

An Extraordinary Season in Prayer: Warren Felt Evans's Journey into "Scientific" Spiritual Practice

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A RECENTLY REDISCOVERED nineteenth-century New England Methodist pastor-cum-mental healer provides a contribution to the field of Christian spirituality, in the areas both of affirmative prayer and the relationship between science and inner experience. Warren Felt Evans (1817-1889) wrote the first effective literature of New Thought, a notable branch of the movement Ahlstrom calls "harmonialism," and so was foundational for a broad, diffuse American quasi-religious episode begun in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century still flourishing today. Evans's value, however, may extend beyond historic interest regarding an identifiable form of current religious expression. A specific contribution in the area of affirmative prayer, elaborated in six widely read books as a particular practice couched in a pluralistic Christian framework, has been recently linked to spiritual practices now established 125 years. Soon after his death, the distinct form of mental prayer preached by Evans received attention from William James for its apparent psychological value in religious experience, a line of inquiry that has been renewed in the past thirty-five years in the realm of biophysics.

In addition to historic significance, though, Evans's modest recovery in recent scholarship has been limited to his role as a foundational philosopher for modern American metaphysical religion. Evans's poignant struggles with the meaning of Christian practice as a resource for healing maladies of spirit have been overlooked. Yet the phenomenon of a Methodist pastor's healing prayer practice effectively launching a religious movement of interest to contemporary research concerns in psychology and science provides intriguing ground for Christian spirituality. That after his death Evans dropped quickly into obscurity may be seen as unfortunate for both New Thought and for the Christian world in general, as the former may not have strayed so far from its Christian foundations and the latter may have understood better by now scientific dimensions of affirmative prayer.

Evans's conception of "primitive" Christianity with healing at its center provides an intriguing modern nexus for scripture, philosophy, psychology, science, and practice. What little has been recovered of Evans's private journals can be combined with a strategic reading of his published works to shine a light onto psychological aspects of prayer life with demonstrably striking effects for health and spiritual uplift. With a view toward illuminating a particular perspective on a practice of prayer that may be used as a contribution to Christian spirituality, I purport to draw upon spiritual biography with a backdrop of history, psychology, and science to explore the work of Evans.

Nineteenth-Century "Harmonial" Religion

The most recent scholar to examine Evans's role in American religious history concurs with what is now becoming an accepted position: when he left the parish ministry and turned in 1867 to free-lance spiritual healing and writing, New Thought as a movement was born. Sydney Ahlstrom situates New Thought as a foremost expression of "harmonial religion," a broad nineteenth- and twentieth-century American movement with roots in Transcendentalism and

encompassing “those forms of piety and belief in which spiritual composure, physical health, and even economic well-being are understood to flow from a person’s rapport with the cosmos.” Well-suited to the optimistic American mindset, forms of harmonialism in the twentieth-century have spread to those cultures around the world whose sociological development is similar to the United States (Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland, Canada). Its two most important original sources were Emerson and Swedenborg.

Though nineteenth-century analogs in England (Romanticism) and Germany (Idealism) were flourishing simultaneously, the turgid spiritual atmosphere in nineteenth-century America (utopianism, spiritualism, perfectionism, a rack of new and radical thought schemas in both social and psychological spheres, and a “sectarian heyday”) has been a frequent subject in modern religious history. Among the plethora of new optimistic “isms” and perfectionist practices in the nineteenth-century American religious imagination was a sustained, complex wave of faith healing practices. While the Christian tradition may be said to originate in the greatest healer in history and to include spiritual healing traditions and saints within many centuries and cultures (Bernard of Clairvaux, Francis of Assisi, Catherine of Sienna, Francis Xavier, George Fox, John Wesley, among others), with the rapid rise and exaltation of medical science in the nineteenth-century, healing in the United States, at least among the intelligentsia, had already been separated from prayer and the practice of spiritual faith by 1860. Indeed and ironically, medical science and the Enlightenment notion of continuous human progress played a role in creating the environment of confidence and creativity of the period.

It was into this milieu that a new “ism” sprang: New Thought, closely associated with scientific spiritual healing. Though now located as the founding author, Evans, however, was but the second link in the harmonial chain of New Thought. A figure with no philosophical standing is regarded without cavil as the Godfather not only of New Thought but of the whole “Metaphysical Movement” in America: Phineas P. Quimby (1802-1866), an unpublished, uncredentialed clockmaker and inventor of some local reputation who developed a theory of the psychic origin of disease. He possessed an investigative mind fascinated by cause-and-effect relationships, and, bothered by the failure of conventional medicine to help him, he explored the then-new fads of “animal magnetism” and mesmerism making the rounds in New England. Quimby appropriated the principles from animal magnetism and mesmerism into a therapeutic of mental healing, promptly healed himself of a hitherto chronic consumption and then subsequently of a serious kidney disorder. He considered his method a “science of mind.” Leaving the clock-making business, he opened a now-legendary office in Portland, Maine, spending the rest of his life as a healer of considerable celebrity throughout New England.

Unlettered and with no pretension to historic significance or participation in the academic culture of ideas, Quimby’s goal was a commitment to his patients and to fine-tuning his methods. But as historic fate would have it, he received two patients during the same year (1863) who incorporated his insights into a Christian framework and took them to the world: Warren Felt Evans and Mary Baker Eddy (then Mary Baker Patterson). Quimby died in 1866-three years before Evans’s best selling, *The Mental Cure*, was issued and nine years before Eddy produced the first edition of *Science and Health*. But whereas *Science and Health* went through 35 revised editions before Eddy died and whereas Eddy focused considerable skillful organizational zeal in catapulting what is now a well-known international sect, Evans quietly turned his home into a

healing sanitarium (for which he charged no fees) and wrote books enjoying moderately large sales, but which were all out of print by 1910.

Aside from Christian Science, too often treated as an isolated phenomenon, when Braden, Anderson, and Judah all produced scholarly histories on New Thought in the 1960s, no serious critical work had been brought to bear on the movement in nearly half a century. Meyer suggests that though New Thought gained a large following and registered significant questions in the parent culture, as an organizational movement it has never shaken the image of a cult, perhaps explaining why it has lain so long ignored by the scholarly community. New Thought today can be found in numerous church and para-church organizations ranging from Unity, Religious Science, Divine Science, and Christian Science to dozens of lesser known movements with New Age tints, as well as numerous writers, psychotherapists and spiritual practitioners unaffiliated with any organization. Notorious for being “without creed,” New Thought groups and individuals nevertheless share core values summed up well in the constitution and bylaws adopted in 1916 by the still-thriving International New Thought Alliance: “To teach the Infinitude of the Supreme One; the Divinity of man and his infinite possibilities through the creative power of constructive thinking and obedience to the voice of the indwelling Presence, which is our source of Inspiration, Power, Health, and Prosperity.”

The recent scholarship unambiguously recognizes Evans as the first to organize the philosophical foundations of spiritual experiences of intentional healing activities into an intellectual discipline and preach it to the world in a series of widely sold books, thereby creating a larger cultural movement that became New Thought. Perhaps the leading living source on Evans, Anderson writes, “If Quimby was the Socrates of the New Thought movement, Evans was its Plato: by the time Evans finished publishing, from 1869-1886, his six books on mind and healing, New Thought thereafter became a series of footnotes to Evans’s work.” The author of the standard history on New Thought, Braden, notes that Evans’s intellectual contribution to New Thought was to ground its practices in a vast philosophic framework that in addition to the New Testament drew, with acumen, upon Aristotle, Plato, Plotinus, Descartes, Leibniz, Fichte, Schelling, Berkeley, Spencer, Kant, Goethe, Emerson, Coleridge, Schleiermacher, even Kabbalah, Buddhist and Hindu thought, and especially Swedenborg. Teahan emphasizes Evans’s familiarity and facility with the Christian mystical tradition, featuring in particular Bernard of Clairvaux, Eckhart, Ruysbroeck, Kempis, Boehme, and Fenelon (also noting Swedenborg as Evans’s most important resource). Especially for a movement that has been loath to cite sources and connect with tradition, it is easy to understand why the recovery of Evans has focused on his philosophic insight as his defining feature. Yet camouflaged as it may be in a forest of scientific terms and in its sophisticated philosophic underpinnings, a body of spiritual experience remarkable for its perspicacity, intelligence, and compassion for humankind glows. One can glimpse the drama of a Methodist clergyman struggling with depression and a sense of professional frustration that yet in its season flowered into mystical experience and a spiritual praxis touching tens of thousands of lives.

Brief Sketch of Evans’s Spiritual Biography

A revealing memory from Evans’s journals indicates his life-long love of study, even as a young farm boy in upstate Vermont. So ardent was his affection for school that though his family could

not assist even minimally in his dreams for an “academy education,” he somehow found a way to enroll and finish at Chester Academy near the family farm. He proceeded to work his way through one year at Middlebury College (Vermont) and two more years at Dartmouth College in neighboring New Hampshire. The pressure of finances appears to be the cause of his premature departure from Dartmouth at the end of his junior year, as he desired to wed Charlotte Tinker and needed to provide for a home. There are indications that he had been leaning towards the medical profession, because he took sufficient coursework designed for physicians that he was able to apply for and receive a regional physicians permit many years later in Massachusetts. But immediately, Evans turned his vocational eye toward another compelling passion, as he began the process of candidating for preaching in the Methodist church. In the space of nine days in June of 1840 Evans began both his marriage and his ministry career with the appointment as minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church at Peacham, Vermont. For the next twenty years Warren and Charlotte (they eventually had three children) served in thirteen New England parishes, before leaving the Methodist ministry after a dramatic healing and the divisiveness caused by his interpretation of his healing and of spiritual formation in general.

Three overarching subjects inform consideration of Evans’s spiritual development: his early preference for an inward-looking form of the Christian faith; his scholarly reputation; and his health. Especially telling is Evans’s selection of Methodism. Religion played no part in his upbringing, but during adolescence his own inner life led him to seek a spiritual home in the Congregationalist church. Yet before the age of twenty-one, he transferred to Methodism, attracted by its doctrine of inward perfection-by what he called the Oberlin Doctrine. Ahlstrom identifies Methodism (rooted in Wesley’s preaching) as the greatest Protestant movement embracing “Christian perfection,” and when Evans joined its ministry, Methodism was experiencing its finest hour in America. Evans therefore early rejected Calvinist notions of outward “salvation by faith” as a sufficient spiritual development program. His journals indicate he was seeking “a higher and deeper experience in religion,” one including a felt and conscious communion with God, “a calm happiness of unbroken fellowship with Him.”

Also significant is his reputation among his clerical peers for philosophic sophistication. At age thirty-four Evans was given the appointment at Concord, New Hampshire, which served as the seat of Methodism’s primary divinity school for New England. (At a later date the school moved and became Boston University.) The faculty of the seminary attended his church, and Evans was used frequently as an adjunct teacher at the school- being especially valued for history of philosophy and for his skill in New Testament Greek, which, it is said, he read as fluently as he did English.

The third biographical aspect of special relevance is the indication that Evans suffered from chronic poor health from early in his life. (He once submitted to a “faith healing” just before entering the ministry.) Numerous journal entries indicate feeling nearly crippled during his early years of ministry with a case of fistula; and all through his adult life until the age of 47 (when he was healed) he continued to have bouts with recurring and at times “aggravated and obstinate” dyspepsia, which he overcame from time to time “through spiritual means.”

Progressive and ultimately interlocking force from these three aspects of Evans’s spiritual life-philosophical passion, concentration on prayer and inner holiness, and chronic poor health-led to

a transformation in all three. Leonard cites the year 1856 as decisive. His poor health was seriously affecting his work, and his philosophic unrest was becoming pointed. The historical Christian mystics were drawing his greatest interest, but they seemed to have no place in the Methodism of that day. (The journals indicate how superficial Evans found not only most of the church literature, but also most of the prayer life and practice of his church, where outer spoken prayers seemed all that was necessary for a spiritual life.) During that year after “praying to the Lord most sincerely to lead me to some book or books which could satisfy this inmost need,” he felt he was led almost immediately in a Portsmouth, New Hampshire bookshop to Swedenborg. This eighteenth-century scientist-Christian mystic would over several years time renovate Evans’s views of cosmology, psychology, the Bible and prayer.

Evans’s health, however, continued to worsen. His feeble condition led to several suspensions of his parish work, and in 1859 his journal reports he had not been able to preach for six months. He notes, however: “But during this complete prostration of my nervous system my soul has tranquilly reposed in God. Far down below my trembling nerves there is a region of soul where all is still and silent.” Here is perhaps the earliest evidence, still over three years before his first visits to Quimby, of Evans’s intuition of spiritual healing, relying on Swedenborg’s “new” teaching to focus not so much on the body, on the symptom, as on the deep, innermost well of life from which healing energy springs. His spiritual unrest and beginning vision supplies him with enough energy to write his first book, published in 1860 when he was forty-three—a spiritual allegory entitled *The Happy Islands*. In this inaugural book writing venture as an outreach in ministry, the protagonist, whom one presumes is the author, travels from island to island, gleaned truths from each one and then journeying to the next. Each seems to contribute something vital, yet a restlessness permeates the tone: “He was still too far from the soul. This distance must be annihilated, or we cannot attain to perfect tranquility, we must grasp the God we seek.”

He next turned his hand to a booklet, “*Divine Order in the Process of Full Salvation*,” largely a tender plea for perfect consecration of the life to the will of God, which he followed with a full-length inspirational book combining cosmology and spiritual practice, *The Celestial Dawn; or, Connection of Heaven and Earth*, published in 1862. Though Swedenborg is not mentioned, the source of the views was immediately ascertained, creating considerable tension with both colleagues and parishioners.

His journals do not record why he chose to visit Quimby as a patient in 1863, but we know he made two visits and experienced nearly immediate recovery from his decades-long dyspepsia. He realized that he could do what Quimby was doing, an assessment with which Quimby agreed. Horatio Dresser, whose father, Julian, was also a successfully-cured Quimby patient, knew Evans intimately over a period of twenty years. He believes Evans’s philosophic training, and especially his unitive theosophic framework derived from Swedenborg, specially prepared Evans to understand and interpret Quimby’s method of mental curing: “Evans needed only to find a man who was actually proving what he had theoretically anticipated.”

From that point Evans became more confirmed in his spiritual views, leading to rapid deterioration of his relationship with his church. In April 1864 he severed his connection with the Methodist Episcopal Church; five days later he was re-baptized at a Swedenborgian church on

Beacon Hill; he and Charlotte moved into the Boston area and for the next twenty years from their home practiced and taught informally a method of healing meditation or prayer. Among a number of testimonies left in evidence, Julius Dresser reports that Evans was an effective practitioner, producing so many dramatic improvements in people's health conditions that in another age he would've been deemed a saint or a miracle worker. "He seemed to produce the wonders of the Gospel history." He published nine books altogether, three on Swedenborg's theology (none of which ever gained any reputation within or outside of the Swedenborgian Church) and six on mental healing, which, notes the Dictionary of American Biography, began a movement of historic significance. He also founded, along with Julius Dresser and Ann Seabury (another of Quimby's patients), the longstanding Metaphysical Club of Boston.

Evans's historic significance as the first author of New Thought gains in importance through an understanding of his spiritual biography. He produced physical, spiritual, and psychological uplifting effects in himself and in others through the intensity of a specific spiritual practice. We find both a conscious and effective rooting in traditional resources of the Christian tradition, as well as a special contribution to these resources. A study of his prayer method helps clarify a worthy resource for Christian spirituality.

Discerning Evans's "Mental" Prayer Practice

We have two types of writing from Evans's hand-his published books on prayer and a small number of personal journal entries-through which we may gain a sense of his inner relationship to God as he experiences and interprets that relationship. These two bodies of writing present a fairly continuous story, as the entries' dates, usually noted by Leonard, all precede his books. While the journal entries reveal personal experiences in prayer, none of Evans's books, save perhaps his spiritual allegory, are autobiographical; rather, these formal works present a method of prayer supported by a specific cosmology, psychology, and theology. If we permit Evans's biography to provide a corroborating picture covering decades for the few journal entries selected by Leonard to demonstrate the intensity of Evans's inner life and his ultimate focus on mental prayer and health as a spiritual modality, we can observe a continuity from his journal experiences to his mature contribution on mental prayer.

For space considerations, I have chosen seven entries to highlight the special interest of this study: to explore the connection between prayer and healing. The first two entries witness to Evans's capacity for a growing experience of mystical union with God, and the final entries track Evans's groping connection between the dynamics of his inner states of faith and its outer effects in his life, especially in his physical well being.

These seven entries range from the late 1850s-1863, which is the period immediately preceding his visit to Quimby (though the final entry very possibly was written after his healing with Quimby). Among other virtues, his private journal provides glimpses into his progressive journey into mystical prayer:

At times my soul has had a clearer sense of the Allness of God than I ever before experienced. One night on my bed my soul lost itself to the All. It seemed to me that there was nothing but God; that he was the life, the support, the substance of everything which exists. I thank God for

rest in the All-pervading Deity. This inward consciousness of God, this living and moving in the Divine element has made all times and places alike. . . . Sometimes I find formal prayer to be an impossibility. I enter my closet and hold my soul in the Divine presence. I can only sweetly rest in the will of God, while my heart from its inmost center silently breathes out the prayer, the holiest in earth or heaven:

‘May thy will, not mine, be done,

May thy will and mine be one.’

Prayer is becoming with me an inward life.

The soul in a ceaseless current flows out after God. Its desires silently flow into my soul.

I have recently enjoyed a deeper consciousness of the love of God, his boundless and everlasting love, than I ever before reached . . . I have found that my growth in the spiritual life has gone forward by new manifestations of God to my consciousness and every successive stage of that growth has been based upon, and preceded by, some new and enlarged view of God . . . Long have I found God so near to me that I could not move without moving in Him. I am floating in the depths of the ocean of the Infinite Life. But that Life seems to me to be Love.

Evans focused for years on the matter of the mind-body relationship. The following entries track the progression of his growing convictions just before meeting Quimby, providing ample evidence Evans had already arrived at the essential features of his mental prayer method before 1863. In March of 1860, he writes:

I have thought much of the power of a living faith, by which I mean a faith that is connected with love, or which proceeds from love. Such a faith is power, and it seems to me that its power is but little understood. In the primitive church the power of faith was understood. In the church of the future it will be so again. Once faith had power over disease. Here, undoubtedly, was no violation of the laws of nature, but the unfolding of a higher law. A law is only the mode of the divine action. Faith once gave the mind power over the material world, to some extent. All causation, all force lies in the spiritual world or in some mind, uncreated or created. The phenomena of the outward world are effects, the cause of which are in the world of the mind. [A biblical reference to the faith that moves mountains is omitted by the biographer.] Our Savior expresses in these words, I believe, the law of the soul’s power over matter. In the future this law will be more fully developed. I pray the Lord to increase my faith.

A month later, April 12, 1860, Evans writes for the first time that his own condition resides in the mental sphere:

My health is not yet adequate to the full work of the ministry. I long for strength to employ it in the work so dear to my heart . . . I have hope of regaining my former power. The Lord is my strength. ‘He is the health of my countenance and my God.’ I will find in Christ all that I need. He can cure every form of mental disease, and thus restore the body, for disease originates generally, if not always, in the mind.

All through 1860-1862 Evans struggles with applying his understanding of Christian cosmology to his own need for healing. As he had throughout his life, he experienced occasional improvements-physical effects-from his spiritual work, but he also continued to relapse. A significant entry appeared in August of 1862, when he experienced a confirmation that suggested he was ready for a new work:

This has been a remarkable day in my experience, a new epoch in my spiritual history. My faith was put to the trial, and through Christ gloriously triumphed. I enjoyed an extraordinary season in prayer. Out of the depths I cried unto the Lord and He heard me. While sinking, like Peter, I seized hold of Christ, and walked upon the abyss as if it had been marble. I touched Him who is the Life, and life thrilled through my whole being. More than twenty years ago, after a long season of desolation and self-imposed condemnation, Christ spake me whole, soul and body. There is a faith to which the Divine power always responds, 'Go in peace, thy faith hath saved thee.' With holy violence I laid hold upon Him who has become my salvation. I live because Christ lives. Here is the connection of cause and effect. I no longer live, but Christ liveth in me. I am dead and my life is hid with Christ in God. I feel myself saved-perfectly well, soul, spirit, and body. The eleventh day of August is laid up in everlasting remembrance. From this time forth I live a life of faith. There is a faith that puts the soul in vital connection with the one only Life. I am saved on this eleventh day of August. All is well. Christ is bringing me up to a higher plane of divine life. I now bid an eternal farewell to the experience described in the seventh chapter of Paul's epistle to the Romans. The day of freedom dawns at length.

Eight months or more later, possibly after his healing, Evans observes even more pointedly:

I see how it is that by believing I have the thing for which I am praying [that the believing] causes me to have it. It is implied that the faith is divinely imparted. It proceeds from God. Faith is truth and truth from God is something real and substantial. If one prays for recovery to health and the Lord gives him to believe that he is recovering, that faith is only the truth that it is so, received from the Lord. To believe that I am recovered to health, if that faith is self originated, accomplishes nothing. But if my belief of it is a truth received from God, or if my faith is the faith of God, it becomes a substantial reality . . .

Considering the role his subsequent books played in the larger culture, we can say the rest is (recovered) history. His six books on Christian healing prayer feature three themes: the philosophy integrating science and theology showing the fundamental unity between physical and spiritual aspects of the human being; Jesus as the representative healer; and a prayer theory (or method) for healing (oneself and others). He considered the six books to be a complete series. We will look at the first, last and a middle volume to discern aspects of his prayer practice. Evans's actual first book after his full healing, *The New Age and Its Messenger*, was an unabashed polemic in favor of Swedenborgian thought, whose fusion of Christian theology and scientific philosophy he felt provided a framework for what he experienced.

Evans's first salvo on bringing a technique for spiritual healing to the public was *The Mental Cure*, which in retrospect is now viewed as the first textbook of New Thought, going through at least nine editions. In twenty-seven chapters he presents Swedenborg's "integrated dualism" (or

“integrated monism,” depending on which aspect one wants to feature: the merely apparent discreteness of levels of reality or their ultimate integrative oneness). On the one hand, the information borders on the esoteric, with lengthy discussions of physiology and the correspondence of the human body to spiritual substance, all of which is taken in straightforward manner from Swedenborg’s 1756 tome on the same subject. On the other hand, Evans subjects the reader not only to a dissection of the psychosomatic origin of disease, but to a sustained positive analysis with copious illustrations of the resources within the mind (and importantly the will) to enable the healing that God is already trying to effect. Perhaps the overall thrust of the message of the book is succinctly captured by this quote:

God was in Christ. In him God was manifested in the flesh, as never before in the history of the race. The Father was in him and he was in the Father. This vivid consciousness of the indwelling divine principle, was the marked characteristic of the man Jesus. In him God became man, and the humanity divine. He seemed to himself and has so seemed to others, as the God-Man and the Man-God. In his personality there was a humanization of the Divine, and a deification of the human. But the Deity was thus manifested in Jesus, in order that through him he might be incarnated in all humanity, so that every man might walk forth consciously to himself as a son of God and say, “I and my Father are one.” Then will be realized the full import of the words of [the gospel]: ‘He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become sons of God.’(John i. 11, 12).

A simplified framework of Evans’s thought involves these ideas: the most elemental reality of life is the love and wisdom of the divine emanating from unseen dimensions into this more external, material plane; we live simultaneously in material and spiritual realms that are unceasingly inter-related and in which the spiritual creates and sustains the material; Jesus is the supreme ontological reality as the Divine-Human whose redemption is a continual potential healing of disorder, sin, disease; by wise and concentrated spiritual focus any person can bring about powerful effects not only upon their own health but upon the health of others. Evans seems to believe his highest hurdle is the idea of “effects” in the physical realm having their immediate cause in an invisible spiritual dimension. He therefore describes an encompassing picture of unseen forces, ranging from gravity, magnetism, and other forms of force in physics to the presence of angels waiting to be of service.

Evans’s third book, *Soul and Body*, is much simpler, focusing on Jesus as exemplar of healing, on trust and faith (contrasted with doubt and fear) as psychological environments for healing prayer, and on the power of right mental sight in the practice of prayer. In a word, Jesus had come to earth from God, and through his own work of sublimating his humanity to his divinity, learned to touch fully the divine within him. He grew into an ability to dwell in the divine consciousness that was within him: “Jesus was distinguished from all persons of human history by his vivid consciousness of God within.” Evans’s therefore taught a method of accessing the power of God centering in the idea of the human psyche as being designed primarily for reception of divine energies. Evans’s own prayer meditation method was to focus the mind’s eye at the “inmost” depths of soul where God’s life most directly is received. A chapter on prayer proper opens with his long-held opinion that genuine prayer is an inner communion and has nothing to do with spoken prayers offered without deep feeling. He goes on to write, “There are deep places of the soul of man that are near the region where Divinity is incarnated in humanity.

When prayer issues de profundis, out of the depths, it carries a divine fragrance with it from the temple of God in man, and when wafted upon a suffering, unhappy one, it has a life-giving spiritual potency in it.”

Evans’s subsequent books do not deviate from the formula honed in *Soul and Body*. *The Divine Law of Cure* (1881) and *The Primitive Mind Cure: the Nature and Power of Faith; or Elementary Lessons in Christian Philosophy and Transcendental Medicine* (1884) did not change tack: he sought to teach a method of mental spirituality that accords with philosophic science, as he understood it, and with early (or primitive) Christianity. As always, he dazzled with his lay reading audience with a broadly sophisticated philosophic framework (Berkeley, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Kant, Schopenhauer, Swedenborg), and his writing has the feel of one who felt the need to create credibility, at least among the intelligentsia of the United States, for what he presumes is a radical reinterpretation of Christian practice. But one also sees progression towards a narrowing of Christian practice to his ideal of assuming the “Christ mind,” to an exclusive reliance upon a method of intense belief and inner visualization of Christ as the bearer of divine light, strength and healing love, located at the innermost depths where soul and body intersect.

Evans’ sixth and last book (declared in the preface as the completion of “a series of works . . . commenced several years ago”) is an attempt to strengthen the tie between Christian theosophy and a spiritual practice that leads to health and well-being. Written in 1886, *Esoteric Christianity and Mental Therapeutics* again draws upon an ambitious array of historic philosophy, but he roots his framework more deeply within the Hermetic tradition, including an integration of Buddhist and Hindu metaphysics. Walsh identifies Evans as allied with an observable religiously eclectic American trend: the “satellite religion” exploding in the 1880s in a union of Spiritualism, New Thought, Theosophy, eastern metaphysics and western science. The Hermetic rhetoric, though, is but a sub-theme to the practice of Christian mental therapeutics. Evans stresses the importance of mentally seen and spiritually felt ideals held vividly in prayer. He encourages “a Hindu” practice of repetitive meditation, even as he wavers not from Christ as the modality of visualization prayer.

The metaphysics of praying for another person’s health improvement is another theme emphasized in *Esoteric Christianity* that began in *The Mental Cure* and never departed from his writings. Evans had experienced numerous instances of prayer’s concrete effects manifesting in a third party. He promoted a metaphysics (Swedenborg’s integrated monism) in which space was of little account, and he taught a practice of spiritual alignment that could be used for someone on the other side of the world as easily as for someone on the other side of the room. Vividly held and felt mental ideals-or prayer foci-could create effects no matter where in space the object of the prayed-for was. A principle Evans claimed was being confirmed in scientific experiments in France, he believed this was understood and practiced in primitive Christianity (and taught in the New Testament). Indeed, it is fortuitous that Evans closes his literary oeuvre pointing to western science in its then-current material determinism as inimical to the reality of the spiritual causation. But he attests to a growing number of thinking people standing in the tradition of what Huxley would come to call “the perennial philosophy,” and the book closes with a hint of an expected future vindication of the “string that has been harped upon until it is well-nigh worn out.” Evans died three years later without any further known writings.

Conversation with Modern Psychology and Science

The realm of the natural sciences looms large in this discussion. The century in which Evans spent his entire life served as a bridge between the two great eras of modern science: the scientific revolution which produced the Enlightenment (Bacon through Descartes) and the New Physics begun in the early twentieth-century. The former eclipsed an immanent God for many, while the latter supplied models for an interactive divine ontology. Though Evans was never tempted to regard science as religion's master, he seemed keenly aware of the issues it raised for religionists of his era, especially in his world of well-educated New Englanders. The Enlightenment created many problems for Christian commitment among the educated: radical dualism (resulting among other things in a mind-body split); material determinism (with its dismissal of idealism); and Deism (with its relegation of God to a remote, uninvolved post). Though new structures of natural theology met the challenge for some, when Darwinism was added to the rationalist pyre, intellectuals began abandoning Christianity in droves beginning in about 1869-the very year Evans issued *The Mental Cure*. That Evans's most important "teacher" was a scientific Christian theologian (Swedenborg)-bonding successfully, in his estimation, the two domains. Evans saw himself as continuing Swedenborg's work of developing a philosophy of science that could take account of modern natural science and New Testament Christianity. Evans pursued throughout his series of six books his interest in answering scientific challenges to Christian faith that were then floating in the intellectual atmosphere.

If the hallmark of the scientific revolution was a new method of inquiry rooted in phenomenological observation, statistical analysis, and the process of hypotheses by inductive reasoning, then empiricism could be said to be the holy writ in the natural sciences. That is probably why Evans's work and that of those who followed him in mental healing received such the pointed attention of America's most important psychologist of that period, William James. James believed the phenomena of healings sweeping through America, especially New England, fit into his interests in the psychological aspects of religious faith. In his famed Gifford Lectures of 1902, James saw fit to address the issues raised by such experiences, considering these experiences within his category of religious experience called "religion of the healthy minded." It is of more than passing interest that James grew up with an extensive exposure to Swedenborg through his Swedenborgian father's passionate preoccupation with the Swedish scientific seer. Though James's own attitude toward Swedenborg was complex and beyond the scope of this study, we can note that James is generally recognized as the first major American scholar of psychology-often called the "new" science of the twentieth-century.

Then in its infancy, psychoanalysis predicated a psychic structure in the human person driven primarily by motivations issuing from undetected depths of the mind. The sub-conscious mind entered common vocabulary, and James, as the principal American peer of Freud at the time, is credited with the proverb that the average person accesses but five percent of the mind's capacity. James viewed the subject of religion, and of New Thought, through the lens of psychology. Though criticizing quackery in the mind-cure movement, he also identified genuine human experience worthy of close scrutiny, and he attributed its popularity to the optimistic and pragmatic characteristic of the American people. Citing the power of suggestion, the taming of fear, and the mind-body capacity for inducing deep relaxation, James provides a psycho-dynamic construct for the phenomenology of mental healing.

Evans had already dealt with each of those areas, devoting chapters to the subject of trust in prayer, providing the same psycho-dynamic explanation for the effectiveness of suggestion (recalling the early use of mesmerism in Quimby's work), noting the importance of inducing a state of relaxation by which the subject can gain deep access to the divine energy of perfect love and wisdom. Whereas Evans' laid full weight on God as the origin of the energy itself, James, without theological speculation, confirmed the psychological mechanics of suggestion and deemed it capable of producing the effects being witnessed. James not only validated the psychological framework that New Thought employs, but also declared it a preferable "religion" to the profusion of "sick soul" morbidity that Christianity has too often produced. The "sick soul" psychology, with its instinctive selection of a fear and anxiety response to life situations precludes the person, thought James, from accessing the deeper flow of regenerative power within the human psychic structure. James called the mind-cure "healthy-minded" religious philosophy the only genuine American contribution to the history of world philosophy. Despite the movement's tendency to become extreme in its applications of positive thinking, there can be no doubt that it took hold so broadly across the country because of its practical results.

Three-quarters of a century later, another Harvard scholar would return to the subject. Herbert Benson is credited with laying original groundwork in biophysical research, releasing in 1975 the results of new studies on the connection between mental thought patterns and resulting patterns registering in the body's response system. Coinciding with a new wave of interest and practice of mostly eastern forms of meditation, The Relaxation Response opened one of the most important avenues of health research in the past quarter-century. Benson launched a renewed critique of Cartesian dualism of the mind and body. Dozens of studies on the connection between mind and body followed, many of which have cited both powerful and statistically predictable effects of the mind upon the body through visualizations or through affective affirmation prayer. The list of important topics cited by Benson in his newly-written foreword sounds almost like a precis of Evans and James: Descartes' radical dualism, the importance of volitional practice of mental stillness, the inducement of relaxation, and the eradication of fear. He also gives a new name to what Evans and New Thought have been calling disease: stress. Benson identified stress (without giving it any larger theological or philosophical baggage) as the primary cause for physical maladies. Reducing stress leads, in Benson's view of 1975, to health and well-being.

Benson today, after two more books on the subject of the mind and healing, has moved toward a stronger interest in a spiritual context for the mind's environment of thought and perspectives. He has just concluded the most extensive double-blind study to date on the connection between prayer and healing, the results of which are to be released within the year. Benson has noted that research supports the proposition that people with spiritual perspectives experience stronger positive effects than do people using the same meditation exercises whose mental visualizations are not supported by spiritual convictions.

Benson has been followed by a long line of medical researchers in scientific investigation of the causal role of thoughts over physical and psychological healing and health. One of the best recent treatments of the subject has been published by Esther Sternberg, a research scientist at Washington University and director of the Molecular, Cellular, and Behavioral Integrative Neuro-Science Program. An immunology specialist, Steinberg has researched the subtle frontiers

of the communication process between the brain and the immune system. It is in this “communication” process where stress can originate.

As historic background, she, too, follows Swedenborg, Evans, James, and Benson in identifying Descartes’ radical dualism as the enemy. She then presents two chapters of new brain-neurological research clarifying further why the pathways of our thoughts in our neurological system so powerfully affect the rest of the physical organism. Here she introduces the critical role that emotions and social life play in disease and health—that is, in the emotional foundation of a person’s spiritual life. In fact, she suggests that emotions are the central consideration in mind-body wellness. Sternberg’s view is that neurological research indicates that in our brains we carry a map of our relationships, which directly affect our emotions and thus our immune transactional patterns. Whereas Benson and the biofeedback research played down visualization, Sternberg brings it back to the fore. Relationships provide primal visual maps in our brain that produce powerful effects on our brain’s ability to transact business effectively through the immune system. In a word, Sternberg believes that focusing on strong relational environments and on relational skills, along with a regular practice of inward mental focus, with effective “visual beliefs,” is a potent regimen for a psychological and spiritual health well-grounded in the vehicle of the soul (the body).

Conclusion

Evans’s legacy is still alive today. Not only has his life’s work has been duly footnoted as historically significant, but the questions he cared about and the creative path he struck uncannily speak to modern concerns. How to heal the chasm between science and theology, to discover an inner practice opening to authentic and transforming experience, to construct a life centered upon helping oneself and others become more whole: these are the central questions the present generation is asking, at least in his native culture.

Were Evans to be reincorporated actually into New Thought practice, its adherents would drink from a much richer source of Christian resources than is generally accessed today in the movement. (And New Thought’s repugnant spirituality of pursuing such goals as “prosperity consciousness” would find no support in Evans!) Were Evans to be explored in the larger Christian world, contemporary seekers might find new vision for a place of affirmative prayer in the spiritual life, for a deeper appreciation of the power of their own psychology in prayer in opening to the presence of God.

Evaluating Evans’ own spiritual life may yield another gift for those who find value in spiritual biography. Though the details of his life seem largely lost, an important story nevertheless emerges from the materials available. His sustained inner practice across decades of physical debilitation while yet faithfully ascending a mental mountain of faith and spiritual vision carried him at last into, as he put it in his own words, “an extraordinary season of prayer.” It was a gift he tried to give away for the rest of his life—by teaching and by healing, opening his home as a sanitarium, and especially by writing, which he felt was his “higher use.” In a sensitive engagement with his biography and oeuvre, there may be something still to be gained for those whose palate is not offended by a repetition and extravagance of flavors!

Though Evans may offer little specific to modern scientific research, the history of science and spiritual practice is an area where his contribution is most suggestive. (It is hard not to notice the irony that whereas he had a life-long legitimate interest in natural science and strove for an integration of science and religion, the movements associated with New Thought appropriated the term “science” in a way that Evans did not, yet have often bordered on being anti-science.) In the ongoing dialog between science and theology, a better understanding of the history of that conversation is needed, and Evans’ participated creatively and productively during a pivotal period of the nineteenth-century. In fact, the practice he forged and “preached” to the world is direct ancestor to contemporary personal devotion and scientific research alike.

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