

The Evolution of the New Thought Philosophy as a Psycho-Spiritual Movement in the Global Culture

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*In the mid-1800s two men in the New England region of North America laid the groundwork for a new psychological and philosophical approach that another New Englander called “a religion of healthy-mindedness”. Ralph Waldo Emerson of Concord, Massachusetts, laid out the principles in his essays and lectures, Phineas Parkhurst Quimby of Belfast, Maine, developed the methodology through hundreds of experiments, and in 1902 William James, a Harvard professor speaking at the Gifford Lectures in Scotland, captured its essence, as published in his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Since then, thousands of study groups, centers, and churches have been formed to apply this approach, and, in the 21st century, many of its fundamental concepts have been integrated into the global corporate and pop culture through media and emerging developments in neurophysiological research. This paper lays out the principles of what has become called the New Thought movement and describes their historical progression into the mainstream American, and now global, culture.*

Keywords: *New Thought; psycho-social movements; spiritual movements; cultural evolution; applied metaphysics*

Introduction

This study provides a description of the evolution of the New Thought movement with an assessment of the prevalence of the ideas developed within the New Thought philosophical framework across the planet today. It places those principles in their historical context and describes their expansion through the 20th century and into the 21st.

Historical Context for the Movement

Over the millennia, each stage in the development of Western Culture has offered voices who have encouraged their listeners to rely on an Inner wisdom, in harmony with the processes of Nature, rather than the strident, often discordant directives of the cultural norms. Modern students of shamanism (a westernized version of the Siberian term for a person who “steps outside” and “lifts awareness to higher levels”) have seen how this understanding is present in the most ancient, pre-urbanized cultures [Harner, Michael, *The Way of the Shaman*, 1980, and others]. Students of the most ancient codified spiritual tradition, dating from 6000 b.c.e. and called today Zoroastrianism, experience

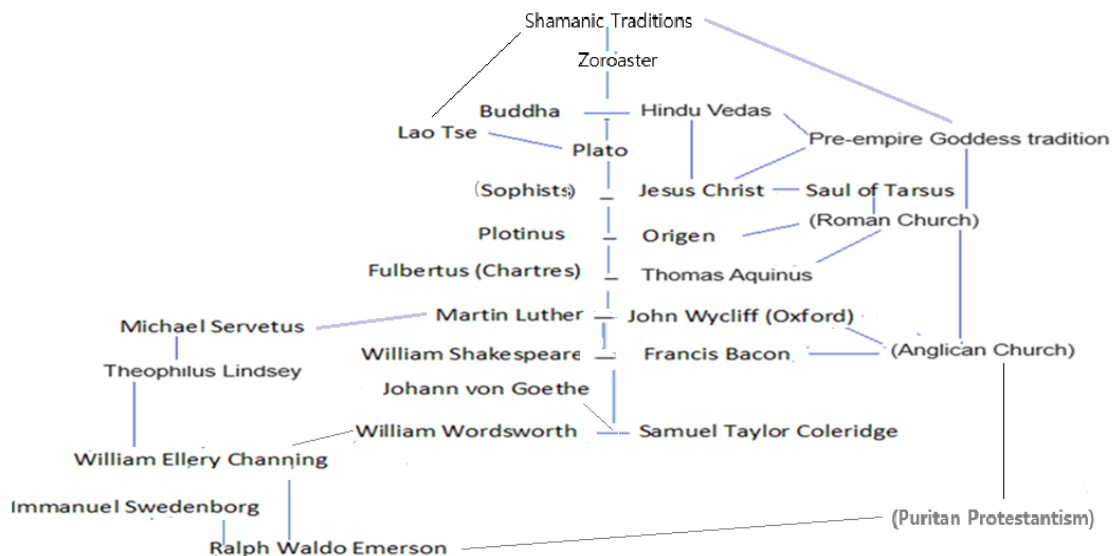
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the call to lift one’s awareness beyond the material to a great Light of being (Smith 1955). The *Vedas* and *Upanishads* of the 3rd millennia b.c.e. formed the basis for the Hindu tradition and offered the path of *yoga* to experience a life of higher consciousness, making it possible to develop skills and abilities beyond those found in the normal culture. Various modern interpretations of the 7th century b.c.e. works of Lao Tsu and Chuang Tsu, called today, Taoism, invite the reader to step outside of a world of competition and acquisition and align with the flow of natural processes (Mitchell 1991). During the same century the prince Gautama synthesized the Hindu traditions into a simple practice, based on eight principles that invite the practitioner to leave behind attachment to the material world and discover the peace and wisdom within, in what became known as Buddhism (Smith 1955). We see some of the same teachings in the works of the ancient Greeks, notably Heraclitus and the Stoics, culminating in the “idealism” of Plato as described in his *Republic*, and expanded on several hundred years later in Plotinus’ *Enneads* during the early years of the Roman empire.

Following the fall of the empire, the call to turn within for wisdom was made available only to a very few, educated men and women, flowering for a time at Fulbertus’ (980-1030 c.e.), cathedral school in Chartres, where the Greek liberal arts were integrated into Christian theology and a Neo-Platonic philosophy. With the emergence of the Inquisition, 1184 c.e., however, such ideas were repressed across the territories controlled by the Roman church, while they bloomed in the Arabic world, as illustrated by the popularity of the writings and teachings of the Turkish Sufi, Rumi during the 1200s c.e.

They re-emerged in Europe with Kant and the various writers of German idealism, culminating in the works of Johann von Goethe, whose transcendentalist logic strongly influenced the American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. (see Figure 1)

Figure 1. A Simplified Overview of the Philosophies Influencing Ralph Waldo Emerson



Philosophical Foundation of the Movement

Emerson, abandoning his career as a Unitarian minister, traveled to Europe in 1832. While there, visiting all the great cities, he met John Stuart Mill in Rome, and was introduced to the British writers Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Carlyle while in England. This trip provided the missing pieces for Emerson's emerging philosophy, which he laid out first in the essay "Nature," in 1836. Specifically, according to Marc Josef Wortman,

Goethe and Emerson found that the study of nature was a way to unify the individual with the wider processes of nature, thus gaining insight into the ideal whole. Both rejected a static understanding of nature, instead believing in the primacy of the mind's intuition of the dynamic quality of nature. (Wortman 1987)

Emerson went on to write many more essays defining his ideas and to lecture on these subjects across North America (see, e.g. *Emmerson's Essays* 1981). In those essays he introduced the possibility of living life in harmony with Nature and one's Inner Wisdom.

Nature is so elegant that just one substance becomes all the variety of the universe. However complex a form may be—star, sand, fire, water, tree, humanity—it's still that one substance... ["Nature"]

...none of us can comprehend what we're not prepared to experience, no matter how close we are to it. We much have a mental framework to make sense of what our perceptions tell us... So, since we can neither see nor have anything more than what we are, let's stop looking outside ourselves to justify our fears or find our good. Let's seek inside ourselves instead, for what is already in our being must emerge and shine in our world as long as we exist. ["Spiritual Laws"]

The true doctrine of omnipresence is that God, as the Soul of life, exists with all His qualities in everything everywhere, always...all wisdom, all beauty, and all good. When I act in accord with Nature's law, I add to the world. I roll back the illusions of darkness and chaos. ["Compensation"]

He also expanded on the idea, present in only the most esoteric societies at the time (see, e.g. Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*) of improving oneself to live a more prosperous life. Thus, the philosophical underpinnings of a uniquely American form of religious practice, having been established across the millennia, were formulated for the 19th century in the writings of a New Englander who thought of himself as a poet, rather than a Christian minister.

Methodological Approach within the Movement

Paralleling Emerson's career, a clockmaker in Maine was discovering that there is a causal relationship between a person's belief systems and thought patterns and the

state of their physical health, and so was developing a method to eliminate the physical symptoms by transforming the beliefs (Braden 1963, Anderson 1995, Miller 2024).

Having been healed of consumption, and later, the secondary effects of medications he had been prescribed, by non-medical means, he was fascinated by the role of mind in bodily conditions. Accordingly, he was one of the first North Americans to study mesmerism, and spent several winters traveling around New England offering demonstrations. He stopped that practice, however, when one of his subjects was clearly responding to his thoughts and to those of people in the audience, rather than his verbal suggestions. According to Quimby's son, George,

After a time Mr. Quimby became convinced that, whenever the subject examined a patient, his diagnosis of the case would be identical with what either the patient or someone else present believed, instead of Lucius really looking into the patient and giving the true condition of the organs; in fact, that he was reading the opinion in the mind of someone rather than stating a truth acquired by himself.

Becoming firmly satisfied that this was the case, and having seen how one mind could influence another, and how much there was that had always been considered as true, but was merely some one's opinion, Mr. Quimby gave up his subject, Lucius, and began the developing of what is now known as mental healing, or curing disease through the mind." (Dresser 1895)

At that point, Quimby began to analyze the thoughts and beliefs he had experienced prior to his own illnesses, as well as the similarities between the state of consciousness of the hypnotized subject and that of the patient in the doctor's office or congregant in the church. Over time, and through hundreds of experiments, he found a direct correlation between a person's belief in what Christian ministers called their "sinful nature" or their doctor's diagnosis and the symptoms they were experiencing.

He began using quotes from the Old and New Testaments in the Christian Bible that contradicted the religion-based issues and to point out the lack of support for the diagnoses as ways to shift the belief systems of people who came to him.

MY THEORY: the trouble is in the mind, for the body is only the house for the mind to dwell in . . . If your mind has been deceived by some invisible enemy into a belief, you have put it into the form of a disease, with or without your knowledge. By my theory or truth I come in contact with your enemy and restore you to health and happiness. ...as Science sees through man's belief it destroys the belief and sets the soul or wisdom free... So awake from your lethargy and come to the light of Wisdom, that will teach you that man's happiness is in himself, that his life is eternal... (Dresser 1921)

Several people among Quimby's successful cases learned his methods and applied them to others, forming healing centers and schools over the years 1860-1880, notably Julius and Annete Dresser, Warren Felt Evans, and Mary Baker Glover Patterson (later Eddy) (Braden 1963). In those centers, they trained more students in

Quimby's method, as they understood it. As described by the Dressers' son, Horatio, some 50 years later, the essence of their teachings was as follows:

- The state of our body is not the cause, but the effect, of our thoughts and feelings;
- Our beliefs shape our thoughts and feelings;
- What we hear when we're half asleep or upset or not really paying attention, along with what is repeated over and over in our minds or around us, forms our beliefs;
- To change conditions in our body or life, we must change the beliefs that shape our thoughts and feelings. (Dresser 1921)

Expansion of the Movement

The ideas presented by Emerson and Quimby were picked up and developed by men and women throughout the New England region and printed in magazine articles – notably Margaret Fuller's *The Dial*, and Mary Baker Eddy's *Christian Science Journal* – and offered in classes and lectures in the New England region through the 1870s and into the 1880s.

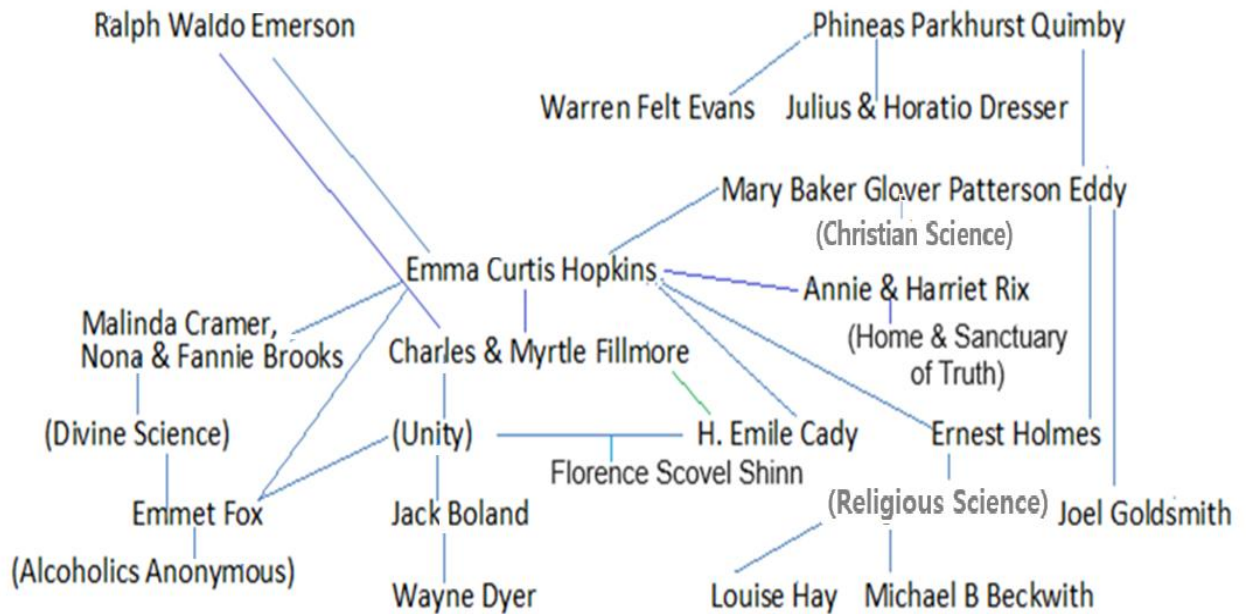
Through these journals, the principles and practices of the New Thought movement spread across North America and into England and Australia, where other writers and teachers began to expand upon them, and to develop healing practices based on them. Among these was Charles Swartz, a student of Eddy's, who took the ideas to Chicago, publishing a journal he called *Mind-Cure*. (Braden 1963, Miller 2024)

Mrs. Eddy formed a school to teach her version of Quimby's methods in Lynn, Massachusetts in 1876, which became the Massachusetts Metaphysical College in 1881, then, in 1903, was established as the Church of Christ, Scientist in Boston, Massachusetts. There she taught a basic and advanced class to groups of a dozen or so students a couple times a year. (Braden 1963, Miller 2024)

One of those students was a high school teacher named Emma Curtis Hopkins, whose family experienced a sudden and complete elimination of a respiratory illness following a verbal treatment by one of Mary Baker Eddy's students. Although originally skeptical of the method, this demonstration was sufficient to cause Hopkins to seek to learn how it worked, which she did, at the Massachusetts Metaphysical College, completing the six-week program in December of 1883, and being listed as a practitioner in the *Christian Science Journal* in February, 1884 (Braden 1963). By spring of 1886, she was practicing and teaching Eddy's method in Chicago, Illinois, and her first textbook was published in 1887. Over the years she developed her own variation of the method and is documented as having demonstrated its efficacy in close to 11,000 cases, many of whom were also taught the method and were encouraged to go out and teach it to others (Braden 1963, Hopkins 1888, Miller 2024). Her school was restructured as a seminary from which one hundred ten people were ordained and over five hundred

Hopkins Associations were formed between 1888 and 1916 (Braden 1963), establishing the New Thought movement both formally and informally across the North American continent. (See Figure 2).

Figure 2. The Formation of the Major New Thought Organizations



Hopkins' students formed the schools that defined the main branches of the movement; Unity, Religious Science, Divine Science, and Sanctuaries/Homes of Truth. Their students formed churches to ritualize and teach the methods to people who were not seeking to be healed but were seeking a better life and were open to the fundamental ideas, and then formed associations to share their experiences and understandings, including the International Divine Science Federation, the Association of Unity Churches, the United Churches of Religious Science (now International Centers for Spiritual Living), and the International New Thought Alliance. (Braden 1963, Miller 2024) Other, smaller associations have been formed from these, including the Universal Foundation for Better Living and the Affiliated New Thought Network. Paralleling these is the Seichi-No-Ie movement out of Japan, informed by the work of Fenwicke Holmes, brother of Religious Science founder Ernest Holmes, with around a million adherents, worldwide. (Seicho-No-Ie website 2024)

Through these schools, churches, and associations, the number of practitioners of New Thought principles and practices were maintained at sufficient levels to be an established presence in most of the cities of the U.S. through the 20th century. Today, according to the website NewThoughtWisdom, the publishing and educational activities of these associations reach approximately 2.5 million people worldwide annually, of which Unity's *Daily Word* is the largest of these publications, with over a

million subscribers in 2024 (personal communication, Jim Braden, Unity Worldwide Headquarters 2024).

One of Hopkins' students, William Walker Atkinson, picked up the mantle when Hopkins closed her seminary in Chicago, offering classes on his own. He published several books outlining his understanding of the principles, calling them the "Law of Attraction."

We are sending out thoughts of greater or less intensity all the time, and we are reaping the results of such thoughts. Not only do our thought-waves influence ourselves and others, but they have a drawing power--they attract to us the thoughts of others, things, circumstances, people, "luck"--in accord with the character of the thought uppermost in our minds...

A strong thought or a thought long continued will make us the center of attraction for the corresponding thought-waves of others. "Like attracts like" in the Thought World--as ye sow, so shall ye reap. (Atkinson 1906)

During the same years that Atkinson was working in Chicago, James Allen, a devoted student of Emerson's works, was integrating basic Buddhist principles with Neo-Platonic Christianity in England. Starting in 1902 he self-published *As A Man Thinketh*, and led an ongoing series of evening dialogues for visitors in his Cornwall home. Over the next 10 years he published *All These Things Added*, *The Way of Peace*, *Above Life's Turmoil*, and *The Eight Pillars of Prosperity*, all of which were international successes. (Allen 2012)

The Higher Thought Center was formed in London during that same period, and sponsored the work of a retired magistrate, Thomas Troward, who had grown up in Ceylon and worked for decades in the Punjab. Though grounded in the Anglican Christian tradition, his familiarity with the Sanskrit/Urdu/Hindi, Hebrew, and Arabic languages and their respective religions and cultures, as well as frequent and powerful paranormal experiences, led him to create a whole body of theory to support the ideas of the New Thought movement, outlined in his Edinburgh and Doré lecture series [1918], as well as *The Law and the Word* [1920], and several other volumes.

Troward's work provided the theoretical foundation that Ernest Holmes, in Los Angeles in 1917, needed in order to understand how it was that practitioners like Nona Brooks and Mary Baker Eddy could accomplish the results they did. Holmes continued to study and teach with his brother, Fenwicke, until 1925, when he completed a series of lessons with Emma Curtis Hopkins and immediately published his seminal work, *The Science of Mind* (1926). The next year, in 1927, he established the Institute of Religious Science and, like the other founder-teachers, was persuaded to launch a church a few years later, which he did, after being ordained by the head of the Divine Science church, Nona Brooks. (Braden 1963, Miller 2024)

Between all of these early students, researchers, and teachers, in the years 1890 - 1930 over 900 study centers, schools, and churches were founded across the English-speaking countries. (Braden 1963) They provided access to the essential principles and practices that would empower people to heal themselves, heal others, and live

abundant lives of well-being. They also trained practitioners, teachers, and ministers to continue the work, focusing primarily on physical and emotional healing and well-being.

Emergence of The New Thought Prosperity Movement

Outside of these organizations, however, another branch of the New Thought movement was developing, focused on prosperity and abundance through creative thought and action. The movement's initial focus began to shift to general well-being, including financial, very early on. In 1890 Mrs. Hopkins insisted that students who were practicing her teachings should be able to pay a relatively high tuition (\$50 in 1890 would be around \$1850 in 2025, (U.S. Consumer Price Index)) for her advanced, 6-week course without any effort. (Braden 1963). The Fillmores gave up seeking income through any other source besides their teaching and practice in 1892, shortly after they were ordained as ministers. (Braden 1963) About the same time, Nona Brooks found that she could "treat" for financial well-being for her school just as easily as for health for her patients. (Deane 1945)

Thus was born what could be called the "masculine arm" of the New Thought movement, which would take on a life of its own. While leaders in the healing, spiritual, or "feminine arm" continued to focus on physical and emotional healing, this group began to apply the same principles and practices in the world of business. Building on Emerson's principles and Allen's applications, they developed theories and practices to help men create thriving businesses and comfortably support their families. William Walker Atkinson's *Thought Vibration* (1911) took Thomas Troward's explanations of then-current scientific principles (Troward 1918) and explained the "Law of Attraction". Wallace Wattles encouraged people to think and act "in a certain way" that would lead to "certain results" in the world around them (Wattles 1910).

In 1925, a magazine illustrator in Greenwich Village, New York, wrote up some of her successes as a practitioner and teacher of these principles, and published a book called *The Game of Life and How to Play It*. Florence Scovel Shinn was well known in the publishing industry and a popular figure in New York. In her book she described how people could have the home of their dreams, the money to pay whatever needed to be paid, the helpers that would get things done, and more. Her explanations of the principles were clear, her anecdotes understandable, and her book has never been out of print since.

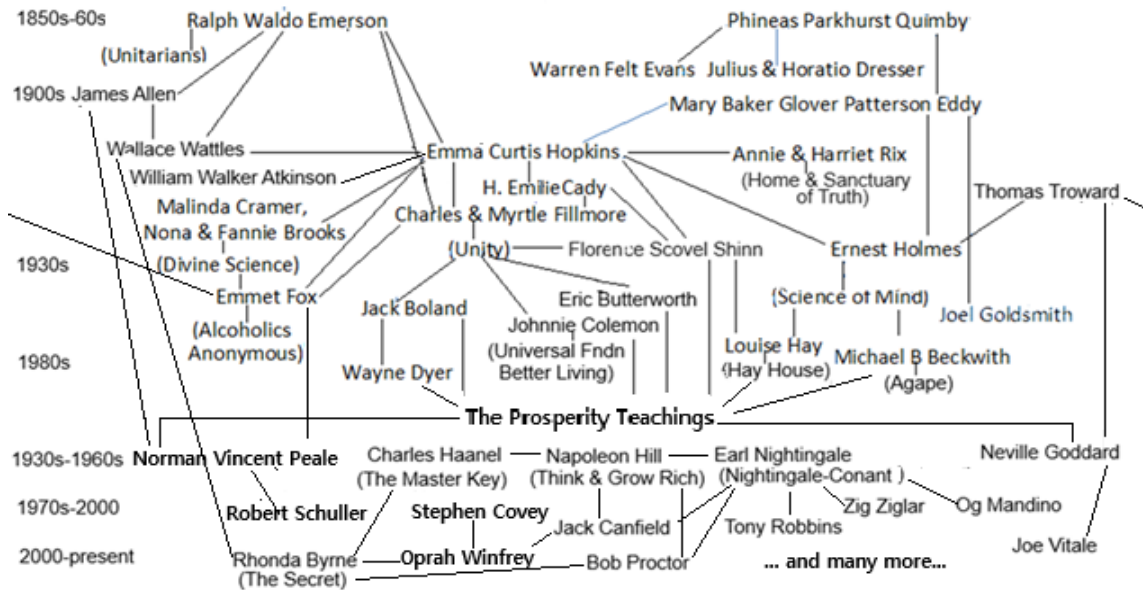
In the 1930s a young Irish engineer, Emmet Fox, who had studied with Thomas Troward to understand his paranormal experiences, began to teach New Thought principles and practices across England. In 1937, during the Depression, he moved to New York City, where his Sunday and Wednesday services filled Carnegie Hall (Braden 1963, Miller 2024). Fox also assisted in the formation of Alcoholics Anonymous, for whom Fox's writings are considered a supplemental text to their "Big Book" (Miller 2024).

Also in the 1930s, Napoleon Hill interviewed dozens of successful businessmen and told his readers how to “Think and Grow Rich” (1937). Earl Nightingale started reading Hill’s material on the radio in the 1940s, then joined with Lloyd Conant to record and distribute those readings as a company in Chicago (from the Nightingale-Conant website: <https://www.nightingale.com>). They focused on men in business, providing inspiration and motivation to transform their work and their lives by transforming their patterns of thought. Motivational speaking, drawing on all these materials and some personal experiences, became a profession.

During the 1960s and 1970s, new teachers from India and Tibet began to explain the principles of *yoga* to Americans and Europeans, including ways to still the mind and begin to allow new patterns of thought to emerge. At the same time, the women’s “consciousness raising” movement led to a wave of divorces and a reduction in teen marriages, which shifted the focus of nearly half the North American population away from home and family into the work world.

As a result, the 1980s saw a huge expansion of women in the business-building market, nearly doubling sales of what was by then considered “traditional” motivational materials, and by the 1990s, many of the producers of these materials were the women who had studied them in the past. Louise Hay launched Hay House to promote the practitioner methods she’d learned from one of Ernest Holmes’ students in a Religious Science church (Hay 1984). Oprah Winfrey introduced Hay and many more teachers of these ideas to thousands of women in her late-afternoon television shows, interviewing the current speakers and writers who were promoting, or finding new ways to apply or explain them. Catherine Ponder published her “Dynamic Laws” series (1963-1987), explaining how the characters described in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian New Testament were using these principles to live healthy, abundant lives. Both Hay and Ponder encouraged the repetition of affirmations to help change one’s thought patterns, as the masculine and feminine arms of the New Thought movement were merged.

Figure 3. Expansion of the New Thought Prosperity Movement



All of these separate activities came to a head in 2006, when an Australian woman named Rhonda Byrne produced a pilot for what, at first, was going to be a TV series, but became, instead, a standalone DVD, called *The Secret*. Integrating her personal story with the mystery of a little-known “emerald tablet” and inviting half a dozen motivational speakers to explain how it worked, she created a vehicle to promote the ideas that “thought become things” and “what you’re thinking becomes your reality.” It was an immediate hit, selling over 2 million copies in its first year, and reawakening interest in the authors who inspired it, which, in turn, led to the publication of books and supplemental videos, and the creation of “The Library of Hidden Knowledge,” a book series offering the 19th century teachers’ complex prose in modern language with summaries and exercises (Atria 2006-2013). Books from this series have been published in Indonesian, Estonian, Chinese, Hindi, and more, and *The Secret* is published in a dozen languages (personal communication, Richard Cohn, publisher 2024).

With these works, the global New Thought Prosperity movement was fully established, even though most people had no idea it existed. A recent introduction to the movement put it this way:

Ever hear of the positive thinking of Norman Vincent Peale, the seven habits of Stephen R. Covey, or the Be-Happy Attitudes of Robert Schuller? Familiar with the concepts of self-fulfilling prophecy, psychosomatic illness, the placebo effect, and what goes around, comes around? Acquainted with the concept of God being within each of us and in all of nature? Aware that your thoughts play a crucial role in the kind of life you experience? If so, then you know about New Thought. (Evans 2005)

Literature Review

Since the 1960s, the primary reference for the history of New Thought has been Charles Braden's *Spirits in Rebellion*, published by Southern Methodist University Press [1963; 1984]. Braden's encyclopedic text provides excellent historical documentation of the lives and teachings of the 19th century discoverers and teachers of the fundamentals of the New Thought philosophy and practice. He documents the relationship between the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and the work of Phineas Parkhurst Quimby in the 1840s-1860s, and that of Quimby's students with each other through the 1880s, then goes on to describe the lives of their students who were the founders of the various branches of the movement in the 1890s-1920s.

Braden's history was drawn largely from the archives of the International New Thought Alliance (INTA), then located in Mesa, Arizona. Those archives have been considerably expanded over the past sixty years, as students of those early founders have passed away and left their notes and documents to the archives. This past year, 2025, they were moved to Lee's Summit, Missouri, and are now housed in climate-controlled facilities at Unity Village, adjacent the archives for Unity Worldwide Ministries, and the Science of Mind archives, providing unprecedented access to primary source material regarding these people and their teachings.

In those archives, the INTA magazine offers a continuous series of articles and datapoints that inform the development of the movement since 1914.

Other resources on the history of the movement include Alan Anderson and Deborah Whitehouse's *New Thought: A Practical American Spirituality* (1995) and the early text by Horatio Dresser, *A History of the New Thought Movement* (1919). In addition, a number of independent websites have been developed over the past 20 years that provide useful insights and access, among them:

- the New Thought Wisdom Site: <https://www.newthoughtwisdom.com/index.html>;
- the encyclopedia.com site: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/new-thought-movement#:~:text=NEW%20THOUGHT%20MOVEMENT%20,Science%2C%20Theosophy%2C%20and%20Spiritualism>;
- an Emma Curtis Hopkins site: <https://www.emmacurtishopkins.org/>;
- the Fillmore Fellowship site: <https://www.truthunity.net/>.

Methodology/Materials and Methods

This study provides an assessment of the prevalence of the ideas developed by the teachers within the New Thought philosophical framework across the planet today, in the context of its development in the New England region of North America since the 1850s.

A qualitative review of historical documents provides a summary of the defining principles and practices that have become known as New Thought, as well as a history of the movement up until the 1980s.

Quantitative data about those publications and the activity of organizations within the movement is taken from conversations with or the websites of the associations and publishers.

Personal observation through the editing of the seminal works of the major teachers is a major source of the thesis developed here, as well (see, e.g., *As We Think So We Are*, *The NEW Science of Getting Rich*, *Natural Abundance*, *Unveiling Your Hidden Power*, etc.)

Finally, scanning social media sites provides insight to the ubiquity of New Thought principles being applied for personal development in individual and corporate settings around the world.

Results

The purpose of this paper is to establish the process by which the New Thought philosophy has become a global psycho-spiritual movement. Thus far it's been established that there have evolved two main branches of the movement: one that focuses on physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being, and one that focuses on abundance and prosperity.

Current State of the New Thought Well-Being Movement

The organizations and associations established by the early 20th-century founders of the movement continue to shift and change, and were strongly affected by the Pandemic shutdown of 2020-21. They continue, however, to teach practitioners methods for healing and restoring well-being in the lives of those who attend their centers and churches. The training has evolved, and is now offered mostly in the churches and centers, but also through schools like the Unity Urban School, the Johnny Colemon Theological Seminary, and the Emerson Theological Institute, all of which, together, graduate 30-50 practitioners and ministers each year. These then either help to form new centers and churches or go back to their home organization to offer healing services.

While most medical practitioners have discounted the methods established by Quimby and taught, in various forms, within the New Thought movement, there are now close to 200 years of records demonstrating the effectiveness of changing one's life by changing one's beliefs. These start with Dresser's (1921) documentation of Quimby's 12,000 documented cessations of symptoms (or "cures"), continuing through Hopkins' 11,000 cases (Braden 1963), Brooks' 18,000 cases (Deane 1945), and include the hundreds of thousands of "answered prayers" documented by Silent Unity at Unity Worldwide Headquarters.

As a result, some scientists have explored the possibility that there is some validity to the method. Two authors, in particular, helped to launch that field of research: Deepak Chopra, with his *Quantum Healing*, and Norman Cousins with his *Anatomy of an Illness*. Their careful documentation of the relationship between the mental state of a patient and that person's medical condition reached enough people in enough places to open the door to rigorous research.

Since then, the work of biologists like Bruce Lipton, with his *Biology of Belief*, and neurophysiologists like Joe Dispenza, with *You Are the Placebo*, have detailed the mechanism by which what is happening in the brain affects what is happening in the body. Their work is supplemented by an increasing understanding of the nature of consciousness as a universal field, rather than electro-chemical activity in the brain. A brief summary of these theoretical and experimental understandings follows (a detailed explanation may be found in Miller 2024):

- In physics, it's become clear that matter is not solid, but is, in fact, energy held in tension in patterns, which can be interpreted as information, which can be understood as a form of awareness, or consciousness (see, e.g. *The Self-Aware Universe* by Amit Goswami, or *Quantum Self* by Danah Zohar)
- These patterns act as fields, and they interact in such a way that our experience is a function of the behaviors of "fields within fields" in a nested hierarchy, of which the largest is the "quantum field" out of which all matter, energy, and information emerge. (see, e.g., *Space, Time, and Beyond* by Fred Alan Wolf and Bob Toben)
- This quantum field is a holon, indivisible; it's ordered, and increasing in complexity across the universe, based on the patterns of energy flows within it. (see, e.g., *Order Out of Chaos* by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stenger)
- The orderly progression of increasing complexity is a creative process that applies to all levels of fields within the whole, and so is ongoing within the individuals within it. (see, e.g., *The Noetic Universe* by Dean Radin)
- The human experience is one part of the whole, and each human being is the result of and a contributor to the creative process of the whole – physically and energetically creating and expanding the possibilities of, not only their individual experience but that of the whole. (see, e.g., *A New Science of Life* by Rupert Sheldrake)
- The nature of fields is such that the pattern of matter and energy being created in one place is mirrored and reflected back by the surrounding, interacting fields, so the individual's thoughts and feelings are reflected back in various forms of matter and energy. (see, e.g., *The Reflexive Universe* by Arthur M. Young)
- The body's chemistry and physiology are determined only partly by innate genetics, which can be changed, and largely by the feelings and emotions of the individual (see, e.g., *The Biology of Belief* by Bruce Lipton, *You Are the Placebo*, Joe Dispenza)

Following this set of understandings, each individual being is currently experiencing the consequences of past thoughts, actions, feelings, and the beliefs that sustain them, in the body and the larger material world they are creating, according to the patterns of information they have habitually been within the interacting fields-within-fields of energy that is our universe. Together, these understandings establish the essence of New Thought. They provide a sound theoretical basis for practitioners seeking to help people improve their experience of well-being.

Current State of the New Thought Prosperity Movement

While there are well established centers and associations devoted to the well-being arm of the New Thought movement, no official organization for the Prosperity branch exists. Therefore, documenting its development requires monitoring the distribution of materials produced by its adherents.

To that end, a cursory count of the sales of books, audiobooks, and ebooks in this arena amount to over 40 million copies a year, globally, for the past 20 years [drawn from goodreads.com, googlebooks.com, amazon.com]. This count is based on recorded sales of individual titles, including *The Secret* (2 million copies of the DVD sold in its first year and over 100,000 in most years since, per the publisher), *Think and Grow Rich* (over 100 million copies sold between two publishers since the original publication in 1937), and *The Science of Getting Rich* (now in the public domain, published by 50 different publishers in the US, with average sales of 3000+ copies/year, according to listings on Amazon).

They are also published in several languages, as illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Some Translations of the New Thought Prosperity Title *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill



The larger category for such works is “Self-Improvement” or “Personal Development”. While this description is not unique to New Thought, the “perfectibility” of the individual human being through one’s life and work is fundamental to the philosophy and is not typically found in traditional Judeo-Christian teachings.

According to John LaRosa, on the website MarketResearch.com,

Self-improvement is big business, as Americans constantly seek out services to improve their lives — spiritually, financially, and for health reasons. The market is primarily female, but men are getting more involved. (LaRosa 2025)

He quotes a report from the research firm Market Data, saying “Marketdata estimates that the self-improvement market in the U.S. was worth \$13.4 billion in 2022... fueled by growth in personal coaching services, self-help books and audiobooks, and self-help apps.” (LaRosa 2025) Another firm, Grandview Research, set the global market for such products at \$48.4 billion in 2024, of which the North American market is 35% (grandviewresearch.com 2025).

Another measure of the extent to which such ideas have penetrated the world marketplace is their prevalence on social media sites like YouTube. A basic search for "change your thoughts change your life" on YouTube currently yields thousands of direct results, with many individual videos amassing millions of views. Top dedicated channels include:

- Tony Robbins: Over 833 videos focused on mindset shift and personal transformation.
- The Mindset Mentor Podcast: Regularly uploads content on subconscious rewiring, with some videos reaching over 500,000 views.
- Psych2Go: Features over 1,000 videos (reaching 9.42 million subscribers) about understanding and managing emotions for a better life.

Other social media sites, like Facebook and Instagram provide what are called “memes,” or short, clearly stated affirmations or guidelines for personal development. While neither Facebook nor Instagram report the number of specific memes, a search on Google Images reveals hundreds of such items, across multiple languages, as illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Some New Thought Prosperity Memes in Multiple Languages

Another measure is the degree to which the principles and practices are being applied within traditional Judeo-Christian organizations. Online journalist John Haller traces how New Thought doctrines transform into a Prosperity Gospel whose preachers are “promoting techniques for success in business and in life through positive attitude” (Haller 261). And Jewish rabbis have begun to offer teachings from the *Kabbalah* that are in alignment with New Thought (see, e.g., “rabbi David” and “rabbi soul coach” YouTube channels).

Discussion

The research shared in this paper addresses both the historical evolution of the New Thought movement and its current contributions to the global Prosperity movement, with a brief consideration of the modern scientific research that supports the principles and methods that define the movement. It is by no means definitive, and one could readily find reason to explore the current status in greater detail. The paper does, however, establish the essential bases for further research.

Conclusions

As stated at the outset, the teachings of the New Thought movement are by no means new, but through the work of the authors, ministers, and practitioners trained within the movement, the principles and practices have extended far beyond the limits imposed by ancient spiritual texts based in unfamiliar cultural contexts. They are, in

fact, the basis for a global movement calling people to turn inward, away from mechanistic science and toward an inner field of unfolding possibilities—based on an awareness of one's own nature as a human being.

New Thought products—print, e-, and audio-books, affirmation cards, dvds, classes, coaching, and webinars -- are offered in a global marketplace, promoted by television celebrities, motivational speakers, therapists, organizational development specialists, and sales managers. The use of positive statements to shift one's mental attitude and so achieve greater levels of productivity and advancement has become a normally accepted practice across the professions.

In addition, books by the original teachers, and by the authors explaining the science that supports their principles and practices, are now being used as textbooks to teach New Thought practitioners through several schools around the U.S., including the Emerson Theological Institute, in classes offered online and through 35 New Thought centers around the world (2025).

The ideas are being spread through many different media across the continents and language barriers, encouraging people to live a life of, as William James put it in 1902, "healthy mindedness." Thus it can be said,

New Thought, as Dr. Holmes wrote, has valued and timeless concepts or principles which, when developed in generation after generation, can serve all of humanity in working toward a future world that works for everyone. (Lockhard 2023)

To which students of Ernest Holmes' Religious Science ending their declarations of intention, or "treatments," would say "and so it is."

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