Introduction

New Thought in Late-Victorian America

On the steamy morning of June 14, 1888, Chicago's Central Music Hall was packed, from the orchestra to its highest gallery seats, with well-dressed middle-aged women. Fanning themselves in the heat, they eagerly awaited the Reverend Mary Baker Eddy, about to deliver her first public talk outside of New England. Eddy soon appeared on the stage, a solemn, diminutive figure in a simple black-and-white silk dress. The audience of four thousand rose in respectful tribute and then listened intently to Eddy's speech, entitled "Science and the Senses." Eddy explained that sin, sickness, and death had no absolute reality, but were mere errors—that is, false conceptions created by our faulty senses. True Science, on the other hand, was a power so great that it could destroy all error, including sin, sickness, and death. Christian Science was merely the modern revival of the spiritual and healing Science that Jesus had practiced, Eddy claimed. If one wanted to be healed or to heal others, one had only to recognize this true Science; it was as simple as that.

When Eddy finished her talk, her audience rushed the platform and showered her with hugs and kisses. The newspaper accounts only fanned the flames of her triumph. Eddy had shown herself to be "a woman of impressive appearance and intellectual force," wrote the *Chicago Daily Tribune.* Her voice was "exceedingly penetrating" and had an oddly "electrical quality," wrote the *Daily Inter Ocean,* while the *Chicago Times* reported that Eddy "seemed to be conjuring her audience," so rapt was their attention.[1]

Eddy's Chicago triumph seemed to prove that her Christian Science had surpassed its nomenclature of the "Boston Craze" to become a national movement. This success was not the entire picture, however. As Eddy was en route to her first experience of adulation in the midwest, her organization was crumbling at home. That same spring of 1888 a Mrs. Abby H.

Corner of Medford, Massachusetts, had engaged in Christian Science healing—that is, silent prayer—to help her daughter, who was having a difficult childbirth. Both her daughter and the infant died, and Mrs. Corner was indicted for manslaughter. Anxiety over the trial fueled a mood of dissension and fear among Eddy's Boston followers. Instead of finding Eddy to be a reassuring leader, they focused on her apparent lust for money, her demands for unquestioning loyalty, and her growing paranoia over the evil designs of former students. Three days before Eddy gave her acclaimed Chicago speech, a stormy session of the Boston Christian Science Association culminated with the defection of one third of Eddy's followers. She returned from her Chicago triumph to find in shambles the Boston Christian Science group she had laboriously constructed over the previous ten years. Nearly despairing over the future of her movement, Eddy considered abandoning Boston altogether and simply starting over in Chicago.[2]

Eddy had reason to seriously consider such a relocation of her tottering movement. Chicago had had a thriving Christian Science scene since 1883.[3] The year Eddy visited the city, Frances Lord's *Christian Science Healing,* Ursula N. Gestefeld's *Statement of Christian Science,* and the *Christian Science* magazine were published there and Emma Curtis Hopkins' Christian Science Theological Seminary opened there. There was one problem, however. The women leading the Christian Science movement in Chicago, formerly students of Eddy's, had now become her rivals. Despite their sporadic protestations of loyalty to Eddy, Chicago women such as Hopkins, Lord, and Gestefeld were in fact promoting their own doctrines, variously known as Mind Cure, Mental Science, and Christian Science.

By 1888 Eddy was losing control of the movement she claimed to have originated, and not only in Chicago. While Eddy's followers in Boston abandoned her in increasing numbers, Boston itself was the location of at least six similar schools of mental healing that viewed each other as allies and Eddy as an enemy. Eddy could not find words harsh enough for these apostates; "whining dogs," "Malicious Animal Magnetizers," and "mental assassins" were some of the phrases she used to describe them. But by the late 1880s, their followers far outnumbered her own. According to one estimate, of five thousand people active in mind-healing in Boston in 1887, less than one thousand were loyal to Eddy. "There are twenty false lecturers and teachers to one that is true," Eddy mourned, and evidence from the period supports her admission that her followers comprised only a small proportion of the nation's mental healers.[4]

The following study focuses on these "false lecturers and teachers," the women, together with some men who, between 1885 and 1910, formed the

majority of the metaphysical milieu of which Eddy was merely one wing, and who, after Eddy's death in 1910, continued to spread their faith to vast numbers of Americans.[5] Throughout the 1880s, these groups were often confused with Eddy's Christian Science. They called their beliefs Mental Science, Divine Science, Spiritual Science, Unity, Mind Cure, Science of Being, Home of Truth, and even, until Eddy definitively copyrighted the term in the 1890s, Christian Science. At that point the groups' leaders united their separate faiths in a loose national alliance and agreed upon "New Thought" as the umbrella term for their movement.[6] Yet from the 1880s on, there were so many influential New Thought teachers that it is historically more accurate to view Mary Baker Eddy as an important contributor to the turn-of-the-century New Thought movement than to view New Thought as the long-forgotten context for Eddy's Christian Science. Eddy will thus be treated as a contributor in this study. Eddy disliked New Thought healers, but she shared enough of their basic beliefs—and personally trained enough of their major leaders—to be seen as an intellectual contributor to the movement she abhorred.

Although Eddy strove to separate herself from the New Thought movement, it is easy to see why many turn-of-the-century Americans failed to see the distinction between Eddy's Christian Science and the broader New Thought milieu. There were significant overlaps between the theology and practice of both groups. Both believed that the mental or spiritual world was the true reality, while the material world of daily life, the world of "matter," was merely a secondary creation of the mind. Both also believed that human beings had god-like powers. As God created the universe through pure thought, so on a lesser scale did people create their own worlds through their thought. Since human thought had creative power, negative thoughts materialized into negative situations, while spiritual thoughts could form a positive reality. Both believed in thought transference, claiming that either intentionally or unintentionally, people "picked up" the thoughts of their neighbors.

New Thought and Christian Science proponents therefore attempted first to enlighten people about the creative powers of their minds, and then to teach them how to control their minds, and thus the world around them. The first step in controlling the mind, they believed, was to train it to ignore the information imparted by the senses. Science had proven that the senses provided false information. As Christian Science and New Thought manuals often pointed out, our eyes report that the sun travels around the earth, while in truth the earth revolves around the sun.[7] Clearly the mind needed a more reliable source of information. According to Eddy, this more reli-

able source was scripture. According to New Thought writers, it was either scripture, pure reason, or intuition—all three were in any case believed to agree. Both groups thus encouraged people to retrain their minds on the basis of a spiritual rather than a material reality, and to refute both the sense-information and the "mental errors" of those around them. The result of such mental discipline would be the creation of a perfect world.

Both groups achieved notoriety as a result of their claims to heal the sick through thought or prayer. Their healing practices were simple applications of their faith in the creative power of human thought. They believed that mental fears created both emotional and physical distress. One attained health and serenity by accepting that physical, material, or emotional conditions had no ultimate reality. The healer's job was to convince the patient that since Spirit or Mind was all, her problems or pains did not truly exist. Because of the power of thought transference, the healer could impart this information mentally and silently. The patient would mentally absorb the healer's thoughts and then be healed. In Eddy's own words:

> Argue at first mentally, not audibly, that the patient has no disease, and conform the argument so as to destroy the evidence of disease. Mentally insist that harmony is the fact, and that sickness is a temporal dream. Realize the presence of health and the fact of harmonious being, until the body corresponds with the normal conditions of health and harmony.[8]

And in the words of one of Eddy's rivals, Warren Felt Evans:

> We . . . affirm . . . that the deepest reality of the disease is not physical, but mental. . . . [in the case of a man who injured his arm] recognizing both the fall and the fracture, we would affirm that the immortal man is not injured, and that no sooner was the wound made than an everywhere-present Divine Life goes to work to heal the hurt. We would steadfastly believe this, and form in our mind the idea of the change to be effected, in order to . . . aid nature by accelerating the curative process.[9]

There were significant theological differences between Eddy's Christian Science and most New Thought groups. New Thought leaders embraced reason, intuition, or an amalgam of the world's scriptures and esoteric traditions as sources of spiritual truth. Eddy felt that truth could be found only in the Bible and in her own writings, both of which she believed to be divinely inspired. She also maintained the Christian understanding both of God as a transcendent being wholly distinct from humanity, and of humanity as needing to acknowledge complete dependence on this higher power. Thus although Eddy accepted New Thought claims about the creative power

of human thought, she also feared it, since a reliance on the "mortal" mind's power detracted from one's reliance on God. This was in sharp contrast to the beliefs of the mental healers, who reveled in the mind's creative ability, which they equated with the "Divine Within."[10]

Eddy saw the proliferation of New Thought or Mind Cure groups in the 1880s as evidence of the distortion of her teachings, rather than of their spread. She finally abandoned the idea of starting over in Chicago, and instead, from 1890 until her death in 1910, set about restructuring her church so that power rested only in herself and in her hand-picked (and all-male) board of directors. She created elaborate application procedures for membership in an authorized Christian Science church. She also restructured the church service itself, replacing speakers or pastors, who might have offered personal interpretations of the Bible and Eddy's texts, with "Readers" who simply recited her preassigned weekly scriptural passages and Bible lessons without comment.[11] Eddy also worked relentlessly to clarify the distinction between her faith and that of the wider New Thought movement, regularly blasting New Thought leaders as malicious mesmerizers or worse.

New Thought leaders also attempted to organize. In the late 1890s the mental healers who did not follow Eddy united under the banner of the International Metaphysical League, which soon renamed itself the International New Thought Alliance.[12] Although many groups who had no affiliation with Eddy called their teachings "Christian Science" throughout the 1890s, the distinction between Eddy's "Christian Science" and "New Thought" has held to this day.

Today Mary Baker Eddy is seen by non-Christian Scientists as the most successful representative of an obscure late-nineteenth-century Mind Cure or New Thought religious milieu. Historians generally agree that Eddy's brilliant institutionalization of Christian Science enabled her faith to survive to the present in a way in which the eclectic New Thought movement could not. Evaluating this historical judgment requires a comparison of the respective fates of the two movements in American culture.

Eddy's bureaucratization of Christian Science enabled a movement that was in shambles in 1890 to rise phoenix-like from the ashes by 1900. Christian Science stunned and sometimes frightened contemporaries with its meteoric spread. From a single congregation of twenty-six members in 1879, it had expanded to 86,000 members by 1906, to 202,000 by 1926, and to 269,000 by 1936. The movement's growth tapered off, however, at that point. Currently, Christian Scientists make up only two-tenths of one percent of the U.S. population.[13]

Unlike Christian Science, New Thought remained an open, eclectic, and easily splintered movement. Beginning in the 1890s, numerous attempts were made to unite the diverse New Thought sects into a national organization. These umbrella groups never survived more than a few years without major defections. Yet the popularity of New Thought principles seemed only to increase as the remnants of its institutional identity crumbled. Unlike Christian Science with its rigid, authoritarian structure, the very looseness of New Thought's organizational structure allowed popular New Thought authors to adapt to and influence mainstream American ideas.[14]

Despite the familiarity of Christian Science and the obscurity of New Thought, it was New Thought principles about the creative power of thought that struck early twentieth-century Americans as the wave of the future, and which remain operative in American culture today. As early as 1901 William James could report that "mind-cure principles are beginning to so pervade the air that one catches their spirit at second hand." The movement seemed to grow more influential over the next two decades as inspirational and self-help bestsellers such as Ralph Waldo Trine's *In Tune With the Infinite* spread the New Thought message to literally millions of Americans. New Thought principles also reached Americans both through journals such as B. O. Flower's *Arena* and Orison Swett Marden's *Success* and through magazine articles by New Thought authors in mainstream publications such as the *Atlantic, McClures,* the *Ladies Home Journal,* and *Good Housekeeping.*[15]

Throughout the twentieth century, New Thought's central premise—the power of thought to alter circumstances—had a strong allure for millions of Americans. By the early 1920s there were three to four hundred active New Thought centers in the U.S. and Canada. The doctrines of the movement experienced upsurges of popularity in the 1930s and again in the 1950s. New Thought was promoted by organizations such as Kansas City–based Unity, one of the original New Thought churches, which in 1954 processed six hundred thousand prayer-requests yearly and published a magazine with a circulation of two hundred thousand. It also reached Americans through popular literature, from Emmet Fox's *Sermon on the Mount,* a 1930s bestseller that is still in print today, to Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking,* which in 1954 sold more than any nonfiction book except the Bible.[16]

In the 1970s and 1980s the principles of New Thought affected the lives of vast numbers of Americans, many through involvement in the various branches of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA's view that alcoholism can be healed through spiritual discipline and its references to God as one's "Higher

Power" owe a debt to New Thought healing practices. Other individuals affected by the principles of New Thought were members of "human potential" organizations, such as Werner Erhard's EST (now known as the Forum), Insight, Actualizations, Silva Mind Control, and Lifespring. These groups offered programs for corporate employees and attracted millions of dollars a year in revenues. According to a 1986 *New York Times* article, scholars believed this "new age" perspective was "working its way increasingly into the nation's cultural, religious, social, economic and political life." One researcher described it as the "most powerful social force in the country today."[17]

The popularity of thought-as-power continues to grow. Bookstores around the country are selling 1990s reprints of early-twentieth-century "Religious Science" and "Divine Science" bestsellers. Talk-show host Oprah Winfrey dispenses her New Thought philosophy daily on a show watched by millions. The success of evangelist minister Robert Schuller and his "possibility thinking" is enshrined in his $16.5-million-dollar "Crystal Cathedral." The Codependency Movement, an offshoot of Alcoholics Anonymous that claims to treat the disease of denying one's emotions and giving too much of oneself to others, is embraced by large numbers of Americans. The movement's practices could have been lifted straight out of a nineteenth-century New Thought manual. According to Lynne Namka, author of *The Doormat Syndrome*, "[c]hanting affirmations to yourself daily is an important recovery technique. 'Energy follows thought,' . . . You actually become what you think."[18]

New Thought has had a century-long presence in the United States. Yet most historians of American culture view New Thought as little more than a crude religion of success, a tone set by a 1934 article by A. Whitney Griswold entitled "New Thought: A Cult of Success." According to Griswold, "New Thought was a get-rich-quick religion, a something-for-nothing religion; that was the secret of its appeal." New Thought expressed the "voice of the poor clerk," he claimed, who believed that one could obtain success by simply wishing for the "correct endowment of virtues." Building on Griswold, a number of historians in the 1960s and 1970s argued that New Thought outgrew its roots as a nineteenth-century metaphysical movement to become the "single greatest conveyer of the success ideology in the twentieth century." As Horatio Alger narratives epitomized the success literature of late-Victorian producer culture, they argue, so were New Thought tracts the paradigmatic success literature of modern consumer capitalism.[19]

The most recent and sophisticated studies of New Thought are in this

vein. Donald Meyer's 1965 classic, *The Positive Thinkers,* argues that New Thought encouraged believers to passively wait for the Divine Mind to fulfill their desires. New Thought encouraged Americans to demonstrate their trust in "Divine Supply" by spending rather than saving, thus serving the needs of an economy based on consumption. Gail Thain Parker's 1973 study *Mind Cure in New England* points out that New Thought authors typically urged their readers to both "float in harmony" with the cosmos and "hit hard and win" in the world. By encouraging Americans both to hold on to and let go of their egos, New Thought literature helped Americans manage the conflicting impulses that were roused by the transition from producer capitalism (with its calls for self-denial and strenuosity) to consumer capitalism (with its encouragement of spending and self-gratification).[20]

This picture of New Thought as the popular ideology of twentieth-century consumer capitalism does not take into account the first thirty years of the movement, from approximately 1875 until 1905. This early period, which forms the heart of the present study, has never been adequately explored by historians. Yet a look at its most prominent characteristics quickly undermines the dominant view of New Thought as a simple faith of accommodation to consumer capitalism. It was popular not only with struggling young businessmen, but with white middle-class women. Indeed, the majority of late-nineteenth-century New Thought authors, healers, teachers, patients, and congregants were white middle-class women.[21] While women were overrepresented in all Protestant denominations at this period, many New Thought followers understood themselves to be part of a women's religious movement that would herald a new "woman's era."

Late-nineteenth-century New Thought was embraced not by self-indulgent consumers, but by prominent middle-class reformers, both male and female. As the journal *Mind* reported in 1901, New Thought material was "read with avidity in economic societies and social clubs, in political and moral reform organizations, in liberal Christian associations, and by individuals interested in the rescue of science from the pitfalls of materialism."[22] These early progressives—liberal and radical Protestant ministers, women's suffrage activists, pioneering investigative journalists, social purity leaders, and proponents of Bellamyite Nationalism and Christian Socialism—believed that New Thought meditations would help to bring about a new era in the development of the "race."

Perhaps most significantly, a look at this era reminds us that early New Thought was notorious for being a stunningly effective method of *mental healing.* The apparent successes of New Thought healers made them the envy of physicians and neurologists, who were forced to appropriate their

most effective ideas and techniques. These included not only practices of silent meditation, but also the beginnings of a reconceptualization of the nature of the mind and its relation to matter, heredity, "influence," selfhood, and desire.

For these were the issues that occupied early New Thought authors—and understandably so. Between the 1870s and the 1910s, New Thought could most accurately be defined as a religious healing movement that claimed that "spirit," "mind," or human thought had the power to shape matter, overcome heredity, and mold desire. The precise meanings and functions of *mind, matter, spirit,* and *desire* were of central concern to New Thought authors. Their journals were rife with debates over whether "mind" was masculine or feminine; whether "matter" was nonexistent, or infused with mind; and whether desire was an evil to be "denied" or the saving truth to be embraced. In short, whether the goal was health and spiritual development or wealth and personal power, New Thought authors believed that the most basic challenge confronting them was how to understand the meanings of *mind,* and its relation to matter, heredity, and desire.

Befitting a movement whose primary concern was the nature of mind, this study presents an intellectual and cultural history of New Thought. My focus is more on ideas than on institutions. This book does, however, identify major New Thought leaders, detail their missionary methods, and outline the means by which they turned their faith into lucrative careers. It indicates some of the organizations—from journals, metaphysical clubs, meditation circles, theological seminaries, and "colleges" to summer camps, lecture circuits, mail-order ministries, and national conventions—that early leaders created to promote their ideals.

Most interesting about New Thought, however, are the interconnections between New Thought and turn-of-the-century woman movement leaders, early progressives, and proto- and pioneering psychologists. New Thought will be analyzed, therefore, as a popular intellectual discourse that both drew upon and deeply influenced the ideas of woman movement leaders, early progressive reformers, and turn-of-the-century neurologists and physicians. What linked New Thought to the core intellectual concerns of these three contemporaneous groups was their shared involvement in a broad cultural debate over precisely which qualities constituted ideal manhood and womanhood, or the ideal gendered self. More specifically, these groups were united by their shared engagement in a pervasive but now-forgotten late-nineteenth-century contest over whether the key to progress, civilization, and race perfection was (Anglo-Saxon) male desire or female virtue.[23] Was the nation in need of male rationality or female spirituality?

Who offered the more complete paradigm of human mind or selfhood—the desirous, competitive, and rational white man, or the desireless, spiritual, and altruistic white woman? Did man represent the rational mind that must dominate feminine "matter" and physicality? Or did woman represent the moral spirit that must dominate unruly, masculine matter?

It is important to stress that although New Thought leaders participated in this argument over the respective meaning and value of male desire and female virtue, they did not create it. The debate, which engaged social theorists, woman movement leaders, reformers, and physicians, was the culmination of a century-long struggle between white middle-class men and white middle-class women for cultural dominance. Although external to New Thought, the debate nevertheless provides the most appropriate framework for understanding it. New Thought texts were immediately comprehensible to, popular among, and even healing for, many late-nineteenth-century middle-class Americans because they wrestled with slippery concepts that were at the core of that broader cultural battle for authority between proponents of white middle-class manhood and those of white middle-class womanhood. They discussed and ambiguously reworked the meanings of gendered definitions of mind, matter, spirit, selfhood, and desire.

REFORM VERSUS SOCIAL DARWINISM: FEMALE VIRTUE VERSUS MALE DESIRE

The struggle over whether desirous men or virtuous women ought to be leaders of civilization was essentially a debate over the sort of gendered behavior, and consequent economic and political behavior, that was most likely to further the evolutionary development of "the (Anglo-Saxon) race." Because the turn-of-the-century debate about gendered selfhood that framed New Thought has both slipped from popular memory and been overlooked by historians, I outline it briefly here.[24]

On one side were those who took what can loosely be called a social Darwinist perspective. The major spokesmen for this outlook included British philosopher Herbert Spencer, American sociologist William Graham Sumner, and many late-nineteenth-century British and American physicians. These men felt that (Anglo-Saxon) male desire, channeled through male rationality and will, fueled the competitive drives that created economic prosperity and civilization itself. The free competition of driven, desirous men led to the "survival of the fittest," and hence to race improvement toward ultimate perfection. State intervention in the economy was

anathema, since it interfered with Darwinian laws that were equally applicable to nature and to society. Aid to the poor must be avoided, since it kept alive those who had proved themselves "unfit." Unions and other forms of political organization among the poor were similarly futile means of keeping afloat those whom nature had condemned to perish.

Many social Darwinists believed that "refined" women's higher education and political activism were racially devolutionary. Essentially, they viewed men as impassioned "mind" and women as passive "matter." Women did play a role in evolutionary development—as potential wives, they were the prize that compelled Anglo-Saxon men to compete for ever greater achievements. Once married, women were to "minister" to men's sexual "necessities." As mothers, they were to devote themselves to their children. But white women were not believed to have the intrinsic passion and desire that white men drew upon to fuel their intellectual, economic, and cultural achievements. The delicate minds and maternal instincts of women formed a closed energy system. Intellectual development of white women would therefore render them infertile and lead to race suicide. Women should also be barred from educational and political leadership because a defining feature of civilization was the difference between men and women. Intellect was male, emotion female. An intellectual woman was by definition manlike, and even atavistic, since she erased a key sign of advanced civilization—the development of selfless reproductive women and passionate but rational and productive men.[25]

This perspective was opposed by those who took what might be called a social purity or reform Darwinist perspective. Figures articulating aspects of this outlook included Lester Ward, Benjamin Flower, and most late-nineteenth-century woman movement leaders, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Frances Willard. As with the social Darwinists, the ultimate goal of the purity-oriented reform Darwinists was to spur the evolution and perfection of "the race." They also agreed that scientific law held the key to social and racial improvement. They defined the laws of science differently, however. Truly scientific laws were not the cutthroat, amoral laws of nature, but the unchanging, spiritual law that pure woman, not desirous man, best represented. Indeed, they argued that the competitive desires of (white) men had now become a destructive force. In the public sphere, these lustful, competitive desires led to unethical business practices and created massive economic inequalities that threatened to sabotage the American dream of a republican commonwealth. In the private sphere, unchecked male passions led to marital rape and forced maternity. The offspring produced by marital rapes would be passive and sickly, like their mothers, and

mindlessly sensual, like their fathers. It was desirous men, not educated women, who led to devolution or race suicide, they argued.

Social purity activists and reform Darwinists felt that these threats to civilization could only be averted through the leadership or influence of "woman." They viewed (Anglo-Saxon) woman as rational spirit and man as lustful matter. While the mind of competitive man was warped by his raging desires, "advanced" woman lacked destructive desire. Instead, woman's "mental force" was fueled by her "heart force"—understood not as irrational emotion, but as high-minded love and spiritual morality.[26]

As a rational, pure, and deeply moral being, the New Woman could help redeem a race and a nation now threatened with moral dissolution.[27] Instead of representing laissez-faire practices that sanctioned selfishness and greed, she stood for social scientific or sociological efforts to rationally understand and altruistically improve society. She understood that aid to the poor was not a suicidal negation of the laws of natural selection, but the obvious response of a refined people motivated by the eternal laws of love, spirituality, and maternal self-sacrifice. Her higher education and growing political involvement in society would accelerate the nation's evolution toward a new era, one crowned by a new model of selfhood. No longer would humanity be bifurcated into desirous, impassioned, and rational men and spiritual, passive, and irrational women—into male "mind" and female "matter." Rather, both men and women would aspire to a pure, desireless, and rational character. Manly and womanly "spirit" would triumph over masculine "matter" or sensuality. The pure woman, not the desirous man, would be the model of selfhood in a dawning "era of woman."

Without the broader context of this racialized evolutionary discourse about gender, early New Thought texts are virtually incomprehensible. They are filled with seemingly arcane debates about mind, matter, desire, and selfhood. For example, Mary Baker Eddy insisted that matter was masculine and spirit feminine. New Thought author Warren Felt Evans insisted, to the contrary, that matter was feminine and spirit masculine. New Thought author Helen Van-Anderson claimed that the sick could be healed by meditating upon the following "denials":

> There is no life, substance or intelligence in matter; there is no sensation or causation in matter; there is no reality in matter . . .

Yet Mental Science founder Helen Wilmans believed that "affirming" matter was the key to health and happiness. "I cannot repeat too often the great fact that there is no dead matter. . . . It is on this mighty truth that man's

salvation depends," she explained. Divine Science founder Malinda Cramer told her patients to "deny" desire. Others counseled the opposite. New Thought author H. Emilie Cady emphasized, "*[d]esire in the heart is always God tapping at the door of your consciousness with His infinite supply.*" New Thought author and social reformer Abby Morton Diaz called on women to renounce their "I-hood." In contrast, Wilmans stated her opposition to womanly self-denial in unmistakable terms.

> Next to the word God comes that limitless and unconquerable word "I" . . . We must refuse to believe that an assumption of humility is pleasing to God. . . . Let us begin at once to exalt ourselves.[28]

What was the meaning of these debates? Why would discussions of this sort dominate popular manuals ostensibly devoted to healing?

When New Thought is set in the context of the turn-of-the-century debate over whether masculine "mind" or womanly "spirit"—or male desire or womanly virtue—encouraged race progress, the meaning of New Thought texts and the reasons for contemporary interest in them become clear. Early New Thought authors offered competing versions of the proper relations among contested, explicitly gendered concepts of mind, matter, selfhood, and desire. They thereby created new models of womanhood and manhood that overlapped with, but were not always identical to, the competing paradigms of selfhood offered by social Darwinists and social purity leaders. In so doing, they not only engaged in what was arguably the primary cultural debate of their era, they also appeared to heal the nervous illnesses of late-Victorian women and men who were sickened by the contested yet rigid gender norms of their day.

This study thus goes beyond putting women back into the history of New Thought—it also recovers a New Thought discourse about gender, or about the constitution of the male and female self. It uses the concerns of New Thought authors to highlight a broader turn-of-the-century debate over manliness and womanliness. It demonstrates the continuity between the deeply ambiguous writings of New Thought authors and now-forgotten concerns about racialized, gendered selfhood that structured the intellectual and political debates of the early Progressive era.

NEW THOUGHT AS A DISCOURSE OF DESIRE

Early New Thought leaders offered diverse answers to the question of what constituted healthy womanhood and manhood. They can be broadly di-

vided, however, into two competing schools. In the late nineteenth century, the dominant group insisted that health and spiritual development depended upon the "denial" of matter, selfhood, and desire. This "anti-desire" school of New Thought was popular among woman movement leaders, purity reformers, and Christian Socialists. The dissident, minority group heralded the interactivity of mind and matter, the importance of selfhood, and the divinity of desire—both sexual desire and the desire for wealth. This "pro-desire" school was popular among more economically marginal women and men.

The existence of these competing schools helps to explain the most puzzling aspect of late-nineteenth-century New Thought—its rapid transformation. Within a few short years at the turn of the century, most New Thought tracts shifted their focus from the attainment of health through denial of desire to the attainment of prosperity through the expression of desire. By the early twentieth century New Thought began to fit the image historians have presented us with—that of a cult of success or of accommodation to consumer capitalism. The internal debate between rival schools enables us to see that the movement's twentieth-century transformation was the result of an alteration in dominance between two competing perspectives within late-nineteenth-century New Thought. More important, it indicates that New Thought's sea change is not most accurately portrayed as a shift from a focus on health to a focus on wealth. Rather, the shift was from a rejection of desire to an acceptance of it.

The transformation of early-twentieth-century New Thought, however, involved more than the defeat of one school or generation and the rise of another. Instead, some of the same women leaders who had initially taught the importance of "denying" matter and desire suddenly, in mid-career, began to insist that desire was holy and that "matter" was alive. Indeed, some late-nineteenth-century New Thought women went on to write the earliest, and some say the crudest, manuals about how to meditate one's way to success. This seems a puzzle. Why would white middle-class women, supposedly barred from all economic concerns, help originate the twentieth century's most popular form of success literature? Why would a faith of Victorian womanhood, middle-class reform, and proto-psychology turn into a crass cult of success?

I answer this question by recasting it. Instead of asking why some supposedly pure and sheltered white middle-class women wrote books that praised the divine desire for wealth, I ask what it was about desire—the desire for wealth, as well as for personal and sexual expression—that had be-

come so problematic for middle-class women. That "success" and "womanhood" were seen as antithetical—and, not coincidentally, that "selfhood" had become deeply troubling for middle-class white women—has a history that needs to be told; it should not be assumed to be natural. New Thought women authors, who debated the meaning of "woman" as well as of wealth, of "the self" as well as of "desire," help us uncover that history. Their texts illuminate more than late-Victorian white middle-class women's odd relation to ideals of economic success. They interrogate the deeper issue of how these women struggled with, and were damaged by, mainstream understandings of the relations between female selfhood and desire.

By analyzing New Thought in the context of the turn-of-the-century debate over competing paradigms of gendered selfhood, this study presents a new interpretation of the shift from Victorian ideals of male and female subjectivity to modern ones. It makes the complexities of white middle-class women's desire central to the story of the emergence of modern constructs of manhood and womanhood. It reinterprets not only New Thought, but also the white middle-class woman movement and early Progressivism in light of the battle over Victorian gender ideals and the emergence of modern paradigms of gendered subjectivity.

The New Thought debate on desire provides a remarkable record of a struggle, largely by marginally educated white women, to rework their era's definitions of womanliness and manliness. Yet the nineteenth-century fascination with desire cannot be reduced to gender tensions alone. Desire is a highly ambiguous concept that lay at the heart of nineteenth-century social thought.[29] Desire was lauded by Romantics, dissected by economists, explored by Transcendentalists, and spiritualized by theologians. New Thought was a popular outgrowth of Transcendentalism, German idealist philosophy, and liberal Protestantism, and a full intellectual history of New Thought as a discourse of desire would need to explore these roots. The aspect of desire that has been most neglected by intellectual historians, however, is the extent to which it was intertwined with Victorian ideals of manliness and womanliness. By focusing on New Thought as a gendered discourse of desire, we can see gender implications of the nineteenth-century fascination with desire that more traditional intellectual histories leave opaque. We also get a fuller sense of the specific meanings of desire for late-Victorian women. When female New Thought authors spoke of desire, they referred to material and sexual desires, but more broadly to their fundamental cravings for the right to think, feel, and act for themselves. They were talking, in short, about subjectivity. Their writings help

us understand why New Thought discussions of selfhood, of love and sexuality, and of consumption and economic productivity were so inextricably connected. All were fundamentally about desire.

I also treat New Thought as a discourse about *white* ideals of womanhood and manhood. The New Thought network my research has uncovered appears to have been entirely white and Protestant. This does not mean that African Americans had no interest in New Thought. On the contrary, discussions of mesmerism, hypnotism, telepathy, and other phenomena related to New Thought were common in African-American race uplift manuals. Authors from Pauline Hopkins to W. E. B. Du Bois drew upon spiritualism, mesmerism, and hypnosis to explore, from an African-American perspective, the same sorts of issues that white New Thought authors explored—the components of the gendered and racialized self.[30] My analysis of New Thought as a discourse of gendered selfhood is limited to white authors not because New Thought was inherently off-putting to non-whites, but because the African Americans who practiced mental healing operated in separate networks that I have been unable to recover.

What do we find, then, in New Thought debates about desire? Some "anti-desire" New Thought authors explained with remarkable candor the ways in which an embrace of desirelessness could allow women to distance themselves from compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory motherhood. Other anti-desire New Thought leaders penned utopian novels depicting a world modeled on spiritual, desireless womanhood rather than on desirous, competitive manhood—predating by twenty years Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland,* which explored similar themes. These authors claimed that if women and men learned to "deny" masculine desire and matter and "affirm" the pure, womanly mind and spirit, then marriage would be perfected and a new sort of race could be created. This new race would be modeled not on the desirous, greedy, competitive Anglo-Saxon man, but on the pure, moral, and cooperative Anglo-Saxon woman. The chains of heredity would be broken, and "the race" would achieve its full evolutionary potential.

"Pro-desire" New Thought women authors, meanwhile, claimed the opposite. They argued that the race was being sabotaged by the repression of healthy desire. Paralleling and sometimes anticipating the works of such theorists as James Mark Baldwin, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, they claimed that mind and matter must be accepted as mutually influencing, mutually positive forces within the human psyche. These women promised that New Thought affirmations of godly desire would both

strengthen the individual and liberate the race from its "bondage" to enervating doctrines of sin and self-hatred. Some of these authors offered devastating critiques of the ideal of desireless womanhood promoted by both social Darwinism and social purity or reform Darwinism. They insisted that desire was a critical component of a liberated self. They attempted to create, with varying degrees of success, new paradigms of manhood and womanhood within which (white) women could claim both "mind" and "desire"—some of which have now been entirely forgotten.

Whether they were "pro-" or "anti-" desire, New Thought writings pinpointed the weaknesses in late-Victorian paradigms of manliness and womanliness. They help us understand why those paradigms crumbled so quickly in the early twentieth century, and why the models of gendered selfhood that replaced them took the forms they did. With a clarity unusual for their time, New Thought authors understood that mind was a gendered symbol. They wrestled with the gender implications of separating, spiritualizing, or merging "mind" and "matter," thus participating in the primary philosophical debate of their time. They also participated in the primary political debate of their time between laissez-faire capitalism and cooperative altruism. They highlighted the complex ways in which white middle-class women's subjectivity, like that of white middle-class men, was enmeshed in beliefs about evolutionary racial hierarchy. New Thought authors helped pioneer modern discourses of gendered and racialized sexuality. Ultimately, some New Thought authors helped to create and popularize the subconscious-mind-as-reservoir-of-energy discourse that molded the direction of American understandings of selfhood.

In short, female New Thought authors and their male associates debated and helped shape white Protestant Americans' beliefs about mind, body, spirit, and will. They explored the ambiguous ways in which these foundational concepts were related on the one hand to spending, sex, and desire, and on the other to newly emerging understandings of manhood and womanhood. Their ideas were not necessarily radical; the fact that these authors were often female and generally not elite does not mean that they transcended the power relations of their day. But their texts, if not always subversive, are still worthy of study.[31] They show how late-nineteenth-century women struggled to create a new kind of white woman's self or ego in the midst of a culture that was rapidly changing the ground rules of gender. They reveal the origins of modern gender ideals that continue to impede women's ability to claim a strong ego, to speak honestly about their experiences, or to attain cultural legitimacy without the most carefully

crafted of ruses. New Thought women sought to reconfigure female identity to fit within a new economic order and a new order of subjectivity. Their lives and their writings help to illuminate the constrictions that still bind.

Chapter 1 outlines the late-nineteenth-century debate over the meanings of male desire and female virtue. This now-forgotten debate set the stage for the popularity of New Thought as a mental-healing movement. Chapter 2 analyzes the ideas of two foundational figures in New Thought: Mary Baker Eddy and Warren Felt Evans. It demonstrates that opposing views of the relations among mind, matter, selfhood, and desire—and of the implications that these relations had for the behavior of middle-class men and women—were at the heart of these authors' teachings in the 1870s and 1880s. Chapter 3 details the rise of Emma Curtis Hopkins, a renegade student of Eddy who embraced the ideas of Evans and went on to teach every major New Thought leader of the 1890s. It also describes the methods by which Hopkins's students—the majority of whom were women—created New Thought schools and churches throughout the country.

Chapter 4 interprets novels by three female New Thought authors. Because these authors feared women's animal-like inner selves, they defined women's "freedom" as desireless, selfless service to others. Yet because Victorians believed that wealth was the product of channeled male desire, the denial of desire meant a denial of wealth—which was the precondition for sheltered true womanhood. These novels demonstrate why the denial of desire was both an attractive and an ultimately unworkable strategy for late-nineteenth-century white middle-class women. Chapter 5 analyzes the life and thought of Helen Wilmans (1831–1907). Wilmans was a student of Emma Curtis Hopkins who wrote *The Conquest of Poverty* (1899), one of the earliest examples of New Thought as a "Religion of Success." Wilmans explored the connections between women's selfhood on the one hand and economic independence and entrepreneurial ambition on the other. Rejecting the anti-desire school's definition of women's freedom as loving service to others, Wilmans drew upon survival-of-the-fittest rhetoric to fashion an aggressive and desirous model of female selfhood.

Chapter 6 explains why some prominent turn-of-the-century political reformers were enthralled with New Thought. These reformers were convinced that the beliefs and practices of the anti-desire school of New Thought would help hasten the dawn of a new era—one in which womanly spirituality would finally triumph over manly desire. Chapter 7 describes the transformation of New Thought in the early twentieth century. As the Victorian norms that upheld the "woman's era" began to crumble, new discourses of popular psychology emerged to replace evolutionary

doctrines. Now pro-desire New Thought authors, long fluent in discussions of the "inner mind" and the nature of desire, found an enormous new audience. They both incorporated the language of psychology and molded the ways in which Americans interpreted that vocabulary. The conclusion briefly traces the history of New Thought ideas to the present day. It suggests that current New Age and self-help manuals offer tantalizing clues about the forms of gendered selfhood now emerging at the turn of the twenty-first century.