

Healing Encounters in Two Communities African American Protestantism and Christian Science

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MY INTEREST in religion and healing is not purely academic. I come to these two research projects not only as a graduate student of theology, but also as a practitioner of various healing arts, including Ayurveda, massage therapy, herbology, and meditation. My experiences over the last twelve years in alternative medicine in the United States, Brazil, and Argentina have shown me the important roles that religious community and spiritual practice play in healing.

Because I view my research through the lens of one who believes in the healing power of spirit, I would like to acknowledge the tremendous value of the healing work being done by the people I have met, interviewed, and worshiped with. I am grateful for and humbled by both the warm welcomes and the suspicious stares I have encountered coming into these communities as a white female researcher. I am truly inspired by the healing that I have witnessed taking place in the forms of social activism and prayerful awareness. Through religious traditions and prayerful practices, people in both communities I am working with are changing peoples' lives—that is to say, they are changing the physical, mental, spiritual, financial, social, and political well-being of people through their daily commitment and faith-filled actions.

I believe that healing occurs in the six areas of life I just mentioned, both at the level of the individual and at the level of the community. As I continue to explore this broader concept of healing, I find great inspiration in the works of Latin American liberation theologians. According to Raul Rodriguez's guidelines for a spirituality of resistance, I interpret resistance in this context to mean healing, because Rodriguez is speaking about resistance against such social and structural illnesses as racism, classism, and sexism. He says:

resistance (and I contend healing) is achieved in simple everyday things, not (necessarily or only) in those that are extraordinary and make waves. It is an important and

urgent task not to cease to nurture the dream of a new society where justice and equality dwell, where we all have the right to be happy and the opportunity to be brothers and sisters.¹

I am honored to be working with people who are providing such nurturing daily in their communities. As I present my work here, I do so in shared commitment with them toward the goals of healing, health, and justice made manifest.

I have spent the last year working and worshipping in two very different Christian communities: the African American Protestant community of Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan; and the predominantly white middle- and upper-middle-class Christian Science community of Boston. As a non-denominational Christian, I have entered these communities as someone who, to a certain degree, speaks the same theological language. This has allowed me to experience in greater detail the different worship styles and practices of each community. My research has revolved around two main questions: What does healing mean to the people in these communities? And how is healing experienced?

I began working in the African American Protestant churches of Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan as an advocate for the Spirituality and Child Health Initiative, which is a program out of the Department of Pediatrics at Boston Medical Center (BMC). Under the direction of Linda Barnes, the Spirituality and Child Health Initiative is helping physicians understand more clearly that their patients are pursuing complementary healing methods through their church communities.

As a way to build a bridge of communication and collaboration between BMC and the faith communities it serves, the Community Rolodex project was created. It is a web site that houses information about the various services and programs provided by churches whose members are served by Boston Medical Center. In my role as an advocate for this

project, I have interviewed twenty-five pastors and church officials and have attended numerous worship services, bible studies, and healing services in a range of denominations. They include: Baptist, Pentecostal, Independent, Seventh-Day Adventist, African Methodist Episcopal, Presbyterian, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Methodist. One of the most striking features of the Dorchester-Roxbury-Mattapan area is that it is teeming with churches. In my travels I have walked through many neighborhoods where I have seen two to four churches on every block, representing a rich diversity in settings and styles of church buildings.

For the purpose of this paper I would like to talk about two types of healing experiences I have encountered in this community. The first is the story of a physical healing of a pastor of a Seventh-Day Adventist church. The second is a Friday night healing and testimony meeting at a Pentecostal church in Dorchester.

Last summer when I interviewed the pastor of a Seventh-Day Adventist church, he shared with me the story of a healing he experienced over ten years ago. Pastor Johnson was told that he had a brain tumor, which, if operated on, could leave him with permanent brain damage. Yet, without the surgery, the tumor would continue to grow and would eventually kill him. Upon hearing this news, the church began to pray for the pastor immediately. Pastor Johnson opted for the surgery, which the doctors deemed a great success. After many months of therapy, the pastor experienced a full recovery. The doctors simply had no explanation for this. However, Pastor Johnson was certain that God had worked through the doctor. In his words, "The Lord used the doctor, he used that man to heal me, to make me whole. God can do that, he did it for me, he can do it for anybody." Interesting to me in this story is that, while the emphasis is on reliance on God rather than human will and skill, God is understood at times to use individuals to "deliver His healing." As the pastor explained: "The doctor was not alone when he operated on me. He was filled with the Holy Spirit, and God used him to help me."

At a Pentecostal church in Dorchester, I observed people being "slain in the spirit" at what people refer to as the altar call. During this time, the minister stands in the middle of the altar and a line forms of people who want to receive a blessing or have demon spirits expelled. The congregation sings during this time, which helps preserve the privacy of the individuals who are asking for healing while they share their troubles with the minister. At the beginning of the blessing, the minister places holy oil on the forehead of the person. Then, in the case of

expelling bad spirits, the minister prays loudly and forcefully while pushing on the forehead of the person. There are helping ministers surrounding the person in case the person starts to fall. If someone does fall, he or she is covered with a blanket and left on the floor, often with a woman attendant close by, in order to experience the healing fully. The minister is given no credit for the healing, but is a conduit, a vessel for the healing to move through. The one phrase I heard repeatedly that emphasized this point was, "Give Him the praise, give Him all the praise." This refers to the only power present during the healing, and that power is God. Another interesting aspect of the testimonial meetings is the interaction between the person who is testifying and the rest of the congregation. There is a palpable support system. The members share in the joys and sorrows of the one giving testimony by responding to this testimony while it is being given. This acknowledgment is often expressed with affirmations. The phrases I heard repeated the most were, "Thank you, Jesus, thank you, Lord" and "He didn't have to do it." This last phrase refers to anything good in life, anything at all, from the act of waking in the morning to the ability to pay one's bills or to sing in worship. These activities and fulfillments are not to be expected from God, but rather, acknowledged as gifts of God's loving care. As one pastor explained to me: "We don't have to be here. I have my life because God gives it to me everyday. It is not for me to say; it's His will, not mine."

What is so inspiring to me about these two stories and many others I have encountered in this community is that church members pray for one another regularly. They communicate their needs openly and pray for healing of the body, of finances, of relationships and for basic needs to be met for self and other. So, while the church hierarchy has significant power and authority where the theological teachings of the church are concerned, the pastor and the ministerial team are not the sole practitioners of healing prayer. It is a community effort. The church hierarchy works with its members in mutual support. In this respect, community is a fundamental component in the churches I have visited and worshiped in. The churches go beyond addressing the spiritual needs of the community and work diligently for social change. The experience of community is cultivated, not only within the churches themselves, but across the churches and denominations as well. One example of this is the Black Ministerial Alliance, a body of pastors from churches throughout the Boston area. I had the opportunity to attend their monthly meetings over a few months in spring 2001. Each meeting has a specific

agenda, which focuses on an area of community life. These areas include: spiritual life, education, criminal justice, housing, political and economic affairs, and human services. Each of these represents a different aspect of the commitment through the prophetic mission of the church to address social and economic injustice within the community.

I'd now like to turn to my work with the Christian Science Community of Boston for the Religion Health and Healing Initiative of the Center for the Study of World Religions. I became interested in the healing work of Christian Science several years ago when I was given a copy of the denominational text *Science and Health, with Keys to the Scriptures*, written by the discoverer and founder of Christian Science, Mary Baker Eddy. In my work with the initiative, under the direction of Susan Sered, I have interviewed seven Christian Science practitioners in the Boston area in order to gain insight into the healing practices of this religion. I learned very quickly that prayer is the only healing practice in this tradition. There are no ministers, priests, or clergy ordained to perform special prayers or rituals. There is no laying on of hands or physical practices of any kind.

In terms of the prayerful practice of healing itself, there is no specific formula. There is no system of prayers in place designed to treat particular ailments and problems. Christian Scientists study the Bible (King James Version) and the denominational text *Science and Health*. These are the only resources for the healing work being done. A Christian Science practitioner is someone who has dedicated his or her life to studying these two texts as a way to serve God by serving those in need through healing prayer. A Christian Science practitioner is a person who works full time praying for other peoples' healing. A practitioner may have an office or work out of the home. Because the prayerful treatment they provide does not require any physical contact, practitioners often work over the phone with clients or via e-mail. Practitioners are paid for their services. There is no set fee determined by the church, because the practitioner is not working directly for the institution. Each practitioner has her or his own private healing practice. The fees for prayerful treatment can range from fifteen to fifty dollars per day. If the patient makes a visit to the office or home of the practitioner, then an hourly rate may be charged. I was told by all of the practitioners I interviewed that charging for services is not a requirement. Many practitioners take cases for free, if they are in financial situations that allow them to do so.

In answer to the question "What constitutes a healing in Christian Science?" I received the following responses:

"Healing includes a correction of the problem at hand, and often a moral and spiritual regeneration." (John Quincy Adams)

"The physical problem has gone away, and a good side effect of this is spiritual upliftment and a greater understanding of God. Healing means cure in Christian Science." (Rich Biever)

"Healing is feeling better about a relationship. Healing is complete eradication of the disease." (Joyce Walton)

"The proof of healing is a sweet certain sense of God as Love. The substance of healing is a shift from a material basis of life to a spiritual basis of life. A spiritual understanding of life is always practical. It brings healing to the human body." (Carol Krishnaswami)

While these responses reflect a strong commitment and belief in the healing power of prayer on the part of the practitioners, no belief or understanding is required on the part of the patient. Non-Christian Scientists can and do receive Christian Science treatment and experience healings from it. As one practitioner explained: "There can be less resistance in the thought of a patient who does not have fixed ideas about Christian Science and the idea that prayer can heal. This can make the work go faster, because thoughts of Love and God's care can permeate the situation more quickly and easily." This same practitioner also explained that she has, on occasion, refused to treat a non-Christian Scientist because she felt the intention of the individual was to test her and to see if Christian Science "really works."

In terms of community activity, the Christian Science Church has two weekly services—Sunday morning worship and the Wednesday evening testimony meeting. These services are held in twenty-two hundred branch churches, in sixty countries around the world. The testimony meetings are one hour in length, and members are asked to keep their comments to about five minutes. The testimonies vary greatly in content. I have heard testimonies about the healing of a difficult work situation, of a broken foot, of financial stress, and of mental illness, just to name a few. Some Christian Scientists I spoke with after a service one night described the meetings themselves as healing experiences. One woman told me she had arrived feeling the symptoms of a cold coming on; by the end of the meeting, all traces of the symptoms had disappeared.

Another community endeavor is the Christian Science Benevolent Association. A Benevolent

Association (B.A.) is a facility where Christian Scientists can come and receive assistance with daily living skills while they are healing from an injury or illness. For example, a person whose leg had been broken could, after having the bone set by a medical doctor, come to the B.A. for bed rest until the break was fully healed. The person would be cared for by a Christian Science nurse who has been trained to feed, clothe, assist with mobility, and bandage wounds, while expecting a full recovery for the patient. Some B.A. facilities also act (in part) as rest homes for elderly Christian Scientists and as retreat spaces for younger ones.

I would like to share a healing story, told to me by a practitioner who said that while she has experienced many small healings in her life as a Christian Scientist, this healing, which she had as a young child, was by far the most profound.

At the age of six, Kristin became very ill. Her mother began praying for her. She was not seeing any results, so she called a Christian Science practitioner for help. After working with Kristin for a couple of hours, there was no sign of improvement. In fact, Kristin seemed to be getting worse. The practitioner suggested to Kristin's mother that she take her daughter to a medical doctor. Kristin's mother did not take this advice. Instead, she called another Christian Science practitioner. When the practitioner arrived at the house, she took one look at Kristin, who by this time was having great difficulty breathing, and said with great authority, "We are going to pray all night until she is healed." They began to pray, and after several hours something truly extraordinary occurred. A bubble began to form under the girl's skin on the left side of her chest. As they continued to pray, a small slit broke open on the bubble, and fluid began to drain. During this time, the mother and practitioner watched and prayed. The only physical step they took was to turn Kristin onto her right side and then place a small bowl beneath the bubble in order to catch the fluid. As the fluid drained, Kristin's breathing improved. In a matter of days she was completely well.

This story of physical healing demonstrates the belief in Christian Science that illnesses are spiritual, not material, that illnesses, as well as any other problems, are ultimately worked out theologically, at the level of thought. It is the correction of thought that leads to the desired physical outcome. As one practitioner explained it to me, "Prayer *is* the medicine of Christian Science."

I have chosen to end my paper with this example of extraordinary physical healing because, I believe, it challenges us to think. It challenges us to think not only about healing as a *concept*, but about healing as a *possibility*. The issue of expectation arises when we look at healing this way. I find the most interesting theological issues coming to bear in this moment. In the Pentecostal testimony meeting I spoke about earlier, there is the message that one does not expect healing from God, but rather, one is blessed and gifted by God. In the Christian Science testimony meeting, there is the understanding that healing is a result of a person's right relationship with God. Christian Scientists expect healing from God. On the one hand, there is God the Father, separate from and in relationship with His creation. On the other hand, there is God as Love, God as inseparable from God's creation. What we have are two Christian communities with vastly different concepts of Deity, both seeking *and* experiencing healing, both at the level of the individual and the community.

As I continue my research, I am committed to further exploration of the cultural and socioeconomic aspects of each community and of how these aspects affect expectations of God as healer and the possibilities for healing through prayer.

Site Visits

The Mother Church, Boston, Mass.
 First Church of Christ Scientist, Cambridge, Mass.
 First Church of Christ Scientist, Belmont, Mass.
 First Church of Christ Scientist, Worcester, Mass.
 Christian Science Reading Room, Boston, Mass.
 Christian Science Reading Room, Cambridge, Mass.
 Christian Science Reading Room, Belmont, Mass.
 Lecture on Ardenwood Benevolent Association, Belmont, Mass.

Interviews

Carol Krishnaswami, Boston, Mass.
 Heidi Bieber, Brookline, Mass.
 Rich Bieber, Brookline, Mass.
 Joyce Walton, Boston, Mass.
 Gary Wilson, Dorchester, Mass.
 John Quincy Adams, Boston, Mass.

Notes

1. Raul Humberto Rodriguez, "'Wait for the Day of God's Coming and Do What You Can to Hasten It. . .'" (2 Peter 3:12): The Non-Pauline Letters as Resistance Literature," in Leif Vaage, ed., *Subversive Scriptures* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1997), 205.