

Catholics and Traditional Healers in History

by Stuart C Bate OMI

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1 The Catholic Church has its Tradition

The word “catholic” comes from the Greek word for universal. It was first used of the Church by St Ignatius at the beginning of the second century to indicate one of the distinguishing characteristics or “marks” of the Church. The term was codified in the Symbol of Constantinople in 381 AD.¹ At the time of the great schism in the Church in the 1054 the word was used to distinguish the Western Church whilst the Eastern Church preferred to use the term “orthodox”. Some Eastern Churches however have always remained in communion with Rome. From the Reformation onwards the term was used more restrictively to refer to Roman Catholics. Today the situation is as follows:

The Roman Catholic Church consists of 22 distinct churches *sui juris*, which roughly translates as “autonomous” churches. The Latin Church and the 21 Eastern Catholic churches each have their own hierarchy in communion with the Bishop of Rome. (Huels 1995:4)

Consequently when we talk of the relationship between Catholics and Traditional Healers throughout history we should bear in mind how the term “catholic” has itself changed in the 2000 years of Christian tradition.

This alerts us to a truth about all traditions. They never remain fixed. They adapt and change throughout human history as they respond to new contexts, new times and new realities. The Catholic Church is no different. It has lived through its history in widely differing communities, cultures and contexts. In all of these it has attempted to respond to the prevailing social conditions in terms of its understanding of the requirements of the Gospel usually as expressed in terms of its own ecclesial priorities. One of these social conditions is the context of sickness and healing and in particular those people endowed by societies and cultures with the power to heal sickness. This article sketches the response of the Church to healers within the various cultures and societies where it has taken root. Clearly an article of this length can only sketch an outline of such a vast undertaking. We have to be selective too since the Church has operated in so many different contexts.

2 Traditional Healers

The term “traditional healer” also needs to be explained. It has come to have a rather specific meaning in the African context referring to those healers who work within the context of “traditional” African culture which is usually understood as African culture unsullied by missionary influence from the major world religions. This is the African “tradition” of which these healers are traditional healers. In fact, however, all healers work out of a tradition even though they may not refer to themselves as traditional healers. This tradition is the culture from which they emerge and so sometimes they are referred to as “cultural healers” . Other healers are called “religious healers” since the tradition of healing out of which they operate is concerned with religious practice or the religious sphere. Often healers are a mixture of all these.

We will adopt a very wide understanding of the term traditional healer letting it refer to all healers who are working out of a particular healing tradition with its own understanding of sickness and health. In such an understanding even the modern medical profession can be seen as working out of a particular tradition: the Western medical tradition. So even medical doctors and nurses could be referred to as “traditional healers”. We adopt this understanding as we believe it helps us clarify the approach of the Church to all socio-cultural and religious traditions of sickness and health and shows us some constant attitudes which help to define this relationship.

3 The Church has Worked Within Many Traditions

To illustrate the relationship between the Church and traditional healers we have chosen the following contexts as examples:

- X The Church and Greco-Roman Cultural Healing
- X The Church and Celtic Healing practices
- X The Church in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance: The Witches Controversy
- X The Church and “Primitive” Cultures: The Nineteenth Century Missionary Period
- X The Contemporary Context

4 The Church and Greco-Roman Cultural Healing

It is the pre-Socratic attempts in Greek philosophy to explain the world in terms of natural forces which provided the theoretical framework within which the large number of

efficacious natural remedies could be articulated as natural rather than mythical processes. This led to the birth of medical science. However that does not mean that the Greeks rejected the mythical and the religious. The Greco-Roman world was a world underpinned by its religious beliefs. So even medicine was understood as a gift of the gods and healing was not restricted to medicine alone (Amundsen 1987:320). A common Hellenistic view, admittedly influenced from the east, especially Persia, was “to regard all disease as the creation of evil demons. To conquer the disease therefore demanded the defeat and expulsion of the evil spirit” (Griffiths 1987:256). Magicians, priests and healers used various approaches to expel demons. The main one was to identify the demon and then expel it in the name of a stronger spiritual power. Sometimes however a different strategy would be employed in an attempt to pacify or calm the demon so that the person might not be disturbed by it and the symptoms could go away.

Another very popular source of healing in this culture was the cult of the god Asklepios. More than 200 healing sanctuaries of this cult are known to have existed throughout the Greco-Roman world. People would travel to these sanctuaries and stay there for a period of days undergoing a mixture of natural and supernatural remedies including diet, baths and exercise as well as the “incubation, whereby the worshipper slept in the temple of the god in order to experience a visitation from him through a dream or vision; such a visitation could bring both a cure for the disease (or advice as to how such a cure might be obtained) and a revelation of a spiritual nature” (Griffiths 1987:256).

The Catholic response to these healing traditions coming from Greco-Roman culture was two fold in a way that somehow reflects a continuing Catholic tradition right from antiquity to the present time. The first response was that of the assimilation and accommodation of these traditions within Christian practice. With regard to medicine the Church’s position was very accepting. Christian doctrine accepted that God has created nature for human beings to use. “The charitable use of medicine was clearly seen as a means of extending Christ’s love...The visitation, care, and comfort of the sick was a duty incumbent on all believers” (Amundsen 1987:321).

The Hellenistic worldview expressing a demonic source of illness is found in scripture and is seen as the principal reason why Jesus expressed his mission in healing (Bate 1995:164). This view was also assimilated into the early Church and Frost (1940) has shown how this kind of healing continued in Christianity. Even some aspects of the cult of Asklepios were assimilated into Christian practice. This was especially the case regarding the setting up of Christian healing shrines and centres. The practice of “incubation” continued as

a Christian practice. People would visit churches and sleep over in them to be healed by the power of Christ or the Saints. The Church of Saints Cosmas and Damien in Constantinople and the Church of St Menas in Alexandria were powerful healing centres. In the latter “some patients stayed for over a year and the church itself was so completely filled with mattresses and couches that they had to overflow into the sacristy” (Davies 1987: 392). One of the temples of Asklepios was situated on the Tiber island in Rome and this site was turned into a Christian healing centre. A church was built using part of the original temple and later, a hospital was added. Both of these are still in use today.. Part of the relics of the original temple are still visible including the image of the snake which was a central symbol of the Asklepiion cult.

The second prong of the Catholic response to these traditions was much more negative. This was a response which was concerned with theological orthodoxy as well as maintaining pastoral (and often political) control over Christian practice. “Pagan” religious practices came increasingly under scrutiny after the Edict of Milan making Christianity the religion of the Empire. In particular, most of the pagan temples were destroyed or converted into churches including those of Asklepios. The offering of sacrifices to other gods was clearly incompatible with Christianity and as the Christian religion grew, the bishops felt it necessary to prevent Catholics from participating in these cults. As Christianity became the religion of the empire so the Christian emperors were keen to outlaw pagan practices. None was more severe in this than the Augustus Theodosius (379-395). Holland Smith (1975) has outlined in detail the process of the stamping out of pagan practices from the Christian empire both through edict and the encouragement of “monks” and other Christian zealots to destroy temples and especially pagan statues.

5 The Church’s Encounter with Celtic Healing Practices

Christianity penetrated into Celtic society during the Roman period and by the fourth century there was a relatively organised Christian community. It was a “strongly Romanised Church....whose language was overwhelmingly Latin and whose diocesan structure...reflected the Roman pattern of civil organisation” (Davies & Bowie 1995:9). From this Church the local Celtic population was gradually evangelised through people like St Patrick.

However as Roman influence waned in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Celtic Church was able to develop with very little Roman influence. This was particularly the case in Ireland which had never been conquered by the Romans. This allowed the emergence of a “Celtic” inculturated Church whose spirituality and practices is the object of much study

today.²

Celtic culture was very ritualistic and religious with many deities and in particular many female deities. Airmid was one of the goddesses of healing, of medicinal plants and “keeper of the spring that brings the dead back to life”.³ The Celts had a widely developed knowledge of medicinal herbs and plants. Much of this knowledge has penetrated down to today kept alive by family traditions especially in the rural areas. This is yet another example of how traditional practices were assimilated into Christian practice as people became Christian.

A more striking example of such assimilation is found in the cult of St Brigit. Originally, Brigit was “the Irish-Celtic goddess of healing and fertility, patroness of smiths, poets and doctors, symbolized by a white swan”. St Brigid is said by legend to be the daughter of the Druid Dubhtach. She founded a monastery at Kildare and is one of the three national patrons of Ireland. Her feast day, February 1 is the same as the ancient Celtic festival of Imbolc which honoured Brigit amongst other Celtic gods.⁴

From the time of Pope Gregory the Great onwards the Catholic Church began to redouble its efforts to win over the people of the northern areas of Europe. St Augustine was sent to Britain to convert the Anglo-Saxon tribes who had driven the Celts to the West. He was successful in converting the king and was installed as Archbishop of Canterbury proclaiming himself primate of all Britain. The already existing Celtic church complained about this treatment but in 664 the Celtic party was defeated.⁵ This marked one more step in the re-Latinisation of Europe and the growing control of the papacy on local Christian traditions and practices which was to culminate in the high middle ages with Papal sovereign power over all Christian lands. In this process many local practices were suppressed and more universal ones imposed. Nonetheless Celtic Christianity continued to permeate the ordinary daily life Church of Britain and Ireland: “Celtic monks supplied medicines and...surgery was practised, perhaps by clerics as well as laymen” (Gardner 1983:1927). There are many surviving records of miraculous healings performed by Christians often after the Druid priests had failed. Gardner (1983) provides a fascinating study of these Anglo-Celtic Christian healing practices.

6 The Late Middle Ages and the Witches Controversy

The Church’s attitude to witches and witch beliefs underwent some remarkable changes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Before this change, the medieval world view contained a considerable set of witch beliefs: “a scattered folk-lore of peasant superstitions:

the casting of spells, the making of storms, converse with spirits, sympathetic magic” (Trevor-Roper 1970: 121-2). The Church of the early middle ages had spent a considerable effort in showing people that these pre-Christian pagan traditions and beliefs were part of the darkness of superstition that Christ had done away with and that the Christian should reject. Witches and witchcraft were powerless and a delusion. In the eighth century St Boniface was clear in “declaring roundly that to believe in witches and werewolves is unchristian” (:122). Trevor-Roper (:122-3) outlines in some detail how the medieval church taught that witches had no power to influence events and that it was “infidel and pagan” to believe in their power: a statement which became encoded into canon law as the *canon episcopi* which condemned “wicked women ...who believe that they ride out at night on beasts with Diana, the pagan goddess...Such fantasies are thrust into the minds of faithless people not by God but by the devil” (Marwick 1987:417). In eleventh century Christian Hungary, King Coloman laws noted that witches “do not exist” (Trevor-Roper 1970:122).

In the succeeding centuries there was a complete turnaround of theological teaching regarding witches and witchcraft. From the medieval condemnation of *belief* in witchcraft and its power, theology turned to a strong belief in the power of witchcraft as the work of the devil and something to be fought. Marwick (1987) suggests that this reflected the change from Platonic to Aristotelian philosophy in theology. As a result the supernatural was classified as either under God or under the devil without the option of the more neutral possibilities allowed in Platonism. Consequently marvels and wonders either had a divine or demonic source. By the fifteenth century the classical formulation of witchcraft had been developed and reformulated into heresy. Its chief elements included a pact with the devil, the repudiation of Christ, secret night meetings, desecration of Holy places and species like the Eucharist as well as practices like orgies and cannibalism.⁶ In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries this doctrine was applied in a frenzy of witch hunting led principally by the Dominican inquisitors but eventually taken up by the Protestant reformers and later by the Jesuit missionaries.⁷ More than a hundred thousand “witches” were killed in this period. It is significant to note that the witch hunting craze occurred in the early modern, enlightenment, renaissance period and not in the so called “dark ages”. Several reasons have been posited for this including the use of witch hunting to fight the wars of the Reformation as well as the prevailing social disorganisation and uncertainty of the age.⁸ The linking of witchcraft with the devil and heresy changed its nature from something relatively mild and powerless to something very dangerous and fundamentally evil. It is this understanding of witchcraft which influenced subsequent events in the history of the Church especially during the

colonial period of European expansionism.

7 The Nineteenth Century Missionary Period

The prevailing ethos of nineteenth century missionary period was of exploration of the non-European world and the evangelisation of the non-Christian “pagans” and “primitive” people found there. Clearly the inspiration of the missionaries was a zeal to bring the gospel and Christianity to the ends of the earth. Matthew 28, 19 was a powerful paradigmatic text as the “world” of European knowledge and experience extended to the whole globe. New peoples had been “discovered” by Europeans in the previous two centuries but this was the century in which a powerful missionary movement emerged. Lopez-Gay (1987:89) notes that in 1800 there were just 350 Catholic missionaries. By 1900 this had risen to 87000! These men and women went to the ends of the earth to witness their faith and to establish the Church. However they were also people of their time, context and culture with a strong belief in the superiority of their culture and civilisation and the need to bring the people to whom they were sent, out of their cultural primitivism and spiritual darkness.

All local traditions were considered pagan and people were enjoined to abandon them on becoming Christian. This was particularly the case with traditional healing which was considered and called “witchcraft”. We have already seen above the connotation this word had in the Christian consciousness during the modern period. Consequently the approach of the Church in this period was to wean people away from these beliefs and to have a very strong condemnatory approach to traditional healers. Fr. Schimlek (1950:9-18) reports on a missionary conference of the Mariannahill Fathers held in the early part of the twentieth century in which he notes the attitude of many missionaries to traditional healers in the following way: “Then there were those who began to argue with izangoma or witchdoctors, as if anyone had ever heard of such prophets of the devil having been converted” (:11). In his “Acknowledgement” to the book, Schimlek writes of the “difficulties which were experienced especially in the struggle against witchcraft, which is undoubtedly the greatest of all obstacles to Christian civilisation and orthodox medical care among the Bantu people of Africa” (:5). Such was the common attitude of the period. At this time the Church’s healing ministry was concerned with the setting up of medical missions and as a result Catholic hospitals and clinics spread throughout the world. In many cases the Church’s medicines were seen as more powerful and were increasingly used by people as an adjunct to their own practices. Some who were converted came under powerful influences to give up their pagan practices which were seen as inspired by the devil and thus dangerous. Many did precisely

that. Other Catholics however continued to bring together both sets of practices syncretistically using whichever suited them. At the same Mariannahill conference cited above Schimlek quotes the comments of one of the missionaries as follows:

But all of us who are daily in contact with our Bantu Christians will agree with me when I say that the quality of Christian religion in the hearts of our converts is far from being perfect, and the practices to which many of them secretly resort is evidence that paganism is still a strong force in their daily life. (Schimlek 1950:13)

In the early missionary period such people were often treated harshly and made to do heavy penances in order to be reconciled back to the Church. As a result many Christians continued to practice traditional healing rituals clandestinely.

At the same time there was an attempt by many missionaries to be open to the culture of the people they were working for and to see the values within that culture. Consequently attempts were also made to discover the values within African traditional healing. Fr Bryant (1966) made a very sympathetic study of Zulu medicine men in the early part of the 20th century although the manuscript was only published much later. Schimlek (1950:133-145) too recounts a conversation between a Mariannahill brother and a Zulu Catholic medicine man illustrating the possibility that a Christian may indeed practice some forms of traditional healing as being compatible with faith. At the same time the Christian medicine man was aware that there were forms of traditional ritual that he could not be involved in as a Christian (cf. :141).

8 The Contemporary Context: The Emergence of Inculturation

Respect for the cultures of people being newly evangelised has been a missionary theme right from biblical times. It formed the basis of the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) and was an important theme in the writings of St Paul. In the modern era it has appeared in all the important missionary encyclicals.⁹ Of late this dimension of the missionary process has been given the name “inculturation”. Theologically the term is linked with the incarnation. The Word takes on human flesh in order to redeem humanity. Part of humanity is our culturality. So the Word must penetrate to the depths of human cultures in order to redeem human cultures. This means that what is good and of value in human cultures should be preserved and incorporated into Christian life and practice (EN 20).

The theological concept of inculturation has proved invaluable in moving away from ethnocentric judgements of one culture by another in Christianity. In regard to traditional

healers, local Churches are trying to develop a much more positive approach to cultural healing forms. The two criteria for inculturation are that practices be compatible with the gospel and that union is maintained with the universal Church (EA 62). These criteria help to avoid the slide into sectarianism and syncretism for it is all too easy that the practices of one local Church can move far from that of another and conflict and secession become a real threat to the One-ness and Catholicity of the Church. These “marks” of the Church have to be lived in the world. They cannot just be a “mystical” or “spiritual” reality only. The Church is a human institution during this time of the Spirit. There will be no Church after Jesus comes again and the Reign of God is fully established. For now, what we are has to be manifest in what we do.

On the level of healing, it is increasingly clear even to Western medicine that many traditional herbal remedies are very effective and many new drugs are today being made from the traditional medicinal sources. Similarly the therapeutic value of many traditional healing rituals has also been studied in some depth and what was often dismissed as superstition and paganism is now understood by many psychologists and medical anthropologists to be cultural expressions of well known healing mechanisms.¹⁰

With regard to traditional healers, many of the ritual and herbal practices would be acceptable and compatible with the Gospel. Jesus too used rituals and herbs. He healed with spittle and earth, he sent the leper to show himself to the Priest in accord with the Jewish rituals regarding leprosy and impurity.¹¹ The area of controversy and concern is around the recourse to spiritual powers. It is clear that the Gospel depicts a battle between good and evil on the spiritual realm. Many traditional healers claim to heal through spiritual powers of one kind or another. In Africa, ancestors are often the source of healing powers and some healers considers themselves to be possessed by the ancestor who performs the healing. People explain their experiences with the language available to them so we should not rush too quickly to make judgements about the veracity of such statements. At the same time we should not be blind to the existence of evil and good in the world and the existence of an ongoing struggle between them which also has a spiritual component. Criteria of judgement, or spiritual discernment are important here and as Christians we have two basic ways of discernment. Firstly there is the criterion of faith: all movements from God will affirm the basic truth of the Gospel (1 John 4, 1-4) . Secondly there is the criterion of the fruits: by their fruits you shall know them (Mt 7,16; Luke 6, 43-45). The task of local Churches is to come to understand the traditional healing practices around them and to attempt to make a discernment of spirits. This is not as easy as it looks since our judgements are always

informed by our culture and our experience. We need to be humble and open rather than quick to judge and condemn. Jesus gives us at least two answers of caution when it comes to making judgements. The first is to rebuke his disciples who wish to condemn someone who was casting out demons in his name (Lk 9,49-50). The second is the reminder not to judge or you will be judged and that the judgements you give are the judgements you will get (Mt 7,1-5).

The relationship between Catholics and traditional healers of whatever culture¹² is a complex one which does not admit of hurried and simplistic solutions. We are called to a process of sharing and mutual understanding at this stage. We have to see before we judge or act. We are called to implore the spirit of discernment to come upon us in our relationships with all healers. We are to note that healing is a mission that Jesus gave his Church and that many others who we may not know are also bringing healing into the world. At the same time much of what goes under the name of healing is enslavement and control. It makes people less human and less free. Such must be exposed and condemned. Nonetheless, our task as Christians is to go forward in a spirit of optimism and trust in God who's Spirit continues to work today in his Church.

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Notes

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1. We believe... in one Holy Catholic and apostolic Church (ND 12).
 2. See for example Davies and Bowie 1995; De Waal 1996; Gardner 1983.
 3. The material and quotes of this section come from the Internet site www.eliki.com/ancient/myth/celts.
 4. See the Internet site www.atlanticonline.ns.ca/Celtic/stbrigit for more on this relationship.
 5. The synod of Whitby in this year confirmed the Romanisation of British Christianity. See Livingstone 1977:98;552.
 6. See Marwick 1987:417.
 7. See Trevor-Roper 1970:129-134.
 8. See Trevor-Roper 1970:140-142 for a summary of these reasons.

9. The following would be some examples of this traditional teaching: The Encyclicals *Summi Pontificatus* (1939) (See ND 1121); *Evangelii Praecones* 1951 (ND 1129). In Vatican II AG 22; GS 44; Post Conciliar Papal references: EN 20; CT 53; RM 52.

10. See Mkhwanazi 1989, Landy 1977. See also Bate 1995:79-115 for broader presentation of this.

11. See Kelsey 1973: 79-80 for the range of approaches used by Jesus in his healing ministry.

12. This statement should also be applied to the healers of the Western tradition: the medical doctors and psychotherapists.