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Healing Religions and Well-being

Régis Dericquebourg

Exposé fait dans l'atelier : Religion, Healing, Welfare and Well-being : Policies and Praxis in Comparative Perspective. Organizers : Grace Davie, University of Exeter, and Ian Varga, Queens University, Kingston. Convener : Adam Possamai, University of Western Sydney. 66th Annual Meeting of The Association for the Sociology of religion : The Causes and Consequences of Contemporary Moralities, San Francisco, Cal.. August 13-15, 2004.

For many years, I have been studying a subset of the religious field that I have named healing religions or religions with therapeutic vocation or also healing Churches. I will give some examples later on.

Generally speaking, it can be noted that many religions show great concern about health. Some religions, like Mormonism, reduce the risk of illness by proposing some life hygiene. Other faiths practice healing. Catholicism is known for its pilgrimages, such as Lourdes, for its masses for sick people, for the anointing of the sick the importance of which was stressed by the Pope in 1998, for devotions to healing saints. In Protestantism, pastors can lay on hands on suffering people. Asian spiritual movements (Buddhism and Hinduism) propose the extinction of sufferings and have invented a medicine adapted to their beliefs, such as the Yang Ji medicine which is at the confluence of biomedicine and three religious traditions: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. In their respective peripheries, one can also find healing mediums and people invoking goddesses specialized in one type of illness (Bertrand, Harman). Muslims have invented the unani medicine (Kakar, 1997). In his travel stories dating back to 1347, Ibn Battuta describes healings of paralytics near the grave of Ali (Battuta, 1982). In Greek ancient times, healthcare was put under the auspices of the god of medicine, Asclepius, who became Esculape in the Roman Empire. Some New Age practices aim at the conservation and the improvement of health as well as healing, although New Age is not a religious therapeutic movement.

Among smaller religions, Mahikari and Soka Gakkai for example have healing practices (Louis Hourmant, 1999). In the wake of Protestantism and Catholicism, Pentecostals and Charismatics can pray to get healings.

From a global perspective, religions may be a source of some psychological wellbeing and even better health for believers. From Freud's point of view, they appear to be « concern-breakers ». This expression is linked to medicines used by man to face the harshness of destiny and to endure the sufferings and the deprivation imposed on him by civilization. Such medicines are expected to make life in community possible even if for the founding father of psychoanalysis, they hardly achieve their goal (S. Freud, L'avenir d'une illusion, Paris, P.U.F., ed. In 1975, p 25).

However, according to Max Weber, the various fruit of salvation (Heilsgüter) that religions promise and propose cannot be considered by empirical researchers as exclusively or even primarily related to the beyond » (Weber, French translation, Grossein, p 345). Indeed, « Apart from Christianity and a small number of specifically ascetic faiths, the fruit of salvation, proposed by an religions, whether primitive or civilized, prophetic or not, mainly concerns this world: health, long life, wealth were the promises of Chinese, Vedic,

Zoroastrian, Judaic, Ancient, Islamic religions ; such were the promises made to pious laymen by Hinduism and Buddhism. » (Weber, French translation Grossein, p 346).

From a particular point of view, empirical studies of the Jesus Movement, the Ananda Cooperative Village, the Children of God, Moonism and the Divine Light Mission carried out by researchers like Richardson, Simmonds and Harder, Kuner, Galanter, Nicholi (James Richardson, 1985) have shown that religious movements linked to Asian spiritual movements or Judeo-Christian monotheism can have indirect therapeutic effects and facilitate the rehabilitation and the reinsertion of drug addicts and unstable persons. See also M. Argyle and B. Beith Hallami, 1975.

Yet, although many big religions and religious minorities show great concern about health and well-being, their primary objective is ontological salvation (entry of the soul in the light) or collective salvation (final resurrection and entry in the paradise restored on earth). In their theologies and in their practices, their concern about health is secondary. This makes them different from the healing Churches where the will to heal the body, the mind and the difficulties of life is in the heart of faith and publicly announced. For example: Christian Science, Antoinism, Maguy Lebrun's prayer groups, the Christ of Montfavet group (now named Universal Alliance) and Invitation à la Vie (IVI). The last three are based in Europe but there are similar movements elsewhere in the world. I set aside Pentecostal and Charismatic groups because their primary objective is the soul's salvation and the recognition of Christ as the redeemer whose power is proved by some through the healing charisma.

1. Ideal type of healing Churches

In my research works, I defined healing religions by outlining their ideal type according to the Weberian typification method, that is to say by stressing, linking and organizing the traits that are common to a specific category of phenomena in an ideal table that does not necessarily exist as such in reality (Weber, 1995:181).

Each case has some significant characteristics that bring it closer to the ideal type but what is essential is to measure the deviation from the ideal type so as to find its limits

The presentation of this ideal type of healing religions would require more than just a few minutes. I had the opportunity to describe it in details in my thesis for the position of research director (Dericquebourg, 1999) and in several articles (Dericquebourg, 1995, Lautman), Dericquebourg, 1997 RFP), (Dericquebourg, 2002, Benoist). Here are its characteristics:

They publicize their quest for healing and therefore attract sick people or people in psychological and moral distress.

They have accredited religious therapists whose healing charisma was legitimized by the movement. From a Weberian point of view, they can be qualified « religions virtuoso ». They are for example practitioners in Christian Science. Healing Churches grant them a central role and a legitimate authority in the leadership of the movement. They thereby avoid possible tensions between the managers and the owners of a specific charisma.

They have a broad definition of illness: not only physical and psychological ailments but also the material, social, professional, sentimental or family vicissitudes of life. This is to be

connected to the concept of *infirmitas* in the Middle Ages which meant at the same time poverty, illness and the condition of the pilgrim.

They provide a metaphysical explanation for the illness and its spiritual treatment which is based on the belief system of the movement. The treatment is not applied in an epistemological vacuum. It is the prolongation of a theology. When healing is achieved, it authenticates the movement.

They consider the spiritual treatment as a stage on the way to salvation because it offers the sick the opportunity to meet a supernatural reality and to enter the way to salvation. However, some people only use religious therapists when they need them, just as providers of services, but never adhere to the proposed spiritual way. A tension has been noticed between the demand for healthcare and the offer of salvation. Few people follow the proposed way to salvation, even if they were healed. Such religious groups sometimes regret that they are only « client-cults ».

The spiritual treatment is a mystical experience in so far as it creates a direct relationship with god or a supernatural entity.

They are not ceremony-oriented in so far as their main practice is the experience of the spiritual treatment. When they exist, religious offices consist in reading the fundamental doctrines, like the reading of verses from the Bible and of their comments in *Science and Health with the Key to the Scriptures* in the Church of Christian Science or like the reading of the Revelation of « Father Antoine » in Antoinism.

They know how to manage the failure of the treatment so that it does not question the validity of their doctrine.

They create an epistemological rupture with biomedicine both in the explanation of the illness and in the type of medication they propose. In healing religions, illness in the broad sense has a metaphysical cause and the treatment is spiritual. Although the medical establishment and healing Churches are potentially in conflict, they manage to reach a *modus vivendi* which allows them to coexist in society without being in confrontation, except when medical doctors can invoke negligence and lack of discernment of the religious therapists in a death case. Generally speaking, they are rarely sued for illegal practice of medicine.

Another characteristic of healing religions is practicing prevention. Their practice is not limited to the peak experience of healing. In their view, it is important to be healed, it is essential not to get ill or not to relapse. That is the reason why they have developed practices aiming at keeping illness away. The daily prayer of the Christian Scientist will protect against « malicious mental poison » or regular harmonization in *Invitation à la Vie* — a sort of massage of the body accompanied by prayers will prevent illnesses. Some recommend some food hygiene excluding tobacco, alcohol, drugs and some food items presented as harmful as in the movement of the Christ of Montfavet or as the Adventists or the Mormons.

The healings they achieve cannot be considered miracles which from a theological point of view are exceptional events through which God reminds men of his presence and his power. Healing religions reject « divine lottery » in which the one gets healed and another does not, as in Lourdes. In healing religions, healing must take place if it is done the right way, even if the healing procedure must be repeated as often as it must.

12) I will also add that healing religions are distinct from magic because contrary to magicians, 1) they have worked out a rational religions thinking under the form of a theology along with an axiology; 2) they claim to be universal and do not use a local symbolical system which would limit their power to a given local area; 3) their therapists are not isolated entrepreneurs like magicians, even if the latter ones can unite in corporations to teach their art ; religious therapists are accredited and supported by a community of believers which communicates and propagates a belief ; 4) healing religions propose salvation based on manipulations (beneficial effects here below), like magicians, but they also have an ontological salvation, the soul's or an immortal principle's salvation while magicians do not care about salvation.

2. Religion and well-being

The modus operandi of religious therapy always consists in a protocol which is common to ail therapies :

- a) a demand originating in suffering or distress and addressed to a therapist accredited by his community;
- b) a relationship with the therapist based on hope (believing expectation);
- c) a theory about illness that cannot be questioned by a possible failure of the therapy;
- d) the implementation of the spiritual treatment;
- e) the installation of new social attitudes and behaviors;
- f) a debt which can be settled through a payment and sometimes a conversion which can sometimes be considered a limitless transfer (in the Freudian sense) to the healing movement.

Contrary to healers of traditional societies, the religious therapist does not aim at reintegrating the patient into his or her family or community. The new social attitudes acquired through the spiritual treatment are either at the micro-relational level or at the moral level. The treatment does not manipulate a local symbolical system which limits its efficiency to a cultural area as in traditional religions (Rosny, 1992). The religious treatment concerns the individual in modern societies with a universal outreach. Healing religions allow the patient to put his or her illness in a theory (Pardinielli, 1989) and to appropriate it while giving it a meaning that goes beyond the framework of life on earth; a medical doctor can say how someone gets ill but he or she cannot say why the illness strikes Mr X. The religious therapist answers the question « Why me? » which is posed in the face of the injustice caused by the illness which strikes some people and not others. At this level, he relieves the existential anguish of the sick or distressed person.

It can also be noted that healing religions do not increase the standard of sufferings. There is no transfiguration of the sufferings as in a part of Christianity. They are mostly viewed as the result of errors of judgment like the belief in the existence of evil in the creation whilst a good god cannot have created it. The only thing that man must do is to get rid of the belief in illness and to live pleasantly. It is a sort of contemporary secular hedonism where man claims happiness and health as a right. The mystical habitus that it produces must manifest itself « through the sweet euphoria of man with god. » The individual is not induced to withdraw from the world but is encouraged to acquire a bigger intensity of enjoying life and of happiness.

3. The end of suffering as a present-day

Healing religions are in the minority in the world. However, it can be noticed that official medicine, though established, has not replaced the recourse to religious therapists. We have wondered if the plausibility of the religious therapy was rooted in the conscience of the public. To this end, we have carried out a survey among students of the University of Lille (France). We have selected students in psychology because they are rather cautious towards belief phenomena which they link to the « obscure » foundation of the mind.

In a first move (2004), we proposed those students a list of 17 criteria and we asked them to choose three in order of importance to qualify a religion « a true religion. » We received 101 fully filled in questionnaires. The first three criteria selected by the students are :

- a) « makes life meaningful » (43)
- b) « allows its faithful to overcome the hardships of life » (41)
- c) « leaves its faithful the possibility not to believe in god » (33) (This is a curious choice!)

After a balancing of the choices (1 = 3 points, 2 = 2 points, 3 = 1 point), we have this range:

- a) « leaves its faithful the possibility not to believe in god » (97)
- b) equally: « allows its faithful to overcome the hardships of life » (94) and « makes life meaningful » (94)
- c) « defends human rights » (66). We can see that guaranteeing the well-being is in good position.

In a second survey (2004), we have asked another sample of students (95 responses) to agree or to disagree with 12 proposals concerning religious healing. Items 1, 2, 8, 9, 11 concern the possibility of a « out of track » healing. The average percentages of those who agreed are:

Overall: 53.46%	Believers: 63.82%	Unbelievers: 44.99%
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Items 4,5,7 concern the recourse to religious therapy along with a classical medical treatment. The average percentages of those who agree are:

Overall: 68.76%	Believers: 73.75%	Unbelievers: 59.71%
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These results show us that those students have a positive attitude towards the quest for healing or well-being in a religion, including for a large share of unbelievers. We can find here the idea of a magical transformation of the world which is consistent with other vider and more statistically refined surveys (Michelat). The results also show a positive attitude towards the recourse to a combination of medicine and spiritual treatment of illnesses. We will interpret this in terms of mobilization of resources as the students agree to resort to medicine and to religion to have a maximum of chances to get healed or to feel better.

In a short conclusion, we will say that religions give a global response to the suffering of man but we have shown that some religions are specialized in religions healing, in recovering and in keeping well-being. These religions carry out a function that big religions only partially take up or have left aside although it is one of the expectations of a man in distress. They answer the questions on the meaning of illness and unhappiness that medical doctors neglect. This is the reason why, according to us, healing religions will go on existing, even marginally, despite the growing hegemony of biomedicine.

table 1.

items	number of choices	ponderation
1- It defends human rights.	13	23
2-It has or it had martyrs because its believes.	1	1
3- It helps psychologically distressed people.	20	52
4- It protests against some immoral social pratices.	8	14
5- It supports human rights	28	66
6- It asks men a moral improvement	29	57
7- It gives a knowledge of God	21	48
8- It allows its the faithful to overcome the hardships of life.	41	94
9- It has clergymen.	2	5
10- It strives to convert men	6	10
11- It belongs temple or halls for getting to gether and pray.	20	28
12- it has religious offices	8	11
13- It helps men to improve their capacities.	9	16
14- it sacralizes the mains events of the life (birth, marriage, death) .	20	30
15- It was of it is now prosecuted.	1	1
16- it leaves its faithful the possibility not to believe in God.	33	97
17- it makes life meaningful.	43	94

table 2 (percentages of students who agree with the items).

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items	together	believers	unbilievers
	agree %	agree %	agree %
1. today, one may always heal by the prayer.	33,68	40,42	25
2. some people have a personal gift of healing.	54,73	55,31	54,16
3. The healing by the prayers is permanent even though the healing with medicine is temporary.	1,06	2,1.2	0
4. The cure by religious therapist is not inconsistent with the cure by the medecine.	58,94	80,85	83,33
5. When the medicine is not able to heal a person, one understand that these person seeks the recovery with a faith healer.	84,21	85,10	83,33
6. When a person is healed by a religion, it is normal that she converts to it.	59,57	63,04	54,16
7. One may be healed by a religion without joining it.	63,15	55,31	66,66

8. Miraculous healings may exist nowadays.	67,36	44,68	50
9. One cannot totally reject the hypothesis of healing by the prayer.	62,10	74,46	50
10. The healing by the prayer gives also the salvation of the soul.	32,63	44,68	37,5
11. In the universe, it exists an unknown dimension which can exercise an influence on the body and the mind.	49,47	51,06	45,83
12. The testimonies of the recoveries by the prayer let me think that! could be healed so.	24,21	34,04	18,75