L. Ashley Squires


The misconceptions surrounding Christian Science, the metaphysical religious movement that emerged from turn-of-the-century Boston, are nothing new. Christian Science shared much with other metaphysical movements, and continues to be largely misunderstood. As L. Ashley Squires acknowledges, it is now commonly confused with Scientology and treated as a fringe sect. Yet Christian Science was, during its heyday and the lifetime of its founder, Mary Baker Eddy, considered by its followers to be a legitimate alternative to undependable, poorly regulated medical science and an unsatisfactory modernizing world. Today, selective refusal of modern medical treatment seems regressive, but when regarded historically as a harbinger of the self-help and positive-thinking movements, we can see how Christian Science’s tenets offered a different progressive choice for its followers, rather than a full rejection of encroaching modernity. Its focus was healing. Eddy, despite any faults, was a woman in search of truth when she found enlightenment. Her movement was, according to Squires, “a cultural phenomenon that […] left virtually no corner of the early-twentieth-century American literary canon untouched.” Therefore, she is right to ask, “why is almost no one in the field of literature talking about it?” (p. 3).

Squires offers a brief introduction to Christian Science’s origin story, history, and legacy in her opening pages, but moves swiftly into literary analysis. Her work focuses on the decades around the turn of the century and touches on several giants of American letters. Yet the strength of her work lies not in an appeal to personality, but in her consistent approach to wedding Christian Science and literary production. This is not a book concerned solely with what was written about Christian Science and its practitioners; it is also a work that credits prolific Christian Scientists with influential works of religious philosophy, as well as a central role in the reform of professional journalism through the *Christian Science Monitor*. As such, Christian Science emerges as a historically influential current of progressive intellectualism, and one that deserves to be talked about.

Squires is most convincing in her contention that the writers and figures discussed in her book were, at their core, complex individuals engaged in an active quest for perfect health and fundamental Truth-with-a-capital-“T.” Their beliefs evolved and wavered. Theodore Dreiser embraced Christian Science during a personal crisis, as discussed in Squires’s final chapter on *The Genius*. Frances Hodgson Burnett declined to commit to Christian Science officially, yet her works and biography point to a deep connection with many of its core...
principles. She, like the other writers included in this study, was concerned with health and restitution. Perfect health, according to Christian Science, was humanity’s default position. Spiritual and physical health required a committed belief to the power of the Mind and a oneness with God. One need only believe they were well to be well. Mankind and, on a more immediate scale, the nation had become lost and were seeking restoration.

The narratives of Christian Science—philosophy, fiction, and journalism—endeavored towards truth, recovery, and progress. Journalists, religious leaders, novelists, and their characters all sought the same thing as their narratives. Some of the most admired literary personalities of the age approached Christian Science with an enquiring mind and intellectual rigor. These were men and women who respected the power of the Mind and valued the advancement of knowledge. They were also, as Squires demonstrates, people who often had suffered or continued to suffer with mental health issues or emotional collapses. They sought to heal themselves. In many instances, healing could only be achieved on the page.

Squires’s most interesting “reading” of a writer (an opinion she shares, as she acknowledges intentionally engaging with his work in the introduction, middle, and concluding chapter of her book) is that of Mark Twain. Long considered a vehement opponent to Christian Science and Eddy’s chief nemesis, under Squires’s close examination he emerges as less actively hostile to the movement than previously depicted. That he considered Eddy a charlatan and profiteer is clear, but Squires points to first-hand accounts that demonstrate he was not wholly dismissive of the movement she inspired, or, at least, its principles. Following years of personal loss and grief, Twain is portrayed as cantankerous yet receptive to alternative philosophies and ideas. Was he a wounded, reflective man in his twilight years, grasping at straws? Or did he have more in common with his opponent than he cared to admit? The fact that he died the same year as Eddy recalls another famous American rivalry: that of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, feuding friends who died on the same day. Squires seems to suggest that Eddy and Twain, for all that separated them, may have been but two sides of the same coin: indefatigable, influential, prolific, larger-than-life, and questing for answers to humanity’s plight. They were both, in their own way, hungry for a solution that would break mankind’s cycle of suffering, and their own. It was a quest that defined the era in which they lived.

Eddy was selective in appropriating principles from mainstream Protestantism. Her followers, many of whom eventually split from her church, selected which of her principles they would follow. Patients often opted for both professional medical treatment and a Christian Scientist healer. In the same way, Americans are free today to choose their religious beliefs, as well as what