



**Human Rights Without Frontiers Int.**

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## The Church of Christ, Scientist/ Belgium

### A harmful sectarian organization?

### Judge for yourself !

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The Church of Christ, Scientist, also called commonly Christian Science, is most known for introducing a Christian-based system of healing within a metaphysical cosmology, where the practitioner supposedly awakens the faith of the patient, reestablishing trust in God and creating a moral regeneration. Their greatest controversy has lain in legal battles over medical care for children. This profile includes the entry on Christian Science by Gail Harley in the encyclopedia *Religions of the World*, edited by J. Gordon Melton, and addresses particularly the Belgian branch of the movement.

### The movement in the international scene Its history and doctrine in brief

Christian Science is a metaphysical religion with a spiritual healing component based on the revelations of Mary Baker Eddy (1821-1910), revelations received after a fall on the ice in 1866. Eddy, a semi-invalid, had in the past been assisted in her health problems by Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1902-1866), a mesmerist and spiritual healer in Belfast, Maine. Since he died in 1866, Eddy was confined to bed without his services after her fall. While she was reading the Bible, she received what she saw as a divine healing. After the healing, she got up and walked. Later, perceiving her mission to be divine, she began to explore Scripture and wrote her first major treatise, *Science and Health* (later expanded as *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*), in 1875. Her work formed the theological cornerstone for the church and today is believed by Christian Scientists to be a companion volume to the Bible.

Eddy believed that Christian Science had been revealed to her alone and started the Christian Science Association for her students near Boston in 1876. Her religion was a controversial one, frequently called the "Boston Craze" by newspaper writers. She suffered attacks from former Quimby student Julius Dresser (1838-1893), who accused her of pirating the healing work of Quimby without giving him credit. The polemics continued for a



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number of years, even after the death of Eddy, and the historical repercussions eclipsed the history of New Thought (i.e., those metaphysical churches like the Unity School of Christianity and Religious Science whose history parallels Christian Science) and tainted Christian Science itself until late in this century.

Eddy trained others how to heal in silence using her specific methodology when she formed her first class in 1870. In 1879 she organized the Church of Christ, Scientist, in Lynn, Massachusetts, later, in 1881, moving it to Boston, where she allowed her students to ordain her as the sole pastor. (Church services today are conducted by readers, who follow her precise lessons for each Sunday of the year.) In 1882 she founded the Massachusetts Metaphysical College, where she taught her students to be Christian Science practitioners. It flourished for several years, and then Eddy closed its doors in 1889.

Many of her brightest students, such as Emma Curtis Hopkins (1853-1925), Ursula Gestefeld (1845-1921), and Augusta Stetson (1842-1928), left Christian Science to found other churches or academies for spiritual training. Later these religious entrepreneurs and others like them became strong influences of the eclectic New Thought movement. Despite Eddy's attempt to wed Christian Science with Christianity and divorce it from New Thought, it differs from normative Protestantism because of the interpretation of God as monistic, not monotheistic, that is, because God is seen as the one underlying reality of the whole universe, rather than as a Creator separate from his creation. In other words, God is a principle, not a person, and that principle is Life, Truth, Love, Substance, and Intelligence.

Eddy fully reorganized her church in 1892 and developed the *Church Manual* and bylaws, which gave it the organizational configuration that it has today. There is a five-member governing board, which runs the administration by the authority vested in it by the Mother Church. The board charters branch churches, which operate with democratic control within the framework of the *Church Manual*. Perhaps the most well-known component of the church is the Christian Science Publishing Society, which has its own board of directors. Publications include the award-winning newspaper *The Christian Science Monitor* the *Herald of Christian Science* (published in twelve languages and Braille), the *Christian Science Journal* (whose first full-time editor was Emma Curtis Hopkins, who later went on to found organizational New Thought), the *Christian Science Sentinel*, and the *Herald of Christian Science Quarterly*, all published in Boston.



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A major controversy hit the church's leadership in the early 1990s, and some administrators resigned in protest or were fired. Several of the issues concerned the expansive development of television as a promotional device, the spending of church monies in ventures that were considered speculative by some, and most importantly what appeared to be autocratic control by the board of directors.

There are approximately three thousand churches worldwide. Membership is unknown. The complex housing the church headquarters (address given below) has become a mecca for tourists as well as visiting Christian Scientists and features a number of educational and religious exhibits. Mary Baker Eddy as a religious entrepreneur earned the longest entry in *Notable American Women*.

### **Presence worldwide**

*Year of implantation:* 1879

*Number of members:* Although exact numbers have not been published, the Church reports that readers of *Science and Health* exist in 120 countries and that there are about 2,200 branch churches in over 70 countries worldwide. Unofficial sources suggest that the Church has been in a long period of decline, with estimates of current worldwide numbers from anywhere between 60,000 to 400,000<sup>1</sup>.

The Spring 1992 edition of the *Christian Research Journal* reports a decline in readership of *The Christian Science Monitor*, the Church's main publication, from 240,000 in the 1960s to 100,000 in 1992. However, the Internet edition of *The Christian Science Monitor* now has a readership of 2.5 million. In 2001, the ten millionth copy of *Science and Health* was sold.

### **Presence in Belgium**

*Year of implantation:* 1920's

*Number of members:* The governing By-Laws of the Church of Christ, Scientist do not permit publication of the number of its members. There is

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Cults/science.htm> suggests that membership is "well under 100,000 at the present time." "The Cult of Christian Science," by William G. Wells ([http://www.go.studentz.com/my\\_faith/christian\\_science.htm](http://www.go.studentz.com/my_faith/christian_science.htm)) estimates between 200,000-400,000 worldwide, with most of the churches in the United States. This article named the subscription level to the *Christian Science Monitor* at 73,000.



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one local church in Belgium, located in Brussels, and a church is required to have sixteen members. The Christian Science Publication Committee of Belgium has commented that the number of Christian Scientists in Belgium is "small, compared with established churches": there are less than 50 members.

### **Some doctrinal points**

From <http://www.faithandvalues.com/channels/ccs.asp>:

Christian Science distinguished from church organization:

Christian Science, itself, refers not to the church organization, but to a universal, practical system of spiritual ideas and prayer-based healing, available and accessible to all. Christian Science is:

- practiced by people of many different denominations and faiths, or no faith tradition at all -- whether or not they are church members.
- fully explained in Mary Baker Eddy's primary text on spirituality and healing, *Science and Health*.
- a means of spiritual care through which individuals have found better health, answers to life's deepest issues, and progress on their spiritual journeys.

Although known for its emphasis on "divine healing as practiced by Jesus Christ," Christian Science offers a "practical spirituality," aimed at "harmonizing man's total experience, bringing it under control of a higher power called Father/Mother God."<sup>2</sup>

Christian Scientists' interpretation of the Bible posits that matter, terrestrial existence, and information from the five physical senses are illusion, only "mortal error," with no power except what the mind gives them. Everything is infinite Spirit, and man, having been created in the image of God, is of divine nature as well—thus he cannot get sick or die. We see through the illusion to the extent to which we can understand and manifest the true nature of God. This is where Jesus, called the "First Scientist," was an ultimate example; through his healing work, in which he went under the physical surface of disease and found the spiritual cause, he showed that sickness and death could be defeated when one had a perfect accord with God. The divine Science represents the second coming of Christ.

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<sup>2</sup> Roger Bevan, Christian Science Committee on Publication for Belgium



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## *Healing*

The healing aspect of Christian Science is inextricably intertwined with its metaphysical philosophy, as "healing" is considered an acknowledgment or recognition of connection with the Divine. As Eddy states in *Science and Health*, "If God were understood instead of being merely believed, this understanding would establish health." (p.203)

The essential spiritual concepts of Mary Baker Eddy's writings, according to Virginia Harris, present Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Mother Church, are as follows:<sup>3</sup>

- Understanding what God is—all-power, divine Love, divine Mind, Father-Mother
- Discovering what it means to be the child of God, made in His "image" and "likeness"
- Understanding what it means to have a precious, indestructible, eternal relationship with God
- Understanding matter as a phenomenon of thought; and therefore,
- Thought as the arena where healing takes place
- Allaying the patient's fear
- Love as the essential quality in healing

The cause of all sickness, as well as bodily or moral wrong, Christian Scientists posit, is a mental one—an erroneous conviction that these things exist and that one can actually get sick. "So-called death" will disappear when the whole world understands that it is only an illusion, as will "individual souls," which are also an illusion of the senses, as individuals are only different reflections of one divine soul. Healing, what the Belgian Publication Committee calls "a result of wholehearted turning to God," occurs through a transformation of consciousness; through prayer, Christian Science practitioners find the fears and unconscious beliefs that interfere with perfect communion with God. It is not necessary for the person being healed to have faith in the healing, but if she does become healed, not only her health problems disappear—she will have been reborn into a state of reconnecting with her divine nature.

Prayer for healing is different from the emotional-desire state most people associate with the word "prayer"; Christian Scientists use a more mental prayer, of affirmation rather than petition, fueled by a deep knowledge of

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<sup>3</sup> "Spiritual essence of the writings of Mary Baker Eddy," *The Christian Science Journal*, April 2002.



how the mind-body system works—including recognition of the effect of replacing a patient’s fear with hope and comfort. Says Harris, “The patient’s thought is the arena where change takes place in order for healing to occur. Prayer brings about this change in consciousness as the individual recognizes his or her wholeness and feels the presence of divine Love.”

By encouraging an acknowledgment of the sacred dimension of medicine, Christian Scientists wish to help physicians become aware of the mental and spiritual components of healing.

## **Profile**

### **1. Hierarchical structure of the movement**

Sources:

From Dericquebourg, Regis. *Religions de guérison*, Les Editions du Cerf, 1988, and  
<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/chrissci.html>

From its origin, Christian Science was structured by Mary Baker Eddy to facilitate its capacity to branch out. The Manual of the Mother Church, written and revised by Eddy, provides the by-laws that govern Church activities, officers, and members.

Authority for conducting church business according to the Manual is vested in the church’s board of directors, composed of five members who hold their positions for an undefined period and select their own successors. Local congregations (branches) are democratically self-governed.

#### *Administration*

At the level of the Mother Church:

- A 5-member Board of Directors, installed in the Boston headquarters, presides over the Church.
- A three-member Board of Trustees is in charge of the Christian Science Publishing Society and manages the Church’s property. This Board implements the decisions of the Board of Directors.
- A Board of Education deals with Christian Science education. This Board organizes a three-year course for 30 practitioners from all over the world, preparing them to teach the doctrine as Teachers of Christian Science. These teachers then teach an annual primary



course to at most 30 pupils. Students meet again every year for a refresher day course on living and dealing with societal problems according to Christian Science.

- A Board of Lectureship (around 50 orators) acts as official worldwide spokespersons of the movement.
- A Christian Science Committee of Publication, made up of an administrator in Boston and delegates in numerous countries 'presents Mary Baker Eddy in her true light and corrects false views of Christian Science', and is in charge of dealing with the press.
- A Treasurer and a Committee of Finances deals with revenue and expenses of the movement.

The members of these administrative groups are compensated, meeting at times fixed by the Manual of the Mother Church.

At the local level, there are **churches** and **societies**.

- There is an unpaid board elected for local churches and societies.
- Churches are named in the order of their creation in a city—"First," "Second," and so on. They should have sixteen members, four of whom belong to the Mother Church, and one member should be a certified practitioner. The church should maintain a **reading room** open to the public and organize an annual public lecture as regulated by the Mother Church's Board of Lectureship. Each church should have two readers who belong to the Mother Church, one man and one woman, elected for a year at a time, renewable up to three years, by the local congregation. During services, one of them reads Bible verses, the other the correlative passages of *Science and Health*.
- A society has no obligations save enough adherents for normal functioning, along with two people belonging to the Mother Church who act as readers during religious services.
- Local groups are democratic and generally independent of central authority.
- One can belong to both a local church and the Mother Church; the difference is that one can be physically present in a local church.



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### *Practitioners*

Christian Scientists typically pray for themselves for healing, but for additional assistance they can call Christian Science **practitioners**—men and women in the public healing ministry, who take calls round the clock. Practitioners claim no personal healing power nor do they act as intercessors, but turn to God alone as the healing power. They heal solely with prayer, and the patient does not need to have faith.

The Church keeps for public availability a list of practitioners worldwide who are authorized to practice spiritual healing (The *Journal of Pastoral Counseling*, vol. IV, No. 1, 1969, mentioned 6,500 practitioners in 40 countries in 1969). Practitioners are not subsidized by the Church, but according to the First Church of Christ *Scientist and Miscellany* (p. 237), payments should be equivalent to those to a doctor of good reputation in his area. Many practitioners leave it to their patients to decide what fee to pay, or don't ask for fees at all.

One becomes a Christian Science practitioner by individual preparation through study, prayer, and several years of spiritual discipline. Before certification, one must perform three attested healings. The working practitioner must then follow certain procedures—s/he cannot diagnose, disclose confidential information, or give advice.

### ***In Belgium:***

The Belgian branch of the Christian Science church is organized as an International Association. There is only one local church in Belgium, located in Brussels. It is organized as stated above. The only aspect in which the Belgian church differs from other local churches, administration-wise, is that because it is legally uncertain whether practitioners can charge fees in Belgium, unlike in a number of other countries that allow this, such practitioners are not allowed to advertise.

There used to be a society, located in Antwerp, but now there is not any more.

## **2. New member recruitment**

There is no direct recruiting, but members will informally distribute textbooks if they feel it is warranted.



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In the US, reading rooms, containing Christian Science books, newspapers, journals, and Bible lessons, are available to the public, and Christian Science Organizations (CSOs) exist on some college campuses for students who would like to find out more. The Church also maintains a number of websites, including [www.spirituality.com](http://www.spirituality.com).

The Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Mother Church, Virginia Harris, has encouraged a mainstreaming of the Church. Allying itself with society's budding interest in spirituality and alternative medicine, the CCS's weekly magazine, for example, now includes quotes from New Age proponent Oprah Winfrey, and church representatives attend medical conferences in order to make a bridge to the mainstream.

### **3. Entrance in the movement**

*Admission to Mother Church:* To become a member of the Mother Church, an applicant must cut ties from all other religions, accept the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy, be older than twelve, and be recommended by a member of the Church. Applicants are voted in by the Council of Directors, which meets twice a year to examine them. No justification is needed for rejection, and there is no ceremony for those who are accepted.

*Admission to local churches:* Each local church adopts its own admission criteria, accounting for local legislation regarding religious freedom and majority age.

*In Belgium:* For the local church in Belgium, an application must be supported by two or more Christian Scientists who can vouch for the applicant's character. To join the church, one must attend services, study the lessons, and endeavor to put the teachings into practice.

### **4. Simultaneous membership in the movement and another religion**

This is not permitted, based on Mary Baker Eddy's teaching that Christian Science cannot be mixed with any other doctrine or spiritual healing system, including medicine. Christian Scientists can attend other services but cannot join other religions.

### **5. Financial responsibilities of members**

There are no fees, admission or otherwise, for members of the Belgian local church. The Mother Church charges a per capita tax that has not changed



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since it was instituted, at \$1/ year, although no one will be refused for not paying, as there is never any financial pressure.

## **6. Voluntary departure from the movement**

Anyone can leave the movement at any time.

## **7. Procedure for expulsion of a member**

This is rare. People have been admonished with warnings, and occasionally, if conduct is judged too far from the principles of the Church, a member will be expelled from the Mother Church or put on probation. The Manual of the Mother Church regulates the criteria and procedures for expulsion, which is done by the Board of Directors in Boston.

## **8. Social and family relations**

Members of the movement fully live in civil society. They can get married to non-members and are not incited to break relations with their families. Children do not automatically become Christian Scientists; they attend public or schools financed with public money. The Church of Christ, Scientist does not interfere with family matters or sexual life of the members.

## **9. The movement and medicine**

The Christian Science policies regarding healing are the most controversial aspects of the religion. In the United States, ten cases were brought to court in the 1980's and 90's following the deaths of children of Christian Science parents who relied on "spiritual treatment" instead of conventional medical care.<sup>4</sup> The main concerns have been that children will not be treated for easily treatable or preventable disorders, and that they may expose others to infectious diseases. Although the teachings emphasize that members of the Church are permitted to go to doctors, they have not produced clear guidelines as to where this line should be crossed. From an ideological standpoint doctors should not be necessary according to the tenets of the religion; however, from a practical one they often are, thus Christian Scientists are taught to abide by the laws regulating medical treatment of children.

Regarding the cases against Christian Scientists, one neutral view of the

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<sup>4</sup> <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/chrissci.html>



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movement states as follows:

"Fairness would seem to suggest that several facts be noted. First, all the cases involving the death of a child because of the suspension of conventional medical treatment have now been resolved and in most instances, the parents were exonerated. Second, while there are no comparative empirical studies, it would appear that Christian Science practice has been held to a standard of perfection medical practice hasn't faced. Third, in none of the cases was the Church held financially liable, since it does not direct what actions should be taken by individuals in their own lives."<sup>5</sup>

Despite how Christian Science is generally perceived, it is untrue that Christian Scientists never go to doctors. Mary Baker Eddy maintained "friendly relations" with doctors, and her *Science and Health* book advocates that Christian Scientists be "guided in the right use of temporary and eternal means," or in other words, one can go to a doctor if one feels it's best.

*Does Christian Science really heal?*

One researcher, Robert Peel, studied 4,000 remissions obtained between 1971 and 1981, many of them medically verified. Also, over a one-hundred-year period, Christian Science magazines have published more than 60,000 testimonies of healing through prayer, many of which have been medically verified. Many healings that have taken place are unpublished.

There are some questions as to the viability of the Christian Science healing method: "Whereas the Christian Science approach to healing may help psychosomatic illnesses, it has been scientifically demonstrated that it is not effective with real illness. In fact, studies comparing the cumulative death rates of practicing Christian Scientists with control groups have shown significantly higher death rates among the Christian Scientists (*Journal of American Medical Association*, September 22/29, 1989, pp 1657-58; and *Morbidity Weekly Report*, August 23, 1991, pp. 579-582).]"<sup>6</sup>

## **10. Financial statements**

These are available in detail to the members in the Belgian local church.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/chrissci.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.rapidnet.com/~jbeard/bdm/Cults/science.htm>



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## **11. Religious activities**

There are two important days for Christian Scientists: the Sunday service, and testimony meetings on Wednesday. Both the Bible and *Science and Health* are used in conjunction for both individual study and during these services; as the foundation for Christian Science teaching and practice, these books were ordained by Eddy as a "dual and impersonal pastor," and, according to the Church's official website, both books are used to "unlock the Bible."

On Sunday, lesson-sermons prepared in Boston and published in the *Christian Science Quarterly* are read at the services. Each lesson-sermon is part of a series of 26 lessons that repeat once per year. Lessons are focused around subjects such as "man," "substance," "matter," and "reality." They are given at the same time in all the Churches, with the same procedure—two readers alternating Bible verses and corresponding commentaries from *Science and Health*. Singing and Bible verses open and close the service. On Sundays, there is also an optional Sunday school for youth (youth meaning up to age 20).

On Wednesday, there are testimonies of healings by congregation members, and there are also readings of passages from the Bible and *Science and Health*.

The Church does not celebrate marriages or funerals.

*Private life:* Aside from attending religious services, a member must pray daily to protect him/herself from aggressive mental suggestion. During this "divine communion," he is conscious that error is impotent and that truth and goodwill triumph. For him, without protection of the Eternal, the error leaves him open to sin, sickness and death on the faithful.

Personal morality should reflect recognized communal values, and members must adopt a code of good conduct with regard to the Church, not circulating information contrary to official doctrine and not adhering to other religions. Abstention from alcohol and smoking is strongly encouraged, and Eddy also recommended abstaining from tea and coffee.

*In Belgium:* There are both the Wednesday and Sunday meetings. The Sunday service is in French at 10:00 and in English at 11:15; the former is mostly locals, with a strong African presence, and is more well-attended than



the latter, which is mostly expatriates. The Wednesday evening service, which is well-attended, is bilingual, with readings in both French and English and testimonies in both or one. The reading room is also available for people to read the lesson or consult periodicals. The reading room in Brussels is open on Monday and Wednesday, and Sunday after church.

## **12. Life in community**

Christian Scientists do not have a communal living situation, although in some countries, "nursing homes" have been created where members who do not want to stay in hospitals can go.

## **13. List of allegations concerning the dangerous character of the movement**

### *1. Medical neglect of minors*

Those who object to the allegedly physical dangers of Christian Science suggest that members of the religion and their minor children will "often suffer needlessly from treatable ailments and neglect life-threatening conditions that could be cured if treated in their early stages... Since they are taught that learning about their bodies is spiritually harmful, Christian Scientists are ill-equipped to understand the symptoms of illness."<sup>7</sup> Some sources paint a picture of Church members as tending "to hide their illnesses from one another, even within families," because of the stigma attached to exhibiting symptoms of lack of health.<sup>8</sup>

"No national studies on the mortality of Christian Scientists have ever been done, but smaller studies have pointed to a high mortality rate among Christian Scientists--for example, among the graduates of Principia, the Christian Science College. The American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Medical Association have publicly declared their opposition to the laws that allow Christian Scientists and members of other religious groups to withhold medical care."<sup>9</sup>

### *2. Financial mismanagement in the US*

The former allegation points to inappropriate transfers of funds, as well as

<sup>7</sup> Wells, [http://www.go.studentz.com/my\\_faith/christian\\_science.htm](http://www.go.studentz.com/my_faith/christian_science.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Miller, Laura. "Like Jonestown in Slow Motion": interview of Caroline Fraser by Salon.com, Sept. 1, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Id.



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over-extension, financial debt, and alleged misuse of resources of a Real Estate Trust Fund. With regard to the latter, the *Chicago Tribune* on January 27, 1993, p. 2 reported that "the church had secretly transferred \$ 46.5 million from endowments and pension funds to help cover huge losses on the Monitor Channel, which had lost over \$ 325 million."

#### **14. Official position of the movement regarding allegations**

##### *1. Medical neglect of minors*

There have never been any such cases in Belgium.

##### *2. Financial mismanagement in the US*

Such cases must be handled by courts. There have not been any such accusations against the movement in Belgium.

#### **15. Condemnation of the movement or of clerics in Belgium on the basis of one of the aforementioned allegations**

**None.**

#### **16. Complaints by members of the movement regarding intolerance, discrimination for their beliefs, and limits on the exercise of their liberties before the publication of the Parliamentary Report on Cults**

There has been no reported case of discrimination or intolerance.

#### **17. Complaints by members of the movement regarding intolerance, discrimination for their beliefs, and limits on the exercise of their liberties after the publication of the Parliamentary Report on Cults**

The Church of Christ, Scientist was not on the Belgian Parliamentary Report on Cults.

There has been no reported case of discrimination or intolerance.

#### **18. Lawsuits against the movement in Belgium**

None



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## 19. The movement and human rights

The Christian Scientists are committed to human rights and social justice as global aspects of life that are worthy and needing of healing. With this in mind, *The Christian Science Monitor*, an impartial publication with the goal to "injure no man and to bless all mankind," was created.

Another notable example is Christian Scientist Rushworth Kidder's Global Ethics group ([www.globalethics.com](http://www.globalethics.com)), which was created based on research of global criteria for ethical decisions.

### Suggested reading

- **Ontario Consultants for Religious Tolerance, Christian Science**  
Page: [http://www.religioustolerance.org/cr\\_sci.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/cr_sci.htm)
- **Mary Baker Eddy's Path to Religious Leadership--a Book Review by Peter J. Gomes:**  
<http://www.bookwire.com/bbr/life/with-bleeding.html>
- **University of Virginia, Religious Movements Pages, Christian Science Profile:**  
<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/christsci.html>
- **Dericquebourg, Regis. Religions de guérison, Les Editions du Cerf, Paris, 1988**
- <http://www.americanreligion.org/cultwtch/chrstsc.html>

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This profile will be updated with new and pertinent information brought to the knowledge of and checked by *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int.*

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