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How Unity School of Christianity Adopted Eastern Religious Ideas

On New Year's Eve 1914 a large crowd gathered to dedicate the new four-story Unity Administration building in Kansas City, Missouri. Bundled in heavy winter coats, the people stood in the dark street before two giant limestone columns. Myrtle and Charles Fillmore, founders of Unity School of Christianity, stood near the building as handwritten blessings from around the world were added to the cornerstone. At midnight the dark structure "suddenly flashed into light; the front doors swung open and the chimes began to ring."¹

For Unity folks celebrating 1915, there was no champagne! Instead, they gathered inside for a service of thanksgiving and praise. Charles Fillmore shared how a foundation must begin with a great idea. The analogy of a structure was appropriate as his address described how Unity was built on the "right concept of God as Spirit." He proclaimed that "the New Jerusalem is not to be in Palestine, but in the heart of the American continent."² As the people toured the new building, with a lobby fountain surrounded by ferns, they may have wondered if heaven had already arrived.

Today the international Unity religious movement is sometimes described as a positive, practical, progressive approach to Christianity. Its spiritual communities and publications utilize the Bible, Jesus' teachings and prayer. And yet, Unity claims to honor the universal principles in all religions. This paper will begin by describing Unity's Christian origins as well as the religious and literary transmission of Hindu and Buddhist ideas into its theology. It will explore the people and books that influenced Unity's founders. Ultimately Unity's application of syncretism, mysticism and spiritual evolution allowed for the integration of Eastern religious concepts.

¹ The Dedication, *Weekly Unity*, January 20, 1915, 2.

² Charles Fillmore, The Foundation and Object of the Unity Work, *Unity*, February 1915, 87, 88, 91.

Unity's Unorthodox Leaders

Christianity has long been a diverse religion with diverse points of view about Jesus Christ. But few American Protestants had adopted modernist views of scripture or theology in the late 19th century, when Unity began. Philip Jenkins, author of *Mystics and Messiahs*, argues that “fundamentalist evangelicalism,” or what Marcus Borg simply calls “common Christianity,” has been a powerful part of the nation’s religious center since its birth.³ In the late 19th century, common Christianity insisted on beseeching prayer, belief in salvation from Jesus’ death, required religious pledges and the notion of religious exclusivism.

Given their early biographies, the unorthodox religious leadership of the Fillmores seems an unlikely prospect. The pair held some typical Midwestern values and were in many ways average middle-class people. From her birth in 1845, Myrtle Fillmore learned the religious values of the Methodist Episcopal Church her family attended near the small settlement of Pagetown, Ohio. Educated at Oberlin College, she set off to teach school in Clinton, Missouri and later in Denison, Texas.

Myrtle and Charles Fillmore met each other at a literary meeting in Denison and the two began a long friendship that led to their marriage. Charles worked for the railroad in Denison. He had been born in 1854 on the Chippewa Indian Reservation near St. Cloud, Minnesota, where his father worked as a government official. In his fractured family, he was largely self-educated and learned Christianity through self-interest rather than regular attendance. Eventually the couple settled in Kansas City where Charles sold real estate.

In 1886 Myrtle Fillmore began an earnest exploration of Christian Science and personal meditation. Charles eventually joined her as they studied with independent religious leaders, many of whom were dissidents of the Church of Christ, Scientist

³ Philip Jenkins, *Mystics and Messiahs; Cults and New Religions in American History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 5.

founded by Mary Baker Eddy. The Fillmores first opened their home to pray with neighbors. In 1889 they began publishing a spiritual magazine titled *Modern Thought*.

Many of Unity's perspectives of Christianity were in direct contrast to Christian evangelical views. The Fillmores' first publishing endeavor followed a host of religious scandals in the same decade as a series of publications, court cases and organizations battled the growing influence of Christian Science, Theosophy and Mormonism.⁴ Unity became part of a new religious lay movement known as New Thought,⁵ groups that adopted progressive Christian perspectives, as well some Eastern spiritual ideas. Just as other groups did, Unity challenged the common Western understanding of the Divine.

People Who Influenced Unity

There was no Buddhist monk that showed up on the Fillmore's front porch in Kansas City. Instead they united with the growing American interest in Eastern religious ideas. They also attended the Parliament of World Religions in Chicago in September 1893. In that instance the world's religious traditions came to them! The Parliament, which marked the first formal gathering of representatives of Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, was held during the World's Columbian Exposition, a world's fair.⁶ We do not know who the Fillmores listened to or how long they attended the gathering. Their interest in Christian Science suggests that they may have attended some of the Christian Science gatherings held in conjunction with the festival. While they may have learned much from the Parliament's speakers, the Fillmore's teachers were all Americans who shared their fascination with Eastern philosophy. Though they dialogued with many New Thought leaders, the Fillmores found blueprints in the lives of three main teachers: Emma Curtis Hopkins, Annie Rix Militz and R. C. Douglass.

⁴ Jenkins, 35.

⁵ The New Thought movement includes a number of organizations including the Centers for Spiritual Living (Religious Science), Divine Science, Seicho-No-Ie, Unity and other groups. Seicho-No-Ie is primarily located in Japan, Brazil and the west coast of the United States.

⁶ Besides various Eastern religious leaders, Mary Baker Eddy, founder of the Church of Christ, Scientist spoke at the Parliament.

Emma Curtis Hopkins (1844-1925) provided some of the most profound influences on the Fillmore's ideas. She had been a prominent associate of Mary Baker Eddy in Boston. After leaving the Church of Christ, Scientist in 1886, she practiced spiritual healing and taught classes at her own seminary in Chicago. She educated hundreds and ordained most of the early New Thought leaders. Charles and Myrtle first met her when she taught in Kansas City in March 1886; she ordained them in 1890.⁷ An eclectic teacher herself, she embraced the diversity of religious doctrines and sacred scriptures. Hopkins also taught Christian mysticism and healing.⁸

Annie Rix Miltz (1866-1924), founder of the Home of Truths on the west coast, was a student of Hopkins who later taught classes at Hopkins' Chicago seminary. A California native, Miltz first attended a class taught by Hopkins in San Francisco in 1887. In 1891, she was ordained as Christian Science minister by Hopkins. In August 1893, she began working for Unity. She wrote a series of Bible lessons. The Fillmores openly acknowledged their appreciation of her as a writer, teacher and healer. She became a popular lecturer and publisher of *Master Mind* magazine. Miltz' writing focused mainly on twelve mystical powers and allegorical Bible interpretation.⁹

Rufus Collins Douglass, a Boston metaphysical teacher, became a trusted source for the Fillmores and Unity, particularly about the Bible. When Douglass spoke in Kansas City in 1912 Charles Fillmore praised him his articles about the Bible and the Cabala. Charles said "he wrote good Bible Lessons. . . I can assure you that what Mr. Douglass says to you will be true and scientific from start to finish."¹⁰ One series of Bible lessons led to a small *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary* Unity published in 1914. Douglass also wrote about syncretism, intuition, and spiritual evolution.

⁷ Hopkins also instructed Nona Brooks, co-founder of Divine Science; H. Emilie Cady, author; Ernest Holmes, founder of Religious Science; Elizabeth Towne, publisher; Nellie Van Anderson, founder of the Church of Higher Life; and Ella Wheeler Wilcox, a poet.

⁸ In 1895 Hopkins closed her seminary and moved to New York City. Hopkins' followers published her lectures in books after her death in 1925.

⁹ Controversy surrounded Miltz' death on June 22, 1924. Some of her followers talked of her ascension, believing she had overcome death.

¹⁰ Healing Meeting, *Weekly Unity*, July 10, 1912, 2.

Books That Influenced Unity

There was no great Asian trek in the Fillmore's lives. Actually during the first forty years of their organization, they rarely left Kansas City. They managed a family life and administered an ever growing religious structure. Instead of travelers, they became avid readers of Eastern religious literary sources. The Fillmores did not read or speak any languages other than English. So, they relied on English translations of Eastern texts from the late 19th century. Everything they learned had been filtered and translated by Westerners. They adopted some Eastern religious ideas from the works of the American Transcendentalists, Theosophists and the Vedanta Society. The ideas the Fillmores discovered helped form Unity theology.

Two sources indicate the books the Fillmores read. The first source is the Fillmore Family Book Collection, today housed in the Unity Library and Archives. It represents the family's interest in history, religion and literature.¹¹ The original contents of the library are unknown. The remaining collection contains no Hindu or Buddhist related works. The second source is the Fillmore's inventory of books they sold from the first issue of *Modern Thought*, published in April 1889. It advertised 109 books and 94 pamphlets that they sold from their one-room office in a downtown Kansas City office building.¹² The strongest emphasis among the works was on Christian Science, Theosophy and other esoteric publications. *Science and Health* by Mary Baker Eddy was the first on the list.

Unity people embraced ideas from the American Transcendentalists, especially Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882). The Transcendentalists were reading the *Bhagavad Gita* and exploring Eastern concepts, including vegetarianism. Emerson is best known as a writer and public lecturer who captivated generations of Americans with his views about the nature of humanity, individualism and religion. Myrtle Fillmore

¹¹ The Fillmore Family Collection (3035) includes literature and poetry by Emerson, Longfellow, Shelley, Whittier, Hawthorne, Poe and Shakespeare.

¹² The sale inventory of *Modern Thought* also included works about Judaism and the Kabala and a book called *Pearls of Faith* or *Islam Rosary*.

treasured at least two of his books. *Representative Man* and *Letters and Social Aims* were part of her personal library. The Fillmores also owned and sold copies of *Emerson's Essays*.

The Fillmores became familiar with the efforts of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) and the Theosophists. Blavatsky's life reads like a work of fiction. Born to an aristocratic Russian family she exhibited psychic abilities, traveled throughout the world and introduced many Eastern religious concepts to America from her office in New York City. Before the Fillmores began publishing their own books, they were selling ten Theosophical related books including Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*.¹³ Two of the Buddhist related books they sold were published by the Theosophical Society: *A Buddhist Catechism* by Henry Steel Olcott and *Esoteric Buddhism* by A.P. Sinnett.

In 1897 the Fillmores were selling seven pamphlets by Swami Vivekananda and offering his biweekly newspaper, *The Brahmavadin*.¹⁴ Vivekananda started his adult life as a quiet monk and became an international speaker promoting the philosophies of Vedanta and yoga in the West. They may have heard Vivekananda speak at the Parliament of World Religions in 1893. To date no Unity records indicate that the Fillmores met Vivekananda.¹⁵

The Fillmore's 1889 inventory included other Eastern related texts. They sold two Hindu works: *The Bhagavad Gita* and *The Yoga Philosophy*. They sold two more Buddhist works: *Legends and Theories of Buddhists* by Robert Spence Hardy and *The Light of Asia* by Edwin Arnold. Hardy was a British Methodist minister and missionary to Sri Lanka who believed Christianity could prove Buddhism wrong. Arnold's pamphlet was an epic poem about the Buddha. He was a British journalist and poet who lived in

¹³ *Modern Thought*, April 1889, 14.

¹⁴ The pamphlets were "The Ideal of a Universal Religion," "The Cosmos," "The Hindu Conception of God – The Atman," "Bhakti Yoga – Devotion," "The Real and the Apparent Man," "Karma Yoga," and "The Vedanta Philosophy," *Unity*, July 1, 1896, 46.

¹⁵ The closest Vivekananda came to Kansas City was a November 1893 trip to Des Moines, Iowa. In 1900 he did speak at the Home of Truth in Alameda, California led Annie Rix Millitz. From "A Chronological Record of Swami Vivekananda in the West," <http://www.vedanta.org/rko/vivekananda/chronology.pdf>, Retrieved March 23, 2011.

India for a time. His poem provided curious Americans with a largely positive understanding of Buddhist philosophy.

Syncretism

The Fillmores enthusiastically adopted the perspective of religious syncretism. Syncretism combines different forms of belief and may also attempt to synthesize disparate ideas or practices. Like others before them, the Fillmores took on a personal research pursuit to decide for themselves ultimate truths. While today the idea of one God expressed in different religions is especially popular, the notion was relatively new when the Fillmores began their quest.

This attention to other religions was in direct contrast to Christian evangelical views. Common Christianity in the 19th and early 20th century held the premise of Christianity's superiority and Jesus' uniqueness. As evidence against other world religious concepts they referred to John 14:6 where Jesus states: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." For evangelicals, belief in the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ on the cross was essential. Christian evangelicals viewed Christianity as the only valid religious path.

Emma Curtis Hopkins and the writings of the Transcendentalists, Theosophists and the Vedanta Society influenced the Fillmores' interest in religious syncretism. Hopkins praised world religious traditions and honored ancient spiritual teachers.¹⁶ In her 1888 lessons she noted the "remarkable analogies" of spiritual texts. She suggested that because their "life teachings" were "wonderfully identical" they deserved "attention and investigation."¹⁷ In her 1894 Genesis Series Hopkins praised the scriptures of the world, including those from India, Arabia, Egypt, Persia, and Palestine.¹⁸

¹⁶ Gail M. Harley, *Emma Curtis Hopkins: Forgotten Founder of New Thought*. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 83; P. Joanna Rogers, *Emma Curtis Hopkins: An Appreciation for Her Students*. (Dayton, Ohio: Wright State University, 2009), 116.

¹⁷ Emma Curtis Hopkins, *Class Lessons 1888*. (Marina del Rey, CA: DeVorss & Company, 1977), 13.

¹⁸ Rogers, 117.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and H.P. Blavatsky shared an interest in religious commonalities. In *Letters and Social Aims* Emerson explored how similar ideas from India, Arabia and Greece show up in Christian dogmas. Blavatsky also viewed Christianity as simply a reworking of ancient ideas. She compared the similarities in the legends of Krishna, Gautama-Buddha, and Jesus. Blavatsky was critical of Christians who “did not confess that they own next to everything to the Hindu religions.”¹⁹ In her book, *Isis Unveiled*, she wrote “. . . it is undeniable that the theologies of all the great nations dovetail together and show that each is a part of “one stupendous whole.”²⁰ Blavatsky imagined the “universal brotherhood of humanity” to be her purpose.

Swami Vivekananda spoke directly about syncretism in his welcome address at the Parliament of World Religions: “I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true.”²¹ Vivekananda’s goals offered a great example for the Fillmores.²²

¹⁹ H. P. Blavatsky, *Isis Unveiled; a Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Theology*, (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1972), 539.

²⁰ Blavatsky, 39.

²¹ Vivekananda, Response to Welcome, September 11, 1893. From <http://www.ramakrishna.org/chcgull.htm>. Retrieved February 1, 2011.

²² Paramahansa Yogananda, founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship, visited Kansas City in January 1932 for a series of lectures. It is unknown if Charles Fillmore attended the event.

Mysticism

The Fillmore's embrace of mysticism allowed Unity to integrate Eastern ideas. Mysticism is the experience of direct communion with ultimate reality. Mystics report direct knowledge of God and spiritual truths through subjective means like intuition. Of course, mysticism was not unknown in Western religion. Christian mystics like Origen, Meister Eckhart, Catherine of Siena, John of the Cross, and George Fox all found inspiration in personal experience with the Divine. The predominant and common Christian view of prayer was in direct contrast to Unity's concept. Christian evangelicals believed in the legitimacy of beseeching prayer and they cited Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 11:3-4 as a warning about false prophets and anything other than "biblical Christianity." Unity adopted the notion that an individual may unite with the Divine, rejecting separation and beseeching prayer.

Myrtle Fillmore first experimented with mystic practice beginning in 1886 and led the way for others. The personal experiences of this once ailing housewife and her entrepreneurial husband were essential, but their mentors and the writings of Emerson and Blavatsky served as a cornerstone for the Fillmore's path into mysticism. Hopkins encouraged her students on the mystic path:

Begin with yourself to repent, to return. Lift up the willing inner sight toward the Supreme One, whose Soundless Edict through the ages is "Look unto Me, and be ye saved." Taste the first manna which the upward watch sprinkles over the unfed brain and heart.²³

Hopkins explored the steadfast vision of mystic practice by citing the right thinking concept from Hindu and Zoroastrian mystics.

Annie Rix Militz advocated meditation throughout her writings. Much of her 1913 book *The Renewal of the Body* focused on her personal divine guidance about the soul and the body. Some of her writing spoke of how sexual desire must be stilled in order for the spiritual body to be realized. She notes twelve "chief departments" of the body

²³ Hopkins, *High Mysticism: A Series of Twelve Studies in the Wisdom of the Sages of the Ages*. (Cornwall Bridge, CT: High Watch Fellowship, n.d.), 24.

and their respective qualities. For example, she viewed the head and five senses as symbolizing “thoughts concerning intelligence.”²⁴ To Militz each part of the body represented a different mystical power.

In his book *Spiritual Evolution or Regeneration: The Law and Process for Unfolding the Christ in Consciousness*, R.C. Douglass referred to Hinduism as the “parent” of true mysticism, even Hebrew mysticism. He suggested that “Jesus of Nazareth was a prince among mystics; and by using the Spiritual powers inherent in himself he was able to overcome physical laws by understanding and employing the higher Spiritual laws.”²⁵ Douglass addressed his readers “Through meditation you begin to live from the Spiritual; so that the Spiritual becomes natural to you. This is your higher natural. . . .”²⁶

In his book *Representative Man* Emerson suggests the importance of mysticism as he describes the plentiful writings of Swedenborg. Blavatsky also wrote about spiritual emanations in beings like Gautama-Buddha, Jesus and Krishna who fully understood their connection to God. She cited Moses, Confucius, Plato and Christian saints as mystics who experienced periods of spiritual connection.²⁷ Like Hopkins and Douglass, Blavatsky cited guidance from her divine connection.

Spiritual Evolution

The Fillmores embrace of the concept of spiritual evolution allowed Unity to adopt Eastern ideas. Spiritual evolution may include spiritual and physical changes in an individual. It is about consciousness unfolding, developing, and changing. Myrtle’s healing from tuberculosis and Charles’ healing from a withered leg seemed miraculous to many. They cited their healings as a new understanding of the Divine, an evolutionary action.

²⁴ Annie Rix Militz, *The Renewal of the Body* (Holyoke, MA: Elizabeth Towne Co., 1913), 11.

²⁵ R. C. Douglass, *Spiritual Evolution or Regeneration: The Law and Process for Unfolding the Christ in Consciousness*. (Boston, MA: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard Co., 1903), 213.

²⁶ Douglass, 213.

²⁷ Blavatsky, 159.

The Fillmore's views conflicted with the common Christian concept of a single creation or an apocalyptic end-time. While Christian fundamentalists believed in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, Christian evangelicals shared their view of humanity as utterly corrupt and the Bible as a story of God's great epic battle. Citing verses, like Revelation 11:18, they explained the coming end of the world when the dead "should be judged" for their sins and God would destroy the earth. In order to be saved from the dramatic and dismal end, adherents must pledge their belief in their sinful nature and Jesus as Lord in order to be freed.

R. C. Douglass and H. P. Blavatsky may have influenced the Fillmore's interest in spiritual evolution. As mentioned before Douglass' book is titled *Spiritual Evolution or Regeneration: The Law and Process for Unfolding the Christ in Consciousness*. Based on Biblical texts, the book explored the awakening of the soul into greater expression. His book used two biblical analogies of spiritual growth. He used six steps equated with Mosaic symbolism and seven steps related to Jesus' life. For him these evolutionary steps represented the "order of life." He suggested that everyone could move from material understanding to "higher unfoldment" with "finer and more interior faculties" becoming the "more keenly active the more they are used."²⁸ Blavatsky too believed that humanity had once lived in an idyllic age and would again through spiritual evolution. Blavatsky referred to Plato and Jesus suggesting that humanity could live as unlimited spiritual beings rather than limited human beings.²⁹

Uncommon Christianity

Philip Jenkins, author of *Mystics and Messiahs*, suggests American history has recurring cycles of emerging new religious interest, followed by periods of reaction, speculation and scandal. He notes that "Extreme and bizarre religious ideas are so commonplace in American history that it is difficult to speak of them as fringe at all."³⁰

²⁸ Douglass, 337.

²⁹ Blavatsky, 345.

³⁰ Jenkins, 13;

Some fringe groups, like Unity opened to religious ideas from the East.³¹ As it built buildings, Unity constructed an uncommon Christianity.³² Its assembly of a theological system took time to integrate syncretism, mysticism and spiritual evolution into its theology.

In the first hours of 1915 faithful Unity folks and workers listened to Charles Fillmore equate Unity's message to Jesus' message. Yet his speech also pointed to his beliefs about syncretism, mysticism, and spiritual evolution. Though he never used the word, he spoke about syncretism reminding his audience of how Jesus' experiences were filled with the word of God, Divine Wisdom. He reminded his audience that "the Scriptures of all religious people tell of Truth, but none have a complete revelation."³³

In another address, this time to the 1923 Unity Conference, Charles Fillmore explained how he and Myrtle had begun their long process of assembling a cohesive set of beliefs:

We had, studied various religions but were not satisfied to accept any of them wholly. We said: "There are so many religions. Let us go ahead for ourselves; let us do what we think is best, and ask God to be with us and to lead us and guide us." We began our work in one little room down town, and it has grown gradually. We have studied many "isms," many cults. . . . We have borrowed the best from all religions. . . We found that we could group under the name, Unity, all the different cults that we had thought out and worked out. In this way we established the fundamentals of the doctrine called Unity.³⁴

As the Fillmores synthesized various Eastern spiritual ideas they largely neglected other world religions. Quotes of Mohammed, Confucius, pagan or indigenous religious leaders are largely absent in Unity writings. The people they knew and the books they read simply did not address Islam, Chinese, or the indigenous religions of the world.

³¹ The early 20th century also gave rise to occult groups and millennial groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Worldwide Church of God. See Richard Kyle, *The Religious Fringe: A History of Alternative Religions in America*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 93.

³² Unity School of Christianity was incorporated in 1914 and brought together ministries of education, prayer and publishing.

³³ Charles Fillmore, 1915, 88.

³⁴ Charles Fillmore, Address of Welcome, Unity Conference, July 1923, Charles Fillmore Papers (3026), (Unity Village, MO: Unity Library and Archives), 1.

Muslims, for example, were largely absent from America until the early 20th century.³⁵ The first widely distributed English translation of the Koran was not published until 1917.

But Unity literature cited various world exemplars: Jesus was by far the ultimate example, along with various mystics of other cultures. Unity rejected the idea of the saving action of Jesus Christ's death. Instead in Unity's theological model, Jesus was a man who had attained enlightenment and was still helping others to attain enlightenment. Rather than a savior he became more of a bodhisattva and a superior teacher. Unity's adoption of syncretism allowed them to merge Eastern and Western religious ideas.

In the early hours of 1915, Unity people sat quietly as Charles Fillmore talked about mysticism. He described how Jesus' example "demonstrated the capacity of man to receive the inspiration and power of Divine Mind"³⁶ and how Divine Mind has "ever since been with us in dreams and visions, inspiration and spiritual quickenings."³⁷

Back in 1886, Myrtle Fillmore often felt ill and shrouded her symptoms with a variety of remedies. After hearing Eugene B. Weeks, a Christian Science practitioner, she began to try mystical practices. Some stories indicate that she sat with an empty chair across from her where she pictured Jesus sitting. She forgave herself and each of her body parts for thinking ill thoughts. She explained "it flashed upon me that I might talk to the life in every part of my body and have it do just what I wanted. I began to teach my body and got marvelous results." Her work included not allowing, in her words "any worried or anxious thoughts into my mind, and I stopped speaking gossipy, frivolous, petulant, angry words."³⁸ In a period of two years, Charles noted dramatic physical changes in her. Skeptical but curious, Charles adopted his own meditation process; at first it was an intellectual exercise. Later he reflected on his process: "In this

³⁵ In 1889 Edward W. Blyden, a scholar, traveled in the American East and South lecturing about Islam. Mohammad Alexander Russell Webb, an American convert to Islam, gave two lectures at the Parliament of World Religions in 1893. By 1908 Muslim immigrants (Turks, Kurds, Albanians, and Arabs) from the Ottoman Empire were immigrating to America.

³⁶ Charles Fillmore, 1915, 88.

³⁷ Charles Fillmore, 1915, 89.

³⁸ Myrtle Fillmore, How I Found Health, *Unity*, March 1, 1897, 207-208.

babel I will go to headquarters. If I am Spirit and this God they talk so much about is Spirit, we can somehow communicate, or the whole thing is a fraud.”³⁹

Unity sought to introduce mystical practices to average Americans. Unity authors often used the term prayer as synonymous with meditation. The misperception in the West that meditation was an alien or even dangerous practice, may have led to the common use of the word prayer within Unity. While many people think of prayer as words or a request to the Divine, Unity authors usually described prayer as a general process of spiritual awareness. Some of Unity’s earliest writers wrote about its contemplative process. H. Emilie Cady, in her book *Lessons in Truth*, argues,

At the great heart of humanity there is a deep and awful homesickness that never has been and never can be satisfied with anything less than a clear, vivid consciousness of the indwelling presence of God, our Father.⁴⁰

While Cady and other Unity authors use different words – connection, consciousness, acquaintance, recognition – they suggest that ultimately contemplative prayer is a unity with Spirit.⁴¹ Though there are differences in the meditation methods recommended by Unity teachers, the tradition encourages concentration and the Silence.

Concentration refers to exclusive attention, a close mental action. This is a period of prolonged stilled focus on spiritual qualities. The focus may be on Divine ideas, described by ancient and medieval philosophers as archetypes found in the Absolute realm. Abundance, wholeness, wisdom, faith, understanding and order are examples of divine ideas. Frances Foulks, author of the book *Effectual Prayer*, proposes: “We concentrate on holy thoughts and build them strong within. These new thoughts which we use would not come from the intellect but from the superconscious or Christ Mind.”⁴² In his booklet, *The Silence*, E. V. Ingraham advises individuals to focus on one idea –

³⁹ Charles Fillmore, Not an answer but an opportunity, *Thought*, February 1894, 457.

⁴⁰ H. Emilie Cady. *Lessons in Truth* (Kansas City, Missouri: Unity Tract Society, 1903), 111.

⁴¹ Myrtle Fillmore once portrayed inner contemplation as the “kingdom within” and “a transmitter” that God can talk through. Myrtle Fillmore. Silence (Be Still and Know). Unpublished Manuscript. December 17, 1922. Charles Fillmore Papers (3026), (Unity Village, Missouri: Unity Library and Archives), 1.

⁴² Foulks, Frances. *Effectual Prayer*. (Kansas City, Missouri: Unity School of Christianity, 1927), 61.

the Divine Presence.⁴³ Concentration is a choice that moves the individual into deeper meditation.

As early as 1891, Unity encouraged participation in the Silence. For those joining the Silent Unity prayer ministry in prayer they wrote: “. . .go into the Silence and hold in consciousness a few moments: ‘BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD.’”⁴⁴ Foulks described how “the intellect ceases, the emotions are stilled, the body forgotten. Even the thought with which the meditation started becomes absorbed in the other holy thoughts that it has attracted, as they flow in to possess us.”⁴⁵ E. V. Ingraham wrote: “The fundamental purpose of the silence is to establish a means of conscious communion between God and man.”⁴⁶ Myrtle Fillmore described what was gained from the Silence: “It brings forth the best that is within us, the image and likeness of God that is waiting to be brought into activity, that will who itself after the fashion that God intended it should.”⁴⁷

Unity writers also wrote about what they gained from their mystical experiences. Some basic information about Charles Fillmore’s private mystical experiences is known. He focused on twelve body centers. Certainly the ideas of body centers were being discussed prior to Charles writing about the concepts. He acknowledges Hinduism for the idea of seven centers or chakras in his writings. He wrote about twelve centers. He also wrote often about the personal guidance of Spirit. Indeed the Fillmores made decisions about organizational changes, names, and real estate transactions based on subjective intuition!

In the early hours of 1915 Charles Fillmore also talked about spiritual evolution. He explained how Jesus and his followers “applied the laws in a field of mind beyond the range of average men.” For his audience he described the spiritual evolution in their

⁴³ E.V. Ingraham, *The Silence*. Pamphlet. Finishing Department Records (1126) (Unity Village, Missouri: Unity Library and Archives), 12.

⁴⁴ Silent Unity Societies, *Unity*, November 1891, 6.

⁴⁵ Foulks, 81.

⁴⁶ Ingraham, 9-10.

⁴⁷ The Silence: Extracts from Silence Services Conducted by Myrtle Fillmore, *Unity*, April 1924, 307.

midst. He stated “knowledge of the soul has wonderfully increased and especially during the last half-century.”⁴⁸ Instead of the dramatic and violent end-time worldview of common Christianity, Unity chose to view humanity on one great march to world peace. Two days after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, Unity workers gathered for a meeting. The then eighty-seven year old Charles Fillmore stated “We say that God is His world and PEACE must come; and when it does come, it will be the PEACE OF GOD.”⁴⁹

While Charles Fillmore had spoken often in his career about spiritual evolution, Myrtle Fillmore’s understanding of spiritual growth was shared through correspondence. She answered thousands of requests for prayer and religious questions with lengthy letters of encouragement and advice. Her letters averaged 5 to 6 pages in length with some as long as 12 to 14 pages. She shared her beliefs with individuals in a straightforward manner.⁵⁰

Myrtle did not believe in the customary Christian concept of original sin and saw it as a block to evolution. She taught that perfection was original to people. She viewed sin as error thoughts, mistakes, shortcomings, or unwise use of power. She wrote, “We should remember that man is always punished by his sins and not for them.”⁵¹ The influence of this carnal mind led people to view themselves and others as sinners. The negative traits in consciousness led to fear, worry, condemnation, pride, and dependency.⁵²

⁴⁸ Charles Fillmore, 1915, 90.

⁴⁹ Charles Fillmore, Unity Worker’s Attitudes on Japanese Crisis. December 9, 1941, 1. Unity Village, MO: Unity Library and Archives.

⁵⁰ After her death two books were compiled based on her writings: *Letters of Myrtle Fillmore* (1936) and *How to Let God Help You* (1956). Frances Foulks edited *Letters of Myrtle Fillmore* and Warren Meyer edited *How to Let God Help You*.

⁵¹ Thomas Witherspoon, *Myrtle Fillmore: Mother of Unity*, (Unity Village, MO: Unity Books, 1977), 285.

⁵² Neal Vahle, *Torch-Bearer to Light the Way: The Life of Myrtle Fillmore*, (Mill Valley, CA: Open View Press, 1996), 58.

Myrtle Fillmore felt very strongly that common Christianity pointed to failure as a common human characteristic. Those “sin-hunters” neglected to see Jesus life as an example to emulate.⁵³ She wrote:

In the past we have been led to believe that we are the children of physical parents and that we must get our impressions and education, form our living habits, and even do our work, in the way that they direct. Because of this we have failed to wake up to and find out that we are really God’s children and that we have inherited from Him a perfect mind which is capable of unfolding the wonderful Christ qualities as Jesus Christ unfolded His God-given mind.⁵⁴

With succinct words she reassured her correspondents. In a March 1929 letter Myrtle wrote “Man sometimes makes mistakes, in his efforts to discover and to develop and to use a power”.⁵⁵

Myrtle Fillmore believed that all of humanity could take on “the Christ” with the ability to follow the example set by Jesus. She wrote to one correspondent, “We are rejoicing that in the heights your consciousness and the consciousness of your dear ones, become merged in the Jesus Christ Consciousness and you are freed from every limitation.”⁵⁶ To another she wrote “manifesting the Christ is a matter of growth, and growth cannot be forced, so we must be patient with ourselves and with others that are beginning to find the path.”⁵⁷ The growth depended on the individual, “The transformation in to the Christ type of man is a matter of growth; and none of us can say just when, or how long [it will take for] the full awakening.”⁵⁸

Spiritual evolution was the solution the Fillmores proposed to spiritualize the world. They focused on right thinking, a concept from Buddhism. In 1922, Charles Fillmore delivered a sermon about how the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures contained

⁵³ Neal Vahle, *The Unity Movement: its Evolution and Spiritual Teachings*. (Philadelphia, PA: Templeton Foundation Press, 2002), 30

⁵⁴ Myrtle Fillmore, *How to Let God Help You*, (Lee’s Summit, MO: Unity School of Christianity, 1956), 14.

⁵⁵ Vahle, 1996, 60.

⁵⁶ Letter to Mrs. Jones, August 13, 1929. Myrtle Fillmore Papers (3026), (Unity Village, MO: Unity Library and Archives).

⁵⁷ Letter to Alice Gleason, November 28, 1930, Myrtle Fillmore Papers (3026), (Unity Village, MO: Unity Library and Archives).

⁵⁸ Letter to Mr. Weir, March 26 1929, Myrtle Fillmore Papers (3026), (Unity Village, MO: Unity Library and Archives).

the story of spiritual development.⁵⁹ The Bible, from Fillmore's point of view, was a history and a *prophecy* of humanity's spiritual advancement. Unity also integrated with the stories of Jesus' message from the Christian scriptures the Eastern fascination in the power of the mind⁶⁰.

Unity's adoption of spiritual evolution allowed acceptance of other Eastern ideas. Unlike other New Thought groups, the Fillmores and some of their students even adopted reincarnation and vegetarianism into their philosophy. They saw both as essential elements in evolution. The uncommon became more commonplace.

The Fillmores and their students built a Christian institution based on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Their uncommon Christianity adopted some Eastern beliefs. Though relatively small in numbers and not particularly adept at interfaith dialogue, Unity is still attempting to integrate positive practical concepts from Eastern religions. Beginning in the 19th century Unity chose a path of inclusion when most Americans followed common Christianity. Today we live in a multi-religious America. In her book *A New Religious America*, Diana L. Eck urges Americans to "hear and value" the variety of cultural faiths in our rapidly changing society.⁶¹ Through its embrace of syncretism, mysticism, and spiritual evolution, Unity still has the opportunity to demonstrate how listening to and honoring a variety of spiritual practices benefits our distressed world.

⁵⁹ Charles Fillmore, [Study of the New Testament]. Typewritten Lesson, October 1, 1922, (Unity Village, MO: Unity Library and Archives), 28.

⁶⁰ Unity's Statement of Faith, *Unity*, April 1921, 303; In a May 1921 article called "Concentration" Charles Fillmore explained how Hindu adepts levitated with the use of their spiritual mind power (*Unity*, May 1921, 406).

⁶¹ Diana Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 77.

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