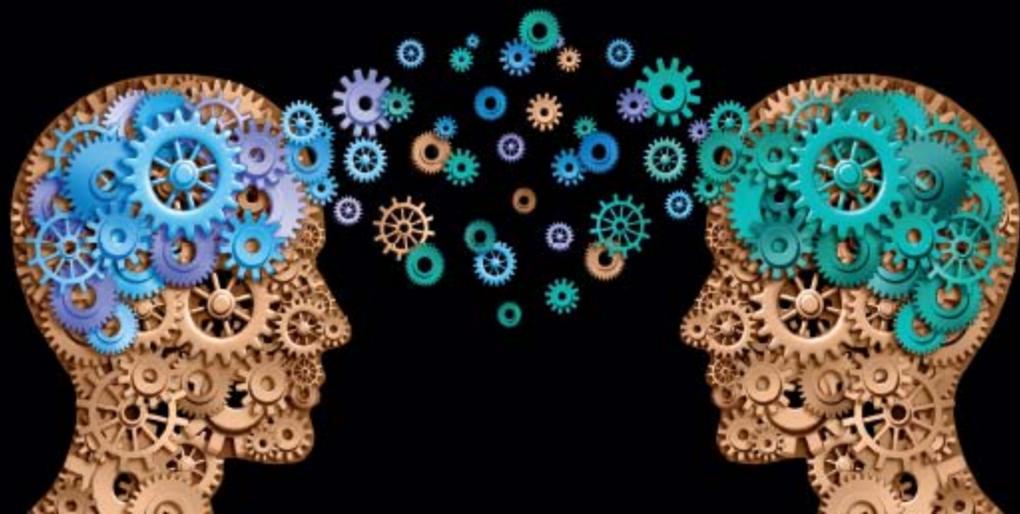


The
HISTORY
of
NEW
THOUGHT

From
MIND CURE to
POSITIVE THINKING
and the PROSPERITY GOSPEL

John S. Haller Jr.

Foreword by Robert C. Fuller



The History of New Thought

Swedenborg Studies No. 21



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*From Mind Cure to Positive Thinking
and the Prosperity Gospel*



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Foreword

An unknown Australian author took the American reading public by storm in 2006. Rhonda Byrne's *The Secret* rapidly climbed to the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list, where it remained for 146 consecutive weeks (selling over twenty-one million copies). The book's commercial success was hardly owing to its literary merits or conceptual clarity. It offered little more than a rehashing of simplistic aphorisms first formulated by an American "positive thinker" a full century earlier. Yet Byrne's bold confidence in the power of disciplined thinking resonated with some of the most enduring themes in American religious and cultural life. The same can be said of James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy*, which performed a similar commercial feat a decade earlier (spending 165 weeks on the *New York Times* best-seller list en route to sales of over twenty million). Mixing axioms drawn from nineteenth-century metaphysics and contemporary self-help psychology, Redfield pointed readers to the powerful energies lying deep within themselves. As these two stunning examples suggest, the general reading public often imbues a book with a meaning or significance that far surpasses the book's actual content. Certain philosophical conceptions persist in a culture, enabling people to make connections between ideas that aren't always explicit in the ideas themselves. There is an important story here that needs to be told.

Neither journalists nor academic scholars seemed comfortable trying to explain the public's avid interest in these books. Although these best sellers were surely inspirational and even spiritual, they had no overt connection to biblical religion. They explored themes that were

clearly psychological, yet they had no overt connection to academic psychology. Some commentators depicted the books' idealism as naïve and magical. Others decried their narcissistic focus on the inner self. Almost no one was attentive to the subtleties of their message. Even those who knew that the books' major themes were linked with the New Thought movement didn't really know what this meant or how this helped place the books in a broader theological and cultural context.

John Haller provides the perceptive eye we need to make judicious sense of America's long-standing interest in the power of mind and thought. He reminds us that New Thought is not fundamentally about cultivating a willful ego as so many of its critics have mistaken it to be. New Thought instead expresses a nuanced and surprisingly sophisticated metaphysical vision. It rests on an ontological conviction born of its adherents' numinous experiences. These experiences seem to reveal that mind in any single human is an individuated expression of a grander cosmic reality. Whether phrased in monistic, pantheistic, or panpsychic theological terms, New Thought coheres around its experiential conviction that the human mind is intimately connected with a much vaster spiritual universe. It is true that New Thinkers insist that "all creation is mental" and believe in "the power of positive thinking." But they are not simply subscribing to some hyper version of rugged American individualism. They are testifying to their metaphysical conviction that humans are potentially continuous with the "final" or "ultimate" causal force in the universe: God.

The History of New Thought traces the origin and subsequent development of these beliefs beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson and the transcendentalists. Many of the individuals who figure into Haller's story are well-known creatures and creators of American thought. Mary Baker Eddy, William James, Norman Vincent Peale, Dale Carnegie, and Deepak Chopra find their way into many religious and cultural histories. Yet Haller finds that lesser-known thinkers such as Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, Warren Felt Evans, Napoleon Hill, Henry Wood, Orison Swett Marden, and Emma Curtis Hopkins have equally contributed to this enduring strain of American piety. True, most New Thinkers (with the obvious exceptions of Emerson and James) have not been orig-

inal thinkers. Their genius has been in synthesizing various strands of unchurched American spirituality and restating it in the idioms of the day. Their only philosophical test has been that ideas in some way enrich the lives of those who embrace them. As William James observed, “the plain fact remains that the spread of the movement has been due to practical fruits, and the extremely practical turn of character of the American people has never been better shown than by the fact that this, their only decidedly original contribution to the systematic philosophy of life, should be so intimately knit up with concrete therapeutics.”

Haller shows us how these spiritual and psychological ideas came together to create an enduring cluster of cultural metaphors that to this day connect otherwise disparate ideas. He does this in a way that clarifies concepts and meanings that lurk just beneath the surface of so much of modern spiritual and psychological writings. There have, of course, been about a dozen previous efforts to illuminate this somewhat amorphous cluster of beliefs and practices.¹ Yet none has succeeded so well at articulating the movement’s principal tenets and demonstrating their connection with wider currents in modern intellectual and social life. In 1963, Charles Braden published the first comprehensive account of the rise of New Thought since the early histories written by Julius and Horatio Dresser, who were partisan participants in the very movement they sought to explain. Haller updates the best features of Braden’s work in that his primary purpose is to explain rather than to critique the movement. Yet Haller’s grasp of the wider social and intellectual sweep of American history takes us well past Braden’s narrower descriptions. His account explains why William James considered New Thought to be the quintessential expression of “The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness” in his epochal *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Haller similarly expands on the works of historians Catherine Albanese and Sydney Ahlstrom, who have shown that New Thought constitutes a “harmonial” approach to religion in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person’s inner connection with the ultimate source of things. He explains how New Thought’s emphasis on meditative practices such as “entering the silence,” its interest in the power of suggestion, and its deliberate

schemes for cultivating optimistic attitudes all stem from the movement's faith in an immanent spiritual power.

Not all historians have been sympathetic to New Thought's theological and psychological beliefs. While himself a central figure in the movement, William James conceded that the movement had a tendency to naïve or magical thinking and noted that some New Thought publications were "so moonstruck with optimism and so vaguely expressed that an academically trained intellect finds it almost impossible to read at all." A more pointed critique was advanced by Donald Meyer. Meyer noted that New Thought exemplifies Americans' penchant for ignoring the brute realities of social class and economic conflict. Later joined by Gail Thain Parker and Barbara Ehrenreich, this critical assessment of New Thought faults it for desensitizing Americans to the real social and economic forces affecting our collective well-being. By directing us to pay attention only to our own inner thoughts, New Thought risks perpetuating the status quo. Its self-help regimens often lure weak people into imagining themselves to be strong while fating them to remain weak and without the skills to engender meaningful change in their lives. Haller incorporates these criticisms into his narrative, striving to balance his account of what he describes as the movement's "youthful aspirations, its preoccupation with healthy-mindedness, its spirit of self-sufficiency, and its varying degrees of passivity to life's distasteful edges."

The History of New Thought builds on these previous works and becomes our most sensitive account of this countervailing—yet surprisingly pervasive—form of personal spirituality. Haller shows us how works like *The Secret*, *The Celestine Prophecy*, or Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* didn't simply burst onto the scene out of nowhere. They are instead living expressions of what he describes as "an intricately interwoven philosophy of practical idealism" anchored in an enduring cultural heritage. This practical idealism cuts across all traditional denominational lines or boundaries. Americans from every walk of life assimilate at least bits of the New Thought outlook into the stock of ideas with which they take their bearings on life. New Thought remains vital even in the twenty-first century. True, New Thought occupies an unusual place in our cultural landscape. It doesn't connect with

the “old thought” found either in our existing churches or in those forms of science that lack curiosity about the final or ultimate source of the universe. Yet New Thought encourages its adherents to incorporate both a suitably expanded science and a suitably expanded spirituality into a practical philosophy for daily living. We are fortunate that John Haller has given us such a fresh and intelligent account of Americans’ only decidedly original contribution to the systematic philosophy of life.

Robert C. Fuller
Bradley University



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The History of New Thought





Introduction

The metaphysical movement known as New Thought has long been a conspicuous force in American culture, articulating a set of ideas and practices that remain to this day at the forefront of our contemporary religious and secular scene. The pioneers of this movement found their initial voice in the lecture halls of the nineteenth-century lyceum. Exploiting that forum, a handful of spiritually minded entrepreneurs attracted to the recently discovered “sciences” of neurology, mesmerism, and phrenology sought to graft them to a mixture of liberal Christianity, transcendentalism, Spiritualism, and Swedenborgianism. In doing so, they marked a path religious in content, middle class in character, focused on healing in the broadest sense of the word, and anxious to illuminate the more practical side of human nature. These revelators spoke of a harmony unfolding within the individual, God, and society that would eventually permeate American culture and become a creed for its distinctive brand of individualism, self-reliance, and healthy-mindedness. The outcome of their collective efforts was a hybrid philosophy simultaneously religious, synoptic, idealistic, optimistic, transformative, and eclectic.

Believing that the mental world was the only true reality and the material world its creation, these practitioners of the soul felt they could utilize their newly found sciences to free the human body of its material impediments, including sickness and disease. Only by discovering the personal freedom and individuality within one’s inner or spiritual nature, and merging that individuality with God or the One, could the individual find lasting health and happiness. Through affirmation,

advocacy, prayer, and visualization of a “Christ Science,” they set out to transform mental thought into a dynamic power with which to counter the body’s material and spiritual failings. In doing so, they replaced the angry God of the Old Testament with a Creator whose powers were checked by the imposition of rational laws and embraced a worldview where disease was a physical event, not an expression of divine purpose or retribution. Unlike dogma-bound Christians who dwelt on humanity’s fall from grace and the need to expiate themselves from sin and darkness, the practitioners who explored these new sciences chose to celebrate life by identifying the spark of divinity in humanity’s inner nature. The presumption of humanity’s total depravity and of predestination fell before a benevolent Deity operating through known laws, where the intellect alone was free. All that a person was and could be lay within human power that, by inference, was received through an influx of life from the Divine. One of the paths that these new metaphysical philosophers forged would eventually become known as New Thought.

The transition from Calvinism to New Thought followed a path struck by the self-made philosopher and mental healer Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–66) of Belfast, Maine, whose gospel of healthy-mindedness captured the attention of several generations of mental healers in search of a new “Christ Science.” The common denominator for Quimby and his devotees was the proposition that illness resulted from erroneous belief. Drawing from the magnetic theories of German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815) and the revelatory writings of Swedish scientist and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), Quimby’s followers set themselves to building a whole new mental framework for humanity. For them, not all knowledge was scientific in the same sense as chemistry and physics, since much additional understanding could be gained if one relied on extra-sensory channels found in séances, clairvoyance, and other paranormal experiences. As a consequence, New Thought’s healing practices oscillated between the inflationary scope of the sciences and the hegemony claimed by the revelatory side of religion.

New Thought represented a temper of mind that ranked emotions and intuition as equal to reason and experience. Building on concepts

rooted in idealism and celebrated in transcendentalism, it held strongly to the principle that the human mind was capable of knowing the very essence of things. This evoked a particular mood of incorrigible optimism and a faith in individuality that rebelled against authoritarianism of all kinds, particularly cold and formalized creeds. This was nowhere more succinctly stated than in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Nature," published in 1836 and reprinted numerous times in the succeeding decades. "In the woods," Emerson wrote, "I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God."¹

New Thought relied heavily on Emerson, whose thoughts and observations were repeatedly quoted in their oral and written communications. His occasional mysticism, his sweep of imagination, and the stretch of his wit and good sense provided exceptional insight into the passions and judgments of the age. The movement borrowed his terms for God, including the interchangeable use of *Father*, *Spirit*, *Supreme Being*, *Soul*, and *Over-Soul*. They also borrowed his ideas: God was incarnate in nature and in human beings, with the earth and heavenly bodies as the visible retinue of his spirit. Nature was not God but a garment used to express his constant emanation.

New Thought was also laced heavily with the wisdom and metaphysics of Swedenborg, whose writings, inspired by his visionary experiences of heaven and hell, shaped many thinkers' views on the spirit world. Others picked up on his law of correspondences, which held that everything in the physical world is a representation of a spiritual counterpart; the rejection of ecclesiasticism and theological dogmatism; the emphasis on the inner (spiritual) and outer (sense-based or "natural") person; matter as a condition of spiritual substance made visible for divine purposes; and closure to a host of questions left unanswered in the writings of the church fathers. Swedenborg's concept of the Universal Human—that all of the spiritual universe was in the shape of a