
Biographical treatments of Mary Baker Eddy tend to be polarized between what feminist biographer Gillian Gill has called “hagiographic zeal” and “damning...accusations.”¹ Some biographies “embrace [Eddy] in loving praise,” concurs psychobiographer Robert David Thomas, while “others hold her skeptically at arm’s length or launch an outright attack.”² Starting with Robert Peel’s trilogy in the 1960s and 70s, a small cadre of responsible historians has bucked this trend by producing engaging studies of Eddy’s life. The most recent entry in this category is Stephen Gottschalk’s Rolling Away the Stone, published posthumously this year as part of IUP’s Religion in North America series.

Gottschalk gives us a sophisticated and imaginative reading of Eddy’s final two decades. Most notably, he focuses on Eddy’s inner prayer life as revealed by both her published writings and personal papers, the latter of which were recently made available to the public at the Mary Baker Eddy Library in Boston. He sets up his dual focus on character and theology in the Prelude, “The world’s ‘leaden weight,’” by discussing one of the final chapters in Eddy’s life: a lawsuit against her constructed by Joseph Pulitzer’s New York World. Called the “Next Friends Suit” in the press due to its premise that, at eighty-six, Eddy was mentally incompetent and the management of her affairs should be turned over to a group of largely estranged relatives and associates (or “next friends”), Gottschalk positions the suit as one of the first instances of a “distinctly twentieth-century form of...media-orchestrated event” (13). She won the suit after her examination by a panel of court masters found her to be mentally sharp, and she subsequently founded The Christian Science Monitor both to combat the perpetuation of “yellow” journalism and to encourage her students to engage more knowledgably and prayerfully with world events. The episode was harrowing for her entire household and deeply formative for Eddy, however, and Gottschalk uses it to place key aspects of her character in sharp relief.

The book unfolds thematically, rather than strictly chronologically, around these aspects: Eddy’s spiritually “tough” nature, which “was not so much a male toughness as a fierce motherly protectiveness” in relation to the faith she founded; the personal costs (such as exhaustion, stress, and isolation) that attended her exercise of leadership; her constant and often failed entreaties to students she hoped would more ably conform to the spiritual requirements of the faith; and her status as a Christian thinker (24).

Regarding this last point, Gottschalk notes that Eddy “did not aspire to...dialog[ue] across the ages with the great male figures of the Christian tradition. [She] accounted herself both less and more than a Christian theologian: less, because she had neither the temperament nor the opportunity to enter into what was almost exclusively a male professional world; more, because she believed she was accomplishing something far closer to the bone of daily life than the development of new theological insights for their own sake” (169). Although Eddy “did address some of the differences between her thinking and the idealism of Kant and Berkeley,” she was uninterested in “theological disputes that did not have direct bearing on life as lived” (169). This focus on experience over traditional theology is one of the main aspects of Eddy’s work on which Gottschalk dwells. It is also an aspect of Christian Science that has prevented scholars from seriously considering the seamless ontological system Eddy felt it possessed. Gottschalk makes clear that while “constructing an intellectual system as such” was never Eddy’s main interest or purpose, it was a definite byproduct of her driving focus on issues of theodicy. Her work pushes to a logical extreme the biblical premise that “the Lord

He is God, and there is none beside Him,” a passage she quoted to explicate what Gottschalk calls her rejection of “what might be called the hidden metaphysics of traditional Christianity…[which] held to the virtually axiomatic assumption that God was the creator of matter and finitude, and thereby the ultimate source of the suffering and death that human beings must endure” (2).

With his sustained attention to theology, Gottschalk does an excellent job explaining the details and implications of this often misunderstood aspect of Christian Science. He clarifies Eddy’s view that “human existence does not transpire in a context of physical substance-matter, but is thoroughly mental—that what we call ‘matter’ is” not a fixed ontological fact, not the effect to God’s cause, but “simply a name for the images of limitation we ignorantly entertain within our own mentalities” (85). Gottschalk wryly comments that Eddy knew how radical this sounded to orthodox ears, and she was keenly aware of the ridicule to which it would subject her. But she felt that biblical logic, and most centrally what she accepted as the fact of Jesus’ resurrection, compelled her to adopt it.

Here is the source of Gottschalk’s book title. Asking in a sermon what “seems a stone between us and the resurrection morning,” Eddy answered that it is “the belief of mind in matter…the human view entertained of the power, resistance, and substance of matter as opposed to the might and supremacy of Spirit” (2). The revelation of Christian Science, she felt, “rolled away the stone’ of the belief that God created and sustained mortality, undercutting the assumption that so drastically limited Christian faith and experience” (41). She saw this theological shift as not only the sole viable answer to the problem of theodicy, but as a strategic necessity if Christianity was to move intact beyond the onslaughts of modernity. Refiguring Christianity as a science, Gottschalk notes, was Eddy’s answer to scientific materialism.

One of the strongest sections of *Rolling Away the Stone* centers on the relationship between Eddy and Mark Twain. Gottschalk digs beneath the easy stereotype of Twain as Eddy’s most celebrated enemy to highlight an internal resonance between the two figures. As inheritors of the Arminian groundswell in nineteenth-century America, Eddy and Twain shared their generation’s questioning of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination and its attendant teachings about the nature of God’s sovereignty, goodness, and will. Again, theodicy is at the root of Gottschalk’s analysis. “…Twain insisted on pushing the question: If the God of the Bible is real, and if he is both sovereign and good, why are so many in pain, and can God do no more than hear their anguished wails? If the Bible, God’s Word, gives comfort and cheer to the sick and dying, why are they sick and dying in the first place? No one in America had asked this same question more insistently than Mary Baker Eddy” (56). Twain rejected Christianity as an empty mockery of human suffering, including his own tortured final days, while Eddy’s acute experiences of suffering led her to more fully embrace a revised version of the Christian project.

Gottschalk also highlights correspondence that shows Twain vacillating between genuine sympathy for Christian Science and a degree of vitriol that baffled even himself. Even while publishing charged polemics against the religion, Twain told one of Eddy’s associates that he would like to have Christian Science treatment for “his ailing wife, Livy, but that she was such a staunch Presbyterian that she would rather die first” (86). In the end, says Gottschalk, Twain and Eddy “appeared to be in an adversarial relationship with one another, although they shared more ground than either of them ever knew” (87).

In the chapter “Woman goes forth,” Gottschalk treats Eddy’s maternal approach to leadership. While parts of it read almost quaintly (as does Gottschalk’s prefatory note announcing that “[g]ender questions…in recent years” have caused him to refer to Eddy by her family name alone, sans “Mrs.”), there is an underlying rigor to his argument that makes it almost retro-hip. He in effect lampoons liberal feminism for judging Eddy
according to the same masculinist standards Twain publicly employed to denigrate her (even while his private papers show a different story). Twain saw power as synonymous with “competitiveness, domination, and planning,” writes Gottschalk, and he portrayed Eddy’s exercise of power as similar to “the captains of industry: she was ambitious, selfish, self-confident” (180). Feminist scholars vacillate in their views about Eddy, Gottschalk implies, because like Twain their working definition of power is fundamentally linked to worldly, aggressive ambition. Therefore, Eddy’s exercise of power is interpreted either as a negative alignment with masculinist ideals or a positive alignment with feminist appropriations of those ideals. Eddy saw her leadership in neither of these terms. For her, empowerment meant the ability to heal through Christ and to inspire her followers to the type of spiritual growth that would allow them to do the same. She had admittedly mixed results with this latter effort. But notable success stories exist as well. Gottschalk’s conclusion: “Eddy came to discover that there was immense power in this kind of mothering—not so much power to coerce others as power to further their growth” (179). On this basis, Gottschalk reads Eddy as anti-authoritarian in nature, subverting the Twain-like suggestion she was an autocrat that has persisted in Eddy studies.

Gottschalk could have pulled on a broader and more recent range of feminist scholarship in this chapter, though he easily makes his point without doing so. This might have helped clarify some minor points, however, such as his comment that making certain choices “would have made [Eddy] more of a man than a woman.” Is he referring to masculinity and femininity in terms of sex or gender, biology or a particular nineteenth-century cultural context? Flaws in the book are for the most part limited to similarly slight passage-specific details, though some topics could have been profitably explored at greater length. Gottschalk briefly mentions “[t]he relation of Christian Science to Hinduism and Buddhism,” only to immediately add that this “is an issue that has not as yet received the attention it deserves, and is so complex that it can only be touched on here” (141). A few passages sound vaguely “faith-promoting” (to borrow a phrase from the Latter-day Saints), but Gottschalk’s critical rigor prevents such passages from becoming problematic. Overall they read as a function of his immersion in Eddy’s life and work and not an insistence that others agree with her views. Such an insistence is totally absent from the text; the picture Gottschalk draws of Eddy is critically formed, not stylized or perfect.

Other chapters include a sensitive and subtle reading of Eddy’s relationship with her adopted son Foster; a fascinating discussion of Christian Science participation at the 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions in Chicago; absorbing accounts of Eddy’s relationship with students and ex-students; and extended commentary on the building and organization of the Christian Science church. Gottschalk highlights aspects of Eddy’s life not taken up in other biographies, such as her role as a preacher, which is often overshadowed by her textual work. Other examples include his focus on Eddy’s ironic and sometimes caustic wit, which other biographers have ignored or mentioned only in passing, and theological issues such as her extensive use of Edwardsian typology.

Rolling Away the Stone is full of small and large instances of historiographical revisionism. Gottschalk rewrites Eddy’s relative “seclusion” during her final years as an aspect of Christian devotion “in the great Christian contemplative tradition,” a strengthening retreat to be with God as the only viable strategy for helping her understand and fulfill what felt like overwhelming responsibilities (103). He overturns the facile reading of Christian Science as a variety of sunny positive thinking by foregrounding its theology of sin, commenting that Eddy “sometimes outdoes Calvin in characterizing the sinfulness of the mortal picture of man” (5). Although this sinfulness remained a “picture” or two-dimensional image and was never, to Eddy, an ontologically inherent attribute of God’s creation, she held that this fact could not be grasped without the repentance that allowed the action of Christ to make creation’s
innocence clear in human consciousness. This gives shape to Eddy’s attempts to inculcate in herself and her followers a more constant sense of penitence. Gottschalk also restores to Eddy’s historiography her unique understanding of the divinity of Jesus as neither orthodox nor quite unorthodox; as God’s Son he was not literally God, she held, but still divine to a degree that was “unique in all of human history” (234). This helps adjust for problems in the last major biography of Eddy, in which Gill (an excellent historian and friend of Gottschalk’s) recovers aspects of Eddy’s life lost to sexist misreadings, such as the view that she was a “hysteric,” but in the process sidelines her religion. (Her volume includes index entries on Luce Irigaray and the economics of widowhood, for example, but none on Jesus or Christ.)

In 1973, Gottschalk wrote that “Mrs. Eddy was, in the final analysis, a woman of religious vision...Much of the material that friendly biographers have soft-pedaled or eliminated from their accounts becomes relevant to an understanding of her character, while many elements in her life that hostile commentators have dwelt upon become of less importance or begin to make a different kind of sense.” In his 2006 biography Gottschalk adds to this initial judgment the advantages of the intervening thirty-five years of research. Rolling Away the Stone is, as Catherine L. Albanese and Stephen J. Stein put it in their preface, a “fitting conclusion to a significant career” (x). In the end, Gottschalk argues that we should not “leave [Eddy] in the nineteenth century” by adhering to simplistic or dogmatic understandings of her work (415). Instead, he seems to be telling church members as well as scholars, we should continue to understand Eddy freshly as a radical Christian thinker who went to great lengths to live what she taught.

Amy Black Voorhees
University of California, Santa Barbara