

## BIBLICAL BASIS FOR SOME HEALING METHODS IN AFRICAN TRADITIONAL SOCIETY

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In many parts of Africa and Asia, medical doctors are accustomed to seeing their patients seeking help from "traditional healers" who possess links with the indigenous non-Western medical tradition. This is evidenced especially in mental and psychosomatic disorders. In spite of the achievements of modern medicine, the tenacity of traditional medicine and therapy is still an obvious fact. One common reason for this phenomenon is that most patients view modern medicine as tackling the manifestations of disease but not its cause, so they look for someone who will tackle its cause as well.<sup>1</sup> Often they do so to supplement the help they get from orthodox Western medicine.

To most medical doctors trained in Western medicine, this attitude looks absurd and illogical. They ignore the fact that it is an act of faith, because Africans believe that the unaided effort of man is vain. Unconsciously some Christians and even non-Christians who indirectly associate the Christian faith with the West, think that everything African is fetish, idolatrous, quack, and unchristian. As every aspect of western medicine and therapeutic skill can not be said to be Christian, all traditional therapeutic techniques can not be branded pagan, fetish, and unscientific.

This paper will address itself to a critical search for the biblical basis and equivalents for some traditional therapeutic methods in contemporary society. It is a theological evaluation of some indigenous methods of healing (which had hitherto been neglected or ridiculed) to ascertain their acceptability to a practising Christian in Africa today. The health of the whole person is a challenge to Christians now more than ever before, particularly in respect of the United Nations' dateline for "Health for all by the year 2000." Most people still confuse everything Christian with the West or see it as a west oriented faith. To say the least Christianity, which is not the traditional religion of the Jews or Europeans but a transcendental and incarnate faith, is older in Africa than it is in Britain. It is a universal faith which offers salvation to anyone who accepts Christ (see John 1:9-13; cf. Acts 10:34-35). Christianity was established in Egypt, Lybia, Ethiopia and some other centres in North Africa before it got to Britain. As an incarnate faith, it is not culture bound but rather transcends all cultures, refines and purifies them, and expresses itself through some noble aspects of the culture, especially the language.

This paper does not intend to sound apologetic but serves as a genuine search

for the basis of making Biblical faith meaningful to the African Christian especially those engaged in the ministry of making men whole such as pastors, evangelists, and Christian doctors.

### I. African Concept of Health in the Light of the Bible

In Africa one observes that the concept of health is far more social than biological. A more unitary concept of psychosomatic interrelationships is an apparent reciprocity between mind and matter. Health is, therefore, not an isolated phenomenon but part of the entire magico-religious fabric far more than an absence of disease.<sup>2</sup> So anyone trying to work out a scheme of "health for all by the year 2000" must not only think in terms of physical eradication of disease but also the proclamation of the Word of God that nourishes the soul. Dr. S. R. Burstein, a public health expert, has stated that among many non-industrialized societies

medicine in our sense . . . is only one phase of a set of processes to promote human well-being, averting the wrath of gods and spirits, making rain, purifying streams or habitations, improving sex potency or fecundity . . . it is bound with the whole interpretation of life.<sup>3</sup>

Burstein is right to point out that in traditional societies, the treatment of sickness falls within the realm of religion. This is particularly true when we understand that the traditional worldview is rooted in religion.

This comprehensive concept of health and healing is not an exclusive reserve of the African or other non-industrialized societies. For instance Bernard Haring, writing from his experience of orthodox medicine in the West, clearly states that:

a comprehensive understanding of human health includes the greatest possible harmony of all man's forces and energies, the greatest possible spiritualization of man's bodily aspect and the finest embodiment of the spiritual. True health is revealed in the self-actualization of the person who has attained that freedom which marshalls all available energies for the fulfilment of his total vocation.<sup>4</sup>

However, not many practitioners of orthodox medicine who adopt anti-religious philosophies (particularly anti-Christian) understand this broad concept of health (see John 10:10). In the Biblical perspective healing in all its ramifications is the symbol of the redemptive grace and manifestation of it. The healing of disease is always represented as God's victory and more particularly His victory won in Christ over sin and death.<sup>5</sup> Healing and salvation are constantly associated: "Heal me O Lord and I shall be healed; save me and I shall be saved" cried the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 17:14; cf. Ps. 91:1). The psalmist in many other places echoes similar songs of joy when he remembers the healing and forgiveness the Lord offers (Ps. 103:1-3; Ps. 116:1-5).

By the time of Jesus, the healing of the sick and the proclamation of the Gospel were an inseparable part of the same complete ministry. He sent out his disciples to preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God and to heal the sick (Luke 9:2). He had earlier in the synagogue appropriated the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-4 in his public reading of the Scripture (Luke 4:16-19).

Healing either in the traditional African society or in the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ is therefore an elaborate enterprise in which the practitioner does not seek only the person's physical well being but also his spiritual and psychological fulfilment. It thus incorporates the reintegration of the person to the full membership of his community.

#### **A Few Evidences of Biblical Healing: Their Characteristics**

The Bible is replete with evidences of healing which are inherently miraculous. Four Old Testament examples stand out conspicuously: The healing of King Abimelech (Gen. 20:17), the healing of the Israelites bitten by the wild snakes (Num. 21:6-9), the healing of the Syrian Captain, Naaman by Elisha (2 Kings 5:1-19), and that of King Hezekiah (2 Chr. 32:24ff; 2 Kings 20:1-7). A common denominator in the above four healings is that none was performed with any physical administration of drugs and medicaments. In the case of Hezekiah, the balm recommended by the prophet was after the Lord had granted the healing and perfected the cure. The essence of the finality of the authority of God is evident in all. Rituals played some subtle part. The victims of the snake bites were only asked to look at a pseudo-snake hung on a tree as a therapeutic technique (cf John 3:14-15 where Jesus is signified as the object which is lifted high for all to behold and live). Naaman is asked to go and wash off his leprosy in a river which he considered inferior and dirty compared to the one in his home country. Each of the actions enjoined above looks absurd. In traditional societies some of the actions which the healers recommend or perform look absurd but involve nothing mystical or fetich. They sound ridiculous when analysed with the empirical methods of science. The integrity of the one recommending the action and faith in his person and ministry afford much to the patient. It is this essence of faith that undergirds the whole ritual and should be focused on the Power of God in Christ in African society today.

Jesus performed numerous acts of healing. Many of them are reported collectively in the New Testament (eg. Matt 8:16; 12:16; 14:14; Matt 14:36; 15:30-31). He healed the lepers (Matt 8:1-4; Luke 17:12-19), a woman with issue of blood (Mark 5:25-34), a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1-6), and an epileptic (Luke 9:37-43), two paralytics (Matt 9:1-8; John 5:2-47), a crippled woman (Lk 13:11-13), a man with withered arm (Matt 12:10-13), Peter's mother-in-law (Luke 4:22-28), a centurion's servant (Luke 7:2-10), the noble man's son (John 4:46-53), many blind people (Matt 9:27; 20:30-34; Mark 10:46; John 9), a man both deaf and dumb, two men with mental disease (Mark 5:1-17; Luke 4:33-37), and even in the Garden of Gethsemane, the ear of the High Priest's servant (Luke 22:50-51).

The apostles, when sent out by Christ to preach and after the Pentecost, performed many acts of healing. Many of the acts were, however, reported collectively. They include the lame at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:6-8), the sick in the streets healed through Peter's shadow (Acts 5:15), Aeneas, the paralytic healed by Peter (Acts 9:32-35), a cripple from birth healed by Paul at Lystra (Acts 14:8-10), and the father of Publius healed of dysentery by Paul (Acts 28:8). Many other acts of healing were performed.

The above and other acts of healing recorded in the Bible are evidences of the power of God over sin, disease, and evil (see Luke 11:14-23). S. I. Momillen has in a lucid way explained that attainment of mental, spiritual, and physical health is an obvious possibility if one lives in conformity with the stipulations of the Law of God.<sup>6</sup> He was in effect echoing what the writer of the wisdom literature had earlier on stated. God speaking through the writer of the Book of Proverbs advised, "My son, attend to my words, incline thine ear unto my sayings . . . for they are life unto those who find them and health to all their flesh" (Pro. 4:20, 22). "Fear the Lord and depart from evil, it shall be health to thy navel and marrow to thy bones" (Prov. 3:7-8). "A merry heart is a good medicine, but a broken spirit drieth up the bones" (Prov. 17:22). These among other Biblical injunctions maintain that sickness is a disruption of the rhythm of the normal process of life and an external disharmony as well as an intrusion that upsets the normal working of the body.

Having found some similarities in the traditional concept of health and causes of illness with the Biblical views, it is now pertinent to establish the links in some of the basic therapeutic techniques of both systems. Sin is understood in both as harmful to a healthy body, and the Biblical cure for sin may be effectively appropriated by healers of human bodies in contemporary Africa. For instance some similar traditional skills may be purified by Biblical methods and at the same time improve on them for greater utilization.

### **III. Traditional Psychotherapy and Biblical Injunctions**

Traditional psychotherapy involves techniques affecting community care, ego strengthening, and reintegration. These among other things make for the health for the whole person which is the goal of the Biblical healing ministry. Psychotherapy aims at influencing a patient for change, and the goals are independence, freedom, maturity, adulthood, and self reliance. The traditional society is a caring community, and the individuals are seen as personally linked with the cosmos. Every effort is continually being made to re-establish contacts when normalcy is disrupted.

The meaning and uses of confession and absolution cannot be over emphasized in the traditional society. Its place in the Biblical sense should be captured. The effects on the life and health of a patient in the traditional society are immense. For instance, among the traditional Igbo of Nigeria, relief has often been given to many sufferers from mental illness when those related to them and others included in their social network meet them either in their private homes or in the clinics of

the traditional healer and publicly confess their ill will towards them (the patients). Often a patient is allowed to speak out his grudges against his people who in turn accept their faults. The patient is thus reassured that he is a part of the healthy community which is prepared to welcome him to its fold. Without under rating the good effects of sympathy, exhortation, advice, reassurance, and doctrinal teaching, the role of confession is still important in traditional medical care.

Many functional disturbances and in the long run many organic lesions are the direct consequences of unresolved remorse and guilt. Some medical practitioners have testified that some long standing cases of insomnia, palpitations, headaches, disorder of the digestive organs, and hypertension have disappeared overnight after confessions of a lie or an immoral sex affair. The experience of David is probably a vivid Biblical example (Ps. 51). The Bible assures us that if we confess our sins, God is faithful and righteous to forgive us and cleanse us of all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). A guilty conscience clogs the flow of vitality and inhibits the joy of a free and open heart. The Igbo of Nigeria who realise the enormity of unconfessed and unrepented sins practise a ritual of *Ku-Ogu* as a part of the therapy. This ritual is performed before or during the healing when a patient or his close relative is asked to unburden his heart by confessing his sins before seeking divine blessings. The Bible is clear about the fact that repentance and confession are essential steps towards the health of the soul (Jas. 5:16; cf. 2 Sam. 24; 17; Dan. 9:20; Acts 19:18).

One other form of psychotherapy is reintegration. It is a form of a traditional healing method which Jesus practised. Most of those he healed were asked to go back to their various villages instead of following him. When Jesus asked the healed Gerazene demoniac to go back to his kinsmen and friends and tell them all that the Lord had done for him, he was asking the cured man to reintegrate with his people. This psychotherapy aimed at making the cured man self confident when he gave testimony of his healing. Besides giving glory to God the method also intended to reassure the man of his people's willingness to accept him back into their fold (Mark 5:19-20). He was no longer ashamed of himself as people gathered around to ask how he was cured. He became the centre of attraction and thus assumed some air of importance in the community. Again after Jesus had healed the leper, he commanded him to go and show himself to the priest and perform the prescribed rituals (Mark 1:40-44). This was not only aimed at fulfilling the Levitical Law of purity (Lev. 13:49; 14:2-32), but also served another important purpose--that of reintegration into this society that had earlier cast him out as unclean. When the ex-leper, now healed, came to the priest to show himself clean, probably in the presence of the congregation at worship, the whole community would be assured of the fact of the man's new life and cleanliness. They could now associate with him.

In some traditional African societies especially among the Igbo of Nigeria, a mentally sick man on being cured performs a similar ritual of reintegration as a testimony of his recovery. He may perform an outing ceremony, or organise a party, or take a title to show his people that he is no longer insane. He is also assured that he has been fully accepted by his people as a responsible member of the community.

#### **IV. Pharmacoreia and Physical Therapy**

The Bible does not condemn medicine and its uses in healing. On the contrary it is seen as a part of the gifts of the bounty of God. One apocryphal passage speaks clearly about this and needs to be quoted in full:

We have earlier mentioned 2 Kings 20:1-7 and 2 Chr. 32:24 in connection with the healing of King Hezekiah. Read again the instructions of the prophet Isaiah in verse 7. The Lord has given every good gift to serve man's needs.

Jesus performed several miracles of healing. In John 9:6 in the story of the man born blind, Jesus adopted a completely different methodology of using natural elements. The use of spittle and mud to produce a paste is by and large a new dimension in Jesus's technique. The man was directed to go and wash off the paste rubbed on his eyes by Jesus. The cure was gradual. From science man learns the mechanism of treatment and from the Bible its meaning. Science tries to discover the wonders of the world created by God recorded in the Bible. Healings are merely restoration of the innate property to its original design and function.

#### **Summary and Conclusion**

From the foregoing discussions we have tried to establish some close relationships between therapeutic techniques in traditional African society as part of the Divine redemptive scheme recorded in the Bible. The concept of health in both systems is patterned on the same broad conceptual scheme, incorporating body, soul, and spiritual dimensions. The awful effects of sin as a factor of physical malaise are not peculiar to the Biblical view but are also found in the traditional religious system.

Psychotherapy, either in westernised Christian societies or in the traditional non-industrialised communities, may be understood as a form of theology of restoration and restitution - a methodology for change, change for the better. It does not belong to any particular profession; even though modern psychotherapy grew out of medicine when the great innovators like Freud and Adler were physicians.<sup>7</sup> The traditional healer is qualified to offer this ministry in his society where his reputation is respected. He is not only seen by his people as a healer but also as a pastor, teacher, enabler, counsellor, and priest. The Church is a community of saints where every believer can serve as an agent of healing. Rightly, Charles Jackle has described pastoral psychology as a ministry that may be done by clergymen, physicians, school teachers, psychologists, social workers, and any whose training qualifies them and who identify with the historic community of faith.<sup>8</sup> The Church played this role in the first century of the Apostolic era (1 Cor. 12:9). It was regarded as a valid proof of apostolic authenticity and sound doctrine (Titus 1:9). Some groups of people in the Church today have, however, been guilty of intellectual distortion of the healing power of the Gospel and of almost neglecting the gift of healing. In traditional religious systems where faith rather than intellect is emphasized, healing is given pride of place. The healing

ministry of the Church is Biblical and an important feature of the religious experience just as it an indispensable feature of the traditional faith.

A strong faith in God enables a man to decipher the basis of any sort of ritual involved in any form of traditional healing. Some of the traditional rituals (in fact many) are sordid and corrupt, shrouded in secrecy, and should not be accepted by a Christian. Nonetheless, a good number of such rituals may not be anti-Biblical but need a knowledge of Scripture to relate them reasonably and meaningfully to the pre-venient Grace of God. They may be some of the unknown seeds of Christianity which need the illuminating light of the Gospel to make them serve God's people in a wider dimension. A sound theological understanding is then necessary if a balanced assessment would be made lest we throw out the baby with the water in the bath. Such spirit directed theological study can help to check the errors of *syncretism* and *liberalism* which have been the bane of most theological positions taken in the past by many heretics.

The Bible speaks of the Jews accusing Jesus of casting out demons in the name of Beelzebulb (Matt 12:22-33; Lk 11:14-23; Mark 3:20-27). The accusation is false, but the essential thing here is to note that not all traditional or Western therapeutic methods which can produce effective results are Biblically sound and God motivated. Even though David was invited to entertain Saul with music when the King was delirious, we know that not all forms of music have that healing touch and render glory to God. Before any cultural form of healing is accepted, one must therefore examine it against the background of the Bible.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> H. B. M. Murphy, "The Traditional Healer: Colleague or Quack?" *Postgraduate Doctor, Africa*, Vol. 6, No. 5 (May 1984) p. 148.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) p. 84. See also, S. I. Mcmillen, *None of These Diseases* (London: Lowe and Brydone, 1963) p. 12ff. cf. Mark 2:5ff. See J. B. Phillips, *Making Men Whole*, (London: Collins, Fontana Books, 1955) pp. 45ff.

<sup>3</sup> S. R. Burstein, "Public Health and Prevention of Diseases in Primitive Communities" *The Advancement of Science* IX, 33 (1952) pp. 75-81. J. H. Thompson, *Spiritual Considerations in the Prevention, Treatment and Cure of Disease* (London: Routledge and Regan Paul, 1984) pp. 36ff.

<sup>4</sup> Bernard Haring, *Medical Ethics* (London: St. Paul's Publications, 1972) p. 154.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Tournier, *A Doctor's Casebook in the Light of the Bible* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd., 1954) 205. See W.A.R. Thompson, *Faiths That Heal*, (London: A & C Black Ltd., 1980).

<sup>6</sup> S. I. McMillen, *Ibid.*, pp. 12ff. See T. Seliman and J. S. Sinolowe, *Holistic Medicine - Harmony of Body/Mind/Spirit* (Renton Virginia, Renton Publishing Co. Inc.) Reviewed in *In the Service of Medicine* No. 121, (1978) pp. 31-32, Christian Medical Fellowship, London.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Jackle, "Pastoral Psychotherapy: A new consciousness in Ministry," *Journal of Pastoral Care* XXVII, 3 (Sept. 1973) p. 174. P. Tournier, *The Third Dimension in Medicine - Relationships*. Contact No. 47, Christian Medical Commission, Geneva, 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Charles Jackle, *Ibid.*, p. 176.