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Deidre Michell: Christian Science: Women, Healing, and the Church

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Deidre Michell: *Christian Science: Women, Healing, and the Church*

Lanham, MD/US: University Press of America, c2009, 242 p. ISBN 13: 9780761845744 (soft cover)

Reviewed by Sarah Littlefield, Ph.D., Professor, Department of English, Salve Regina University

In this compelling overview of the work of Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), foundress of the First Church of Christ, Scientist in 1879, theologian Deidre Michell examines why this church, once so vital to a majority of women members during the feminist wave of late 19th century America, should decline during the feminist wave of the 1960's and become virtually unknown to women in Michell's native Australia.

Her research takes her to Boston and to the Christian Science headquarters, a fourteen-acre complex that includes the Mother Church and a 26-story administration building, home to the *Christian Science Monitor*. There on a wintery day, she recalls her initial "shock"---"it looked to me as if Mary Baker Eddy had been subsumed by a profitable corporation"--and then her admiration--"Here in Boston a woman-founded religion had made a considerable impact." What follows, though, is a caveat--that success, represented in the plaza and buildings, had cast "a shadow over small beginnings" and contributed to a "rigidity" and "harshness rather than welcome" (2). Only in the Research Room of the Mary Baker Eddy Library does the centrality of Eddy to her church emerge, but there, too, Michell experiences what she had earlier sensed: that obtaining materials for her assessment of the church bureaucracy's treatment of women needed the approval of the Board of Directors. With Chair Virginia Harris, then the only woman on the board, Michell quips, "although Eddy and Harris are the women in control of the church at either end of the twentieth century, for eighty years in between it has been men who have controlled every aspect of this woman-founded church" (4).

The irony of Eddy's decisions before her death, notably, not appointing a successor and leaving an all male Board of Directors in charge of church governance, is clear to Michell. Nonetheless, she argues that the decisions and policies of successive male Boards have affected women adversely throughout the twentieth century. Significantly, however, Michell discovers that existing studies emphasize Eddy and eclipse the experience of women connected with Christian Science in the twentieth century and their reasons for leaving the church.

The complexity of this project becomes apparent in chapters that review representative critical studies; provide a contextual study of Mary Baker Eddy and the structure of her church; examine the reasons that women first flocked to Christian Science for their physical, mental and spiritual health; and, perhaps most engaging, introduce the stories of women who have remained with or abandoned the church today.

Although Michell considers the rise and impact of such factors as healing groups and alternative medicine, she nonetheless concludes that the very church that once expanded and enriched women's understanding of themselves has, under the rigidity and intolerance of the male-dominated Board of Directors, driven women away. Who can become a member; what a member is allowed to read or write; what the policy is if a member seeks medical intervention are just a few examples of the Board's pervasive control. While Michell recognizes the efforts of Chair

Virginia Harris to revitalize the church through, for example, an alliance with the Harvard Mind Body Institute, she wryly notes that the Mary Baker Eddy Library for the Betterment of Humanity, not the church, is what may preserve Eddy's teachings.

This carefully documented feminist theological study follows Michell's doctoral research of Christian Science women of the twentieth century. A rich resource for scholars, as well as for readers unfamiliar with Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science women, it provides detailed notes and a useful bibliography. This, combined with Michell's insights and candid commentary, serves as a valuable framework for examining feminism and spirituality throughout time.