

Metaphysics in the Metaphysical Movement

[Alan Anderson](#)

Presented Oct. 23, 1999

at the Regional Conference of the [Society for the Study of Metaphysical Religion](#), Clearwater, Florida

I am concerned with metaphysics in the whole of the metaphysical movement, but-partly because some of what I am saying here is in response to Dell deChant's important Spring 1999 *Journal of the Society for the Study of Metaphysical Religion* "Editorial Essay,"¹ which deals with New Thought and Christian Science--many of my observations will be directed primarily to New Thought and Christian Science, especially to New Thought. However, much of what I shall say is applicable to the whole metaphysical movement.

I am going to be dealing with the following questions, necessarily rather briefly; any one of them could be the topic for a presentation. I am including all of them since I am attempting to show something of an overall pattern. Moreover, it may be that a large part of the worth of what I am saying is in calling attention to the questions as such, regardless of my conclusions.

1. What is meant by *metaphysical* and *metaphysics*?
2. What is meant by *the metaphysical movement* or *metaphysical religion*?
3. How did the term metaphysics come to be applied to metaphysical religion?
4. What did some founders of metaphysical religious groups mean by *metaphysics*?
5. Is there any precedent in philosophy or elsewhere for an outlook similar in name or practical aims to the metaphysical movement?
6. Does New Thought have at least one philosophical metaphysics or something in place of it, and, if so, what?
7. What does Dell deChant's Spring 1999 *JSSMR* "Editorial Essay" contribute to this exploration?
8. If we do not have metaphysics in a traditional sense, but have something else, is there something that might point toward or be the foundation for some form of philosophical metaphysics?
9. How can the characteristic New Thought (and probably most of the metaphysical movement) approach be developed into a sound metaphysics?
10. Is idealism essential to metaphysical religion?
11. Where is the metaphysical movement, especially New Thought, in relation to the anti-metaphysics of postmodernism?

1. What is meant by *metaphysical* and *metaphysics*?

Metaphysical obviously refers to metaphysics, but what does *metaphysics* mean in the sense in which it is used in *metaphysical movement*? Wadsworth Publishing's online Glossary² offers only one definition of *metaphysics*:

Metaphysics: American religious tradition that thought of God in impersonal terms and stressed the power of mind to change the world. Expressed since the nineteenth century in spiritualism, theosophy, New Thought, and, most recently, the New Age movement.

metaphysics has both (1) popular and (2) traditional philosophical meanings, and the title of this presentation, "Metaphysics in the Metaphysical Movement," deals with philosophical metaphysics in relation to the popular movement that fits the quoted Wadsworth glossary definition. This popular, secondary meaning takes *meta* as "beyond" or "above" the physical.

This confusion is ancient. *The Oxford English Dictionary* notes that although the name *metaphysics* refers to the "first-philosophy" writings of Aristotle arranged in such order as to be after his works on physics, *metaphysics* "from an early period" (1) was used

as a name for the branch of study treated in these books [that followed the books on physics and (2)] came to be misinterpreted as meaning 'the science of things transcending what is physical or natural'. This misinterpretation is found, though rarely, in Greek writers, notwithstanding the fact that *meta* does not admit of any such sense as 'beyond' or 'transcending'. In scholastic Latin writers the error was general (being helped, perhaps, by the known equivalence of the prefixes *meta-* and *trans-* in various compounds); and in English its influence is seen in the custom, frequent down to the 17th c., of explaining *metaphysical* by words like 'supernatural', 'transnatural', etc.

Horatio W. Dresser says of the term *metaphysical healing*, that many

used this term as synonymous with "mental science" and applied idealism. . . . The term "metaphysics" as thus employed need not be understood in the philosophical sense as a complete system of first principles. It means a

practical idealism emphasizing mental or spiritual causality in contrast with the prevalent materialism, or the assumption that matter possesses independent life and intelligence. Thus the term "Christian metaphysics" is practically the same as the terms used by Quimby to indicate that there is a spiritual science in the New Testament.³

Dresser's own first periodical was named *The Journal of Practical Metaphysics*, and the organization that he helped to organize in 1895 in Boston was called the Metaphysical Club. A statement of the Club contrasts the physical world "and the metaphysical."⁴ The third chapter of the Dresser-edited 1917 anthology, *The Spirit of the New Thought*,⁵ is "The Significance of the New Metaphysical Movement" by E. M. Chesley, from a paper delivered in 1898, probably under the same title, since the term is used several times in the writing.

2. What is meant by the metaphysical movement or metaphysical religion?

I take the *metaphysical movement* to be equivalent to *metaphysical religion*. The title of the conference that includes the paper is "What Do We Mean By the 'Metaphysical' Religious Tradition?" and the call for papers refers to the "'metaphysical' tradition." All this implies that there is a single something with which we are concerned. A metaphysical religion obviously refers to only one group within the collection of metaphysical religions also known as the metaphysical movement. Similarly, as the very title of J. Stillson Judah's *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America*⁶ suggests, one can refer to "metaphysical movements" (plural), since some of the parts of the metaphysical movement have been referred to as movements, for example, "the Unity movement." However, it should be noted that Dresser in referring to "the metaphysical movement" probably intended that it cover only New Thought and perhaps also Christian Science.

Maureen Temple Richmond, in her article in the Spring 1999 *JSSMR*, after taking note of some traditional philosophical understandings of metaphysics, says that metaphysical religion "comprises those approaches to the mysteries of spirituality that evidence a definite bias toward or preoccupation with answering at least some of the questions raised by the dimension of thought called metaphysics."⁷ I am not sure that this excludes any religion, but it may, if one emphasizes that a religion so classified does this more consciously than do other religions. The Richmond definition includes "answering," which I interpret as meaning that it actively wrestles with certain problems, rather than taking answers for granted or as presented by someone else, or as if the questions did not exist. I do not know whether any "metaphysical religion" could pass that test, at least if the answering is to include philosophical reasoning. I believe that a religion qualifies for the category of *metaphysical religion* if it is more aware of metaphysical problems than are most religions and/or if it accepts answers at least vaguely associated with some seer or metaphysician out of the mainline of Judaeo-Christian traditions. I'll deal later with whether this deserves to be called metaphysics.

In his *Encyclopedia of American Religions*, J. Gordon Melton deals with the problem of how much to include in the metaphysical movement by dividing it into two "families" of American religions, with Chapter 15 devoted to the "Christian Science-Metaphysical Family," and Chapter 16 given to the "Spiritualist, Psychic, and New Age Family." Probably Melton's solution was aided by the presence of something not in existence when Judah wrote: New Age. Perhaps that large, wild something simply burst the bounds of earlier classification. Melton's division admirably highlights the occult character of the second mentioned family.

The classification used by Judah in his *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* may well be accounted for largely by his words characterizing *metaphysics* as used in his book as applying to "a practical type of philosophy."⁸ Apart from whether at that point he should have used the word *philosophy*, practical application seems to be the most important criterion for putting together the groups that he selected, apart from the fact that all the groups are related to *metaphysical* in the popular sense. Moreover, his major categories are not so many as the table of contents suggests, since various ones fall under the heading of New Thought, thus leaving only Christian Science, Spiritualism, and Theosophy and its offshoots. In addition, Dell deChant's current Editorial Essay, to which I shall refer shortly, suggests that it is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish New Thought practices from those of other groups.

3. How did the term metaphysics come to be applied to metaphysical religion?

One finds no emphasis on these terms in the writings of Phineas P. Quimby (1802-1866) or Warren Felt Evans (1817-1889).⁹ Of course, Quimby did not think of himself as engaging in religion, nor, perhaps (at least under that name), metaphysics. Quimby's emphasis was on science, whether in a conventional sense or in a special sense referring to the divine. Only later did the term *metaphysics* arise in what we call the metaphysical movement. For that, almost certainly we have to look to Mary Baker Eddy, who established her Massachusetts Metaphysical College. Her one-time associate, Emma Curtis Hopkins, followed suit in founding the Illinois Metaphysical College. It may well be that it was partly in order to avoid use of the name *Christian Science*, which Eddy claimed as her own, that the neutral terms *metaphysics* and *metaphysical* gained prominence. Had Eddy not objected to the use of the name *Christian Science*, all New Thought groups might include the name *Christian Science*.

4. What did some founders of metaphysical religious groups mean by metaphysics?

In the *SSMR* Monograph Number One¹⁰ (and, so far, the only one), I quote several prominent founders of popular "metaphysical" groups to discover their understanding of what metaphysics is. I repeat the essence of that small part of it here:

Charles Fillmore:

The systematic study of the science of Being; that which transcends the physical. By pure metaphysics is meant a clear understanding of the realm of ideas and their legitimate expression. (*The Revealing Word*, p. 132)

In his *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary* preface he explains, "By 'metaphysical' [in "metaphysical interpretation"] we refer to the inner or esoteric meaning of the name defined . . ."

Emma Curtis Hopkins:

The study of the lines of reasoning which bring out your healing power is called the study of metaphysics. The word, metaphysical, means "above and away from the physical." (*Scientific Christian Mental Practice*, p. 12)

She also presents metaphysics as the "Science of Life, Health, Strength, Support, Defense or Protection, Truth, Love, Substance, Intelligence, and Spirit." (*Scientific Christian Mental Practice*, pp. 13-14)

Ernest Holmes:

That which is beyond the known laws of physics. Refers to what are considered unknown but intelligent forces latent in the human mind. (*New Thought Terms and Their Meanings*, p. 91)

I emphasize the importance of Holmes's way (repeated in each issue of *Science of Mind* magazine) of referring to Science of Mind as "a correlation of laws of science, opinions of philosophy, and revelations of religion," obviously suggesting a lack of appreciation of philosophy. Possibly he derived the use of *opinion* in relation to philosophy from *Science and Health*, p. 112, where Eddy, in connection with schools of philosophical thought, refers to "some particular system of human opinion."

Mary Baker Eddy:

Metaphysics is above physics, and matter does not enter into metaphysical premises or conclusions. The categories of metaphysics rest on one basis, the divine Mind. Metaphysics resolves things into thoughts, and exchanges the objects of sense for the ideas of Soul. (*Science and Health*, p. 269)

Later, New Thought theorist Thomas Troward gave a valuable clue about the nature of a significant part--possibly all--of the metaphysical movement, when he rejected, in his terminology both "extreme idealism" and "extreme materialism." He maintains:

The error of the extreme idealist is in endeavouring to realize the absolute without the relative, and the error of the extreme materialist is in endeavouring to realize the relative without the absolute. On the one side the mistake is in trying to realize an inside without an outside, and on the other in trying to realize an outside without an inside; both are necessary to the formation of a substantial entity. (*Edinburgh Lectures*, p. 7)

Whatever he may have intended, he revealed a misunderstanding of the claims of both idealism and materialism, neither of which could be itself if not "extreme."

5. Is there any precedent in philosophy or elsewhere for an outlook similar in name or practical aims to the metaphysical movement?

Samuel Johnson derisively applied to John Donne and several other late sixteenth and early seventeenth century writers the name *Metaphysical Poets*, and "condemned them for their excessive use of 'learning' in their poetry."¹¹

Metaphysical often has been used in a less than approving sense, not only in positivistic and postmodern philosophy, but in more popular writing, as in Thomas Jefferson's calling metaphysics "the disease of philosophy, which instead of chasing 'abstractions,' should be 'clearing the mind of Platonic mysticism and unintelligible jargon.'"¹²

Far more significant than the Metaphysical Poets for our purpose were the ancient Stoics.

In 1904, Bowdoin College President William De Witt Hyde, who seemingly did not know about New Thought, linked Christian Science and Stoicism.

Hyde, in his *The Five Great Philosophies of Life*, writes of the Stoics:

No external thing alone can affect us for good or evil, until we have woven it into the texture of our mental life, painted it with the color of our dominant mood and temper, and stamped it with the approval of our will. Thus everything except a slight residuum is through and through mental, our own product, the expression of what we are and desire to be. The only difference between Stoicism and Christian Science at this point is that Stoicism recognizes the material element; though it does so only to minimize it, and pronounce it indifferent. Christian Science denies that there is any physical fact, or even the raw material out of which to make one.¹³

6. Does New Thought have at least one philosophical metaphysics or something in place of it, and, if so, what?

There are various branches or brands of New Thought, but they are so similar in regard to this that I write as if they were one.

In deciding whether there is a New Thought metaphysics, we need to distinguish a metaphysical position or conclusion, a metaphysical sound bite one might call it these days, from a carefully reasoned system of thought about the nature of reality, which system is a metaphysics. Having metaphysical sound bites without having a metaphysics itself is like having a creed as distinguished from having a theology. In metaphysics there must be some linking to traditional metaphysics, some recognition of metaphysical problems and of other possible answers to them. It must put its answers into an overall pattern that can be recognized as philosophically significant. It must be distinguishable from the more clearly religious aspects of an approach to living. Metaphysics does not accept at face value unexamined revelations nor flashes of enlightenment. However, metaphysicians can and should think about them. To accept them uncritically is not to engage in metaphysics. I do not demand that every New Thoughter study metaphysics, but I do say that in order to call any New Thought position metaphysics there must have been some New Thought leader who did think it out in line with what I have said above, and there must be a clearly discernable chain of influence extending to current New Thoughters, who grasp at least the essentials of the metaphysical reasoning in question.

I sometimes call philosophy an armchair enterprise; it consists of thought, whereas any religion, including New Thought and other metaphysical religions must have beliefs, attitudes (emotional or other), and actions, whether devotional or good (or bad) works.

Although in the early history of New Thought there were a few people who might reasonably be called metaphysicians, I find little or no justification for concluding that New Thought has any prevalent metaphysics. New Thought is a religion, and it has much of what religions ordinarily have—although probably not anything sophisticated enough to be called theology. However, this is not to say that even without theology religion cannot be rational, cannot be reflective, cannot build great patterns of ideas of various sorts. What are these non-philosophical, non-theological collections of ideas? They are what we traditionally say that thought became philosophy by abandoning. I refer to *myth*. Myth makers were not irrational; they simply accepted some beginning-point assumptions that we consider inadequate, and developed them into meaningful stories. What most of New Thought offers as fundamental truth could better be called myth than metaphysics (or theology). It has developed at least partially in reverse order in a movement from philosophy to myth. What has been produced has been a handy thing for New Thought to have, since, as Alasdair MacIntyre says, "the break with mythological thought forms involves the raising of sharp questions about truth and falsity, which the mythological forms themselves are able to evade."¹⁴ It is exactly this evasion of "sharp questions about truth and falsity" that has been convenient for New Thought. Philosophy attempts to be sharp, precise, critical, as well as synthetic, constructive. However, I do not suggest that New Thought deliberately hid in myth.

Lest one think that myths must be ancient and of considerable length, one should consider some words of Gregor Sebba:

The myth-making power is not extinct. Mythopoeia occurs on various levels. Leaders who understand the power of myth and know how to utilize it may deliberately create myth; mythical beliefs, mythical concepts, mythical stories may grow out of concrete social and political situations; finally there is the phenomenon of "grass-root mythopoeia," the spontaneous invention of stories capable of performing the function of myth, though they usually are short-lived and remain ineffective.¹⁵

As to how long or short the myth may be, Sebba refers to "the myth of American origin" as "find[ing] its expression in one short sentence that describes the forebears of the present-day Americans as 'those sturdy pioneers who carved a nation out of a wilderness.'"¹⁶ A similarly short myth about "a god who is all and expresses 'itself' in and through and as each of us" fits the bill very well. What greater myth could one imagine?¹⁷ No deity on Olympus ever aspired to perform such impossible feats.

If New Thought wants to have a solid foundation, it will have to choose between myth and philosophical metaphysics.

Myths bordering on metaphysics are fed not only by metaphysical sound bites, but by intuition, even as metaphysics is fed by intuition, which is unreflective experience. What one does with the intuition makes the difference. In a later section we shall see Emerson as an example of one who takes intuition as final, and spins it in a literary way into an account of a great cosmic something that is everything. We shall also consider two philosophers who deal with intuition in contrasting ways and in their conclusions differ not only from Emerson but from one another.

While in this section on metaphysics and something possibly substituting for it, despite finding myth as the substitute for metaphysics in the metaphysical movement, it is appropriate to consider science as a possible substitute for metaphysics. These two often seem to be used interchangeably in New Thought. Certainly the word *science* is found in abundance in the metaphysical movement, but from the outset it appears to have been used in ignorance of the meaning that emphasizes the scientific method and often consider physics the paradigm science. What is common to all conventional understandings of science is that they are limited to acquiring knowledge about the natural world, the world that can be measured, quantified, ideally described in mathematical terms. Were it to go beyond this and purport to have ultimate truth, knowledge of a realm of value and purpose, it would be metaphysics. Science and metaphysics share a rational, step-by-step procedure, however much intuition may inspire or enter into their procedures at some point. Moreover, science deals not with the basic nature of the real, of how everything must be at bottom (as metaphysics endeavors to do), but rather with ways that the universe works in its present stage of development (or such others as can be detected), which presumably need not have developed exactly as it occurred. In other words, science deals with the contingent, while metaphysics deals with the necessary, with what could not be otherwise.

The word *science* is found in such names as Divine Science, Religious Science, Science of Mind, Christian Science, Mary

Baker Eddy's *Science and Health*, and Malinda E. Cramer's *Divine Science and Healing*. Judah, in characterizing popular (my word, not his) metaphysics as "a practical type of philosophy," adds, "It is considered to be both scientific and religious."¹⁸ Obviously, there is widespread belief in New Thought that New Thought is scientific. Emmet Fox, for example, emphasizes "scientific prayer."¹⁹ New Thought's "science" is to academic science as New Thought's "metaphysics" is to philosophic metaphysics. The essence of the popular view of science (by no means limited to the metaphysical movement) is workability, applicability of beliefs held. One might say that it is faith that science can be applied in technology. Thus, two prominent groups could be named Divine Technology and Christian Technology. However, there is a significant difference, in that the metaphysical movement religions hold to an "absolute Truth of Being [applied] in all the affairs of our daily and hourly living"¹⁹ foreign to pragmatism, science, and technology, which reject absolutes. Ernest Holmes, in "defining" the sentence "science is a study of the mechanics of the universe; reality is a study of values," says, "Every science, including the Science of Mind, is a study of exact mathematical laws, while religion seeks to use these laws in moral, ethical and spiritual ways."²⁰

In "defining" the sentence "Science of Mind is not a revelation," Holmes emphasizes intuition:

Like other sciences, the Science of Mind is worked out as intuition guides personal intelligence to an understanding of the laws of cause and effect. This science is not only mental, it is also spiritual. The highest use of the laws of Mind is based upon spiritual perceptions which include love, unity and conscious fellowship with the Invisible.²¹

It seems to me that the science of any religion in the metaphysical movement, although often referring to a Divine Science, is most like the Merriam-Webster second definition of science as "something (as a sport or technique) that may be studied or learned like systematized knowledge< have it down to a science>,"²² or, as *The American Heritage College Dictionary* puts it in its second definition: "Methodological activity, discipline, or study: *I've got it down to a science*. Its third definition is "An activity that appears to require study and method: *the science of purchasing*."

Charles Fillmore, in his *The Revealing Word*, under "science, spiritual," writes:

Science is the systematic and orderly arrangement of knowledge. Spiritual science, which is the orderly arrangement of the truths of Being, does not always conform to intellectual standards, but it is still scientific. Spiritual science treats of absolute ideas, while mental science treats of limited thoughts.²⁴

It may be that science conceived this way is essentially what others would consider more appropriately classified as metaphysics. Yet there is very little philosophical metaphysics in the metaphysical movement. In the metaphysical movement there is mostly abortive, fragmented, truncated, sound bite "metaphysics," better termed myth.²⁵

The outcome of this relatively brief sampling of views about science is that while much ado is made about science in the metaphysical movement, there is little that would fit current sophisticated understandings of science with physics the paradigm science and scientific method essential. New Thought's "science" seems to be part of its overall metaphysical-epistemological myth.

Before leaving this section, I note that there is one science, a social science, that may seem to be an exception to this description. It is psychology, the science of mind and behavior. Its sister, parapsychology, extends the range of this inquiry into regions more controversial, but it is not essentially different from its sister science. Much of the metaphysical movement may simply be psychology. But if this is the case, that just shows again that metaphysics has been either not present or of secondary importance here. If we divide a "metaphysical religion" into theory and practice, psychology falls on the side of practice, or at least its use is primarily as a practical guide to practice.

Charles Braden notes that it may well be the case, as a Christian Scientist whom he has quoted maintained, "a predominant emphasis in New Thought in general is on the creative power of thought. You visualize what you desire and bring it into manifestation."²⁶ If this is so, metaphysics takes a back seat to psychology. To be sure, many New Thinkers are concerned with supposedly metaphysical foundations for their practices, but it may make little practical difference which metaphysics is adopted, if there is efficacious faith. On the other hand, Braden's unidentified Christian Scientist maintained that Christian Science puts great emphasis on "ascertaining the already established truth of reality, or the perceiving, realizing or demonstrating of what is already true [one might add, "or believed to be already true"]."²⁷ This, as given to Braden, is in line with observations of Dell deChant in the very recent past.

7. What does Dell deChant's Spring 1999 JSSMR "Editorial Essay" contribute to this exploration?

The Editorial Essay presents us with occasions for clarification of terminology, in connection with its fascinating topic: the difference with regard to attachment to (what is assumed to be) metaphysics characterizing two "metaphysical religions": New Thought and Christian Science. The Essay maintains that Christian Science tenaciously retains its metaphysics (at the price of application of it), while New Thought forgets its metaphysics and goes whoring after all sorts of "materialistic" techniques.

The Essay maintains:

To understand both Christian Science and New Thought as distinct expressions of a single enduring religious essence set in the same transcendental context (that is, expressions of the same soul), leads to consideration of what is most critical to both communities. The what (that must be remembered) I suggest is twofold: (1) the principle of Idealism, which affirms the omnipotence of Divine Mind (the Good) and the omnipotently causative

power of mental activity, and (2) the principle of demonstration, which affirms the perfectibility (transformation or upliftment) of the physical/material world through the full realization of the Truth of Divine Mind (the Good). (12)

I assume that in referring to idealism, the Essay means metaphysical idealism, rather than idealism in a popular sense. However, the Essay's "principle of Idealism" must be a special version of whatever general principle of idealism there may be. If I were to pick the most essential tenet of idealism, I'd say that it is that there is something of psychical nature about everything; in other words, everything actual is characterized by experiences comparable to what we know as feeling, choosing, and enjoying; this is approximately equivalent to saying that there is no basic unit of reality that entirely lacks life. Since psychical units are aware of one another and in being aware of others are influenced by them, this implies "causative power of mental activity," although not necessarily any omnipotent version of it. Similarly, I find nothing in idealism that necessarily implies the second principle, "the principle of demonstration, which affirms the perfectibility (transformation or upliftment) of the physical/material world through the full realization of the Truth of Divine Mind (the Good)." To be sure, people in metaphysical religion have affirmed these claims, but not out of necessity, which is the essential concern of metaphysics (which deals with what has to be, what could not be otherwise). Of course, the Essay does not say that the second principle is derived from the first, and this leaves the door open to considering psychological principles to be at least as important as metaphysical ones in what the Essay refers to as Popular Religious Idealism. Presumably, *perfectibility* does not necessarily mean full perfectability, as distinguished from some degree of improvement.

The Essay, after asking whether the present-day principle of idealism is what the founders intended, says:

If it can be shown that the rise of materialist practices is consistent with the principle of Idealism, then there is no need for further inquiry--we have learned something helpful and important and we can move on. But if it can be shown, and I think it has been here (at least in summary form), that the rise of materialist practices reveals forgetting in New Thought, then we are on to something and we can ask our question of why.

What immediately comes to my mind is that philosophical Idealism does not necessarily lead to endorsement of any sort of practice. Of course, Popular Religious Idealism, or PRI, in using the words *popular* and *religious* doubly emphasizes at least the possibility that its idealism is not to be identified with philosophical idealism. Yet it seems likely that it is more closely allied to it than to idealism, as used for example, in the title of 1969 booklet that I came upon recently: *The Peace Corps: From Enthusiasm to Disciplined Idealism*. In this popular sense, idealism of course refers to being "high-minded," pursuing noble ends, looking on the bright side, etc.

Philosophical idealism (or materialism or other metaphysical system) simply states, explains, what is at work in any healing or other process. Similarly, to refer to "materialist practices" needs to be explained. Presumably, it means practices that are based on materialistic assumptions, or at least are not grounded in idealistic theory. As the Essay seems to recognize, it would be possible for one to understand aspirin, for example, as essentially mental or spiritual, yet to operate essentially independently of human mental orientations. In other words, there are no practices that are inherently idealistic or non-idealistic. However, metaphysics can assist a particular type of practice by explaining how it can work, and thereby providing encouragement extending beyond its metaphysical conclusions, especially if it discovers a God who promotes such action.

We would do well to remember what Borden Parker Bowne (1845-1910) said in his *Philosophy of Christian Science*, a 10-page pamphlet without date (New York: Eaton & Mains):

It is a great mistake to fancy that our metaphysics is the source of experience, or that it in any way makes the experience real or unreal. The experience stands absolutely in its own right, whether the metaphysicians can make anything out of it or not. And the experience remains the same under one system of metaphysics as under another. . . . If the philosophers can do anything it must be in the way of interpreting experience, not in the way of producing or verifying it. (5-6)

At the same time, he recognized "that the state of mind has great significance for health or disease . . ." (pp. 9-10)

It would be interesting to know what founders of New Thought groups would think of the practices of their followers, but their approval or horror in relation to techniques is not necessarily philosophically significant.

In his conclusion, Dell deChant summarizes:

What has been forgotten in P[opular] R[eligious] I[dealism] is not just the principles that define its soul, but the religious genius of that soul itself and the genuine power of this system to change the world. What has been forgotten, in short, is that the Idealist approach to culture is fundamentally different from the materialist approach but it is no less flexible. Christian Science remembered the difference but not the flexibility, while New Thought has remembered the flexibility but not the difference. Separately they have but half the soul of PRI and perhaps that explains the status of both in American culture.

The author, without having to say so, is very much concerned with areas of philosophy termed ethics, social ethics, social philosophy, and political philosophy, or at least with their practical application. He believes that idealism has a power and apparently even a duty to change the world. Since I am concentrating on metaphysics in this presentation, I shall not deal with the questions of whether and which societal changes ought to take place.

As to why Christian Scientists remember their metaphysics, part of the answer may be that in the fairly recent past they have

had at least one metaphysician and other scholars (and critics). Henry W. Steiger's Boston University philosophy Ph.D. dissertation, "A Metaphysical Investigation of the Doctrine of Christian Science," was published as *Christian Science and Philosophy* (1948). But there have been other legitimate doctoral dissertations written by Christian Scientists, as well as scholarly books by Christian Scientists, including Robert Peel, who wrote *Christian Science: Its Encounter with American Culture* (1958), and his biographical trilogy of Mary Baker Eddy (1966-1977), and Stephen Gottschalk, who wrote *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life* (1973).

On the other hand, at least since the passing of Thomas Troward in 1916 and the decline of interest in the views of Horatio W. Dresser around that time, and until the very recent past, New Thought has had no one who might reasonably be considered a metaphysician in the philosophical sense.

In terms of metaphysics, what the Essay at least implies is that the concerns around which it turns are not basically metaphysical. "Popular Religious Idealism" and "metaphysical religion" and "the metaphysical movement" refer to religions that probably have a little more interest in matters related to metaphysics than do most religions, but topics of sociological, ethical, and theological concern are far more important to such religion than is metaphysics currently. I emphasize *currently*, since metaphysics could become of great importance in them and in relation to them, at least if there should be a rebirth (or first birth) of concern with metaphysics. A religion can grow a metaphysics, even if it does not have one at the outset. It could make the difference between becoming meaningful and even vitally important in the world of ideas and slipping off into practically nothing but New Age mediocrity.

8. If we do not have metaphysics in a traditional sense, but have something else, is there something that might point toward or be the foundation for some form of philosophical metaphysics?

Yes, and curious as it may seem, it is what largely has led to New Thought myth-making and in some degree has itself served as a substitute for metaphysics. It is intuition. If explored only a little, it leads to myth; if pressed as far as possible with the aid of rational interpretation, it leads to the best metaphysics.

I am using a very simple, broad definition of *intuition*: any awareness of anything without, or before, rational thought. While the term *intuition* can be used for sensory perception, I am considering it in connection with extrasensory awareness, in the broadest sense of that term.

Intuition is so broad that it can encompass mysticism and all (other) sorts of extrasensory perception. All are points on a continuum. It is interesting to note that two people often referred to as possible influencers of Quimby were seers: Emanuel Swedenborg and Andrew Jackson Davis. Seership itself has more than one point on the continuum, ranging from the more or less unconscious priestess at Delphi to the unconscious Edgar Cayce or JZ Knight or other New Age channelers, to the presumably conscious Swedenborg or Davis, to any of us who may have a hunch (or unknowingly feel the feelings of others).

Extrasensory perception in the narrower, usual, sense was found in mesmerism. It was here that Phineas Parkhurst Quimby first encountered it. He found that his assistant, Lucius Burkmar, when "magnetized" could see distant locations and, supposedly, conditions inside human bodies. Later, Quimby developed his own extrasensory perception of conditions of his patients. It might be going too far to say that Quimby's system of belief in divine Wisdom as ultimate source of healing was directly related to whatever intuitive ability Quimby had. However that may be, intuition of one sort or another would be stressed in one way or another throughout the history of New Thought.

9. How can the characteristic New Thought (and probably most of the metaphysical movement) approach be developed into a sound metaphysics?

I now go beyond the "metaphysical movement" to consider briefly three figures who used intuition as an essential ingredient in their outlooks, which were heading progressively toward sound philosophical metaphysics—and in the third case achieving it.

The first figure whom I shall consider was Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), who was first recognized by proto-New Thinkers in the 1880s as having something in line with their own beliefs. It may be that it was to a considerable extent because of embracing the views of Emerson that New Thought followed in his train and settled for intuitive revelation, rather than philosophical metaphysics. It is no accident that some accounts of American philosophy omit Emerson, since he was not a philosopher by most understandings of *philosophy*.

Vernon L. Parrington in his *Main Currents in American Thought* advises:

Transcendentalism, it must always be remembered, was a faith rather than a philosophy; it was oracular rather than speculative, affirmative rather than questioning; and it went to Germany to find confirmation of its faith, not to reexamine its foundations. . . . They were poets and prophets; they were young and strong in their faith; others might concern themselves with the dialectics of idealism, they would apply it in their daily lives.²⁸

Harold Clarke Goddard's *Studies in New England Transcendentalism* proclaims, "Intuition—that is the method of the transcendental philosophy; no truth worth the knowing is susceptible of logical demonstration."²⁹

Joseph L. Blau writes in his *Men and Movements in American Philosophy*:

Now, transcendental method, as Emerson conceived it and used it, was wholly and entirely intuitive. It had no element whatever of logic or understanding. Each act of transcendentalist reflection was an individual, immediate raid on universal truth. It stood by itself; it had no connection with what came after it or what had gone before. There was room in the transcendental method for every inconsistency. The wind of the spirit did not always blow from the [123] same quarter nor with the same intensity. Emerson cared not at all that the vagaries and willfulness of his spirit might lead him into self-contradictory views. "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds." There was a simple honesty, too, in his reply to Henry Ware, Jr., one of the champions of a more conservative Unitarianism. Ware asked Emerson for his arguments in support of the views expressed in the "Divinity School Address." Emerson gave the thoroughly transcendentalist answer that he had no arguments and that he did not know "what arguments mean in reference to any expression of a thought."

Nor would Emerson have admitted that his method led to insights which were valid only for the single thinker. It was introspection, of course. In his view, however, and that of the other transcendentalists, introspection leads not to subjective conclusions, valid only as a practical guide for the life of the individual, but to universally valid results.³⁰

There is, of course, no such thing as reflection, or a truth, in isolation from the whole of things, with "no connection with what came after it or what had gone before." Probably most New Thinkers would agree with this, but many-perhaps most-are haunted by the ghost of Emerson, which is to say Emerson's attempt to balance the universal and the individual by denying the importance of the rational. From this (or parallel with it) may come the New Thought contempt for the intellectual.

One scarcely could deal with intuition in philosophy without introducing the second of the figures emphasized in this section, Henri Bergson (1859-1941). Although relatively forgotten today, he once was so popular that people going to one of his lectures caused what has been considered the first New York City automotive traffic jam.

Perhaps the only writing on Bergson published in a New Thought magazine was Horatio W. Dresser's four-installment *Nautilus* article, "Bergson's Philosophy." For the most part, Dresser simply provides an exposition of the French philosopher, and barely refers to New Thought. In the third part he writes, "It is the inner changes that are consequential, the life that makes the habits, not the consciousness that has become their creature. Thus the Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance begins where Bergson leaves off, and one finds in Bergson new reasons for Emerson's faith." Dresser goes beyond Bergson in advocating creative freedom.

Bergson was one of the founders of present-day process thought, with which Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) is preeminently associated. Whitehead is the third of our non-metaphysical movement figures. Victor Lowe, in his *Understanding Whitehead*, states:

It is fatal to the understanding of Whitehead's constructive metaphysical effort to define it in Bergsonian terms. . . . When he goes about relating mind and body, Bergson ascribes to the events in the nervous system purely physical properties only-the power of receiving, preserving, and continuing movements; he comes close to swallowing Cartesian natural science whole.³¹

One finds no such dualism in Whitehead. In Whitehead intuition becomes *prehension*, the feeling that each experience has of all earlier experiences, including those constituting God, who provides individually-tailored guidance to every experience. Prehension, especially in its form as love, inelegantly could be called the glue that holds everything together. Here, although most Whiteheadians choose not to call their metaphysics a type of Idealism, clearly it is such-a pluralistic Idealism with full recognition of freedom, cooperation, interrelationships of all sorts, and a God changeless in character while growing in experience, never apart from the universe while never identical with it nor with any part of it.

Returning to Lowe:

In sum, Whitehead comes to experience as a Plato-loving theorist who wishes to construct an all-inclusive cosmological scheme; Bergson as a half-Cartesian intuitionist cleanly and systematically setting off his own meditation from other types and areas of thought.³²

In addition, Lowe points out:

When Whitehead asks philosophy to mobilize and make manifest the basic experience which is lived, he is in accord with Bergson. "If you like to phrase it so," he grants in 1935, "philosophy is mystical. For mysticism is direct insight into depths as yet unspoken" (MT Epilogue). But he continues as no Bergsonian can: ". . . the purpose of philosophy is to rationalize mysticism . . . by the introduction of novel verbal characterizations, rationally coordinated." Though "akin to poetry," philosophy "allies itself to mathematic pattern." Metaphysics is decidedly not what Bergson said it was-"the science which claims to dispense with symbols."³³

Summarizing in my own words, Emerson and Bergson in varying degrees accepted intuition as essential to getting at the essence of life. Emerson used intuition to jump to an essentially unreflective pantheistic worldview, whereas Bergson endeavored to found a philosophy on intuition, or at least recognized that only intuition could grasp the flowing nature of the vital force essential to living. It was left for Whitehead to recognize intuition, under the name of *prehension*, as the universal activity. All this fit together in the great metaphysical project, which Whitehead put as

the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our experience can be interpreted [in which] everything of which we are conscious, as enjoyed, perceived, willed, or thought, shall have the character of a particular instance of the general scheme.³⁴

10. Is Idealism essential to metaphysical religion?

Yes, because only Idealism—whether of a partially coherent substance type or a fully coherent process, personalist, panentheist, panexperientialist type, places life, values, and experiences of all sorts at the very core of reality and explains causality and creativity as no other worldview can. With such an explicit idealism, metaphysical religion could advance splendidly. This is not to say that a metaphysical religion need have an explicit metaphysics. It can muddle along on mythical spinings of intuition (which can be considered an impetus to idealism) or on sound bites giving some bits of metaphysical idealism. The bites may coalesce, either—and most likely—in vaguely idealistic myth or—one can hope—in a demand for full-scale metaphysical reflection, which should lead to process idealism.

11. Where is the metaphysical movement, especially New Thought, in relation to the anti-metaphysics of postmodernism?

If intuition does not ripen into an urge to philosophize, the metaphysical movement will remain about as it is, believing its myths in the midst of what Dell deChant has called "the tidal wave of forgetting" (8) and perhaps sinking into ever greater reliance on what he has termed "materialist healing practices." (17) For some years to come most metaphysical religionists probably will remain blissfully unaware of what is happening. Beyond that, I am not predicting.

But what if, for any reason, the muse of metaphysics descends, especially in New Thought, and waters the metaphysical shoots even now sprouting here and there, and a full-scale study of idealism emerges, what then? Will that be our intellectual salvation? Not quite. It will be a step toward finding a firmer foundation for the metaphysical superstructure. But idealism will have to spread and be accepted by many who do not now see any need to accept it. And the students of idealism will discover many dragons to slay, many pitfalls to avoid.

Metaphysics has been under attack since the days of ancient skepticism, but more relevantly since the attacks of Auguste Comte (1798-1857), the founder of positivism and the logical positivists of the 1920s and 1930s. All these positivists wanted to substitute science for metaphysics, which was bad enough, but at least it left the hope of reliable knowledge. Now we have entered the postmodern period, in which deconstructive thinkers consider science no more basically reliable than metaphysics, language as incapable of conveying fixed meaning from writer to reader, and all intellectual positions as simply means for holders of power to force their ways on other people.

We are living in the midst of one of the most intellectually (and otherwise) confusing periods of history. The intellectual world is in a mess, with enormous confusion. As in any crisis (the Chinese characters for which indicate danger and opportunity), there are occasions for great good, as well as for disaster.

The most comprehensive name for the new kid on the intellectual block is postmodernism.

Diggins gives three "prevalent themes"³⁵:

- (1) The rejection of philosophy as the search for foundations, whether they be origins or ends, or absolute, indubitable, necessary truths.
- (2) The deconstruction of language in order to expose the absence of intention, the indeterminacy of meaning, and the unreliability of words without reference beyond the text.
- (3) The reality and ubiquity of power, whether submission of the subject or the autonomy of the system, whether coercive or consensual, whether inherited from traditional mechanisms of dominion or emerging from new knowledge productions.

In the face of the postmodern challenge (and it just might prove to be attractive to some New Thinkers since it turns from philosophy to literature,³⁶ to "discourse and action,"³⁷ to stories, which might be congenial to New Thought mythical storytellers), where shall we turn? Especially in relation to religion, we have essentially three courses that we could follow, if we do not see fit to cast our lot with the anti-philosophy, anti-Godly faith of postmodernism:

- (1) Attempt to stay in modernism and suffer its failing facilities of all sorts, material and nonmaterial, including a slide into the destructive postmodernism (which has also been called ultramodernism,³⁸ since it is the ultimate outworking of modern assumptions). Most people assume that this is all that postmodernism can be;
- (2) Turn back to pre-modern ways and beliefs either to conventional premodern Judeo-Christian-Muslim religion or to so-called perennialism (primordialism), which I maintain is incoherent in its God-is-all belief; and
- (3) Go ahead to constructive postmodernism.

Destructive postmodernism also has been called eliminative postmodernism, since

it overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-worldview: it deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as god, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence.³⁹

Constructive postmodernism is identified with a Whiteheadian process-relational outlook that I identify as updated idealism. It affirms the ingredients required for a meaningful worldview, without returning to the fatal flaws of modernism. From the standpoint of our interests in the metaphysical movement, as far as I can tell, it is the only alternative that reasonably can be seen as providing not only a firm philosophical base for metaphysical religion but for a constructively transformed world.

Especially in recent months there have been many references to *irony*, in a sense somewhat different from that found in traditional definitions. *Ironic* now can mean, roughly, jaded, superficial, mocking, turning away from involvement in solving social problems. The newly-reshaped term was given considerable prominence by anti-metaphysician Richard Rorty more than a decade ago and, in perhaps a somewhat different sense, is the concern of wunderkind Jedediah Purdy's 1999 book, *For Common Things*⁴⁰. It seems appropriate to apply the term not only to social situations but to individual orientation toward one's place in life in relation to (which can be denial of) God. The new irony is born of destructive philosophical denials of meaning and any foundation for optimism. Constructive postmodernism, on the other hand, paves the way for any constructive effort.

The New Thought idealist will have to confront all this and more. Perhaps the New Thought ethicist will have an even greater job. But, as always, theories of reality, of knowledge, and of what is good and what is the right course of action to follow, and what is the beautiful will have to proceed hand-in-hand if overall progress is to be made. The first step is to study these fields of inquiry, to clarify our thoughts, to decide on what our beliefs should be, and to use our knowledge of cooperation with God to bring about such good as we can, with ever greater awareness of what we are doing and how reality supports our efforts.

ENDNOTES

1. Dell deChant, "Editorial Essay: The Soul of Religion and the Internal Logic of Change: Remembering and Forgetting in the Idealist Tradition," *JSSMR* 5:1 (Spring 1999): 3-30.
2. <http://religion.wadsworth.com/intro/american/glossary.html#anchor2366583>
3. Horatio W. Dresser, *A History of the New Thought Movement*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1919), 141-42; see also 136-38.
4. *Ibid.*, 187.
5. Horatio W. Dresser, *The Spirit of the New Thought* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1917).
6. J. Stillson Judah, *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967).
7. Temple Richmond, *JSSMR* 5:1 (Spring 1999): 31-32. In papers presented in October and November 1999, her emphasis on cosmological religion at least implies that the metaphysical concerns that I have could well be called *ontological* (emphasizing the basic nature of reality), to distinguish them from *cosmological* concerns (related to the patterns that the basic units of reality have produced over the ages. Traditionally, ontology and cosmology have been recognized as two sides of metaphysics; however metaphysics and ontology often have been considered identical, and in especially in recent decades cosmology often has been considered a branch of science.
8. Judah, *op. cit.*, 11.
9. Charles S. Braden, *Spirits in Rebellion: The Rise and Development of New Thought* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), chs. 3 and 4 and C. Alan Anderson, *Healing Hypotheses: Horatio W. Dresser and the Philosophy of New Thought* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1993). Links to material on Quimby can be found at <http://websyte.com/alan/qlinks.htm>.
10. C. Alan Anderson, *Contrasting Strains of Metaphysical Idealism Contributing to New Thought* (Santa Barbara, CA: Society for the Study of Metaphysical Religion, 1991). The quotation of founders on metaphysics are at p. 2. This publication is on the Web at <http://websyte.com/alan/contrast.htm>.
11. *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia*, 3rd ed., 643-44.
12. John Patrick Diggins, *The Promise of Pragmatism: Modernism and the Crisis of Knowledge and Authority* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 432.
13. William De Witt Hyde, *The Five Great Philosophies of Life* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1904, Collier Books, 1969), Collier edition, 45.
14. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Myth" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 5: 435.
15. Gregor Sebba, "Symbol and Myth in Modern Rationalistic Societies," Thomas J. J. Altizer, William A. Beardsley, and J. Harvey Young (eds.), *Truth, Myth, and Symbol* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., A Spectrum Book, 1962), 150-51.
16. *Ibid.*

17. Deb Whitehouse and I have emphasized that such beliefs, which I am calling myths, are-like other myths-psychologically powerful, regardless of their metaphysical inadequacy. She particularly has called my attention to the work of depth psychologist Alfred Adler (1870-1937). Adler drew on the outlook of philosopher Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933), who had a philosophy of "As if," maintaining that we usefully hold our basic beliefs as if they were true, although they are fictive, and that they may lead us to nonfictive reality. See Heinz L. Ansbacher and Rowena R. Ansbacher (eds.), *The Individual Psychology of Alfred Adler: A Systematic Presentation in Selections from his Writings* (New York: Basic Books, 1956; Harper Torchbook edition 1964).

18. Judah, op. cit., 11.

19. Emmet Fox, *Power through Constructive Thinking* (New York, Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1940), 267.

20. Ernest Holmes, *New Thought Terms and Their Meanings: A Dictionary of the Terms and Phrases Commonly Used in Metaphysical and Psychological Study* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1942), 126.

21. Ibid.

22. <http://www.m-w.com/cgi-bin/dictionary>

Main Entry: sci-ence

Pronunciation: 'sl-&n(t)s

Function: noun

Etymology: Middle English, from Middle French, from Latin *scientia*, from *scient-*, *sciens* having knowledge, from present participle of *scire* to know; probably akin to Sanskrit *chyati* he cuts off, Latin *scindere* to split -- more at SHED

Date: 14th century

1 : the state of knowing : knowledge as distinguished from ignorance or misunderstanding

2 a : a department of systematized knowledge as an object of study <the science of theology> b : something (as a sport or technique) that may be studied or learned like systematized knowledge <have it down to a science>

3 a : knowledge or a system of knowledge covering general truths or the operation of general laws especially as obtained and tested through scientific method

b : such knowledge or such a system of knowledge concerned with the physical world and its phenomena : NATURAL SCIENCE

4 : a system or method reconciling practical ends with scientific laws <culinary science>

5 capitalized : CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

23. Holmes, op. cit., "science and opinion" entry, 126.

24. Charles Fillmore, *The Revealing Word* (Unity Village, MO: Unity School of Christianity, 1959), 174.

25. This is a topic too broad for this paper. Much material can be found by searching the World Wide Web for science and myth.

26. Braden, op. cit., 19.

27. Ibid.

28. Vernon L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (Vol. 2, "The Romantic Revolution," NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc; A Harvest Book, 1927.

29. Harold Clarke Goddard, *Studies in New England Transcendentalism* (NY: Hillary House Publishers, Ltd., 1960, originally Columbia University Press, 1908), 5.

30. Joseph L. Blau, *Men and Movements in American Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1952), 122-23.

31. Victor Lowe, *Understanding Whitehead* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1962), 258.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 259-60; see more there on Whitehead's sources.

34. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (NY: Macmillan, 1929), 4; Corrected Edition (ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne; NY: Free Press, 1978), 3.

35. Diggins, op. cit., 428.

36. Ibid., 475.

37. Ibid., 486.

38. David Ray Griffin *Parapsychology, Philosophy, and Spirituality: A Postmodern Exploration* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), xii.

39. Ibid.

40. Jedediah Purdy, *For Common Things* (NY: Knopf, 1999).

[Society for the Study of Metaphysical Religion](#).

[New Thought Movement Home Page](#), relating to the non-Christian Science side of the movement that grew out of Quimby's work.

[Anderson-Whitehouse New Thought](#) .

Chapter One of [Practicing the Presence of God for Practical Purposes](#) by Deb Whitehouse and Alan Anderson.

[Links](#) to Phineas Parkhurst Quimby material.

[Process New Thought](#), with links to other process sites.

Created Dec. 19, 1999

by [Alan Anderson](#)

[Contact Info](#).

Latest update Mar. 8, 2001

"The terms metaphysics and metaphysical in a popular sense have been used in connection with New Thought, Christian Science, Theosophy, and Spiritualism, as in J. Stillson Judah, *The History and Philosophy of the Metaphysical Movements in America* (The Westminster Press, 1967), as well the New Age movement, and in the name of the Society for the Study of Metaphysical Religion. Some of the varying understandings of metaphysics held by some founders of New Thought and Christian Science are given in the opening pages of *Contrasting Strains of Metaphysical Idealism Contributing to New Thought. The Very Idea of Metaphysics in the Study of Zen Thought*. In saying that a philosopher is interested in "metaphysics," I mean that he or she is interested in an inquiry into the character of being qua being, or (if one wants to avoid the implication that all things are substances) one can say that metaphysics concerns the character of reality qua reality or reality as such. [12] This movement argues that certain metaphysical claims (such as those concerning original enlightenment or Buddha-nature) are not truly Buddhist. They have challenged DÅgen studies by their claim that at the end of his life DÅgen came to reject these views.