

"Faith Healing" in the 'Philippines

Many have asked questions about "faith-healing" in the Philippines. Who are these faith-healers? How genuine are their powers of healing? May Christians seek healing from these people?

To answer these questions I must first give a brief sketch of Asian medical practices before I can describe the popular methods of healing in the Philippines. What takes place in that country must be viewed from the broader perspective - as a part of the whole.

In Asia there are few health services of the Western variety available for the majority of the people, but the services of a "doctor" versed in native medical lore and trained in the traditional Asian manner can be obtained without too much trouble. The average Asian doesn't visit a doctor's office. He must be very sick before he goes to the expense of calling a doctor - either Western or Asian. Doctors and medicine cost money and the ordinary Asian doesn't have money on hand for such an expense. Medical treatment may mean that someone goes hungry and that a whole family may have to eat less for a year for the sake of one ailing person. A doctor is often considered as a last resort. The tolerance level for pain is very high. I recall an elderly Filipina who came to our home seeking medical care. She was very ill, yet she didn't complain. She appeared stoic. We brought her to the hospital, where she died only a few days after admittance. We have seen many people with ugly sores walking down the street. The deformed, maimed and blind people are seen wherever one travels. Large cities in the Philippines like Manila and Cebu have up-to-date medical services, but the vast rural areas in the provinces suffer from an acute lack of modern medical services. Because the medical needs are so enormous and treatment so expensive, the ancient medical practices, whether in the Philippines or elsewhere, are still popular.

In Sri Lanka, for example, magical medical men are doing brisk business. These people call themselves "occult practitioners". The ministry of Cultural Affairs gives financial assistance to the legitimate practitioners of the magical arts. "Any such person," explains ministry secretary Nalin Ratnayake, "must have his application authenticated by the MP for his area." This is all it takes to be in business. These occult practitioners use a wide variety of methods. The most spectacular is the Yak Netum, or devil dancing, to appease the evil spirits, believed to bring various forms of illness. The proponents of the magical method maintain that their art is an arm of Ayurveda, the ancient South Asia medical discipline related to yoga and which relies heavily on herbal cures. D. G. Gabo Singho, president of the Sri Lanka Occult Practitioners Association, takes his work seriously. He comments: "Of course there are the charlatans who practice it for money. But any true Kattadiya (occult practitioner) is generally carrying, on an important family tradition. Money is not important. Many have gained a wealth of knowledge from ola (palm leaf) books preserved through the generations."

In the Philippines, there are basically three types of traditional healers: the Albularyo (herb doctors), the Baylan (mediums) and the Espiritista (spiritualists).

Albularyo

A herb doctor lives in a village and has an occupation. He may be a farmer, a plow maker or a carpenter. He is well sought after. He will not perform surgery, He will accompany his patient all the way to the hospital. But even there his task is not always finished. When the relatives of the patient feel that the hospital treatment is not adequate, they may still resort to the herb doctor. One such "doctor" said: "At times the parents or relatives still call me in. I remember several instances where I would be smuggled into the hospital posing as a visitor. When the doctors and nurses are out of the room I treat the patient, using herbs and oraciones (prayers)."

The matter of treatment seems strange to the Westerner. If the herb doctor attributes a relatively mild case of fever in a child to the spirits, he may try to drive them away through the offering of prayers and food. Dr. Juan M. Flavier, president of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction in the Philippines, interviewed some herb doctors. He asked one, "What types of illness do you feel doctors don't know about?" The herb doctor replied, "Those of the spirit and those that are unseen, as for example, the sickness of the soil." The "sickness of the soil" refers to being struck down with illness brought on by spirits living in the ground. The disease may take various forms. The herb doctor commented to Dr. Flavier, "No one can deny the existence of such spirits but doctors continue to deny them as causes of some diseases. That is why there are illnesses doctors cannot cure. Those cases eventually end with albularyos."

Appeal is made to the faith of the patient. Dr. Flavier inquired of a herb doctor about the many methods of treatment used. He answered, "Five; prayers, spitting, rubbing, plastering and murmuring." "Can you explain each so I can understand?" asked Flavier. He replied that prayer is nothing more than the use of prayers to invoke some saint or God. Spitting is associated with chewing and spitting on the object for a cure. For example, in circumcision, tobacco mixed with guava leaves is chewed. Then the mixture is spat on the newly cut foreskin. Rubbing may include little massage with the use of an ointment or a liniment, Kerosene is used to rub on the joints that are painful or aching. Plastering means that the herbs are pounded in the mortar and applied with a piece of cloth. Murmuring means a special secret phrase with specific wonders on certain ailments. This is not directed to God or a saint. The words themselves are responsible for the results. They can also be used to ward off evil.

As modern medical practices are beyond the reach of a vast percentage of Filipinos who live in rural areas, the herb doctor will continue to function for years to come.

The Baylan

So called mediumistic healing, in one form or another, is found in many countries. In the Philippines, mediums are believed to possess extraordinary powers to cure sickness, to

exorcise evil spirits from the rice fields, or out of the human body, and to intercede with good spirits for the petitions of the people. The mediums claim to have special knowledge of the environmental spirits. They perform all important rituals, chant prayers for the community when the barrio faces a crisis.

How do mediums function? F. Landa Jocano, a Filipino scholar, witnessed numerous mediumistic experiences in a small, rural community in central Panay. In this community sickness and malignant disease are first referred to the medium before they are brought to the attention of medical practitioners. To insult or harm a medium is to endanger one's life. To imitate his work is equally harmful. Jocano relates the story of a Filipina and one of her friends from the city who went to witness the performance of the *sagdahan* ceremony. This is a ritual done for the spirits of the river, when a man is seriously ill. When the Filipina and her friend came home after the ceremony, they re-enacted, out of fun, the dances and the prayers of the *baylan*. They beat tin-cans and called upon the spirits to come down. The following morning the Filipina lady lost her mind. Witnesses recall how she danced and chanted that sunny morning. No medium in the area would treat her. They knew that the spirits were angered and "whoever treated the girl would suffer her fate". The Filipina lady died two weeks later.

The Roman Catholic Church as it functions in so many places in the Philippines is folk-Catholicism. The official practices of the Roman Church have been modified to suit local situations. For many Filipinos the priests and the mediums have the same functions. The mediums believe that rites of the priests are more effective than their own as they "contain" more powerful magic. "That is why," says Jocano, "the *baylan* often supplements his own prayers with Latin prayers; and takes his ritual paraphernalia – holy water, the cross, pieces of wood from the *santo entero* (Sp. Santa Entierro, or Christ in the Sepulchre), incense, and others from the church."

Espiritists

Plane loads of ailing Western tourists have made their way to Baguio City to seek healing from a "faith healer". Baguio City, a beautiful resort center, north of Manila, is frequented by rich Filipinos and Westerners during the hot dry season. It is well-known for its faith-healers. At least four faith-healers practice there. Some ten others operate in nearby Pangasinan province. These healers are called spiritualist, psychic or astral surgeons who claim to cut incisions with their fingers and perform other miracles of para-science. Dr. Kurt Koch tells of a cure by such a healer. He writes, "One woman who was known through X-rays to be suffering from gall stones, went and visited this astral surgeon. Subsequently new X-rays showed that the stones had disappeared. It was a case of some sort of spiritistic apport, an apport being the appearance or disappearance of an object within a closed space. It may perhaps also have been an example of dematerialization, where substance just disintegrates and dissolves into nothing."

What happens when a "faith healer" gets sick? When Antonio ("Dr. Tony") Agpaoa, Baguio's most widely known faith-healer, got sick, he entered the Sacred Heart Hospital

for surgery. He underwent an appendectomy, and was later treated for pneumonia, which he suffered for two days after the operation. Agpaoa claims to have healed thousands of patients from the Philippines and abroad. He also runs a multimillion peso healing center. Why didn't anyone know of Agpaoa's surgery? He was admitted under a different name. When he was asked by his surgeon why he had gone to the hospital to be treated, Agpaoa replied: "You know, Doc. physicians can't heal themselves."

Agpaoa's case received prominent news coverage through Manila's dailies. Yet the plane loads of ailing tourists still keep coming.

Why do so many Westerners go to Asia for healing? I believe that we live in a day where people will sacrifice everything to have their existence here on earth continued. This is the triumph of secularism! Can a Christian even enter the thought of seeking treatment for an ailment from a Filipino espiritista? My answer is "No".

In our days of spiritual turmoil we shouldn't forget the warning of the apostle Paul, "Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). The evil can come in very appealing forms. Mediumistic or spiritualistic healings have nothing to do with the gifts and the fruit of the Spirit. Western man must remember that the average Asian doesn't make a distinction between the sacred and the secular. So healing comes therefore also in the guise of religion. The Christian's sense of discernment should be in fine tune with Scripture. The Bible clearly states that both God and the devil can heal. Spiritualistic healing is seen as the cult of the devil. Demonic signs and wonders are mentioned in Matt. 24:24; Mark 13:22; Thess. 2:9; and Rev. 16:14.

A Filipino Christian, Edilberto V. Banzuelo writes in his article, *Contemporary Occultism: Games Satan Plays* about a young Filipina, who had returned with her mother from the U.S. They had gone back to the Philippines to have her treated by one of the Philippines' world famous faith-healers. Banzuelo states that this 13-year old girl had already been examined and treated by specialists in the U.S., including the medical experts at the Walter Reed Hospital. In all this, she was pronounced normal and subsequently released. But, anybody who sees her would know she is physically ill. From the waist down, everything looked normal and so was her blood pressure, pulse beat, etc. Upward from the waist, she was literally skin and bones but with bulging stomach. Some things about her were irreconcilable. She had not been eating a regular diet for months, but she was strong. Viewed from her looks, blood pressure and pulse beats could not be normal. The girl remembered almost anything from the past except religious truth. "When I asked her if she knew Jesus Christ," says Banzuelo, "she said 'no' and added that she did not like to talk to us." Because she was under treatment by a "quack doctor," there was no freedom to minister to her that night of the visit. But prayer was offered before departure. The parents had attributed the unexplainable condition of their daughter to black magic. The girl died before another visit could be made, barely three days after she was seen last by Banzuelo.

My intention in this article is not to open a whole debate on faith-healing. My desire is to share with the readers what I have gleaned from my reading and experienced in the

Philippines as a missionary-teacher. The Philippines is a needy but also a very receptive mission field. The churches are growing by leaps and bounds. Hundreds of missionaries and national workers are witnessing many conversions and transformation of lives. Once a Filipino has come to Christ, he will shun the mediums and the spiritistas.

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