



"The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness"

It's inspired leaders from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Deepak Chopra, and has spawned both the New Age and spiritual self-help movements. But what is New Thought? Writer Arthur Goldwag explains its "change your thoughts, change your life" philosophy and the health-wealth-happiness practices it's generated. [More...](#)

## 'There is Nothing You Cannot Be, Do, or Have'

All about New Thought, the philosophy that launched a thousand best-sellers, New Age gurus, and some enduring U.S. religions.

By Arthur Goldwag

- An AIDS patient writes a letter to the HIV virus, forgiving it for the harm it's done him and thanking it for inspiring him to live a fuller life.
- A recovering alcoholic reminds herself to "let go and let God."
- Parents pray to see their son as "the perfect child of God" rather than call a doctor to prescribe medication for his earache.
- A collective of incorporeal beings sends this message to a best-selling author: "There is nothing you cannot be, do, or have."

What do these people have in common? All of them are heirs of the religious philosophy that came to be called New Thought. Practical, robust, optimistic, and results-oriented, New Thought is a prototypical product of 19th-America. Not only is it the progenitor of a number of distinct religious denominations—Christian Science, Religious Science, Divine Science, Unity, and even a Japanese offshoot called Seicho-No-Ie—its ideas have informed the sermons of popular pastors such as Norman Vincent Peale and Robert Schuller, the prosperity programs of Napoleon Hill and Stephen Covey, and the teachings of a veritable pantheon of New Age writers and authors such as Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra, and Marianne Williamson.

The founder of New Thought is generally acknowledged to be Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866), a Maine clock maker who discovered that he could cure sick people simply by talking to them. Quimby's son George published a biographical sketch of his father in the New England Magazine in 1888, in which he summarized the series of epiphanies that led to his practice of mental medicine: "That 'mind was spiritual matter and could be changed;' that we were made up of 'truth and error;' that 'disease was an error, or belief, and that the Truth was the cure.'"

Quimby's patients Warren Felt Evans, Julius and Annette Dresser, and Mary Baker Eddy did much to popularize his ideas, though the movement Eddy went on to found in 1879, the Church of Christ, Scientist, quickly went its own way (many of its teachings were Bible based and its members were discouraged from using conventional medicine). One of Mary Baker Eddy's students, Emma Curtis Hopkins, broke away from the Christian Science movement and started the Hopkins College of Metaphysical Science in 1885. Hopkins' student Nona L. Brooks would become one of the founders of the church of Divine Science in 1887. Charles and Myrtle Fillmore, who also studied with Hopkins, would go on to found the Unity Church in Kansas City, Missouri in 1899.

In addition to New Thought, Unity drew on Hinduism, Buddhism, Theosophy, and Rosicrucianism. "We have borrowed the best from all religions," Charles Fillmore declared. "Unity is the Truth that is taught in all religions, simplified. . . so that anyone can understand and apply it." Still another of Hopkins' students, Ernest Holmes, published the influential book "The Science of Mind" in 1926; he would found the church of Religious Science in that same year.

Dubbing New Thought "the religion of healthy-mindedness" and "Mind-cure," William James devoted several of the lectures in his seminal "Varieties of Religious Experience" (1902) to the philosophy and its offspring. Though he found its theology derivative and its science somewhat less than rigorous, he testified to the positive psychological effects it had on its adherents.

James wrote: "One of the doctrinal sources of Mind-cure is the four Gospels; another is Emersonianism or New England transcendentalism; another is Berkeleyan idealism; another is spiritism, with its messages of 'law' and 'progress' and 'development'; another the optimistic popular science evolutionism...and, finally, Hinduism has contributed a strain. But the most characteristic feature of the mind-cure movement is an inspiration much more direct. The leaders in this faith have had an intuitive belief in the all-saving power of healthy-minded attitudes as such, in the conquering efficacy of courage, hope, and trust, and a correlative contempt for doubt, fear, worry, and nervously precautionary states of mind. ...The blind have been made to see, the halt to walk; lifelong invalids have had their health restored. The moral fruits have been no less remarkable. The deliberate adoption of a healthy-minded attitude has proved possible to many who never supposed they had it in them; regeneration of character has gone on on an extensive scale; and cheerfulness has been restored to countless homes."

A marriage of philosophical idealism and mystical Christianity, the cornerstone of New Thought was Quimby's revelation that "every phenomenon in the natural world has its origin in the spiritual world." God is present in all things—including each one of us. When we change our thoughts to align them with God's, when we unleash the power of positive thinking, we can expect miracles. As the scripture says, "**Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind.**" (Romans 12:2)

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Though Quimby believed that he was practicing the same sort of medicine that Jesus did, and while most of the founders of New Thought considered themselves to be Christians, traditional Christian tenets of faith—original sin, the virgin birth, the Trinity, crucifixion and resurrection, the Eucharist, justification by faith and grace, heaven and hell—are nowhere to be found in its various theologies, except as symbols (the crucifixion, for example, represents the damage that negative thinking does to our bodies; the resurrection is the fruits of corrected thought; rather than a divinity, Jesus, as in some forms of Gnosticism, is understood to be a fully enlightened human being).

In New Thought, God (like the atoms of the 18th-century mystic Swedenborg or the Tao of Lao Tzu) is immanent in creation as invisible but omnipresent and intelligent energy. Anyone whose mind is properly opened can access this energy; its blessings are freely available to all. As Emmet Fox (1886-1951), a popular minister in Divine Science (and an early influence on Alcoholics Anonymous—his secretary was the mother of one of its first members) wrote:

"God is the only real Presence—all the rest is but shadow. God is perfect Good, and God is the cause only of perfect Good. God never sends sickness, trouble, accident, temptation, nor death itself; nor does He authorize these things. We bring them upon ourselves by our own wrong thinking. God, Good, can cause only good. The same fountain cannot send forth both sweet and bitter water."

New Thought might have begun as a method of faith healing, but by the early 20th century it had broadened into a complete spirituality. If new thoughts can conquer sickness, then they can eliminate prejudice, war, poverty, and all the other human miseries as well. In an address to the Metaphysical Club of Boston in 1914, Annette Dresser, one of Quimby's earliest followers, described its aspirations in almost messianic terms:

"We stand for the ideal that a new life, a new philosophy is coming into the world. Some of us are interested in applying it to healing; others care more for

the philosophical elements; others still for its mystic and spiritual factors; and some for the religious point of view it presents; but we are all united in the desire to interpret and to understand life as a whole in the light of it... Affirm your capacity to receive love, wisdom and power from the Lord—affirm that truth—hold to that truth. So shall your life be full, and so shall you live your life in service, and find it gloriously in Him. The truth shall make you free."

Dresser's son Horatio would publish a history of the New Thought movement in 1919; its first chapter proclaimed the dawning of "The New Age."

For all the zeal of its founders, today the denominations that comprise the New Thought Alliance are small—Unity, the largest, has about 75,000 members, Science of Mind slightly less; Divine Science has some 5000 members. Christian Science, which does not count its membership, was once hugely popular, but has declined in recent years.

But despite its small official numbers, the influence of New Thought philosophy—or a "God-centered health-wealth-happiness-producing practice designed to transform your daily living by changing your unconscious assumptions and consciously held beliefs, attitudes, and expectations," as the One Spirit Ministries of the Poconos styles itself on its website—is inescapable.

Today's most prominent New Thought teachers deliver their sermons from the couches of television talk shows rather than pulpits; their books are more likely to be shelved under "Business" and "Self-Help" in bookstores than in "Religion." Stephen Covey's highly effective business executives are direct descendants of the constitutionally "healthy-minded" Victorians that William James marveled at one hundred years ago.

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Wayne Dyer's "Power of Intention," the ordained Unity minister Marianne Williamson's "A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles," Deepak Chopra's many books on quantum healing and spiritual affluence, Gary Zukav's recondite explorations of quantum physics and practical exercises for "soul empowerment," Jerry and Esther Hicks' "Ask and It is Given" (the channeled wisdom of a spiritual entity named Abraham who reveals how you can become "vibrationally aligned" with your desires), not to mention the tapes, infomercials, and packed lectures by the motivational guru Tony Robbins and the first "New Thought" film "What the Bleep Do We Know?" about the invisible organization of energy—all offer variations on ideas that were first proclaimed by Quimby, Warren Felt Evans, the Dressers, Emma Curtis Hopkins, and Mary Baker Eddy more than a century ago.

Clearly New Thought spawned an effective practical psychology—millions of Americans recite daily affirmations to encourage their positivity while they struggle up the career ladder and through the vagaries of toxic relationships. 12-Step programs have empowered countless addicts to reclaim their lives; support groups help the chronically ill maintain hope and according to some studies actually improve their longevity. And innumerable informal groups gather together to learn how to access Universal Spirit in order to "manifest" more good in their lives. But are these really religions?

### **Inside a New Thought Church**

One Sunday morning, not too long ago, I ventured up to a mansion on Manhattan's Upper East Side, where The Sacred Center For Spiritual Living (a member church of the New Thought Alliance) conducts its services. I got there a few minutes late; when I arrived, a

gospel quartet was already in mid-song, accompanied by a jazz piano trio. The usher, a cheerful-looking young man with dreadlocks, offered me a program. There were no prayer books, no crosses in sight. The congregation was youngish and seemingly prosperous, artistic-looking and racially mixed.

When the music stopped, announcements were read—the workshop on “Mastering Your Fear” had been postponed until September (“You’ll just have to live with your fear all summer,” she quipped) but the invitation to “celebrate the joyful connection with the divine through ecstatic dance and music” later in the week still stood. A guided meditation followed. While the pianist tinkled a blandly hypnotic melody, a woman lit candles and intoned variations on the following phrases:

I am remembering who I am Into the presence would I enter now,  
For I am surrounded by the love of God May every voice but God's be still in  
me

Then everyone stood and recited a prayer:

Peace in my heart brings peace to the family,  
Peace in the family brings peace to the community.  
Peace in the community brings peace to the nation.  
Peace in the nation brings peace to the world.  
Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me.

I watched from the back of the congregation as a little red-haired boy, about seven years old, recited the words from memory. The gospel quartet returned to the stage and sang a rousing version of *Wade in the Water*. Then the Reverend August Gold came out and delivered a seemingly extemporaneous sermon. The texts she preached on were the novel “The Kite Runner,” her own life, and the Tao of Lao Tzu.

It was an extraordinary and inspiring performance. She spoke of the moments of moral failure that seemingly have the power to define an entire life—and of the opportunities that life affords us to atone and to change. In the case of “The Kite Runner,” it was the narrator’s betrayal of his best friend. In her own case, it was when, as a naïve teenager, she’d allowed a married man, whose wife was a dear friend, to kiss her. No matter how irrevocable your error, no matter how blighted your life seems as a result, the Tao flows through everything and everyone. “The Tao is eternal,” she said, “it does not favor one person over another, and it brings all things to completion.” We can forgive others and we can forgive ourselves. We can overcome our shame, we can heal.

Understand, she said, that you are coming into consciousness of what it is to be human in a human world. I was reminded of a saying from AA—“We are not human beings having spiritual experiences, we are spiritual beings having human experiences.” The point of her sermon wasn’t that our moral lapses don’t matter, that self-love trumps everything. It was that life affords us an opportunity to grow.

Looking at the faces of the congregants, listening to the Reverend Gold’s creedless, therapeutic, but compassionate and profoundly moral sermon, I thought of William James, who concluded “The Varieties of Religious Experience” with the observation that the religious life could be defined by the following beliefs:

- “The visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance.”
- “Union or harmonious relation with that higher universe is our true end.”
- Through prayer or meditation “spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world.”

Religious people, James added, enjoy “a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism” as well as “an assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections.” Whether or not New Thought is truly “Christian” is a question that I’d prefer to leave for Christians to debate. That morning, I had no doubt that the worshippers at The Sacred Center for Spiritual Living were experiencing genuine religion.