

# Esoteric Healing in the Orthodox, Roman and Anglican Churches

John Nash

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## Summary

Esoteric healing is attracting considerable attention because of the rich opportunities it offers for individual and group service. But it has to be placed in the context of efforts, dating back thousands of years, to alleviate physical, emotional and mental ailments. And during long stretches of history the primary motivation for those efforts was religious. This article focuses on the healing ministry in major segments of Christianity: specifically the Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican Churches. The active healing ministry that existed in early Christianity continued without interruption in the Orthodox Churches. But it was allowed to lapse in western Christianity and has only recently been revived.

The article examines the nature, scope and techniques of the Christian healing ministry as it developed in east and west. It concludes with a critical evaluation of this ministry as it interfaces both with conventional medicine and with approaches to healing promoted by major esoteric teachers.

## Background

The healing of physical, and in some cases emotional, mental and other ailments, has been a concern for thousands of years. Today that concern is expressed through conventional medicine, the various forms of alternative and complementary medicine, clinical psychology, and a wide range of modalities associated with religious, spiritual and esoteric healing. Historically, the divisions were less clear. In ancient times—or even as late as the Renaissance—when people took a more holistic view of reality, distinctions among physicians, priests, shamans and magi were often difficult to discern. An individual might move seam-

lessly from one role to another, even in a single healing encounter.

With the renewed emphasis on holism, we are already seeing some integration of different approaches to health preservation and restoration, and this trend seems likely to continue. Whether or not such integration continues or expands, certain types of healing work offer exceptional opportunities for discipleship service, even for people who are not able to devote the time and effort necessary for mastery of specialized disciplines.

This article provides a very brief introduction to healing in antiquity and in the early Christian church. Then it traces in greater detail the traditions of spiritual or sacramental healing within three major branches of Christianity that emerged from the medieval church: the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Church of Rome, and the Anglican Communion.<sup>1</sup> Of these three, Eastern Orthodoxy has by far the longest continuous tradition of spiritual healing, while the others have only recently revived an active healing ministry. Finally the article includes a brief evaluation of healing techniques and comments on the relationship between the Christian healing ministry and “esoteric healing.”

## Healing in Antiquity

Egyptian, Greek and Hebrew societies all had their healing arts.<sup>2</sup> Priests in the

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## About the Author

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Egyptian temples are said to have developed and practiced a variety of healing techniques, including but certainly were not confined to early forms of what we would now call conventional medicine. Similar techniques no doubt spread to the Hebrews, and there is evidence that practitioners were held in high regard in biblical times. Use of terms like “physician” and “apothecary” even suggests a measure of specialization. For example we read in the Old Testament apocrypha:

Honour a physician... for the Lord hath created him. For of the most High cometh healing, and he shall receive honour of the king. The skill of the physician shall lift up his head: and in the sight of great men he shall be in admiration. The Lord hath created medicines out of the earth; and he that is wise will not abhor them. Was not the water made sweet with wood, that the virtue thereof might be known? And he hath given men skill, that he might be honoured in his marvellous works. With such doth he heal [men,] and taketh away their pains. Of such doth the apothecary make a confection; and of his works there is no end; and from him is peace over all the earth, My son, in thy sickness be not negligent: but pray unto the Lord, and he will make thee whole.<sup>3</sup>

Healing was practiced in the temples of Asclepius. The cult of Asclepius, a conspicuous feature of Greek religion, dated at least from the fourth century BCE. Asclepius, the son of Apollo and a mortal woman, was taught a variety of healing arts, including surgery. Based on Egyptian antecedents, healing temples, called *asclepieion* (ασκληπειιον), are reported to have treated large numbers of pilgrims. The Roman physician Galen (131–201), whose work would dominate western medicine for 1,000 years, is reported to have spent four years at a temple of Asclepius in Asia Minor. Sleep temples provided treatments for a variety of physical and psychological ailments. Dream analysis played a major role, in which priests took the place of today’s Freudian and Jungian psychologists. Other therapies included fasting, meditation, hypnosis, chanting, and visits to the baths or gymnasium. Attendants at the temples were known as *thera-*

*peutae* (Greek: θεραπευω, “to serve, or heal”) or *therapeutrides*, their female counterparts.

The same terms, *therapeutae* and *therapeutrides*, were applied to members of certain Jewish monastic communities that flourished at the beginning of the Common Era. These communities functioned much like communities of Essenes,<sup>4</sup> but a major focus of their work was healing. Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c.10 BCE–50 CE) described a community of Jewish *therapeutae* on the shore of Lake Mareotis, Egypt, in the first century CE. He was clearly impressed with the work of its members:

[They] have embraced the contemplation of nature and its constituent parts, and have lived in the soul alone, citizens of Heaven and the universe, truly commended to the Father and Creator of all by virtue, which has secured for them God’s friendship.<sup>5</sup>

Philo spoke enthusiastically about the practitioners’ success, noting that their services were more effective than were available from physicians in the cities: “for the latter’s [care] cures only the body, while [the care of the *therapeutae*] treats also souls mastered by grievous and virtually incurable diseases.”<sup>6</sup>

## Healing in Early Christianity

Healing in the early Christian church was probably influenced by these antecedents. But it sprang more directly from the miracles of the Initiate Jesus, overshadowed as he was by the Christ. These miracles ranged from changing water into wine,<sup>7</sup> to exorcisms,<sup>8</sup> to raising three people from the dead.<sup>9</sup> The canonical gospels record a further 38 healings.<sup>10</sup> The techniques used can be divided into three groups. The first involved touch, initiated either by Jesus or by the patient.<sup>11</sup> The second involved the spoken word.<sup>12</sup> And in the third group some other method was used or the method was not recorded.<sup>13</sup> According to *Matthew* Jesus healed “every sickness and every disease among the people.”<sup>14</sup> In addition, in the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus reminded his followers of the duty to provide nursing care to all who might be in need.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus clearly intended others to participate in the healing ministry. According to *Luke* his first charge to the twelve was to preach, heal and perform exorcisms:

Then he called his twelve disciples together, and gave them power and authority over all devils, and to cure diseases. And he sent them to preach the kingdom of God, and to heal the sick.<sup>16</sup>

And in the next chapter of *Luke* we learn that a larger group of 70 disciples was sent out on a similar mission.<sup>17</sup> Upon their return they reported: “even the devils are subject unto us through thy name.”

What the scriptures meant by “exorcisms” will be discussed later.

The healing ministry was invigorated by the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.<sup>18</sup> The disciples and others received the “gifts of the Spirit” (Greek: *charisma*, χάρισμα, “divine gift” or “spiritual endowment”). Paul explained the gifts thus:

[T]he manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts [*charismata*] of healing by the same Spirit. . . . But all these worketh that one and the self-same Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.<sup>19</sup>

By this time typical healing therapies included prayer, the laying-on of hands, and anointing with oil.<sup>20</sup> Anointing, or *chrismation*, had special significance because Christ himself was the “anointed one.” Also, it is significant that

the laying-on of hands and chrismation featured not only in healing but in the proto-sacrament of confirmation,<sup>21</sup> demonstrating the unity with which sacred rituals were viewed at that time. Furthermore, sacramental healing was viewed as therapy for both body and soul:

Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord: And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him.<sup>22</sup>

References to healing are not limited to the canonical scriptures; in the extra-canonical text known as the *Tripartite Tractate* we read that the disciples “are from prayer, so that they heal the sick.”<sup>23</sup>

During the first few centuries it was believed that the gifts of the spirit were available to all who were baptized. Accordingly all Christians could participate in the healing ministry. Moreover, deaconesses were active in the early church, performing liturgical as well as service functions. They cared for the sick, and we can

assume that some used spiritual healing techniques in addition to providing conventional nursing care. Two famous deaconesses were active in the fourth century. At the turn of the century one named Fabiola founded a charity hospital in Rome. Another named Paula, the widow of a Roman senator and student of church father Jerome, founded a number of hospitals in Rome in the 380s.<sup>24</sup>

Skilled nursing care no doubt helped many people recover from their ills. And sacramental healing may have accelerated patients’ recovery or resulted in improvements unrelated

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**The practice of anointing continues to the present [in the Orthodox Churches]. The sacrament of Holy unction, or *euchelaion*, is solemnized on the Wednesday of Holy Week, but it can be administered in abbreviated form whenever a person is seriously ill. Based on the premise that body and soul are inseparable, its purpose is both to restore health and to seek forgiveness of sin. The solemn sacramental ritual involves seven anointings.**

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to conventional treatment. But, from time to time, dramatic healings occurred, and not surprisingly these attracted the most attention. Church father Irenaeus (c.140–203) acknowledged the occurrence of miraculous healings:

[T]hose who are in truth His disciples, receiving grace from Him, do in His name perform [miracles], so as to promote the welfare of other men, according to the gift which each one has received from Him. For some do certainly and truly drive out devils, so that those who have thus been cleansed from evil spirits frequently both believe [in Christ], and join themselves to the Church... Others still, heal the sick by laying their hands upon them, and they are made whole. Yea, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised up, and remained among us for many years.<sup>25</sup>

Lay people, including women, continued to nurse the sick and perform various types of service. But as time went on efforts were made to restrict the more public roles in the church to the male clergy. A statement in the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* makes clear the restrictions placed on participation in sacramental healing:

[H]e who has received the gift of healing is declared by revelation from God, the grace which is in him being manifest to all. But if there be occasion for him, he must be ordained a bishop, or a presbyter, or a deacon.<sup>26</sup>

## **Decline of the Healing Ministry in the West**

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) initially dismissed the possibility of miracles and was only convinced when a blind man in Milan regained his sight. Eventually he acknowledged that many healings had occurred in his own time, and he may have participated personally in some of them.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, his initial skepticism reflected a general decline of confidence in the power of sacramental healing in the western church. This decline would accelerate over the next few centuries.

In the belief that healing was an exceptional occurrence, necessarily dramatic in nature, the

notion of an ongoing ministry in which clergy, or even lay people, might seek to bring about incremental healing was no longer taken seriously. Similarly, the possibility that healing might lie within natural but unrealized human potential—even with the help of the Holy Spirit—was discounted. More importantly, there was growing ambivalence about the physical body and its needs. Monks and nuns took up the task of caring for the sick, providing social services that were unavailable elsewhere at the time. But in general Christianity absorbed the Gnostic view that the body was corrupt and suffering inevitable. Emphasis shifted to the health of the soul.

Pope Gregory I (c.540–604), whose opinions had considerable influence on western Christianity, insisted that sickness was sent to punish us, and we should bear the pain patiently, even enthusiastically, as atonement.<sup>28</sup> Indeed to alleviate suffering might impede an individual's repentance. In Gregory's view "healing" was really just a metaphor for the forgiveness of sin.<sup>29</sup> If physical healings took place during apostolic times, that was a temporary dispensation to demonstrate the divinity of Christ and the church's legitimacy. Perhaps healings did occur in later times, but these were miracles performed by saints in their quest for canonization. Gone was any memory of Christ's pastoral compassion for human suffering. If miracles benefited the afflicted, that was no more than a side-effect of more important purposes. However, if the church urged people to bear afflictions bravely, ordinary people sought any opportunity for relief. By the Middle Ages they had turned to relics and pilgrimages to sacred sites; or they prayed to candidate saints in the hope that they might be the fortunate recipients of miracles.<sup>30</sup>

Between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, anointing of the sick had evolved into the sacrament of "extreme unction," administered on a person's deathbed to prepare the soul for the hereafter. Seven "canonical" sacraments were identified in the 12th century: baptism, confirmation, the eucharist, penance, extreme unction, holy orders and matrimony.<sup>31</sup> One of the criteria for selection was supposed to be the sacrament's "ordination"—that is, institu-

tion—by Christ. To justify the ordination of extreme unction, theologians customarily have quoted *James* 5:14-15. But this and numerous other scriptural passages support sacramental healing much more convincingly than they do any notion of the “last rites.”

The only other sacraments in the western Christian tradition that might be considered to have healing functions are baptism and penance. Penance, or the confession of sins, could be so viewed because it relieved the burden of guilt. And we note that bodily sickness was considered to be the result of sin. Baptism washed away the original sin inherited from Adam.

To support its insistence that treating the body might interfere with penitential suffering, the church even discouraged conventional medical treatment. Restrictions were placed on monks' care of the sick,<sup>32</sup> and all clergy were prohibited from performing surgery because “blood might be spilled.”<sup>33</sup> By the 13th century physicians were required, on penalty of excommunication, to call a priest to hear a patient's confession before administering medical care.<sup>34</sup>

Exorcism, which Jesus is reported to have performed on several occasions and which clearly met the criterion of ordination, was omitted from the sacramental canon. Nevertheless the church continued to practice exorcism, reflecting the strong belief that evil spirits possessed hapless individuals and might also haunt certain buildings or locations. The official position of exorcist traditionally was a minor order, squeezed between lector and acolyte.<sup>35</sup> But in more recent times ordained priests have been appointed to serve as exorcists in major dioceses. The use of incense and holy water and the practice of blessing oneself all originated as banishing rituals; and the lighting of votive candles might also have that connotation.

The seven canonical sacraments are still recognized by the Catholic Church, but their authenticity and validity came under attack by the Protestant reformers. As part of their broad-based assault on ritual, Martin Luther (1483–1546) and John Calvin (1509–1564) also discounted any role for the church in healing. Calvin agreed with the western church

fathers, insisting that a healing ministry did not extend beyond the apostolic era: “the gift of healing disappeared with the other miraculous powers which the Lord was pleased to give for a time... [however] it pertains not to us, to whom no such powers have been committed.”<sup>36</sup>

Following the Enlightenment, the notion of healing became even more unpopular. The consensus developed that God did not intervene in individual crises,<sup>37</sup> and Biblical reports of healings were dismissed as “mythological.” “Demythologizing” the Bible has become the special mission of Protestant theologians like Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976) who described Jesus' miracles as “incredible to men and women today because for them the mythological world is a thing of the past.”<sup>38</sup> This same view pervades much of contemporary Protestant and even Catholic doctrine.

## Healing in the Eastern Churches

The negative attitudes to healing exhibited by Gregory and others—and to a lesser degree by Augustine—had little influence in the Greek Church. And both care of the sick and sacramental healing continued without interruption from early times. The healing ministry was integrated with conventional medicine, and no conflict was seen between the two. Gregory of Nyssa (c.335–c.395) commented that “medicine is an example of what God allows men to do when they work in harmony with Him and with one another.”<sup>39</sup> Hospitals, staffed by both physicians and priests, were common in the Byzantine Empire. The Pantokrator Monastery hospital, established in 1136, functioned essentially like a modern hospital at a time when western hospitals were little more than “hospices for the dying.”<sup>40</sup>

By the time the anointing of the sick evolved into “extreme unction” in the west, the Great Schism was well underway and the change was ignored in the eastern patriarchates.<sup>41</sup> The Greek Church, and more particularly the Russian Orthodox Church which would become the largest component of Eastern Orthodoxy,

continued to anoint the sick as a health-restoring therapy.

The practice of anointing continues to the present. The sacrament of Holy unction, or *euchelaion* (ευχηλαιον), is solemnized on the Wednesday of Holy Week, but it can be administered in abbreviated form whenever a person is seriously ill. Based on the premise that body and soul are inseparable, its purpose is both to restore health and to seek forgiveness of sin. The solemn sacramental ritual involves seven anointings, one of which contains the following invocation:

We entreat Thee, O our God, that Thou wilt send down Thy mercy upon this oil, and upon them that are anointed with it in Thy Name, that it may be unto them for the healing of soul and body, and for the cleansing and transformation of every passion, and of every sickness and wound, and of every defilement of flesh and spirit. Yea, O Lord, send down from Heaven Thy healing power; touch the body, quench the fever, soothe the suffering, and make every weakness to melt away. Be the Physician of Thy servant, N. \ raise him (her) up from his (her) sickbed, and from his (her) couch of suffering whole and perfectly restored, granting unto him (her) to be well-pleasing in Thy Church, and one that works Thy will.<sup>42</sup>

Orthodox Christianity, like its western counterpart, acknowledges a relationship between suffering and sin. But sin is rarely viewed as an act of deliberate disobedience. Rather, it is a breakdown in the individual's relationship with the community and God. "All sin, even the most trifling... can render our nature opaque and impenetrable to grace." A state of grace is "a dynamic and shifting reality which varies according to the fluctuations of the infirmities of the human will."<sup>43</sup> And if sin is regarded as an infirmity, repentance is seen as a healing process. Indeed, "salvation" is healing on a larger scale. And we note in this regard that the Greek verb *sozo* (σωζω),<sup>44</sup> which is usually translated in the west as "to save"—and is the root of the word *soteriology*, the theory of salvation—more commonly meant "to heal." Salvation, in the east, is viewed not in terms of the forgiveness of sin but as the

transformation "from sinful mortality into blessed immortality."<sup>45</sup>

Importantly, healing in the Orthodox Churches is viewed not only in the context of physical ailments but as a way to improve psychological health. Counseling was the traditional role of a *gerontas* (Greek: γεροντας) or *staretz* (Russian: старец). These terms are often translated as "elder"—or "eldress" because both women and men can serve—but "spiritual counselor" is a better description. A *gerontas* or *staretz* is a wise, intuitive counselor able to discern the innermost strengths and weaknesses of those who seek guidance. Many spiritual counselors are attached to monasteries, where they serve as spiritual directors of groups of monks and nuns—distinct from abbots whose role is more administrative in nature. They also counsel visitors and pilgrims. Those who are also priests may combine their counseling with the sacrament of penance, or "repentance" as it is more commonly called in the eastern churches.

The counselors can be regarded as the successors of the prophets and prophetesses of the early church, and a few instances are recorded in which, like the biblical Simeon and Anna, a *gerontas* or *staretz* predicted the future course of a child's life.<sup>46</sup> One of the most famous *starsy* was Seraphim of Sarov (1759–1833). Seraphim, who has been compared with Francis of Assisi,<sup>47</sup> is one of the Russia's best-loved saints. After spending many years as a recluse, he embarked on a public ministry, gaining wide recognition as a teacher, counselor and healer. Seraphim's teachings emphasized the transformation of the whole human entity, body and soul, by the influx of divine light.

Spiritual counselors also performed exorcisms to dispel *logismoi* (singular: *logismos*, λογισμος), or "demons." Counselors recognized that these can cause a variety of psychological conditions from mild neurosis to severe psychosis; in turn psychosis can manifest in physical pathologies. The existence of demons has almost entirely been dismissed in the west. To be sure, Jesus and apostles are reported to have driven out demons. But modern biblical exegetes explain away these demons as fig-

ments of ignorant superstition, predisposition to sin, primitive understanding of the cause of sickness in general, or at best unspecified mental illness. Similarly, reports that the early desert fathers, like Anthony of Egypt (c. 250–355), confronted demons are dismissed as hallucinations or the effects of sexual frustration. However in eastern Christianity the existence of demons has always been taken more seriously. Logismoi are considered to be the equivalent of what western esoteric writers would call negative thoughtforms or elementals. “Exorcism” continues to be part of a continuum of therapies involving traditional counseling, clinical psychology, and psychiatry.<sup>48</sup>

### Revival of Healing in the West

Despite its institution by Jesus Christ and strong emphasis in the early church, the healing ministry was abandoned in western Christianity. Leaders of the pre-Reformation church, the post-Reformation Church of Rome, and the emerging Protestant churches were all in agreement that a healing ministry had no place in their worship or service activities.

Since the 18th century we have witnessed early charismatic healings among the Shakers, the pioneering work of intuitive diagnosis by Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1866) and Edgar Cayce (1877–1945), the rise of New Thought and Christian Science, and most recently the popularity of faith healing in Pentecostal churches. However, these developments all took place on the fringes of Christianity. Not until the charismatic revival of the 1960s, in which healing and other practices spread from Pentecostal to Protestant and Catholic churches, was healing once again practiced on a large scale in mainstream Christianity.

One of the few developments within mainstream Christianity, prior to that time, occurred in the Anglican Communion. In 1920 the Lambeth Conference appointed a commission to study the issue of spiritual healing. In its report, presented four years later, the commission acknowledged that healing was “part of the redemptive work of our Lord.”<sup>49</sup> The 1920 initiative was followed up by a number of further studies, including one commissioned by

the archbishops of Canterbury and York in 1953 “to consider the theological, medical, psychological and pastoral aspects of Divine Healing.”<sup>50</sup> Among other things this study recommended an expansion of the healing ministry and “increasing understanding and cooperation between [clergy] and the medical profession.”

Another important initiative was foundation of the International Order of St. Luke the Physician in 1955. The Order was conceived of as a Christian fellowship of clergy and lay people interested in sharing experiences of the healing ministry.<sup>51</sup> Prayer, anointing, and the laying-on of hands are all included in its repertory. The Order proclaims:

The revival of Christian healing in the church today may be a means of the greatest advance of Christianity in this century. God's healing power operates within the church which is the body of Christ on earth.<sup>52</sup>

The most recent major study within the Anglican Communion was published in 2000. Called *A Time to Heal*, it affirmed:

Christ healed because healing itself was central to the proclamation of the new creation (2 *Corinthians* 5:17), into which we are called as we repent and believe. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, and it is a healing work, the work of redemption.<sup>53</sup>

By that time a great deal had been done to integrate healing into the ongoing liturgical, pastoral, and other work of Anglican churches. *A Time to Heal* was able to report:

Prayer for healing is offered to individuals during or after the usual Sunday liturgy. The laying on of hands is widely used, sometimes with anointing. Counseling of various kinds is available in many parishes. The ministry of deliverance [i.e. exorcism] is practised in some. And, most notable of all, increasing numbers of laity are involved.<sup>54</sup>

Participation by the laity seemed to meet with approval, although the report commented that “very few are properly trained or formally commissioned.” In addition to the forms of sacramental and pastoral healing mentioned,



the 2000 report also made recommendations relating to hospital and prison chaplaincy.

A revival of Interest in healing in Catholicism began at the grassroots level in the 19th century, as increasing numbers of people sought healings at sacred sites like Lourdes. The church set up committees to examine claims of healings and established strict criteria for what could be considered a “miracle.” But official interest was muted until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Coincidentally, the charismatic revival was in full swing, and healing practices were being introduced into Catholic worship, often without the knowledge or approval of ecclesiastical authorities. Be that as it may, the Council recommended that the anointing of the sick—the sacrament of “extreme unction”—once again be used even when death is not imminent. Another outcome of Vatican II was redefinition of the sacrament of penance as the “sacrament of reconciliation.” Pope John Paul II would later emphasize that it should be regarded as a healing sacrament.<sup>55</sup>

A leading proponent of the charismatic revival in Catholicism was a Dominican priest, Francis MacNutt. His extensive studies of charismatic practices and their relevance to the church’s ministry were published in several books. MacNutt argued that we must foster belief in the possibility of healing as a routine occurrence: not necessary dramatic or “miraculous,” but still significant. In a criticism of Pentecostal practices, he urged caution in raising patients’ expectation of instantaneous cures and then either placing the burden on patients to “claim their healings” or failing to provide

follow-up care. Those whose hopes are dashed will understandably feel abandoned by God and will lose faith in the possibility of longer-term improvement. Sustained healing therapies may be more effective than a single attempt to procure a miracle. As MacNutt’s own work demonstrated, healing may be gradual and incremental.<sup>56</sup> If skeletal deformities are corrected, cancers decrease in size, or patients’ pain is lessened, the healing ministry is succeeding. It succeeds even if patients simply feel better. “Psychological” or “psychosomatic” conditions may be the most responsive

to treatment, but the records amply show that the reach of spiritual healing extends far beyond such conditions.

Francis MacNutt also made an in-depth study of exorcism, which he published as *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*. Among the demonic entities that may possess patients and require exorcism are: “spirits of the occult,” “spirits of sin,” “spirits of trauma,” and “ancestral, or familiar, spirits.”<sup>57</sup> He also discussed the removal of curses and preparation of patients to face death. MacNutt recommends a variety of therapies, including

prayer, repentance on the patient’s part, and the use of blessed objects, oil, salt, and holy water. His approach to exorcism has much in common with the Orthodox banishing of *logismoi*, but his therapies are less well integrated with routine pastoral counseling.

Expressing satisfaction with the progress made, Morton Kelsey was able to report in the 1970s:

This new emphasis on healing in the Christian churches is anything but an isolated

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**It is still too early to conclude that the healing ministry has been restored and will continue to flourish within the Anglican and Catholic Churches. But great progress has been made in a relatively short time... It has been noted that this ministry offers rich ecumenical potential. The... 2000 Anglican report noted that Christians of widely different persuasions can work together in healing without compromising what they perceive as core doctrinal positions.**

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phenomenon. It is worldwide... Clearly, a new spirit is moving among men, which speaks of their need for healing.<sup>58</sup>

Healing services have become popular in Catholic churches, and a new awareness of their potential has taken root. But despite these positive developments, high-ranking Catholic officials became nervous about the charismatic revival. Francis MacNutt left the Dominican order to found an ecumenical healing center in Florida—and also to marry. In 2000 the Vatican issued a directive whose ostensible purpose was to warn against insertion of unauthorized prayers or rituals into the Mass.<sup>59</sup> But the directive has been interpreted by some as an attempt to dampen the growth of the healing ministry.

It is still too early to conclude that the healing ministry has been restored and will continue to flourish within the Anglican and Catholic Churches. But great progress has been made in a relatively short time, and certainly the hope is that the ministry will continue to expand. It has been noted that this ministry offers rich ecumenical potential. The authors of the 2000 Anglican report noted that Christians of widely different persuasions can work together in healing without compromising what they perceive as core doctrinal positions.<sup>60</sup>

### Evaluation of the Christian Healing Ministry

Healing is aimed at alleviating pain and nurturing the fullness of life. It did not begin with Christianity, but Jesus Christ offered pastoral care, demonstrated and trained his disciples in the healing arts, and initiated what became an active ministry in the emerging church. Christians believed that the ability to heal was strengthened by the “gifts of the spirit,” made available by the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Healing, which incorporated prayer, the laying-on of hands, anointing with oil, and exorcism, was a sacramental practice benefiting both body and soul. The Eastern Orthodox Churches continued sacramental healing through the centuries. Western Christianity allowed the healing ministry to lapse from late antiquity onward, focusing instead on atonement for sin and prepa-

ration for death. The healings attributed to Jesus and his disciples would eventually be dismissed as figments of mythology or primitive superstition.

The Anglican Communion, to its considerable credit, led the way among major western denominations to revive a healing ministry. Healing services now form a regular feature in many Anglican and Episcopalian churches. In the Church of Rome, which responded later, healing has become popular at the grassroots level. But the commitment of higher officials remains in doubt. Also lacking is a comprehensive theology of healing to support pastoral care already being provided.

### Healing and Professional Healthcare

Clearly there is broad overlap between the healing ministry and professional healthcare. Spiritual healing must be regarded as complementary to, not—as Christian Science teaches—a substitute for, conventional medicine. The two should be viewed as parts of a single process. In fact significant steps have been taken to integrate the Christian healing ministry with conventional and complementary healing modalities. A very encouraging development is the collaboration between certain medical intuitives and licensed medical professionals.<sup>61</sup> The healing ministry shares with many alternative and complementary therapies a holistic approach to healing. It extends beyond the treatment of particular maladies to the wellbeing of the whole person: body, soul and spirit.

Scientific medicine made its greatest strides in a secular environment. Sadly, those strides were sometimes made in the face of determined religious opposition.<sup>62</sup> However, we might ask whether so-called secular healing and the Christian healing ministry are really distinct. To heal is to carry out a charge given by Jesus Christ; and Christ’s work extends beyond the specifically religious domain. Or, to put it another way, healing work of all kinds taps into that power in the world to which Christians give the name “Christ.” Vocations in professional healthcare may be at least as strong as they are in the Christian ministry. And the interesting suggestion has been made

that even conventional treatments have a “sacramental dimension.”<sup>63</sup>

Medical opinion swings back and forth between the position that the mind is an important factor in the development, treatment and outcome of pathologies and the position that all pathologies, including neuroses and psychoses, can be treated by medication or surgery. Modern psychiatry has become almost totally chemicalized, while psychology has pursued an independent path in an often uneasy relationship with the medical profession. On the other hand it has long been recognized that religion can play an important role in healing. Psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961) commented on the patients he had treated in the latter part of his life:

It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has really been healed who did not regain his religious outlook.<sup>64</sup>

Some medical professions have recognized the power of prayer as an element in healing,<sup>65</sup> although attempts to demonstrate its effect in statistical studies have been inconclusive.

Healing is now recognized to be a multifaceted ministry, addressing patients’ needs at every level of the personality. Building on an age-old tradition of spiritual counseling, the Orthodox Churches have played a leading role in integrating exorcism and psychotherapy in the treatment of neurosis and psychosis. One commentator described counseling as “a unique interdisciplinary ministry that is clinically sensitive and spiritually informed.”<sup>66</sup> Many counselors believe that they are guided by Christ or the Holy Spirit; but effective training is also required. In both east and west it is acknowledged that the ministry of “deliverance,” in particular, demands the services of highly trained professionals. And patients with deep psychological wounds may need the services of professional therapists outside the religious communities to which they belong.<sup>67</sup>

The methodologies of modern psychotherapy are not totally different from those of the sac-

rament of penance, repentance or reconciliation. The sacrament of penance, as traditionally viewed, may have placed undue emphasis on guilt; but it helped people unburden themselves. And if medieval theologians interpreted “healing” as the forgiveness of sin, perhaps we can reinterpret absolution as healing. This is not to say that sin is simply another word for sickness. People are capable of the most heinous crimes, and to portray all of them simply as “sick” is to render words meaningless. Having said that, many people really are sick. They engage in destructive or self-destructive behaviors because they are incapable of doing otherwise. If salvation means anything it must provide the means by which such people can be rescued from the conditions that plague them.

### **Spiritual and Esoteric Healing**

Significantly it was the emerging *institutional* church that continued Jesus’ healing ministry, not Gnosticism with which modern esotericists often claim affiliation. With their strong dualistic beliefs, Gnostics had little interest in healing the body, which was considered evil. The entire goal of life was to escape from the confines of physical existence. However charismatics in the early church, contemptuously termed “Montanists” after the second century itinerant preacher Montanus, practiced forms of healing very similar to those of present-day Pentecostalism. Opposition to these charismatic practices,<sup>68</sup> and disgust at the defection to their ranks of church father Tertullian of Carthage (c.160–c.225), may well have soured certain church leaders to healing in general.

The healing ministry studied in this article is characterized by a belief that physical—and emotional and mental—ailments are amenable to nonphysical processes which can be set in motion by focused, purposeful intent; rituals; and use of sacramental materials. Viewed in this way it would be difficult to argue that there is a qualitative difference between Christian healing and therapies recommended by leading esoteric teachers.<sup>69</sup> Certainly the ritual prayers employed have a distinctive Christian flavor, but important parallels can still be detected.

The objectives of modern esoteric healing are to uncover the nonphysical causes of disease, to understand the laws governing healing, and to train practitioners in the rules of healing. The Christian healing ministry is well on the way to proficiency in some of these. For example, the time-honored practice of laying-on of hands comes close to following Alice Bailey's rule of healing: "The healer must seek to link his soul, his heart, his brain and his hands."<sup>70</sup> The laying-on of hands also has obvious connections with bio-energetic healing methods such as Reiki.<sup>71</sup> And it is worth noting that Reiki, usually considered to be rooted in Buddhism, was discovered, or rediscovered, by Mikao Usui who was raised in a Christian orphanage. Anointing with oil has obvious connections to essential-oil therapies and possible connections to homeopathy.<sup>72</sup>

Most Christian practitioners would be receptive to the advice that healing work must draw upon the power of love, rather than the will.<sup>73</sup> They would also be receptive to Theosophist Geoffrey Hodson's (1886–1983) advice to individuals aspiring to healing work:

[T]he motive should arise from a genuine and deep personal concern for both the healing from suffering of particular persons and the welfare of the human race as a whole... The suppliant must deeply care for all others and especially for those in pain.<sup>74</sup>

Where healing in the Orthodox, Roman and Anglican Churches differs from esoteric healing lies mainly in their assumptions underlying the healing mechanism. Christian healing is believed to operate through the intervention of God, Jesus, Mary or a saint; while practitio-

ners, acting alone or commissioned by the church, play no more than intercessionary roles. No suggestion is made that practitioners could draw upon the power of their own higher selves to either diagnose or cure ailments. Neither is there any recognition that practitioners may work within comprehensible, universal laws. Indeed, to the Christian practitioner, a healing is considered a divine intervention that violates, or at least temporarily sets aside, natural laws. The effectiveness of the Christian healing ministry is likely to remain limited until the "naturalness" of healing and humanity's ability to bring about healings through natural means are accepted.

It will also remain limited in the west until the potential for intuitive diagnosis is recognized. The very few intuitives like Phineas Parkhurst Quimby and Edgar Cayce worked on the fringes of Christianity; and their work was ignored or rejected by mainstream denominations. Church leaders should study the long history of "elders" in the Orthodox tradition and explore whether the environment in which they served could be recreated in the west.

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Attempts to bridge the gap between the religious and esoteric understanding of ritual date back to the 19th century. Important parallels between the sacraments and rituals of ceremonial magic were noted by the French magus Alphonse Louis Constant (1810–1875), who wrote under the pseudonym of Éliphas Lévi. However, since the late Middle Ages, mainstream Christianity has been loath to admit any such connection, regarding magic of any complexion as demonic in nature. Bailey's *A Treatise on White Magic* is found in few seminary libraries.

Members of the Theosophical Society also did important bridging work. Charles Leadbeater's (1854–1934) influential book *The Science of the Sacraments*, published in 1920, made a major contribution to rationalizing our understanding of the sacraments. After holding positions of responsibility within the Society, Leadbeater became the second presiding bishop of the Liberal Catholic Church, whose charter commits it to combining “Christian sacramentalism of which the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican Churches have long been the principal custodians” with “the esoteric Wisdom Tradition.”<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, from our standpoint, Leadbeater did not discuss healing in detail. He was content to quote the liturgy of the Liberal Catholic Church, which he helped develop, stating that the sacrament of “Holy Unction... is intended simply to aid the normal processes of nature by freeing the body from lower influences and opening it to spiritual influence.”<sup>76</sup> Also he predicted—accurately as it turned out—that healing would become more common in the years ahead. Unfortunately, too, the Liberal Catholic Church is not in communion with Rome, Canterbury, or the eastern patriarchates.

The work of Éliphas Lévi, the Theosophists, Alice Bailey, and other esoteric teachers can help place understanding of the healing process on a firmer theoretical basis. But as Bailey notes, esoteric healing itself is still in its infancy:

[O]nly in this age and generation is it at last possible to impart the laws of magnetic healing, and to indicate the causes of those diseases—originating in the three inner bodies—which today devastate the human frame, cause endless suffering and pain, and usher man through the portal which leads to the world of bodiless existence. Only today is man at the point in the evolution of his consciousness where he can begin to realise the power of the subjective worlds, and the new and vast science of psychology is his response to this growing interest.<sup>77</sup>

Christianity does not, at this time, accept that individual, group and racial karma play important roles in disease; nor that the local cause may be a blockage of soul energy between the

emotional and etheric bodies.<sup>78</sup> Such technical detail, based on Hindu and Buddhist teachings, would not be understood by the conventional Christianity mindset and consequently is unavailable to the Christian healing ministry.

Also beyond current Christian beliefs are esoteric teachings on the role of devic forces in healing. Although Christianity accepts the existence of angels, it regards them as messengers rather than agents of form-building and form-restoring processes. However Geoffrey Hodson, who was both a Theosophist and priest in the Liberal Catholic Church, notes the existence of “those agencies which restore injured forms to the original pattern and shape under the operation of word-force... Healing *devas* function under this principle.”<sup>79</sup> No information is provided about the required “word-force,” although prayer may be effective in sweeping healing *devas* into action. Hodson also documented clairvoyant observations of some very powerful *devas* overseeing the healing work in hospitals.<sup>80</sup>

The fact that the healing ministry was revived in western Christianity at roughly the same time as new esoteric teachings were becoming available cannot be dismissed as pure coincidence. Both, no doubt, were parallel results of developments in planetary consciousness. At the dawn of the Aquarian Age we have two great assets. One is a two-millennium-long Christian healing ministry, preserved in an uninterrupted tradition in the east and revived in the west. The other is the growing body of esoteric teachings that could enhance its effectiveness. The hope is that the two can come together.

Accommodations will have to be made on both sides. Liberal theologians who see only a universe of appearances governed by physical laws—laws, no less, as they were understood by 19th-century rather than more recent science—are a definite hindrance to progress. Esotericists who dismiss Christianity as nothing more than “aspiration,” inferior to their own path, pose a similar obstacle. Fortunately, certain basic principles are already in place for synthesis to occur. At the very least, every Christian practitioner accepts that the healing ministry was instituted by Christ; and every

esotericist accepts that healing is an expression of the second aspect of deity which the Christ anchored in human consciousness.

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- <sup>1</sup> The selection of these three branches of Christianity for study should not be taken to imply that significant interest in healing is limited to them.
- <sup>2</sup> The Ayurveda tradition in India may go back 5,000 years. Medicine was also practiced in ancient China.
- <sup>3</sup> *Sirach* 38:1-9.
- <sup>4</sup> Among “Essenes” we should include the Qumran community referred to in the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- <sup>5</sup> Philo. *The Contemplative Life*. David Winston (ed.). *Philo of Alexandria*. Paulist Press, 1981, p. 57.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- <sup>7</sup> *John* 2:1-11.
- <sup>8</sup> For example: *Matthew* 12:22-37.
- <sup>9</sup> *Matthew* 9:18-25; *Mark* 5:22-42; *Luke* 7:11-17, 8:41-55; *John* 11:1-44.
- <sup>10</sup> See the discussion in: Morton T. Kelsey. *Healing and Christianity*. Harper & Row, 1973, pp. 55-57. Descriptions of healings of one kind or another occupy an estimated 25 percent of the gospel.
- <sup>11</sup> *Matthew* 14:14; *Mark* 1:40-42, 5:25-27, 6:56; *Luke* 22:51; *John* 9:6-7.
- <sup>12</sup> *Matthew* 8:5-13, 15:22-28; *Mark* 5:2ff; *Luke* 17:12-19; *John* 4:46-54, 5:8.
- <sup>13</sup> *Mark* 7:33-35.
- <sup>14</sup> *Matthew* 9:35. All quotations in this article are from the King James Bible.
- <sup>15</sup> *Luke* 10:30-37.
- <sup>16</sup> *Luke* 9:1-2. The apostles’ power over “unclean spirits” appears also in *Mark* 6:7.
- <sup>17</sup> *Luke* 10:1-2. In some traditions there were said to be 72 disciples.
- <sup>18</sup> See for example: *Acts* 5:12-16.
- <sup>19</sup> *1 Corinthians* 12:7-10.
- <sup>20</sup> *Mark* 6:13.
- <sup>21</sup> See for example: *Acts* 19:6.
- <sup>22</sup> *James* 5:14-15.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Tripartite Tractate*, 1 51, 116. (Transl: H. W. Attridge & D. Mueller.) *The Nag Hammadi Library*. Harper-Collins, 1990, p. 93.
- <sup>24</sup> Carl J. Scherzer. *The Church and Healing*. Westminster Press, 1960, pp. 43-45.
- <sup>25</sup> Irenaeus. *Against Heresy*, Book 2, 32:4. (Transl: A. Roberts & J. Donaldson.) Christian Classics Ethereal Library.

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- <sup>26</sup> *Apostolic Constitutions*, VIII:26. (Transl: uncertain.) This section of the *Constitutions*, which date from the fourth century, is believed to be the work of Hippolytus of Rome.
- <sup>27</sup> Augustine of Hippo. *The City of God*, XXII, 8. 426-427 CE. (Transl: M. Dod.) Modern Library, 1950, pp. 819-831.
- <sup>28</sup> Kelsey. *Healing and Christianity*, pp. 194-199.
- <sup>29</sup> In his influential *Liber Pastoralis Curae* Gregory emphasized that bishops should be “physician of souls.”
- <sup>30</sup> The popularity of Lourdes and similar sites shows that the belief remains strong.
- <sup>31</sup> The canon of seven sacraments was listed by Peter Lombard (c.1095–1160)<sup>31</sup> and confirmed by the Councils of Florence (1439) and Trent (1545–1563).
- <sup>32</sup> Second Lateran Council, Canon 9. 1139.
- <sup>33</sup> Council of Tours, 1116. One consequence of this decree was that heretics must be burned rather than killed with a sword or axe.
- <sup>34</sup> Fourth Lateran Council, Canon 22. 1215.
- <sup>35</sup> The traditional minor orders were porter, lector, exorcist, acolyte and subdeacon. All except lectors and acolytes were abolished by the Second Vatican Council.
- <sup>36</sup> John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, book 4, ch. 19:18. (Transl: H. Beveridge.) Arnold Hatfield, 1599.
- <sup>37</sup> This viewpoint reflected the influence of 18th-century Deism.
- <sup>38</sup> Rudolf Bultmann. *New Testament and Mythology*, 1941. (Transl: S. M. Ogden.) Fortress Press, 1984, pp. 2-3.
- <sup>39</sup> Gregory of Nyssa. Quoted in: John G. Demakis. “Historical Precedents for Synergia.” Stephen Muse (ed.). *Raising Lazarus*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004, p. 16.
- <sup>40</sup> John G. Demakis. “Historical Precedents for Synergia.” Stephen Muse (ed.). *Raising Lazarus*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004, pp. 17ff.
- <sup>41</sup> In the Great Schism in 1054 the ancient patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem severed communion with Rome. By then the latter three were under Muslim rule and Christian practices were severely limited. Orthodox Christianity spread to Russia in the 10th century. And after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 the main focus of Orthodox Christianity shifted to Moscow. The Russian Orthodox Church attained full independence, and its metropolitan was promoted to the status of patriarch, in 1589.

- 42 Third Anointing. Similar language appears in the fourth and subsequent anointings. Source: Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, California.
- 43 Valdimir Lossky. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1944/1976, p. 180.
- 44 *Sozo* appear in several scriptural passages, for example: *Mark 5:23*.
- 45 Williston Walker. *A History of the Christian Church*, Revised Edition. Charles Scribner, 1959, p. 36.
- 46 Simeon and Anna prophesied when Jesus was presented in the temple. See: *Luke 2:36*.
- 47 George Macris. "A Comparison: Francis of Assisi and St. Seraphim of Sarov." *Synaxis: Orthodox Christian Theology in the 20th Century*, Vol. 2, pp. 39-56
- 48 Jeff Rediger. "Psychiatric Considerations," pp. 61-83; Demetra Jaquet. "Pastoral Psychological Response," pp. 95-112. Stephen Muse (ed.). *Raising Lazarus*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004. Also: Kyriacos C. Markides. *The Mountain of Silence*. Image Books, 2001, pp. 118ff.
- 49 *The Ministry of Healing*. Lambeth Conference of the Anglican Communion, 1924.
- 50 *The Church's Ministry in Healing*. Archbishops Council, 1958.
- 51 This order is not to be confused with the Methodist Order of St. Luke,
- 52 Source: International Order of St. Luke the Physician.
- 53 Bishop John Perry *et al.* *A Time to Heal*. Church House Publishing, 2000, p. 18.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 55 John Paul II. *Reconciliation and Penance*. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Vatican, 1984.
- 56 Francis MacNutt. *The Power to Heal*. Ave Maria Press, 1977, pp. 35-87.
- 57 Francis MacNutt. *Deliverance from Evil Spirits*. Chosen Books, 1995, pp. 87-94.
- 58 Kelsey. *Healing and Christianity*, p. 242.
- 59 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "Instruction on Prayers for Healing." Vatican, September 2000.
- 60 Perry *et al.* *A Time to Heal*, p. 75.
- 61 See for example: Shafica Karagulla. *Breakthrough to Creativity*. DeVorss, 1967.
- 62 An example was ecclesiastical opposition to the use of anesthetics in the 19th century.
- 63 Peter Bistolarides. "Regenerating the Heart" a Wholistic Perspective." Stephen Muse (ed.). *Raising Lazarus*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004, p. 37.
- 64 Carl G. Jung. *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Harcourt Brace, 1933, p. 239.
- 65 See for example: Larry Dossey. *Healing Words : The Power of Prayer and the Practice of Medicine*. Harper, 1885; *Prayer is Good Medicine*. Harper, 1997.
- 66 Demetra Jaquet. "Pastoral Psychological Response." Stephen Muse (ed.). *Raising Lazarus*. Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2004, p. 96.
- 67 This is considered essential for establishing boundaries for successful therapy.
- 68 The "Montanists" also practiced glossolalia; i.e., speaking in tongues,
- 69 See for example: Alice A. Bailey. *Esoteric Healing*. Lucis Publishing Company, 1953. Bailey's work inspired formation of the Institute for Bioenergy Studies, now known as the International Network of Esoteric Studies.
- 70 Bailey. *Esoteric Healing*, p. 17.
- 71 As the term is currently used, bio-energetic healing includes all methods in which energy is directed or channeled to a patient. It may be offered to address physical, emotional or mental conditions.
- 72 Use of oils also feature in Ayurveda healing modalities.
- 73 Bailey. *Esoteric Healing*, pp. 98-99.
- 74 Sandra Hodson (ed.). *Light of the Sanctuary: the Occult Diary of Geoffrey Hodson*. Theosophical Publishers, 1988, p. 289. Emphasis removed.
- 75 Source: The Liberal Catholic Church Worldwide.
- 76 Charles W. Leadbeater. *The Science of the Sacraments*. Apocryphile Press, 1920/2005, p. 381.
- 77 Bailey. *Esoteric Healing*, p. 1.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 54.
- 79 Hodson (ed.). *Light of the Sanctuary*, p. 219. Emphasis in original.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 495-496.