

Forum on Sacred Spaces of Healing in Modern American Christianity

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The short essays gathered here advance our understanding of the importance of sacred space in modern American practices of Christian healing. The papers work together in remarkable ways, each augmenting insights expressed in the others. Separately and together, they advance our understanding of how religion works and show how much analysis of healing can contribute to that understanding. In their focus on religious healing as a means of sacralizing space, the papers reveal religion's important role in larger processes of social change as well as in the lives of individuals.

Heather Curtis's paper, "Houses of Healing," combines description of different aspects of healing practice in faith homes, constructing a multilayered and holistic picture of these sacred spaces. Her paper explains how inner and outer spaces resonated together—and changed together—for women who took up temporary residence in faith homes. Material and rhetorical practices of divine healing enveloped these patients, reconstructing their bodies as sites of transformation within the faith home's larger transformational space. The patient's own transformation into a living icon and testimony to the healing power of Christ made the faith home a sacred space. At the same time, the home and its ethos transformed patients, making sacred spaces out of healed women.

Curtis situates her depiction of these coinciding spaces of healing transformation in historical context, arguing that the healing power experienced by individual patients paralleled larger social trends that encouraged female agency, such as women's leadership in missionary work. She shows how passage through the faith homes enabled women to move beyond more traditional and restrictive expectations of female suffering and passivity. Interestingly, women moved beyond these more conventional expectations of womanhood by building on some of the same linkages of womanhood, domesticity, and sanctity that created expectations of suffering and passivity in the first place. Women involved in faith homes reconstructed the tropes of their sickness and repression to escape sickness and repression. This is a recurring theme in the history of female Christian religiosity dating back at least to the late-medieval period.

There is a certain circularity characteristic of the relationship between suffering and healing in these faith homes that limited the transformational power of the homes and even made women in them culturally compliant. Faith homes were as much a product and reinforcement of sentimental culture as a means of escape from it. The religious performances conducted in faith homes celebrated many of the same aspects of female nature, including women's special capacities for religious feeling, as the domestic performances recommended by earlier sentimental Christians like Horace Bushnell and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Perhaps the faith homes opened at the end of the century were a kind of bridge between the sentimental cult of domesticity and progressivism. But they also drew women back toward essentialist experiences of female nature that discouraged full participation in political and economic life and discouraged criticism of the political and economic forces that helped make them sick in the first place. The point here is not to hold progressivism up as a standard against which the worth of divine healing ought to be measured. But the relatively conservative social positions and social outlooks characteristic of participants in the divine healing movement do suggest the conservative trajectory of their newfound religious agency and religious influence in society.

In his paper, "From Seeker to Saint: Teresa Urrea's Search for a Place of Her Own," Brandon Bayne offers a revisionist interpretation of the life of the Mexican saint Teresa Urrea, leaving aside hagiographic characterizations that dehumanize her on one hand and, on the other, challenging interpretations of her later life across the border in the U.S. as a sellout to religious show business and cheap commercialism. Alluding to Virginia Woolf's "room of her own" and using a term deployed by sociologist Wade Clark Roof and others to describe spiritually eclectic individuals in the baby boomer generation born after World War II, Bayne presents Teresa as a protofeminist and seeker of an earlier generation. Bayne's Teresa is a woman in search of a religious home of her own and a seeker engaging a variety of different traditions, hungry for new forms of religious experience and remarkably adept at exploiting these traditions for their healing power.

Even more interesting than his concern to humanize Teresa and make her familiar, Bayne uses discussion of the Yaqui healer as a springboard for suggesting that the study of religious borderlands and religious healing go together and that attending to healing as a borderlands practice is a useful approach to American religious history. These suggestions build on, or are at least reminiscent of Catherine Albanese's emphasis on contact and exchange as distinctive

characteristics of American religion. Bayne pursues this line of thought in a way that reflects a new focus on human bodies as sites of cultural transformation. His attentiveness to bodies as sites of cultural change presupposes certain theoretical ideas about the relationship between ritual practice and social structure, and it is here that Bayne offers his most important insight. Teresa's story reveals a connection between the need for healing and the problem of cultural contamination. Healers attract people not only because people are sick, but also because the cultures they identify with are contaminated as well, that is, invaded by competing beliefs, practices, lifeways, and traditions, or caught between and among them. People were drawn to Teresa not only because she cared about, attended to, and helped sick people but also because she absorbed and embodied multiple traditions in a holistic and powerful way. In some respects, her story is similar to those of the women in faith homes that Heather Curtis describes whose attunement to divine healing embodied a new form of womanhood that carried them into missionary work, as well as gave them relief from suffering.

How far can we go with this attention to healing on the borderlands as means of interpreting American religion? What about expressions of American religious life that seem intent on preventing contamination or warding it off, rather than reaching through that contamination to some new synthesis? Marie Griffith's *Born Again Bodies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), a study of white evangelical women who diet and hone their bodies for God might represent this way of ritualizing the body; white evangelical women ward off cultural contamination by diet and exercise in ways that prevent their being confused with women who are less white and less thin.

Candy Brown's nice paper on "Healing Spaces in the United States, the Americas, and the World" moves us further along in this line of thought. In an immensely helpful move, Brown turns our attention away from entities of sacred space to the process of sacralizing space. With insights similar to those of Heather Curtis, Brown shows how sacralizing individual bodies as recipients and agents of healing sacralizes space. In addition, Brown argues that the continual dissolution and reestablishment of boundaries between sacred and secular spaces in pentecostal and charismatic healing is characteristic of globalization and ought to be understood in relation to the repositioning of the U.S. in the Americas and in relation to the rest of the world. Although the process of sacralization through healing has been going on for millennia, during the last century, as Brown argues, sacralizing bodies have acquired new kinds of mobility and plasticity. New, speedier, and less firmly grounded bodies are less dependent on traditional spaces, such as churches that have

permanent and elaborated material elements facilitating sacralization in more rooted and predictable ways. The pivotal role that individual bodies always play in healing, and in the sacralization of space more generally, has become more obvious and transparent over the last century as *individuals rove more freely, less embedded in traditional forms of communal space and traditional forms of sociability and status.*

The people who engage in healing while waiting in checkout lines or standing at the produce counter at Walmart embody this roving, relatively boundary-less process of sacralizing space. They also participate in a society thoroughly saturated by commercialism in which the practices associated with selecting, buying, and consuming things are pervasive and often seem to drive behavior and dominate identity. Brown explores how the healing performances conducted in Walmart checkout lanes function in relation to the social practices associated with consumerism. On one hand, they can be interpreted by participants as counteractive antidotes that reverse the give-and-take of shopping at Walmart, offering healing for free as a subversive alternative to the spending of money for material goods that characterizes secular forms of consumerism. On the other hand, they also contribute to the commercial process, uplifting and humanizing it through sacralizing events that only enhance the appeal of Walmart and facilitate its seductive consumer-oriented ethos, its transformation of retail experience, its exploitation of U.S. workers and even greater exploitation of cheap labor from China, the Philippines, and elsewhere.

Discussion of the social consequences of these new forms of healing is an important dimension of Brown's paper. Given the linkage of healing to new media of transmission and new communication technologies, we can begin to understand the role that new expressions of healing play in the larger process of globalization, and the kind of influence they exert in that process. The other papers on faith homes and Teresa of Urrea also connect to this interest in globalization. Awareness of the dissolution and reestablishment of boundaries between sacred and secular aspects of globalization enables us to better understand the healings performed by Teresa in the early twentieth century and those performed in the faith homes at the end of the nineteenth. In some respects, Teresa embodied and helped to inaugurate the new era. Perhaps the faith homes, through their connection with the missionary movement, stand on the cusp of that new era of sacred contamination and reintegration.

The three essays work together to provoke discussion about one another. They also convey the complexity and vitality of religious healing and show how important it has been and continues to be in the construction of modern worlds.