

Mary Baker Eddy and her lecturers

Paul Stob interviewed by the Journal's Rosalie E. Dunbar
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• • • • • • • *The Mary Baker Eddy Library's research programs are designed to support original contributions to scholarship and help further research by established scholars, graduate students, and recent graduates beginning their academic careers. The Library awards fellowships to academic scholars and independent researchers for research in its collections, which center on the papers of Mary Baker Eddy and records documenting the history of the Christian Science movement. Paul Stob is one of those scholars. An Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Vanderbilt University, he is writing a book titled Intellectual Populism in American Thought and Culture, 1875–1915, which will include a chapter on Mary Baker Eddy's lectures and the early decades of the Christian Science Board of Lectureship. He shared with the Journal's Rosalie E. Dunbar his reasons for the research and what he discovered while doing it.*

How did you get interested in Mary Baker Eddy and the Christian Science Board of Lectureship?

It was through my work on William James, who was a famous psychologist and philosopher at Harvard University around the turn of the 20th century. He was involved in a number of battles—professional, legal, and personal—regarding faith-cure movements in the Boston area, and he was advocating for the Massachusetts State Legislature to allow faith healers. As a professional psychologist, he saw their work as a legitimate function of healing.

Massachusetts was trying to enact a medical registration bill, saying that all doctors and physicians had to be licensed through a state board. This was a common response in the country to Christian Science and other faith healing movements. James believed they should be allowed to practice their approach to healing without needing a license. He did his best to defend Mary Baker Eddy in the press, and to his colleagues, who were more skeptical of Christian Science and other faith-healing movements than he was.

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Through James's work, I became interested in how Mary Baker Eddy would lecture before different audiences, especially in the early decades of Christian Science, and how her ideas and her approach to public speaking ended up transforming and informing the Christian Science Board of Lectureship. Also, I wanted to find out how the lecturers themselves, who went around the country on behalf of the Christian Science Church, took their cues from Mary Baker Eddy herself. I've been looking at the actual structure and mechanism behind the Board of Lectureship—how it functioned, the mechanics and the day-to-day operations of the Board, the various lecturers on it, and the content of the lectures.

What I've examined is the way lecturers tried to empower people around the end of the 19th century in a new approach to healing and to medicine. The lectures, and particularly the Board of Lectureship, were a way of providing an alternative to the dominant forms of healing and medicine, particularly surgery, and what physicians were doing at the time when these state boards of licensing were created.

I'm also interested in the way the lecturers gave people the reason they needed to have faith and confidence in their own healing. This was despite what the medical establishment and theological organizations said to denounce and decry Christian Science. I also like to look at the way the arguments within the lectures themselves gave people a reason to take healing into their own hands, and no longer rely on an external, institutional authority.

What I'm trying to do is map these different strategies across various lecturers, from people such as Mary Baker Eddy herself, to some of the more prominent lecturers. Edward Kimball is perhaps the best known, but there are some less well-known lecturers, including some female lecturers such as Sue Harper Mims.

What's been so remarkable about my research is to see how consistent all of the lecturers were, despite differences in age, geographic location, and socioeconomic standing. They were all very consistent in the way they talked about Christian Science as an alternative to theological and medical organizations at the time—to the dominant ones, at least.

Lecturing at this time in the 19th century was considered a mixture of entertainment, edification, and education. Community members, instead of going to the movies, listening to the radio, or watching TV, because those things didn't exist back then, would go to lectures. That gave Christian Scientists a wonderful opportunity to use live interactions in lecture halls to spread their ideas and to talk about the importance of Christian Science.

One of the most interesting things I discovered in my research was that Mary Baker Eddy and the members of the Christian Science Board of Lectureship were not using their lectures primarily to proselytize or to convert people. They were primarily designed to give a cogent, compelling response to criticisms of Christian Science that were circulating widely at the time. They wanted to discuss these points from their perspective—to give reasons for their belief in this Science, and to explain it as clearly and effectively as they could.

It was a way of responding to a lot of the falsehoods about Christian Science, from both religious and medical figures, and to make sure that average Americans, everywhere, had the information they needed to make a judgment on their own about Christian Science and its validity. I think it's significant that they were not seeking converts but were trying to open a public discussion about the value of Christian Science and its ideas.

A lot of times, with religious organizations or traditions that are trying to spread their message, the impetus to convert people is prominent. Christian Science certainly did that in other ways, but in this instance, it was really an intellectual and conversational approach. They just wanted to have people discuss Christian Science from an informed perspective. That's one of the most fascinating things I discovered in my research about the early years of the Board of Lectureship.

Earlier, you were talking about William James speaking up on Mrs. Eddy's behalf. What was the outcome of that?

Ultimately, most states, including Massachusetts, ended up passing a medical licensing and a medical registration bill. It was a state-by-state strategy that was largely spearheaded by the medical establishment at the time. The goal was to change individual state law to require medical licensing, which often excluded Christian Science practitioners.

While Professor James wasn't necessarily pro-Christian Science, he did feel Christian Scientists had the right to practice their faith. And he testified against the law, as I said. Here's one of the passages that was quoted in *The Christian Science Journal*:

“I am here having no axes to grind, except the axe of truth, that ‘Truth’ for which Harvard University, of which I am an officer, professes to exist. I am a Doctor of Medicine, and count some of the advocates of this proposed law among my dearest friends, and well do I know how I shall stand in their eyes hereafter for standing today in my present position. But I cannot look on passively, and I must urge my point. That point is this: that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is not a medical body, has no right to a medical opinion, and should not dare to take sides in a medical controversy” (“[The Editor's Table](#),” April 1898, pp. 68–69).

Eventually, the states relented and backtracked a little bit on the stringency of their laws and made it legal for Christian Science practitioners to do their work. So in the short term, a lot of these laws got passed in states all over the country, but over time the laws were relaxed to allow Christian Scientists to work more uninhibited than they were before.

Is there anything about the project, in terms of Christian Science, that you feel changed you, or made you feel differently about things?

I don't know if it changed me or made me feel differently, but I was struck by how, early in the work of the Board of Lectureship, it was very much designed to reach a non-Christian Science audience. Mary Baker Eddy was very clear that the lecturers in the early years of the Board of Lectureship should be speaking to non-Christian Science audiences, and of course in the early days of the Church it was logical to expect that most attendees would not be church members. Today, lecturers assume that an audience will include both members and those who are unfamiliar with Christian Science.

Early guidelines for the Board of Lectureship emphasized that a church should look for a large, conveniently located venue. Lecturers should not be speaking at a Christian Science church. In response, churches would rent a local opera house, a local lecture hall or an auditorium, and they would invite the entire community. The lecture would be free, and the local Christian Science church was responsible for footing the bill. The lecture would really be a communal discussion about big ideas, and it would be a way of clarifying the aims and goals of Christian Science.

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Reading the lectures from the early years of the Board of Lectureship, I've found that they're incredibly clear—they're straightforward and cogent in their arguments. Someone who is coming to Christian Science for the first time might pick up *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy, which is presenting ideas that will be new and even challenging for some readers to accept.

Christian Science lectures, on the other hand, reach people who haven't read *Science and Health*—or who are less familiar with the tradition. So lecturers attempt to be as clear as they can and to present arguments that are compelling and engaging. It's been very instructive for me to read early Christian Science lectures, and see how much they are trying to connect with people outside of the Christian Science tradition.

When people look into Christian Science for the first time, it can be a very challenging topic, but those lecturers were very conscious of what they had to do to make it understandable. They couldn't get into all the details of it, but at a general level, they made a very clear, compelling case. I have maybe hundreds of newspaper articles about the lectures, and the local newspapers at the time were very positive in their comments about these events.

Occasionally you would get a newspaper that would be dismissive or hostile, but the vast majority of the time, the newspapers were singing the praises of the speakers, saying, in fact, how clear, how understandable, how forthright these lectures were, and how much sense they made. The lecturers came there to answer people's questions about Christian Science, and they did that beautifully.

Newspapers time and again would say that the lectures cleared up all the issues about Christian Science, and that they'd given people the power to decide for themselves what they thought about this religion. Sometimes they even said they were glad the lecturer had come to town to get all the negative opinions out of the way, and to clear the ground for people to think on their own. And it's remarkable how often newspapers said something like that.

Did the lecturers have to make a special effort to get press coverage?

A conscious strategy for the early lecturers was to do everything they could to get the text of their lectures into the local newspapers. They knew they were going to speak to a live audience, and that was important, but they were very, very strategic about how to get the lecture text into local papers.

They would often print up different forms of their lectures. The brief form of the lecture would be a 500-word summary. Then there would be the longer summary—maybe 1,500 words—and then the full lecture itself. They would go to the local newspapers, trying to develop relationships with the editors. Then when a lecturer was back in town, he or she could give the newspaper these texts and say, "Hey, I'm coming to town to lecture. I'd love it if you'd print the short version, the medium version, or the long version of my lecture."

This was a way of getting their ideas into another venue—not just into that live lecture in the auditorium, but into the local newspapers. Hopefully this would start a conversation in the local newspapers and would spread the lecturer’s ideas even further in the local community. So lecturers had to present ideas that were not only clear for people’s ears—when they delivered them to a live audience—they also had to provide for people’s eyes as they read the words in a local newspaper. These two avenues for their ideas—the printed word and a live venue—were always at the forefront of their thoughts.

To what extent do you think Mrs. Eddy directed the lecture activity?

From the time the Board of Lectureship was first created in 1898 until her passing in 1910, she was involved in shaping the approach lecturers took. Many of the prominent Board of Lectureship members, Edward Kimball, for example, would go to her house in Concord, New Hampshire, and talk with her about his progress on the lecture circuit—what he was doing, and what he could do better—and she would give him advice.

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A lot of times lecturers would send a handwritten or typed copy of their lecture to Mrs. Eddy before they delivered it, and she would comment on it—where it could be strengthened, where it could be cut, where it could be improved. I knew she was involved a little bit from the outset—but when I got into the archives, I found she was more involved than I had anticipated. She regularly corresponded with the lecturers, instructing them about how they should present themselves, how they should work with local newspaper editors. She had had her own struggles with the press over the years, and she had figured out what were some good strategies and what were bad ones.

What is the end goal for your research?

My work on the Christian Science Board of Lectureship and Mary Baker Eddy’s lectures is going to be a chapter in the next book I’m writing, which is about a number of intellectual figures around the turn of the 20th century who were dissatisfied with the increasing institutionalization of knowledge.

It’s around the end of the 19th century that research universities are born and that countless professional societies are created. These stake a claim on knowledge—on ideas, in a very exclusive way—saying you have to be an expert if you want to heal people; you have to be academically certified if you want to really understand this or that area of knowledge. So I’m looking at a number of people who tried to resist that. For example, there are methods of healing, which are different from what the medical establishment would tell people at the time, and that is why I’m looking at Christian Science. I’m particularly interested in how people communicated their ideas—the way people would travel the country lecturing and spreading knowledge among ordinary people, as opposed to within what we would consider the great halls of learning or research in a university.

The overall idea for the book is to explore what I call “intellectual populism”—that is, an attempt to return the pursuit and the production of knowledge to ordinary people, to make sure that average Americans can participate in knowing the world. They don’t just have to be handed ideas from authorities and experts, but can actually be part of the creation of understanding. I’m using Christian Science and the Board of Lectureship and Mary Baker Eddy’s own lectures as a way of looking at one moment in this larger tradition I’m calling intellectual populism.
