy recently while trying to collect from the estate of the well-heeled author of the “dragon” lady claim.

While Catholic style gratitude and veneration of a saint may be ok, for instance, gratitude toward St. Anthony when we find our keys, but the adoration and apotheosis is too much as Mary Baker Eddy suggested during her ministry, and we suspect she is looking down from heaven alongside all the other saints, with a gigantic frown. This perception of the deification of Eddy, more than heterodoxy or heretical doctrine, is in large part why some Christians view the Christian Science church as having a “cult” status, because so many Christian Scientists revere their founder to a fault, but it was not the original intention, and the leadership of the Church in Boston has done a good job of being transparent with Eddy’s flaws and theological wishes lately, so maybe it is a moot point. The recent critical biography by Gillian Gill was published by the church which helps to take her down off a pedestal also.

(Back to Top)

**Old Calvinist TULIP vs. NeoCalvinist Evangelical-TULIP**

Calvinism is now misunderstood as well. We now have to define Calvinism over time, like we have defined Unitarians at different points in time, or Roman Catholics, pre and post Vatican II, and Christian Science in Eddy’s day and modernly. Calvinism has gone through some different changes that have moderated its predestined aloofness from the evangelical agenda.

The Westminster confession of 1647 was basically based on Calvin's theology, but the changes to it over the years show that theological controversy has not left Calvinists alone either. The Orthodox Calvinists point out how little has been changed in the confession, but at the same time highlight the important content of those changes, including a greater tolerance in America for religious differences. We often want to gloss over these changes as unimportant, but these little changes were the most important points to those Calvinists who made them. As lawyers say of contracts, changes like these can be seen to represent the “dickered terms” of the theological new deal.

This can cause misunderstanding among people who are not familiar with the history of Calvinism. If a Christian Scientist is told that a person is Calvinist, they might react by pitying the poor soul's lack of evangelical attitude, not knowing that “neo-Calvinists” are not wanting in this department at all. Christian Scientists, not having kept up with the Calvinist's church history since Mary Baker Eddy sided with Wesley have missed out on this “history of the idea.”

As something that came to America mostly from English speaking Europe, Calvinism has something of this in common with the economics history of Keynesianism. In the “history of ideas” generally (with thanks again to Lovejoy), this has happened with economics ideas, where

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people who think of themselves as “Keynesian” are often surprised to find that John Maynard Keynes would not approve of modern, or American “Keynesian” economics. The same is true for American neo-Calvinists. I'm not sure that modern Calvinists would be acceptable to Calvin if he were with us today.

The biggest of turns in Calvinist thought, to my mind, can be seen reflected in the later Calvinist Spurgeon, who couples the idea of being Calvinist and evangelical. The exchange between Wesley and Toplady pretty well convinced most Calvinists that the truth was inclusive of both ideas, and neither extreme.

(Back to Top)

Again, All Seriousness Aside: Spicy Ketchup

Putting on our “cultural anthropologist” hat, everyone sees that while individuals may defy the norms of the society they are a part of, every church has a “modal personality,” which can change across time and territory. We might note that the values of modern Unitarian Universalists and Community Churches place an emphasis on hospitality, which forms or attracts a particularly outgoing and hospitable modal personality in community churches. People go where they feel comfortable. People go where they fit in in church.

What did this look like 200 years ago in the nascent New English churches? Where did Irish immigrants feel they fit in best? We might joke that whole waves of puritanical Irish immigrants hitting the docks of New England became particularly drawn to churches where it was generally agreed that ketchup was spicy. They were a spiceless lot to begin with, so the blandness of the Christian Science church, for instance, may have given them a welcome sense of home. Already feeling lost in a new world, they would not want to challenge their palates. Or were they convinced that ketchup was spicy by the Lutherans they met who only ate mustard?

One of the themes that people who do church history repeatedly come back to in what is important for understanding ecclesiology, is that there is a “kernel and a husk” problem to the question of “what is Christianity?.” My initial reaction to this theme, widely repeated by church historians, is that it seems a silly question since everything is both kernel and husk. We are not sure why great minds like Harnack return to it so often. God cares about what we care about, so everything is kernel, even ketchup. What is bound on earth will be bound in heaven, what is loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven. But what I ultimately think is the importance of the kernel and husk dichotomy as a useful tool for these historians, is that in analyzing different Christian peoples across time and space and having to explain some perplexing ways they had, church historians required this explanatory analytical device. Like if Harnack is looking at Ethiopian Christians, why do Ethiopian Christians celebrate the Ark of the Covenant especially? If it is essential to Christianity, then they are the only fully functioning Christians, or is it husk or elective kernel? Or why did Southern Christians persist in slave ownership for so long? Or why did Congressman Bob Brady steal Pope Francis' water glass?
So this “kernel and husk” concept has been useful for me in clearing up the confusion in looking back through New English Christian history, which is often confounded by the Victorian/Waspy sensibilities of our Unitarian Christian brothers and sisters from up north, who may have believed that to be Christian was tied to how one felt about equality of the sexes, temperance or Manifest Destiny. Unitarians, and the churches they influenced during the Victorian Era, including the Christian Science Church, the Unity Church, the Quakers, the Northern Baptists, are all still very Victorian and Waspy. They will probably be re-reading Little Women this holiday season as a way to celebrate the spicelessness of New English history, and if ketchup is served they will comment on how spicy it is, and go for the mustard in droves.

In fact, the only doctrinal issue on which there is universal agreement among these protestant thinkers is that ketchup is spicy. It is an old kernel and husk problem, that is potentially culturally bound. Yes, they were originally iconoclastic, but then the Quakers appeared to develop an aesthetic of their own, if only a bland aesthetic of “simplicity.” From the Quakers we have such sauceless moments as Richard Nixon playing the piano, and the Quaker Oat character posing in his monochromatic black cape. Quaker society was based on the same principle that ketchup is spicy. We Puritans eschew outward signs of sauciness. Some say Christian Scientists are not really sauceless, because of their liberal use of pastel colored wall paper in their church libraries, but they respond humorlessly enough when you point this out the them, to show that their heads are in the right place.

The New English culturally bound sensibilities of stodgy Bostonian Protestantism, whether it affected the theological conclusions they drew is an open question that I will just throw out there. What affect on “the Harvard Man” might have been seen from The Great Ketchup Rebellion? Was continental expansion fueled in part by a desire to bring Quaker oatmeal to Mexico? But we Puritans do know that in religious life we sometimes tossed aside Hildegard of Bingen's admonition to reconcile nature to ourselves because we hated nature because it was too saucy; and Hildegard's admonition to give to the sinner “the wine of repentance and anoint him with the oil of mercy” was disregarded in favor of grape juice and blood letting, which some might conclude resurrected some forms of ascetic flagellation that Hildegard would certainly be against. I am a big fan of Hildegard and suspect we may have gone too far. But this way of viewing history with the kernel and husk device allows us to see that the hairs that Quakers and Unitarian Christians were trying to split were not necessarily with the important work of Aquinas per se, but maybe sometimes just with the derivative work of Southerners who were putting Tabasco sauce on their rice. Tabasco sauce invited all manner of lasciviousness, and we remember it today simply as the Great Tobasco Controversy of the Synod of Ought Nine, but it was very important to those in attendance from the North, who had to smell hot sauce that they were not accustomed to.

Just like any good revivalist movement that is catering to the religious needs of the people in front of them, the New English themselves had trouble separating kernel and husk. Having spent so much time trying to get to know these Victorian people, how they thought, and even considering their customs of how they ate and such, it is easy to mistake their cultural influences
for theology sometimes. And they themselves do this on occasion, like with abstinence from alcohol being perhaps the most famous, with Methodists leading the charge on the demon rum.

But lest we only pick on New English, this game is best played in the round. Roman Catholics are particular for inclusion of Italian Christians, who Luther was so envious of their artistic abilities that he started the Reformation. How dare they be more artistic than the rest of us, and wearing nicer shoes? Luther’s thought, essentially, grew out of his understanding that Christianity should be much more drab. And if the old style Christian Unitarians were here with us today, they would share his alarm at the modern fascination with color in our society, while maybe peppering their exhortations with neologisms like “churchianity.” But I suspect they would still likely think that ketchup is spicy, which was the more important point for them. This much at least we can all agree on, husk though it is. The question of whether catsup is the correct Unitarian spelling is beyond the scope of my thesis.

Of course, I am not as funny as the “Catholic Guy,” Lino Rulli,30 who regularly points out on his radio show the ways that Catholicism is offended by puritanical monochrome, but I just wanted to share these few bits of New English reasoning with everyone.

(Back to Top)

Protestant Christology and Catholic Mariology

Back to the core of theology though for a moment, the differences between Catholic and Protestant ideas about the place of the Virgin Mary in theology is a third point that might be seen to divide many Christians. For many of us, Our Lady of the Rosary is worthy of belief,31 as the Catholic Church says of Our Lady of Fatima. But we all know there is some lingering anti-Catholic sentiment among protestants for the Mariology that those claiming to be sola scriptura Christians do not share with those who accept more of the Apostolic tradition. Some Protestants say that Catholics “worship Mary” instead of God, and this has old roots in protestant history, where C. H. Spurgeon had a way of slighting Catholics for venerating a “winking” Mary, which he thought was all superstition.

The Catholics, if you look into their logic, are not being superstitious or unbiblical, but basing their reasoning about Mary on themes that run through the gospels and on the history of Mary’s tomb. The sticking point for ecumenism as regards doctrinal tests for Trinitarian belief would be that, Catholics say Mary’s bodily Assumption into heaven puts her on a level above mere sainthood for Catholics, and this is a problem potentially for some protestant Trinitarian theology that has jettisoned the idea of different levels of sainthood, let alone a special place of adoration for the Virgin Mary as the Queen of Heaven and the Angels. I’m not sure how people who claim there are certain doctrines that have “always” been taught by Christians, if those same protestants

30 See Linorulli.com.
perceive a turn in the Catholic faith after either the Assumption of Mary just under two thousand years ago, or the Marion Apparition at Fatima about a hundred years ago.

If Trinitarian belief is the test for Christianity, at least some protestant Christians seem to be making the fantastic claim that Roman Catholics are no longer Christian if their cosmology has both saints and Mary shining down on us from heaven. And after Fatima, the Catholic Church, and all the Catholics you meet, believe that Jesus wants us to be devoted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, and this is a potential stumbling block for reconciliation between at least some neo-orthodox protestants and Roman Catholic Trinitarianism. The claim of historical unity of thought on the doctrine of the Trinity is shaken, since not all protestants have “always” taught the Assumption of Mary, especially the sola scriptura set. When we sola scriptura Christians agree with Catholics in their devotion, we want to see biblical support for her special place in heaven, which some of us find in the Annunciation of Gabriel, the Magnificat and the prophecy of Simeon, not to mention the glaring lack of her remains, assumed as she was into heaven. This presents a problem for protestant church historians though, who have to deal with antagonistic figures like Spurgeon.

Water Baptism

Another funny thing to notice is the Wikipedia article on baptism, which says, “Today, some Christians, particularly Christian Scientists, Quakers, The Salvation Army, and Unitarians, do not see baptism as necessary, and do not practice the rite.” But that gets it only half right. All of these churches do not practice the rite of WATER baptism. It stems from the same intuition that led protestants to be iconoclastic generally, but they all believed they were baptized in the Word, and Christian Unitarians, as opposed to the universalist variety, believed in the baptism of carrying one's cross as well. Foregoing water baptism was just another eschewing of outward signs of worship, though there were also instrumental reasons why submersion in water is an unwieldy process for mass evangelicalism, especially in cold climates or unhygienic settings.

And how do we reconcile outward signs of worship like lifting our hands toward heaven, when every good post-reformation protestant knows that you cannot point to the “heaven of heavens,” sometimes understanding the kingdom of heaven to be within ourselves. We are equally shocked to find that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s contact with the Catholic church ultimately led him to start crossing himself. The protestant conclusion was that pious religious conscience is where you find it, with or without certain trappings of Christianity like water baptism or other outward signs of worship. There is the cultural angle as well, where we don't still argue over whether Christians in a desert climate should have to be fully submerged or if sprinkling is enough. Perhaps reaching one hand out toward heaven works fine, so long as God closes the gap, and when Bonhoeffer did it, I suspect crossing himself was a way to smash the icon of iconoclasm.

But in the cold of New England, in the sanitary challenge of a Salvation Army homeless shelter, in a sauce-free Quaker household, water baptism could shock those Northern sensibilities, and
seem to invite the use of ketchup, which could call to mind the old Tabasco Controversy of Ought Nine, and no one wants to bring up such a divisive issue. We may as well start playing the rock-and-roll music in church.

Who Decides which Churches Are Trinitarian?

The Wikipedia article I mentioned on “non-Trinitarian” Christian churches had another funny thing about it, which was that it lists the Christian Science church as non-Trinitarian. That is the mistake of confusing the “doctrine of no doctrines” with being for or against a particular doctrine. If anything, the Christian Science church should be considered a Trinitarian church of some type, and if we polled them in the sola scriptura vernacular language they would certainly 100% come out this way. I.e. “Do you believe that Jesus is the Son of God? That the Mind of Christ was in Christ Jesus? That the Holy Spirit is at work in Churches? That Jesus and His Father are One? In the Virgin Birth? In the Ascension? etc.” Perhaps these questions are too easy by not forcing some specific Trinitarian point, like “Is Jesus God?,” as the controversy at Wheaton is currently considering, but I would expect the vast majority of Christian Scientists would answer an unequivocal yes to this question as well, at least in the sense of agreeing with Aquinas that Jesus had a “unity” of “essence” with His Father, or specifically that there was an essential “oneness” as Mary Baker Eddy paraphrased Aquinas. If we further weed out those few Christian Scientists who have a view of Mary Baker Eddy as an object of apotheosis rather than mere sainthood as she understood herself, then we might lose two or three more wingnuts, but would still be left with a 99% Trinitarian church.

The Christian Science church has been pointing out in recent years that Mary Baker Eddy's religious beginnings were Congregationalist, and therefore that the Christian Science church is Trinitarian. But coming from a Congregationalist family and maintaining her membership there may not be decisive. That would be a poorer reason to conclude she was Trinitarian when there were so many Unitarians she kept company with and corresponded with. Though her maintaining her membership there is a partial argument from her biography, a better reason to think she was Trinitarian come from her statements at Tremont Temple, which show her to have thought the matter through. She had apparently intelligently thought through the Unitarian debates and honestly concluded, alongside Aquinas, that there was an essential oneness between Jesus and God, which nevertheless remained amenable to Aristotelean/Aquinian/Johannine/Hellenistic metaphor.

One thing that can be confusing here is that, for reasons specific to her Victorian philosophical anthropology, she leaned toward the stoic side of Christian placement of “personality.” She tried to talk around the “personal” nature of the Godhead by using a functional equivalent term that has not caught on in our modern time, “individuality.” That is, in her view Jesus had an essential oneness with God the Father, one essence as Aquinas would say. And Jesus retained his individuality from the Father in heaven, like the Complimentarians say. I think some of this is
culturally bound, like ketchup being spicy. But some of it borders on heterodox Hellenistic views that some consider heretical and too close to Gnosticism or the Docetic heresy.

It is probably just terminological difference though, explained by a dim view that stoic Victorian society had of “personality.” If the song “walk with personality, talk with personality,” were around in the Victorian era, for some reason the connotation that the word “personality” had developed for the New English would make them want to instead sing “walk with individuality, talk with individuality.” Personality they thought was just too spicy, like ketchup. Like Luther, the New English wanted to have a drabber “individuality.”

(Back to Top)

**Christian Science Marriages**

As Christian Scientists don't make arrangements for water baptism as a church, though they believe instead in the baptism of the word, and may elect I suppose to be baptized in water if they want, even more exceptional though, Christian Scientists don't make provision for marriage ceremonies either, so Christian Scientists are usually married by a reverend pastor from another denomination. Since Luther threw out every sacrament but communion and baptism, if you look at the history of the protestant church, everything he threw out the window came walking back through the door at some point in some protestant form, but not uniformly in every church. What Luther threw out remained implicit in our Christian anthropology, whether Luther could find everything in sola scriptura form or not. But oddly enough, the New English went even further than Luther, finishing the job he started, by throwing out water baptism, and replacing it with baptism of the word.

Communion is yet another story, where Christian Scientists don't break bread or drink grape juice. They kneel twice a year, which while a sparing use of an outward sign of worship that was a tolerable functional equivalent, yet may have still been too saucy for some of the Quakers in attendance, who preferred to commune in the Spirit only. Still another hurdle in trying to understand the theology of the Christian Science church is that they don't maintain a seminary. No water baptism, no arrangements made for wedding ceremonies and no seminary. What a crazy turn of events. That such an idiosyncratic church should ever exist is uncanny.

Some Christian Scientists in Illinois have been maintaining a college for over 120 years, but no Christian Science M.Div is forthcoming. Christian scientists who want a divinity degree have to go somewhere else. Ironically the Christian Science movement started out as a “Metaphysical College,” but dropped out of academia and became a church with no degree granting academic arm. They do use Christian Science teachers and Associations for advanced teaching purposes, but these are much less formal than the 2-to-5 year M.Div., which is the staple of most church organizations. But you have to admire the New English expression of the protestant egalitarianism that holds up the priesthood of all believers.
Reconciling all the things we know about Christian Scientists against the universe of Christian beliefs and practices can be a lengthy pursuit. It can be a worthwhile exercise though, in making us more adept at parsing between religious belief sets in general, like Muslim, Bhuddist, etc. Taking up the theoretical and historical debate on behalf of the Quaker, the Christian Scientist and the Unitarian enables us to take it up on behalf of the Muslim or Jewish person. Particularly the similarity between the predicament of Muslims not being able to explain their way out of the box we paint them into, is very close to the predicament of Unitarians and Christian Scientists. And now Professor Hawkins, who dares to quote the Koranic phrase that we are people “of the Book,” by which Muhammad just meant the people of Mosaic law that Jesus said he came to fulfill. Does that make Professor Hawkins Muslim or Christian, or both? Like 97% Christian and 3% Muslim?

Hyper-Egalitarian Trinitarianists In-Depth

Examining Trinitarian literature, causes us to run into what linguists call a “lexical gap,” created by the combination of our modern focus on Trinitarian doctrine when combined with older Hellinistic ways of thinking about God. I have coined a hyphenated neologism to help me understand the way that Mary Baker Eddy viewed the Trinity, though I think she was following in the line of the scholastic theologians, particularly Aquinas and scholastic theology generally, but potentially the Hellenistic thinking of John the Evangelist, which continued through Patristic thinking and had a tremendous influence on Protestant writing from the impact of Augustine’s Confessions. This form of Trinitarianist/Hellinistic thinking can be termed “Hyper-Egalitarian Trinitarianism.” When the attributes of God are seen alongside our modern debate between Complimentarians and Egalitarians, as a third way of being Trinitarian that has gone undefined, it can add nuance to our categorization of Christian understanding. Though in older Christian histories, complicated versions of Trinitarianist ideas was not always seen as the sine qua non of Christianity, so this type of thinking was simply referred to as “Hellenistic.”

Hellinistic thinking was not only Augustinian, but Johannine and Pauline and Judaic. Modern Calvinist Complimentarian Trinitarians take the position that the superior way to refer to God is by the neo-Calvinist doctrine of the Trinity. For example, if someone claims to “know God,” but does not appreciate and understand the doctrine of the Trinity and the perfect eternal relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they might be seen to have an inferior or immature understanding. Unless they take the longer sola scriptura reference, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but even then some neo-Calvinists use a doctrinal rule to make sure that people understand the Trinity both correctly and with extreme specificity. But not everyone has always agreed that one way of approaching God is superior to others, and we refer to these people as egalitarians I guess, who hold that if you address a prayer to God by any of His names, Father, Son or Holy Spirit, He hears. This is what Professor Hawkins was getting at when she says Muslims and Christians worship the same God, since after all there is only one God. She is a good egalitarian Trinitarianist, but not a good complementarian Trinitarianist. The added question then, is if we see God as through His Univocal attributes, Life, Truth and Love, may we approach God that
way also, using what Christian Scientists call “synonyms” for God, which the scholastics called Univocal Attributes. The answer from a Hyper-egalitarian Trinitarian is yes. As it is potentially for many Orthodox Jews and Muslims.

It is possible even to make an argument that the doctrine of the “Trinity” is so complex, that a prayer to “Our Father,” as Jesus taught us to pray, may be superior to a prayer to the Trinity, since the cognitive load it puts on us infinity incapax created beings pushes the limits of our ability to think. To think on the Trinity of God, or God's TriUnity, as Mary Baker Eddy says, uses up all of the cognitive “levels of intentionality” that even smart people have according to psychologists. Is it any wonder that some of us more simple people appreciate a simpler faith? The argument would be that the name “Trinity” for God, is such a complex idea that it may be better left as a theoretical framework for understanding the Godhead for seminary students only.

As a matter of history, the name “Trinity” for God is relatively new compared to some of the other names for God, like Jehovah, or Yaweh, or the Lord of Hosts, all of which are thousands of years older than Christianity, where the Trinity is dated to some early century of years Anno Domini, surfacing sometime after the canonical gospels were written, but relatively established in theory by the time of Athanasius and Arius. But if we see this relatively new term “Trinity” as being coextensive with the old terms for God, and we are egalitarian at the same time, then we can say Isaiah’s references to our Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel, is equal to referring to Jesus Christ. And if we go one Aristotelean step further, and point out that God's attributes are Univocal in nature, and therefore unique to God, which is where the old attribute/synonym names come from anyways, then we have “hyper-egalitarian Trinitarianists,” including potentially Augustine, Aquinas and Mary Baker Eddy. Christian Scientist's references to God as Life, Truth and Love, rubs many Christians the wrong way for the same reason that many Protestant's don't canonize Aquinas’ Summa Theologica, because it waxed too philosophical for their sola sensibilities. Even though both Mary Baker Eddy and Aquinas felt the references they were making were strictly Biblical, as much as any personal Trinitarian references are, though either can be taken out of their Christian context as Gnostics and Universalists do, and some accuse Mary Baker Eddy of doing herself.

And indeed, we can chafe at what could be perceived as a lack of “incarnational” thinking that hyper-egalitarian viewpoints can imply if taken to a docetic extreme, but the answer from the school yard is “you too.” Everyone is subject to the human inability to escape the cave on our own. Both sides of the debate are pointing to something missing in the others’ framework. Mary Baker Eddy and Aquinas get the metaphor, and Calvin and Henry of Ghent get the sovereignty, and if we read any of these theologians as a whole rather than nitpicking one sentence here or there, we see that they each get both Aristotelian and Platonic aspects of the Gospel to some extent, but one or the other predominates, because we are always infinity incapax, and have limited perspective.

Again, as with the “doctrine of no doctrines,” if we look closer at what Mary Baker Eddy was doing during the 19th Century, there is a theological maneuver that was very important to her,
when she was confronting what she saw as materialistic “them bones” theology; and something very important to the “them bones” theologians, who to this day will not undergo cremation at their funerals, because they expect Jesus to come back and resurrect the saints bodily using the bones we leave asleep. Mary Baker Eddy was more in agreement with Bonhoeffer who said we should be looking forward to a “really new” heaven and earth, where the “them bones” theologians see Jesus returning to fix this world. Eddy and Bonhoeffer saw total transformation. I don't know who is right, and I hope I am being fair to both sides, but I suspect mere terminological difference sometimes, and I am not concerned that Almighty God could not resurrect us from a state of cremation, if that is the point that Bonhoeffer and Mary Baker Eddy were making.

And not just Eddy and Bonhoeffer, or Grecian and Native American theologians prior to contact with Christianity, but the practice of finding synonyms for God has been a common practice for philosophically minded Johannine churches, not to mention the names of God in Judaism, etc., and often even orthodox Christian teachers will use one of these synonyms for God, when trying to broaden a debate over this or that, they point to an attribute of God that they invoke for their reasoning. God is our Healer they say, Jehovah Rapha. Metaphorical thinking has this effect as it can use abstract terms over concrete. And some Christians are concerned that St. Francis refers to Brother Sun and Sister Moon, and that Hasidic Jews see creation mystically.

Perhaps someone can think of a better term than hyper-egalitarian, or maybe someone knows of a term I have missed in concluding there is a lexical gap. Or perhaps the old term Hellenistic was good enough. But the combination of reflexive analogical reasoning that God is Love or that God is Father, with beliefs about the Trinity, sets those who engage in such ways of thinking apart, alongside or distinct from strict Complimentarians and Egalitarians. These theologians seem to reflexively close the loop. Where we want a simile, they give us a metaphor. To St. Francis, the sun is not like a brother, in that my brother and the sun are both creations of God that God is pleased when they do His will. To St. Francis, Brother Sun pleased God by racing across the sky as directed. Incidentally, since I think Thomists, and therefore modern Roman Catholics in general often fall into this category, this is not just applicable to some tiny minority view within Christianity. Many if not most Christians are hyper-egalitarian. After Vatican II, religious bodies with highly specific doctrinal statements lacking syncretic or ecumenical mandates are more in the minority. This fact of hyper-egalitarian Trinitarianists being something like a “silent majority” has gone somewhat unnoticed since within the Protestant world neo-Calvinism can seem to be a majority of Christians. But this illusion quickly vanishes in the wake of Pope Francis’ recent visit and the headlines over Professor Hawkins being suspended for voicing her agreement with Catholic ecumenical positions.

“Attribute” theology becomes a way of seeing Jewish and Muslim people alongside Christians, with coextensive references to God, not to mention non-Abrahamic faiths, in how we all name and relate ourselves to God. Is attribute theology the same as or more than mere syncretism? Attribute is a way of approaching God as well as a way of seeing our neighbors’ theology. Some definitions of syncretism probably are broad enough to encompass these ideas as well. So to repeat my joke about Mary Baker Eddy, she was a very late scholastic theologian, and Professor
Hawkins is a very, very late scholastic theologian. The names for God that different churches, synagogues and mosques use can be traditional and ancient, like God is Love, God is our Shalom, God is the God Who Sees Me, or relatively new ones, like God is He Who Stands at the door and knocks from our Savior's parable, or from the enlightenment, God is the Great Watchmaker. Indeed, modern invention often has given rise to new metaphors for how we see the Divine, just as Isaiah saw God as our Potter.

And some Christians have trouble with the Gospel of John's Aristotelian equation of God with Love, where they might readily accept that God is our Father, since a father is a concrete idea, where love is abstract. Mary Baker Eddy had the opposite problem. John was her favorite Gospel, and she thought he was the greatest evangelist. Both capital letters on Father and Love though, are denoting the special univocal nature of the “attributes” of God, who is both Father of all and perfect Love. But when we see standalone references to God, of either Platonic or Aristotelian variety, whether God Who/Which is the Father or God Who/Which is Love, denoted by the capitalized letter, we meet a philosophical divide. That is why on some days I can’t give Eddy more than a B- for her theology, since she glosses over the personal nature of God, but I am not ultimately her judge, and maybe there is something of the feminine theological voice about her that I just don't get. Or maybe she and Kant are correct that religion is more amenable to syllogistic logic than Bonhoeffer and I suspect. Or maybe the criticism is inapposite where we find functional equivalent terms like “individuality” for personhood. And where Eddy was like a “battle hardened” veteran, who was philosophizing about Christian nursing first, and only engaging theology per se as an afterthought. In Eddy’s case, she spent all her time being a protestant Florence Nightingale dealing with psych patients and teaching them that ketchup was spicy, so of course she would be suspect of theological notions of “personality.” Christianity still has difficulty incorporating the ideas of the field of psychology. Soul sickness we know how to deal with, belief systems we can analyze and study in the context of the Bible, but personality is more intractable and psychology is its own religion. Modernly, the “practice” of Christian Science, what Christian Science Practitioners do, could be seen as a combination of intercessory prayer and Christian counseling. I sometimes wonder that so few people have put together that the conversation that modern psychology has about “transference” or “counter-transference,” is a very similar conversation to what Mary Baker Eddy has always been accused of being crazy or paranoid for having. Not to mention the modern charismatic church's way of seeing spiritual warfare.

The “hyper-egalitarian Trinitarianist” vs. orthodox Trinitarian divide is also a very complex thing for me to try and describe when relating my theological research to Christian Scientists, and when I explain Christian Scientists to the neo-orthodox Christians I know, I have trouble getting around the same biographical angle that I criticize Mary Baker Eddy devotees for starting with. “Well you see, she slipped on the ice.” So theologians who wonder how to parse Mary Baker Eddy's views into the modern conversation may find my neologism helpful, but if we really want to understand what was going on in Mary Baker Eddy's head, there may be no way around “going native” to her 19th Century environment in our imagination. Emerson was on the tip of everyone's tongues; Edison had just invented the light bulb; mesmerism was all the rage; Mary Baker Eddy, the puritan Christian New English woman gets involved in the speaking
circuit and masters the art of homeopathic medicine as it was known to the 19th Century; and then rediscovers what we all should know because it is written on our hearts, that only God can ultimately heal us. She starts practicing her “discovery” of “Christian Science” prayer treatment, which combines what was theretofore known as hypnotic suggestion with “declaring the truth,” by which she means the Christian truth, vice occult error. And she does this not in a seminary or monastery, but in 19th Century hospitals and psych wards with sick people and to the applause of liberal Protestant Christians. Like a Catholic priest might perform an exorcism, but in a mode that both Christians and religious Quantum physicist naturopaths would recognize, Eddy teaches people to cast out sickness. Eddy felt she was following Jesus example and direction. But then all of a sudden everyone expected this successful alternative medicine doctor to do theology and pastor a church. And then she became too ambitious perhaps and wanted to sell books, like Mark Twain, who she later outdid in sales.

But the effect on ecumenism or on church disunity that jumps out at us from older Hellenistic writings that includes those capitalized letters denoting the attributes of God as synonyms for God, was that the friction between people who think more platonically or those who think less metaphorically becomes palpable. When Mary Baker Eddy refers to the trinity of Life, Truth and Love at Tremont Temple, we wonder if she was trying to make some peoples' heads explode. I still don't understand it, because it is not in line with her other work on the subject. To me, I cannot help but wonder if she was purposely trying to get the goat of her Pauline/Platonic Christian counterparts who she saw as too materialists, from the vantage point of her Johannine inclined theology. Was it a shot across someone’s bow? Did she know that her Johannine/Aristotelian mode is a theological extreme? Seeing that Jesus condescension was to the role of a servant, it may have just come naturally to her to echo Aquinas and take a hard line against those she criticized for making Christianity into a personality cult of “vain” worship. But in doing so she obfuscated her incarnational beliefs, which up to that time conformed to the Aquinian orthodox view of the divine persons of the Trinity, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; encompassing every other Good also. The best way to see it may be to see her refusal to use the doctrine of the orthodox Trinity, as a refusal to bow before a theological (abstracted) effigy of Jesus, just a hard stance on being an iconoclast. Many people, even Christian Scientists, miss this about Mary Baker Eddy, that like many of her 19th Century protestant contemporaries, she was an iconoclast. She was not as good an iconoclast as some Quakers, but their influence was felt. This is another brick in the wall of the problems I see from a lack of church history. Most Christian Scientists I know don't have a solid history of iconoclastic Christianity as it relates to 19th Century American Christianity, so they may never arrive at this conclusion about why Mary Baker Eddy was anti-doctrine.

The Man Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father was the Savior Mary Baker Eddy loved whole-heartedly, but an effigy or doctrinal “abstraction” she saw as a temptation to the sin of idolizing Jesus’ effigy. Just like if we put up a Baroque Crucifix in a Calvinist church. We good puritans only allow organ music to be baroque in our protestant churches, because ketchup is spicy. Meanwhile, her more platonic New English counterparts saw the same problem, that ketchup was spicy, but from a different angle. They were not going to erect a Crucifix like the Catholics, but neither would they abandon their idea that Jesus coming in the flesh was the
Embodyment of Love, and they refused to bow before what they saw as an effigy of the Light of the world, which was an abstract metaphor that did not come naturally to them. Both sides can be seen to be iconoclastic of each other, though both agree that baroque organ music was bland enough to be acceptable. But this is the problem that post-Calvinist protestant Christian history has with “popery” in general also, not to mention some things that are very important Kernel for our fellow Catholics, like transubstantiation, and Luther's consubstantation, where we New English had long since been doing things iconoclastically “in memory of” which Catholics are sure we are at least somewhat apostate for.

Since most Protestant American theology comes from either Calvin or Arminius, it is no wonder that this identification with Aquinas puts Christian Scientists so much on the outs, since for all that Calvin and Arminius had dispute over, neither were as Johannine or Aristotelian as Eddy and Aquinas. Calvin and Arminius could be seen as more Platonic, like Henry of Ghent and Augustine. So Christian Scientists are not the only ones who can benefit from more time in Church History classes. We all need to try to understand each other better. Catholics won't understand us until they see we are being iconoclastic, and we won't understand Catholics until we see they have closed the loop like Luther, that Christ's presence on earth is made real in the Eucharist, in our coming together in church, and that iconoclasm itself can be a false idol. But

And whether we Protestants like to admit it or not in our more cavalier protestant churches of today, with all of our pyrotechnics and visual aids, our forebears in protestant thought aligned themselves much more with Muslims on the issues of iconoclasm. No crucifixes, sparing use of symbols, sola scriptura and communion “in memory of.” We should have white walls and non-ornate crosses at the altar, if at all. If we can see where Catholics are coming from in following 1 Corinthians, they are correct that iconoclasm can be an icon. Where we admire Mary Baker Eddy and Henry Ware for refusing to bow before abstractions they thought were idolatrous, we can also respect platonic Christians refusal to adopt metaphors they think leave out too much of the incarnation. One Christian's metaphor is another Christians false idol, requiring us to forgive each other our limited understandings, forebear to judge, and make better efforts to communicate, and lovingly correct and help each other. The alternative is to mount our trusty steed Rosinante and charge at each other with messianic assurance that our way is the only right way, as we suspect Mary Baker Eddy may have done at Tremont Temple.

By 19th Century New English standards, Mary Baker Eddy was a tolerably good theologian, but even a cursory critical look at her work reveals plenty for criticism. For instance, like many theologically naive 19th Century Americans, she seems to equate the “Immaculate Conception” with the “divine conception of Jesus,” rather than Mary. Of course, this is the theological equivalent of a malapropism or typo, but rather than condemn Christian Scientists and Unitarians for all these errors or misunderstandings, I have always been disappointed that there is not better communication among churches. Granted, busy pastors lack the time to help sort these things out, but it can lead to theological isolation. Christian Scientists should readily see the problem of Muslims, because if becoming theologically isolated can happen to femininely-Aristotelianly-FlorenceNightengale voiced Christian Scientists, it can certainly happen to Fifth Century-Mohammad voiced non-Christians. We need more theological debate and sharing, less
agreement to disagree and more engagement, or at least ministries of presence, and prayer. Disunity is the stuff that Rodin sculpted after reading Dante’s Inferno, but we are assured that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church of God, so we should be optimistic about engagement on these issues. It is the mustard seed of faith that we are promised turns into the Kingdom of God.

Bonhoeffer used to celebrate that when we pray for each other, even for our enemy, we stop being enemies. We all agree that Christian unity is a commandment. When Jesus said “love one another as I have loved you,” he was talking to people from very different walks of life, with very different personalities; some who understood him differently than others; St. Peter who saw His Sonship miraculously, St. John whom He loved and St. Thomas who needed proof.

Where analogical reasoning serves to make Christian Scientists look heterodox for Mary Baker Eddy’s Trinity of “Life, Truth and Love,” we find a glaring surface example. But where American experiment churches survive today, they are in need of outreach, while also listening to the contributions that those churches have to make, from their experiences and seeing them charitably that they were addressing the perceived problems they saw in very different times. The naïveté reaches not only historical churches, but even the contemporary American theological academy. To cite Bonhoeffer again, when he got off the boat at Union Seminary, he commented that Americans did not really do theology as he had known it in Germany. Our American brand of sola scriptura has not always made room for, for instance, Hellenistic thinking. Is this why Professor Hawkins can make headlines for suggesting that Muslims pray to the same God as Christians? We Americans tend toward either personal religious experience or bullet point systematic theology. Any Christian with a background in philosophy can identify with what Bonhoeffer was getting at. We can all benefit from putting our theologies through a round or two of critique, or dialectic testing.

We treat theology with kid gloves as though it would break and not be able to be put back together. But God is not dead, and to speak of Him is not humpty dumpty. He did not die, as Johnny Cash said (who I think we can all agree was the greatest theologian of the 20th Century). Alongside ketchup being spicy, the greatness of Johnny Cash is another point on which theologians universally agree. And our personal experience and Bible reading gives our American churches great Berean strengths in availability of the gospel, but can leave us puzzled when we consider why some finer points of theology have been so important to this or that historical group. In the present case, the synonyms for God are not only important to Jews, Muslims and Christian Scientists, but everyone agrees that God is Love, Life, Truth, Our Healer and Comforter; so these truths are not only Biblical, but have the seal of approval from patristic and scholastic theologians as well. It is a shame that Mary Baker Eddy tried to put a patent on them, but we should hope there is a way for the church she left behind to make amends.

And perhaps the attributes of God should not be put in conflict with the personal nature of the Trinity anymore, by answering in a non-sequitur fashion as Mary Baker Eddy appeared to do. Or maybe Eddy is like Augustine and other dialectic writers, where people take them out of context very easily if they fail to see the mischief specifically being addressed. It is basically the same
problem of casuistry, where we fail to isolate or understand what exactly the controversy was at the time before extrapolating a rule from it. This has been suggested with Bonhoeffer’s dialectic theology also, that it is too easy to twist his words. And anyone who knows philosophical people knows they will think differently about a topic based on their own metaphysical understandings, or even what they went to bed reading the night before. It is not for us to judge anyway.

To the point for those outside nominal Christian circles, Muslims, because they see Jesus as a prophet, and have their 99 names for God, they are within a hair of being hyper-egalitarian Trinitarianists themselves, or at least Arians or something. While Jewish also, who I believe have as many names for God could be called hyper-egalitarian Trinitarianists if they are messianic Jews, believing in Jesus’ messiahship. From what I understand, the names for God are regularly taught in Jewish parochial schools.

(Back to Top)

**Popery in the Christian Science Church**

Trying to get away from “outward signs of worship” is always something of a Sisyphean errand, because eventually the plain dress of the Quaker becomes an outward sign of piety. And the organ music becomes the ornate focus instead of the mural carvings. The doctrine of no doctrines, the icon of no icons, become the popery of no popery. Iconoclasts have never been perfect at it, but Christian Scientists manage for about nine to eleven months out of the year, depending on how you count. Come Christmas time though, you can’t tell them apart from any other Christians. Their calling to a stoic form of prayer and third order monasticism gives way to caroling and Christmas trees and overdoing it on brownies and butterballs. Eastertide is just as bad, though they skip over Good Friday, having the rest of the year to carry their crosses.

So the giddy secret about Christian Scientists, who are regularly so stayed in celebrating their faith, is that around Christmas time they get downright Pentecostal and holy rolling with caroling Joy to the World. They become practically indistinguishable from any other Christian Church around the holidays. So for anyone who is interested in the spectacle of Waspy people eating too many butterballs and belting out the classics around the baby grand, stop by your local Christian Science church's Christmas party, it is the one indulgence they allow themselves, to let their hair down for the Christmas holiday. And to a lesser extent Easter egg hunts can be seen and Thanksgiving services and feasting, but we should feel that Christian Scientists are the most similar in their worship to other churches around the Holidays. Even Mary Baker Eddy’s celebrated hymn “Blest Christmas Morn” is a joyous addition that other churches may consider adding to their Christmas pageant alongside all of our other favorites.  

Iconoclasm has this ultimate limiting effect, that when we reach too far for it, we can push it away, and our catharsis is more full of popery than if we had just let it in a little at a time. Of

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course, the Christian Science church, which looks so stayed now, was probably considered indulgent by many protestants of the 19th century. Consider Spurgeons remarks, anti-popy was a live issue back then:

“All the churches which call themselves Protestant, even the strictest, now betray the silent influence of those Romanizing tendencies which have been and are hereafter to be explained (ketchup?). There is an almost universal letting down of the old standard of doctrine and worship. A comparison of prevalent usages of to-day and of seventy years ago in the Methodist, Baptist, Congregational and Presbyterian Churches (except those of the Secession) would startle any thinking mind. Every one of them now admits usages which were then universally rejected by them (ketchup?), such as architectural pomps, pictured windows, floral decorations, instrumental and operatic music. One may say, that these are matters of indifference which cannot be proved anti-scriptural; but every sensible man knows that they proceed from one impulse (ketchup?), the craving for a more spectacular and ritualistic worship. This is precisely the impulse which brought about prelacy and popery in the patristic ages.”

Can we also say it was the impulse that drove Luther to envy the Italian's loafer over the German clog, and Mark Twain to envy Mary Baker Eddy's book sales numbers?

(Back to Top)

Two Bits of Theology, Census and Pain-Free Birth of Jesus

Two more bits of history can show why I think Christian Scientists have a great deal of trouble understanding themselves, because we have failed as a church to do theology per se, more or less since the expiration of Mary Baker Eddy, and this exacerbates our difficulty with church history. Two bits of Christian Science theology had always been a puzzle to me, that I suspect must puzzle other Christian Scientists as well. The two points are Mary Baker Eddy's views against “counting” and her view of the pain free birth of Jesus.

The first, that Christian Scientists don't count the number of church parishioners they have. I always thought this must be some kind of superstition that Mary Baker Eddy was given to, until I realized how rich the history of opposition to censuses has been among Protestants, particularly it seems those fleeing religious persecution. George Washington mentioned the effect and prevalence of the theology against “counting” as the Christian Scientists put it, in his letter to Gouverneur Morris July 28, 1791. He said he thought the first census of the United States had been a bit under-reported, since “the religious scruples of some, would not allow them to give in their lists.” Mary Baker Eddy was therefore not being superstitious, just following along with a long standing American protestant tradition. Whether those Protestants aptly applied the lesson of King David's census is another question, since Moses also did a census, but for reasons approved by God, but what is apparent is that we cannot begin to understand where Mary Baker Eddy was coming from without examining the theological beliefs then prevalent in 19th Century America where she was situated. If modern theology does not proscribe “counting” anymore provided it is for reasons approved by God, this might also be an example of one of those points
that could stand a theological update. Or perhaps we should all refuse to participate in the
Census, unless we truly feel we are one nation under God, and reexamine counting in church
also.

The second bit of theological trivia that I had always mistaken for a Christian Science innovation
was from a Christmas hymn, “Blest Christmas Morn” which has the words, “No natal hour and
mother’s tear, To Thee belong.” I had always thought Eddy was referring to either a
reformulation of Augustine’s privative theory of evil, which would be consonant with her other
writings; or that she was referring disapprovingly to the idea that the punishment for Eve’s
original sin was pain in childbirth. Then I realized both were wrong, since what she was referring
to is plainly historical. The belief that the Virgin Mary suffered no pain in childbirth is 2000
years old. Apparently it has been part of the Holy Family’s biography since the first Christmas. It
actually happened. Rather than being an extrapolation of Mary Baker Eddy’s that Christian
Scientists were trying to impose on the Christian world as theological device, I now wonder if it
was not the historical leaping off point for Eddy’s understanding of the Bethlehem Babe’s
harmlessness. And again, here we find an American protestant revival of something that the
Catholic church had been teaching all along, but that was lost to many Lutherans and Calvinists,
for being outside sola scriptura, a problem that Mary Baker Eddy had no issue with.

The time has come for the Christian Science church to put out a study version of their texts, with
points like these footnoted, so that everyone does not have to run over the same ground trying to
figure out what 19th Century bit of theology Eddy may have been highlighting. And this could
be a gift to the rest of the theological community, as a way to reinvigorate certain gems of
Christian history. And there are a host of seminaries out there that might be glad to comment,
with graduate students who could benefit from the experience. Perhaps we need a few updated
study versions of the Koran as well, not only so that we can point out things like why Joseph
may have been truncated from the holy family in Arabia, but also so that we may be able to
winnow out some lost Christian artifacts of history that Muhammad gleaned from his Christian
contemporaries, i.e. the Koran seems to preserve an understanding that Jesus had a special
concern for working poor people.

(Back to Top)

Mark Twain’s Criticism, as Endorsed by Val Kilmer

For many Christian Scientists, Mark Twain’s contemporaneous criticism of Mary Baker Eddy
needs no introduction. But I should highlight that one of the most famous modern day Christian
Scientists, Val Kilmer, has commented recently that to see Mary Baker Eddy and Christian
Scientists properly, we need another Mark Twain. So let me quote liberally from the first one, to
show that Twain also saw the need for an “update.” As a funny man, Twain gets some things
wrong about Christian Science. For instance, Twain suggests that readers are the same as pastors,
which is not true in the Christian Science church, and anyone familiar with broader church
history knows that such an “office” as reader has roots that go back to the beginning of church
history, so Twain is incorrect that the office of the “reader” is something that Eddy invented. But
I think Twain is correct in his general criticism that no one is willing to “update” the profound and unsullied contribution of our pastor emeritus, “‘She’ who must be obeyed,” as one Christian Scientist I know jokingly quotes H. Rider Haggard. More accurately, readers are just readers in the old sense, and Christian Science practitioners, teachers and lecturers hold the lion’s share of duties we think of as germane to “preachers” in other churches. But Twain writes:

READERS

These are a feature of first importance in the church-machinery of Christian Science. For they occupy the pulpit. They hold the place that the preacher holds in the other Christian Churches. They hold that place, but they do not preach. Two of them are on duty at a time—a man and a woman. One reads a passage from the Bible, the other reads the explanation of it from Science and Health—and so they go on alternating. This constitutes the service—this, with choir-music. They utter no word of their own. Art. IV., Sec. 6, closes their mouths with this uncompromising gag:

“They shall make no remarks explanatory of the Lesson-Sermon at any time during the service.”

It seems a simple little thing. One is not startled by it at a first reading of it; nor at the second, nor the third. One may have to read it a dozen times before the whole magnitude of it rises before the mind. It far and away oversizes and outclasses the best business-idea yet invented for the safe-guarding and perpetuating of a religion. If it had been thought of and put in force eighteen hundred and seventy years ago, there would be but one Christian sect in the world now, instead of ten dozens of them.

There are many varieties of men in the world, consequently there are many varieties of minds in its pulpits. This insures many differing interpretations of important Scripture texts, and this in turn insures the splitting up of a religion into many sects. It is what has happened; it was sure to happen.

Mrs. Eddy has noted this disastrous result of preaching, and has put up the bars. She will have no preaching in her Church. She has explained all essential Scriptures, and set the explanations down in her book. In her belief her underlings cannot improve upon those explanations, and in that stern sentence “they shall make no explanatory remarks” she has barred them for all time from trying. She will be obeyed; there is no question about that.
In arranging her government she has borrowed ideas from various sources—not poor ones, but the best in the governmental market—but this one is new, this one came out of no ordinary business-head, this one must have come out of her own, there has been no other commercial skull in a thousand centuries that was equal to it. She has borrowed freely and wisely, but I am sure that this idea is many times larger than all her borrowings bulked together. One must respect the business-brain that produced it—the splendid pluck and impudence that ventured to promulgate it, anyway.

Before we ask for another Mark Twain, we may just want to acknowledge the biting criticism of the first one. And if Twain was being meticulously honest, he knew that Christian Science practitioners were largely responsible for explaining Christian Science to the outside world, just that they have had an increasingly difficult job of it. He makes fun of Christian Science practitioners in the opening chapter of his book, basically seeing them as making fools of themselves. And Twain is not alone. We see comedians continually find that people of all faiths are a humorous subject, perhaps because religious are too sincere for the sometimes callous world we live in. Ellen Degeneris’s mother is a Christian Science practitioner, and some of Ellen’s stand up riffs off of the funny double speak of these easiest of comedic targets. “Stomach ache” becomes “stomach cake,” etc. It is very easy to miss that most Christian Scientists are in fact, or at least consider themselves, free-thinkers, having freely arrived at agreement with Mary Baker Eddy on just about everything. But that is perhaps another reason why Mary Baker Eddy quotes Paul. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” She was setting up a very structured church, but wanted people to keep thinking for themselves.

(Back to Top)

CS Lewis’ Literary Sola Scriptura

An anecdote from life in Los Angeles, a few weeks ago we discovered our neighbors are bible church parishioners. My neighbor commented in passing that she was a bible church participant, and upon learning that our family was also Christian she offered us an invitation. She then upbraided me on the necessity of Bible reading, on believing in the soteriological verses she was quoting from Luke and of the importance of bringing our daughter up in The Way. I thought these were pretty good marching orders.

This was the type of sola scriptura Christian that CS Lewis claimed he wanted to be. In CS Lewis version of Sola Scriptura, he saw any analysis of scripture as a departure from the Good Book, and the Good Book as sufficient in itself, needing no elaboration. To Lewis, beyond reading the Gospel and approving of what it said, everything else was bound to make for literary artifice, departing from the “True Myth” and inevitably leading to terminological differences that are accidentally taken for important disagreement.
It has taken the Roman Catholic church a little over/under a thousand years to reach this conclusion regarding Eastern Orthodox church theologies of the Trinity. But CS Lewis went further still by saying that all theology was built upon the sacred story of the Bible, and was therefore derivative. Lewis really was like some “Bible” church parishioners are, like my neighbor who admonished me to read the Bible, where they agree on the sola scriptura doctrine of “read the bible.” The logic is that the Bible is sacred literature, and the sermons, comments and theologies that examine it are a literary form of their own that necessarily departs from the original literature to some extent. This was similar to the conclusions of Tyndale and Luther, but CS Lewis lent his ethos of a modern literary critic to the claim. Lewis, if you are not familiar with his biography, was a tower of an intellect. A genius, he literally had every book in the Cambridge library memorized. In some ways, Lewis is the most commanding 20th Century academic presence to weigh on theological matters, even though his academic work was not in the theology department per se.

Such was his literary genius, and the angle it gave him on theology that, like Milton and Dante and his friend JRR Tolkien, his angle lent special credence to his theological work, from his departmental expertise on the “forms” and “structures” of the known literary universe, to the mythological alternatives he exhausted in coming to the Christian faith as the only True Myth. He could sort artifice from substance like a literary critic, rather than as a theologian or philosopher would. His literary genius endorsed the Gospel as the Greatest Story Ever Told, the Word and the Truth. Like when Francis Collins speaks to us from the standpoint of heading the Human Genome Project, assuring us that genes were the alphabet of God’s design, Lewis gave witness from his corner of the university. He was a Christian poet.

But Lewis disappointed Tolkien by joining the Anglican church instead of the Catholic. Not a terrible disappointment, since at least Lewis was no longer a militant atheist, and that change was something that Tolkien was glad to have been able to witness. But Lewis also saw the problem of Catholicism in a fallen world, and while he urged people to go to some Christian church within the invisible house of God, he became an Anglican. And now the Catholic church embraces the Anglicans more like Lewis did, accepting parishes in whenever the ministers are willing to submit to Papal authority. So Lewis’ biography can serve as a reaffirmation that the literary rationale behind sola scriptura remains strong in the face of one of our greatest recent intellects, and that we should all get into a community of faith before the world eats us alive, as Father Henri Nouwen might say.

Lewis’ literary and theological voice calls into question the necessity of our mountains of theology. Theologians like Luther and Bonhoeffer relented in the face of an apparent need to theologize and make doctrinal statements, feeling that theology was of a penultimate necessity, though they always kept a health grudge against the way that theology becomes a sacred cow instead of a tool to better help people walk with God. Both treated theology as at least somewhat of a necessary evil. Bonhoeffer would never take theological disagreement as of ultimate importance and threw off theological disagreement with a laugh. Bonhoeffer even taught a homiletic that encouraged sermons to border on heresy if they were to be any good. But Bonhoeffer, like Lewis, understood that we read the psalms differently than we read to Gospels,
and theology differently still. We don't usually just read psalms, we pray them, and we read the Gospels in celebration of what God has done, while we too often do academic theology in much more self-conscious ways. The literary cognitive load is different, which Bonhoeffer might say results from our “creation and fall,” which was a theme from his essay of that title, and Lewis might say is a descent into artifice.

Lewis’ original claim was perhaps more intricate than Bonhoeffer and Luther, that the gospels contain no artifice, excepting maybe Bonhoeffer's view of prayer and psalms. Lewis thought that theology was more or less unnecessary in the face of the Gospel, which was a protestant view that echoed the practice of St. Francis toward theology, etc. But then Lewis turned around hypocritically and penned some great theological works. This hypocrisy over theology is something that New English protestants loved to engage in also, and while the theologians who wrote the Westminster confession were careful to note theology's subordination to the Bible, as did the Catholic church when it installed the Summa Theologica and finally the Christian Science Church's subordination of Science and Health. All churches do this very same thing. Decrying theology with one hand and doing it with the other, just as we smash icons with one hand and replace them with the other. That is why we are all in need of grace.

_(Back to Top)_

**The Emperor Has No Clothes, but You Will Be Beaten if You Say So**

So yet another way to look at the doctrine of the Trinity is that the effect of affirming it in our modern times, or any other supposed doctrinal *sine qua non* of Christianity, is that you will be allowed unquestionably into the earthly Christian club if you do. Presently the doctrine of the Trinity has become the *sine qua non* for membership in many churches, which has the effect, for those who do not affirm the doctrine of the Trinity, that they are treated as outsiders or unregenerate second class citizens. In the 19th Century the same was true of displays of “popery.” But this leads to a funny situation for a person like myself who has spent too much time in philosophy departments, because as I have suggested, I am not sure anyone understands the doctrines well enough to be pointing fingers at each other, and certainly not well enough to know if the people they are supposedly agreeing with on it understand it in the exact same way that they do. The “paradox of definition” is that when we try and extremely specifically define something, we can still lose sight of what we are defining since words are imperfect tools. So my advice to anyone who wanted to submit a membership application to a church that required acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity, or anti-popery or anything else, would be, answer “yes” unqualifiedly if you are not a philosophically minded. Or, if you cannot do that, because no thinking people actually claim to understand doctrines perfectly, except for a few highly educated scholastics, like Thomas Aquinas and Peter Kreeft in the case of the Trinity, and Spurgeon in the case of popery, my advice would be to say “I don't understand it, but have no reason to argue against it.” In Professor Hawkins case, she should say she is Trinitarian and did

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**115 | Ecumenism, Trinity, Unity, Christian Science**

Reed Troutman
not have a basis to appreciate why her statement was objectionable, not being a theology doctor, which is what you need to be almost to appreciate the gravity of the theological stakes.

If on the other hand, you were to say, I don't understand it, and I don't think anyone else does either, and I am not sure what purpose it really served to the few people who, like Kreeft and Aquinas, Eddy and Spurgeon, who can actually claim to understand their own work, so why don't we get rid of it and just go back to the old definition of being a Christian if you consider yourself to be a follower of Jesus Who is ascended to the Father, then that should be good enough? But if you say this, because it is the equivalent of saying the Trinitarian litmus-test-emperor has no clothes, unlike in the fairy story where everyone points and laughs at the Eddy and Spurgeon, everyone instead will run you out of town as a heretic and potentially burn you at the stake.

My point is not that the doctrine of the Trinity is a problem in its proper sphere, i.e. an M.Div. theology course, but that it is a poor litmus test for Christianity, because no one actually understands it, even many of us supposedly learned people. If we have been blessed with an education that includes a philosophy background, we still find the psalmists words resonating with us, that such knowledge is too high. We can't attain to it. It is not the “milk of the word,” that St. Peter and Paul talked about. It is not the flesh of the pear from my Trinitarian dream.

The fact that non-Trinitarians are presently second-class citizens is not as much of a problem for me, since I go to a Presbyterian Church, call myself a Christian, and most people probably think I am a Presbyterian, even though I do not want to affirm the doctrine of the Trinity for my Lutheran/Free Church sensibilities. But official membership in a church is not an aspiration of mine. But if it was I would be informed, sorry, you cannot be a member because you don't hold our Christian beliefs. Some might even say I am not a Christian for failing to support a decision the church has arrived at.

But communion is open in my Presbyterian Church, as are all church programs to non-members, so I have the luxury of not worrying about membership. But if I said, OK I will sign the rest and promise not to argue against the doctrine of the Trinity, some churches might affirm my Christianity for membership only, but probably not leadership, like if I wanted to lead a small group or something. They might conclude that Christians can’t have a monotheist simpliciter leading a small group. But if I said I have little idea what the intricacies of the doctrine means, and you all have little idea, it is too high for any of us to attain to perfectly, well I would get treated like Muslims and Arians and Oneness Pentecostals and Unitarian Christians and sometimes Eastern Orthodox and Egalitarian churches, and Professor Hawkins, all of whom are known to claim the status of being followers of Jesus. There is a theological cold shoulder that we can give each other in the church, and this goes against Jesus’ commandment to be united in His Spirit. It is not unfair to require some basic knowledge of Trinitarian thought of Christian Professors like Hawkins, but when disagreement arises, it needs to be meticulously explained. Which doctrine of the Trinity is she violating? Is Wheaton not misunderstanding their own position? We need to forgive each other our cognitive deficits as we do any other brokenness.
We can bless as Jesus blessed, by giving the spiritual milk that people need until they can handle the solid food, as St Paul said, if ever. Jesus obviously preferred his non-intellectual disciples to the educated elite in the temple, except for the educated Matthew and later Paul of Tarsus and Thomas Aquinas, but we can place too many intellectual demands on ourselves that are unnecessary and send many away as heretics, when we should be embracing our heretic brothers and sisters like Bonhoeffer encouraged us to do. Now in Christ Jesus, there is neither slave nor bond, heretic nor orthodox, intellectual nor dunce-cap, rich nor poor. But let anyone who does not love Jesus be cursed. Our Lord has come!

This is the best and simplest litmus test for Christianity. Do you love, admire or respect Jesus? By devotion of anything? Devotion to following His example should be good enough. That is why I think it is a mistake to call historical figures like Thomas Jefferson non-Christian. Jefferson had the utmost respect for Jesus and wholly devoted his life to, imperfectly like the rest of us, following Jesus example. Ghandi said I love your Christ, not your (nominal) Christians. Our Lord has come!

(Back to Top)

Oppression and Scapegoating in the Christian Church

So the upshot of all this is that we have people who hold minority suppressed opinions on theological matters, but we don't always hear from them, and I believe this leads to what is technically termed “oppression” and sometimes “scapegoating.” One of the hallmarks of oppression is that people will not speak up for you for fear they will be ostracized alongside you. People become afraid to be associated with you. One of the places of the worst oppression in history was Nazi Germany, where if you spoke up for homosexuals, Jewish people, or minority Christian views like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sophie Scholl, you discovered that you were treated like a homosexual, a Jew and a heretic. I was sitting in a coffee shop once where I could not help overhearing a seminary student bring up some point of theology to a colleague, and then one said to the other, “I don't know, you are not trying to get me fired are you?”

We Christians have an inflated persecution complex that should make us very sensitive to oppressed people, but too often it instead underscores our assurance in judging minority views. When we see the Westboro Baptists express intolerance of homosexuals, or even when we see homosexuals be intolerant of Westboro Baptists, in a pluralistic society, the idea is not that we get it right, but that in reserving judgment, we follow Jesus advice to not judge, that we may not be judged ourselves. Or if we prefer St. Paul's formulation, we leave room for the wrath of God. God will someday judge the people with equity that we can barely imagine. We hope that Wheaton goes through its review process with Professor Hawkins with both eyes open, to where she may learn from Wheaton’s doctrinal statement and where Wheaton may learn from the controversy over what is Trinitarian-Monotheism.

(Back to Top)
Two More Associated Problems, the Missing Christians and the Disturbed

Oprah Winfrey is a Christian lady, who calls herself a Christian, feels the Christian call on her life from her grandmother who taught her to apply the Bible passage, that we live and move and have our being in God. But some people are calling Oprah’s Christianity into question along the same lines as Unitarian Christians or Quakers or Christian Scientists, for not being orthodox enough. I would suggest masculinely voiced enough as well. Like Professor Hawkins, I wonder if Oprah knew this about her faith and the potential for this deepest part of her to be criticized that led her to a reticence on the topic of her Christianity for so long. The practical effect of failing to embrace our heterodox brothers and sisters who love Jesus is that practically hurts our fellowships. We leave the heterodox in a state of thinking that they are not Christians. We tell people disingenuously or intellectually irresponsibly that they either have to believe in what Christians have “always” believed, not only the doctrine of the Trinity, but also sometimes of hell and the Virgin Birth etc., or some particular theological formulation of everything, maybe Calvinist predestination or Catholic transubstantiation, before they can be called Christian. We are happy to look a doubting Thomas in the eye, and rather than extend our hands to show him the scars and rib him for having so little faith as Jesus did, we say “Thomas, you are not a Christian.”

To be ecumenical in our thinking has the opposite practical effect, that when we are ecumenical, our theological thinking can lead to Christians returning to church rather than going missing from our church communities, and whole congregations of people who have felt isolated or in the extreme attacked and oppressed, can feel encouraged and join their voices to the cloud of witnesses a bit louder. Oprah has recently been talking more about faith and sharing her own Christianity, much in the way that a good Quaker would. By saying “I am a Christian, I don’t want to push my faith on you but I am happy to share, and I respect all people’s religious conscience.” Is Oprah setting a better Christian example than the rest of us? Professor Hawkins?

Oprah is my favorite example of a missing Christian, because we would all love for Oprah to show up in our church some Sunday and sit next to us in the pew. But she frowns on “religion” because she sees some of the problems with church that we all see. Unlike John Lennon who wanted to do away with heaven and make “above us only sky,” Oprah’s greatest conflict with church growing up was just not being a hell-fire and brimstone Christian. This makes her not a very good Baptist or Latin-rite Roman Catholic, but she is squarely in the Wesleyan evangelical tradition of the Buffalo United Methodist Church that her grandmother fostered her first senses of Christianity in. Oprah’s later reaction to the hell-fire and brimstone message was what any good Wesleyan would have. Oprah fits right in with Methodists.

Wouldn’t it be funny if you walked into a Methodist church, sat down and looked up to find Oprah was sitting next to you? We all want to meet Oprah. You have questions you want to ask her too. She seems to be such a caring person and having been blessed with so many gifts of the Spirit. She is full of an inner joy that she has shared. A very deep human being, she calls herself a Christian because she sees God at work in her own life. She is a Christian who embraces
people of all faiths, which is not Universalism, but Wesleyan ecumenical evangelicalism. She calls herself a Christian because she is the spiritual daughter of her Grandmother Hattie Mae Lee.

Modern Methodists have all these 19th Century roots in common, where American Methodism incorporated the lessons of American Quakers, free church thinkers, Unitarians and Roger Williams style Baptists. That is why when she thinks back on her spiritual roots, she sounds like a very good Christian Quaker, not wanting to force her beliefs on anyone. There are many people out there like her though, who have been told that they are non-Christian for some reason by the neo-orthodox. And Oprah’s identification with Christianity is only one angle to approach the subject from.

Many people who may be inspired by the pacifism of Thomas Jefferson and Ghandi have been led to believe that they need to look into deism or Hinduism if they want to follow their spiritual example, rather than pointing out that Thomas Jefferson was a Unitarian Christian of the humanitarianist variety, and that Ghandi, though disapproving of us Christians, “loved our Christ,” and got all his ideas about ahimsa from Jesus as much as from any Hindu-Jainist sources, first through Christian Quakers and Leo Tolstoy. If we tell these people they are not Christian if they don’t believe in the hell-fire and brimstone version of the afterlife, the heterodoxy which goes under the technical theological term “annihilationism” and is actually a widespread minority view within Christianity, i.e. among Seventh Day Adventists and other 19th Century American Churches, our Christian history suffers, and therefore our ability to discourse intelligently with society at large. This merits attention to nuance and specificity that we expect from other subjects to ensure that we Christians are engaging our mission fields as best we can. By failing to accurately sort out different kinds of Christians, we are turning people off of Christianity and onto non-Christian gurus, including maybe Richard Dawkins and TED Talks about singularity. Saying that there are some things that Christians have always believed kicks Oprah and Ghandi out of our communions, and leaves them disturbed by their excommunication. Then we wonder why they don’t want to be labelled “religious,” while going about their business of following Jesus.

And it is not just individuals. There are whole churches, synagogues and mosques that serve as examples of Christians and the blessed of God, who are disturbed by the lack of unity in Christianity and in God’s creation. If we are scapegoating them for some ungodly purpose, as bad as they are off for being counted as heretics, they at least have the solace of the sermon on the mount, that their persecution is for the righteousness they have from God and with their fellow man, even if they are not right with us doctrinally “good” Christians. Where we come at them as theological oppressors from positions of power, not to build them up in what little faith they have, we are their persecutors. Jesus Christ could say to us, I was thirsty and did you give me to drink? I did not know about St. Joseph, did you share his example of fatherhood with me?

That is one of my disappointments with the way that Christian Scientists and other liberal churches are treated for not throwing heterodox Christians like Gandhi out. They are treated as though they also subscribe to the heterodox points that their parishioners make. Though I also think there are elements that want to take the Christian out of “Christian Science,” most of the
perception that they are a “new thought” church in fact comes from misunderstanding their free church beginnings. Tolerance must be distinguished from condemnation or condonance. If Gandhi showed up in a Quaker meeting house, he may very well be met by a Christian Bible-reading Quaker, who believes in orthodox platonic Christology, but understands Gandhi’s walk with God has to be both individual as well as in the “convincement” of the community of faith. If there is something a Quaker cannot convince a fellow traveler of, they neither condemn nor condone what they see as incorrect, but leave it to God to sort out in the quaking of the Spirit.

Take a hotter topic like homosexuality for instance. A person can be tolerant of homosexuality, while neither condemning it, nor thinking that it is good. A person may believe that homosexual behavior is theologically unnatural and psychologically aberrant. They might think that biblical manhood and womanhood should be taught from the pulpit and psychologists should put homosexuality back in the DSM, without going to the extremes of saying that their behaviors/psychological make ups are either objectionable or normative. Or equally controversial, the Westboro Baptists’ freedom of speech, while we may not condemn them for a “gospel” of contempt, we may also question whether “calling out” people’s sin at vulnerable moments is actually Christian and driven by love as they assert. Is it Christian to square the circle in the direction of condemnation? If we have to lean in one direction it should be “judge not or you will be judged.” Certainly to square the circle in favor of tolerance is the better advice. As Pope Francis has recently said of homosexuality, “If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?”

Tolerance is not a final end. We could rewrite the Country song to read, “faith, hope, tolerance and Love are some good things He gave us, but the greatest is Love.” Love is an ultimate end, God is Love. But tolerance, faith and hope are penultimate temporal goods that are blessings we get by on, which only God will ultimately bring to their ultimate conclusion.

(Back to Top)

The Status of Christians as the Status of Persons

Thomas Merton said that “into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it, because he is out of place in it, and yet he must be in it, his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected by power, because they are regarded as weak, those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world.” Writing these words as he was, about a decade and a half after the “unspeakable” horrors of Nazi Germany, we cannot help but feel with him the sense of loss, guilt and mourning over those who we civilized people hounded from our earthly existence. Harassed from our world are Sophie Scholl, Anne Frank, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Sometimes when we walk alongside Thomas Merton, as he makes his “raids on the unspeakable,” we find ourselves touched in a way that we almost thought was no longer possible in our overwhelmed, busy and sometimes necessarily calloused modern life. We walk alongside
Otto Frank as he discovers that he alone among his family survived. We board the train with young Maria Von Wedemeyer, hoping to find Dietrich Bonhoeffer alive. We read incredulously that these Scholl siblings of the White Rose Society have been killed for “calling us to our last chance,” as Father Delp put it, himself killed for the same.

What Merton is telling us is that in Anne Frank, Sophie Scholl and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christ has come into the world. These three who were denied the status of persons, for being Jewish, for speaking out against the senselessness of Germany's war machine, for smuggling Jews to freedom and giving moral courage to underground resistance. The interesting part to me for the purposes of church history is that, while there was this common loss of what we think of as rights related to people having the “status of persons,” these could also be said to have come from having lost the “status of Christians;” or the “status of persons” qua the “status of Christians.” Anne Frank, obviously, was not a Christian as we usually identify them. She was marked out by the star of David, and was “exterminated” as Merton says; or for being a rat, as Nazi propaganda implied. But it is easier to miss the fact that Sophie Scholl and Dietrich Bonhoeffer also were not members in good standing with the Reichskirche, the orthodox of that nationalist time, when the good people of Germany, the “German Christians,” were trying to usher in the millennium of Hitler’s Thousand Year Reich; “Eternal Germany” as Wilhelm Frick infamously called it at his execution.

But like Anne, Sophie and Dietrich had also lost the status of “Christians” to the likes of Frick. It was heresy to not support one's nation in a time of war. To actively resist authority was punishable by death of body and soul. Lesser known Christian groups also found themselves on the outs, like Jehovah's Witnesses. The Christian Science church in Germany discovered this as well, adding some of their own names to the list of the martyred, when on June 9, 1941 “every known Christian Scientist” was arrested. Notably among Christian Scientists, Albert Telschow apparently went down like a true Maccabean, refusing to bow his knee to the Gestapo harassment.

And these martyrs don't necessarily cast rosy lights on us, if we are “Christians” in good standing. Martin Luther may be the ultimate example of this. He was very candid about his participation in the bloody maintenance of protestant church authority at the beginning of the Reformation. In reminiscing about his having preached the slaughter of the peasants during the Peasant rebellion he said, “preachers are the biggest murderers about, for they admonish the authorities to fulfill their duty and punish the wicked. I, Martin Luther, slew all the peasants in the rebellion, for I said they should be slain; all their blood is on my head. But I cast it on our Lord God, who commanded me to speak in this way.” Are we still so cavalier today as well? I hope not. Was Luther invoking the “cheap grace” that Bonhoeffer spent his too-short life worrying about in *The Cost of Discipleship*? Are we listening to preachers today who are more like Luther, who purport to be commanded by God, but tell us that “when there is a fire he is the best who can quench it first?” This appears to be the advice that the Nazi's were following. Otto Frank, Sophie Scholl and Dietrich Bonhoeffer were not persons, let alone Christians; they were destructive fires that needed to be snuffed out. Rats that needed to be exterminated.
We should have known better of course. These were the only act in town with any class at all. They were the only real Christians. Merton pointed this out in his especially eloquent way, but we should have known it to begin with. Bonhoeffer told us as much during his pastoral life, warning those who would distance themselves from the Confessing Church that to do so would mean distance from salvation. These were representatives of the true church, the true Christians, the true house of God. These were “the gospel making room for itself on earth, even and precisely when no such opportunities were offered to it.” Or as Merton says, these were Jesus’ coming uninvited. Where Mother Theresa saw the face of Christ in a very distressing disguise, giving her life over to washing the feet of the poor, and where Johnny Cash saw “victims of the times,” for whom he always wore black. These were the voice of God.

Anne Frank’s thinking about the suffering of those she held dear, praying for God to perform a miracle to save at least some of them. Otto Frank hoping Anne’s Diary would have an effect on the rest of our lives so that, insofar as it is possible, in our own circumstances we would work for unity and peace. Or as Jesus said, blessed are the peacemakers. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of My hand. My Father, which gave them Me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of My Father’s hand. I and my Father are one.

(Back to Top)

Pragmatism in Theology

Which leads to the question of American Pragmatism. What part has American pragmatism played in our American theologies. What good is theology if it does not work? What is a working theology? Does being logically right make us righteous? A lot of times when we see rifts in theology, it is from the standpoint of pragmatic questions, which is all that we Americans have cared about from time to time. Bonhoeffer asks, what good is a theology of easy grace, if it allows us to sing Gregorian chants while our Jewish brothers and sisters are being exterminated. Mary Baker Eddy asks, what good is a “them bones” theology if it leads Dominic to say we can no longer say to the lame, take up your bed and walk. Calvin asks us, what good is our easy theology, if it allows people think they are earning grace and don't need to be grateful to our loving and magnanimous Creator for its free gifting.

Pragmatism reverse engineers the mischief rule hermeneutic, to ask instead of what mischief is to be solved, ask what pragmatic effect is to be seen.

(Back to Top)

Phillip Yancey on Eastern Reaction to Jesus’ Crucifixion

Today we still see people being denied the status of persons for religious difference. Can any of us pretend that some of the failures of human rights around the world are not motivated by religious animus? Muslims are not Christians, so the story goes, and haven't we seen them.
treated differently internationally for this? As peoples of “theocratic” nations, as refugees, as prisoners of war? My funny way of seeing Muslims as Unitarians may be too much for some to swallow, but I see them as not only persons, but Christians. But we fail to see this, because we don't take the time to understand the Koran.

Phillip Yancey provides a great explanation for why Muslims developed Christological differences with the West. Phillip Yancey was not talking about Muslims, but his point is one of the best ones I can think of to describe why the Koran functionally apologizes for Jesus' Crucifixion. His point goes to the heart of the ecumenical problem in sharing theologia crucis with people who are sensitive to Jesus' suffering. Yancey turned up a great example of what happens when people who have never heard the gospel hear about Jesus death, which could lead us to suspect that Muhammad may not have glossed over Jesus' Passion to diminish the work of the cross, but because he was either met with a truncated version of the Gospel which had omitted the stripes of Jesus, or because his own conveying of the message was more effective with the truncated story. Understanding this can also help us understand liberal churches as they recur throughout history, which have “theologies of Easter,” which fail apparently to appreciate the physical sacrifice that Jesus made; those that, like Christian Scientists, may gloss over Good Friday on their way to Christus Victor, before of course taking up their cross behind Him. Yancey writes:

> When the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci went to China in the sixteenth century, he brought along samples of religious art to illustrate the Christian story for people who had never heard it. The Chinese readily adopted portraits of the Virgin Mary holding her child, but when he produced paintings of the crucifixion and tried to explain that the Godchild had grown up only to be executed, the audience reacted with revulsion and horror. They much preferred the Virgin and insisted on worshiping her rather than the crucified God.

> As I thumb once more through my stack of Christmas cards, I realize that we in Christian countries do much the same thing. We observe a mellow, domesticated holiday purged of any hint of scandal. Above all, we purge from it any reminder of how the story that began in Bethlehem turned out at Calvary.

The comedian Will Ferrell makes fun of us Christians for doing this, and while I don't condone Ferrell’s “scoffing,” I think his popular reference has been an unintended blessing by reminding us of the problem that Yancey is pointing to. It is difficult to keep the entire gospel in our heads at once, the cognitive load of which is so great. It is tough for even those of us schooled in theology to see Jesus life altogether from the stable to the cross and without any historical wrinkles added in.

(Back to Top)

The Safest Place on Earth, Mary’s Crypt
The violent history of religion, violent persecution of early Christians, wars between Christian nations, power hungry Muslims, including Mohammad, power hungry Crusaders and later wars of religion in Europe, leading up to our modern desire for peace in Northern Ireland and Israel are a shame on all of us religious people. Jesus' disciples were full ready to follow Him into battle with Rome if he was a warlord messiah. The Crucified One was a much more difficult messiah to follow. How are we doing? Are we ready to turn the other cheek? Are there any Christian pacifists left? Are we still wise as serpents if we turn the other cheek to a venomous enemy whose conscience is seared?

As Christian pacifists, we should be delighted by the history of the tomb of Mary. As religious animosity has flared between Christians and Muslims over the centuries, we nevertheless hold Mary in such reverence that every time we have fought over the spot where her tomb is, we knock down the structure of worship on top of it, but leave the crypt undisturbed. Muslims, it could be said, love our Mary, not our Christians. Or perhaps the archangel stays the otherwise violent hand. Either way, this leads us to wonder if Mary's crypt is not the safest place on earth. No one dares touch the crypt. Get the infidels and tear down their mosque or church, whichever the case may be, but leave the crypt alone.

I was impressed by the theme of Mary's icon weeping in the recent movie dramatizing conflict between religious Christians and Muslims in Lebanon, “Where Do We Go Now?” Has anyone seen this movie? It is a rated R movie, a bit racy for some, but there is a poignant scene in it where two women who would otherwise have their families drawn into a religious conflict suddenly collude to switch religions, and the originally Christian one who had already lost a son and, before she switches she pours out a bitter vitriolic complaint to the statue of Mary, hurls water at the icon, turns her back and as she walks off to go be a Muslim, the moistened statue of Mary begins to weep.

Sister Lucia’s watchword was peace, which in Arabic is Fatima, and perhaps it is time for us to begin asking Our Lady of the Angels for a miracle to turn our hearts toward peace.

Peter Kreeft, a Modern Thomist's Example, and Bonhoeffer

Another modern reference point for me on ecumenism is Peter Kreeft. A modern Thomist philosopher, whose career I have been following for a while. He has some great resources related to apologetics and Thomist philosophy, but some of the things he says about Muslims and his attitude toward atheists has rubbed off on me also. Of Muslims, he says they have been much better at submitting to the will of God than many modern Christians. He says that Muslims tend to not use birth control, reflecting their submission to the natural rhythm of life as God created it. He says their meek example in the face of the natural rhythm of life is what is causing them to inherit the earth, including Europe.

34 See The 13th Day, fn. 31 above.
Of atheists, we are impressed to see Kreeft in a debate with an atheist go out of his way to share that atheists can receive the blessing of God, that if they are sincerely seeking truth, God promises that they will find it. This is similar to how Bonhoeffer saw atheists toward the end of his too-short career. Of the debates between Christians and atheists, Kreeft always comes across as perhaps the most generous and gentlemanly. Kreeft sees the good in atheists, or as he says of Aquinas, a little truth everywhere. Kreeft is an extreme example of ecumenism that we might follow even more easily with each other as Christians, and with Abrahamic Jews and Muslims. If Kreeft can be so charitable toward atheists, how much more should we be toward our fellow religious, praying alongside us every day to the One True God. It is only for God to decide who is a tare and who is a wheat.

Bonhoeffer, like Kreeft, said something similar about the atheists he knew in the anti-Nazi resistance. He said that they would receive the blessing of the sermon on the mount, that those who hunger and thirst for righteousness would be filled. I think the examples of Bonhoeffer and Kreeft should guide our engagement with theologies we disagree with, trying to see the good in them, or at least disapproving of sin while having compassion on the sinner. What CS Lewis, Kreeft, Bonhoeffer and every other modern Christian intellectual teaches us, is that we do not need to feel insecure in our faith because modernity calls us stupid. Far from it, just point out that atheists are engaging in *ad hominem* logical fallacy, and however many names they call us, it does not prove their point, but shows a lack of class. And it is great fun to read Kreeft and quality apologetics, which joins us with the prophets of every time in their intellectual callings. As Father Delp said in his farewell Advent address to his church, we join the John-the-Baptist figures in “the great comfort known only to those who have paced out the inmost and furthest boundaries of existence.” Those who have critically examined their faith are much more secure in it, and can afford to be more charitable to others.

(Back to Top)

**Athanasius and the Athanasian Heresy**

Kreeft’s is a very different mindset than was employed in inquisitions past. If we view the problem of orthodoxy throughout the ages, we might go back to the origin of Trinitarian orthodoxy with St. Athanasius. Theologians have been bullying each other, rather than communicating their points in gentlemanly ways, for ages. It should be no wonder to Christians that the Muslims began by impressing their orthodoxy with the sword, since that is the same way we began. Most historians mark the first inquisition to medieval times, but we can mark it all the way back to Athanasius or earlier. The beginning of orthodoxy brought with it the implied beginning of heresy, which meant stamping it out with the sword if possible. Our modern church puts Athanasius on a lofty pedestal, calling him the father of orthodoxy and remembering him as the great defender of Trinitarianism against the Arian Heresy. But if we look at what Arius believed, it is very difficult to tell it apart from modern complimentarian Trinitarianism or Eastern Orthodox beliefs that later caused the schism.
And St. Athanasius, who is now venerated as a saint by the Catholic church, has himself later been found to have held heretical views. And the Catholic Church has somewhat abandoned its stance on heresy since Vatican II, but also in its actions of accepting some Eastern Orthodox and Episcopal Churches back into the fold if they submit to Papal authority. Because many people who have studied the differences between Trinitarian beliefs that led to the schism conclude there is only a terminological difference, if this is true for Eastern Orthodox, maybe it is true for Muslim communities as well, and maybe heterodox Christians also. Is there a way for Muslims to be brought into the Roman Catholic fold? That is a wild idea. Put it on the to-do list?

Theology is very complicated and hard to understand, leading to all kinds of miscommunication and terminological differences among people who should be working together. I think if Christian Scientists relaxed the rule forbidding joining other churches, it might be very easy for Christian Scientists to become Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Orthodox Catholic, etc., and if the Christian Science church became viewed more as a parachurch organization, the healing mission of biblically based metaphysical intercessory prayer could go forward. But God sometimes knocks down the towers of Babel we build for good reason, so maybe it is not the worst thing that we are not all in lockstep. Maybe the protestant church is necessary to keep the invisible catholic church humble. At least we should feel some Christian unity with everyone who loves God though.

Going back to the example from Aquinas article on the Trinity, Peter Kreeft says that by reason alone Aquinas would not attempt to prove the Trinity affirmatively, but only would say what God is not. Aquinas viewed positive proofs of the Trinity as a fool’s errand that made the person undertaking the argument look just that, foolish. Ergo, Aquinas believed that faith in the Trinity is not assailable by reason, which is not necessarily intuitive for Christians who expect their faith to always jive with human knowledge. Without this background in philosophy or religion, does anyone really stand a chance at not being a heretic or at least looking foolish? Everyone will accidentally proffer subpar affirmative notions of the Trinity as teaching aids. This is why the Church was so against having the Bible in the vernacular for so long, because theology gets to be ridiculously complicated and easily given to disputation, leading the Bible to be given to all manner of interpretations. Knowing this can help to understand why St. Thomas More felt that Tyndale should be stopped from translating the Bible into English.

Continuing with our example of the doctrine of the Trinity, most people explaining it resort to, what I think are pretty good metaphors as teaching aids, like St. Patrick and the three leaved clover, Julien of Norwich and the hazelnut, but even these metaphors can be called “stupid” by a sophomoric pastor who is trying to turn Aquinas’ stance of epistemic humility into a ruler for rapping knuckles. I guess at least on this score, Tyndale loses the argument with the Latin rite.


Reed Troutman
Pretty much every Christian is a heretic by the measure of using Aquinas as a theological bully stick. The message is, if you cannot do theology as well as Thomas Aquinas, you are probably a heretic. As much as no one wants to be a heretic, even in our “secular” times when the epithet matters little for mundane purposes, if you think back to times when a person could be burned at the stake for heresy, we quickly see the problem with expecting everyone to be able to do theological calculus off the tops of their heads. Pop quiz! Going back to the example of St. Athanasius, since he was both the father of orthodoxy and held heretical views himself, the history of orthodoxy becomes a history of heretics enforcing orthodoxy. Athanasius, Arius, Muhammad, Mary Baker Eddy and everyone else are all heretic from some vantage points, though ultimately God knows their status with Him, but to us I can't tell them apart entirely. Arius meanwhile, one of the most infamous heretics in history was not that far off from orthodoxy, and believed that Jesus was the Sinless Messiah, born of Virgin Mary, and seated at the right hand of God, but because he was an unrepentant subordinationalist or something (believing that Jesus was created rather than from eternity?), Dante assigned him a place alongside Muhammad in the lowest rung in hell. It is not enough for Jesus to be essentially one with the Father according to some views to get you out of heretic territory. If the church has voted on it and you go against it, you are a heretic in your failure to submit to church authority.

Ironically for Protestants who think that the Catholic church is the church of legalism, if Arius were alive today, and joined an eastern orthodox church, and affirmed the authority in Rome, I suspect he could be accepted back into the Roman Catholic church without further explanation. But he likely could not be a member of an orthodox Calvinist church which still strictly follows Athanasian conclusions from Nicaea, or derivative. So I guess Dante's inferno will have to write Arius back into heaven?

Meanwhile, if you look at the procedural aspects of the way that heresies were resolved for most of history, it has a lot in common with the way that witches were tried by floating or sinking. Councils were held, but then it was up to political lobbying and force to enforce the findings and stamp out heresy. Does our modern Trinitarian orthodoxy now rest on the logical fallacy of might making right centuries ago, argumentum ad baculum? Were the councils otherwise fair? Did the Eusebian supporters of Arius necessarily agree with Arius, or were they just going against Athanasius? Did Athanasius supporters agree with him or were they just against Arius? History forces the conclusion that the great creeds and orthodoxy we have received have resulted from tremendous theological bullying, starting with Athanasius who we now regard as both the father of orthodoxy and a heretic himself.

Hypothetically, if I were to go out and establish a Presbyterian nation in say, Peru, and you go out and found a Seventh Day Adventist nation in Argentina, and we go to war over which day of the week to have church on, does the winner have the right doctrine? That is how the Arian controversy was settled, by appeal to the force of Athanasius and the other Trinitarian bishops. And it only forced the problem under the surface until the schismatic eventually went elsewhere and the Church broke apart for the first time into east and west. This is one of the things that

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37 See Wiles, note 35 above.
troubles me about how we Christians are forever condemning Muslims for the use of force that Muhammad undertook to enact his own orthodoxy in Mecca. We point to the mote in Muslim eyes while ignoring the splinters we have from these more violent theological times in Christianity, from Abraham to Athanasius. And later the Christian religious violence from the slaughter of the Waldensians at Piedmont to the slaughter of the peasants by Martin Luther. And on and on over the bloody centuries.

This is one way to view Martin Luther and the reformation also. Luther was a latter day heretic like Arius, but unlike Arius, Luther had the political support to force a stalemate between the monarchs of Christendom and the Bishop of Rome. Where Arius and the churches related to his ideas did survive, but not within Occidental Christendom. Similar to Arius, the influence of Peter Waldo remained among the hill folk of France. But the Roman Catholic church maintained something of a monolith of faith for a long time, until the freedom of Luther's press and the support it gained him finally shattered the Catholic hegemony in the greater schism of the Reformation. Once the heresies of Luther and the vernacular of Tyndale were in the hands of the common man, there was no return to scholastic monopoly on what orthodoxy entails. Though whether papal infallibility is still important to what God allows to be bound on earth and in heaven via the magisterium that St. Peter left in Rome is a spiritual question that we can leave to our betters. It is funny that now 500 years later, with the church in a beleaguered state in an increasingly apostate world, some Protestants, of all people, are trying to gloss over our differences and claim certain Christian truths have “always” been taught, when the Roman Catholics at the height of orthodoxy could not even contain, in the earthly sense, the heretical protestant beliefs of the Elizabethan era.

Finally, what the history of Athanasius becoming heretic tells us, is that beyond history, from a standpoint of logic, if we are to intelligently affirm orthodoxy, we should have to make plain which orthodoxy. Arius’, Athanasius’, Aquinas', Luther's, Calvin's, or Papal, etc.

(Back to Top)

John Henry Newman's Criticism of Protestant Trinitarianism

Another place to look for controversy in the ways that the doctrine of the Trinity has been formulated is John Henry Newman’s criticism of protestants from Luther and Calvin down. Cardinal Newman always strikes me as a bit too cold analytically, but then I remember he has inspired some of my favorite people, like the White Rose Society, and more recently Pope Benedict XVI. While his criticisms of protestant theology are biting, looking at them may be a best way to healing the broken relationships everywhere between churches, synagogues and mosques, not to mention Catholics. At least there are very few criticisms of the protestant world that he failed to make.

Heresy’s Etymology

The word heresy is one of the most loaded words in the English language. I suppose most people would rather be many other things than a “heretic, rebel, thing to flout,” but the root of the word heresy is simply “choice,” though it is Greek to many of us. Heretics were literally “choosing” their theology over what had been voted on and sanctioned by the church.

In his Confessions, Augustine tells of how his mother Monica stopped passing sips of wine around to celebrate communion after the church forbade the practice, which was feared to incline people toward liberality. Augustine records how she quickly saw the wisdom of the discontinuation of the practice. This submission to church reasoning and authority has always been a mark of the faithful believer in the Catholic church. But submission was later called into question by heretics who, after Luther's reformation, we began to call protestants in English.

The whole historical fact of Protestantism or schism is failure to submit to the church authority in Rome, and to instead “choose” a different theology. So every protestant is simultaneously a heretic until we forgive each other and are forgiven from Heaven. Some try and strike a middle path between freedom of conscience and doctrinaire orthodoxy. Bonhoeffer lamented that the concept of heresy had been lost to protestant theology, but he himself did not then entirely go the route of Cardinal Newman and abandon Protestantism. I think we can all join him in saying that there is something wrong with us if we do not occasionally wish to join the Catholic church though. They are less under wrath than we are, perhaps sheltering in their submission to St. Peter's line. Carrying the burden of the priesthood of all believers, as we protestants do, is itself a cross to bear for many of us, from Nicaea to our modern day.

First Century Christianity According to St. Peter and Harnack

In the book of Acts, Peter gets surprised to hear about how all the gentiles are being brought to repentant hearts. The hearts that the Gospel of Jesus Christ were turning back toward God were evidence enough of saving grace. The litmus test in the first century was basically this, a repentant heart and an acceptance of the Christian gospel. Adolph von Harnack said anyone who considered themselves followers of Jesus were considered Christians during this time. Most evangelical churches have simplified this back down for modern quantification of the reach of their message, counting “decisions for Christ,” like early Methodists, without requiring more intricate theological knowledge than is required to recite the sinner's prayer.
This might be seen as a watering down of doctrine and confirmation arcana, but should not be seen as a watered down doctrine of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, unless we are willing to say that the Apostles in Acts or Paul in 1 Timothy were preaching watered down Christianity, since they did not have the doctrine in any of the forms we have it today, excepting the sola scriptura form.

Textual Criticism of the Koran, Embellishment vs. Simplification

Durior complicatio. Being *infinity incapax*, we all need each other to keep the gospel whole. One thing I find unique about the evangelical mission that Christians have to Muslims, is the opportunity to expand on what Muslims have of the Gospel. Imagine if all you knew of the New Testament Bible were one truncated gospel. Imagine how much poorer our understanding of fatherhood would be without the example of the holy family.

We should be particularly disappointed that St. Joseph is missing from the Koran. In Santa Cruz California, the visitor to St. Joseph's Catholic Church quickly discovers that the parish rests in the shadow of St. Joseph, since many of his devotees are housed nearby. Incidentally, there is also a point for textual criticism of the Koran, since some might argue that authentic records tend to be more intricate and detailed, where points of “truncation” for cultural reasons tend to be more obvious. Of course this, like all interpretive guides, can be argued both ways. One might argue truncation is more likely while the other responds that embellishment would also explain the appearance of Joseph in the Christian gospels. But charges of embellishment without an articulable reason to doubt veracity ring more hollow than vice versa, so I would say truncation seems to be what happened to St. Joseph in the Koran, and especially considering Phillip Yancey’s point, that the Gospels met with cultural barriers in explanation as they traveled east. Further, since the Koran was written later, the truncation would have happened anywhere between the end of the first Century to the time of the Koran, potentially by Mohammad's own hand, so truncation of St. Joseph is not anywhere near as extraordinary a claim as embellishment.

The Psychological Angle - Please Understand Me II

As a matter of Christian anthropology, most people agree that every human being is created with a makeup that is spiritual/physical/psychological. How these relate to each other and what we should do to form Christian souls, bodies and personalities is somewhat more controversial, but the mere fact of the existence of psychology is not really debated, and most traditions celebrate individuality in these things in theory. We are all precious and unique snowflakes belonging to God.

39 See *Who Cares about the Saints*, fn. 15 above; *Joseph the Man Closest to Christ* (Ignatius Press 2005).
But the extent of the difference between religious people's personalities can lead to extremely different ways of interacting in the church. And the cultural anthropologist's notion of a “modal” personality, for instance the modal personality of Japan celebrates respect and tradition, while the modal personality of the American might lean more toward the egalitarian and innovative. When we see churches in this same light of both the individual personalities who make them up, and the way that this aggregates to form perceptions of a modal personality of the church, which then may be self-reinforcing as people want to conform to the norms of that personality, we may discover that North Eastern Protestants are particularly waspy and think that ketchup is spicy, while southern Catholics and Baptist's spar over how cavalier they should be and whether Tabasco or red rooster is the official sauce of the church.

If this were all husk it would just be fun to think about, but where extremes of modal personalities make “ghetto” Christianity out of a subculture, then we should suspect psycho-social anthropologists can inform our discussion of what leads to sectarian judgmental attitudes. The words they use are informative of how we can relate as religious societies: in-group, out-group, xenophobia, xenomania, instinct, enculturation. Community churches may be seen to need to make room for introverts. Bookish churches may need to reinforce the importance of Christian fellowship. Perhaps we all know an American Buddhist who relishes being different and avant-garde. When they are informed that Buddhists in Asia are not as full of counter-cultural people, they get disappointed. They wanted to be different, and are sometimes surprised to find that Buddhists in Asia are not necessarily non-theistic. We see personality operate in churches, where some people seek out special churches and missions, and some people just want to go where they can feel comfortable.

One book that can guide the way we see differences in personality is aptly titled Please Understand Me II. It basically just goes over the Meyers-Briggs personality indexes, but one thing that jumps out at us regarding divergent theology is the potential for so-called thinkers and feelers to arrive at the same conclusions religiously, but in different words. This is only one way in which personality can drive church interactions and communication challenges.

Two great web resources to consider might be Tom Schwanda's classic article “The Personality of Worship,” and MyPersonality.info's list of famous people's personalities, which includes historical church figures like Martin Luther King and Albert Schweitzer. Missing from the list are many who we would like to take a guess at, like what was the personality type of Mary Baker Eddy, John and Charles Wesley, Arius and Athanasius, etc. So much of theology and church organization is driven by who we are psychologically that we cannot ignore our differences without losing mutual understanding, as the name of Kiersey's book, Please Understand Me II implies.

Not to mention that ways of thinking can be a “dimorphic” traits among men and women, making women “churchmen” like Mary Baker Eddy and Julien of Norwich sound totally different to us.

(Back to Top)

**The Five Love Languages of Gary Chapman**

Very similar to the idea that people's personalities are different, is the phrasing of felt relational needs and duties as expressed by Gary Chapman's book, popular among Christian audiences, *The Five Love Languages*. People tend to respond to God the way that they feel they are called. For someone whose “love languages” include “quality time,” we might expect they would be more likely to answer a religious calling by being contemplative, or spending an hour each morning reading a bible lesson, as the Christian Scientists and Methodists tend to. But this can be a mismatch for someone whose love language is “acts of service,” like Therese of Lisieux was known to have chafed at the contemplative side of Carmelite life, while dedicating herself to little acts of kindness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer who took more naturally to contemplative time, at least the amount that we protest ants tend to set aside, he was forever reminding himself to be patient with constant interruptions to his work, whether taking his turn to do the dishes or putting down the book he was working on to smuggle some Jewish people to Switzerland.

(Back to Top)

**Feminist Literature's Standpoint Epistemology**

Another point of difference is sex and gender difference, which comes up repeatedly in discussing Mary Baker Eddy and Hildegarde, etc., but which not only goes to the heart of theology, but to the heart of every type of relationship. We spend so much time discussing the “complementarian” “egalitarian” divide as it relates to the Trinity, it would be easy to forget to mention that this is a novel use of those words by the theological academy to describe the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity, where they have traditionally been the terms applied to the place of men and women in relation to each other. It has only been more recently that the concept of complementarity was graphed onto understandings of the relationship of the Persons of the Trinity. People are now confusing this, and thinking that the complimentarian argument of the Trinity is what leads to our understanding of the relationship of the sexes, where the late 20th century first used the term to define “Biblical” manhood and womanhood. And modern science supports the idea of innate differences between the sexes, while calling into question whether they were by design or the product of evolutionary pressures.

But either way, as our modern understanding of men, women and “other” genders has grown since the 19th Century, some “old school” churches may want to revisit these older contexts as well if they have gone overboard in their egalitarianism that would wipe our sex difference on every level. It is a debate whether churches want to remain egalitarian, complementarian, in
between or to update their view in light of modern feminist theory, or explain why they will maintain the view they already have.

The debates’ roots run through 19th Century suffrage movements, and historical understandings of the relationship of the sexes in married life and in church, which can all be informative. As in times past, there is nothing new under the sun, though people make no shortage of claims that we can discover what the Bible says about the relation of the sexes. The simplified modern style of theology, which reduces every important debate to a bullet point version of “systematic theology,” we see the place of it for rudimentary teaching purposes perhaps, but it has the hazard of becoming systematic legalism rather than systematic theology when it turns into the sacred bullet points, especially when coupled with the idea of submission to church authority that Calvin was so fond of. As soon as we submit to church authority, we may as well go back and join the Roman Catholic church, because we are no longer protestants. We realize that this was a mistake that Luther made immediately after refusing to submit to Rome, he then demanded the submission of his own congregation, but the American protestant churches have always done a better job of maintaining the protest on an individual level.

One of the most gigantic discoveries for philosophy during the 20th century, which is something that any uneducated person could have told us, is that men and women think differently. The rise of feminist philosophy comes from Carol Gilligan's groundbreaking work, “In a Different Voice,” and as much as this has been earth shattering for politics, art, family relationships and philosophy, modern theology leaves this historical moment without enough discussion, and the complementarians who should find an ally in feminism fail to account for Gilligan’s contribution. Seminaries may feel they have been backed into the corner they prefer. Some even believe the world was created 5000 years ago, and at that time our natural differences were complimentarily based on submission, not oppression, so we don't want to talk about oppression. This has not always been the case though, where the Roman Catholic Church has given us Hildegarde of Bingen, Joan of Arc, Julien of Norwich, Mother Theresa, Therese of Avila, Therese of Lisieux, all standing to speak for the church on some level. The Catholic church reasoned that in following a male calling to be a religious nun, nuns become like men. And the protestant church has given us Mary Baker Eddy, Aimee Semple McPherson and Ellen G. White. All of whom held more egalitarian ideals. Not to mention ancient Christianity giving us the women of the Bible, like St. Photina.

Like personality tests, i.e. Meyers Briggs or Gary Chapman’s love languages, can shed light on why people approach theology differently, the psychological-philosophical comment from modern feminist literature points to the differences that people can have in their thinking from what is their gender or other difference. In trying to understand the way that men and women do theology differently, one idea is that if men and women have different moral voices, as Gilligan says, the way that women do theology should be profoundly affected by this. That is the conclusion that can be drawn comparing feminine theology for similarities and contrasting it with masculine theology for differences. Women tend to arrive at certain gospel truths more easily than men, and revolve their theology around caring, mercy, creation and beauty. The Motherhood of God, for instance, that Isaiah refers to, was very important to Mary Baker Eddy.
Doctrines of mercy seem easier for women, which Hildegard of Bingen sprung onto the scene of medieval Europe with, wanting to do away with flagellation, in favor of “the wine of repentance and the oil of mercy.” She would have mercy and not sacrifice.

Conversely, we men seem to be more innately comfortable with the Gospel truths revolving around good and evil, justice, protection and strength. We men always get the justice aspects of the gospel more intuitively, celebrating the end of time when all the evil will be wiped away. But it is not that men don’t understand mercy or that women don’t understand justice, but that on average at least, we do so from different psychological starting points, and this can seem to confuse our jargon. And some of it is individual, so one woman may feel instinctively feminine, while a man like myself, raised in the femininely voiced Christian Science church, may find mercy as intuitive as justice.

Incidentally, philosophical feminism is different from politicized feminism, for anyone not familiar. Philosophical feminism starts from the basis of gender difference, and sees it at least somewhat out of our control, perhaps a “natural” or “interactive” kind. Philosophical feminism retains early feminist thought, which was simply to note how incredibly different men and women are, and how this leads to all kinds of societal repercussions. Christians who are complementarian in their thinking about the sexes have a lot of agreement with early feminists actually, though leading to very different conclusions than, for instance lesbian feminism. But the work of feminism to uncover the “different voice” that women bring to their intellectual lives goes a long way to describe why men and women tend to think differently about things like justice, caring, competitiveness, etc.

I often joke about feminism that men are smarter than women, and women are smarter than men, but depending on the way you twist the numbers. This is actually true. When psychometricians study IQ, they find the natural distribution of men’s IQs contrasts with women’s in the extremes. Men are smarter and dumber in the extremes, e.g. the tails of the bell curve are fatter for men, with more geniuses and more simpletons than there are for the same number of women. But women on the average are just as smart, though with less dunces or geniuses. So we should suspect that there are more Gottfried Leibnizes and Simple Simons among our male Christian theologians than women. Among the great theologians of history are women like Hildegarde of Bingen, who were unique and incomparable geniuses. My favorite medieval “Kyrie” is from the musical genius of Hildegarde, let alone her other accomplishments.

So while I disagree with the entirety of the politically correct claims that some feminists might make, perhaps that the genius of women has been suppressed by a politically dominant male voice, I think there has been some structural suppression. As importantly I see natural difference and mutual failure in communication between the different voices. The dominant voice may not
always have made room for minority understandings, but it may not be by design. This is something that Complementarian Christians have maintained for a long time, so feminist philosophers may be interested in learning from the complementarian theological academy, about why they advise men and women to listen intently to each other's perspective. But historically, I think primarily there were just more men disposed to being added to the theological canon for prevalence of males in history based on dimorphic cognitive distributions at the extremes. And the structural hurdles that women faced can in part be seen as natural evils based on ideal and/or necessary divisions of labor, i.e. men cannot gestate and generally don't lactate, which has predisposed men toward more freedom to follow a theological career usually. I think we would be incredibly poorer for disregarding those theological voices from the soprano section that we do have though. Let alone that genius IQ is distinguishable from inspiration and holiness, where being rich in cognitive ability may just mean the greater damnation if we use our gifts wrongly. But dimorphic IQ aside, and arguments over nature/nurture determinants aside, men and women, for whatever reason, have different distributions of personality traits also, that can predispose them to very different careers. Men and women also have different distributions of personality driven ways of thinking.

Bonhoeffer once threw out the rhetorical question: “What makes for the religious personality?” In the environment of Nazi Germany. Bonhoeffer was afraid it was the love of submission to authority, which he saw running rampant among the Lutheran state church, which alternated between being bullied by the Nazi's and messianic assurance in support of ushering in Hitler's Thousand Year Reich. Where Martin Luther himself obviously did not shy away from controversy or confrontation with authority, Luther expected those in his congregation to respect his authority, leading to some level of submissiveness in the Lutheran church, which I think is what Bonhoeffer was commenting on; the “Herr Pastor” side of Lutheranism. To some extent the soft spoken Emersonian religion of the 19th Century New English may have been the fertile ground that the feminine voice needed to find its protestant expression. And indeed many of the great feminists in history have come out of this period, especially Mary Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft is more a Unitarian Universalist rather than Unitarian Christian, but it was her philosophico-religious element that many continue to view as giving her voice its permanence and resonance. Feminists may cringe if we call her the female Thomas Paine, but that is one way to see her. (You have to be a feminist to get that joke. It is a fundamental point in feminism that to define a feminist by a similar male misses some of the point of feminism.) But it is Wollstonecraft's religious respect for life that makes her pro-life stance important to modern pro-life feminists, like Quaker anti-abortion activist Rachel MacNair. And by examining theological issues, inclusive of how women perceive themselves, these modern feminists make some fantastic points that religious people should be interested in.

Rachel MacNair for instance points out that abortion is not only violence against a fetus, but also violence against the woman pressured to get the abortion by a society that is insensitive to both

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the life of the unborn and the plight of unwed mothers. MacNair sees potentially no fewer than three victims in every abortion, the mother, the fetus and the society that gets a sort of PTSD from a failure to respect life. We think of war the same way, in what does it do to target countries, and what is the effect on deployed service members, but what if we also asked the question of what does it do to families that go without a father and husband for a year at a time, or who have to deal with the fallout of PTSD. These are the feminist analytical angles that philosophy has added to its modeling. Theology would do well to acknowledge these post-Gilligan bases for, not only mutual understanding, but expanded analytical frameworks.

With regards to the way that people of difference are attracted to religion or Christianity, we should appreciate that some think theologically and intellectually, while some may just intuitively get that Jesus was the most caring wonderful man in existence. And more than being a point for agreement, we can see it as an enriching perspective. There is something of the caring situational nature of Christian practices that can be echoed by people of all religious backgrounds and levels of faith. Modern “Care Ethics,” a philosophy that has been seen as growing out of Gilligan's work is one of the philosophy department's ethical reactions to feminism. And also has given rise to the theology of care that is celebrated alongside the preaching evangelical roles of ministry.46

Each of the disciples, from John the youngest, who Jesus loved and chose to care for his mother, to James the Just, who spent all his life in monastic prayer; Jesus chose to form His first group of disciples from incredibly different personalities and backgrounds. This should caution us against thinking that there is one right personality type or way of thinking that Christians ought to have. It has been suggested that this was a purposeful choice on Jesus’ part to show, among other things, that God welcomes all personality types. And what do we learn from the unexpectedly “inclusive of women” nature of the gospels, where Jesus is seen speaking to the Samaritan woman, St. Photina, at the well, who Eastern Orthodox hold was the 13th apostle. Is there a correct gender to be an apostle/teacher, or were there just less of them, naturally gravitating instead to the Care Theology role of being “pastoral” like the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene?

Watching the disciples debate from their different standpoints, there will be unexpected blessings pouring out of their debate, including the gender differences. But to appreciate this requires that we come to terms with Bonhoeffer's admission that we are all infinity incapacit, and waiting on the grace of God to bring these blessings out of our limited understandings. One final reason to bring up feminism, is that for anyone growing up in femininely voiced churches, including the Christian Science Church, where Mary Baker Eddy's picture hangs on the wall, the question of what would the Christian church look like if we allowed the feminine voice to be heard is not a theoretical question. You might say that for us Christian Science men, the feminine voice is as much a yoke around our necks as feminists feel the dominant male voice is for women generally. Women just phrase things differently and care more about some things than others, including “care” perhaps. Traditional Jewish ways of seeing motherhood, Catholic views of respect for the contributions of saints and nuns and Islamic views of the role of women from Muhammad’s wife

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down through the centuries are also informative. This is a topic that is not unknown to neo-Calvinist seminarians, where pastors in training are taught to distinguish their “teaching” roles from their “pastoral” role, and husband and wife ministry teams are often expected to divide these in favor of women’s more natural inclination toward the pastoring part of being a pastor. I don't say this dismissively either, just pointing it out as a barrier to communication sometimes between theological circles and feminist circles, each of whom may be surprised to find how much common ground there is between them and what different conclusions they sometimes draw from the same differences.

What can we all learn from those two greatest Christian teachers Photina and Hildegarde? And if they phrase things differently, does that mean they are disagreeing or adding nuance to the masculine voice of theology? If we see it this way, we tend toward reconciliation, maximizing what unites us in our difference.

(Back to Top)

Jesus the “Mass Man” According to Atheists and Popular Science

Another litmus test that touches on the idea of the Trinity that I have been toying with as an alternate test for who is a Christian, is that I often find Christians emphasizing that Jesus was a unique person, while people who are antagonistic to Christianity or religion in general are trying to say “He never lived,” “He never lived in the flesh,” or “his life did not matter,” and Jesus was therefore not really special. All of these would put Jesus alongside a “mass” man, as Thomas Merton says. There are lots of these relatively unimportant figures out there in literature. There are made up characters like King Arthur and Don Quixote, made up gods who are no gods, gods that have no seat from which to condescend on us to lift us higher, and myriad heroic figures who Jesus might be lumped in with. Where Christian's celebrate Jesus' humanity as condescension, atheists would have it be a sign of mediocrity.

Thomas Merton says Jesus “had indeed emptied himself, taken the form of God's servant, man. But he did not empty himself to the point of becoming mass man, faceless man.” In art we see Rembrandt celebrate the condescension of Christ in his “Face of Jesus,” which is not a way to jab at Christ, but a celebration that God so loved the world He sent his only begotten Son to restore our hearts to a condition of flesh from stone. Rembrandt’s painting of a Sephardic man was still a celebration that the Messiah was a real unique person. Where the same subject can be drawn by Popular Mechanics, perhaps unintentionally, it has the effect for some of saying that Jesus was “mass man,” just some Israelite from the first century, with a goofy look. rather than the Prince of Peace coming with the tenderness that Rembrandt’s portrait brings out.

The same thing is done in intellectual theology, where many theologians want Jesus to be one of many. With regard to Unitarians and the 19th Century New English, this was not a mistake that

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they made, though their interpretation of Jesus life is sometimes interpreted that way by modern orthodoxy. And the messianic Jews and early church fathers for that matter, though they did not have our modern post-Athanasian Trinitarian orthodoxy, they were like Rembrandt, celebrating Jesus Sonship in the platonig narrative way. I think “uniqueness” is one potential minimum test for whether people are worshipers of Christ Jesus, whether they see His Condescension as unique, or his being the second Person of the Trinity, we should accept either. If we hear people say He existed in the flesh, and that He was unique and important, that makes for a Christian theology, even in the case of the demythologizing humanitarianist Thomas Jefferson types, though I think demythologized Christianity misses the most important parts of why Jesus’ life was special, it is still revolving all of religion around the right Exponent of God's Love.

We incarnational thinking Christians are always quick to point out that one drop of Jesus’ blood is as big to God as an ocean of mercy, but we forget that the same is true of Jesus’ words, not one of which will ever pass away, and His life, the resolve with which He lived it “for others,” as Bonhoeffer said, sets an Ensample that will also never pass away. Most Christians consider Jesus sacrifice as the most important thing about his life, and the judgment and call that that places on our lives, but we forget that Jesus was a great philosopher too. Some have disagreed with J. B. Phillips, that we search the Bible “in vain for any vague humanist optimism.” Some have found this optimism in putting the Sermon on the Mount into practice. Many “unbelievers” throughout history have taken advantage of the wisdom of Jesus of Nazareth to help their fellow man. We should be no more surprised to see that Pope Francis quoted from Jefferson and Franklin's final draft of the Declaration of Independence during his visit, than we are that he celebrated Mass and Eucharist. The Life, Liberty and Pursuit of Happiness that Pope Francis quoted approvingly, comes through Jefferson from Christian Theologian John Locke, whose benevolent view of our Creator led him to see all of the blessings we are showered with, up to and including the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, but also including His example and direction from the sermon on the mount. It is often Jesus’ advice to settle with one's enemies that we see animating the pacifism of many otherwise conflict prone actors.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spent the latter part of his life thinking through the nature of all these bits of Christian wisdom that form, in at least a nebulous way, the ethics of Christianity. Bonhoeffer’s Ethics alongside his earlier Cost of Discipleship were his answers to the problem of what Christian ethics are, and we can all see how the love of God’s law shapes and informs the Christian life. In comparison, while Jefferson's skepticism may have missed some of the most important effects of the life of Christ in soteriology and history, he was correct in his agreement with Jesus on the affirmation and advocacy for the mutual bonds of friendship and reciprocity, as the proper foundation of any humanitarianist religion. God cares that we follow Jesus’ example and direction. However impoverished Jefferson's Christianity was from demythologizing, it was not so impoverished as to miss everything of the truth that Christ's coming into the world meant.

Therefore, I think it is proper to call humanitarianists like Jefferson Christian, as long as they are not lumping Jesus in with mass man.
Mary the “Mass Woman” According to Protestants

Likewise, we Protestants, trying to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus atoning sacrifice, have treated Mary in the same way that we treat the loving ideas that Jesus and Jefferson affirmed. Popular Mechanics treats Jesus likeness with little respect by dissecting it, and we protestants in turn celebrate the blood of Christ, failing to respect the wholeness of the incarnation. Mary is just one example. If we pause to look into why Catholics have a Mariology at all, we quickly realize that God did not pick just any soul to bring Jesus into the world, but that the holy family is worth a great deal more attention than we pay it. And Mary's assumption into heaven may empower her to bless us in our walk with God. This was a point, ironically, that some more liberal Christian churches like Unitarians do not suffer myopia from, because they don't have as much at stake in the perceived threat of Mariology to the doctrine of the Trinity.

The lives of the saints may also be seen as somewhat disregarded. We fail to appreciate, for instance, how the Holy Spirit's guidance of St. Rita to be a great conciliator and forgiver can be applied to our own Christian response to conflict. Studying “church history” is a celebration of the many ways that God has worked in the lives of his people, including the Virgin Mary and the Saints.

(Back to Top)

Heuristic Theology

If we examine the study of theology from the perspective of information theory, we find a number of heuristics are at play in our modern theological discussions, some are good information, or produce good information, and some are bad. This is an additional angle from which to examine ecumenism, since not all Christians use the same heuristics. Some heuristics, we agree, are based on sound reasoning and some are flawed in their logic. One easy example of a logically flawed heuristic would be the atheist’s assertion that God does not exist, based on the reasoning that God cannot be dissected like a fruit bat, where fruit bats are known to exist, therefore God does not exist because He is not a fruit bat.

This falls down on the logical fallacy argumentum ad ignorantiam, “argument to ignorance.” To quote Stuart Chase again, “for those who believe, no proof is necessary. For those who don't believe, no proof is possible.” Heuristics that cause us to jump to conclusions about God, the Gospel or each other ecumenically, can be nailed together with flawed logic, and we should always be reexamining our reasoning to make sure we are not jumping to unwarranted conclusions.

If our heuristic for examining who is a Christian is based on an objective test that fails to exhaust logical possibilities, this is also a logical fallacy, commonly referred to as a “false dichotomy.”

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But even if we give two or three tests, what if there is a fourth or fifth test we have not exhausted, a false trichotomy, etc.: The Trinity test, or even the “fruits” test, if we fail to account exhaustively for what are the fruits of the Spirit, could be seen as a logically flawed heuristic for who is a Christian, or what is acceptable for organizational or ecumenical purposes. If this is the case, we may as well be saying, Christians don't eat hot sauce, ergo Louisiana is heathen territory. Check your pantry, you may be a heretic. Ketchup? I always think of the false dichotomy as somehow related to “correlation not causation,” post hoc ergo propter hoc for those who think of it that way.

The Ecumenical Lesson of My Father

Recently, reminiscing about the memories my cousins and I had of my father, who passed in 1996, that people could not help loving my father, because he was a very gentle soul, both sincere and sensitive, my cousin Bridget surprised me at a Christmas party with a copy of a “chronological” Bible that my father had given her three decades earlier. Apparently Bridget and my father had had an ongoing discussion of the relative merits of chronologically driven Bibles, and he had given it to her as a gift. But marked in this Bible in blue chalk, characteristic of the way that Christian Scientists mark out their Bible lessons, was an ecumenical lesson from my father that he had shared apparently with my Cousin Bridget. My cousin Bridget being a Catholic, we can’t help but think that perhaps it was not just any markings, but ecumenical markings in a Christian Scientists way of communicating his perspective. While unsure how he came up with these, a few of the ecumenical passages marked out chronologically as best as can be made out through the fading of the chalk, are as follows:

ACTS - DISCIPLES BAPTIZED IN THE HOLY SPIRIT – May 28, 30 A.D.,
Acts 2 1-4. 1 And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. 2 And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. 3 And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.

ACTS - GOSPEL PROCLAIMED IN JERUSALEM – May 28, 30 A.D.,
Acts 2 5-6. 5 And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. 6 Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language.

JAMES – CHRISTIAN CONDUCT DURING TRIALS – 45/46 A.D.,
James 1 27. 27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

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49 The New Chronological Bible, King James Version (E.E. Gaddy & Assoc., Inc, 1980).

140 | Ecumenism, Trinity, Unity, Christian Science

Reed Troutman
James 3:2-5. 2 For in many things we offend all. If any man offend not in word, the same is a perfect man, and able also to bridle the whole body. 3 Behold, we put bits in the horses' mouths, that they may obey us; and we turn about their whole body. 4 Behold also the ships, which though they be so great, and are driven of fierce winds, yet are they turned about with a very small helm, whithersoever the governor listeth. 5 Even so the tongue is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how great a matter a little fire kindleth!

James 3:9-10. 9 Therewith bless we God, even the Father; and therewith curse we men, which are made after the similitude of God. 10 Out of the same mouth proceedeth blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not so to be.

I CORINTHIANS – CONDEMNATION OF STRIFE AND DIVISIONS – 54/55 A.D.
I Corinthians 1:4-5. 4 I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ; 5 That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge;

I Corinthians 1:10. 10 Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

I Corinthians 1:18. 18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

I Corinthians 2:1-2. 1 And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

I Corinthians 2:4-5. 4 And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: 5 That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

I Corinthians 2:12-14. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. 13 Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. 14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

I Corinthians 3:18-21, 23. 18 Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness. 20 And again, The Lord knoweth the thoughts of the wise, that they are vain. 21 Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours; … 23 And ye are Christ's; and Christ is God's.

I Corinthians 8:5-6. 5 For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) 6 But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.

I Corinthians 12:4,8-11. 4 Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. … 8 For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; 9 To another faith
by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; 10 To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: 11 But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.

I Corinthians 14 12, 33. 12 Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church. … 33 For God is not the author of confusion, but of peace, as in all churches of the saints.

II CORINTHIANS – PAUL’S DEFENSE OF HIS APOSTOLIC MINISTRY – 57 A.D.
II Corinthians 2 14. 14 Now thanks be unto God, which always causeth us to triumph in Christ, and maketh manifest the savour of his knowledge by us in every place.

II Corinthians 10 4-5. 4 (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) 5 Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ;

ROMANS – SOLUTION: FAITH IN JESUS – 57 A.D.
Romans 5 1-5. 1 Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: 2 By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. 3 And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; 4 And patience, experience; and experience, hope: 5 And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.

Romans 6 20-23. 20 For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. 21 What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. 22 But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. 23 For the wages of sin is death: but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 8 2,14,28-29, 35,37-39. 2 For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. … 14 For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. … 28 And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. 29 For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. 35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? … 37 Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. 38 For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, 39 Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans 11 33,36. 33 O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! … 36 For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.

EPHESIANS – GRACE REVEALED – 62 A.D,
Ephesians 1 3-4. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: 4 According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love:

Ephesians 2 13-14, 19. 13 But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. 14 For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; … 19 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;

Ephesians 3 14-19. 14 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, 15 Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, 16 That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; 17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.

Ephesians 4 17-18, 20-24. 17 This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, 18 Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: … 20 But ye have not so learned Christ; 21 If so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus: 22 That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; 23 And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; 24 And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

Ephesians 6 11-15. 11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. 13 Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. 14 Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; 15 And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace;

COLOSSIANS – PRE-EMINENCE OF JESUS CHRIST – 62 A.D.

Colossians 2 8. 8 Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

Colossians 3 1-2, 16-17. 1 If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. 2 Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. … 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. 17 And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.

PHILIPPIANS – GREETINGS AND COMMENDATION – 62/63 A.D.

Philippians 1 9-11. 9 And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment; 10 That ye may approve things that are excellent; that ye may be sincere and without offence till the day of Christ; 11 Being filled with the fruits of righteousness, which are by Jesus Christ, unto the glory and praise of God.

Philippians 2 5. 5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

143 | Ecumenism, Trinity, Unity, Christian Science

Reed Troutman
1 Peter 4:10-11. 10 As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 11 If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

1 Timothy 2:1-4. 1 I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; 2 For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. 3 For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; 4 Who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth.

1 Timothy 6:20-21. 20 O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust, avoiding profane and vain babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called: 21 Which some professing have erred concerning the faith. Grace be with thee. Amen.

II Timothy 2:15-16. 15 Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. 16 But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness.

II Timothy 3:14-17. 14 But continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; 15 And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. 16 All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: 17 That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished unto all good works.

II Timothy 4:7-8. 7 I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.

Hebrews 13:5. 5 Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.

I John 1:1-3. 1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; … 3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

I John 2:15-17. 15 Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world, the lust of the
flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. 17 And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. … 23 Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: (but) he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also. 24 Let that therefore abide in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. 25 And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even eternal life.

I John 4 16,19. 16 And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. … 19 We love him, because he first loved us.

I John 5 20. 20 And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life.

REVELATION – JESUS CHRIST: ALPHA AND OMEGA – 90-96 A.D,
Revelation 1 9-11 (and the last). 9 I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ. 10 I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, 11 Saying, I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last:

Revelation 2 7. 7 He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.

Revelation 7 1-3,11-12. 1 And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. 2 And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, 3 Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. … 11 And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, 12 Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.

Revelation 12 1-5, 15-17. 1 And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars: 2 And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered. 3 And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads. 4 And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born. 5 And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne. … 15
And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. 16 And the earth helped the woman, and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth. 17 And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Revelation 19 1,11,14,16,19-20. 1 And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: … 11 And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. … 14 And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. … 16 And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS. … 19 And I saw the beast, and the kings of the earth, and their armies, gathered together to make war against him that sat on the horse, and against his army.

20 And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

Revelation 21 1,7,9. 1 And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. … 7 He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. … 9 And there came unto me one of the seven angels which had the seven vials full of the seven last plagues, and talked with me, saying, Come hither, I will shew thee the bride, the Lamb's wife.

Revelation 22 8-9,14. 8 And I John saw these things, and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel which shewed me these things. 9 Then saith he unto me, See thou do it not: for I am thy fellowservant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them which keep the sayings of this book: worship God. … 14 Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city.

Thanks to my cousin Bridget for preserving this lesson.

(Back to Top)

Theological Mistakes, Failures

I have had a fondness for as long as I can remember of quoting Mother Theresa for saying that “we cannot do great things, we can only do small things with great love.” Her way of working with the poor, one washbasin at a time, forms at least a part of the basis of all Christian anthropologies. Unfortunately, while quoting her is technically accurate, to my embarrassment, I
discovered that she was herself quoting Therese of Lisieux, so for most of my life I had been quoting the wrong Theresa.

This is an obvious example of theological mistake in attribution, but what about when we fail to see complexity, and think we have theology nailed down, or worse when other people esteem us for being pious and deep until we become covetous of this esteem itself, as Augustine chastened himself in pondering this temptation. Augustine said the righteousness we look for in doing theology should come only from loving God and our fellow man, and not from hearing the undeserved praises of men, though these are tempting to want to hear. I imagine someone winning the lottery imagines themselves deserving of the jackpot. And Augustine had legendary struggles with this type of thinking. Augustine is legendary both for the impact and complexity of his thinking about psychology and metacognition. His discussions were in the context of desiring praise of himself, as the sin of pride as self-righteousness, and from others whom he deemed worthy to render an opinion as being from those of good reputation themselves, etc.

This may have been why Luther and the reformation was so insistent that grace is always a free gift, because no one can attain to righteousness by their theological bootstraps. What is worse is this self-righteousness can lead us to condemn others for misunderstanding God. As in the childhood game of telephone, Christianity is passed from one generation to another, there are always things being lost and miscommunicated, rediscovered and buried again.

(Back to Top)

Missing the Joke

Alongside the tendency to presume that theologians are inspired and therefore infallible, there is a tendency in academic theology to assume that theologians are always serious and/or sincere, which may usually be true of self-serious academic theology. But, outside of academia, most of theology exists in the real world where people are much more down to earth and willing to laugh at ourselves. And occasionally we find theologians like Bonhoeffer being funny even within the academy.⁵⁰ One of the best ways to read and understand Bonhoeffer is as a running dialogue of humorous quips aimed at his proud nemesis Immanuel Kant.⁵¹ Academics argue whether Christians should drink alcohol, while Baptists tease each other that the never recognize each other in the liquor store. Academics debate the role of icons and iconoclasm in church, while Christian Scientists poke fun at each other for being divided over what pastel colored wall paper to apply in church libraries. There have been some very serious debates in theology about whether or not God is funny. And some theologians are like that too. You have to read them with a straight and sincere face, while others you can't even begin to understand them if you don't have a sense of humor. We are left thinking that Jonathan Swift was a terrible misanthrope if we don’t get his sense of humor.

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⁵¹ Id.
God is Silly, Taking Giddiness Back

When the Nazi Gestapo questioned Albert Telschow about Christian Science, before they officiated at his martyrdom, they accused Christian Science of being “giddiness.” And this is how Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Science church is sometimes viewed for lacking the masculine tone that is taken more seriously. Or at least this is potentially the perception of Christian Scientists like myself, who have grown up being called heretic, non-Christian, heterodox, cult, etc., that we are also dismissed as being childish. It is possible to see a further theological contribution of Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Science church, alongside its charismatic contribution to reinvigorating faith healing and pointing to problems with “them bones” theology, that Christian Science has also been sticking up for the capitol G term Giddy as an Aristotelean synonym for God. God is the source, not only of all Fatherhood and Seriousness, but of all Motherhood and Care. And Giddiness? These different ways of knowing God, could be see alongside “standpoint” epistemology, important to feminist literature and feminist epistemology. The feminist Maria Lugones describes an attitude of “playfulness” as a necessary precondition for understanding certain things, emotionally and relationally. In a way, Christian church writ large, from every calling within Catholicism to modern Protestant experiments of every variety, have traced out the reaches of feminist standpoint epistemology for Christians. And Christian Scientists have done a great job of taking theological “giddiness” back from the man. Where Albert Telschow’s response to the Gestapo was firm and serious in nature, but it can also be read as a joke. “Christian Science is the same, just that it is now illegal in Germany.” But humor in Nazi Germany was illegal at the time, so of course they killed him.

Outlawing humor is a hallmark of authoritarianism according to some. Andre Codrescu, the famous modern American poet, says that in his childhood, while watching Ceausescu come to power in Romania, the first thing the totalitarian state did was outlaw joking about the dictator. And we see the hazard of this, not only from secular governments, but also from legalism in churches, which was the main charge that Jesus laid against His contemporary Pharisees, that they had become self-righteous and lost their sense of humor. Jonathon Swift may have been the greatest funny man associated with the idea of a humorless God who nevertheless created humorous beings. Some theologians have posited that our sense of humor, of poetry and ability to give our lives for each other are the result of a “fortuitous fall” from grace. Man who we later discovered in Jesus Christ could set His face like flint for His human family and give His life even for the undeserving became the ultimate Hero in Milton’s epic, with the whole of cosmology stood on its head. Dante’s exposition of the gospel led him to title his master work the Divine Comedy.

And we find this being studied by theologians in academic settings, but also by Sunday School teachers, and feminists, and anyone who sees the problem of pretending that God is made of

cardboard, or as Bonhoeffer says, a God who can be proved. Or what Ferre refers to as “Lilliputian” theology. Christian Scientists have one of the most robust theologies of laughter within Christendom, seeing God as Silly with a capital S, and linguistically reappropriating the word Giddy back from the Nazis.

(Back to Top)

But All Seriousness Aside, Blaise Pascal

But as funny as they are, Christian Scientists have still failed to outdo Blaise Pascal. Hands down, the funniest man in theology, with apologies to Twain, Swift and Bonhoeffer, had to be Blaise Pascal. If someone dressed for Halloween as Blaise Pascal no one would recognize the costume? We are less familiar with Pascal’s portrait and with him as a literary figure than many others from history, seeing him as a boring theologian and mathematician. Swift we remember as a literary figure, forgetting that he was a theologian. For me the irony in this is that there is no one funnier than Pascal. Even Cervantes comes second. Swift makes us chuckle, Cervantes is a belly laugh, but Pascal has us doubled over until our sides ache. Val Kilmer has said we need another Mark Twain to point out the comedy and gravity of religious life within Christian Science and other churches, and I think he is generally correct that the literary angle has one of the best perspectives on religion. But with compliments to his suggestion in general, I would suggest we forget Twain and look to Blaise Pascal’s *Provincial Letters*.

As Mark Twain said, “if I’d a knowed what trouble it was to make a book, I wouldn’t a tackled it, and ain’t a going to no more.” Like Pascal, I have tried here to be at once ostentatiously heretical, while hopefully pointing out some places where our modern theology has become too sure of itself. We protestants always remember the *Pensees* of Pascal because his “thoughts” dovetail nicely into the bullet point version of systematic theology that we prize as being next to cleanliness nowadays. But Pascal’s provincial letters can help us descend back into the total depravity of dialectic theology. It has not been easy for me to write all this, in spare time, so I hope I have done everyone justice and that you find it helpful as a starting point for looking at ecumenism.

Dialectic theology, practiced by such heretics as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who would not admit a sermon was any good unless it bordered on heresy, and who could also be accused of having a sense of humor, much like other heretics, Pascal is waiting, alongside Swift and even Cervantes maybe, to pillory our most sacred PowerPoints. Scratching their heads at our lack of sophistication in examining the theological problems we have recreated by having resurrected a form of neo-orthodox Protestant Catholicism that Bonhoeffer might say is “protestantism without reformation.” The problems of bullet point theology as a form, may not have been something that Pascal was able to anticipate. And we modern American theologians have less interest in examining our forms for the structural problems they create. We presume to know better, that systematic theology should be accomplished in bullet points on PowerPoint slides that take 10 seconds to read and contain no more than 50 words maximum, because we will lose our audience. The discursive essay is dead, as is the provincial letter and laughter.
But maybe once in a while we should be able to laugh at ourselves. Perhaps we should sit with Pope Alexander and laugh at Pascal’s satire, that we did not see past the end of our nose sooner, while publicly taking umbrage the fact that Pascal is now aiming his heretical quill at us. Why did we trust those in the seminaries who said with a straight face that Christianity had “always” taught certain things about which there has been universal agreement? Two minutes in the library would put the lie to that claim. And now Bonhoeffer has become the guardian angel of the debate between Professor Hawkins and Wheaton College, goading us righteous to compass them about and reexamine the way toward Christian reconciliation on these topics that we as a church had forgotten were divisive.

For this reason, and like Bonhoeffer’s criticism of the German Christians, rather than *Pensees*, Pascal's satire of the casuists of Jolly old Europe is the more important work. Yes, even than his contribution to Christian game theory, which Kreeft calls an argument from the “rational.” The views Pascal expressed in *The Provincial Letters* were heretical because they lampooned the self-assured interpretations of scripture by the doctors of the church, and yet it had the singular achievement, unsurpassed in history, of making him the funniest outlawed heretic ever to put a grin on the face of Pope. If anyone has not read them, I hope you will take the opportunity.  

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