

***President's Fall
Convocation Address***

Principia College
September 16, 2004



TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Like others in our community, I try to keep an eye on national trends in higher education, reports of which cross my desk with considerable frequency. Not all of these trends are reflected in our experience here at Principia, to be sure, but all of them are interesting because they place our work here in the larger context of what's going on in the realms of academe nationwide.

There are five or six major trends worth pointing out, which I do here in no particular order.¹

Here's one: Far fewer American college students today are choosing to major in the traditional disciplines of the liberal arts. Over the past 35 years, English has lost two-thirds of its majors. History and political science have taken comparable hits. The physical sciences have lost half their majors. As you might guess, the majors that are picking up the slack are computer science, engineering, business, and various vocational fields, especially related to medicine. That's one national trend.

Here's another trend: There's a declining interest in world affairs on the part of today's college students, and far less commitment to social activism, to things like cleaning up the environment and promoting racial understanding. There has been a slight up-tick in global interest since 9/11, but it's almost exclusively focused on Iraq and terrorism.

Here's a third trend: When asked 40 years ago, most students said they were in college to develop a meaningful philosophy of life. Just a few said they were in college to increase their earning power. Today the percentages have reversed. Seventy-five percent of college students, reflecting an increasingly utilitarian attitude towards higher education, say they are in college to help them eventually make more money.

Here's another trend: Campus social life has changed – and dramatically so. Reflecting the time pressures

imposed by studies, jobs, and extracurricular activities, far more students say they have much less time for social life. Dating in college has all but disappeared in favor of hanging out or “hooking up.” Much of the social life that does occur in colleges occurs off campus, and “off-campus” means mostly in bars. A Harvard study reports that half of all American college students are now binge drinkers, meaning more than five drinks at one sitting for men and four drinks at one sitting for women.

Here are two more trends:

The gender balance in colleges has shifted. Since 1967, the percentage of men attending college has dropped somewhat, while the percentage of women attending college has doubled. Women now comprise 55% of entering classes around the country and some schools report nearing 70:30 ratios. More female high school graduates now go to college than male high school graduates. Once they get through college, more women pursue graduate degrees than men. And more women are now entering what used to be traditionally male fields, like college teaching, research science, and law. In 1966, men were nine times more likely than women to aspire to a legal career. Women now attend law school in greater numbers than men. Men and women have even converged in terms of bad habits. Men used to do most of the smoking and drinking. The drinking gap has largely disappeared, and women are now somewhat more likely to be frequent smokers.

And, finally, this trend: College students study far less today than their parents did – in fact, about half the time their professors say they *should* study and assume they *do* study. Far more of them come to college with underdeveloped skills in reading, writing, and math. But almost all of them are getting far higher grades. In other words, there is a striking inverse relationship between preparation for college and study time, on one hand, and grades, on the other.

Nationally, A's now outnumber C's seven-to-one on college campuses. “One consequence of such a trend,” reports UCLA, the prime watcher of college trends, “is that the C grade will virtually disappear, at least among

students who attend four-year colleges and universities.” That may sound like good news, but there are great dangers when the academy grades on a different scale than life does, as Mrs. Morgan so frequently pointed out. Notwithstanding easier grades, cheating in American colleges is up – way up – especially Internet plagiarism. And the disposition to regard cheating as wrong is down – way down – among students around the nation attending high school and college.

So now you know what’s going on out there among your fellow college students – some of it for better; some of it for worse.

Now, there’s one other, quite different trend I’d like to point out, and this is the one I’d like to focus on particularly today. It’s documented in a survey, also done by UCLA, that I ran across last March.² When I saw it, I immediately sat down and wrote today’s convocation address, if you can imagine being so far ahead of the curve.

The survey gauges the thinking of college students regarding spiritual matters. Happily, the survey contains lots of good news. But it also contains news that we need to read about with an extremely discriminating eye.

Here’s the good news. According to the survey:

- A substantial percentage of college undergrads these days is expressing a strong interest in spiritual matters.
- Over half of them place a high value on “integrating spirituality into my life,” and more than two-thirds report that they’ve had some kind of spiritual experience in their lifetime.
- Most students indicate that they “pray,” at least sometimes.
- Most indicate that their spiritual beliefs have helped them to develop their identity and give greater meaning to life.
- And many say that their quest for greater spirituality has produced a greater degree of optimism, civic responsibility, empathy for

others, physical and psychological health, and racial and ethnic awareness and tolerance.

These are all very good things.

But the UCLA survey also contains three bits of cautionary news:

- The first is that, across the nation, students aren't getting any reinforcement in the classroom as they press on with spiritual pursuits. As the *New York Times* put it recently, "Most college students searching for the meaning of life are not getting direction from many of their professors."³ So, if you want one good reason to be at Principia, here it is: There's no faculty in the world that puts more time and effort into the spiritual and character development of its students than the faculty at Principia. This is a fact worth celebrating.
- The second bit of cautionary news is that, according to the polling data, the farther students get along in college the less likely they are to maintain their commitment to church. In other words, the more likely they are to be part of the phenomenon that experts refer to as "seeker [meaning un-churched] spirituality."
- And thirdly – and this is the big one – the range of things that students define as "spiritual" is huge and includes premises and assumptions that are diametrically opposed to the definition of spirituality that was taught by the Master, that was illuminated by Mary Baker Eddy, and that enables us to heal and redeem human lives.

To put the point more simply, while there is an increased interest in spirituality, much of what passes for spirituality is at odds with what Christian Scientists have demonstrated spirituality to be.

Before I elaborate, let me emphasize again that there's a great deal that's good in the quest for spirituality on college campuses. The students queried in the UCLA poll equate the search for spirituality with "attaining wisdom," "becoming a more loving person," "attaining inner

harmony,” and “developing a meaningful philosophy of life.” No one could quarrel with these aspirations.

The problem, as I say, is that “spirituality” has gained a definition in this culture that poses some hidden dangers. It’s interesting that, in the past, religion has usually gotten a bad name because it has been associated with hardcore, sometimes militant theological dogmatism. That’s obviously not a good thing. In *today’s* culture, the threat – if this is the right word – may be just the opposite. It stems from what one commentator describes as the “soft-core spirituality” that has gained wide currency in the contemporary culture and that, for many, translates into “feel good” philosophies that are almost completely divorced from the normal disciplines of religion and church.

Lots of experts have written about this contemporary phenomenon. One writer refers to it as “religion-lite.”⁴ That’s “lite,” as in Miller Lite, which we don’t sell in the Pub. And they note that today’s “New Age” spirituality has a kind of anti-religious dimension to it

- in which man, not God, is at the center of the universe;
- in which virtue and vice have entirely subjective meanings;
- in which there’s no clear moral framework within which to locate man;
- in which there’s more emphasis on feeling good than on character reformation;
- in which there is less of a search for God than for a community that meets our human needs;
- in which religion has become more self-serving than God-serving;
- in which simple peace of mind takes precedence over the Jacob-like wrestlings with error that, heretofore, have always been judged indispensable to real spiritual growth.

In short, we find ourselves in a religious era in which the assumptions of “New Age” thought hold sway, have crept into the theology even of traditional mainline churches, and at least at some points actually stand in

opposition to, rather than support of, the core values of traditional Christianity. Notwithstanding a superficial resemblance to Christian Science, in particular, the underlying premises of “New Age” religion are entirely antithetical to Mrs. Eddy’s discovery. That’s why we need to be discriminating when we analyze current trends like the one reported by UCLA, even as we celebrate the good motives involved in the spiritual searching.

So what do we mean by “New Age?” Well, it’s a phrase that all but defies clear definition. At one level, it’s an understandable reaction to some of the tendencies in traditional religion – the idea of original sin and eternal damnation, for example. Or the notion that religion can’t be rational. Or the proposition that man can only communicate with God through an intermediary, like a priest. Or the assumption that women and minorities should be excluded from leadership positions in the church.

But if it took exception to some of the religious practices to which Mrs. Eddy herself was opposed, it also embraced assumptions that are radically different from Mrs. Eddy’s own. “New Age” is eclectic. It includes things with mysterious-sounding names like “pantheism” and “spiritualism” and “theosophy.” It’s a mix of various self-help therapies. It’s reincarnation. It’s holistic medicine. It’s meditation. It’s Hindu and Buddhist mysticism – mysticism not meaning here truth gained by reason and revelation, as Mrs. Eddy specifies, but through enhanced psychological states, which is the exact opposite of Mrs. Eddy’s meaning.

There’s arguably some good in most systems. But Mrs. Eddy warned over and over that efforts to mix such strains of thought with Christian Science would produce what she called “semi-metaphysical” systems that would adulterate truth and undermine the ability of Christian Scientists – or anyone, for that matter – to heal.⁵ “Adulterating Christian Science,” she writes in *Science and Health*, “makes it void.”⁶

To be completely clear, Mrs. Eddy never condemned adherents of any faith or philosophy. “Those individuals, who adopt theosophy, spiritualism, or hypnotism,”

she wrote, “may possess natures above some others who eschew their false beliefs.” Her contest, therefore, she says, is “not with the individual, but with the false system.”⁷

But she waged that contest with great vigor and strived mightily to ward off the mixing of religious beliefs that tempted so many of her own followers.

She took special aim at theosophy – the very foundation of “New Age” thought – which rejects Judeo-Christian moral codes; which generally subordinates Christ Jesus and the Bible to Oriental religion; which posits the notion that spirit has to work through the medium of matter; and which embraces pantheism – the notion that God is *within*, rather than *reflected by*, every living thing, as the Bible and Mrs. Eddy teach. All of this is at the core of “New Age” thought.

Hear Mrs. Eddy on the matter: “No greater opposites can be conceived of, physically, morally, and spiritually, than Christian Science, spiritualism, and theosophy.”⁸

So why raise this subject today? The answer is that two particular premises, to which we need to be especially alert, are writ large in the modern quest for spirituality.

Here’s the first. It’s the notion that we can go off and practice religion free-form, without the structure of church. I hear people say sometimes, “I can be a perfectly good Christian Scientist without going to church.”

You may know that, early on, Mrs. Eddy herself assumed that it wouldn’t be necessary to form a separate church for Christian Scientists. But after watching the unchurched practice of her followers grow more personal and more idiosyncratic she changed her mind and wrote into her *Church Manual* – a book awaited by “eternity,” she says – the structure of church.⁹ She defined church – her church – as “the mouthpiece of Christian Science.”¹⁰ It’s noteworthy that when one of her closest students announced that she was planning to go it alone, without church, Mrs. Eddy administered a gentle rebuke: “You have done and are doing *good* and how can you separate that work from His church? You cannot, and do not. Realize this and feel and take your place with the church

as you used to do.”¹¹

Here’s the second premise to watch out for. In this “post-modern” era, there’s a powerful cultural disposition toward the notion that truth is nothing more than what anyone says it is. It’s the notion that truth is entirely subjective. That every man is free to set his own moral code. That – as theosophy teaches – every man is a god. That no one has the right to pass judgment on anyone else’s beliefs.

I was really struck by the story of one college professor – not at Principia – who discovered that his students were unwilling to condemn the Holocaust because they believed that no one has the right to condemn anyone else’s views, no matter how abhorrent.

“Of course I dislike the Nazis,” one of his students commented, “but who is to say that they [were] morally wrong?”¹²

This is obviously an extreme example, but it aptly speaks to G.K. Chesterton’s profound observation that once you stop believing in God – once you stop believing in absolute truth; once you begin believing that truth is entirely relative – the problem thereafter is not that you believe in *nothing*, but that thereafter you believe in *anything*. And maybe that bit of wisdom explains why the modern quest for spirituality has taken so many bizarre twists and turns, from witchcraft to mysticism to astrology.

Much more to the point, it explains why we have to be so profoundly cautious that, in the name of trying to grow spiritually, we don’t buy into subtle premises that completely militate against growing spiritually. Tolerance: yes! That’s crucially important. No one was more tolerant and loving towards practitioners of other faiths than Mary Baker Eddy. But tolerance, for Mrs. Eddy, never meant adulterating truth. It never meant compromising beliefs. It never meant lowering standards. It never meant adopting false premises in the name of tolerance that would compromise her system of divine metaphysics and thus compromise the ability of her followers to heal. Christian Science is a science, she reminded us

often. And as with all science, the slightest deviation from its demonstrated principle is – as she put it – “fatal in Science.”¹³

Let me put the point a different way. If we believe that truth is not absolute but merely relative, we will face the great temptation to believe that all systems of thought and religion are pretty much the same. As I hear it said from time to time, “There are many roads to the mountaintop and Christian Science is just one.”

Mary Baker Eddy saw good in others and in other systems of thought. The Hebrew prophets, she said, caught “glorious glimpses” of Truth. But she was unmistakably clear about her own discovery: “It is undoubtedly true,” she wrote, “that Christian Science is destined to become the one and the only religion and therapeutics on this planet.”¹⁴ These words don’t exactly endear Mrs. Eddy to a society that denies that there is such a thing as absolute truth. In so saying, she risked the charge of intolerance – much as did Christ Jesus, who loved mankind as no one else ever has but who nevertheless refused to subscribe to the religious tenets of his age, and was crucified because he didn’t.

But Mrs. Eddy knew, as few do, that even glorious glimpses, if mixed with the belief of life and intelligence in matter, inhibit the one and only thing that bears the mark of absolute truth – that demonstrates the *existence* of absolute truth – and that is Christian healing.

Please be clear: Nothing but absolute Truth is capable of lifting the burden of want and woe and deprivation that weighs so heavily on so much of mankind. It is Truth, of course, that does the redeeming. But it must be understood in its purity – in its Science – in order to be invoked for the benefit of the race.

The great tendency of the age is for people to fashion their own personal religions by picking eclectically from various religions and philosophies, as if they were all interchangeable. “Cafeteria-style” religion, it’s called. But hear Mrs. Eddy again. She says that “If we wish to follow Christ, Truth, it must be in the way of God’s appointing.”¹⁵ God’s appointing, not our own.

One historian of the Christian Science movement notes that during one of Mrs. Eddy's classes, at a time when many of her students were reading widely in the literature of various religions, Mrs. Eddy warned: "If you break a bottle you will be cut by the fragments, never by the vessel. There is a little truth in all creeds, isms, and ologies, but if you try to find the truth in a part of the vessel, you will get cut. Study the Bible and *Science and Health* and leave the fragments alone."¹⁶

An editor of one of England's leading magazines noted recently that "Moral certainty grates against the spirit of the age."¹⁷ She is exactly right. But the age is exactly wrong, because moral certainty is an essential accoutrement of divine Science. It is the inevitable outcome of Truth. And the truth of Christian Science is borne out by the fact that it – unlike every other system or philosophy – is completely demonstrable. "Socrates, Plato, Kant, Locke, Berkeley, Tyndall, Darwin, and Spencer sit at the feet of Jesus," Mrs. Eddy writes.¹⁸ "Christian Science has overshadowed all human philosophy," she says, "and is being understood in startling contradiction of human hypotheses...."¹⁹

Sometimes it seems as if Principia, with its high standards and rigorous spiritual demands – and yes, its belief in absolute truth – is behind the times. Principia, to the absolute contrary, is in advance of the age. Mrs. Eddy writes that "the materialism and sensualism of the age [are] struggling against the advancing spiritual era."²⁰ Look carefully. It is the materialism and sensualism that are doing the struggling; it is the spiritual era that is advancing. And Principia is advancing with it, not siding with the forces tending in the opposite direction. Everything that Principia does is associated with the advancing spiritual era. Principia is taking its students in the exact direction spiritual history is leading, and helping them take the world in that direction. That's why we are a leading influence in higher education. That's why we are adherents of a scientific system of thought that, eventually, the rest of mankind will have to embrace. And it *will* follow, because, in the end, there is only one definition of what constitutes spirituality; only one definition that constitutes absolute truth;

only one definition that is scientifically accurate; only one definition that demands that spiritual toughness I referred to a few minutes ago; only one definition, the understanding of which elevates the aspirations and completely heals and restores mankind.

This is the great news. The manifestations of true spirituality are healing and hope in a world that, notwithstanding a greater interest in spiritual matters, can only find healing and hope in the way of Mrs. Eddy's pointing out – by redeeming the world of the belief that Spirit, God, is subordinate to matter.

I like what former *Christian Science Monitor* editor Erwin Canham wrote once. He said that “Christian Scientists have an unprecedented opportunity to redeem human thinking of all belief in the reality of matter.”²¹ That's the essence of it.

In the dark watches of the world's night, we – all Christian Scientists – are capable of generating the light that will dispel the darkness. That is our extraordinary opportunity. But it will only come if truth is understood. And that is why, even as we rejoice in the world's growing interest in spiritual matters, we need to be discriminating enough to separate the chaff from the wheat, lest the healing power of truth be lost.

I love what one of my friends on the St. Louis campus says. He says Principia graduates are like bright flares shot into the dark night of materialism. Only, unlike flares, they remain to brighten the sky with their brilliant light. And that brilliance is a function of just one thing and that's absolute clarity regarding the definition – and demonstration – of true spirituality.

“They that turn many to righteousness,” the Bible says, shall be “as the stars for ever and ever.”²² With such spiritual clarity you will be capable of turning many to righteousness. And with such spiritual clarity you will be as the stars – forever and ever.

Thank you.

George Moffett
College President

NOTES

¹ The trends cited are documented in the following:

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- Felicia R. Lee, “Are More People Cheating?,” *The New York Times*, October 4, 2003, p.4.
- Charles C. Schroeder, “Understanding Today’s Students in a Changed World,” *ACB Priorities*, Fall 2000, pp. 1-8.

² Alexander W. Astin and Helen S. Astin, “Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students’ Search for Meaning and Purpose,” *Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA*, n.d., <www.spirituality.ucla.edu> (See Survey Results, Preliminary Findings) (March 2004).

³ Kimetris N. Baltrip, “Colleges Rarely Delve Into Spiritual Issues, Students Say in Poll,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2003, p. A-22.

⁴ David Brooks, “Hooked on Heaven Lite,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2004, p. 25, col. 5.

⁵ Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1971), p. 268:14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 464:25 (only).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 99:18-21.

⁸ Mary Baker Eddy, *No and Yes* (Boston: Trustees under the Will of Mary Baker G. Eddy, 1936), p. 13:19.

⁹ Mary Baker Eddy, *The First Church of Christ, Scientist, and Miscellany* (Boston: Trustees under the Will of Mary

- Baker G. Eddy, 1941), p. 230:1.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 247:5.
- ¹¹ Mary Baker Eddy to Julia S. Bartlett, 10 July 1898, L07742. Courtesy of the Mary Baker Eddy Collection (Boston).
- ¹² Robert L. Simon, “Suspending Moral Judgment: The Paralysis of ‘Absolutophobia,’” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 27, 1997, vol. 43, #42, pp. B5-B6.
- ¹³ Mary Baker Eddy, *Rudimental Divine Science*, (Boston: Trustees under the Will of Mary Baker G. Eddy, 1936), p. 17:1 (only).
- ¹⁴ Eddy, *Miscellany*, p. 266:29-2.
- ¹⁵ Eddy, *Science and Health*, p. 326:3-4.
- ¹⁶ Stephen Gottschalk, *The Emergence of Christian Science in American Religious Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, Ltd., 1973), p. 119.
- ¹⁷ Christine Odone, extract from annual Tyndale lecture, *The Guardian*, October 28, 2003, cited by ZENIT News Agency, *The Return of Paganism: As Christianity Declines, Superstitions Gain Force*, Zenit.org, London, February 7, 2004.
- ¹⁸ Eddy, *Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 361.9.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Eddy, *Science and Health*, p. 65:13-16.
- ²¹ Erwin D. Canham, “Helping Our Young People to Progress,” Address given in The Mother Church, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, Boston, June 8, 1960.
- ²² Daniel 12:3 KJV.

