

# *Mary Burt Messer*

*Christian Science Healer as Sociologist and Scholar*

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**M**ary Burt Messer (1881–1960) was a social worker; activist for women’s suffrage and women’s rights; professor of sociology; writer of books on sociology, politics, and religion; Christian Science healer; and poet. While her vocational breadth suggests viewing Messer as a renaissance woman, the driving force for Messer’s life was reform on a deeper spiritual level. Messer argued for a unifying vision between her spiritual convictions and her political and social outlooks, but their integration did not come about easily in her professional endeavors. Instead, they often existed in tension. Her story invites us to ask how the evolution of religious consciousness combines with academic and political pursuits. In the context of Messer’s accomplished life and works, we can consider what place the voice of the spiritual healer has in academia and the broader milieu of sociological and political commentary in the press.

As a woman who came of age at the beginning of the twentieth century, her involvement with feminist causes and the advancement of feminist thought reflects and forecasts the call for women to achieve not only equal rights with men in a man's world but, as well, a reformation of the world according to women's values and understanding.

## *The Advance of Woman*

The most transcendent values are inevitably linked with the social aspects of the age in which they appear, as for example when vestiges of woman's social eminence are correlated with hints as to the spiritual importance and priority of the feminine idea. (Messer 1928, 348–9)

In her most critically acclaimed work, *The Family in the Making: A Historical Sketch*, published in 1928, Messer narrated a wide sweep of history through a comprehensive study of the family from the time of primitive societies and early civilizations to the current day. Her analysis probed studies and writings on the earliest-known human communities, which pointed to women exercising governance in mother-centered societies. She also considered evidence from the ancient civilizations of Babylon and Egypt, where “we find a body of laws, customs and attitudes which exalt the status of women” (Messer 1928, 47). Based on this groundwork, Messer applied a feminist lens to explore how male domination or patriarchy ascended to displace matriarchial influence. She claimed that the rise of patriarchy compromised the place of women and diminished a woman's capacity to ensure her personal well-being and to contribute to the larger society's overall well-being. For Messer, the anthropological message was clear. Women had served as leaders in societies in the past. There was nothing inherent to womanhood to indicate any natural or necessary inheritance of subservience or marginalized status in relation to men. To the contrary, notwithstanding centuries of suppression and adaptation to male codes and authority, Messer identified within women the inherent qualities, intuition, and insight needed to rescue humanity from the pressures of familial, community, social, and political breakdown in modernity. In particular, her investigations examined the rise of divorce in the United States. In Messer's view, the conditions of marriage all too often reflected

those of a “feudal institution” (*New York Times* 1924). Thus divorce presented a rational option for liberation from this type of social oppression. She also observed other indicators pointing to the potential emergence of a regenerated spiritual vision for modern society. For Messer, this transformative spirituality challenged existing norms, bringing about a more valid and salutary social contract between the sexes, individuals, and cultures.

For Messer, the writings and teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Christian Science religion, promised the advanced spirituality she described in her book. Messer’s adoption of Christian Science came out of her background in social work, as a campaigner for suffrage and women’s rights, and as a sociologist focusing on questions of the modern family. Her decision to become a Christian Science practitioner placed healing as the central proposition for addressing individual ills and those of the body politic. For Messer, combining the consciousness of the spiritual healer with that of the sociological and political thinker did not prove to be easy or comfortable, especially in her professional life.

### *Life Purpose:*

#### *Born in an Accomplished and Trailblazing Family*

In examining the trajectory of Mary Burt Messer’s life and career, the influence of her family background bears consideration. Messer remained close with relatives throughout her life and placed great value on her heritage. Although Messer never married and experienced motherhood, the subject of the family played a central role in her life and scholarship. Her teaching in the arena of sociology focused on issues pertaining to the family. Her most influential work in this field was titled *The Family in the Making: An Historic Sketch*, which served as a reflection on women’s history and the predicate for a feminist call to action for societal advancement. Messer’s undertakings in feminist activism, academia, scholarly writing, and in her spiritual practice were inclined towards pathbreaking. As a contributor to the world of ideas and religion, her work met alternatively with favor and rejection. However, she remained faithful to a vision in which radical spirituality had meaning and application in every-



**Image 1:** Mary Burt Messer as a young woman, n.d. (Box 8, Merlin Stonehouse papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California).

day social and political matters. In this respect, one finds precedent in previous generations of her family.

On Messer's maternal side, her ancestry hearkened back to the Puritan Separatist Elder William Brewster, the de facto lay spiritual leader of the early Pilgrim settlers in the Plymouth Colony (Hall 2019, 198, 203). A capacity for geographical, intellectual, and spiritual pioneering continued down the generations, perhaps most notably with her maternal grandfather, John Wesley North. North was a storied

figure in the development of the American West and a champion of progressive causes, including abolition, temperance, and women's rights. In his book *John Wesley North and the Reform Frontier*, Merlin Stonehouse (1965) charted the extraordinary expanse of North's life from that of a lay preacher and seminarian in upstate New York in his youth to that of a man of enterprise and civic leadership in Minnesota, Nevada, California, and Tennessee. In his 1966 review of Stonehouse's book, Professor Robert Johannsen offered this portrayal of Messer's grandfather:

North's record was fantastic. In Minnesota, during the decade before statehood, he practiced law, founded the University of Minnesota, promoted immigration, helped to organize the Republican party, developed two townsites, and pushed railroad development. Appointed surveyor general of Nevada Territory by Lincoln, he practiced law, developed a townsite, built a sawmill and a stamping mill, and held a judgeship on that turbulent mining frontier. In both Minnesota and Nevada he helped to ease the transition from territory to state as a member of their respective constitutional conventions. With the end of the Civil War, he moved to Knoxville, where he sought to bring industrial development and northern investment to eastern Tennessee, and, four years later, he led a colony to California. On California deserts, he developed townsites and irrigation works, laying the foundation for a lasting and prosperous economy in the process. (Johannsen 1966, 1076)

Messer's mother, Emma Messer (1852–1938), wrote a three-part series about the experience of growing up with her father, John Wesley North. Published in the California literary magazine *The Overland Monthly*, "Memoirs of a Frontier Childhood" chronicled five years in her young life, bracketed within the story of Abraham Lincoln's ascent to the presidency and his later assassination. The final installment concluded with her coming to a more mature consciousness in the wake of the galvanic repercussions of the president's assassination. "A band of crepe about my arm, grave and reverent, I walked in the sad little procession to the village church," she wrote of her participation in a day of mourning for the president and nation. Reflecting on the experience, she concluded that she "had come to see and feel and a little, perhaps, to understand something of that larger, broader world which had begun to be her own" (E. Messer 1924, 478). While this is her mother's story, it echoed a pattern of familial

concern and engagement with broader social and political issues—a mantle that Messer embraced from early on in her life.

Messer's upbringing in Washington, DC, introduced her firsthand to key political and cultural figures and movements. Messer's father, Edmund Clarence Messer (1842–1919), was a highly regarded painter and arts administrator in Washington, DC. An obituary noted that he was “one of Washington's leading artists and pioneer in the art movements in the Capital for the past 37 years,” listing positions that he held as including those of principal of the Art Students League and principal of the Corcoran School of Art (*American Art News* 1919, 4). Frederick Douglass was a neighbor and family friend of the Messers. In a letter to her aunt, Messer remembered Douglass's influence on her: “On my tenth birthday . . . he gave me a photograph of himself bearing the inscription ‘with the regard, respect and esteem of Frederick Douglass.’ There was something here that I deeply liked, an attitude toward womankind only explainable when I grew up into ‘votes for women,’ in my later years” (Messer to Aunt Mary, June 7, 1950, Holt-Messer Family Papers).

For Messer, the political and moral activism of her family, its artistic and literary pursuits, and its enterprise in government, law, and higher education provided her with a familiarity and sense of life purpose in negotiating and exploring professional and academic opportunities. Equally, they endowed her with an independent voice—one that met with commendation early in her academic career and which would struggle to find its place in later phases of her life as a writer and thinker. Still, the spirituality that undergirded Messer's feminism and her approach to political and social questions stood apart from the maverick exploits of her father and grandfather. While she carried their independent vision and will, she was entering into new territory as a woman, which would bring its own opportunity for expressing a new voice and vision on questions of culture, politics, and the family, and its own challenges in applying a spiritual perspective in these spheres.

### *Suffragist Reformer with the National Woman's Party*

Mary Burt Messer's background in the political atmosphere of Washington, DC, coupled with her convictions about the need for social change and the advancement of women's rights and leadership, led

to her involvement with feminist political organizations. This involvement proved to be an important step in Messer's development as an organizer and advocate and in her understanding of the bridge between political and spiritual advancement. In Messer's view, the achievement of women's enfranchisement signaled only a beginning of liberation from masculine authority. Even with the achievement of the right to vote, there would still be a need for radical regeneration and development of women's ways of knowing and leading in order to address societal needs. Messer's commitment to women's political movements was ongoing, reemerging as a primary focus at various junctures throughout her life.

Messer attended Vassar College from 1901–02 as a special student. Subsequently, she followed a path popular among progressively-minded collegiate women from schools like Vassar, Smith, Swarthmore, and Wellesley to work as part of the settlement movement among America's urban poor (Rousmaniere 1970, 46).<sup>1</sup> Messer's developing social conscience spurred her political activism for suffrage or "votes for women." While Messer's work in the suffrage movement started in New York City, her political contribution to bringing about the legislative victory for the Nineteenth Amendment came about most visibly after her move to Wisconsin, where she took the position of instructor of sociology at the Stout Institute in Menomonie (now the University of Wisconsin-Stout).

Located in Dunn County, in the western part of the state, Stout was a newly emerging institution with a curriculum that emphasized practical "training in industrial and related lines of educational effort" (UW-Stout History). Messer came to Stout at the request of the institution's first president, Lorenzo Harvey Dow (Messer 1928, viii), beginning her seven years at the institution in 1916. Her arrival coincided with radical demographic changes that affected the student body due to male enlistment to serve in World War I. As a result, the campus was almost entirely female during a portion of Messer's time there. Messer was also part of the faculty that ushered Stout from a two-year institution to one offering a four-year program in "the areas of household and industrial arts, [which] resulted in the introduction of course work in history, sociology, and several other liberal arts areas" (UW-Stout History).

On January 12, 1917, Messer and other women from Stout formed the Dunn County Suffrage Party (University of Wisconsin-Stout 2015). Messer quickly advanced in suffrage politics in Wisconsin, becoming active in the National Woman's Party (NWP). Alice Paul and Lucy

Burns had formed the NWP in 1916 to organize added political pressure to achieve an amendment to the United States Constitution that would provide a federal guarantee for women's full voting enfranchisement. Messer became a vice-chairman of the Wisconsin NWP and chairman of the state's 10th District, working under Chairman Mrs. Frank Putnam. In this same year, Messer formally applied for and was granted membership in the Christian Science church. Of note, member records indicate that Helen Paul, Alice Paul's younger sister, joined the Christian Science Church in November 1916, shortly before Messer's admission into the church. Helen Paul had "enthusiastically joined suffrage activities after Alice became involved with the Pankhursts in England and later rose to leadership in the American suffrage community" (Zahniser 2015). Messer was not alone in suffrage and women's rights circles in finding inspiration and direction in Mary Baker Eddy's spiritual writings and teachings. In an oral history from late in her career, Alice Paul made numerous references to the contributions of Christian Scientists to her women's rights organizations and initiatives (Paul 1976).

The National Woman's Party took a strong interest in the state branches where the effort to bring about congressional support and ratification for the Nineteenth Amendment was most keen. In Wisconsin, the powerful brewery industry amassed against suffrage, seeing the movement as allied with causes, like temperance and prohibition, that posed a dangerous threat to the wellbeing and profits of the beer makers (Catt and Shuler 2020, 334). Newspaper accounts on suffrage activities in Wisconsin frequently noted Messer's involvement as an organizer and presider over suffrage meetings. In 1918, Alice Paul and the NWP leadership reached out to Messer to organize speaking engagements in Wisconsin for Lillian Ascough, a leading suffragist and chair of the Connecticut NWP. "I feel greatly concerned about the success of her meetings since I am convinced if they are small and lacking in enthusiasm, the effect will be bad rather than good," wrote the national secretary. "It seems to me very necessary that we should show great interest in suffrage at this time and an insistent demand for the immediate passage of the amendment" (NWP Records, Mabel Vernon to Mary Burt Messer, May 3, 1918, Reel 60-1, 1-14 May 1918). Despite having reservations about Ascough's visit, Messer agreed to manage the event, which, according to Ascough, came off as a great success. In a letter to Mabel Vernon, secretary of the NWP, Ascough wrote, "Have had a wonderful time here with Miss Messer, have stayed with her in her little bungalow,



she is a most brilliant person, and a great asset. As I told you before there is a lot of good Woman's Party material in this state, and we are beginning to get it" (NWP Records, Lillian Ascough to Mabel Vernon, May 17–20, 1918, Reel 61, 15–31 May 1918).

Messer's dedication to the NWP remained strong throughout the period leading up to the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. In March 1919, she hosted events in Wisconsin for the "Prison Special"—a train chartered by the NWP that brought suffragists who had been imprisoned for their political protests to speak in areas of the country that were seen as particularly vital to the passage of legislation securing women's voting rights (NWP Records, newspaper clippings, Prison Special Tour, Reel 91–6, 1889–1936). In the years that followed the amendment's ratification, Messer became chair of the Wisconsin Teachers' Council of the National Woman's Party (Dunn County News 1923). Here, she turned her attention to labor issues as an advocate and speaker for equal pay for women teachers. While Messer was an outspoken advocate and speaker on women's issues within the political sphere in this period, spiritual concerns would increasingly inform her work and her approach to teaching and scholarship.

### *The Modern Family and the Call for a New Spiritual Idealism*

After retiring from the Corcoran School in Washington, DC, Edmund Messer and his wife, Emma, lived with their daughter in Menomonie, Wisconsin. The following year, Edmund died. Mother and daughter would stay close and continue to live together in the ensuing years. In 1923, Messer and her mother moved to Berkeley, California, where Messer took a position as an instructor at the University of California, Berkeley, Extension. Accounts indicate that her courses were extremely popular. A 1924 profile on Messer in *The Christian Science Monitor* explored her innovations as a teacher on issues relating to the family and modern womanhood. The piece began, "That the 'new woman,' liberated from social, civic and political inhibitions, is destined to effect as notable a change in the conventional standards of the family as in those of politics and government, is the predicate upon which Miss Mary Burt Messer is successfully founding her new



Photograph by Boyé

Miss Mary Burt Messer

## *Ideals of the Home, a College Course*

San Francisco, Calif.  
Special Correspondence

high and exalted purpose, and charity  
work is today more apt to be palli-

Image 2: Mary Burt Messer, *Christian Science Monitor*, April 3, 1924.

course on family life in the University of California.” The article went on to note that Dr. Richardson, the director of the extension division at the University of California, had responded to “student interest . . . so pronounced” that he had “placed every facility at the command of Miss Messer” (*Christian Science Monitor* 1924, 8). The profile not only connected Messer’s approach to the study of sociology with spiritual questions but also signaled what would be her lifetime conviction to a new religious vision for modernity, based on the emergence and influence of a new kind of womanhood: “Should we not note the decline of mere sentimentality, a new relation between that most misunderstood of all words ‘love’ and religion,” Messer asserted. “The setting of principle above impulse, an alertness to higher influences current in the world today and a fearlessness in the establishment of ideals that represent an advance beyond tradition—are not these vital in the social transformation going on in the family.” She then outlined how this perspective applied to her teaching:

In my course I make bold to touch upon love as defined in the Old Testament and in the New, and I submit that already there is evident the beginnings of a more spiritual tone of comradeship between men and women built on understanding and not illusion, honesty not deceit, love not infatuation. . . . The new woman, freed from her old provincialism and restricted outlook, is working in ways unseen and if my course has any merit over the ordinary sociological treatment of the family, it is in my sincere effort to chronicle and elucidate these changes. (*Christian Science Monitor* 1924, 8)

Of particular interest and focus in Messer’s teaching and writing were her insights and observations on divorce, a practice that had been steadily growing in the United States and which was significantly outpacing its application and presence in other Western nations. The question of how to respond to this change in the family garnered Messer attention both in the mainstream press and through religious organizations. *The New York Times* addressed the subject and Messer’s research in a piece titled “Science and Society Take Up Divorce Evil.” It noted that “the investigation into the causes leading up to the disintegration of the American family are to be conducted for the University of California by Miss Mary Burt Messer, a sociologic investigator of Washington and New York, with a teaching experience from the University of Wisconsin.” The article provided ample coverage of Messer’s ideas on the subject, including the following quote:

There is a universal call for a restatement of the aims and ideals of the home and for a widening of the horizon in the handling and consideration of the question of marriage. The home, as it now exists, is a feudal institution, in most cases, that has survived right up to date. It is narrow and insufficient to the needs of the modern woman. While sensationalism, hysteria, and light-mindedness generally play no small part in our divorce chaos, it is equally true that, in many instances, divorce is the only means of escape from the feudal hangovers and tyranny of the home as it has been brought down through the centuries. . .

One thing stands out clearly in modern marriage. It has lost to a very large extent the religious authority which served to cement it together in the past. That loss calls for a substitute and the substitute must be idealism. If marriage will no longer be looked upon as a divinely ordained institution, neither must it be reduced to the basis of sheer partnership that can be dissolved with no more thought than a commercial partnership is dissolved. There is nothing so bleak as a home without a spiritual regard for each other on the part of the parties contracting it. (*New York Times* 1924, 16)

For Father Paul L. Blakely, the chief editorial writer of *America*, a weekly review published by the Jesuits, the issue of divorce was of deep concern, and Messer's thoughts on the subject deserved scrutiny. He wrote, "It is regrettably true that for a very large proportion of our people, marriage, even when celebrated in a church, has no religious significance. It is also true that for those who are dead to all religion, some substitute must be found. Miss Messer finds it in 'idealism.' But what is the 'ideal'?" (Blakely 1924, 73).

For Messer, a practical approach to finding that "ideal" presented itself in the spiritual teachings of Mary Baker Eddy and their application through the study and healing practices of Christian Science. In 1923, Messer undertook class instruction in Christian Science from Frank Gale, a Christian Science teacher and practitioner based in San Francisco. Gale had taken similar instruction in Christian Science from Mary Baker Eddy in 1888 (Gale 2011, 215). The design of class instruction in Christian Science as established by Mary Baker Eddy is to give the student a firm basis for continued study of Christian Science and in the practice of Christian Science healing. In her *Church Manual of the Mother Church: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, Boston*, Eddy (1895, 83) provided this direction for Christian Science teachers: "Teaching Christian Science shall not be a question of

money, but of morals and religion, healing and uplifting the race.” As Messer proceeded in her scholarly career, she increasingly and more explicitly applied the concept of “healing and uplifting the race” in her writing and teaching.

Messer’s experience in social work, political activism, and university teaching, in conjunction with her independent spiritual inquiry, informed her 1928 publication *The Family in the Making: A Historic Sketch*. In the book’s foreword, Dr. Leon J. Richardson, head of the extension school at the University of California, Berkeley, outlined the merging of Messer’s activist and academic backgrounds as the basis for her sociological study of the family:

The author of this book has devoted years to research in the field of the family—its history, its characteristics, its trend, having approached this study through social work carried on in New York City. . . . As a suffragist, actively participating in state and national campaigns, she gained further insight into the problems and tendencies of woman in contemporary life.

It was from this field that Miss Messer was invited to Wisconsin to undertake a task of academic research in the interests of the family. This task was undertaken under the most favorable conditions and required seven years of labor. During this time she taught her subject as a college course at Stout Institute, and later lectured on it under the auspices of the University of California Extension Division. (Messer 1928, vii–viii)

The book drew serious attention from leaders in the emerging academic field of sociology. Reviewers included Sophonisba Breckinridge, the first female graduate of the University of Chicago School of Law and co-founder of the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration; Manuel Conrad Elmer, who obtained one of the first doctorates in sociology from the University of Chicago and was a founder of the Department of Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh; and Ernest Groves, professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who “taught the world’s first college class in marriage in 1925” (*New York Times* 1946, 15).<sup>2</sup> These reviews and others reflected favorably on Messer’s contribution in advancing the field. Breckinridge (1929, 319) extolled Messer for taking on the subject of the “break-up of domestication” for modern-day women, noting, “Dr. Messer is not so frightened as some of the modern writ-

ers on the subject.” Elmer (1929; 1930, 110–11) highlighted the book’s spiritual focus in relation to the influence and potentiality of women. Groves (1928, 1957) commented that, in Messer’s work, “discussion goes forward with vigor and portrays the changing family with a skill that makes the subject-matter intensely interesting. It is a book of substance and one that starts thought.”

Near the end of *The Family in the Making*, in chapter twenty-four, titled “The Advance of Woman,” Messer turned to the life and ideas of Mary Baker Eddy, reflecting her deepening interest in Christian Science healing. For Messer, Eddy’s writings and healing work provided the answer to what she saw as Christian patriarchy’s evisceration or weakening of Christianity’s redemptive healing purpose:

The masculinization of the Christian Church—so complete as to have lost for centuries any trace of its historic origin—is thus to be accounted for in terms of the political and social dominance of the masculine half of the human race. Historic Christianity thus runs true to type as the religion of a patriarchate; but in so doing it is astonishing to see how it loses the potencies and uniqueness of Christianity itself, which was originally projected into life as a revelation at variance with patriarchal claims, the tendencies of an official priesthood exclusively identified with a régime of men. With this identification vanishes the very general faculty of healing, the doing of the “first works” so miraculous in character that the reputation of the early Christians was rather that of miracle-doers than dogmatic teachers. And this fixed masculine dominance not only prevails in the great Roman church, but penetrates with nearly undiminished force into the heretical movement of the Protestant Reformation. (Messer 1928, 349–50)

In contrast, Messer portrayed Christian Science as offering an immediate path to rediscovering the essence of Christian spirituality as one illuminated by healing. “Christian Science stands forth as a conception of the Christian religion drawn from woman’s insight,” Messer averred. “The maternal attribute of the divine is thus advanced in connection with the paternal attribute—not as in the poetic overtones of Virgin worship, but with the living potencies of an operative truth, a conception intimately associated with the restoration to Christianity of its lost power of healing” (351–2). Three years after the publication of *The Family in the Making*, Messer embraced the profession of practitioner of Christian Science healing. In 1931, she was formally listed in *The Christian Science Journal* as a Christian Sci-

ence practitioner—a position she maintained until near the time of her death in 1960. Still, her commitment to Christian Science healing would be both a source of inspiration and complication in the pursuit of her other professional interests.<sup>3</sup>

## *Practicing Christian Science as a Sociological and Political Thinker*

As the Christian Science church has no professional clergy, Christian Science practitioners assume some dimensions of pastoral care through their supportive healing work with patients and clients. A Christian Science Publishing Society pamphlet titled *Questions and Answers on Christian Science* explains that “A Christian Science practitioner is a person who gives his full time to the public practice of Christian Science healing. The work is both a ministry and a profession” (1974, 14). For Messer, social, political, and scholarly work was compatible with her Christian Science practice. Her articles on the social and political issues of the day, written from a Christian Science perspective, found a venue for a time in *The Christian Science Monitor*, which understands itself as a secular newspaper, guided by underlying spiritual values. Mary Baker Eddy had founded the paper in 1908 with the stated object “to injure no man, but to bless all mankind” (Eddy 1913, 353). The news organization’s website offers this description of its identity and mission: “The Monitor has built a reputation in the journalism world over the past century for the integrity, credibility and fair-mindedness of its reporting. It is produced for anyone who cares about the progress of the human endeavor around the world. . . . For many, that caring has religious roots. For many, it does not. The Monitor has always embraced both audiences” (*Christian Science Monitor* n.d.). Messer intended her writing for both audiences and was disappointed in March of 1943, when the *Monitor* chose to discontinue, after only one installment, what was to have been an extended series by her on spirituality and world events in the paper’s editorial section.

On March 1, 1943, during the fever of America’s involvement in World War II, Messer’s “The World We Have: A Study of Society Today by a Student of Christian Science” was published as the first article of the anticipated twenty-two-part series. A disclaimer at the

front of the piece indicated that it did “not constitute an authorized statement of Christian Science.” Still, the first installment, titled “As Man Awakes,” was strikingly bold in presenting a religious view of “spiritual society” as an alternative and answer to the strife of world conflict. The following gives a flavor of Messer’s voice and ideas in the piece:

To see the spiritual society as well as the spiritual individual is to realize the Christ. For in the Christ the rays of being converge, the children of God are seen as one. The individual is not lost, he is rather found in this at-one-ment. . . .

Such is the vision of reality which can save the world and give victory to the awakened. It will correct and heal at the same time the unawakened. No one is excluded from the good which it gives forth. But the false concept as such, with the man of its devising, is excluded and defeated. This is the way of healing and redemption for all alike. It is the way of ushering in the perfect order, and overturning every false one. (Messer 1943, 18)

A few months after the series’ sudden termination, Messer wrote to the Christian Science Church’s board of directors in their role of providing oversight of *The Christian Science Monitor*. In the letter, Messer was forthcoming about what it meant for her to be both a writer and a practitioner of Christian Science healing. While she did not complain about the discontinuation of her series, it represented a watershed moment for her, triggering her communication to the board, whom she addressed as “Friends.” The letter’s opening paragraph was direct and confessional:

Whether or not such insight and experience as I have as a writer will be cast into the Christian Science movement or out of it will appear very shortly, since I am at the point of having laid on the altar of the Cause everything you can mention—inheritance, income, reputation, established abilities, a live contact with the public, and so on. This is one of those moments having the quality of end, but also of beginning. It seems a bright one. (Messer to Christian Science Board of Directors, May 13, 1943, Archives of the FCCS)

What Messer went on to propose was not so much a new beginning as a reformulation of the work she had done on the “The World We Have” series in conjunction with ongoing contributions to the paper. She explained:



The prerequisite to my proposal, as I understand it, would be the publication as a serial or in the form of a dollar book, of my MS., *The World We Have*, offering a basis for the student of the current work I propose. All of this would certainly stimulate the sale of Mrs Eddy's writings and widen the field of Christian Science study.

As to the proposal itself: Next fall after Labor Day I would like to go down to Washington, now the capital of the world, and from there send up every week to the Monitor a carefully wrought out interpretation of a world topic. This could appear regularly on Saturdays (with the approval of the editors!) as a double space but short article in The Wide Horizon corner. This should not guide individual thinking but supply it with needed factors. It might still be called *The World We Have*.

However, she offered a caveat about her proposed editorial mis-sives, stating that "neither should the references to Christian Science be too frequent," an indication of how she would not "guide individual thinking." The observation reflected Messer's awareness of the need to modify explicit religious and metaphysical commentary in her editorializing. This concern represented something of a turn-about for the paper as, in its introduction to the would-be series, it had noted:

Readers began to ask that we project and examine the same basic problems of peace and war from a more spiritual viewpoint.

The series of twenty-two articles that opens today is the result. It does not constitute an authorized statement of Christian Science but an analysis of world problems by a student of Christian Science. Thus it is not a doctrinal statement, and we are confident that readers—whether or not they are Christian Scientists—will find its approach lucid, understandable, and inspiring. (Messer 1943, 18)

Evidently, some loss of confidence had occurred immediately after publication of the first installment, as the *Monitor* determined from its legal department that it was under no obligation to continue the series. The answer to its discontinuation lies in understanding how this essentially secular newspaper mediates its place in the world of news gathering and commentary within the construct of the religious organization that supports it.

Mary Baker Eddy had made provisions for the paper to carry one religiously-framed article. Otherwise, the paper followed a regimen in accordance with best practices in the mainstream press. As long-

time *Monitor* editor, Erwin Canham (1958, 53) explained, “Eddy did not believe that the *Monitor* should be just a denominational organ, speaking only to Christian Scientists or prospective converts. The *Monitor* must be a ‘real’ newspaper. But it could or should carry a regular daily article of explicitly applied Christian Science thinking.” Authors of the daily religious article remained anonymous.<sup>4</sup>

The radicalism of Messer’s emerging spiritual voice overstepped the bounds of a “real newspaper,” even for a news source like *The Christian Science Monitor*, which sees its journalistic mission as helping to advance spiritual ideals. While Messer wanted credit for her expertise and writing on political and social matters, she could not temper a spiritual vision in her approach to topical political and social issues. As a Christian Science practitioner, the Church expected that her primary professional focus was to respond to individual patients’ needs. Messer saw that calling as allowing for, if not inspiring, her work as a scholar-healer. In the same letter to the Christian Science Board of Directors noted above, she cited advice she had received early in her career as a book reviewer at the *Evening Star* in Washington, DC. “The editor gave me words of wisdom,” she recalled. “He said, ‘Find out what you can do that nobody else is doing, your own contribution, and offer it to the public. Everyone has something unique to give.’” The discontinued series had promised such an opportunity for Messer.

In a personal letter from several years later, Messer was more open in expressing her feelings about what she had encountered in attempting to fulfill her sense of calling within the channels of the Christian Science Church organization. “It is institutionally confined, in the main, to healing the body,” she wrote, “and the one who takes out exactly the same process into the healing of the body politic is in for quite a few batterings” (Messer to Alice Burt Nichols, February 24, 1951, Holt-Messer family papers). Needless to say, her proposal did not come to fruition. After 1943, Messer had a number of pieces published in *The Christian Science Monitor*, all poems.

Notwithstanding the professional setback, Messer’s dedication to Christian Science continued to deepen, even as she strove to fulfill her special sense of individual purpose and calling. Messer turned again to work on women’s issues through consulting and advocacy activities for both the National Woman’s Party and the World Woman’s Party, which Alice Paul had founded to advance women’s equal rights internationally. In Messer’s correspondence with Alice Paul and others in the National Woman’s Party and the World Woman’s

Party during the 1940s and 1950s, she applied more decidedly religious references and language in discussing her political work. Messer was involved with the National Woman's Party and World Woman's Party in their work with the United Nations in its formative years. She was appointed a National Woman's Party consultant to the San Francisco Conference in 1945, which established the UN. She represented the National Woman's Party at the 1946 UN Assembly, in which she supported efforts that resulted in a resolution for all member nations to give equal rights to women (Mary Baker Eddy Library 2020). At the San Francisco Conference, Messer sent a letter to Paul acknowledging Paul's appointment of her as "a representative of the National Woman's Party," with the added proviso, "so far as that carries, which will be just as far as the design of God demands" (NWP Records, Mary Burt Messer to Alice Paul, May 7, 1945, Box II: 156). She also continued to write, publishing books through the Philosophical Library based in New York City. Through these works, she found a vehicle to expand upon ideas in "The World We Have: A Study of Society Today by a Student of Christian Science," presumably including content from later entries for the series that never made it to publication in *The Christian Science Monitor*.

Messer was proud of her publications through the Philosophical Library, a small publisher dedicated to works of serious intellectual merit.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, Messer's *East and West, as Face to Face and Side by Side: A Christian Scientist Replies to the Communist Manifesto* (1950), and *The Science of Society: The Identity of Each as Godlike Embracing All* (1959) received much scantier attention than her earlier work *The Family in the Making* (1928). A tiny handful of reviews for *East and West* emerged in journals for specific religious denominations. The *American Catholic Sociological Review* gave a terse summation of the book's thesis, noting, "According to the author, the true solution of our contemporary problems can be found only by applying Mary Baker Eddy's rules for spiritual healing to the body politic" (1950, 268). The *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* was more caustic, dismissing Christian Science engagement with Marxism as "rather a funny idea" (Pittenger 1951, 114).

*The Science of Society* found little traction as well. In a review that Christian Science and Mary Baker Eddy scholar, Robert Peel, prepared for *The Christian Science Monitor* but which was not published, he gave this account of the book: "The cryptic subtitle of this book—'The Identity of Each as Godlike Embracing All'—indicates something of the difficulty it poses for the average reader. This is nei-

ther sociology nor religion as he is accustomed to think of them” (Peel to Christian Science Board of Directors, February 16, 1959, Archives of the FCCS). Nevertheless, Peel drew from the title in the first book of his three-volume biography on Mary Baker Eddy. In *Mary Baker Eddy: The Years of Discovery*, Peel cited Messer’s references to Thomas Paine and “The Right of Man” as illustrative of a Christian Science perspective on the unity of man” (Peel 1966, n. 42). Peel’s appreciation of Messer stemmed both from a personal friendship at a time when they both lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and from her writings in *Family in the Making*. In Peel’s *Health and Medicine in the Christian Science Tradition*, published as part of a series on “Health/Medicine and the Faith Traditions,” Peel made several references to Messer’s work. Peel saw in Messer a capacity to place Eddy’s writing within a wider context, noting that, “Today we may be a little closer to the realization of Mary Burt Messer’s 1928 conjecture that eventually Christian Science would be seen as ‘a contribution to the larger ‘science’ that must avail itself of every true perception and attribute of mind in its quest for knowledge” (Peel 1988, 46).

## Conclusion

While Messer struggled with increased marginalization of her work in the later years of her career, both within and outside of Christian Science circles, it is worth noting that this marginalization was in contrast to the satisfaction she took in the development of her vision and voice. Like her grandfather, John Wesley North, she thought and acted big. In a letter to Alice Paul, she commented on how she viewed her book *East and West*:

My publisher is a very fine one, with many of the outstanding international writers. Einstein’s new book (the more biographical one) is at the top of the list of “Books of Lasting Value,” on the jacket, my coming along toward the bottom. I like this juxtaposition because Einstein sets forth one world from the material standpoint, which has its relation to the one world disclosed to Mrs. Eddy through spiritual perception, and which I treat as root and basis of the one world of political structure being brought to birth. (NWP Records, Messer to Alice Paul, October 9, 1950, World Woman’s Party Records, Box II: 281)

Ultimately, the voice that Messer brought to these works was based on her understanding and experience of spiritual healing through Christian Science. As a Christian Scientist and Christian Science practitioner, she knew the applicability of spiritual healing on an individual basis. However, for Messer, this dedication to healing also correlated with her social activism. As she stated in *The Science of Society*, “It is indissolubly connected with its outcome of healing, widely known today in its individual aspect; its vast potential of collective application not yet suspected by the world” (Messer 1959, 3). While it may have seemed “cryptic” or unconventional to infuse a spiritually healing perspective within the academic medium, this is the arena to which Messer’s family background, her development as a feminist thinker and activist, her experience as an educator and scholar, and her commitment to Christian Science healing naturally led.

For Messer, it was critically important for Christian Science and the lifework of Mary Baker Eddy to have a place and reforming influence in scholarship. “Here is an astonishing omission from the scholarly standpoint,” she asserted about Mary Baker Eddy’s thought in *The Science of Society*. “It is not the same thing as doctrine. Here are the directions, they have to do with how to heal and how to act and how to love” (Messer 1959, 65). It is worthwhile noting that Messer attempted to hold herself to this healing standard. Regarding her sometimes-fraught relationship with the administrators of the Christian Science Church, she came to a place of resolution as she noted in a letter to her cousin and friend, Alice Burt Nichols, a few years after her *Monitor* disappointment: “I left with a lovely feeling of fellowship with the Board of Directors in Boston,” she wrote of a meeting she had with them before returning to her home in California (Mary Burt Messer to Alice Burt Nichols, October 7, 1948, sic, Holt-Messer family papers).

Whether considered through a Christian Science prism, that of another spiritual orientation, or an academic framework, Messer’s story allows us to see how the religious thinker and practitioner can influence the scholarly domain with a spirit of healing. Messer’s feminism and academic interests led her into the field of sociology, with a focus on family studies. As an early voice in this domain of academic study, Messer deserves renewed attention, particularly as she engaged with subjects like divorce in classroom and academic settings, in which there was little or no precedent for its airing for contemporary discussion. In her advancement and accomplishments

as a teacher in higher education—what one might call continuing higher education for adults—she is a model of bridging the academic/“real world” divide. Her research and teaching at the Stout Institute and the University of California, Berkeley, Extension, drew from her firsthand knowledge of social work and women’s rights activism. At stake for her was a conviction about the importance of revitalized and revolutionized spirituality as essential to social and political progress, especially regarding core human institutions like the family. As Messer grew as a spiritual thinker and healer, she attempted to bridge the spiritual and sociopolitical divide in publishing and journalism. In this respect, she met a strong measure of disappointment and even condescension. Still, Messer’s career and approach to scholarship and teaching within the academy have lessons for us today as the discipline of religious studies faces challenges as to where it belongs in the academy. Messer’s life shines light from an earlier generation on what it means to be a spiritual activist scholar.

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## Notes

- 1 Rousmaniere (1970, 46) writes that “three-fifths of all settlement residents between 1889 and 1914 were women and, of these, almost nine-tenths had been to college.”
- 2 For more on Breckenridge, Elmer, and Groves, see: Becky Beaupre Gillespie, “Reclaiming Sophonisba,” University of Chicago: Law School. Accessed Nov. 18, 2020. [www.law.uchicago.edu/news/new-book-sophonisba-breckridge-jd-1904-offers-fresh-insights-forgotten-feminist](http://www.law.uchicago.edu/news/new-book-sophonisba-breckridge-jd-1904-offers-fresh-insights-forgotten-feminist). See “The Guide to the Manuel Conrad Elmer Papers 1907-1980,” University of Chicago Library. Accessed Nov. 18, 2020. [www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.ELMER](http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/scrc/findingaids/view.php?eadid=ICU.SPCL.ELMER). See *National Council of Family Relations (NCFR) History Book*, Ernest Groves: [history.ncfr.org/people/ernestgroves](http://history.ncfr.org/people/ernestgroves).
- 3 Requirements for listing as a Christian Science practitioner in the *Christian Science Journal* include having completed formal instruction in Christian Science from an authorized teacher of Christian Science and a substantiated record of healing. Applicants for listing must provide references from those whom they have successfully treated with the result of a complete healing: with at least two of these healings having specifically addressed physical ills. See [christianscience.secure.force.com/cspapplication](http://christianscience.secure.force.com/cspapplication). Accessed January 15, 2020.
- 4 As of 2009, the *Christian Science Monitor* has begun to include author names for its daily religious article, “A Christian Science Perspective.” Articles typically run between 400 and 600 words in length.
- 5 “The Philosophical Library is one of the oldest and most respected publishers of academic, philosophical, and religious texts still operating today.” *Philosophical Library Authors*. Accessed November 20, 2020. [www.philosophicallibrary.com/philosophical-library-authors](http://www.philosophicallibrary.com/philosophical-library-authors).