

“Popular metaphysics in the shaping of American identity: the (Process) New Thought Movement as a mainstream or marginalized phenomenon?”

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It is obvious that a great majority of Americans, and even most people in the world, endorse the *New Thought Movement* teachings, despite the fact that they may never have heard of the New Thought by name. By focusing on this movement we touch on the reality of the importance of the new religious movements and the relevance of the pluralism factor within the shaping of American identity. From mainstream to marginalization, or from marginalization to mainstream, American expressions of faith and spirituality have characterized the unique dynamism of the American population. However, despite the development of the necessary New Religious Movements studies in the past twenty years, the share of the American metaphysical movement has long been downplayed by some mainstream scholars in religion studies.

In my current research on the American metaphysical movement(s), I would like to side with many scholars such as Professor Catherine Albanese or Professor Beryl Satter who believe that so-called marginal or non-mainstream denominations closely linked to occultism and metaphysics have played a more significant role in the construction of the American identity. As a direct heritage from the early settlers of the colonies who learned the practice of occultism and natural science, the influence of metaphysics, magic and witchcraft has

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pervaded and evolved into various forms since then. The New Thought Movement or New Thought is a concentration of all these influences.

My purpose in this paper is to highlight the importance of the New Thought within the American religious landscape and to move into an analysis of its probable return step to some mainstream through the pervading influence of popular metaphysics exemplified by Oprah Winfrey for instance. The last point will confirm the renewal period of the movement with the introduction of a new perspective called Process New Thought.

“The *New Thought* movement (not to be confused with *New Age*) is a more than century old, encompassing practical spirituality that promotes fullness of all aspects of living, through positive thinking, affirmative prayer, meditation, and other ways of realizing the presence of God. *New Thought* is a synthesis of Philosophy, Psychology, Science (i.e. Quantum Physics), and Truths from the Great Scriptures of the World Religions. *New Thought* is more than a religion; it is a way of life.”<sup>1</sup>

The main significant historical periods in the construction of the movement are the nineteenth, early twentieth centuries and the 1960s and 1970s. According to historian Charles Braden, it actually dates back to 1838 and the life, experiments and teachings of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, an unschooled inventor and a clockmaker apprentice in Maine who became a so-called medical sectarian. At this point, we need to emphasize the importance of the historical context. Indeed, the movement is the result of pressing social and spiritual expectations that characterized nineteenth century America.

This period is known as a century of many achievements such as new technological innovations and unprecedented changes. But the transformation is also visible within religion through the reformation of Calvinism by introducing the marriage of religion and science. A proof of this phenomenon is the relative unity of theologians, scientists and philosophers at the time. The emphasis lies also in the celebration of human will and the belief in providence, paradoxically. The expectations for reforms are more acute. Faith in mankind and

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<sup>1</sup> Holly A Heinz, « New Spirituality for a New Life », *Internet*, June 2007, [http://www.1-spirit.net/pages/New\\_Thought/welcome.htm](http://www.1-spirit.net/pages/New_Thought/welcome.htm)

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perfectibility in the institutions determine the nature of the reforms within mainstream America. As a consequence, changes are witnessed in the political, mystical and religious dimensions. The myth of America as Paradise together with the longing for transformations towards a better and purer gathering of souls is prevailing. The eventful period is the expression of a democratic faith in individualism with moral law and the mission of a nation of immigrants. People feel like seeking a new identity which is an utter expression of liberty and discipline. The idea of voluntarism in religion is also dominant. In such a context, the emergence of therapeutic aspirations as a response to a shifting society encourages the rise of what is called *the American metaphysical religion*. The close relationship between therapeutic culture and the culture of consumption is a hint of the sacralization of popular culture. By the turn of the twentieth century, the New Thought embodies this new trend for the therapeutic within an environment of consumer capitalism and the emergence of psychological expertise. The psychic self-fulfillment of therapeutic culture transforms modern America's Protestant culture of salvation through self-denial into a new one. As Gaius Glen Atkins put it: "*New Thought* was an influence rather than an organization, an attitude of mind and not a religion, though it naturally organized a church and just as naturally in Boston. It was called the Church of the Higher Life."<sup>2</sup>

After practicing mesmerism and hypnotism, Phineas P. Quimby engaged into a healing experientialism which coupled nature and mind. He had also been influenced by a wide range of cultural and religious phenomena such as the spreading of Swedish Emmanuel Swedenborg's doctrine of divine flux which he revived and reinterpreted. He therefore established the mingled spirit-matter dimension of the thought. Later, the New England Transcendentalists had a great impact on Quimby's approach of metaphysics. The movement soon chose to stay away from evangelical Christianity so as to combine spirituality with a mystical experience of the divine and to include Eastern religions and creeds, thus bringing

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<sup>2</sup> Gaius Glenn Atkins, *Religion in Our Times*, New York: Round Table Press, Inc., 1932, p. 296.

together mysticism, metaphysics, spiritualism and healing idealism. From nineteenth century Transcendentalism, New Thought borrowed individualism, mysticism, pantheism and above all the supremacy of the mind over the body, referring directly to Emerson's "oversoul" and "intuition". It reveals a new spiritual conception of "empowering people" in their quest for Truth. Nathan Hatch already underlined this phenomenon by calling "insurgent movements" [such as the New Thought] phenomena that:

"[...] empowered ordinary people by taking their deepest spiritual impulses at face value rather than subjecting them to the scrutiny of orthodox doctrine and the frowns of respectable clergymen."<sup>3</sup>

Quimby continued his work as a metaphysical apprentice by showing a particular sense of the spiritual regarding mystical experience and the prevalence of the mind over the body. His unique metaphysical practice attracted many patients who got cured by his healing technique. Although his theories proved to be rather fuzzy, his healing theology was soon recognized as a predominant structural fabric for a new metaphysical religion. For Quimby, disease is what follows the disturbance of the mind or spiritual matter. He believed there is something he called "First cause", "Wisdom", or even "the Christ" that lies beyond any spiritual matter. Idealism was his foremost philosophy to build upon. Hence, he chose to adopt a metaphysical reading of the Scriptures by merging harmony with nature and glorifying in the self-control mind. This development led to the construction of a "self-religion" which became very popular thanks to American transcendentalism along with romanticism.

After Quimby's death, the movement organized itself into a federation called International New Thought Alliance including various denominations founded by Quimby's healed disciples: Christian Science, Religious Science, Divine Science and Unity. Each one has its own particularity though spreading the same metaphysical message and the same healing

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<sup>3</sup> Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, New Haven, CT.: Yale University Press, 1989, p.10.

methods: the use of visualization, positive thinking (from Norman Vincent Peale,) Pantheism (all is God) and Western idealism mingled with eastern mysticism. On the whole New Thought emphasizes practical and pragmatic means, and its diffuse nature characterizes the whole movement as a seductive spiritual or religious adventure for most Americans.

Gordon Melton<sup>4</sup> underlined that new religious movements are not so much as “new” phenomena but the expression of old religions. New Thought might be considered partly as an expression of primitive Christianity, advocating a return to a thorough reading of the New Testament. They praise love, healing through prayer and educating the poor to achieve both spiritual and material prosperity, thus enhancing a personal and individual relationship with the divine, thereby allowing a higher responsibility of the believer within his quest for happiness. The use of primitive Christianity within the movement is expressed through a particular attention toward the popular sphere by the chartering of a *practical spirituality*. The idealistic identification to Jesus as a way-shower displays a humanistic behavior. Each individual is a potential Christ. There is a clear distinction between ‘Jesus the man’ and ‘the Christ’. The former implies an impersonal divine nature or Principle, while the latter describes the one who embodied this Principle-Christ. Jesus / Christ is a mere guide, not Humanity’s savior.

“ Jesus is considered an elder brother, a way-shower, who helps to lead us toward the realization of the presence of God in ourselves, even as God was present in him. This does not necessarily exclude belief in Jesus as occupying a special place; on this, as on all other matters, *New Thinkers* are free to decide for themselves .”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon Melton, A talk given at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Ministries to New Religions held at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky February 22-23, 2002 – <http://www.cornerstonemag.com>

<sup>5</sup> Alan Anderson, « Christ in you: a New Thought perspective », *Internet*, May 2006, <http://websyte.com/alan/Christ.htm>, 1998.

New Thought has always criticized traditional Christianity's biblical choices which enslave the human conscience in the concept of an infinite God.

One of New Thought's originality is its theological marginality. Since its inception, the members have chosen a marginal orientation: the use of a metaphysical reading of the Bible as opposed to a literary understanding symbolizing the integration into institutional religion. Charles Fillmore, one Quimby's cured disciple and founder of Unity, chartered the authoritative *Metaphysical Bible* used by all New Thought denominations.

« Bible--The sacred and inspired Scriptures of the Christian religion. It is a divine "book of life" rather than merely a history of people, and it bears "witness unto the word" of God (Acts 14:3).

Bible characters--The characters of the Bible represent ideas in one's own mind. When this symbolism is understood one can follow the characters in their various movements and thus find the way to solve all one's life's problems.

Bible, place in Truth study--The Bible is a recital of what has taken place in the consciousness of man, of the results of his working, either intelligently with the law or unintelligently against it, in seeking his own salvation. It gives an explanation of spiritual law as applied to man and tells him how to find the kingdom of heaven within.

Bible, spiritual interpretation of the--A spiritual interpretation of the Bible demands that the meaning of every personality, type, parable, and symbol must be in harmony with the fundamental principles of Being. <sup>6</sup> »

Between popular and traditional philosophical meaning, metaphysics in the Metaphysical Movement deals with philosophical metaphysics in connection with the popular movement that is defined as the American religious tradition that thought of God in impersonal terms and stressed the power of mind to change the world. It has been practiced since the nineteenth century in spiritualism, theosophy, New Thought, and most recently, the New Age movement<sup>7</sup>. Referring to metaphysics, J.G. Melton in his

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Fillmore, *The Revealing Word, A Dictionary of Metaphysical Terms*, Unity Books (Unity School of Christianity), 2nd edition, 1994, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Wadsworth Publishing Dictionary online, <http://religion.wadsworth.com/intro/american/glossary.html#anchor2366583>

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*Encyclopedia of American Religions*<sup>8</sup> divides the metaphysical movement into two categories or “families”: the "Christian Science-Metaphysical Family," and the "Spiritualist, Psychic, and New Age Family." New Thought belongs to the former one where there is no official use of occultism or magic. In their metaphysical interpretation of the Bible, New Thinkers use the inner or esoteric meaning of metaphysics by considering what is “above and away from the physical”. The originality or marginality of the New Thought is its construction of a near metaphysics bordering on myths and often substituted by the word “science” understood in its popular meaning. Indeed, as Alan Anderson puts it, New Thought’s “science” seems to be part of its overall metaphysical epistemological myth. My understanding is that it is not a genuine metaphysics but New Thought’s incorporation of its metaphysics into its techniques of healing practically with everyday living through the affirmation and action consistent with the ‘healing idealism’ of the movement.

If J. Stillson Judah described the metaphysical movements as “the mirror of American culture”<sup>9</sup>, then we need to wonder how important the share of the New Thought within the mainstreaming/marginalization phenomenon with regard to popular culture is. One example of this pervading influence of spirituality and particularly New Thought’s popular metaphysics is the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. I chose to scrutinize Oprah Winfrey’s stand, behavior and impact on the American popular culture. The billionaire businesswoman, successful CEO, producer and TV star Oprah Winfrey is often regarded as the quintessential woman spokesman for nearly everything that touches on life in our society. She is (or used to be, according to her words) a member and ordained minister of Unity which is the largest

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<sup>8</sup> J. Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, North Carolina: McGrath Publishing Company, 1978; revised edition, 1986, p. 273-281.

<sup>9</sup> J. Stillson Judah, « Metaphysics midwestern America », *The Journal of Popular Culture* (2004), 17:4, p. 134.

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organization<sup>10</sup> within the New Thought umbrella structure called International New Thought Alliance (INTA). Thanks to her show launched in 1985, she has proven herself to be an ever increasing popular spiritual transformer or at least a change agent on television. Her 20 million viewers each day in the US highlight the popularity of her show and message.

“I’m guided by the vision of what I believe this show can be (...) to uplift, enlighten, encourage and entertain (...) to use TV to transform people’s lives (...) to bring a sense of fulfillment into every home”<sup>11</sup>

With this statement, she may be considered as the agent of a new popular spirituality which aims at converting the masses to New Thought philosophy. Elected *Newsweek*’s “Most Important Person” in books and media in 1997, *T.V. Guide*’s “Television Performer of the Year,” and *Time Magazine*’s one of America’s “25 Most Influential People” in 1996, she definitely roots herself within national popularity. “*My intention is to empower people*” as she insists, echoes the empowerment stand developed in the New Thought where the individual has the power and is even co-creator of his own path (“The power of man to compete for his happiness”). By promoting unconventional beliefs ranging from pantheism, to positive thinking or metaphysics, to quote only a few of them, her show has been pervaded by core elements of the American metaphysical movements. In presenting this non-sectarian spirituality where God is a loving God who does not stand as a lawgiver but instead accepts everyone in Heaven, Oprah Winfrey sets herself and the American metaphysical movement in a renewal path toward popularization, leading to a probable mainstreaming.

Another illustration of this gradual popularization phenomenon is her endorsement of a large number of New Thought authors or prominent members who contribute to the ‘assimilation’ process of alternative spirituality. She includes many nationwide guests such as Eric Butterworth, Deepak Chopra, David Beckwith, Annie Rix Militz, Shakti Gawain

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<sup>10</sup> Unity has 664 churches and 75,000 members in the US. (Source : //www.adherents.com/, 2006. et [http : //newthoughtalliance.org](http://newthoughtalliance.org), 2005)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.oprah.com/magazine/omagazine>



Wayne Dyer, Stuart Wilde, Gary Zukav, Yanla Vanzant or Neale Donald Walsch.

Clearly, the emphasis is on a paradigm shift that will bring American metaphysical movements into prominence and set their message across the popular networks. In 2006, the release of *The Secret* movie by Ronda Byrne, in which the ancient “secret” is revealed to the world, was acclaimed in all of Oprah’s TV shows and websites.

“I want people to see things on our show that makes them think differently about their lives...To be a light for people. To make a difference, to open their minds (...) how to get in touch with the spiritual part of their life.”

The message is still one of self-empowerment addressed to people who are searching for meaning and purpose in life. Her literary promotion is mainly focused on New Thought-inspired books ranging from best-sellers on money-making or prosperity handbooks to essays or pamphlets on metaphysics and practical philosophy. The main target is clearly identified as the popular and middle classes who look for a practical spiritual path to solve daily life problems.

Additionally, Oprah’s stand for religious liberalism makes her one of the most vocal and influential advocates against Biblical Christianity. New Thought members hold that the Jesus of the Bible is not the same as the one they refer to. Rather than viewing Jesus as the first and last member of the Christ family, many New Thinkers (members of New Thought) believe that Christ is a title that we can all earn by following Jesus’s example. Christ may refer to the activity of the super conscious mind or the presence of God as the initial aim of each experience in life. Jesus is the way-shower who first discovered his own divinity before offering it to everyone. Both Oprah’s and New Thought’s views of God feature elements of pantheism and panentheism (all is in God). It is the idea that God is a universal force and that we are all one in this particular force. Famous New Thought best-seller writer Eric Butterworth, one of Oprah’s regular guests, contends that Jesus did not come to teach how divine he was but came to teach us there is divinity within us.

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By wisely and subtly spreading the metaphysical word, rising holistic healing to a higher standard, promoting a liberal spiritual tradition that develops an inward searching for wholeness combined with an active commitment in the society, Oprah Winfrey the popular evangelist of culture, may be considered as one the top agents of a paradigm shift in New Religious Movements in America. Combining Oprah’s spirituality (wrapped in some kind of spiritual capitalism) with *New Thought* ideas leads to a “therapeutic gospel” where the therapeutic discourse, with its “prescriptive” aspect is a very resurgence of Phineas Parhurst Quimby’s healing practice and idealism. The way she uses top modern means of communication to promote a whole world of therapeutic, self-empowerment, self-improvement through metaphysics and healing idealism, suggests that popularization might be seen a renewal path for the metaphysical movements in the US.

Another argument for a significant move of New Thought into some kind of mainstreaming is a recent orientation that has been unfolding through the propositions of one of their most prominent members Alan C. Anderson by the late 1990s.

In keeping with Oprah Winfrey’s indirect role in the renewal of popular metaphysics, I believe the ‘process thought’ perspective introduced by Alan C. Anderson adds to the return of the New Thought into the foreground of the American NRMs spectrum. As Leigh Eric Schmidt from Princeton University pointed out in his latest book “*In Restless Souls: the making of American Spirituality from Emerson to Oprah*”<sup>12</sup> there are new elements in the national conversation about religion and public life (popular culture) in the United States. The new orientation of the *New Thought* movement called “*Process New Thought*” bridges up science and religion into a moderate perspective for a twenty-first century American religious and political identity, while negotiating a subtle balance between mainstreaming and marginalization. .

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<sup>12</sup> Leigh Eric Schmidt , *Restless Souls, The Making of American Spirituality*, New York: HarperCollins, 2005, 11.

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On one hand, what Process New Thought does is, addressing a high perspective in theology and philosophy, by inserting “process thought” into the debate, and on the other hand, offering a practical opportunity to improve everyday life. Process New Thought holds that each unit of existence has “experiential” characteristics, thus offering a third way between dualism and materialism. John B. Cobb, Jr. had already identified that a relevant biblical theme neglected by mainstream protestant theology is that of creation. Within this new theological and philosophical framework, God is both transcendent and personal. Inspired by mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead in the early twentieth century, and taken over particularly by Prof. David Ray Griffin from Claremont College , the “process” thought and process theology (a more naturalistic form of theology) has emerged as a real “third way” in the New Thought metaphysical movement. It develops one main idea which is the process of co-creation combining three necessary elements forming an equation: past (experiences) + divine offer + choice. Practical applications of it rely on two major pillars which are creativity and prehension. The latter is the idea that existence is made of various entities (actualities) that add up to become ONE. It eventually leads to a unification of a new experience. Each decision or change of thought produces a new creation (“New every moment” is the corresponding motto). The new perspective develops a process analysis of creativity while applying it to practical everyday living. The idea of “co-creation” insists on an intense individualism partly inherited from mainline Protestantism. It also insists on dynamism, action and constant change, believing in abundance in economy, though abundance is a concept which is not usually associated with religion.

(Process) New Thought also believes that there is only one power in the universe and that power is good. What is more, Process New Thought is panentheistic, meaning that all is *in* God, rather than pantheistic (all is God), which is a total identification of the world and God, often with the idea that the world is an illusion. The individual is like in Oprah’s show, empowered, but...to what extent? Process Theology is understood as a “renewal” of

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American Christian thought. It is the most advanced form of neo-liberal theology in the States. This effort to unite science and religion is in tune with a desire for legitimizing the movement so as to reach a new mainstream or near mainstream status for the twenty-first century, all the while affirming the freedom of belief of each person.

Today, at this conference on mainstreaming and marginalization of new religious movements, we are discussing the evolution of various religious phenomena. It is my belief that, New Thought, still considered as a deviant phenomenon, has an opportunity to change its status within the American religious landscape thanks to process thought and popularization through the media culture. This would mean a renegotiation of its position by enhancing the legitimizing strategy of a mainstream integration. However, even with the popularization of the Process New Thought perspective, the movement will remain at the fringe of marginalization and mainstream due to its diffuse and eclectic aspect; thereby complying with the founder's wish not to join institutionalized religion or any mainstreaming process.

In 2005 a *Newsweek* article, *In Search of The Spiritual*, gave the results of a *Newsweek/Beliefnet* Poll<sup>13</sup> which indicated that Americans are being shaped by Oprah and the spiritual “gurus” (therefore, the metaphysical spirituality) she has on her show. The poll found that “eight in 10 Americans – including 68 percent of evangelicals – believe that more than one faith can be a path to salvation.” This finding reflects the message that is preached by the metaphysical movements. The *Newsweek* article went on to say, “There is a streak in the United States of relying on . . . ‘individual visceral experience’ to validate religious ideas.” In other words, many Christians no longer accept the Bible as being reliable but are more leaning to look for some experiential validation for their understanding of *truth*. Adler, the author of the article, adds that religion for many people is “Rather than being about a god who

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<sup>13</sup> Jerry Adler, “In Search of the Spiritual”. *Newsweek*, Aug. 29/Sept. 5, 2005, p.52.

commands you, it's about finding a religion that empowers you." Believing without belonging has become a new creed for American society. Pluralism and mystical experience have become the revolutionizing shifts in the spiritual spectrum thus blowing the borders between New Religious Movements and institutionalized religions. Unchurched believers have grown more rapidly in recent years and the phenomenon is here to stay. Popularization through media culture, new philosophical perspectives such as process thought, inter-spiritual wisdom, multi-faith behaviours are the new tools for mainstreaming. In this scheme of acquiring power, New Thought or Process New Thought, like the *Oprah Winfrey Show* are to be taken as popular movements which give the power from the ministers or the elite back to the people or the members. The development of Process New Thought toward mainstream is a means of legitimizing the reality of a democratizing spirituality by using popularization and process theology.

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