

Saints, Miracles and Healings : Eternal Challenges

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Summary

Can miraculous healings be equalized with "spontaneous remissions" from modern medical terminology ? Following the trace of (mostly) medieval miracle accounts, the present paper, though arguing against the use of the term "spontaneous", supports the idea of equalization, finding clear examples of failed or incomplete healings, relapses, and the cases of saints who themselves were passing through the process of illness. In conclusion of this interdisciplinary approach combining historical material with modern knowledge, it is advocated that a significant corpus of miraculous healings have been based on suggestive mechanisms.

Résumé

Les miracles doivent-il être considérés comme des "guérisons spontanées" dans la conception actuelle de l'Art de guérir ? En s'intéressant aux miracles (la plupart) du Moyen Age, ce travail tend à s'opposer à l'emploi du terme "spontané" et défend plutôt l'idée proprement dite de miracle. Il analyse des cas de guérison ratée ou incomplète, de récidives, et des situations où des saints eux-mêmes sont passés à travers la maladie. En conclusion, cette approche interdisciplinaire, combinant des recherches historiques et des connaissances actuelles, soutient l'hypothèse selon laquelle un nombre important de guérisons miraculeuses trouvent leur origine dans la suggestion.

General Problems in the Analysis of Miraculous Healings

Immersed in the flood of the accounts of miraculous-healing, any ambitious investigator, especially if coming from medical circles, confronts the temptation of proclaiming many unexpected inexplicable healings to be "spontaneous remissions". That the symptoms went into remission is obvious, but what does "spontaneous" mean ? Does any process in the world of nature occur spontaneously ? No: this is only one more synonym for our ignorance. "Spontaneous" remission does not exist : Remissions are a result of the intrinsic capacities of the human, and they are triggered by suggestion(I).

One should also admit that we meet, almost exclusively, successful accounts of healing by saints; although there are cases described when a partial or complete failure may be suspected or much more rarely clearly identified. Not all of those who supplicated St Anno of Kohn (11 th c.) were satisfied :

"Who disobeys his vow, will be punished (...). A woman became deaf again (140), a daughter died once more (II 68). Occasionally the sufferings worsen (II 76)" (2).

Obviously, the purpose of the generalisations was to make the folk obey their vows and to force them to follow certain moral rules. For those of us who look upon it from a more practical side, these statements simply mean that there were cases when the saint failed. By the shrine of St Gibrian (12th c.) as well, only a few of the crowd which visited Gibrian's relics on April 29th, 1145

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were healed; "on a Sunday soon after the acknowledgement of the first miracle of this saint". Of course, the official explanation is again : "Because of their sins, most of them had to go back home in the same way they came" (3). Describing the royal touch of the French kings, for scrofula it was said that "many of the touched were healed; but some were not" (4).

An interesting case when saintly propaganda fights pagan propaganda is described in a *Vita* of St Bernardino.

A free translation reads :

"In Toscana, one mile from the city of Arezzo, there was a spring called the Secret Spring, welling from beneath a mountain. At this spring many evil-doing and sorcery-practising men and women were gathering from various places, pretending that the water had some positive supernatural qualities. However, this drink was the work of demons, since the water had been under the spells of the sorcerers. Among other things, these men and pestiferous women were doing as follows: if they had found a 1 or 2 year-old boy having some disease, they would bring him to the spring and dip him into its coldness. Because of this, most of the paralysed children died of freezing. These men and women said that this was by divine permission (...). And this same wicked site was very famous (...), so that evil-doers were gathering here not only from surrounding places but also from distant parts. And not only these, but also many other uncultured and wild persons (...)" (5).

When Bernardino raised his voice against this cult, he was expelled from the city. Obviously, the cult was very strong, and as such it could only have survived if from time to time some miraculous healing had occurred. We owe the objective account of this story to a Christian intention to destroy pagan competition. If the orthodox Christian religion had been exposed to more serious criticism in the Middle Ages (as it

had later with Protestantism and Marxism), maybe the healing accounts would have been more definitive.

Beside failed healings, the accounts indicate the possibility of incomplete cures. Finucane mentions cases when a blind girl «awoke cured, although vestiges of the illness had not disappeared from one eye», and a dumb woman who «could speak somewhat better», etc. (6). In our times these would have provided opportunities for immediate verification as in the case of the young Swedish «saint-to-be» Samira, known for her hands producing oil and forehead secreting blood :

"there were rumours of miraculous healing. For instance, Intissar Zirga, 13, was blind in one eye after a shooting accident. When Samira put her oily hands on the girl's eyes, her sight was said to be 'completely' restored. However, Martin Johnson, the former professor of parapsychology at Utrecht, said that lead shot was still embedded in Intissar's eye and tests showed that her sight was still not perfect; her faith acted as a placebo, enabling her to make better use of the eyesight she had got" (7).

That ancient sources were exercised by the problem of relapse is demonstrated by an example in the *Talmud*:

"Ten things cause a return of the disease one recovered from, and then the disease becomes vehement. Those are: enjoyment of beef, fat, fried meat, bird meat, fried eggs, cress, hair-cut, baths, enjoyment of cheese and animal liver. Some add to it the enjoyment of nuts, some (add) cucumbers" (8).

The variety of this list of causes shows that the frequent cases of relapse had to be «solved» by imposing rules which practically nobody could obey. The real cause of the high number of relapses seems clear, as Finucane correctly emphasises, not only because some diseases



*St. John of Capestrano, painting by C. Vivarini
(15th c). Paris, Le Louvre. Photo : A. Skrobonja*

people probably would have liked to see the man who had returned them their health (10).

How much can we learn from such cases ? Primarily, they prove that, at least in those situations, no supernatural cause needs to be introduced for their explanation. Miracles are not explained by science; otherwise they are not miracles but phenomena obeying certain rules and limits. Miracles either occur or do not occur. They do not take place slowly (cf. the story of the man from the Kinunui family, affected on his skin and in both ears, who received, "after humble service", etc., "the hearing ability first in one, then in the other ear as well". Healing from the skin disease was not mentioned at all). (11). A woman with "a growth as big as a melon on her neck" suffered terribly from pain. Conscious that her illness was caused by her deeds, she dedicated herself humbly to serving God. After 28 years and thousands of votive offerings, "her growth opened and discharged the pus" (12). Is there any superhuman being who would offer help in such a cruel, hesitating, and awkward way ?

Healers Healed

The phenomenon of saints themselves undergoing the process of illness and its curing is primarily curious. It is important because of its influence on their suggestibility capacities. Eliade mentions the uniformity of initiation rites and healing in several cases of Siberian shamans (13), while Halifax uses the personal accounts of Latin-American shamans to confirm this view (14).

Satya Sai Baba, the modern saint who, materialising remedies and surgical instruments, reminds us that miracles do exist, once claimed to have been taken ill with tuberculous meningitis. He suffered severely for five days, claiming that he actually contracted the disease from another person, and then cured himself from hemiplegia in front of 5.000 spectators (15).

were understood to be healed while they were actually only in remission (rheumatoid arthritis, seasonal variations of avitaminosis causing sight disturbances, etc.) (9), but the effect of suggestion or psychoanalytical healing must very often have been only temporary. As soon as the trigger for the conversion was "reactivated", the conversion disorder reactivated as well. The hagiographers and propagators of the cults of saints were extremely reticent to admit such explanations, but we can still sometimes deduce them from secondary information. The best case for this is certainly that of St Capestrano. This saint visited Olomouc for the first time in the summer of 1451 and "cured" 94 persons there. At the time of his second visit, three years later, only one of those "cured" was in the crowd to pay greetings to the Saint. As Elbel points out, "one of 94 cured is little if we consider that those

*Polyptych by B. Vivarini (15th c.)
in the monastery of St.
Euphemia, Kampor, Rab island,
Croatia. St. Bernardino of Siena
as the central figure.*



Bernardino's first known disease occurs in 1401 (16), coinciding with the period of his indecisiveness concerning the choice of his life path and religious order. During Bernardino's stay in Albizzeschi, he was affected with:

"a bad toothache (...). In order to emit a voice, he had to invest an enormous effort, and, on the other hand, that harsh sound coming out from his throat was so unpleasant to a listener, that his audience was decreasing from day to day". (17).



Even more significant is the cure of what is presumably laryngitis :

"After having prayed for a certain time (...), it seemed to him (...) as if a fire ball would have come down from the sky, touched his throat, and disappeared" (18).

The illness was not ascribed to God, but the curing was. There is some mention of Bernardino's contagion with plague in 1411 (like St Rochus one century before), then *erkrankte er schwer* again, this time in Venice, in 1429 (19). Approaching old age, Bernardino seemingly became a wandering hospital :

"He had lost all his teeth but one, and that only tooth, so it was said, was swinging in his mouth like a little bell; he has been suffering for years from gravel, dysentery, kidney inflammation, haemorrhoids, gout, and some of his diseases could be attributed maybe to his voluntary denutrition" (20).



It is strange that a healer by suggestion of such a great capacity and efficiency as Bernardino was not more successful in curing himself. Suggestion can certainly have its limits: inexplicable miracles should not.

Conclusion

Miracles have religious, cultural, medical, psychological, anthropological, social and so many other aspects that can never be exhausted as atopic (21). Combining historical raw material with modern knowledge, the intention of this work is to demonstrate an interdisciplinary approach based on the presumption that time changes cultural epiphenomena with a much greater velocity than it does to fundamental biological phenomena. This paper was intended to provide support for the author's belief that miraculous healings may be compared with "spontaneous remissions" and that the mechanisms of hetero- or auto-suggestion may be seen in their aetiology.

There is no "wrong" conclusion to be derived from this paper save one: that the ideas exposed are intended to "de-poetise" miracles and destroy their spiritual value in favour of some materialistic explanation. On the contrary: once upon a time Le Roy concluded that "faith is not only the source of illusory or true representations: it is the acting power, able to enter the balance with physical powers" (22). And it is indeed.

Notes and references

1. Patricia Norris of the Menninger Clinic, who is best known for her work with a nine-year-old boy healed of a terminal brain tumor, after all earlier treatment had failed, using only biofeedback and mental imagery, says : "It is completely natural to heal. Spontaneous remission is too mystical-sounding; it's like the medieval term "spontaneous generation", when they didn't have enough science to see germs. Doctors think mind-body factors are a very minor part of curing cancer. But patients who are healed say it's major". Marc Barasch, "A Psychology of the Miraculous", *Psychology Today* 27, n° 2 (1994) : 60.
2. *Wer seine Gelübde verletzt, wird bestraft (...). Eine Frau wird wieder taub (I 40), eine Tochter stirbt nochmals (II 68). Gelegentlich verschlimmert sich das Leid (II 76).* Norbert Ohler, "Zuflucht der Armen : Zu den Mirakeln des Heiligen Anno", *Rheinische Vierteljahrsschriften* 48 (1984) : 24.
3. *Wegen ihren Sünden hatten die meisten den Heimweg so antreten müssen, wie sie erschienen waren.* Constanze Rendtel, "Hochmittelalterliche Mirakelberichte als Quelle zur Sozial - und Mentalitäts - geschichte und zur Geschichte der Heiligenverehrung : Untersucht an Texten insbesondere aus Frankreich" (Ph. D. diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 1985), 1 : 69.
4. *Beaucoup de malades touchés guérissent; mais parfois ils ne guérissent pas.* Marc Bloch, *Les rois thaumaturges : Etude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1961), 117.
5. *"In partibus Tusciae extra civitatem Aretii erat quidem fons distans a civitate per unum miliare, qui vocabatur Fonte tecta, qui scaturibat sub uno monte. Ad quem fontem concurrebant multi malefici et incantatores viri et mulieres ex diversis partibus, qui sub specie boni ostendebant aquam istam habere aliquam virtutem supernaturalem. Sed hoc potius erat opus demonum per suas incantationes et ipsorum virtutem prefate aque. Et inter alia que isti et iste pestifere mulieres faciebant, si contingisset puerum unius anni vel duorum habuisse aliquam infirmitatem et allatum esse ad illum fontem per antedictos et dictos mulieres pestiferas, accipiebant et infundebant eum in illum fontem ultra modum frigidum. Ex quo pro maiori parte contracti dicti pueri ex frigiditate illius aquae expirabant. Ipsi et ipse perverse mulieres dicebant hoc esse divina permissione (...).* Et iste locus prophanus in tanta erat fama (...), quod non solum de locis circumstantibus, sed etiam de longinquis partibus concurrebant ad prefatum locum (...) malefice. *Et non isti tantum et iste, sed et multe alie diverse persone indocte et bestiales (...)"* Franciscus van Ortry, "Vie inédite de S. Bernardin de Sienne par un frère mineur, son contemporain", *Analecta Bollandiana* 25 (1906) : 331-32.
6. R.C. Finucane, "The Use and Abuse of Medieval Miracles", *History* 60 (1975) : 8.
7. Paul Sieveking, "On the trainee hairdresser with the greasy hands", *New Statesman & Society* 6, n° 257 (1993) : 47.
8. *Zehn Dinge verursachen Rückfall (Recidiv) in die überstandene Krankheit, und die Krankheit ist dann heftig. Diese sind : Der Genuß des Rindfleisches, des Fettes, gebratenen Fleisches, des Fleisches von Vögeln, gebratener Eier, der Kresse, das Abschneiden der Haare, Bäder, der Genuß des Käses und der Thierleber. Einige setzen noch hinzu, der Genuß der Nüsse, Einige noch der Gurken.* Quoted in Gideon Brecher, *Das Transcendentale, Magie und magische Heilarten im Talmud* (Vienna : Druck von Ulrich Klopfer sen. und Alex. Eurich, 1850), 226.
9. R.C. Finucane, *op.cit.*, 9.
10. Cf. also Döring's and Peter of Klatovy's accusations against Capestrano's healings. Martin Elbel, "St John of Capistrano and the Franciscan Convent in Late Medieval Olomouc", (M.A. thesis, Central European University-Budapest, 1994), 13. It is, however, true, that, in the case of ten lepers healed by Jesus, nine did not bother to come back to thank the healer. Luke, 17, 11-19. *Novi zavjeti psalmi* (New Testament and Psalms), transl. by Bonaventura Duda i Jerko Fucak (Zagreb : Krscanska sadasnjost, 1990), 218.
11. Kyokai, *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese*

- Buddhist Tradition : The Nihon ryoki of the Monk Kyokai*, trans. Kyoko Motomochi Nakamura (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1973), 119.
12. Kyokai, *ibid*, 270. Finucane ingeniously formulates the miracles-relativising time problem : "as if we were to attribute the cure of headache to aspirin taken two weeks earlier". Finucane, *op cit*. 8.
 13. Mircea Eliade, *Le chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase*, 2d ed. (Paris : Payot, 1968), 40-41.
 14. Joan Halifax, *Shamanic Voices : A Survey of Visionary Narratives* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books Ltd., 1979), 11 and 136.
 15. H. Murphet, *Sai Baba - udesnik* (Sai Baba - Man of Miracles), trans. I. Matosic and Z. Marok (Zagreb : Globus, 1990), 146-47.
 16. According to Doelle, he was diseased *per tres menses*, according to Ortroy, even *iacuit mensibus circa quator*. Cf. Ferdinandus Doelle, "Sermo S. Iohannis de Capistrano O.F.M. ineditus de S. Bernardino Senesi O.F.M.", *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 6 (1913) : 87; Franciscus van Ortroy, "Vie de S. Bernardin de Sienne par Léonard Ben voglienti", *Analecta Bollandiana* 21 (1902) : 71.
 17. (...) un grave male di gola (...) L'emettere fuori la voce gli costava uno sforzo grande, e d'altronde quel suono rancio che gli usciva di gola, era cotanto sgradevole a chi lo sentiva, che l'uditario gli andava scemando di giorno in giorno. F. Alessio, *Storia di San Bernardino da Siena e del suo tempo* (Mondovi, Italy : Tipografia vesc. edit. B. Graziano, 1899), 106.
 18. Dopo avere alquanto pregato... parvegli vedere (...) scendere dal cielo un globo di fuoco, tocçargli la gola e sparire. *Ibid*.
 19. Robert-Henri Bautier et al. eds., *Lexikon des Mittelalters* (München; Zürich : Artemis, 1991), s. v. "B(ernardino) v(on) Siena", by G. Busetto and R. Manselli.
 20. (...) aveva perso tutti i denti salvo uno, e questo unico dente gli ciondolava in bocca, fu detto, come un campanellino; da anni soffriva di renella, disenteria, infiammazione dei reni, emorroidi, e anche di gotta, qualcuno dei suoi mali da attribuirsi, forse alla voluta denutrizione; Iris Origo, *Bernardino da Siena e il suo tempo*, trans. C. Roatta (Milano : Rusconi, 1982), 248.
 21. The investigation of all pros and cons regarding miracles would bring us too far. As an example, let us comment only an extremely negative a priori attitude by David Hume, who suggested four arguments against the existence of miracles. Firstly, there is no miracle in the whole history for which enough reliable testimonies could be found. (Typical Humian sceptical agnosticism, applicable to each and every problem). Secondly, it is in human nature to be less critical towards stories on miracles since surprise and wonderment are pleasant emotions. (Although very interesting as a psychological postulate, it is not quite a firm counter-argument in a discussion on miracles. Hume again shows that he is more occupied by epiphenomena and qualia than miraculous phenomena). Thirdly, stories on miracles are mostly part of barbarian and primitive civilisations. (This conception is completely incorrect: miracles can be found even in a sophisticated civilisation, religious, social or geographical area - they are typical pan-human phenomena. Cf. David Hume, *an Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding / A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*, ed. Eric Steinberg (Indianapolis, IN : Hackett Publishing Company, 1977), 78-82).
 22. *La foi n'est pas seulement source de représentations illusoires ou vraies, qu'elle est force agissante capable d'entrer en balance avec les forces physiques*. Edouard Le Roy, "Essai sur la notion du miracle, I", *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* 78, n°1 (1906) : 31.

Biography

Amir Muzur (1969) graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Rijeka, Croatia. As a scholarship holder at the Central European University in Budapest, Hungary, he completed the MA Program in Medieval Studies (thesis title: «Miraculous healings in the late Middle Ages»). Presently, he is a 3rd-year PhD fellow at the International School for Advanced Studies-Cognitive Neuroscience Sector in Trieste, Italy. He lives in Opatija, Croatia, publishes books on local history, and writes for several newspapers.