THE EFFECTIVENESS OF WORDS: RELIGION AND HEALING AMONG THE LUBAVITCH OF STAMFORD HILL

ABSTRACT. Testimonials of miraculous healing offered by Lubavitch Hasidim evoke images of exile and restitution which derive from Kabbalistic texts. Mediated practically through the person of the Rebbe, these testimonials articulate both immediate affliction and ultimate meaning, physical embodiment as well as symbolic representation, each constituting the other. Both Kabbalah and medical anthropology attempt to transcend not dissimilar epistemological dualisms: those characteristic of monotheism and contemporary science. Yet the ‘lower root’ of Kabbalah affirms a material reality known through immediate sensory experience which recalls the rationale of biomedicine.

LETTERS TO THE REBBE

“And I shall behold God through my flesh”
(Job 19:26)

The Lubavitch Hasidim of Stamford Hill in London are members of a worldwide Jewish movement, whose leader, the 7th Lubavitcher Rebbe, lives in New York. Every year he receives hundreds of petitions (kvitlekh) about episodes of sickness and misfortune. He responds to many with reassurance and advice, sometimes suggesting that the household’s religious objects are impure and should be checked. A 60 year old rabbi living in the community recalls how he became dangerously ill following a heart attack: after discharge from hospital he continued to experience chest pains, so his concerned wife wrote to the Rebbe in Brooklyn asking why this had happened and what could be done. The Rebbe replied simply that “one should check one’s mezuzot.” (The mezuzah is a parchment scroll inscribed with the shema, the affirmation of faith in God, enclosed in a metal case and placed upon the door frames of an observant Jewish home.) After a thorough examination of the family’s mezuzot by a scribe, it was found that in one, in the ordinance “Thou shalt love thy God with all thy heart” (Deuteronomy 6:5), the word for ‘heart’ was wrongly spelt. A new, kosher, mezuzah was obtained and subsequently the man experienced no more chest pains. Both husband and wife maintain that the error in transcription was the ultimate cause of the illness, and its correction was essential to his recovery. The Rebbe’s knowledge was, in their words, “truly miraculous.”

THE ‘DOUBLE REGISTER’: EFFICACY AND MEANING IN THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF HEALING

The incident certainly recalls the conventional understanding of a ‘miracle’. Cause and effect are recognised in the material world through our everyday sensory experience, but also on occasion through direct knowledge of (or actual intercession by) a transcendent other-worldly register which ultimately justifies suffering, one which is generally opaque to full human awareness but which we can supplicate if not sometimes actually constrain.

The anthropology of what has been termed ‘symbolic’ or ‘mythic’ healing explained such efficacité symbolique (Lévi-Strauss 1949) as a close coupling of embodied experience to a society’s received cognitions (ibid, Rivers 1924, Dow 1986). Since Mauss (1950) and Moerman (1979), few social scientists would now claim any intrinsic association between the body as a biological fact and such language-based representations. Where a formal isomorphism has been recognised between the body and the social order (eg. Durkheim and Mauss 1903, Douglas 1966, 1973), transformations in either are no longer explained as somehow participating in or causally influencing the other. Indeed, when challenged as to the relationship between the body understood naturalistically and its symbolisations, many – whilst admitting some Kantian antinomy yet discreetly avoiding any apology for ‘magic’ – evoke the local moral rhetoric of the body to interpret what it is to be healed (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987, Good 1994). Phenomenological anthropology argues similarly that the experiencing self must be understood without recourse to any objectifications of the material world (Csordas 1994a, 1994b). If any physiological consequences of ‘symbolic therapies’, systematised or folk, are still recognised by medical anthropologists, then these are assumed to be through non-specific mechanisms such as alleviating anxiety or somehow promoting the body’s immunological response (McGuire 1983, Laderman 1987). With contemporary interest in the political context of biomedicine, the naturalistic body has itself become theoretically redundant, as just another social representation of an external reality whose ontological status is no concern of anthropology.

This shift from empirical explanation to cultural interpretation and thence phenomenology parallels certain developments in Western psychotherapy whose nineteenth century origins lay in an explanation of hysteria which presumed a direct homology between the physiological body and its representation, akin to the homunculus inscribed in figures of the cerebral cortex to illustrate cortical localisation: an isomorphism generally accessible to awareness but not in the ‘dissociated’ patient who in treatment was