

# Humble Humbugs and Good Frauds: Harold Frederic, Christian Science, and the Anglo-American Professions

L. ASHLEY SQUIRES

**I**N October 1898, American-born novelist and *New York Times* correspondent Harold Frederic—famous for regionalist fiction about his native upstate New York, most notably *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896) and *Gloria Mundi* (1898)—died in England under a distressing set of circumstances. Having been sick during the early part of that year, Frederic suffered what was likely a small stroke in March.<sup>1</sup> A more severe stroke on 12 August left him paralyzed on one side of his body. According to Frederic’s biographer, a Dr. Nathan Ellington Boyd treated him throughout this period, recommending rest and a restricted diet. Frederic, who, in the words of one associate, “found amusement in reviving

*Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 73, No. 3, pp. 353–378, ISSN: 0891–9356, online ISSN: 1067–8352, © 2018 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press’s Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/ncl.2018.73.3.353>.

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed retelling of this story, see Bridget Bennett, *The Damnation of Harold Frederic: His Lives and Works* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 6–10, 51–58.

Moliere's gibes at the medical profession," stubbornly resisted the doctor's advice.<sup>2</sup> Frederic's mistress, Kate Lyon, with whom he had been keeping a second household in Surrey (his wife, Ruth, was in London, where Frederic had been sent by the *Times* many years prior), was also treating him with Christian Science and later summoned healer Athalie Goodman Mills, who, following the dictates of her faith, insisted that Frederic give up medical treatment altogether. Ultimately, she gave him special dispensation to continue receiving the services of Dr. Boyd in addition to Christian Science.

Another doctor, Hubert Montague Murray, was on the case by 17 August, when Frederic dictated his will. On the nineteenth, the author dismissed Boyd, ranting that "doctors were killing him but Christian Science could cure him within two days" (Bennett, *Damnation of Harold Frederic*, p. 54). Until 20 September, Frederic was treated by Drs. Brown and Freyberger, who also advised rest and dietary restrictions, which Frederic resisted. On the twentieth of September, Frederic dismissed the doctors one final time, and, one month later, he passed away. Lyon and Mills were later charged with manslaughter during a coroner's inquest, and though those charges were ultimately dismissed, the two women were widely castigated in the press as the murderers of upstate New York's beloved literary voice.

As Susan Albertine has argued, the animus against Christian Science was driven partly by the dominance of women within the movement, and misogyny was very much in evidence in the public vilification of Lyon and Mills.<sup>3</sup> But this case is also a window into a moment of rising faith in professional expertise, when the need to police legitimacy in medicine and other professional disciplines was positioned as an issue vital to the public interest. Christian Science was one of many self-authorizing religious and alternative healing movements that had emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century during a period of populist ferment in both religion and medicine. The central teaching of Christian Science is that all reality originates

<sup>2</sup> [Anon.], "Topics of the Times," *New York Times*, 29 October 1898, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> See Susan Albertine, "'With Their Tongues Doom Men to Death': Christian Science and the Case of Harold Frederic," *American Literary Realism, 1870-1910*, 21, no. 3 (1989), 52-66.

with God but that human “error” produces the delusion of suffering. Because God is perfect and all things he creates are perfect, humans cannot really be sick or depressed or injured, though they may imagine that they are so. Healing involves the conscious realization of this idea through meditation and study of Mary Baker Eddy’s *Science and Health with Key to Scriptures* (1875). Unlike other religious healing movements, Christian Scientists did not believe that God intervened in the natural order but that their healings—and the healings of Christ—were demonstrations of a fundamental fact of existence.

Christian Science therefore challenged the interventionist and materialist healing ethos at the core of nineteenth-century American medicine, which had sustained many blows to its professional status earlier in the century thanks to challenges from homeopaths, Thomsonians, and eclectics as well as the declining credibility of traditional therapeutics. By the end of the century, however, medicine, which one professional journal in 1869 called “the most despised of all the professions which liberally-educated men are expected to enter,” had ultimately become the model for other scientifically based professions.<sup>4</sup> This change in status empowered physicians to begin lobbying for the legal curtailment of the activities of their sectarian competitors. Frederic’s death presented a golden opportunity for them to make their case.

But the debate that ensued also included credible counter-arguments from journalists and lawyers who were wary of the medical profession’s paternalism and the sacrifices to privacy and therapeutic freedom that allopathy’s legally codified supremacy would entail. There were also concerns—sometimes expressed by doctors themselves—about whether the lines between legitimate and fraudulent treatment could be drawn so brightly. Frederic’s case, in which Christian Science did not work but in which it could not be proven that medical treatment would have been any more effective, forced doctors to contend with the myriad counterexamples in which Christian

<sup>4</sup> [Anon.], “American versus European Medical Science,” *Medical Record* (1869); quoted in Paul Starr, *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), p. 7.

Science seemed to work when medicine did not. Many physicians were quite willing to acknowledge these cases and to credit them to the power of suggestion. Indeed, on the basis of Christian Science's occasional successes and broad public appeal, some physicians recommended more widespread use of placebo and "suggestive therapeutics" to their colleagues. Medical and religious historians have long recognized the important role that Christian Science played as a foil for the medical profession, but there has been scant consideration of the possibility that Christian Science actually shaped medical therapeutics. For some physicians, the answer to the challenge that Christian Science posed was not necessarily to criminalize the adherents' activities but to accede to the public demand for suggestive therapy, redeeming Christian Science's "fraudulent" practices through the moral and scientific credibility of medicine.

The defense of placebo, however, raised other discomfiting epistemic and ethical problems because its use presumes a dissonance between what the doctor knows and what the patient believes. In Christian Science, it is paramount that both practitioner and patient accept the unreality of matter in order for the treatment to work. The medical use of placebo, in contrast, implies knowing fraudulence, though the doctor may believe that deception to be benevolent. The next part of this essay will demonstrate how debates over Christian Science forced a reckoning over the moral and therapeutic status of placebo—of potentially healing patients by encouraging them to believe in what the doctor knows to be nothing. In the second half, I find an analogous dilemma in Frederic's most famous novel, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, which explores a similar knowledge/belief gap between liberally educated members of the clergy and their more conservative and less-educated congregations. The title character, a Methodist minister, comes to believe he is propagating a kind of placebo faith as a result of his exposure to an intellectual Catholic priest, Father Forbes, and a skeptical revivalist, Sister Soulsby. Counter to the dominant interpretations of the novel, I see Theron Ware's dilemma less as a product of his exposure to alien confessions (Irish Catholicism) than as a product of a cross-

denominational push to professionalize the clergy and, much like late-nineteenth-century medicine, to seek new bases of legitimacy rooted in erudition. Bringing these texts together, I argue that the placebo—whether it takes the form of the doctor’s “humble humbug” or the “good frauds” of Frederic’s novel—is an important organizing metaphor for the ways in which experts managed the anxieties associated with the widening epistemic gap between this rising class of late-nineteenth-century professionals and the public they were sworn to serve. Placebo describes a way in which such learned experts could assert their relevance and social necessity in the face of populist energies, exemplified in Christian Science, that challenged their rise to dominance.



At the time of Harold Frederic’s death, Christian Science was becoming a major factor in the debate over who had a right to attend patients. In 1887, practitioner Charlotte Eddy Post became the first Christian Scientist to be charged with practicing medicine without a license, though her guilty verdict was overturned in that same year.<sup>5</sup> In 1888, a woman named Abby H. Corner was tried for manslaughter when her daughter and grandchild died in childbirth while under her care. The cause of the daughter’s death was later determined to be hemorrhage, and the manslaughter case against Corner hinged on her failure to summon a doctor until it was too late. The district medical examiner, Dr. Thomas M. Durrell, believed the case for manslaughter could not have been clearer “had the woman been struck over the head with a club.”<sup>6</sup> The harrowing details of the case inspired a public outrage so ferocious that even Mary Baker Eddy eventually denounced Corner as a false Christian Scientist. But the court found Corner not guilty because “the prosecutors in her case could not prove that a ‘real’ doctor could have done any

<sup>5</sup> See Rennie B. Schoepflin, *Christian Science on Trial: Religious Healing in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2003), p. 150.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas M. Durrell, from coverage in the *Boston Daily Globe*, April 1888, quoted in Schoepflin, *Christian Science on Trial*, p. 83.

better for the unfortunate patients.”<sup>7</sup> This case, as Gillian Gill argues, “set a pattern for societal response to Christian Science” in that sustained convictions of Christian Scientists proved difficult to obtain despite the public outrage (*Mary Baker Eddy*, p. 346).<sup>8</sup>

The opprobrium directed at Christian Science can certainly be attributed to *ad feminam* animus against Eddy herself and the women who practiced the religion, but it also reflects a more comprehensive backlash against the populist moment that gave rise to Eddy’s church and other medical sectarian movements in the middle of the nineteenth century. Critics of Christian Science frequently listed it alongside other medical delusions or fads holding the public captive. These were the legacy of a period stretching from about 1830 to 1880 when regulations limiting entry into the learned professions were progressively rolled back, opening up the healthcare market to various entrepreneurialisms.<sup>9</sup> Even allopathic physicians during this period tended to be rather poorly trained, having acquired an education in a rather informal and unstructured way. And their treatments, which still included bloodletting, calomel dosing, and tobacco-smoke enemas, were unpleasant and ineffective enough to send patients searching for alternatives. The cholera epidemics of the 1830s revealed the inadequacies of these treatments and lent credibility to the attacks of sectarians, who successfully argued for the repeal of medical licensing laws.<sup>10</sup> As Charles Rosenberg argues, “More damaging to the medical profession than either lack of education or of ethical standards was the practice of the average physician. His ministrations provided neither cure nor the illusion of

<sup>7</sup> Gillian Gill, *Mary Baker Eddy* (Reading, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1998), p. 347.

<sup>8</sup> Of the thirty-four criminal cases involving Christian Scientists between 1887 and 1925, most involving manslaughter or practicing medicine without a license, sixteen returned not-guilty verdicts and one resulted in dismissal. Twelve guilty convictions were ultimately reversed on appeal. See the Appendix to Schoepflin, *Christian Science on Trial*, pp. 212–15.

<sup>9</sup> See Samuel Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor in the American Professions, 1750–1900* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), p. xiii.

<sup>10</sup> See Ronald L. Numbers, “The Fall and Rise of the American Medical Profession,” in *The Professions in American History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch (Notre Dame: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 53–54.

competence and consistency.”<sup>11</sup> Richard Cabot, a physician and leader of the Emmanuel Movement, would write in 1908 of the controversy surrounding Christian Science: “It is impossible to study the evidence for and against the so-called Christian Science cures without crossing the track of many an incapable doctor. Indeed, there can be no candid criticism of Christian Science that does not involve also an arraignment of existing medical methods.”<sup>12</sup> As the depressed, sickly, and deserted young housewife of an absent and unfaithful husband, Mary Baker Eddy was treated by Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, a mental healer who had once shadowed Charles Poyen, the man who brought mesmerism to the United States. Eddy and Quimby both rejected mesmerism as a system of mind control, but they retained a strong belief in the power of the mind over the body. This power healed via a method that looks like an early version of the talking cure. Eddy would adapt it to her own purposes and fuse it with Berkeleyan idealism and her native New England Protestantism.

Christian Science was a product not only of the rise of medical sectarianism but of the space for religious innovation opened up by the Second Great Awakening, when “a style of religious leadership that the public deemed ‘untutored’ and ‘irregular’ as late as the First Great Awakening became overwhelmingly successful, even normative.”<sup>13</sup> As a religious figure, Eddy had very little in common with the tent revivalists of an earlier generation, but, like those leaders, she based her authority on revelation rather than formal study of theology. As she later came to tell the story, the discovery of the principle that stood at the center of her movement occurred after she suffered a bad fall while walking on a patch of ice in Lynn, Massachusetts.<sup>14</sup> She was treated unsuccessfully—supposedly for a spinal injury—by a doctor named Alvin Cushing in the home of

<sup>11</sup> Charles E. Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 156–57.

<sup>12</sup> Richard C. Cabot, “One Hundred Christian Science Cures,” *McClure's*, 31 (1908), 475.

<sup>13</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> For a detailed account of this incident, see Gill, *Mary Baker Eddy*, pp. 161–68.

a neighbor. Three days after the accident, she asked for her Bible and dismissed everyone from her room. Hours later, she left her bed unaided. In her autobiography, she described this moment: "My immediate recovery from the effects of an injury caused by an accident, an injury that neither medicine nor surgery could reach, was the falling apple that led me to the discovery how to be well myself, and how to make others so."<sup>15</sup>

This "falling apple" narrative emphasized Eddy's independence from all forms of authority save the Bible, a move straight out of the populist revelator's playbook. But she also wed these religious tropes to the rhetoric of science, tying her own discovery to those of Isaac Newton. Eddy's claims about the scientific nature of her system were rooted in certain commonsense realist notions about the validity of empirical observations plus a certain amount of *post hoc* reasoning from the improvement of patients' conditions after receiving Christian Science treatment. She also believed that her results, if the method were applied correctly, were reproducible. In other words, these were not miracles—suspensions of the prevailing natural order—but "demonstrations" (the word used to describe all Christian Science healings) of a newly rediscovered truth. The adoption of the rhetoric of science appealed to the observable and reproducible nature of the phenomenon she, like Newton, had discovered.

Attempts to restrict and even criminalize the activities of Christian Scientists and other sectarian healers began in the late nineteenth century as professional culture began to reassert itself and medicine emerged as the preeminent profession. The progress of subdisciplines like physiology and anesthesiology and the manifest successes attributable to the germ theory of disease contributed to the ability of doctors to assert their professional prerogatives and the willingness of the public to accept them.<sup>16</sup>

The effort to sort the legitimate from the fraudulent was, however, a far messier process than the popularly accepted

<sup>15</sup> Mary Baker Eddy, *Retrospection and Introspection* (1891; rpt. Boston: Allison V. Stewart, 1912), p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> See Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor*, p. 202.

narratives of medical progress would allow. For example, as Eli Anders has revealed, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the return of medical defenses for previously discredited treatments, including bloodletting. Calls for reviving such practices stemmed from a belief that their prior abandonment by many physicians represented not a scientific advancement but an unfortunate concession to the sectarians:

Continuing advocacy of bloodletting, then, was a symbolic affirmation of the mainstream medical profession's expertise and authority. Advocates feared that abandoning bloodletting would signal the weakness of orthodox physicians, undermine their epistemic and professional authority, and leave them with no basis to assert their superiority over medical sects and itinerant quacks.<sup>17</sup>

Heroic treatment was deeply embedded in the professional identity of many orthodox physicians. It was representative of a broader ethos of interventionism that was also being challenged by those who believed that many disease processes were inherently self-limiting and should be allowed to take their course.<sup>18</sup> In essence, the debates over bloodletting were very much about who a legitimate doctor should be: "He should be active and intervene to fight disease whenever necessary. He should be confident and decisive, not timid or easily swayed by fashion, prejudice, or fear of criticism. Above all, he should possess sound and discriminating judgement, derived from clinical experience and a healthy dose of common sense" (Anders, "A Plea for the Lancet," p. 792).

Christian Science, therefore, was an affront not merely to the emergent scientific epistemology of the modern medical profession but to the entire ethos of interventionism. From the Christian Science perspective, the illnesses that doctors treated were fundamentally illusory, and medical intervention merely

<sup>17</sup> Eli Osterweil Anders, "'A Plea for the Lancet': Bloodletting, Therapeutic Epistemology, and Professional Identity in Late Nineteenth-century American Medicine," *Social History of Medicine*, 29 (2016), 791–92.

<sup>18</sup> See John Harley Warner, *The Therapeutic Perspective: Medical Practice, Knowledge, and Identity in America, 1820–1885* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1986), p. 31.

exacerbated the patient's erroneous belief in the reality of their suffering. The debate over Frederic's death, therefore, is best understood not as a standoff between science and religion but as a complex debate over this broader ethos of healing, not to mention the rights of patients to choose among systems that, from a pure (if naive) empirical perspective, may also have had credible claims to efficacy.

As in many of these cases, the discussion of Frederic's death is short on reliable medical specifics, and the reports of witnesses are often confusing and even contradictory. Drs. Brown and Freyberger, the last physicians to attend Frederic, testified before the coroner's inquest that "the deceased had suffered from rheumatic fever, and that he was paralyzed on one side. His death, they asserted, was due to syncope. Both declared their belief that with proper treatment the patient would have recovered."<sup>19</sup> The nature of that proper treatment is unspecified. Another witness asserted in the *Times* that "the condition of [Frederic's] heart required absolute rest, but he was allowed to walk with infinite weariness and martyrdom up and down stairs, and go out for long drives, which might well have tired a healthy man."<sup>20</sup> The idea that Lyon and Mills had murdered Frederic by allowing him to do precisely what he pleased may seem strange, but the *public* debate was not so much over the particulars of Frederic's condition as the moral status of the individuals attending him (the court case, however, depended very much on the particulars).

This moral framing enabled critics to depict the inaction of Lyon and Mills as itself a kind of intervention, their lack of recognizable treatment as, in fact, a kind of treatment. Borrowing from Christian Science's own demonology, commentators attributed to the women the kind of brainwashing powers that Eddy sometimes ascribed to those who sought to do harm to Christian Science. Frederic's admirers were thus also able to account for the seeming paradox of this "intellectual giant" falling victim to "a deadly craze." "That great brain," said one *Times* writer, "might still have been working . . . but for the

<sup>19</sup> [Anon.], "Death of Harold Frederic," *New York Times*, 22 October 1898, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> [Anon.], "Death of Frederic," *New York Times*, 23 October 1898, p. 19.

interference of the creed known as ‘Christian Science’” (“Death of Frederic,” 23 October 1898). This idea that Christian Scientists compromised the ability of even the most rational adults to make their own healthcare choices underpinned many calls for their prohibition. In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, writer R. W. lamented:

It is in this destruction of faith in anybody else that the greatest sin of the “healers” and the “Christian faith healer” and of all their tribe may be found. Those who have too much pride to seek them doubt their own physicians; are careless about obeying orders; try little prescriptions of their own, interlarding them with those given by the physician; talk weak fatalism and live down to it and thwart the efforts of science to save their lives, and die simply because they have heard and read too much murderous nonsense.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, former New York coroner Moritz Ellinger, in an 1899 address to the Medico-Legal Society, contended: “No alleged cure which depended on the superstition of the people whom it sought to aid should be tolerated, and the severest penalties should be enforced against those who practiced it. If it were to be permitted every safeguard possible should be thrown around those who accept its ministrations.”<sup>22</sup>

Other individuals close to Frederic were quick to assert that, regardless of whatever claims could be made for the effectiveness of medicine over Christian Science, Frederic’s choice was an entirely free one. William Alden, Frederic’s colleague and eventual replacement in the *Times* London office, reported on 10 December 1898 that “the whole case against Miss Lyon and Mrs. Mills rests on the assumption that Frederic was not sufficiently sane to decide upon the sort of medical treatment which his case required.”<sup>23</sup> Many commentators also pushed back against the threat that heavy restrictions posed to privacy and therapeutic choice. In a rebuttal to Ellinger, lawyer H. Gerald Chapin argued: “On the whole, the case seems to be

<sup>21</sup> R. W., “Their Greatest Sin,” *New York Times*, 12 November 1898, p. 756.

<sup>22</sup> [Anon.], “Law and Christian Science,” *New York Times*, 22 June 1899, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> William L. Alden, “London Literary Letter,” *New York Times*, 10 December 1898, p. 840.

one where each individual may be permitted to act as he thinks best about calling a Christian Science healer, and any legislation which would tend to restrict it would be so paternalistic as to deserve failure.”<sup>24</sup> Alden likewise insisted that an acquittal of Lyon and Mills was necessary because “any other verdict would make it unsafe for the family or friends of a sick man to have anything to do with him. If, because Miss Lyon urged Frederic to call in a Christian Scientist, she is to be held responsible for Frederic’s death, any advice given to a sick man by his friends may result in landing the advisers in a criminal court” (“London Literary Letter”). Finally, an article in the Chicago-based legal journal *The Public* argued:

The real difficulty in determining the relation of the healing phase of Christian Science to the law, does not rise out of cases like that of Harold Frederic, in which a sane man, in the exercise of his undeniable right of belief, deliberately refuses the assistance of doctors and puts his trust in Christian Science. It is no function of the public to force doctors upon such a man. Not only is it his right to decide for himself, but if he were denied that right the healing profession might be stagnated. Had police regulations successfully interfered with freedom of choice in this respect in the past, the new schools of medicine that have from time to time challenged and ultimately modified the old, would have been suppressed; and like the law-protected Chinese, we might still measure the usefulness of a physician by the amount of blood he draws and the virtues of drugs by their nastiness.<sup>25</sup>

The cause of progress, many thought, would be better served if, according to a certain laissez-faire logic, patients were free to choose than if orthodox medicine were granted a monopoly.

This is the view that, for better or for worse, won out. Not only Christian Scientists but osteopaths and chiropractors—two other targets of fierce medical opposition—were granted the right to practice in the early twentieth century, and all would go on to have some impact on the orthodox profession

<sup>24</sup> Chapin, quoted in “Law and Christian Science.”

<sup>25</sup> [Anon.], “Christian Science and the Law,” *The Public: A Journal of Democracy*, 1, no. 35 (3 December 1898), 7–8.

itself.<sup>26</sup> For Christian Science, this influence was in the realm of “psychotherapeutics,” the acknowledgment by many regular physicians that the mind does indeed have an influence over the body. Richard Cabot, who analyzed one hundred cases of alleged Christian Science cures for *McClure's* in 1908, came to the conclusion that in cases of psychosomatic or depressive illnesses, Christian Science likely helped many patients, though in cases of organic illnesses it could not.<sup>27</sup> Many of his colleagues were likewise willing to credit Christian Science with many successes, attributing them not to brainwashing but to the placebo effect. Dr. J. E. Sutton, writing for the *Illinois Medical Journal* in 1900, stated that, on the basis of his years-long study of various kinds of sectarian medicine, he was “thoroughly convinced, not only of their more or less practical potency, but that they are all of a kind, and dependent entirely upon the natural force of the mind acting on the body, utilized by suggestion. This is no delusion. It is simply a fact.”<sup>28</sup>

Not all agreed, however, that the use of suggestion in medicine was legitimate. As we have seen, Moritz Ellinger, in insisting that the activities of Christian Science be outlawed, referred broadly to cures “which depended on the superstition of the people whom it sought to aid.” Many physicians shared a genuine ethical concern about therapies that seemed to involve deception. Though Richard Cabot himself confessed in 1903, “I was brought up, as I suppose every physician is, to use *placebos*, bread pills, water subcutaneously, and other devices for acting upon a patient’s symptoms through his mind,” he did so only because he had denounced placebo as a fraud.<sup>29</sup> However, as Anne Harrington indicates, “most physicians still felt it was a form of quackery too useful to give up. Moreover, the late-nineteenth-century narrative about ‘the power of suggestion’ provided a new rationale for continuing to practice this ‘humble humbug.’ What if it were possible to

<sup>26</sup> See Numbers, “The Rise and Fall of the American Medical Profession,” p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> See Cabot, “One Hundred Christian Science Cures,” pp. 472–76.

<sup>28</sup> J. E. Sutton, “Influence of Mind on Body,” *Illinois Medical Journal*, 1 (1900), 537.

<sup>29</sup> Richard C. Cabot, “The Use of Truth and Falsehood in Medicine: An Experimental Study,” *American Medicine*, 5 (1903), 348.

think about the placebo less as a form of quackery and more as a form of suggestive psychotherapy?"<sup>30</sup>

The popularity of Christian Science forced a reckoning with this question. For some physicians, broader use of placebo was a way of assimilating what seemed to work about Christian Science while sustaining the argument for the essential role of the interventionist physician. In 1900, Dr. J. T. M'Anally argued: "In view of what has been done in the line of mental healing, the public has a right to demand that physicians give it the benefit of this healing agency. It is a pleasant kind of treatment and possibly less expensive than drugs. It cures some cases when medicines fail, and it has no harmful effects following its use."<sup>31</sup> Some of the discussants whose comments are appended to M'Anally's article, however, suggested that this was conceding far too much to Christian Science: "When it comes to cases requiring actual demonstrations, Christian science absolutely fails," argued Dr. J. E. Allaben. Dr. H. McKennan, however, believed that categorical denunciations of Christian Science might backfire: "The fact that Christian science has such a hold upon the people demonstrates to us that we ought to handle it carefully. When we attacked homeopathy one hundred years ago with all the ridicule and condemnation we could, we thought it was the best way to handle it, but it did not work."<sup>32</sup>

Part of the controversy stemmed from the belief that any ailment that would respond to mental suggestion must itself be imaginary: if a fake cure works, then whatever it is curing must also be fake. This is what the "actual" in Allaben's rebuttal alludes to. Victor A. Robinson, in an address delivered in November 1904 (reprinted in a 1905 issue of *The Medical Critic and Guide*), dismissively asserted:

all that is valuable in Christian Science had been practised by the physicians long before Mary Baker Glover Eddy turned the scriptures into a pharmacopoeia. . . .

<sup>30</sup> Anne Harrington, *The Cure Within: A History of Mind-Body Medicine* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2008), p. 63.

<sup>31</sup> J. T. M'Anally, "Psychology vs. Medicine," *Illinois Medical Journal*, 1 (1900), 314.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in M'Anally, "Psychology vs. Medicine," p. 316.

Every physician knows the value of a cheery presence, and keeps, or tries to keep, his patients in a happy optimistic mood; he often tells them they are improving, when they are doing nothing of the kind. But the doctor is sane. "He knows," says Casson, "that in some cases a drug will do more than oral suggestion, and that in other cases oral suggestion will do more than a drug." He also knows that an imaginary sickness can be cured by an imaginary remedy, and that if a patient makes up his mind he needs something, it is generally best to let him have it, or let him think he has it. "Patients prescribe for themselves," I heard a physician say. Every doctor has his *placebo*.<sup>33</sup>

For the defenders of suggestive treatment, these effects needed to be reinterpreted as real cures that could be explained by science. As Albert Burr argued in 1898,

As a rule he [the doctor] has overlooked the important relations of the mind to morbid processes, and is too apt to regard its influence in the cure of diseases as of minor or secondary importance.

It is not creditable to the intelligence of the great body of scientific physicians that so many of us ridicule or discredit the cures, some of which are genuine, wrought without the above-mentioned agencies through so called faith healers, Christian scientists, and the like. We cannot ignore entirely the testimony of those who have been relieved or cured of maladies by these methods.

It is time the medical profession acknowledged candidly that such things are possible and do take place in a certain class of patients and diseases. It is time it learned to account for and explain these results through the operation of well-known psychical laws.<sup>34</sup>

The practice of suggestive therapeutics, however, could not be left to just anyone. Christian Science, argued M'Anally, "is lacking in many of the characteristics of a genuine science; that it is founded upon false promises; that its teachings are incoherent,

<sup>33</sup> Victor A. Robinson, "Christian Science and Other Pseudo-Science Versus Medical Science," *Critic and Guide*, 5 (1905), 7.

<sup>34</sup> Albert H. Burr, "Faith as a Remedy for Disease," *Medical Record*, 53, no. 4 (1898), 119.

absurd and contradictory and that what it has accomplished as a system of healing has been grossly exaggerated, cannot be reasonably doubted" ("Psychology vs. Medicine," pp. 313–14). Sutton likewise maintained that suggestive therapy might "be utilized by us *intelligently* in the cure of disease. And finally, *with force* it does not belong by right divine to mountebanks, quacks nor fools, but to the man of science who is capable of knowing he has a mind, and what to do with it" ("Influence of Mind on Body," p. 538).

As with the defense of bloodletting, the debate over suggestive therapy was substantially about defending the identity and authority of the medical profession. From this perspective, Christian Science, rather than offering a new challenge, could be understood as having rediscovered something that doctors with their bread pills had known all along, something that could be re-baptized in an emergent scientific discourse. As Eli Anders says, the decline of depletive therapies "was not a precondition for medicine becoming scientific, nor was venesection strictly a casualty of the rise of 'scientific medicine.' . . . for many physicians, the practice of scientific medicine meant finding a new, sounder footing for old and valuable remedies such as bloodletting" ("A Plea for the Lancet," p. 785). Unlike bloodletting, however, placebo has become central to modern medical science, the placebo-controlled trial now being the gold standard of clinical research. Ambivalence about the use of placebos, however, has not died away. They are, as Anne Harrington suggests, "the ghosts that haunt our house of biomedical objectivity, the creatures that rise up from the dark and expose the paradoxes and fissures in our own self-created definitions of the real and active factors in treatment."<sup>35</sup> Though many medical researchers continue to resist the use of terms like "belief" to describe how they work, placebos are an emblem of the difficulty of fully purging the healing arts of their spiritual associations.

What remained troublesome about these defenses of placebo when viewed alongside the efforts to criminalize sectarian

<sup>35</sup> Anne Harrington, "Introduction," in *The Placebo Effect: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*, ed. Harrington (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997), p. 1.

medical treatments is that they betrayed a willingness on the part of a still rather insecure and defensively postured medical profession to undermine the decision-making authority of patients and caregivers. They were an acknowledgment of the fact that doctors did not feel that the public, which seemed so ready at times to reject them, could be trusted to make its own medical decisions. Advocacy for suggestive therapy often seemed like a pragmatic accommodation to what many patients seemed to want. It was, however, missing a crucial point. The difference between Athalie Goodman Mills and a physician with a bread pill, after all, is that Mills likely believed that her treatment was real. That belief, which made her a dangerous fraud in the eyes of doctors, was likely quite meaningful to the sick people and families who summoned her. We cannot know exactly what Harold Frederic believed or why he ultimately chose Christian Science over the wishes of his many doctors, but it is possible that he preferred the sincere “quack” who allowed him to do as he pleased to domineering physicians whose motives he mistrusted.



At the opening of *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, Frederic’s most famous novel, the young Ware couple is assigned to a church in Octavius, a fictional analogue for Frederic’s hometown of Utica, New York. As Frederic clearly understood, to place the ambitious Theron Ware in this small upstate town where the revival still dominates and church elders demand fire and brimstone from the pulpit is to situate the character in denominational schisms that reached back many decades. Utica was the place where Wesleyan Methodists formalized their new denomination after splitting from the Methodist Episcopal Church in the 1840s over the latter’s accommodationist attitude toward slavery. Wesleyans were leaders of the abolitionist movement in the decades leading up to the American Civil War, but, after the war, they turned in a more conservative direction, seeking “less to transform the larger society than to preserve what they considered to be pillars of their faith and to rescue lost souls from an irredeemable

world.”<sup>36</sup> Though the Wares receive their assignment through the Methodist Episcopal conference, their church in Octavius is quite clearly reflective of the Wesleyans’ historical trajectory from political activism toward proto-fundamentalism and fixation on personal holiness. As Sister Soulsby tells Theron, “Octavius, so far as the Methodists are concerned, is twenty or thirty years behind the times.”<sup>37</sup>

Other Methodists pursued a path that was more accommodating to the modern world, and ministers within this subgroup tended to aspire to higher levels of professional status. The revival culture that dominated evangelical Protestant confessions in the early part of the nineteenth century began to change, resulting in the decline of the lay evangelist, whose work “became clearly subordinate to the work of the pastor” (Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor*, p. 260). As the figure of the pastor gained in importance, so too did expectations, as even revival leaders like Dwight L. Moody came to emphasize the importance of formal education. Methodists (compared to other denominations) were relatively “slow to admit the professional idea because they claim a converted and called ministry and the Holy Spirit as teacher,” but they acceded to the demand for more clerical education, founding a seminary in Boston that engaged with German higher criticism.<sup>38</sup>

This more prestige-conscious form of Methodism is on display in the opening scenes of the novel, set at the fictional Nedahma Conference, where the Bishop is issuing ministerial appointments to various districts. The older generation of “bent and decrepit veterans who had known Lorenzo Dow, and had been ordained by elders who remembered Francis Asbury and even Whitefield,” is contrasted to the younger, more bourgeois attendees (*The Damnation of Theron Ware*, p. 4). While the older men “conjur[e] up . . . pictures of a time when a plain and

<sup>36</sup> Randall J. Stephens, “From Abolitionists to Fundamentalists: The Transformation of the Wesleyan Methodists in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” *American Nineteenth Century History*, 16 (2015), 161.

<sup>37</sup> Harold Frederic, *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, ed. Everett Carter (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1960), p. 181. Further references are to this edition and appear in the text.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor*, p. 260; see also p. 261.

homely people had been served by a fervent and devoted clergy,—by preachers who lacked in learning and polish, no doubt, but who gave their lives without dream of earthly reward to poverty and to the danger and wearing toil of itinerant missions through the rude frontier settlements,” the younger ministers carry all the signifiers of rising intellectual and social ambitions (p. 4). Theron Ware is the choice of progressive, upper-middle-class Tecumseh thanks to his respectable appearance and exemplary preaching skills.<sup>39</sup> For Theron, such a post would mean a “translation from poverty and obscurity” (*The Damnation of Theron Ware*, p. 8), but this is denied him due to debts incurred in a previous town, and he is assigned to Octavius, where he and his wife struggle to maintain a middle-class standard of living.

Intellectually speaking, however, Theron is more ambitious than truly accomplished. When he sets out to write a book on Abraham in order to bring in some extra money, he discovers for himself “that he was an extremely ignorant and rudely untrained young man, whose pretensions to intellectual authority among any educated people would be laughed at with deserved contempt” (*The Damnation of Theron Ware*, p. 61). Indeed, all that raises him above the supremely ignorant members of his own Conference is that “they were doomed by native incapacity to go on all their lives without ever finding it out. It was obvious to him that his case was better. There was bright promise in the very fact that he had discovered his shortcomings” (p. 61).

In search of a remedy for his ignorance, Theron turns to Father Forbes, a learned Catholic priest, and also meets Forbes’s friend, Dr. Ledsmar, a secular Jewish physician and anthropologist. It is through their initial conversation that Theron comes into contact with modern theological science, learning that Abraham, in all likelihood, was not actually a real person. Seeking the affirmation and acceptance of these more learned men, Theron has an experience that, as Samuel Haber indicates, was not uncommon among young seminary-trained

<sup>39</sup> On the importance of “preaching to the intellect” in upper-class churches, see Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor*, pp. 267–68.

ministers: “The usual effect of a seminary education was to bind its graduates more closely together and to set them off more sharply from their congregations in fellowship and belief” (*The Quest for Authority and Honor*, p. 264). Thus we see Theron and Forbes establish a bond while leaving Forbes’s ragged parishioners sitting in the hallway. During his visits with Forbes, Ledsmar, and Celia Madden, Theron is exposed not only to their higher educational and cultural attainments but also to the outward signs of wealth and authority. The church that the priest heads is “the largest and most imposing public building in Octavius,” and Theron himself occupies “a fine new brick residence” with a modern electric bell (*The Damnation of Theron Ware*, p. 66). The room in which Theron’s education on Abraham takes place is “the most luxuriously appointed and delightful little room he had ever seen” amid “great dark rows of encased and crowded book-shelves rising to the ceiling” (p. 70). And while this and other revelations—most shockingly Father Forbes’s invocation of the “Christ-myth”—startle Theron, his consternation subsides so that he can bask in “the charm of contact with really educated people” (pp. 74–75).

This sense of intellectual and class affinity enables Theron to bridge the denominational gap that initially made Father Forbes a religious other in Theron’s eyes. This affinity is, to a certain extent, predicated on Theron’s own naïveté and arrogance, as Forbes does not really view his Methodist counterpart as an equal, and Celia Madden later speaks of Theron as an “acquisition” whose wide-eyed innocence and “sincerity in that absurd religion of [his]” rendered him a quaint curiosity in her circle’s eyes (*The Damnation of Theron Ware*, p. 331). But this moment of interconfessional bonding over high theological questions provides the grounds for at least a show of solidarity, making the Catholic parishioners in Forbes’s hallway the novel’s true significant others. These Irish immigrants will be joined in this new category by Theron’s own Methodist congregants, whom Theron soon comes to regard with contempt.

It is worth pausing here for a moment to reflect on what this reconfiguration of insider- and outsider-ness means for the prior discussion of Christian Science. Because *The Damnation of*

*Theron Ware* is a novel that involves the American religious mainstream (Protestantism writ large) coming into contact with an immigrant-affiliated Catholicism, there may be a temptation to group the religious outsiders together and to explore some possible relationship in Frederic's thinking about Catholicism and his end-of-life embrace of Christian Science. That is not at all what I wish to do here. My analysis of the Christian Science controversy shows that its popularity triggered in many doctors a sense of profound alienation from a public that had embraced what physicians saw as a delusion (and, more dangerously, a delusion that threatened their claims to social necessity). Their response was either to seek to protect this public from itself by restricting its access to unsanctioned therapies or to adopt suggestive therapy themselves, raising the specter of placebo treatment and all its attendant ethical anxieties. Frederic's end-of-life choices were particularly distressing not simply because Frederic was well known but because he was recognized by many of his contemporaries as a member of a more enlightened class. It seemed shocking to many observers that he would have crossed over to the side of supposed ignorance, and thus it seemed likely that Frederic had not made that choice of his own free will. This makes Frederic's deeply nuanced sensitivity to the relations between educated professionals and the publics they serve, as evidenced in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, all the more interesting.

As I suggested at the end of the previous section, Frederic's choices could have reflected a preference for sincere, if naive, belief over the condescension of experts, and there is support for such an argument available in this novel. I think a more accurate reading, however, is that Frederic was intensely aware of the ways in which this yawning knowledge/belief gap had complicated the role that professionals were expected to play when so alienated from the publics they served. Indeed, this story is largely one about clergy coping with the dilemmas of providing a kind of theological placebo, and the characters that Frederic presents us with all arrive at different ethical positions, each defensible and each problematic in its own way.

While Theron struggles in a position he ultimately finds intolerably false, Father Forbes models a way of managing the

epistemic and class divide between himself and his congregation of mostly working-class Irish immigrants. Forbes himself is representative of parallel fissures underway in the Catholic Church between modernizers and conservatives. In 1896, James Cardinal Gibbons would lay out a vision for the priesthood as “pre-eminently one of the learned professions. If the well-being of society demands that the physician should be thoroughly acquainted with the causes and the remedies of diseases . . . surely the interests of the Christian Commonwealth require that the Minister of Christ should be thoroughly grounded in the divine law which is the art of arts.”<sup>40</sup> As a character, Forbes—skeptical and rather well-off—is not terribly representative of Catholic priests in the United States, but he is representative of the phenomenon of ministers making peace between their theological doubts and their social role.

Forbes is partly able to cope because of the nature of the Catholic Church, which “doesn’t debate with sceptics. No matter what points you make against it, it is never betrayed into answering back. It simply says these things are sacred mysteries, which you are quite free to accept and be saved, or reject and be damned” (*The Damnation of Theron Ware*, pp. 249–50). But more important than this denominational distinction is the set of self-justifying beliefs that stem from Forbes’s anthropological view of his fellow humans. The otherness of his congregation is exemplified in the primitive terms that Forbes uses to describe them to Theron: “You see those young Irishmen there, struggling like pigs at a trough to get their fill of German beer. That signifies a conquest of Teuton over Kelt more important and far-reaching in its results than the landing of Hengist and Horsa” (p. 248). The priest sees himself not as the bringer of truth to his flock but as the manager of social relations, the keeper of the flame of civilization among a people that remain fundamentally primitive. Like the doctor prescribing placebo, Forbes caters to what he calls their “superstitions” in order to maintain peace and sustain the argument for his own necessity: “The middle-aged man has found out that the chief wisdom in

<sup>40</sup> James Cardinal Gibbons, *The Ambassador of Christ* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1896), p. 169.

life is to bend to the pressures about him, to shut up and do as others do. Even when he thinks he has rid his own mind of superstitions, he sees that he will best enjoy a peaceful life by leaving other peoples' superstitions alone" (p. 249). Sister Soulsby, the revivalist-for-hire who is brought to Octavius with her husband to help raise funds for the Methodist church, comes to represent an analogous point of view within Protestantism. As she tells Theron, her role is to ensure the future of churches by manipulating their congregations: "We who are responsible for running the thing, and raising the money and so on,—we have to put on a spurt every once in a while, and work up a general state of excitement" (p. 180).

Theron, who is disgusted by "the mean dishonesty of it all" (*The Damnation of Theron Ware*, p. 180), reflects the experience of ministers who "were sometimes cautioned not to vent unbelief before their congregations":

Yet some ministers found such counsel difficult to follow, for it seemed starkly to suggest that they maintain one religion for their study and Monday Morning Club and another for the pulpit. "Shall it be counted his [the minister's] duty," asked one writer, "to maintain a policy of altruistic deception?" Notions of esoteric understanding did not come easily to American Protestantism in the late nineteenth century. (Haber, *The Quest for Authority and Honor*, p. 264)<sup>41</sup>

This tension in the ministry mirrors the tension between doctors who advocated the use of placebo for pragmatic reasons—to challenge Christian Science or simply because it worked—and those, like Cabot, who viewed it as quackery. Sister Soulsby's echo of the doctor's "humble humbug" is her self-description as a "good fraud" (*The Damnation of Theron Ware*, p. 186).

Theron's downfall is that he is temperamentally incapable of coping with this dissonance. As Sister Soulsby tells him, "I'm afraid you'll never make a really good fraud. . . . You haven't got it in you. Your intentions are all right, but your execution is hopelessly clumsy" (*The Damnation of Theron Ware*, p. 186). Theron

<sup>41</sup> Haber quotes H. J. Barrymore, "The Ministry: A Paradoxical Profession," *Forum*, 29 (1900).

has difficulty behaving in any manner he feels is insincere without giving himself way, as when Sister Soulsby tells him: "I came up to your bedroom there twice while you were sick, just to say 'howdy,' and you kept your eyes shut, and all the while a blind horse could have told that you were wide awake" (p. 186). At bottom, Theron simply believes that continuing in this manner is a lie, and that the lie is wrong. And it would be easy, again, to see Theron as occupying a superior moral position vis-à-vis Truth and his responsibility not to hide it from the masses, but Frederic does not really allow him that. Forbes's condescension and Soulsby's demagoguery is joined by Theron's malignant contempt for the people he believes he is lying to. He is disgusted, for instance, with the vulgarity of primitive Methodism, as he tells Sister Soulsby:

"Now I sat the other night and watched those people you got up around the altar-rail, groaning and shouting and crying, and the others jumping up and down with excitement, and Sister Lovejoy—did you see her?—coming out of her pew and regularly waltzing in the aisle, with her eyes shut, like a whirling dervish—I positively believe it was all that made me ill. I couldn't stand it." (pp. 179–80)

His wife's wholly sincere participation in the revival causes Theron to despise her and suspect her of the very disloyalty that he is readily contemplating with Celia Madden. His scruples about deceit, in other words, only breed a deeper hypocrisy. Feeling himself to be a deceiver, he sees hidden agendas and false motives everywhere.

After Theron suffers his final breakdown at the end of the novel, however, it is Sister Soulsby who ultimately saves him and sets him on a path away from the ministry. Critics of *The Damnation of Theron Ware* have long had a problem with this ending (a far bleaker early draft ended with Theron's funeral). Fritz Oehlschlaeger points to it as one of the essential ways in which the novel confounds attempts to comprehend Frederic's actual philosophy:

Some commentators have identified him with the pragmatism of Sister Soulsby, but...her philosophy is too limited to be

commensurate with Frederic's whole tragi-comic vision of life. In addition, Soulsby's pragmatism actually prevents Theron from coming to terms with his own boundless egotism. . . . Theron's continued delusion is ensured by Sister Soulsby when she prevents his ego from being entirely broken by God.<sup>42</sup>

This argument assumes, however, that there is a form of faith in God that would answer Theron's fundamental problem, which is social as much as it is theological. Frederic finds no satisfying answers in a return to simple private faith. He also does not seem entirely satisfied with his understanding of pragmatism, a philosophy that, incidentally, rose in tandem with the modern professions and might be understood as a way of navigating an apparent gap between the epistemic foundations of the new scientific disciplines and the obvious fact that sometimes older, unscientific ways of doing things produced desirable outcomes for regular people. Yes, the premises of Mary Baker Eddy's system were epistemically questionable, but, as William James himself argued, "it would surely be pedantic and over-scrupulous for those who *can* get their savage and primitive philosophy of mental healing verified in such experimental ways as this, to give them up at word of command for more scientific therapeutics."<sup>43</sup> Yes, Abraham probably was not a real person, but the Abrahamic faiths play a social and cultural role that is not easily abandoned. Frederic therefore has Theron circumvent this fundamental and seemingly irresolvable problem at the core of the modern expert's role. Instead, Theron's ultimate fate lies in business, in the open (and therefore unhyprocritical) pursuit of profit and self-interest to which the modern professional identity was opposed.

### *New Economic School*

<sup>42</sup> Fritz Oehlschlaeger, "Passion, Authority, and Faith in *The Damnation of Theron Ware*," *American Literature*, 58 (1986), 239.

<sup>43</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902), in his *Writings, 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), pp. 115-16.

## ABSTRACT

L. Ashley Squires, "Humble Humbugs and Good Frauds: Harold Frederic, Christian Science, and the Anglo-American Professions" (pp. 353-378)

In October 1898, American novelist Harold Frederic died of complications following a stroke while in the care of a Christian Scientist named Athalie Goodman Mills, summoned to his bedside by the author's mistress, Kate Lyon. His death was later the subject of a coroner's inquest and unsuccessful manslaughter charge, making the author's death central to an already raging debate about the efforts of an ascendant medical profession to criminalize the activities of healers they saw as illegitimate. This essay reads the public controversy as represented in newspapers and medical journals alongside Frederic's *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896), arguing that both texts demonstrate a widening epistemic gap between an ascendant class of experts and the broader public they served. In each, the concept of placebo emerges as a useful organizing metaphor for this tension. In the wake of cases like Frederic's, many physicians began advocating for a broader use of "suggestive therapeutics" in response to the challenge that Christian Science presented, raising discomfiting epistemic and ethical questions because its use presumes a dissonance between what the doctor knows and what the patient believes. The ministers in *The Damnation of Theron Ware* likewise confront the problem of administering a kind of theological placebo, a primitive faith demanded by their congregants that the ministers themselves have come to doubt. Placebo therefore describes a way in which experts could assert their relevance and social necessity in the face of populist energies, exemplified in Christian Science, that challenged their rise to dominance.

Keywords: Harold Frederic; *The Damnation of Theron Ware*; Christian Science; American medicine; American religion