

Faith cures: or does it?

Kirk Straughen

Introduction

Anthropological and archaeological research has revealed that some form of faith healing the idea that disease can be supernaturally cured through prayer, rituals and faith in God occurs in most cultures, and can be traced back to antiquity when disease was thought to be caused by supernatural agencies:

Perhaps the earliest writings in medical history are found in Assyrian tablets dating from about 2500 BC. Some of these contain incantations addressed by the magician to his tribal gods; others are a direct challenge to the evil demon of disease to yield to the magician's superior powers and to depart from his victim. (J. Ehrenwald: *From Medicine Man to Freud*, page 23.)

The question is: does faith healing work, and if so, why? Many believers would probably say that such healings are miraculous in nature, and therefore beyond the realm of scientific inquiry. However, this explanation is not satisfactory for the following reasons: Firstly, if we claim that an event is a miracle, what we are saying is that no natural explanation can possibly account for the phenomenon. However, by adopting this position we automatically dismiss in advance alternative possibilities, and one of these may be the only true explanation.

For example, the ancient Greeks thought that the goddess Demeter was responsible for vegetative fecundity. However, we now know the growth and reproduction of plants is non-miraculous in nature, and this clearly demonstrates the folly of uncritically accepting supernatural explanations. Secondly, the supernatural explanation is really no explanation at all, it is instead an admission of ignorance: The ancient Greeks were ignorant of modern biology and, as a result, made recourse to supernatural explanations to account for the growth of plants. Modern believers, in a similar manner, resort to the miraculous when their knowledge of science fails them. In this article I shall address the following questions:

1. Does God exist and can It interact with the world; that is can It 'hear' and respond to prayer?
2. Is prayer or faith healing an effective means of curing disease?
3. Are faith healing cures the result of natural or supernatural causes?
4. Can belief in faith healing prove harmful?

Fraud, coincidence & placebos

Faith healing 'cures' fall into several categories.

Firstly, there are the deliberate frauds such as those perpetrated by the televangelist Peter Popoff and the Rev W. V. Grant, both of whom installed accomplices in their audience to produce "miraculous cures", and used the techniques of stage mentalists to obtain information from members of the audience. This knowledge was then passed off as a divine revelation. Secondly,

there are illnesses of a self-limiting nature such as colds, backache, etc that, even if left untreated, will heal of their own accord. Thirdly, there are illnesses of a cyclical nature, such as multiple sclerosis and even cancer, where the sufferer can experience a temporary remission, and claims of faith healing cures can arise from the coincidence of these natural occurrences. Fourthly, there are psychosomatic illnesses and symptoms of organic disease that respond to the placebo effect, which is where a patient who firmly believes in the effectiveness of a treatment may be completely healed, or experience an improvement in their condition:

The placebo response obviously plays a major role in healing ... In fact, it helps explain a wide range of otherwise mysterious phenomena. At one end of the spectrum is voodoo death, in which a person's heart may go into an irreversible arrhythmia (abnormal rhythm of the heartbeat) at the sight of a harmless object he or she has been led to believe can kill. At the other end of the spectrum are the many instances of recovery that defy medical explanation. (R. M. Restak, M D: *The Mind*, page 161.)

The success or failure of faith healing appears to depend on two factors: firstly, the nature of the illness; and secondly, the psychological state of the patient. If a patient is suffering from a psychosomatic illness and has faith in the efficacy of the healing ritual, then the more likely they are to be cured. Could the placebo effect ameliorate or even cure diseases of an organic (non-psychological) nature, and what physiological mechanisms might be responsible? I think the answer may lie in the fact that the brain and immune system can communicate with and effect each other:

New molecular and pharmacological tools have made it possible for us to identify the intricate network that exists between the immune system and the brain, a network that allows the two systems to signal each other continuously and rapidly. Chemicals produced by immune cells signal the brain, and the brain in turn sends chemical signals to restrain the immune system. These same chemical signals also effect behaviour and the response to stress ... They also help to substantiate the popularly held impression (still discounted in some medical circles) that our state of mind can influence how well we resist or recover from infectious or inflammatory diseases. (E.M. Sternberg & P.W. Gold: "The Mind-Body Interaction in Disease", p. 8 in *Mysteries of the Mind*.)

Because of this mind-body interaction, our mental state (especially stress) can effect our resistance to illness. For example, people suffering from constant stress for more than two months experience an increase in their susceptibility to the common cold. On a more positive note, women suffering from breast cancer will, if they experience considerable optimistic support during their illness, tend to live longer than those who do not have such help.

Now, if a person suffering from a serious illness goes to a faith healer, and believes they will be cured, the level of stress they are experiencing as a result of the

illness may decrease, and their psychological sense of well-being increase. The accompanying physiological changes brought about by this shift in mental attitude may boost their immune system and thereby reduce the severity of the illness or, in extremely rare cases, cure the disease.

Although faith alone has, in some cases, been able to cure psychosomatic illnesses, it is largely ineffective against diseases of an organic nature. For example, in the mid-14th century an epidemic of bubonic plague (the Black Death) swept through Europe and devastated whole communities. The first onslaught occurred in 1348-50, with several recurrences in 1358-60, 1373-75; and sporadically from 1380 to 1400. The effect of the disease on the population was devastating:

No exact figures as to mortality are possible, but according to the most recent estimates the European population in the early 15th century had been reduced by 40% from what it had been in 1346. (*Encyclopedia International*, Vol. 3, page 48.)

This epidemic occurred at a time when religious faith was the norm rather than the exception. However, despite this fact, the prayers of priests and laity alike failed to avert the horrendous death toll. By contrast, the plague would not have been as severe if modern hygiene and medicine had existed at the time.

A harmless superstition?

Some people may regard faith healing as nothing more than a harmless superstition. Sadly, this is far from the truth as the following shows:

A recent US survey of college students showed a significantly lower life expectancy for those who attended Christian Science [a religion that emphasises faith healing] schools than for those who did not. Faced by such revelations, these naive people chose to ignore reality and turn their back on further examination of their dogma. And they continue to die before their time, having rejected what medical science - an admittedly imperfect art - can and probably would do for them. Saddest of all is the realisation that these people subject their children to these restrictions as well, often with crippling or fatal results. (J. Randi: *James Randi: Psychic Investigator*, p. 72.)

Another variety of faith healing that has received much publicity, is the so called 'psychic surgery' performed in the Philippines. These healers claim to cure disease by magically inserting their hands into the bodies of their patients, and remove tumours and other diseased tissue which is claimed to be the cause of the person's illness. The techniques of these healers have been examined and exposed as nothing more than conjurers' tricks - instead of pulling rabbits out of hats, they pull fake tumours out of people.

Unfortunately, many people have been deceived by these charlatans, as I well know - the wife of a friend (I shall not mention names for the sake of privacy) was suffering from terminal cancer, and in desperation her husband took her to the Philippines in the hope that these healers would be able to cure her. The healer removed what he claimed was the tumour and, so convincing was the performance, that her husband was certain he had witnessed a miracle cure. Regrettably, as a result of her illness, his wife passed away shortly after returning to Australia, and his grief was exacerbated because of his misplaced faith in these charlatans.

I think it can be safely said that if there was any sub-

stance to any form of faith healing, then conventional medicine would have been rendered obsolete long ago. Indeed, if there are people who possess the ability to magically cure disease, then why don't they come forward and visit terminally ill patients in hospital, and heal them in the presence of doctors who could verify their cures? The fact that such wonders are conspicuous by their absence is a good indication that these abilities don't exist. Instead, what we see is unscrupulous charlatans often making money out of other people's suffering, and offering nothing but false hope in return.

Supernatural explanations

Natural explanations aside, could faith healing have a supernatural basis? Many faith healers attribute their success to the intervention of supernatural beings, however, the question is: do the gods of the world's religions exist and, if so, can they interact with the material world? I shall now address this question. There are at least three arguments that attempt to prove the existence of God, and they are as follows:

1. The Ontological argument (from the Greek word for "being" or "existence"). This argument attempts to prove that the existence of God can be deduced from the idea of God.
2. The Cosmological argument (from the Greek word for "world"). Here it is claimed that the existence of God can be inferred from the existence of the Cosmos.
3. The Teleological argument (from the Greek word for "end" or "purpose"). This argument claims that the existence of God can be inferred from the fact that the Cosmos displays order.

Do these arguments succeed? The consensus of opinion amongst philosophers who have studied them is that they do not. This lack of evidence raises the following question: if supernatural beings exist, can interact with the world of nature and desire our worship, then why would they fail to provide adequate proof of their existence, or fail to ensure their existence was self evident?

Apart from the failure of the arguments, there is still another major problem with the idea of supernatural beings - namely, the very attributes ascribed to them by believers would prevent them from interacting with the material world. Firstly, these beings, at least in Western culture, are considered to be incorporeal - they are not composed of material structures, such as atoms, or forces such as electromagnetism. Secondly, these beings are thought to be divorced from our space-time continuum.

In order to highlight the problems associated with these attributes, let us consider how a non-material being could hear prayers addressed to it. We can hear prayers because sound waves travel down the ear canal to the eardrum which is connected to three delicate bones - the malleus, incus and stapes - that form the ossicles. Sound waves cause the eardrum to vibrate and these vibrations are transmitted by the ossicles to a structure called the oval window, and from here to the fluid contained in the cochlea, a spiral-shaped organ.

The cochlea is composed of a number of canals, each consisting of three chambers - the *scala vestibuli*, the cochlea duct and the *scala tympani*. As the vibrations travel

through these structures they impinge upon the organ of Corti, which is located in the cochlea duct, and it is the microscopic hairs of the organ of Corti that convert the mechanical vibrations to electrical signals which travel via the auditory nerve to the auditory centres of the brain. Given that we need material structures to perceive sound, how could a non-material being hear anything? Sound waves would pass right through it without having any effect.

Moreover, if supernatural beings do possess the attributes ascribed to them by believers, then they could not have any effect upon the material world - they would be the products of an alien continuum that would be governed by different laws incompatible with those of our Universe, and this is the reason why they could not operate in our cosmos, nor we in theirs. If believers claim these beings are within our Universe, then they become part of the natural world, and would therefore be subject to the limitations imposed by our physical laws. Moreover, another problem arises if this case applies - we have ample proof that Mind depends on matter for its existence, and no evidence that Mind can exist independently of matter. This being the case, it seems unlikely the laws of nature would permit the existence of non-material intelligences, and therefore such beings could not exist in our Cosmos.

In my opinion, believers are in a no-win situation - if supernatural entities are extra-continuum they can't interact with our Universe; if they are in the Universe then they can't exist because the laws of nature do not permit their mode of existence.

Conclusions

1. When seeking to explain events, reason requires us to apply Occam's Razor - the least speculative theory that best fits the known facts is the one most likely to be true. At the present time there is no conclusive evidence that supernatural beings exist and, given that this is so, the natural explanations for faith healing are more likely to be true than the supernatural alternatives.

2. The ineffectiveness of faith healing has been demonstrated by the fact that it not only failed to avert the Black Death and other diseases in ages where religious faith (rather than scepticism) was the dominant world view, but continues to do so in contemporary societies where religious belief is still extremely strong.

3. That faith healing can be explained by psychological and physiological processes, tends to reinforce the conclusion that we are dealing with a natural rather than supernatural phenomenon.

4. Belief in faith healing can prove harmful and even fatal when people place their trust in it rather than the proven treatments of modern medicine. In conclusion, we can safely say that modern medicine is the only effective answer to the ills of the human race, and that faith healing is nothing more than a potentially dangerous delusion.

Bibliography

- Ehrenwald, J. *From Medicine Man to Freud*, Dell Publishing Co. Inc., New York, 1956.
 Gordon, H. *Extrasensory Deception*, Macmillan of Canada, Canada, 1988.
 McMahon, F. B. & Resnick, S. B. *Behind the Mask: Our Psychological World*, Prentice - Hall Inc., New Jersey, 1973.
 Randall, J. H. & Buchler, J. *Philosophy: An Introduction*, Barnes & Noble, New York, 1959.

... Sex from p 38

Cross Hospital in London found that the outcome of gender reassignment surgery was generally favourable. Successfully treated transsexuals are mostly self-supporting, and not a drain on society compared with unhappy people with unresolved gender problems. Though gender reassignment should remain an option, according to workers in this field the pitfalls are many, including loss of family and friends, of work, and of esteem by others. Furthermore the end results may be worse than the former state. The outcome in male to female surgery was 50% satisfied, and female to male was 80% satisfied (Snaith 1990, 1993, 1994). Post-operative psychiatric support is advisable, but many refuse this help at rehabilitation into their new gender role (Kuiper *et al* 1988).

Occasionally nature makes mistakes. Rarely a male may have an extra Y chromosome forming XYY, and resulting in 47 instead of 46 chromosomes in his body cells. This is associated with the psychiatric abnormality of aggressive personality disorder, (Bartlett 1968). These males are also unusually tall, and have a significantly higher incidence of homosexuality (Daly 1969). The XYY pattern has also been found occasionally in transsexuals (Taneja *et al* 1992). Very rarely faulty chromosomal distribution results in abnormal genital anatomy as in hermaphroditism (Money 1955). However, these rare mutations should not influence our scepticism about sex change - which is impossible.

References

- Bartlett, D.J. *et al* (1968) - *Nature* 219,351. On XYY Psychopaths.
 Daly, R.F. (1969) - *Journal of Nervous & Mental Diseases* 149,318327
 Diamond, J. (1997) - *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London. Eklund, P.L.E., Gooren, L.J.G., Bezemer, P.D. (1988) - *British Journal of Psychiatry* 152,638640. On the prevalence of transsexuals in the Netherlands
 Garden, G.M.F. & Rothery, D.J. (1992) *Br.J.Psychiatry* 161,852854 Discusses the importance of social upbringing in transsexualism. They refute a simple genetic basis for the disorder.
 Hoening, J. & Kenna, J.C. (1974) *Br.J.Psychiatry* 124,181190. On the prevalence of transsexuality in England & Wales.
 Hoening, J. (1982) "On Transsexualism", *Recent Advances in Clinical Psychiatry* Vol.4, Edinburgh, Churchill Livingstone.
 Kuiper, B. & Cohen-Kettenis, P. (1988) *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 17,439-457. On sexual reassignment surgery in Holland. A study of 141 Dutch transsexuals.
 Mate Kole, C., Freschi, M., Robin, A. (1990) - *Br.J.Psychiatry* 157,261264.
 Money, J. (1955) - *Bulletin of Johns Hopkins Hospital* 97,301319. Introduced the term gender role in place of sex change.
 Roberto, L. (1983) - *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 12,445473.
 Snaith, R.P. (1990) - *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, London. 83.125. Reviews transsexuality.
 Snaith, R.P., Tarsh, M.J., Reid, R. (1993) - *Br.J.Psychiatry* 162f681685.
 Snaith, R.P. (1994) - *Br.J.Psychiatry* 165f417419.
 Taneja, N. *et al* (1992) - *Br.J.Psychiatry* 161,698.
 World Health Organisation (1978) - *Mental Disorders. Classification (ICD9)*, Geneva. W.H.O.

Further Reading

- Money, J. (1988) *Gay, Straight & In-Between* New York. Oxford University Press. Analyses the physiology, cultural and personal histories of transsexuals.

From previous column

- Randi, J. *James Randi: Psychic Investigator*, Boxtree Limited, London, 1991.
 Restak, R. M. *The Mind*, Bantam Books, New York, 1988.
 Robertson, A. Grounds for Disbelief in God, in *The Rationalist Annual* 1951, Watts & Co., London, 1951.
 Sternberg, E.M. & Gold, P. W. The Mind-Body Interaction in Disease, in *Mysteries of the Mind*, Scientific American, Inc., New York, 1997.
Encyclopedia International, Grolier Inc., New York, 1972. 