

**A RENEWAL OF THE  
AMERICAN METAPHYSICAL RELIGION:  
AN ANALYSIS OF  
*CHRIST CHURCH UNITY,*  
ORLANDO, FLORIDA, USA**

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Research and Analyses – No. 24 – February 2011

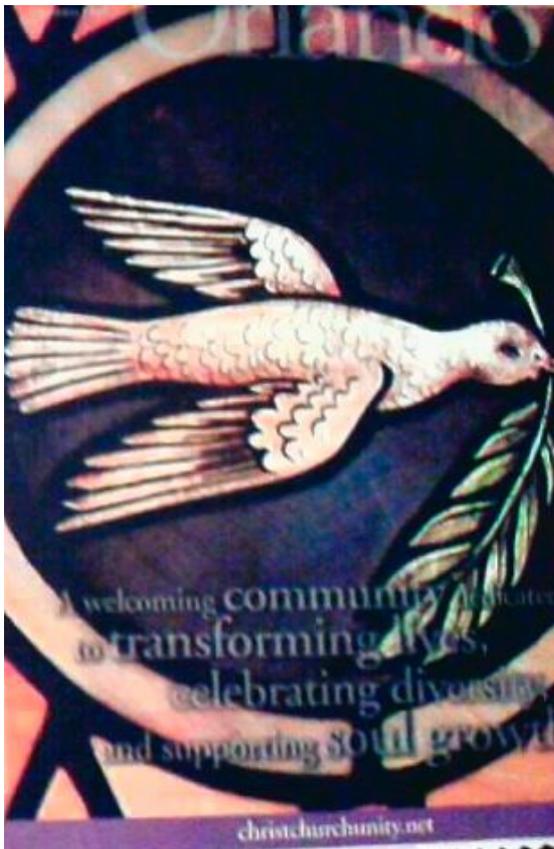
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## Historical outline of the American metaphysical religion: the New Thought

If J. Stillson Judah described the metaphysical movements as “the mirror of American culture”<sup>1</sup>, then we need to consider first the important share of the New Thought movement within this religious/spiritual phenomenon, with regard to the construction of American identity.

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>2</sup>



The main relevant historical periods in the development of this new religious movement are the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the 1960s and 1970s. But it was actually inspired as early as 1838 by the life, experiments and teachings of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby, an unschooled inventor and clockmaker apprentice in Maine who became a so-called medical sectarian. Then the movement itself called New Thought was shaped under the informal leadership of Emma Curtis Hopkins, a New Thought pioneer, mystic, healer and teacher, who split from Mary Baker Eddy’s Christian Science in 1885.

The movement is the result of pressing social and spiritual expectations that characterized nineteenth century America in the building of national identity between interactions and relations. Indeed, that century saw many achievements such as new technological

innovations and unprecedented changes. However, one of the most relevant transformations was the reformation of Calvinism which introduced the marriage of religion and science, along with the ever-increasing celebration of, paradoxically, human will and the belief in providence. The nature of the reforms to take shape within mainstream America was determined by faith in mankind and perfectibility of the institutions. Consequently, the political, mystical and

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<sup>1</sup> Judah, J. Stillson, “Metaphysics Midwestern America,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 17(4), 2004, 134.

<sup>2</sup> Heinz, Holly A, “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)

religious fields witnessed changes. There was a prevalence of the myth of America as Paradise, together with the longing for transformations towards a better and purer gathering of souls, but also the expression of a democratic faith in individualism with moral law and the mission of a nation of immigrants. Through the search for a new religious identity, people were expressing liberty and discipline, with a dominant idea of voluntarism. In this context, the emergence of therapeutic aspirations as a response to a shifting society triggered the appearance of what is known as *the American metaphysical religion*. By the turn of the twentieth century, the New Thought movement embodied the current trend for the therapeutic within an environment of consumer capitalism and the increase of psychological expertise. This close relationship between the cultures of therapy and of consumption lies at the core of the sacralization of popular culture, and gives a hint at the marginalization/mainstreaming process of the movement.

Historically speaking, the acknowledged father of the New Thought ideas, Phineas P. Quimby started practicing mesmerism and hypnotism before heading into healing experientialism, a way of associating nature and mind. Other influences completed his philosophy such as the Swede Emmanuel Swedenborg's doctrine of divine flux which Quimby revisited. He ended up establishing the mingled spirit-matter dimension of thought. Then, with the great impact of the New England Transcendentalists on Quimby's approach of metaphysics, the metaphysical tradition carefully avoided Evangelical Christianity and preferred a combination of spirituality and a mystical experience of the divine, with a clear predominance of Eastern religions and creeds. On the whole, it brought 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, directly in connection with Emerson's "oversoul" and "intuition". This unveils a new spiritual conception of "empowering people" in their quest for Truth. Nathan Hatch already underlined this by calling "insurgent movements" [such as 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>

Phineas Quimby developed his metaphysical approach by emphasizing 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 could be questioned, his healing theology was soon recognized as a founding structural fabric for a new metaphysical religion. For him, 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 the foremost philosophy he built upon. Hence, he chose to adopt a metaphysical reading of the Scriptures by merging harmony with nature and stressing the self-control mind.

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

This development led to the construction of a “self-religion” which became very popular thanks to American transcendentalism.

In 1915, after the influence of Quimby’s ideas and the still much debated ‘maternity / paternity’ notion of Emma Curtis Hopkins, the New Thought movement joined an umbrella organization or federation called International New Thought Alliance including various denominations founded by Quimby’s healed disciples: among the main ones were Christian Science (which later seceded from New Thought), Religious Science, Divine Science and Unity. Each one retained its own particularities while spreading the same metaphysical message and the same healing practices: the use of visualization, positive thinking (from Norman Vincent Peale,) Pantheism (all is God) and Western idealism, mixed with eastern mysticism. To put it briefly, New Thought emphasizes the use of practical and pragmatic means, and its diffuse nature characterizes the whole movement as an attractive spiritual or religious adventure for most Americans.

Gordon Melton<sup>4</sup> underlined that new religious movements are not “new” phenomena as much as the expression of old religions. New Thought might be partly considered as an expression of primitive Christianity, advocating the 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 believers within their quest for happiness. The use of primitive Christianity within the movement is expressed through particular attention to the popular sphere by establishing the charter of a *practical spirituality*. The idealistic identification to Jesus as a way-shower displays a humanistic behavior. Each individual is a potential Christ in the sense that 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. 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 originalities is its theological marginality, because ever since its emergence, the leaders of the movement have privileged 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 of Quimby’s disciples and co-founder of Unity, chartered the authoritative *Metaphysical Bible* which has been used by all New Thought denominations. Between popular and traditional philosophical meaning, metaphysics in metaphysical religion 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

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<sup>4</sup> Melton, J. Gordon, “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> (accessed March 21, 2007).

New Age movement<sup>5</sup>. Referring to metaphysics, J.G. Melton divides the metaphysical movement into two categories or "families": the "Christian Science-Metaphysical Family", and the "Spiritualist, Psychic, and New Age Family"<sup>6</sup> New Thought belongs to the former 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 New Thought is its construction of a near metaphysics, bordering on myths and often substituted by the word "science" (with its popular meaning). My understanding is that it is not a genuine metaphysics but New Thought's incorporation of its own version of metaphysics into its techniques of healing practically with everyday living through the affirmation and action consistent with the 'healing idealism' of the movement.

### **The metaphysical experience within Unity: a field study at Christ Church Unity (CCU), Orlando, Florida**

As I mentioned earlier above, Unity churches stand as one of the core elements of the American metaphysical movement. By focusing on the close scrutiny of one of these churches, I wanted to gauge the current level of dynamism of this metaphysical trend within the American religious/spiritual landscape.

Christ Church Unity (CCU), Orlando, Florida is the fastest growing Unity church within the American metaphysical tradition. I would like to focus on this growth phenomenon by first presenting the quite significant results of a two-month ethnographic study at CCU, before building up arguments and questions that arose from the data regarding a supposedly decreasing religious movement. In a last part, I shall interpret the findings by looking into the real nature of this growth and renewal which is revealing of a resurgence of both spiritual psychology and process thought.

Much has been said about religion in Florida, especially by Mark Silk and Andrew Walsh in American *Religion by Region*<sup>7</sup> series, Gordon Melton's *Encyclopedia of American Religion*,<sup>8</sup> or recent surveys by *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*. The religious landscape shows that Catholics tightly lead the way with a 26%, closely followed by Evangelical Protestants with 25%, while Baptists have a 10.8% share. One thing to be noted is the number of

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<sup>5</sup> Wadsworth Publishing Dictionary online, <http://religion.wadsworth.com/intro/american/glossary.html#anchor2366583> (accessed April 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Melton, J. Gordon, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition, Michigan, Gale Cengage, 2009, 613.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Silk, William Lindsey, in Religion by Region series, *Religion and Public Life in the Southern Crossroads: Showdown States*, Lanham, MD: Altamira, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> J. Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition, Michigan: Gale Cengage, 2009.

unaffiliated (16%) which is similar to the national average (1% Agnostics, 2.4% Atheists and 12.1% Nothing in particular).<sup>9</sup> On the whole, Florida has always been considered as the microcosm of America, at least in terms of religion. While the religious diversity is higher than in any other states, Evangelical Protestantism is more aggressive than anywhere else, and traditionalism is in keeping with individualistic political culture.

### Data presentation of the field study

In June and July of this year (2010), I conducted an ethnographic study with a particular focus on the why and how of a noticeable growth that I have monitored in this church for the past 3 years. It consists of a sample of 22 written questionnaires with 26 questions each filled out by volunteer members. In addition, I conducted 13 one-hour to two-hour interviews with a sample of male (4) and female (9) members aged 24 through 69.

Since 2008, Christ Church Unity has tripled its membership, growing from 150 to 526 in 2010. My working hypothesis relied mainly on the arrival of a new minister (or spiritual leader) Reverend Alice Anderson in June 2008. It also relied on a couple of other ongoing changes within the metaphysical religion/spirituality such as process thought.

To begin with, we need to contextualize our study by presenting a CCU historical outline. Caroline Hightower Parsons Essex Reithinger founded Christ Church Unity on Orange Avenue in Orlando in 1939. Born in 1893 Carolyn Hightower came from a large family in the area of Augustin, Ga. As a teenager, she heard of a new spiritual movement which emphasized the healing power of God. The Unity Movement or Unity School of Christianity founded in 1889 by Charles and Myrtle Fillmore in Kansas City, Mo. has spread the metaphysical message inherited from Phineas Parhurst Quimby<sup>10</sup> and chartered into New Thought by Emma Curtis Hopkins, “the teacher of teachers”<sup>11</sup>, since then. In the 1920s, Mrs Hightower moved to Orlando where she met her first husband and felt a spiritual



CCU building (© 2011 Philippe Murillo).

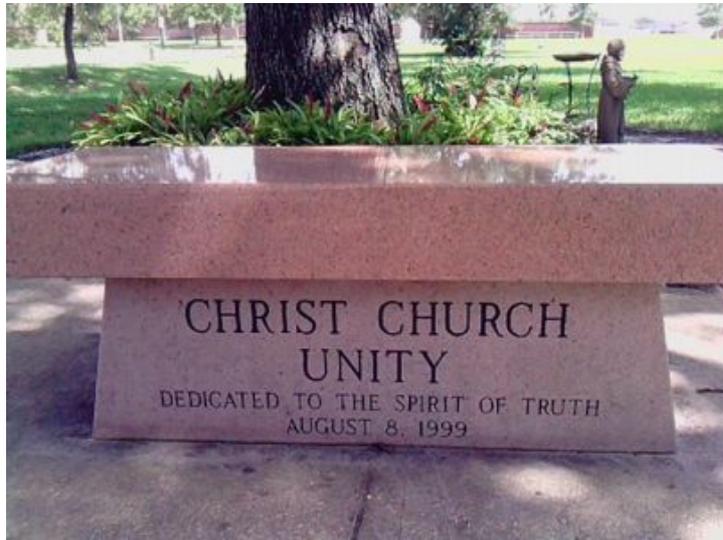
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<sup>9</sup> The Forum on Religion and Public Life, “US Religious Landscape Survey 2008,” Washington, D.C, <http://religions.pewforum.org/> (accessed June 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Alan C. Anderson, Deborah G. Whitehouse, *New Thought: A Practical American Spirituality*, Crossroads Publishing Cy: New York, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> Gail M. Harvey, *Emma Curtis Hopkins: Forgotten Founder of New Thought*, Syracuse University Press: New York, 2002.

call to 'go out into the world and help'. In 1932, she met Charles Fillmore, the same year as Unity study group began meeting in Orlando at the Tremont Hotel. Hightower was ordained Unity minister in 1938 by Charles Fillmore.



Another woman now follows in her footsteps, Reverend Alice Anderson whose great-grand-father and grand-father were both United Methodist ministers in Orlando. Rev. Anderson identifies herself as Methodist, Baptist and Cherokee from her family religious background, which corresponds to “a multi-layered spiritual identity”.<sup>12</sup> She joined Unity in 1998 then took a two-year ministerial apprenticeship at Unity Village in Kansas City. At 41, she is now one of the youngest Unity

ministers in the United States. My various interviews with her this summer and during the past two years, suggest that something new has been going on in this church recently.

In his *Encyclopedia of American Religions*,<sup>13</sup> J.G. Melton divides the metaphysical movement into two categories or families: the "Christian Science-Metaphysical Family," and the "Spiritualist, Psychic, and New Age Family." CCU has been part of the Association of Unity Churches which belongs to the former family.

From this ethnographic observation, I have gathered much material which gave me answers about the causes for the tripling of the membership since Rev. Anderson's arrival: it has to do both with the participants' profiles and also with the spiritual message delivered by CCU.

CCU's motto is:

“Christ Church Unity is a welcoming community, dedicated to transforming lives, celebrating diversity, and supporting soul growth.”<sup>14</sup>

The data show that the religious background of the surveyed members is shared between Catholic (28%), Baptist (23%), Methodist (17%), while the other three denominations are Pentecostal, Adventist, and Lutheran. Only 6% said they were from Christian Science background.

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<sup>12</sup> Rev. Anderson, Alice. 2010. Interview with author. Orlando, FL. June 18.

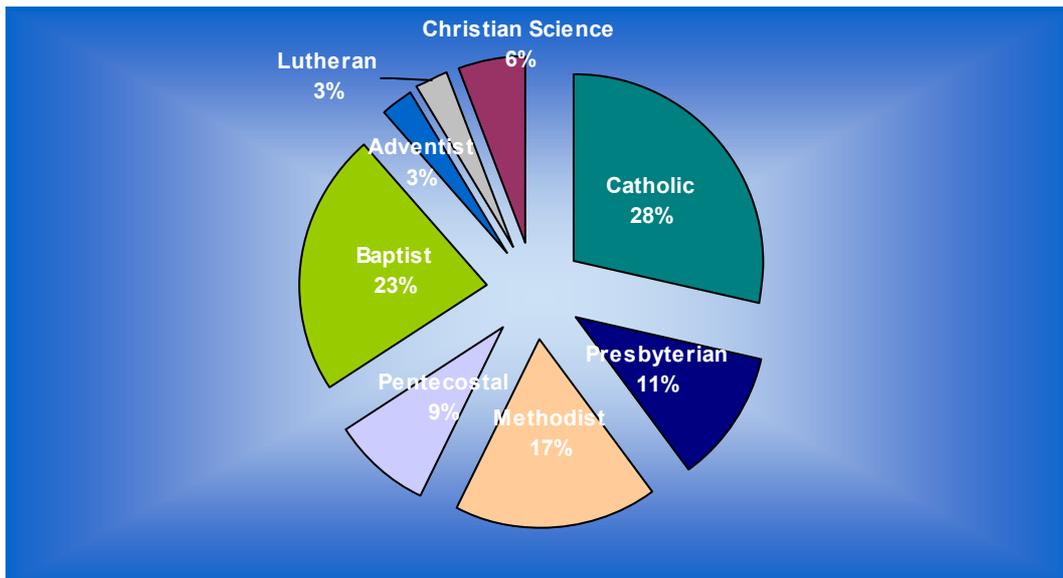
<sup>13</sup> J. Gordon Melton, *The Encyclopedia of American Religions*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition, Michigan: Gale Cengage, 2009, p. 273-281.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.christchurchunity.net/>, Internet, June 23, 2010.

Table 1. Religion of origin or latest denomination of origin

Catholic	Presbyterian	Methodist	Pentecostal	Baptist	Adventist	Lutheran	Christian Science
10	4	6	3	8	1	1	2

Figure 1. Religion of origin or latest denomination of origin



Another interesting part of results shows that 42% of the surveyed came to CCU in 2008 following Rev. Anderson’s appointment by the Board of Trustees.

Now, respondents have different motives for joining CCU, although the majority acknowledges they were looking for a way to grow their soul and lift up their consciousness at a faster pace within a non-judgemental, diverse, non-denominational spirituality. One third of the respondents admitted taking Alcoholics Anonymous classes or the 12-Step Recovery Program<sup>15</sup> at CCU before becoming full members. The non-denominational experience is one determinant factor as all surveyed members wanted to engage into a new path towards Truth and life transformation.

No doubt the “spiritual but not religious” factor best identifies these members. They all have experienced disillusionment, as they say, with denominational religions, although all of them refrain from criticizing denominational / institutionalized religions. Instead, they would adopt a positive thinking attitude. At the same time, they all used descriptions such as “hypocrisy”, “self-centered religions”, “interested in money”, “holding too rigid dogmas and rules”, “exclusion”, “prejudice” and “not all inclusive” to describe these religions. On the other hand,

<sup>15</sup> Emmet Fox (1886-1951) is one of the most influential *New Thought* authors of the twentieth century. He very much inspired the Alcoholics Anonymous association with his “*Sermon On The Mount*”, which became very popular and was even used to teach the 12-Step Recovery Program.

they refuse to use standard labels to define CCU. Alternatively, they refer to it as “spirituality”, where they can find a way for their soul evolution, their spiritual empowerment, and a feeling of the sacred within them, as a way of being genuine in who they are. It also goes along with a “let it be”<sup>16</sup> attitude whereby it is not necessary to resist others’ misunderstanding or aggressive attitude since “resistance persists”.<sup>17</sup>

The practical aspect of their adhesion to CCU message allows them to apply it to everyday life. Within the process of co-creation, soul growing and energy gathering, they transcend their former selves into new ones. By “seeking a higher level of consciousness”<sup>18</sup>, they become more aware of the fact that they are co-creators with God. This co-creation process empowers each individual to build its own path towards the ultimate goal which is self-realization.



Altar in CCU church hall (© 2011 Philippe Murillo).

On the political level, 85% of the respondents would side with a liberal leaning attitude of “inclusiveness”. Even one quoted Kennedy’s definition of *liberal*:

“What do our opponents mean when they apply to us the label "Liberal?" If by "Liberal" they mean, as they want people to believe, someone who is soft in his policies abroad, who is against

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<sup>16</sup> Anonymous questionnaire, Male, 43, June 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Anonymous questionnaire, Male, 24, July 2010.

<sup>18</sup> Anonymous questionnaire, Male, 24, July 2010.

local government, and who is unconcerned with the taxpayer's dollar, then the record of this party and its members demonstrate that we are not that kind of "Liberal." But if by a "Liberal" they mean someone who looks ahead and not behind, someone who welcomes new ideas without rigid reactions, someone who cares about the welfare of the people -- their health, their housing, their schools, their jobs, their civil rights, and their civil liberties -- someone who believes we can break through the stalemate and suspicions that grip us in our policies abroad, if that is what they mean by a "Liberal," then I'm proud to say I'm a "Liberal." <sup>19</sup>

The “we can change” communication strategy during President Obama’s campaign has a deep resonance among all interviewed members, particularly with the emphasis on the uniting “we”. The oneness of this message overlaps Unity’s message of all-inclusiveness, diversity and transforming attitude. Although, nowhere in the church did I find explicit political expression of any kind, neither in the ministers’ sermons.

Regarding social status, I found that respondents belong to a variety of backgrounds from independent workers, to government employees, to unemployed or retired people. The majority clearly comes from lower and upper middle class. Moreover, among the 21 female and 14 male members surveyed, the ages reveal a younger community which is quite relevant for a spirituality commonly considered as decreasing, according to most recent polls on religion and spirituality. Additionally, 60% are married, 30% are single and 10% are gay or lesbian. A significant 38% are between 25 and 35, or even younger (14%) between 18 and 24.

Figure 2. Ages breakdown of respondents and interviewees

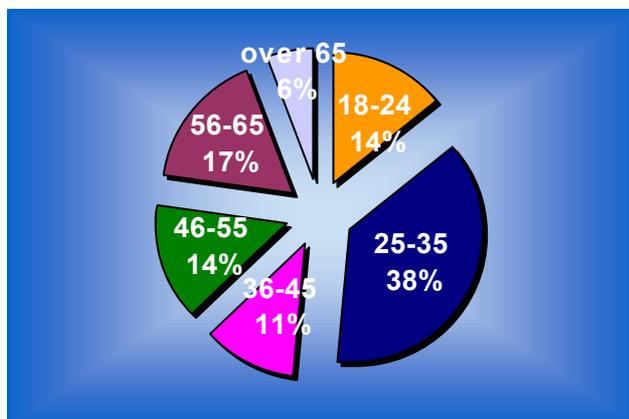


Table 2. Ages of respondents and interviewees

Age	% of surveyed
18-24	14 %
25-35	38 %
36-45	11 %
46-55	14 %
56-65	17 %
over 65	6 %

Also, it is relevant to notice that a majority of them hold a college degree or at least some college education and all of the participants use the *CCU* bookstore regularly to read the recommended literature. Here is a list of the most significant literature items that I have found:

<sup>19</sup> This famous definition of *liberal* was delivered by the presidential candidate Sen. John F. Kennedy for the New York Liberal Party’s endorsement of his Presidential Candidacy on September 20, 1960. (<http://jfklibrary.org>, Internet, July 21, 2010)

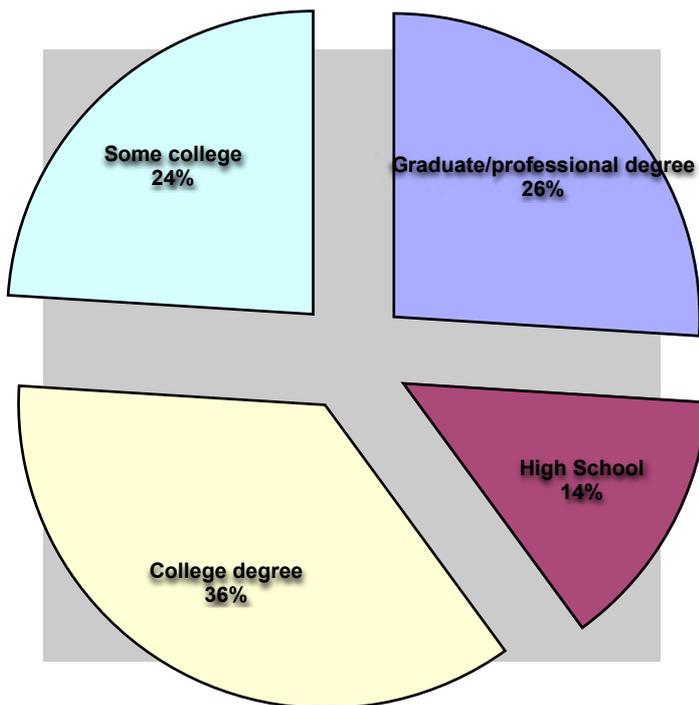
- Mary Manin Morrissey, *New Thought: A Practical Spirituality*, Penguin Group: New York, 2003.
- Swami Rama, *A Practical Guided to Holistic Health*, Himalayan Institute of the USA: Honesdale, Pennsylvania, 1980.
- Joel S. Goldsmith, *Practising The Presence: The Inspirational Guide to Regaining Meaning and a Sense of Purpose in Your Life*, Harper&Collins: New York, 1991.
- Gregg Braden, *The God Code*, Hay House: California, 2005.
- Wayne W. Dyer, *Wisdom of the Ages*, Harper&Collins: New York, 2002.
- Eric Butterworth, *Unity of All Life*, New York: Harper & Row, 1969.
- Emilie H.Cady, *God a Present Help*, Kansas City: Unity School of Christianity, 1940.
- Emilie H.Cady, *Lessons in Truth: A Course of Twelve Lessons in Practical Christianity*, Kansas City: Unity School of Christianity, 1919.
- Charles Fillmore, *A Talk on Christian Healing*, Kansas City: Unity School of Christianity, year unknown.
- ---. *Atom-Smashing Power of Mind*, Unity Village, MO: Unity Books, 1994.
- ---. *Christian Healing; The Science of Being*, Kansas City: Unity School of Christianity, 1919.
- ---. *Mysteries of Genesis*, Kansas City: Unity School of Christianity, 1936.
- ---. *Talks on Truth*, Kansas City: Unity School of Christianity, 1934.
- ---. *The Overcoming Power of a Divine Fearlessness*, Kansas City: Unity School of Christianity, no date.
- ---. *The Revealing Word: A Dictionary of Metaphysical Terms*, Unity Village, MO: Unity Books, 1997.
- ---. *The Science of Being and Christian Healing*, Kansas City: Unity Tract Society, 1910.
- ---. *The Twelve Powers of Man*, Unity Village: Unity Books, 1994.
- Rhonda Byrne, *The Secret*, Simon & Schuster, 2006.
- Author unknown, *A Course in Miracles*, Viking, The Foundation of Inner Peace: New York, 1996.
- Eric Butterworth, *Discover the Power Within You*, Harper: San Francisco, 1992.

- ---, *The Creative Life, Seven Keys To Your Creative Genius*, Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2002.
- *The Bhagavad Gita*
- *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., OUP: USA, 2001.
- *Unity Magazine*, Unity School of Christianity: Unity Village, Mo.

Every Sunday during the services, the bookstore in the church offers a 30% off on every item.

In keeping with the enhancement of a dense literature used by or offered to the church members, the question of the educational background of the surveyed people highlights the significant share of college educated members. 36% hold a college degree and 26% have a graduate or professional degree. Altogether, 62% of the respondents have been through a college education.

**Figure 3. Educational background of respondents and interviewees**



**Table 3. Educational background of respondents and interviewees**

Education	% of surveyed
High school	14%
Some college	24%
College degree	36%
Graduate / professional degree	26%

As far as the participants’ reaction to their interaction with the church, I found a deep feeling among them of “home well being”, as I gathered descriptions such as “I knew I was home when I first came”<sup>20</sup>, “I felt home right away”<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, after each service on Sunday either at 9:15am or 11am, each newcomer is offered a welcome package with a welcoming letter by Rev. Anderson, the latest *Unity Prayer Magazine*, *The Daily Word*, bookmarks featuring the 5

<sup>20</sup> Anonymous questionnaire, Male, 24, July 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Anonymous questionnaire, Female, 39, July 2010.

essential CCU principles, a prayer request bookmark, a Prayer of Abundance, leaflets about “what is a prayer chaplain”, a Unity concise manual, along with an enrolling form.

All the surveyed people say they found a renewal within the church. Part of it, they say, is Rev. Aderson’s “charisma”, “energy”, “ lot of magnetism”, “with her it is Unity plus”<sup>22</sup>, “she is living these principles”, “we resonate the spirit and energy she has just expanded”. But it is as well the “quality of the message”, “we are ONE”,<sup>23</sup> and there is a deep expectation for a genuine Unity community, an expectation to energize the whole community and lift them up to the next step.

At last, along with the renewed message, respondents share a very strong emphasis on the healing element with many classes and workshops such as “pranic healing circle”, “Reiki circle”, “Healing meditation”, at least once a month at CCU.

### **Questions and problems arising from these data**

These data have shown that the respondents’ answers raise many questions that we, scholars, need to address in order to understand this significant growth phenomenon within a spiritual or religious movement commonly referred as marginal by mainline researchers.

First, I need to look into the reasons why new people joined CCU within a perspective of “pull and push” factor. Then, attention has to be paid to answers collected about the diverse means of joining the church with a view to identifying a possible new trend in new (metaphysical) believers. Finally, I shall return to the sociological question of who joins CCU, and wonder whether there is a significant share between the young generation and the older one, as well as how much attention is given to kids as newcomers to the church community.

Here are two quotations from members that sump up the whole participants’ feeling:

“This congregation is ready for soul growth; they work at it by attending services and classes. I attended one of the larger Unity Churches and we did not have the number of individuals attend classes or become involved in the community like they do here. It is the reason I moved here in December.”<sup>24</sup>

“I know many very spiritual people in mainline religions. I feel it’s the searching that keeps us open. God meets us where we are and does good works in us regardless of religion.”<sup>25</sup>

No doubt, answers clearly display that a strong majority confess fleeing dogma within a push factor, away from institutions and rituals. They believe most Americans have lost respect for

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<sup>22</sup> Anonymous questionnaire, Female, 42, June 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Interview, Female, 56, 2010. July 8.

<sup>24</sup> Anonymous questionnaire, Female, 69, July 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Anonymous questionnaire, Female, 50, June 2010.

one another in terms of spirituality or religion in everyday life. This situation leads to an “everyman for himself attitude”<sup>26</sup>.

“Mainline religions have lost the message of oneness”<sup>27</sup>

“(They) are focused on structure rather than relationship”<sup>28</sup>

There is an obvious criticism of dogma and institutionalized religion as a source of disenchantment.

“We are all awakening to the Truth of who we are at our own pace”<sup>29</sup>

Now the pull factor mainly deals with the idea of “energized community” that the church displays. One main element for joining is the adherence to a new message of well-being and an attitude of all-inclusiveness and tolerance.

On the whole, 40% joined *CCU* within a push factor, while 60% within a pull factor. This suggests that *CCU* has a strong capacity to rally new members.

The ways how people join the church are of three different types: the first is the fact that members may invite other relatives, friends or colleagues to attend a service at *CCU* freely. 65% of the interviewed and surveyed used this means. Some even had 6 to 10 people who came to *CCU* and 70% have remained.

Data then show that 25 to 30% came to know *CCU* through the church website<sup>30</sup> and the use of broadcast sermons online. They felt attracted by the “open” message delivered by the spiritual leaders and the idea of a “new consciousness” to be developed for everyone at their own pace.

A significant number of them (5/10%) attended *A.A.* courses as a first step towards joining.

Another 2-5% declared they joined *CCU* because they wanted to leave their former Unity church.

A new trend among these believers is the awareness maturity of the content and goals of the structure they join. Their motivation for joining enhances the spiritual maturity of the new believers’ profiles. The adherence of more young people might result from the fact that *CCU* has set up a fully-dedicated Youth and Family Ministry with Reverend Olesen. All the kids and teenagers are offered special workshops during services, as well as classes throughout the week at the church. They have their own specific rooms (Nursery/birth; Unity Beginners; Unity Kids;

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<sup>26</sup> Interview, Male, 53, July 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Interview, Male, 53, July 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Interview, Female, 42, June 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.christchurchunity.net>

Uniteens; Y.O.U (Youth of Unity). Each child is considered as a human being, a soul to take care of.

“We nurture the Divinity within each child by:

- o providing spiritual education based on Unity Truth principles
- o empowering our children and teens to use these Truth principles in their lives as they learn and grow
- o creating a spiritual community with our kids, teens and families that is safe, supporting and fun.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Analysis and interpretations, a practical and theoretical approach**



At this stage, the study displays a series of significant concepts that I believe, signal the renewal of Christ Church Unity, and thereby metaphysical spirituality: it is soul growth, co-creation and the search for energy. As a matter of fact, Rev. Anderson’s charisma, personal strategy and energy, along with her enhancement of the “quality” of the spiritual message, have attracted a tripled and renewed membership. One of the premium concepts in the

message is the idea of soul growth. Rev. Anderson contends that she “is a very principle-based person”, meaning that she would stick to the original spirit of Unity Churches at its creation by the Fillmores.

“Our main goal is soul-evolution”.<sup>32</sup> She has been using much of Professor Robert Sardello’s work in his *School of Spiritual Psychology* as a path within a psycho-spiritual approach. He is the author of many books such as *Facing the World with Soul* (Lindisfarne/Harper, 1992),

*Love and the Soul: Creating a Future for Earth* (Harper/Collins, 1995), or *Freeing the Soul from Fear* (Putnam/Riverhead, 1999). Robert Sardello from University of Dallas Psychology Department is contributing very significantly to the emergence of a new spiritual psychology in America, which draws on western esoteric ideas and themes in order to reactivate soul-centered awareness as a true expression of concern for healing the disjunction between soul-oriented world concern and contemporary human alienation and fear. Soul is a dynamic, creative

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<sup>31</sup> *Christ Church Unity* service leaflet, July 2010, “Youth and Family Ministry”, CCU.

<sup>32</sup> Rev. Anderson, Alice. 2010. Interview with author. Orlando, FL, July 9.

relationship to the world. By giving interiority to experience, soul works to reintensify personal encounters (within and outside) in a continuous process of creative development. It gives depth and feeling to encounters that swing between degrees of attraction and repulsion, providing middle, existential ground between physical life and spiritual thought and ideals. It implies moving beyond the socialized ego and into a more expansive field of perception and development as inseparable from the world and our relationships with others. Therefore, creative imagination is a central phenomena of the psychology of the spirit (Intro, xxvii) and training the imagination requires opening to both spontaneous, bodily felt intuitions and to inspirations that provide a recognition of the spiritual basis of all thought-forms. In turn, this means that the body must be trained, the senses heightened, the emotions trusted, and the I-consciousness shifted toward more soul-centered, heart-centered perceptions.

This may be summarized as a reanimation of the materialized world of things and processes by instilling them with creative, future oriented soul qualities. Images become a media through which the developing individual discovers primal spiritual energies at work in the world.

The development of the *I* as mature individuality, receptive to a spiritual future, requires constant effort, engagement, and inner discovery. This is a process of soul making that throws off everything general, collective, and ideological while seeking to constantly engage the world creatively, soulfully, individually. The purpose is to reconfigure the world as it is now, in the present. There is a very close link here with Eckharts Tolle's<sup>33</sup> concept of the Now. Tolle is currently one of the most acclaimed and read authors within *Unity* and metaphysical churches.

This teaching of the soul evolution by Rev. Anderson is very appealing to both the former and the new members. "It is less *what* Unity teaches than *how* it teaches..."<sup>34</sup> One of the participants even told me his own formula for soul growing within the perspective taught at the church: it is I+E= YOU ( *Unity*), meaning Individualism and Evolutionary humanism equals unity of the soul with others. He continued by insisting that it is all about looking at the heart and soul of a person.<sup>35</sup> Additionally, I have noticed that the soul evolution concept and the techniques are even taught to the kids through the Youth Ministry and the different workshops offered during the week.

Another element of renewal in her message is the treatment of the soul through process thought or process theology, although Rev. Anderson is not quite aware of it. Infact, she admitted she had never read about process ideas before. Still, there seems to be a significant correlation between the message delivered at the church and these ideas. Indeed, process thought or process theology has a different position from traditional theology in that there is no substantial

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<sup>33</sup> Eckhart Tolle is a contemporary spiritual teacher born in Germany. His most famous book *Practising the Power of Now* shows that the path from suffering to peace is at everybody's reach. His whole philosophy is to confine the attention and awareness to the present moment. For him, the road to enlightenment is something that is inherently ours.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, Female, 28, July 2010.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, Male, 61, June 2010.

soul or body. It has that there is instead a vast matrix of occasions (experiences) which are structures within a complex organization into societies. One of these is the flow of human experience through time and is called the person or soul. In each of these occasions, we can find an element of self-determination and uniqueness. We are then all members of one another, we are in Christ and Christ is in us (*panentheism*).

Rev. Anderson particularly emphasizes this idea in her hammering of “co-creation process”.

“I am looking for a more open religion ... to find something for me today...in a perspective of ‘co-creation’”, she says.<sup>36</sup> The question that members should ask everyday is how do I co-create my life. “It is all about how you believe and not what you believe” would be a frequent answer from my interviewees. This co-creation perspective has many elements of process thought and even *process* New Thought<sup>37</sup> initiated by prof. Alan Anderson in the late 1990s. As a matter of fact, I have been struck by this coincidence of this ‘unconscious use’ of Process New Thought as part of this church growth. In her sermons, as she confirmed to me in the interviews, Rev. Alice Anderson has been developing the concept of co-creation by affirming the empowerment of each individual with his/her own destiny with God through the succession of experiences in life. Indeed, in Process New Thought, the latest New Thought blending of Eastern and Western tendencies interprets this creative process through the prism of Alfred North Whitehead’s and Charles Harsthorne’s process philosophies, which have similar tenets to Buddhism (serial selfhood as a wide range of experiences that add up to one another to build up the soul, mind or spirit. Each experience co-creates itself with God by blending the influence of the past with individually-tailored divine guidance: PAST + DIVINE PROPOSAL (God's offer of perfection as expressible in that situation) + CHOICE = NEW CREATION<sup>38</sup>.

In a word, Rev. Anderson’s inspiring Sunday service is usually focused on one objective: empowering individuals to change their lives within co-creation and soul growth, where she insists on the Buddhist input of co-creation and this idea of serial selfhood.

## Conclusion

Within the broad spectrum of new religious movements, it is my belief that Christ Church Unity is a true example of a theological as well as a philosophical renewal of the American

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<sup>36</sup> Rev. Anderson, Alice. 2010. Interview with author. Orlando, FL, July 9.

<sup>37</sup> *Process New Thought* is the expression coined by Alan Anderson to characterize a new evolution within the *New Thought* movement towards a *process* perspective. (cf. Philippe Murillo, “Popular metaphysics in the shaping of American identity: the (Process) New Thought Movement as a mainstream or marginalized phenomenon?”, Salt Lake City, Utah, <http://www.cesnur.org>, 2009)

<sup>38</sup> *The New Thought Movement: A Link Between East and West*, Delivered at the Parliament of the World's Religions, Chicago, September 3, 1993, by Alan Anderson, Internet, 1998, <http://websyte.com/alan/parl.htm>

metaphysical religion message, in so far as it attracts both churched and unchurched believers with contrasting profiles.

As our findings suggest, the introduction of spiritual psychology with a new treatment of soul growing, the emphasis on a co-creation process which point out a clear influence of process thought and process theology (even Process New Thought), and the stress laid on the energy concept through the influence of Eastern mysticism, all point to the fact that a new trend is emerging among spiritual seekers, whether openly affiliated or unaffiliated. The tendency is now for an open spirituality that enhances the quality of the spiritual message, tolerance, all-inclusiveness and a oneness objective. Without being too far-fetched, we may link this phenomenon to the 2008 presidential election under the “we can change” banner where liberal ideas have spread out and coincide with CCU’s changing perspective and collective identity with the “we”. It would be interesting to conduct a further inquiry into this particular area and find out the possible relationships between the spiritual and the political spheres.

Still, CCU tripling membership and the analysis that I have presented give a hint at what might look as a renegotiation phenomenon of mainstream spirituality or religion from non-denominational structures. American metaphysical religion is truly about changing gods and everyday life for the thriving of a practical spirituality. The claim of a renewal such as this one is in tune with the idea of plastic or amorphous spirituality in which boundaries do not apply, nor do dogmas or rules. Pluralism and mystical experience have become the revolutionizing shifts in the spiritual spectrum, thus blowing the borders between New Religious Movements and institutionalized religions. This analysis suggests that institutionalized denominations lose membership for more amorphous spiritual paths. Does it mean that it comes along with the erection of higher walls between institutionalized religions and alternative spiritualities? And does CCU belong to the phenomenon of what we call “new” new religions?

My last concern is about a the 2008 survey on the American religious landscape by *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life* which totals 16.1% of unaffiliated believers, in which 12.1% say they are ‘nothing in particular’. Most of the participants I surveyed, declared they would belong to the “nothing in particular” category if asked. Indeed, there is no requirement for proclaiming their belonging to a Unity church within the metaphysical movement. Therefore, the porosity of the boundaries is much higher than most people think. The next step would be to examine the profiles of these ‘nothing in particular’ believers and their percentage within the metaphysical tradition, both in Florida and nationwide.

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