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My courses on religious healing begin with a discussion of shamanism, presented as a type of ritual practice. I define shamans as performers who interact with spirits and attempt to manage the influence people believe spirits have in their lives and environments. Defined broadly, shamanism can be found in many different cultures and historical periods, and can be considered one of the most long-lasting and widespread types of religious practice.

Shamanism's appeal can be explained, at least in part, by its effectiveness in promoting human strength and healing. Shamanic performances stimulate feelings of confidence, physical vitality, and relief from stress. While often concentrated on an individual patient, the benefits of shamanic performance also extend to a larger community. Onlookers get caught up in the drama of shamanic performances, and in the feelings of communal bonding they prompt. Shamanic activity contributes to the construction and support of cultures that hold people together in social groups. Thus in addition to the immediate effects of increasing people's sense of control over their bodies and environments, shamanic performances help sustain loyalty to the spirits represented in sacred stories and ritual practices, and to the social groups associated with those spirits, stories, and practices.

Shamanism is a good place to begin a course on religious healing because it serves as a useful model for conceptualizing the general phenomenon of religious healing, and for comparing different instances of religious healing. Defined as a ritual practice that represents the hidden forces influencing human life and material reality, shamanism helps us discern elements of ritual practice and dramatic performance in many instances of healing. This appeal to shamanism as

a conceptual model calls attention to ritual performance involved in Pentecostalism and other forms of modern faith healing, and even in medical procedures in which the symbolic and dramatic dimensions of healing often go unnoted. White coats, stethoscopes, medical jargon, and antiseptic smells may not represent “spirits” in any customary religious sense, but they are manifestations of otherwise invisible power, and they can function much like the symbols of social authority and individual transformation wielded by shamans.

As we work toward a shared understanding of what shamanism means, we move further into the analysis of religious healing by exploring both the biological and social effects of shamanic performance. We consider the role that symbolic procedures can play in stimulating cognitive, emotional, and biological processes that alleviate stress, make people feel stronger, and even slow or reverse the progress of disease. We consider literature on the placebo effect, looking at theories that explain religious healing, and shamanism in particular, in terms of symbols, and symbolic procedures, that generate expectations of power, healing, and health. We also discuss the meaning of the term placebo as it has changed over time, and consider recent arguments calling for a moratorium on use of the term.

We also look more closely at the social settings in which shamanic performances occur, focusing on the role that such performances play in constructing communities, and on the role these communities play in shaping expectations, moods, and behavior. In the performances they conduct, shamans expel malevolent spirits from suffering individuals and invite beneficent spirits to extend their powers to relieve sickness and misfortune. The spirits that shamans invoke represent the vitalities of particular communities and the strength of ancestral taboos, totems, and kinship structures. For individuals whose bodies and life stories become centers of social attention in shamanic performance, engagement with these symbols of communal life can generate extraordinary feelings of power and determination.

While uplifting in many cases, this engagement with the symbols of communal life can also have coercive effects. Religious healing works as much to strengthen a group as it does to relieve individual suffering, and conformity to collective rules of feeling and behavior has often been part of the social responsibility entailed in religious healing. The strengthening or restoration of group integrity is such a powerful feature of shamanism that shamanic techniques have sometimes been employed to scapegoat individuals rather than heal them. For example, the early-twentieth century Danish ethnographer Rasmussen reported that Inuit shamans attempted to reverse bad luck in hunting by pressuring women to confess to — and presumably accept punishment for — secret miscarriages.

In the second section of the course, we explore historical changes in beliefs and practices

associated with Christian healing. This historical discussion of the healing ministry of Jesus sets the stage for moving forward in time to consider some of the ways in which Jesus as Christ has functioned as an object of faith, and agent of healing, for countless believers. In shifting attention from consideration of the historical ministry of Jesus to his presence as Christ in the minds and hearts of believers, we enter into vast terrains of Christian history characterized by a multitude of images, ideas, and ritual practices across many centuries and in many different places, all of which are associated with the person of Christ, and with his healing and saving power.

In working through some of the major turning points of this history, we consider, in sequence, some of the ways Christian healing changed under the influence of Gnosticism; with the spread of Christianity into Europe; in relation to differences between Eastern and Western churches; as a result of various reform movements in the early modern period; as a result of the impact of modern science; and through the modern expansion of Christianity in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. We build upon a lesson from the first section of the course, that performances of religious healing often have a social function, by looking for changes in Christian belief and practice that reflect larger currents of social unrest and development. We look, in particular, for ways that Christians have utilized religious healing to negotiate social unrest, initiate social reform, and develop new strategies for constructing community. For example, in examining the popularity of new forms of Christian healing in southern Africa during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we focus on the infusion of traditional practices into Christian healing. New combinations of Christian and indigenous forms of healing not only represented the suffering and injustice of colonialist and apartheid situations, but also contributed to social reform, and to the development of political leadership in Africa.

Native Americans have also combined traditional healing practices with Christianity, and interpreted the healing messages of Christianity in light of sufferings endured as the result of colonization. Although in many cases conversion to Christianity coincided with missionary efforts to undermine Native cultures, and force Western culture upon Native Americans, Native people developed their own interpretations of Christianity that strengthened traditional community life, facilitated individual vitality, and combated the social ills resulting from the imposition of Western culture. To cite just one example from a multitude of Native American interpretations of Christianity, for participants in the Native American Church, Christian belief combines with traditional commitment to visionary experience in devotion to Jesus as the spirit of healing manifest in visions.

We also consider the historical interplay between Christianity and medicine in world history. Conflicted at times, but also often highly cooperative, this interplay has figured importantly in both traditions. For example, the origins, expansions, retractions, and transformations of hospitals contributed to the historical development of both medicine and Christianity. Beliefs

about Christ as the Great Physician contributed to respect for physicians, as well as to the popularity and success of healing practices within Christianity. New developments in science often found their way into the language Christians used to describe their healing experiences and expectations, as in the case of modern Pentecostals who often describe the healing work of the Holy Spirit as an invisible force or current not unlike electricity.

Selected Resources

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