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Source: *Journal of Religion and Health*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring, 1981), pp. 48-62

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27505608>

Accessed: 19/08/2010 03:40

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Filipino Psychic Surgery: Myth, Magic, or Miracle

Stephen H. Allison and H. Newton Malony

ABSTRACT: This essay considers the current impact and evaluation of Far Eastern psychic healing typified by the psychic surgery of the Philippine Islands. On the basis of a literature survey as well as interviews with persons who had visited the healers and received psychic surgery, an analysis of the spiritual dynamics and physical effects is reported. An attempt is made to balance the positive reports of those who were healed with the more objective and/or skeptical reports of religious and scientific leaders. Cultural, psychological, medical, and magical aspects are considered. An expansion of philosophic outlook coupled with a search for new tools of investigation is suggested.

In the early months of 1973, a group of medical doctors, scientists, and parapsychologists visited the Philippine Islands to study a phenomenon that was causing increased furor amongst health professionals. The objects of this investigation were the Filipino psychic surgeons, also known as spiritual/magnetic healers. Psychic surgeons were scattered throughout the Philippines, working out of hotel rooms, churches, and private homes. They had ministered their healing powers to the local people for many years but only recently had attracted the attention of Western man. Harold Sherman's book, *Wonder Healers of the Philippines*, published in 1966, was the catalyst that triggered Western interest in the beliefs of these "medicine men."

Why should this esoteric and somewhat "primitive" Eastern group suddenly be the focus of so much debate and scientific inquiry? The answer lay in their claims to heal miraculously; that is, using only their hands, these surgeons purported to be able to enter the body, extract any diseased tissue, and close the wound. Furthermore, this procedure required no anesthetic and left no scars. Modern medicine had no explanations for the hundreds who claimed healing via psychic surgery. Hence, the questioning began.¹

Historical perspective

Robert Fox, an American anthropologist teaching at Brent Junior College in Baguio City, suggests psychic surgery dates back two thousand years. He

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posits an alignment between the ancient "cult of the dead," characterized by rituals wherein one's ancestors were consulted, and modern psychic surgery. Changes in the cultic practices were probably necessitated by the arrival of the Spaniards; that is, to accommodate this new cultural influence, the healers took on a facade of Roman Catholicism.²

Their philosophical roots are found in the age-old Platonic concept that the part can never be well unless the whole is well. Because of this belief, many healers engage in transpersonal pursuits, such as mediumship, materialization and dematerialization, Yoga, and meditation.³

Religion and psychic surgery

Today the psychic surgeons fully incorporate a religious element into their teachings about healing. The vast majority of the healers have organized themselves into a religious group called the Union Spiritista Cristina de Filipinas, Inc. By 1973 there were four hundred small congregations of the then seventy-three-year-old Spiritista Church. It is based in Manila, where Joaquin Cunanan, a retired businessman, serves as its president-general.⁴

The religion espoused by the Spiritista Church is syncretistic. Teachings of the Eastern religions and modern spiritualism are incorporated into their theology. John Finch, the founder of the Graduate School of Psychology at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, visited some psychic surgeons, the Zuniga family, in 1968. He reported that this particular family of healers, although espousing Christianity, had roots in Hinduism. A Sikh had taught the Zunigas the arts of contemplation and spiritual healing. (The Sikh religion was founded by Guru Nanak, a Hindu who sought to purify his religion.)⁵

Nearly all the healers practice some form of meditation. Most begin their missions at the age of about fifteen or sixteen. They are introduced to spiritual healing by their spiritual directors, who lead them into an "out-of-body" experience and teach them to meditate.⁶ In these meditative states, the psychic surgeons make contact with the "spirit intelligences" of those who have died and want to serve man as his spiritual doctor. This intercession is necessary in order that the man-healer may receive advice from the spirit-healer. Allan Kardec's teachings regarding spiritual ailments as the bases of physical illnesses may be the foundations for psychic surgeons communicating with the "spirit" world, using transcendent spirits as guides to heal physical (spiritual) man.⁷ Kardec's spiritualism, outlined in his book, *The Spirits Book*, is referred to in some of the writings of the healers.

Christianity seems to have had the most influential role in shaping the religious beliefs of the psychic surgeons. Many describe their spiritual healings as "divine" healings. Most would "give the glory to the God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ operating through the Holy Spirit."⁸ Finch claims "the objective of the whole procedure is to create faith. The healing is incidental. The relationship with Jesus Christ is what they are trying to foster."⁹

Psychic surgeons base their spiritual healing on biblical passages such as:

... they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. Mark 16:18

Behold I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the powers of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you... the spirits are subject to you.... Luke 10:19, 20

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do.... John 14:12

If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in his eyes, and give heed to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord, your healer. Exodus 15:26

These passages are commonly referred to in the Spiritista Church literature.

Healing methodology

The two broad categories into which the healings fall are contact and absent (or distant) healings. Contact healing occurs when the patient visits the healer for a personal treatment. Absent healing occurs through prayerful intercession.¹⁰ Joaquin Cunanan claims Jesus set the precedent for absent healing in John 4:46-54, when the Capernaum official's son was healed although he was not in Jesus' presence.¹¹ Many claim that absent healing is more effective the clearer the image the healer has of the patient's physical condition. The objects of absent healing are therefore asked to correspond weekly, in order to give updated testimonies to the healing process. Some confusion arises at this point as to why the man-healer needs to know about the physical process of healing when, in essence, the spirit-healer is the one effecting the intercessory healing process.

In the literature written by the Filipino healers, numerous adjectives are used to describe different types of healing. All seem to practice present and absent healing but differ in the methodology used. Each particular healer or family seems to use one of these healing methods, but no one of them defines psychic surgery per se. Charles Mattison, a dentist in Los Angeles, who visited the healers, claims to know of as many as seven types (methods) of healings being practiced.¹²

Jaime Licaucó has proposed the following distinctions among healing methodologies:¹³

1. *Mystical healing.* Here the healer attempts to rejuvenate the cells of the body and attune their vibrations to their cosmic source by charging them with electromagnetic energy coming from the healer's fingertips and directed by his mind or consciousness. The concept involves harmonizing the seven bodies, or layers, of man into proper balance to achieve health.

2. *Spiritual healing.* The power to heal is located outside the healer, in a transcendent being. Such practitioners believe the Holy Spirit in man is the one who effects the healing. Mattison labels this type "faith healing" and says it requires the patient to believe in God.¹⁴ Finch believes, according to the healings he witnessed, "the degree or quality of faith with which one comes to the surgeries" greatly affects the success of treatment.¹⁵

Not all believe that spiritual healing is dependent on the faith of the patient. One of the pamphlets printed by an anonymous Filipino healer, entitled "What We Mean by Spiritual Healing," claims spiritual healing is not contingent on the faith of the patient, as evidenced by the healing of children and the mentally ill. Some healers believe that "the patient must possess qualities to bring him into a state of receptivity with the healing intelligence in order to be able to receive treatment from it."¹⁶ Exactly what constitutes such a state is left ambiguous.

3. *Magnetic/psychic healing.* The healing powers are stored within the physical man serving as healer.

G.L. Playfair proposed a theory based on Hermani Andrade's "biological organizing models" (BOM) to explain magnetic healing. He discussed this theory in *The Unknown Power*, which, in simplified form, is:

The human body can be compared to a magnetic field, e.g., when you put iron filings on a piece of paper and place a magnet underneath, the filings instantly jump into place according to the shape of the magnet's field. Now, if you put another magnet over the filings, reversing the polarity so that north is opposite south and vice versa, you will break-up the field and the filings will be free to move around. Take the second magnet away again, and they jump back into place at once. Likewise, in psychic surgery, the lower magnet is the BOM, the iron filings are the molecules of the human body cells, and the top magnet is the medium's hand, causing what we might call an anti-biomagnetic field. The psychic surgeon serves as a disrupting influence on the bodily cell structure.¹⁷

Other terms used, such as faith and astral healings, describe healings with only minor alterations from one of the above three methodologies. Of Licauco's three methodologies, it seems that spiritual healing is what most psychic surgeons claim, but magnetic healing is more often what they practice. These two forms seem mutually exclusive, in that the former delegates healing power to a being *outside* the healer, while the latter claims healing power lies *within* the healer himself.

Those individuals who were personally interviewed by the writers, Dr. Charles Mattison, Dr. John Finch, and Mr. and Mrs. Allan Leach, of Tillamook, Oregon, described various kinds of healings to which they were witnesses. Some recounted incidents of mere laying on of hands, which does appear to be a form of faith healing. However, most often witnessed was a procedure wherein the healer "penetrated" the skin of the patient and "removed" some foreign matter that had floated up close to the tissue surfaces. This procedure seems to coincide with what has been described as magnetic or psychic healing. In addition, most who use this procedure claim to possess

some type of magnetic healing power. For these reasons, when we mention psychic surgery in the remainder of this discussion, it is this "magnetic" procedure that is being examined.

Questions from established medicine

Although very little scientific inquiry has been made into psychic surgery, many of the healers are open to the questionings of established medicine. Many would agree with Luis Reye's statement that "if we were free of anything to impede the flow of God's grace, we may not need medical doctors." At the same time, recognizing man's discontinuity with God, the healers see a place for established medicine. What remains to be answered is, does established medicine see a place for psychic surgery?

While a vast majority of Western medical men would answer negatively to the above question, a few scientists have concluded otherwise. The group described in the introductory paragraph, composed of engineers, physicists, physicians, chemists, and parapsychologists, observed numerous healings and concluded:

... the psychokinetic phenomena which we observed during the healing activity:

1. Did not involve fraud.
2. Utilized no anaesthesia.
3. Did not use scalpel, razor blades, or other instruments to open the body.
4. Required usually from one to ten minutes to perform.
5. Permitted, in most cases, the healer and patient to remain in street clothes, with no special precautions to maintain sterile conditions.
6. Appeared to cause little, if any, discomfort to the patient.
7. Left the patient without operative shock.¹⁸

Since the purpose of their study was to evaluate the treatment itself, not its effectiveness, no radical conclusions can be drawn from these observations. However, such reportings will, we hope, trigger more interest from the world of Western science. Often we dismiss something as primitive or fraudulent because its theoretical assumptions are couched in terms foreign to Western thought. A case in point is the Chinese practice of acupuncture. For two thousand years, Westerners virtually ignored this practice. Recent investigators think acupuncture may have positive contributions to make to medical science. Such may or may not be the case with psychic surgery.

Many aspects of psychic surgery do clash with the theories and practices of Western medicine. The unsanitary working conditions alone are enough to raise questions. Most healers work only with a table, cotton balls, and their hands. Some use a Bible as a pillow.¹⁹ Healer Josephina Sison uses coconut oil in her surgeries, claiming it "helps direct the power of the Holy Spirit."²⁰ Healer Juan Blanche uses unsterilized scissors to cut away body parts, e.g., moles, in his surgeries.²¹

The diagnostic procedures espoused by psychic surgeons also seem mysterious. Some scan the body with their fingers, trusting the Holy Spirit to point their fingers to the troubled area.²² Others ask the patient where the problem is located, sometimes taking his or her word for it and proceeding to operate there, and other times operating elsewhere, explaining that this other locale is a more primary source of the actual pain.²³ One healer, Romy Bugarin, claims to diagnose by x-ray vision. He drapes a white towel over the patient and claims to pinpoint trouble areas through the towel.²⁴

One test of the "orthodoxy" of a psychic surgeon is whether or not he or she has the ability to circumscribe the eyeball of a patient. This procedure, wherein the healer places an index finger under the patient's eyelid and makes a complete 360-degree movement with the finger, is frequently performed to correct vision problems.²⁵ The most baffling aspect of psychic surgery is the surgical procedure that purports actually to penetrate the flesh. The healers' claims to open flesh, using only bare hands, instantaneously clot blood, knit bones, and remove diseased tissue, all without pain or scarring, seem impossible.

Psychological analysis: emotional disturbance

History is full of shamans, witch doctors, charlatans, and psychiatrists who have manipulated the impressionable minds of man and claimed great healing powers. The temptation is to discount quickly psychic surgery and add these Filipino healers to the ever-growing list of frauds. The mass murder-suicide in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978 is evidence that: 1) people of low self-esteem and weak ego boundaries are still very susceptible to the manipulations of men promising security, health, happiness, and 2) men and women still exist who seek to manipulate the masses. These manipulators are either fully aware of their fraudulent activities or are psychotic and, therefore, not in touch with reality.

Investigation of emotional disturbance in the backgrounds of some of the healers has revealed some interesting findings. Josephina Sison told Stanley Krippner, "Sometimes St. Michael takes me on a white horse to other planets. And he gives me precious stones which are very beautiful, but which don't last very long."²⁶ Sison's claim to see and hear the archangel St. Michael may be attributed to visual and auditory hallucinations. Psychodynamically, one could speculate as to a hysterical component actively working in Sison's healings. Sison had a delayed onset of menstruation, at the age of sixteen, as compared to the average onset in Filipino girls at the age of twelve. She recalls her first contact with the spirit world was at the age of thirteen. Her work is trademarked by the use of cotton and the issuance of much blood. She claims the blood "carries disease out of the body."²⁷ What we may actually be observing is a woman who at the age of thirteen denied menstruation by sublimating this physical transformation into a spiritual one. When menstruation could no longer be denied, she chose to deal with it by incorporating the cotton, blood, and menstrual flow into her healing belief system.²⁸

Juan Blanche's healings have a unique component; that is, the skin supposedly begins to open and bleed without the healer touching it. Some have speculated that Blanche actually scratches the surface of the skin with some hidden sharp object. Blanche has a history of violence. As a boy, he threw rocks at the Spiritists. Perhaps Blanche's aggression is being sublimated in this procedure, which requires destruction of tissue, but to the patient's greater benefit.²⁹

Mrs. Zuniga has had several psychotic breakdowns since Dr. Finch's visit in 1968. She has attempted suicide several times and attempted to murder her granddaughter once. Finch speculates that these breakdowns were the results of great demands put upon the Zunigas to heal, accompanied by increasing demands to prove the validity of their healings to government and medical agencies.³⁰ He feels troubled as to why such horrible things have happened to a woman who claimed to be filled with the Holy Spirit and concedes that her gentleness and overtly loving nature were perhaps an example of reaction formation, that is, expression of emotions opposite from the anger actually felt.

Suggestibility

Another psychological variable that deserves consideration is the power of suggestion. Studies by Eysenck and Furneaux suggest two orthogonal factors in suggestibility.³¹ One factor, seen in hypnotic suggestibility, represents an ideomotor response to an outside agent's repeated suggestion that such a result would occur. Krippner claims no hypnotic suggestion was used by the Filipino healers he observed. He claims nobody made an overt or covert attempt to alter the patients' perceptions of the external world.³²

The second factor in suggestibility represents cognitive and perceptual responses that are influenced by a suggestive agent's attempts to exploit an individual's sensitivity to subjective external forces, rather than to objective, external stimuli. Individuals who are easily persuaded would be very susceptible to this form of suggestibility, especially in an unfamiliar or ambiguous situation. People like this typically rely heavily on others in formulating their values and beliefs and invest little value in their own objective experiences.

It is conceivable that this second factor of suggestibility is utilized in psychic surgery. Krippner and Villoldo illustrate a case that may be explained as buying into the power of suggestion.³³ Healer Nemesio Taylo, on one occasion, was presented a case wherein the young boy suffered from swollen testicles. Rather than operating on the testicles, Taylo proceeded to "extract" pieces of elastic and clay from the boy's abdomen. Working on the belief system of the natives, Taylo explained to the mother that the boy had been hexed, but now the hex was removed. He later explained to Krippner that the boy's swelling was caused by unexpressed anger and resentment. We see here what may be interpreted as the healer's ability to adapt his level of sophistication to that of his clientele in order to be most effective in using persuasive healing techniques.

Another example, involving suggestibility and rather crude behavior modification techniques, is reported by Krippner and Villoldo wherein Ben Bustamante treated a patient with a diffuse phobic illness. Bustamante told the patient to melt wax and let the droppings fall into a glass of water. The solidified wax shapes would represent those things that the boy feared. The boy was to put these wax figures under his pillow at night and burn incense. This was to drive away the feared demons. That is, by concretizing the phobias, the patient could now objectively deal with them. This resembles an implosive technique, often used to decrease neurotic fears.

Intra/interpersonal variables in healing

Man has for some time now recognized the healing power that exists merely in the relationship between patient and doctor. Harry Stack Sullivan developed a whole therapeutic modality based on this concept. Alexander stated:

There is little doubt that much of the therapeutic success of the healing profession, of the medicine man, and of the priest, as well as the modern practitioner, has been due to the undefined emotional rapport between physician and patient.³⁵

Surely this factor accounts for some of the healing success of the psychic surgeon. This would be especially true in cases where the ailment is psychosomatic in nature. One cannot ignore the possibility that many of these cases of healing have emotional rather than physiological etiologies. In such cases, even fraudulent healers could heal, in much the same way that placebos alleviate symptoms.

Major O. Carl Simonton, cancer specialist and chief of radiation therapy of Travis Air Force Base, California, maintains, "The mind, the emotions, and the attitude of a patient play a role in both the development of a disease, cancer included, and the response that the patient has to any form of treatment."³⁶ Only recently, with research in areas like biofeedback, have we begun to understand man's innate potential for self-healing. More and more, we are realizing that many times man can and does control, whether consciously or unconsciously, his position on the sickness-health spectrum. Medical science has long speculated as to the psychosomatic nature of asthma, ulcers, hypertension, and other illnesses. Some, like Dr. Simonton, have gone so far as to hypothesize emotional-physical ties in all diseases.

Psychic surgeons have been influenced by this mode of thinking. Writings of Filipino healers and literature distributed by them are full of the philosophy that the psyche affects the physical body. Healer Luis Reyes wrote: "Some illnesses, including some apparently physical ones, have their origins in harmful emotional states such as guilt feelings, hates, resentments, greed, jealousy."³⁷

Healer Jaime Licauco, quoting Dr. Herbert Puryear, claims,

An attitude of resentment will produce inflammation . . . if buried deeply, can cause cancer. Hate, animosity, hard sayings weaken the body. Anger actually causes poisons to be secreted from the adrenals and may result in disease of the liver if it is unable to flush out the poisons.³⁸

We see from these quotations that psychic surgeons have incorporated the theories and scientific findings of psychosomatic and holistic medicine into their scheme of healing. What we find in the practice of psychic surgery goes one step beyond this, and such information has been blended into their theology. The result has been an interesting bio-psycho-theological integration, illustrated by this quotation from Joaquin Cunanan, president-general of the Spiritista church:

Man is the acme of physical perfection. God has provided the mechanism in our body so that our body can heal itself. This mechanism is directed by our subconscious mind. We can heal ourselves by suggesting to our subconscious mind that we get well. This suggestion to our subconscious mind can be done very effectively by our conscious and superconscious minds through meditation and prayer.³⁹

Cunanan further explains that sickness is self-inflicted by man's subconscious.⁴⁰ He feels that healing is effected when man plugs into the spark of Christ in man, through prayer and meditation. This "spark," called the superconscious mind, can control destructive subconscious processes, and ultimately undo the bad work in man.

The Christian recognizes much similarity between this concept and the Christian doctrine of the indwelling Holy Spirit. However, our knowledge of other teachings of the psychic surgeons, e.g., legions of spiritual doctors who guide the healers, makes it impossible to equate the teachings. Furthermore, we now have grounds on which the whole practice of psychic surgery may be questioned. If healing is effected by some intrapersonal communication between oneself and one's deity, coexisting at different levels of consciousness, why the need for a surgical procedure wherein body parts are removed? This must either be viewed as a discrepancy between the teachings and actual practices of the Filipino healers or as psychic surgery going through a paradigm shift. Such a shift is a period of change wherein cause and effect rationales are being reexamined, but new theories have not reached final formulation. Thomas S. Kuhn addresses the topic of theories in a state of crisis in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.⁴¹

Sleight-of-hand

The fact that mankind has been perpetually faced with sleight-of-hand artists posing as genuine healers forces us to examine seriously the possibility of legerdemain in the practice of psychic surgery. Although many of the common people believe in the Filipino healers, the Filipino Medical Association is very critical of them. In 1962, the Association denounced one of the most famous healers, Antonio Agpaoa, as a conjurer, stating that tissue removed during an "appendectomy" turned out to be pieces of chicken intestine.⁴² An Italian neurologist who filmed Agpaoa's procedures reported that:

1. Agpaoa smuggled in a blood-like substance, neither animal nor human, to use in his surgeries.
2. Renal stones removed turned out to be salt and pumice.
3. Pieces of bone removed were found to be in advanced states of decomposition.
4. An actual opening in body tissue was never seen.⁴³

Two Americans, Donald and Carol Wright, have gone on record as claiming first-hand knowledge of fraud in the practice of psychic surgery.⁴⁴ The Wrights were originally quite impressed with the healers and eventually were taken into the confidence of one surgeon. They allege this man taught them how to buy animal parts at a market, where to hide them, and how to make it look as if the animal parts emerged from the human body. Some consider the Wrights unreliable witnesses, claiming their accusations of fraud are merely attempts at vengeance, spurred by personality clashes with the healers.

Others took their story seriously. On the basis of their witness and other information, U.S. Administrative Judge Daniel H. Hanscom declared psychic surgery to be "pure and unmitigated fakery."⁴⁵ He, along with the Federal Trade Commission, ordered several trade agencies to stop promoting psychic healing trips to the Philippines.⁴⁶ Apparently, "healing excursions" began to be promoted soon after the Filipino phenomenon caught the attention of the Western world. Since then plane loads full of sick and crippled people, all with dreams of being miraculously healed, have routinely traversed the Pacific Ocean.⁴⁷ The Trade Commission's orders to halt such voyages have been relatively unheeded.

Others have claimed first-hand observation of legerdemain during healing sessions. A headline in the *National Enquirer* read "Fake Psychic Healers!"⁴⁸ The feature story told of author Steve Tinney's visit to Filipino healer Jacqueline Sison, accompanied by Dr. Augustus Hausen, a Filipino physician, and Mrs. Hausen. Sison claimed to remove blood clots from Mrs. Hausen's leg, but medical diagnosis of the extracted material showed it to be animal tissue. The blood stain was analyzed and found to be red dye. A tumor removed from another patient turned out to be a section of a tropical plant.⁴⁹

A television documentary broadcast from Los Angeles on December 5, 1978, presented one man's attempt to debunk psychic surgery. The program, *The Mysterious World of the Supernatural: Fact, Fiction, or Fraud*, featured magician James Randy. Randy demonstrated two sleight-of-hand procedures he felt were prevalent in the healings of psychic surgeons. One involved folding the fingers to simulate the fingers actually penetrating human flesh. The other demonstrated how blood and fake tumors could easily be stored in a fake thumb made of plastic.

Krippner and Villoldo report that a few healers actually admit to legerdemain, but only on days when they are unable to make contact with the "spirit world."⁵⁰ Confessions such as these tempt us to close the books and mark off psychic surgery as a "bad joke." What keeps the issue alive are the increasing numbers of testimonies of those who have either witnessed or experienced "successful" psychic healing.

Credibility problems

We may question the credibility of the "primitive" Filipino native who believes in this practice. At the same time, it is not so easy to discredit accounts such as those of Drs. John Finch and Charles Mattison. Dr. Mattison claims to be eyewitness to several instances of miraculous healing through psychic surgery. He claims his pastor's heart circulation problem was corrected and that the healers removed kidney stones and a brain tumor from Mattison himself. Perhaps most impressive is Mattison's claim that his college roommate was cured of Hodgkin's disease. He was supposedly diagnosed as having Hodgkin's disease at UCLA prior to the trip to the Philippines. Upon reexamination at UCLA following psychic surgery, the disease was pronounced nonexistent. Seldom does a case such as this come along, wherein the patient has sought diagnostic examination by an established medical doctor both before and after visiting the Philippines. Perhaps greater validity could be ascribed to the healings if pre- and post-surgical measures were taken more often. One final mystery about Mattison's story is that his group was "healed" by Antonio Agpaoa, mentioned previously as having been branded a fraud by the Filipino Medical Association.⁵¹

The shortage of information and a credibility problem with much of the material that is available further compound the problem of properly assessing psychic surgery. Photographs and moving pictures of psychic surgery, although inconclusive in and of themselves, make the viewer keenly aware of the complexities involved in sorting out fact from fiction.

The only scientific study of the healers this writer found was an attempt by Harold Sherman to record EEG readings on the healers before and during their psychic trances. Sherman's efforts were aborted when the EEG machine blew up.⁵² Most of the available information is in parapsychological literature. Literature of this nature is not to be entirely discounted, but the fact remains that very little straight biological or clinical psychological investigation has been done in this area. Even the material that would be considered credible by the majority is hard to locate. For example, none of the major libraries of science and/or religion in Los Angeles, e.g., UCLA, USC, Fuller Theological Seminary, and Claremont Seminary, have a copy of Harold Sherman's catalytic work, *Wonder Healers of the Philippines*.

Cultural considerations

The isolation of this healing technique within a particular culture arouses our curiosity. Why should psychic surgery be primarily a Filipino phenomenon? Dr. Mattison thinks these powers are available to Western man. He knows of a woman from San Jose, California, who practices psychic surgery in the States, having learned it from the Filipinos.⁵³ McCausland echoes Mattison's opinions, claiming these abilities are latent in most people.⁵⁴ This, however,

fails to explain why, for so long, psychic surgery has been such an esoteric practice.

Psychic surgery's influence on Filipino society may be due to a certain lack of medical/psychological sophistication in this culture. Anthropologist Robert Fox interprets the charismata surrounding these healers sociologically. He claims the healers "hold the community's social fabric together by 'curing' people of such antisocial tendencies as selfishness, jealousy, and petty theft."⁶⁵

Interestingly enough, some of the teachings of the Spiritista church contribute to the perception of these healers as very charismatic individuals. For example, God is seen, on one hand, as the administrator of disease, inflicting it on those who transgress his commandments (Exodus 15:26). However, God is seen, on the other hand, as healer, subjecting the evils of the enemy to the virtuous powers of good (Luke 10:19, 20).

These seemingly antithetical views of a God who claims to be "the same, yesterday and today" (Hebrews 13:8) also exist within the Christian faith. The difference in the two theologies becomes apparent when we examine the way the healers have taken this paradox and made it the basis for modern-day miraculous healing. It appears the healers explain these and other passages to mean God will grant miraculous healing powers to people who are extremely righteous (John 14:12) and follow all his commandments. It is, therefore, no wonder that the Filipinos who witness psychic surgery attribute great spiritual qualities to their healers. We could conclude, on the basis of these cultural variables, that the Filipino healers have been successful in practicing within this isolated culture because the culture has built-in superstitions, theological loopholes, and a degree of naïveté which allows for such a belief system to exist. This, unfortunately, does not explain the attractiveness psychic surgery has had to the "modern, enlightened" Western world.

Dilemmas in evaluating psychic surgery

The basic theological dilemma the Christian is faced with in discerning the validity of psychic surgery is the puzzle of how God effects healing in the world today. H.A. Ironside states the problem as:

If the Lord had promised continued health of body to all obedient believers in this dispensation, or if His atonement was for sickness as well as for sin, then we would be authorized, not only to pray for, but claim healing on all occasions . . . but facts prove conclusively that many of the godliest saints are familiar with affliction, with pain and sickness. Moreover, those who advocate prayer as the divine and only remedy for illness invariably succumb at last to some disease which they pray to be healed, only to be denied. What then is our conclusion? Either that they are not praying in faith, or that it is not the will of God always to heal the bodies of His people in the present age. The latter is clearly the testimony of Scripture. We are "blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ," but we are not promised all temporal or physical blessings. We still await the redemption of the body.⁶⁶

Not all Christians would resolve this dilemma the same way Ironside has; so theological agreement does not seem possible. At the same time, most Christians would agree that the syncretistic nature of the beliefs of the Union Spiritista Cristina de Filipinas, Inc., is cause for concern. It would be senseless to ignore the heresies man has fallen into and could fall into by indiscriminately entertaining a theology of eclecticism. Paul condemns the syncretistic religion of the Christians in Collasse (Col. 2:8-23) and rebukes the false teachings of gnosticism, asceticism, mythology, and astrology that crept into early Christianity. We certainly need to proceed with caution before adopting these new teachings as "theologically sound." If the syncretistic elements do not alarm the reader, surely the inconsistencies and lack of clarity in many of the beliefs of this group warrant the "raising of a red flag" by a critical Christian thinker.

The rationale behind such a practice, should it prove to be fraudulent some day, is puzzling. Some have speculated as to monetary benefits. Marcus McCausland, chairman of the National Federation of Spiritual Healers, asserts that these healers "live on the verge of penury because they accept no reward or payment for their work."⁶⁷ Most who were personally interviewed for this report claim the surgeons work solely out of the desire to serve God and their fellow man. However, Finch claims that Antonio Agpaoa, one of the most popular healers, charges extravagant fees for his services.⁶⁸ Journalist Tom Valentine reports that Agpaoa rarely charges fees but that donations from foreigners sometimes exceed one thousand dollars.⁶⁹ The financial benefits of psychic surgery certainly warrant further investigation. However, if money is not the reason for this practice, could the reason be power, or prestige? Or have these people been crippled by their own deceptions, having been hooked into a system elevating service at any price but inevitably leading to poverty and disrepute with much of society?

We are hard pressed to formulate a dogmatic stance, based on the knowledge we now have of the Filipino psychic surgeons. Few, if any, conclusions can be drawn at this time. Even more regrettable is the possibility that this phenomenon may never be properly examined. John Finch reports that in the past decade greedy businessmen have monopolized psychic surgery by hiring counterfeit healers and have made quite a profit off unsuspecting tourists.⁶⁰ The contemporary visitor may be ushered to a modern hotel in Manila to spend a weekend at a healing seminar;⁶¹ quite a contrast to the humble "back-room" healings Finch witnessed in 1968. People traveling to the Philippines can no longer be guaranteed that they will ever encounter psychic surgery in its "native" form.

Conclusion

When all is said and done, psychic surgery per se has perhaps become too "polluted" to be evaluated fairly. But the ultimate crucial issues still stand: What "tools" do we have to use in evaluating such phenomena? What

reference source(s) do we use as standards for comparison? What belief systems that we possess are helpful and which are "excess baggage"?

William James, the founder of American psychology, observed that most claiming psychic or healing powers are fraudulent or engaging in self-deception. He stated, however, "one only has to see one white crow to prove that not all crows are black."⁶² We must, in all fairness, avoid Western man's tendency toward reductionism. The compulsive need to oversimplify has often led to premature closing of profound issues. We must acknowledge the possibilities of yet-to-be-discovered truths and similar truths disguised by linguistic/religious/cultural differences. Eklal Kueshana has astutely observed that "much exists in this universe which would be wholly impossible within the framework of your present philosophy. Fortunately, these things do not require your knowledge or belief in order to exist."⁶³

Inquiry into phenomena like psychic surgery will surely broaden our "philosophical framework." Until such quests bring enlightenment, we, as analysts, would probably contribute most by heeding the advice Abraham Maslow offers:

Slowly and painfully, we psychologists have had to learn to become good clinical or naturalistic observers, to wait and watch and listen patiently, to keep our hands off, to refrain from being too active and brusque, too interfering and controlling, and to keep our mouths shut and our eyes and ears wide open.⁶⁴

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