

## Alternative Altars

*Summary: Many new religions and religious sects were founded in America in the mid-19th century, including Transcendentalism, Spiritualism, Christian Science, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Scientology. Many of these new religions arose out of popular Christian denominations, and some drew from Eastern religious and Buddhist texts for inspiration. Christian Science and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have had complex and sometimes contentious relationships with the U.S. courts.*

Religious freedom also meant the freedom to innovate, and the American spirit has generated its own new forms of religious life. New immigration in the 19th century expanded America’s religious diversity. But America was also developing new religious movements from within. The 19th and 20th centuries saw religious pioneers who, although not newcomers to America, were trying to make spiritual sense of the world and were restless with existing religious and cultural norms. As historian Robert Ellwood describes, they worshipped at “alternative altars.”

Among those who contributed to the flowering of religious diversity in America was a group of thinkers known as Transcendentalists. The name was first intended as a criticism by others because of their lofty ideas, influenced as they were by the spiritual vistas of the East. Today the Transcendentalists are primarily remembered through the major literary figures belonging to the movement, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and his younger colleague Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). They were hungry for the insights they could gain from the Eastern religious texts then beginning to be available in translation. Emerson read translations of Chinese and Hindu scriptures and found in their wisdom an alternative to both passionate evangelicalism and “corpse cold” Unitarianism. If Americans would embrace the ideas and literatures of China and India, he believed they would realize that a common spirit runs through the ancient and the modern, the Eastern and Western, and the Hindu and Christian worlds.

In 1845 a young Thoreau built a rustic cabin on the shores of Walden Pond in Concord, Massachusetts. “I went to the woods,” he wrote, “because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.” What is less often remembered is that Thoreau spent considerable time at Walden reading translations of the Hindu and Buddhist texts just beginning to be circulated among New England’s

literary elite. His own most renowned work, *Walden* (1854), is replete with references to Hinduism and Buddhism and, more generally, to the ideas of withdrawal from the world, non-attachment, discipline, and re-birth that many of his readers have identified as derived from the East. Thoreau immersed himself in Eastern religious texts to a greater degree than did Emerson, and he was also more blatantly critical of Christianity. In his *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), he clearly registers his preference for Eastern traditions. While citing Jesus as an exemplar, he speaks more intimately of “my Buddha,” a gesture that cost him dearly in reviews.

While Transcendentalism was a small movement generally confined to New England intellectuals, Spiritualism was a religious movement that gained much more widespread and popular attention in the mid-19th century. The term was used to identify a loose set of beliefs and practices involving communication with the dead. In Hydesville, New York, young Maggie and Kate Fox, after hearing strange rappings in their house, learned to act as interpreters of what they understood to be visitors from the spirit world. Though by no means the first to claim direct contact with their ancestors, their experiences sparked a wildfire of public interest in communicating with the ancestral spirits and learning about the spiritual welfare of relatives and friends. While many spiritualists still identified themselves as Christians, their interest in the occult and their critique of Christianity placed them outside the dominant religious culture.

For some, involvement in Spiritualism was part of broader religious questioning and experimentation. Such was the case for Madame Helena P. Blavatsky (1831-1891), a Russian immigrant, and Henry Steele Olcott (1832-1907), a respected corporate lawyer, who formed the Theosophical Society in 1875. In Theosophy they sought to uncover the “secret” workings of the divine, tracing current philosophies and religions back to their supposed “common origins” in the Ancient East. Theosophists drew their inspiration from the Neo-Platonic and Gnostic writings of the first three Christian centuries in the West and from recently published Buddhist, Hindu, and Chinese texts. While Madame Blavatsky’s discernment of a common “Secret Doctrine” clouded the distinctions within and among Eastern and Western religions, it nonetheless generated a flurry of interest in the world’s religions.

Not all new religious movements emphasized this intellectual and spiritual turn to the East. Christian Science, for example, responded to the rise of science—including medical science—to new cultural prominence. Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910) grew up in a New England Congregational Church. As she

suffered through the death of loved ones, complications in marriage, and physical and emotional ill health, she found that the church of her youth no longer gave her strength. Instead she found much comfort and inspiration in the healing techniques of Phineas Quimby, a popular “mind-cure” leader, and in the Biblical testimonies to Jesus’ healing the sick. Her work *Science and Health with Keys to the Scriptures* (1875) proclaimed what she understood to be the “true” Christian message: that religion and science, matter and spirit, the divine father and the divine mother are all one in the divine mind. In this understanding of reality, all humans can attain perfection, and religious faith is a key to mental and physical well-being.

Eddy and her followers rejected the emerging field of medical science but used the terminology of scientific experimentation and evidence to bring a “modern” sensibility to their faith. While Christian Science began as a spiritual journey of one woman on the margins of mainline religion, it grew into a religious institution of considerable size, wealth, and prestige. From its first charter in 1879, the Church came to include over 1,000 separate churches by Eddy’s death in 1910. Three years before her death, Eddy founded *The Christian Science Monitor*, a news publication with the goal “to injure no man but to bless mankind.” The publication continues to this day and is published in downtown Boston, just steps away from the Mother Church, the First Church of Christ, Scientist. Today, the Mother Church includes members in over 130 countries and is home to the Mary Baker Eddy Library and Mapparium—an attraction for Christian Science and non-Christian Science tourists alike. Globally, there are nearly 2,000 Christian Science reading rooms and Christian Science Church branches and societies in 70 countries.

Today, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, more widely known as the Mormon Church, is another thriving religious community with founding roots in the mid-19th century. In 2018, the Church released a statement requesting that the shortened phrase “Mormon Church” no longer be used, and that adherents to the faith no longer be referred to as “Mormons.” Though the term “Mormon” is not derogatory, it is no longer accepted within the Church. Adherents are now to be referred to as “members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” or “Latter-day Saints.”

The story of the founding of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints begins with Joseph Smith (1805-1844), who had the profound experience of receiving messages from a heavenly courier named Moroni. Through this angel’s guidance, Smith is said to have discovered and translated an ancient text that became known as the Book of Mormon, which Smith published in 1830. Aided by God and guided

by the Book, Smith led his followers first to Missouri and then to Illinois, where he was ultimately killed in 1844 by an angry mob of Christians and, perhaps, dissidents from inside the faith. Under the leadership of Brigham Young, the community then traveled to the Salt Lake in a territory later known as Utah and established their own state, known as Deseret—a new Zion where life would be based on the teachings of their holy book.

From the beginning, Latter-day Saints aimed to cultivate the temple of the body by avoiding caffeine, alcohol and tobacco; to mirror the fatherhood and motherhood of God by sealing oneself in marriage, to practice baptism of the living for the sake of the dead; and to work for the spiritual and material progress of the religious group itself by practicing polygamy, giving generously to the Church, and establishing a government shaped by spiritual law. In the 1890s membership in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had already burgeoned to almost a quarter million. By 1950 over a half million Latter-day Saints lived in Utah alone. There are now an estimated 4.5 million Latter-day Saints in America.

In the 1950s, L. Ron Hubbard's book, *Dianetics*, brought Scientology to a national and international audience. Hubbard, a prolific novelist, former naval officer, and pilot, founded the Church of Scientology, a religion that understands its ultimate goal to be "true spiritual enlightenment and freedom for all" and whose "roots lie in the deepest beliefs and aspirations of all great religions." The influence of Hubbard's own extensive global travels can be seen in the description of the religion as a bridge between "Eastern philosophy and Western thought," which the Church understands to be "Man's first real application of scientific methodology to spiritual questions." In 1993, after three decades of conflict over the matter, the Internal Revenue Service granted tax-exempt status to all Scientology organizations, a decision that hinged on the answer to the question of whether Scientology is, in fact, a "religion." The removal of a leaked internet video from *YouTube* in 2008 which featured Tom Cruise speaking passionately about his commitment to Scientology sparked intense cyber attacks by the group Anonymous which had targeted Church websites. Despite this ongoing battle and challenges to Scientology's legitimacy as a religion in places like Germany, Hubbard's writings are now available in over fifty languages.

All of these new religious movements encountered opposition, either by Christians or by the United States legal system—or both. A sample of anti-Mormon sentiment may be glimpsed in Josiah Strong's *Our Country*, first published in 1886, and in the missionary tract entitled, "Mormonism: The

Islam of America,” published in 1912. Mormonism, Scientology, and Christian Science have encountered legal challenges to their beliefs and practices. Mormons faced the resistance of U.S. law for their practice of polygamy, which was prohibited by law in 1890, and for attempting to establish a theocracy, which faded after Utah was admitted to the Union in 1896. In the late 20th century, individual Christian Scientists have also been brought to court for refusing access to hospital care for their children. However, both the Church of Christ, Scientist and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have flourished, home-grown contributions to America’s growing religious diversity.