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Healing Rooms. A Healing Church within Protestantism?

By Régis Dericquebourg

Lecture at the 30th meeting of the SISR, in Saint Jacques de Compostelle, July, 27-31, 2009; workshop / Healing Church / Health Religions. Session 43.

I will mention here an on-going study on healing rooms. They held my attention because they belong to my field of study, religious therapyⁱ and also because there was one created in 2007, some miles away from my place (Wattignies, North of France), offering ground for observation.

Even if the healing room movement claims a genealogy of 14 protestant preachers going back to 1870 to which their disciples attribute a particular healing charisma; it is relatively new. It would have been founded in 1999 in Spokane, Washington where John Lake had already established healing centres. The movement had only a relative success in spite of the regular increase in reception centres.

In 2009, the IAHR (International Association of The Healing Room) which groups them, counted 949 as follows: 382 in the US and 567 abroad of which 152 in Europe (with 3 in incoming countries Moldavia (2) Macedonia (1), and 7 in France. We cannot speak of a typically American phenomenon since in November 2010; there are 1159 of which 368 in the US and 791 abroad (we don't know if the siteⁱⁱ is regularly updated).

The International Association for the Ministry of Healing (AIMG) related to the IARH but operating in Europe, depicts healing rooms in the following terms: "A place where trained people pray for the sick". "We wish to bring forth salvation and healing through Jesus Christ. We commit ourselves to keep an eye on and to pray for the healing of those who wish it". Healing rooms privilege the image of Christ the Healer which is one of the images among others in the interpretation of his mission and in the awakening of the gift of healing (the formation). I found this description in the pioneer Bachelor's dissertation that Laetitia Krummenacher, ethnology student at Neufchatel University dedicated to a healing room in Genevaⁱⁱⁱ. The goal of this student is to explain the place and meaning of healing for those resorting to the Ministry of healing. Laetitia Krumenacher doesn't include healing rooms among the Healing Churches I have typified. I exclude Evangelic Protestantism (from which healing rooms stem) from the realm of healing churches, since aiming at salvation is

fundamental and the spiritual cure of maladies (in an extensive sense) is accessory, because the possible cure is only there to display the power of God in order to maintain the religious fervour of the converted, to awaken the faith of the lukewarm and to convince the infidel of the truth of the salvation doctrine.

Concretely a room of recovery consists of a waiting room and a room where those who exercise a ministry of healing pray for the visiting patients. The setting is private and the relation to the religious therapist intimate.

It reminds us of the consultation cabinet of *Antoinists*, the auditing room of Dianetics (Scientology), the harmonisation cabinet of *Invitation à la Vie* or former spiritual clinics.

In their form but not necessarily in the process of the spiritual cure, healing rooms differ from evangelic groups of prayer meeting within an evangelic Protestant community, from the intercessions during a religious service and even more from *mega church assemblies* (the *XXL religion* as Sébastien Fath^{iv} puts it).

In their local organization, healing rooms are headed by a couple, the intercessors or mediators must be baptized in the Holy Spirit, as a proof they should speak in new languages¹ (LK, p.18) and they must belong to a regular Church.

Organisation and functioning modes of healing rooms are to be found in L. Krumenacher's dissertation posted on the internet. I will limit myself on this memo to question whether the latter will generate a new Healing Church.

A) Healing Rooms in the network of protestant denominations.

Even if they stem from evangelic Protestantism, we find healing rooms associated with local Baptist and Methodist assemblies. Actually the IAHR and the AIMG which gather them, claim their independence from any particular denomination and consider that this ministry should gather Christians from all boards and not only Protestants as witnessed at the 2008 session with the in charge of Healing Rooms in France at the Chemin Neuf community in Bouvines and in 2009 at the Esther House in Wattignies (both in northern France) gathering evangelic protestants, some traditional protestants and charismatic Catholics.

One can hence make a first observation. It seems that through healing rooms we face an "externalization" of the spiritual cure of illnesses. In every Protestant Church, each, believer can pray for the sick, but, with healing rooms, the applicant is sent to specialized mediators united in an association. It is as if a classical Protestant Pastor would send a person in great need to the local Salvation Army because the latter has greater know how in dealing with the needy.

¹ Translator's note: Cf. Mark 16:17-18 "And these attesting signs will accompany those who believe: In My name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new languages; They will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick and they will get well". Cf. <http://www.healingroomsofcd.com/healingword.html>

We may make a second remark.

In the debate between the “routinization” of religion and the Re-enchantment of the world² by the claiming of divine healing, we are in a paradoxical situation. On one hand, healing rooms allow Protestant denominations associated with their action, to give followers the possibility of searching for the “miracle of healing” without converting themselves to evangelic Protestantism, and as we have seen before, Protestants seeking for help from Christian Science practitioners; but on the other hand, they allow these denominations to keep their routinized functioning, i.e. by avoiding charismatic education and by avoiding dealing with charisma within the community.

B) Healing rooms and Healing Churches.

Aren't Healing rooms Healing Churches within Protestantism?

In order to examine this question, I propose to compare healing rooms with the ideal type of healing which I have already presented in several articles and works^v.

As in Healing Churches:

- 1) Healing rooms claim healing illnesses as a prime goal (in the broad sense) while healing practices of other religions are peripheral, their main goal being salvation. Evangelic Protestantism even in its more developed form on the specific gift of healing, is not a Church of healing since it aims at salvation by reconnaissance of the biblical message, possible cases of healing do nothing else, than attesting the presence and existence of the word of God.
- 2) Religious therapists are in the core. The mediators of healing rooms are baptized in the spirit who have lived the quite uncommon experience of the gift of languages, they have undergone training which might be considered as an awakening of the healing charisma, they must be affiliated to a regular Church which guaranties the Christian orthodoxy of their practice since the danger, as in independent African churches, would be deviation towards magic therapeutic practices.
- 3) Religious therapists have a legitimate authority within the movement. They are mediators who have the power, avoiding thus a conflict of authority between temporal power and the holders of the specific charisma of healing.
- 4) The notion of illness is extensive. Illness is at the same time physical and psychic trouble, but it is also all the misfortunes of existence and relational or social difficulties. The complaints received through the mediators of healing rooms are very different, they relate to physical or mental illnesses, but also to all forms of distress. In short one requests the healing of one's existence.
- 5) Spiritual treatment of illness is legitimated by a system of belief which furnishes a theory of illness and metaphysical remedies in relation to the conception of illness. In healing rooms, the remedy is prayer.

² TN: Cf. *The Re-Enchantment of the World*, Secular Magic in a Rational Age, Edited by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS.

- 6) Even if it comes first, the aim of healing remains tied to salvation. Healing whether partial or unattained but explained, may allow human beings to find the path of salvation by encountering the message of the Bible.
- 7) A miracle is common. It is not the exceptional fact by which God reminds human beings of his presence and might. It is not the result of a “divine lottery” granting healing to some and not to others. Healing must take place because Jesus Christ died to preserve us from suffering, and he heals those who request it, even if it is necessary to undergo introspection in order to overcome the obstacles to healing. This comes close to the Prosperity Gospel.
- 8) There is of course a handling of failure. It is said that the patient does not heal, because God wishes him to come closer to him, or because God planned his life to come to a halt at a certain moment. It can also be said that there are obstacles to healing in our minds, such as absence of reconciliation, kept feelings of hatred hindering healing. The consulting person is asked to do a spiritual work on forgiveness in order to overcome this.
- 9) As Healing Churches, healing rooms welcome people who are not necessarily converted to Protestantism. They can attract those who come for an occasional consultation and awaken their interest for the path to salvation. They might be a way to join Protestantism.

It seems obvious to us that healing rooms are akin to Healing Churches, as we have defined them. We may consider them as analogical to Healing Churches within denominational Protestantism. Their prime goal is to bring solace to the sick and the distressed. They are no substitute to worship, which is the reason behind religious denominations.

C) What status for healing rooms?

They are several interpretations:

- 1) Within an extreme perspective, we could consider that healing rooms constitute a movement in the sense that W. Hennis gives to this word, i.e. the bedrock of a Church as the movement for Jesus was the “ground floor” of Christian churches. The IAHR could transform itself into a denomination of the Christian Science type. For the moment they are “para-churches” marked by Pentecostalism without being attached to it, specialised in spiritual treatment that the denominations delegate to them. They can one day organize themselves into an independent church as it has already happened, the Salvation Army dealt with poverty and had a charity mission which is normal in Christianity but impossible to accomplish for other churches with as much intensity and know how. One day people joining in wanted to create congregations. The Salvation Army became then a new denomination which kept its original goal and added a soul healing mission and predication to it.

- 2) They continue their expansion without changing its current functioning. They would be part of the Protestant galaxy. They would be the equivalent of groups specialized in human relations joined by couples and families in trouble, with sometimes the assistance of an evangelic protestant psychologist. In this case they would contribute to the vitality of evangelic Protestantism.

Conclusion:

We have shown that healing rooms could be considered akin to healing churches in Protestant Evangelism, within Protestant denominations and even beyond within classic Protestantism. Moreover healing rooms are within the process of specialisation considered by Max Weber. In this case depending from specialisation, (Church of healing, Churches for minorities, Churches for sexual minorities, Churches for immigrants, Religious groups centred on humanitarian aid) which constitute a step towards integration into current ambient society based paradoxically on original particularities. “General” Churches would become gathering networks specialised on the spiritual approach of a problem. The new age with its network movements having different goals gives us an example of what a Network Church could be like.

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Translated into English from the original French by Alex de Valera

ⁱ On this topic see: Meredith B. Mac Guire: *Ritual Healing In Suburban America*, N.J., Rutgers University Press, 1998.*

ⁱⁱ Healingrooms.com

ⁱⁱⁱ Krumenacher L. 2007 *Le seigneur m'a guéri. Analyse des récits de guérisons divines en milieu évangélique charismatique. Le cas de la chambre de guérison de Genève*, 2007 ; Mémoire de l'Institut d'ethnologie de la faculté des Lettres et des Sciences humaines, Neuchâtel, 2007.

^{iv} Fath S, 2008 *Dieu XXL - La révolution des megachurches*, Paris, Autrement (editions).

^v Régis Dericquebourg, *Croire et guérir*, Paris, Dervy, 2001. 2007 The Healing Religions: A specific Sub-group within the Global Field of Religion, *American Religion Studies Review*, Vol. .20.2, 139-157.