

8. From the Early Church to New Thought

Early Christian writers adopted Greek metaphysical notions and attached them to the Judeo-Christian understanding of God. Jesus may not have been a metaphysician, but it is fair to say that many of his disciples and many of the church Fathers were metaphysical in their approach, long before what we now know as Catholic and Evangelical Christianity. And there have been many expressions of metaphysical Christianity that build upon the metaphysical early Church Fathers.

One of my projects is filling in the Metaphysical Christians page on TruthUnity⁷⁰ with profiles of people outside of Unity who contributed to our understanding of metaphysical Christianity. They include individuals in New Thought and those who remained in the established Christian denominations. Tom Shephard's book *Friends in High Places* inspired that page, and I hope to make his book publicly available one day. It is also inspired by two sources already available: Eric Butterworth's *Antecedents of New Thought*⁷¹ and Phil White's *Background of New Thought*.⁷²

This is important because Christianity is a "historical religion." As such, Christians view time as linear, not

cyclical. My view that we are entering a third era of Christianity is another reason we must identify our place in the timeline of Christian history.

Unity is part of the metaphysical Christian tradition.

Unity is a confluence of three streams — mind cure, Christian mysticism, and metaphysics.⁷³ Unity's roots in mind-cure came from Phineas Quimby and his students, most notably, Warren Felt Evans. Although Myrtle Fillmore was Methodist and Charles Fillmore's family was Episcopalian, the kind of mystical Christianity we find in Unity comes from Mary Baker Eddy — who "discovered" Christian Science.

Unity's debt to Christian Science has not been adequately recognized. Anyone who reads *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (the foundational text of Christian Science) will undoubtedly recognize Eddy's influence on the Fillmore teachings. Furthermore, there is a direct connection from Eddy to the editor of the *Christian Science Journal*, Emma Curtis Hopkins, and from Hopkins to the Fillmores, whom she trained and ordained. In the early days, roughly from 1890 to 1895, the Fillmores regarded themselves and referred to their ministry as Christian Science.

Christian Science's debt to Calvinist tradition and scripture is not adequately recognized when it is claimed that Mary Baker Eddy "discovered" Christian Science. Most scholars recognize Eddy's eventual writings as

⁷⁰ *Metaphysical Christians*. <https://www.truthunity.net/metaphysical-christians>

⁷¹ Eric Butterworth, *Antecedents of New Thought*. <https://www.truthunity.net/audio/eric-butterworth/antecedents-of-new-thought>

⁷² Phil White, *Background of New Thought*. <https://www.truthunity.net/audio/philip-white/background-of-new-thought>

⁷³ *New Thought in America*. <https://www.truthunity.net/courses/mark-hicks/background-of-new-thought/new-thought-in-america>

original and independent from Quimby. But if there is any validity to the first section of this credo, we should acknowledge that most religious understandings are traced back to tradition, scripture, and culture. And we see plenty of Calvinist tradition and Christian scripture in Mary Baker Eddy's teachings.⁷⁴

As for culture, it is hard to overstate the influence of Emerson in the late 19th century. Emerson influenced nearly everyone at the time, particularly the Fillmores and Emilie Cady. There is little doubt that both Quimby and Eddy formulated their beliefs in light of what they learned from the great American philosopher and mystic.

So we need to remember the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who pre-dated Quimby, Eddy, and the Fillmores. We can be confident that the Fillmores interpreted everything they were reading from Eddy through the lens of what they had learned from Emerson. As evidence of that influence, I offer the essential document in New Thought, Emerson's *Divinity School Address* (metaphysically interpreted as I believe Emilie Cady and Charles Fillmore interpreted it).⁷⁵

But where did Emerson get his metaphysics? It's commonly said to have come from German philosophers, particularly Hegel. There is little evidence of this other than that Hegel's philosophy of the dialectic aligns with

⁷⁴ Phil White, Background of New Thought, Lecture 3, clip 65. <https://www.truthunity.net/audio/philip-white/background-of-new-thought-3>

⁷⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Divinity School Address, Metaphysically Interpreted*. <https://www.truthunity.net/people/ralph-waldo-emerson/divinity-school-address>

metaphysical notions of the thinking process.⁷⁶ A better explanation comes from *Emerson scholar Richard Geldard*.⁷⁷

Thomas Taylor and the English Neoplatonists.

According to Geldard, Emerson was introduced to Christian metaphysics by Thomas Taylor, an English scholar who was the first person to translate into English the complete works of Aristotle and Plato. He was an enthusiastic Neoplatonist. According to Geldard, Taylor's translation of Plato was read by Emerson and other spiritual writers in America. Without the work of Taylor, Emerson might never have passed on metaphysics to Charles Fillmore, Emilie Cady, and other New Thought writers. Here are several points from Geldard that show why this is important for understanding the metaphysics we have in New Thought.⁷⁸

First, in Plato and later Platonic writers, Emerson found his teacher, someone who could guide his spiritual understanding. Geldard writes, "It was through Taylor's work that Emerson, beginning with his first serious reading in 1826, was to find his intellectual ground, his place to stand."

⁷⁶ Tom Shepherd, *Friends in High Places*. pp. 79

⁷⁷ Geldard, Richard. *The Spiritual Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Lindisfarne Books, 2001. See <https://www.rgbooks.com>

⁷⁸ Nearly all of what is given below comes from Richard Geldard, *The Spiritual Teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. See details at Thomas Taylor profile on TruthUnity. <https://www.truthunity.net/people/thomas-taylor>

Second, Geldard points out that “It was the Taylor influence during the period 1826 to 1848 that shaped Emerson’s vision more than any other, certainly in its outlines if not its particulars. *It was not, in fact, the work of Kant or Goethe that gave New England Transcendentalism its particular esoteric cast.*” (emphasis added). Many people recognize an esoteric character in Unity beliefs. And they want to know why Unity, which grounds so much of its ideas in philosophy, has these esoteric teachings. Geldard asserts that it is because metaphysics came to Emerson through Thomas Taylor’s translation of Plato and Aristotle, not Kant or Goethe.

Third, it is Taylor’s enthusiastic “embellishments from the original Greek” that have given Unity, through Emerson, its esoteric beliefs. Taylor’s translation “was moved to excesses to direct his readers to the spiritual point. Such was Taylor’s passion. The accompanying notes were also written with evident enthusiasm for the Platonic message as Taylor saw it.”

Geldard assesses that,

Taylor is Emerson’s John the Baptist, crying out in the wilderness and providing Emerson with the means to trace the “profound and contemplative genius” from Athens through Europe into England.

Geldard implies that without the “passionate and excessive” translation and annotations of Thomas Taylor, we might not have the passionate and esoteric writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

The problem with authority in Christian theology.

Geldard’s points reveal a great deal about how established religious and academic authorities treat novel spiritual ideas. Geldard writes, “Taylor was of the Emerson stamp: self-styled, self-taught, working independently outside the walls and sanctions of academe.” He further describes how established scholars marginalized Taylor: “He became known simply as T. Taylor, the Platonist, a label which meant that he was a devotee and could not be trusted to present Plato.” Because he was regarded as a disciple, he had lost the right to call himself a scholar.

The marginalization of novel but popular spiritual movements is not new. Such is the burden of Unity and its antecedents, such as Emerson himself. As I said in the introduction to this section, authority in religious matters can be a real problem. In science, we have no difficulty recognizing that authority rests with proven truth. But in the world of religion, we still place authority in churches and traditions, which evolve, and in the opinions of theologians, which change rapidly. Let me stress, again: there are no authorities in metaphysical religion.