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BODY AND FAITH: HEALING RITUALS AND PRACTICES AT CHRISTIAN SACRED PLACES

VIHRA BAEVA, Sofia

Abstract
In this paper I offer an ethnographic study of contemporary rituals and practices aimed at healing different health problems which are performed at both Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic sacred places. My observations have resulted from fieldwork in the Balkans (Bulgaria, Macedonia) and Central Europe (Slovakia, Poland) during the last two decades. By outlining the idiosyncrasies and the commonalities of the separate cases, I point out the sacred spaces and miraculous objects considered to possess the most powerful curing potential and examine different body techniques applied in the search for physical and mental health. In the course of analyses I rely on the approaches of cultural anthropology, symbolic anthropology, and semiotics to interpret the symbols used in the healing practices and to outline the mechanisms through which those symbols produce meaning and thus influence the psyches of the devotees to create a positive therapeutic effect.
Keywords: *healing rituals and practices, religious healing, miracles, Christianity, local cults*

Introduction

The connection between the divine sphere and healing is deeply rooted in most of the religious systems, including Christianity. In the Christian doctrine the healing of the body and mind is closely related to spiritual healing. Orthodox

teaching claims the healing of the soul in the form of purification from passions and sinful inclinations to be the main purpose of human life and the path towards salvation and deification (*theosis*), while Western theology is based mostly on the concept of justification of sins[1]. Therefore, the solving of bodily problems (caused by the fall of mankind) is supposed to follow the major spiritual purification of the individual.

A number of studies from different fields such as medical anthropology and history of medicine, cultural history and history of art[2], point to the fact that the emphasis on physical healing was a major aspect of early Christianity. What is more, Christianity in Europe naturally inherited its concern with the healing of the body and soul from older pre-Christian cults of different origin. In the Greek-Roman tradition which has had a powerful impact on European Christianity, there was a wide-spread devotion to health-providing deities such as Asclepius and the Dioscuri – Castor and Pollux. Gradually the health-providing 'pagan' gods were replaced by healer saints, often worshipped in the same sacred places and with similar rituals and practices, such as incubation, ritual washing, fasting and anointing (Ferngren, 2009; Nutton 2004; Гергова 2015). Many of the saints in the Christian pantheon had the capacity to cure in their lifetimes, as well as post-mortem: St. Luke who is considered to be the patron of doctors, St. Charalambos, St. Spyridon, St. Paraskevi, and others. There are also holy men canonized especially for their healing abilities and for their gratuitous help who form the group of the saint Unmercenaries. In the Orthodox tradition the most prominent among those are Sts. Cosmas and Damian, St. Pantheleon and St. Tryphon (Гергова 2015: 17). The intercession of the specialized healer saints is generally searched for in cases of physical and mental concerns, but there are also 'universal' saints who are regarded as general helpers and protectors. The most typical example of a *generalist*[3] performing the functions of a healer saint

[1] More on the concept of theosis in Orthodox doctrine see in Veniamin 2013 and cit. lit.; a comparison between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic views on the subject is offered in: *Станилоае* 2014.

[2] See Le Goff 1985; Ferngren, 1992; Ferngren, 2009; Nutton 2004; Гергова 2015 and cit.lit.

[3] Discussing plague epidemics in medieval Europe, William Christian makes the distinction between *specialist saints,* often of local importance, whose abilities are concentrated in a particular sphere, vs. *generalists* like Mary, who are powerful enough to treat versatile problems and obstacles. The author concludes that in the course of time the former tended to turn over more rapidly and were eventually supplanted by the latter (Christian 1989: 21). My fieldwork observations, however, reveal a tendency of balance in the presence and influence of the two types of saints.

is Mary[4], who is widely venerated in both Orthodox and Catholic traditions for her miraculous powers and motherly care for mankind.

The miraculous cures performed by Jesus Christ and subsequently by the saints, have produced, in the terminology of Mircea Eliade, *sacred precedents*, which give numerous believers from different cultures, social strata and gender a model to follow and inspire in them the hope of finding relief from various diseases and disabilities. In the course of centuries, within the framework of Christianity, diverse rituals, practices, and techniques for healing have developed which has often verged between official religion and pre-Christian concepts and customs that have been preserved in local tradition and folklore.

In this paper I offer a survey of contemporary healing rituals and practices which are performed at both Orthodox Christian and Roman Catholic sacred places[5]. The concept of healing which I apply here is rather broad and encompasses various health problems, including fertility issues, as well as different mental disabilities. It also should be noted that the practices examined here contain different stages and degrees of healing which may vary depending on the case or the individual. For example, the use of holy water can be more closely connected with the aim of physical healing than making the devotions to the Stations of the Cross. On the other hand, some believers might be primarily motivated to go to the Stations of the Cross by the hope of healing, while others could go in the fulfillment of a vow, as a form of redemption, as an act of veneration, or even for recreation. At the same time, the hope of curing a disease might co-exist or intermingle with other motivations, for example, providing for other aspects of wellbeing such as work, money, relationship, marriage, etc., the repentance of sins or just to achieve spiritual harmony and perform "pure" worship. In fact, when religious healing is concerned, no firm distinction can be drawn between the matters of the body, soul and spirit since the very act of healing is not strictly medical, but rather bears a spiritual and transcendental meaning[6]. In cases where the element of healing was not expressively present in the ritual actions, I relied on interviews, religious literature, media or the internet to qualify a certain practice as containing the element of healing.

The analyses and conclusions suggested here summarize the results of my fieldwork in the Balkans (Bulgaria, Macedonia) and Central Europe (Slovakia,

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[4] Here I will use the English designation 'Mary' to convey the Bulgarian and Macedonian *Богородица* (the one who has given birth to God); the Slovak *Panna Mária* (Lady Mary) and the Polish *Matka Bosca* (Mother of God).

[5] Because of the limitations of this article I won't be able to give a thorough account of all known practices, but rather give meaningful examples of the different categories.

[6] I dwell in detail on this idea in Баева 2003, Баева 2013: 120-123.

Poland). During the last two decades I have worked on a number of research projects connected to popular devotions and local cults in different parts of Europe.[7] I have drawn on qualitative methods and applied the classical instruments of the ethnographic study: observation, including participant observation in ritual practices and celebrations, and free or semi-structured interviews with pilgrims, local believers and representatives of the clergy, as well as fieldwork diaries and photo and video documentation. The complimentary data sources involved published research and popular publications in the media and the internet. Long-term research experience has given me an awareness of the broader picture of the studied issues and provided me with a basis for further interpretations and insights into the aspects and mechanisms of religious healing. In previous research I have examined the phenomenon of healing from the perspective of religious narratives by collecting and analyzing a corpus of oral personal stories of miraculous healings (Баева 2013: 112-123). Alternatively, here I explore a different research perspective to healing, focusing on the performative approaches to religion. This is a viewpoint that "emphasizes the embodied 'doing' of religion in particular contexts, and gives rather less attention to religious belief, doctrine and history" (see Michaels and Sax 2016 and cit. lit). Therefore, my focus in this study is on the rituals, gestures and *body techniques*[8] applied in the search for physical and mental health in a Christian context.

By outlining the idiosyncrasies and the commonalities of the separate cases I explore how men and women, using their bodies, connect to the divine sphere in their search for mental and physical health. I rely on the approaches of cultural anthropology, symbolic anthropology, and semiotics to interpret the symbols used in the healing practices and to outline the mechanisms through which those symbols produce meaning and thus influence the psyches of the devotees to create a positive therapeutic effect. My interest here is concentrated on the common mechanisms and features, rather than on the peculiarities and variations, so I do not draw any comparisons, such as the Balkans vs. Central Europe, the Orthodox vs. the Catholic; men vs. women, etc. Instead, I reflect on the general potential of rituals to connect body and faith and try to understand how people express their

[7] The studied sacred places include Eastern Orthodox shrines in the regions of Asenovgrad, Bachkovo and Kuklen (South Bulgaria), Melnik, Rozhen Monastery and Rila Monasery (Southwest Bulgaria), Sofia (Central West Bulgaria), Ohrid and Ohrid Monastery and Kriva Palanka Monastery (in the Republic of Macedonia) and Grabaka (Eastern Poland), as well as the major Roman Catholic pilgrimage centre of Slovakia, Marianka and Wejherowo Calvary (Northeast Poland).

[8] The concept of certain *techniques of the body* which are culturally specific and culturally constructed is first suggested by Marcel Mauss (cf. Mauss 1973).

faith in rituals through their bodies, and on the other hand, how faith, through ritual, affects the bodies of its bearers.

As Mircea Eliade has eloquently shown in his studies, for the religious man the world is divided into two major spheres or levels. One is perceived as *sacred* and refers to the absolute reality of the divine, while the other is profane and encompasses the mundane world of people with their everyday troubles and anxieties. The former is considered meaningful, important and powerful, while the latter is dull, insignificant, and deprived of power and authenticity. Consequently, the main aspiration of the religious person is to overcome the boundaries of profane life and relate to the sacred (Eliade 1959). In other words, the transcendental world is regarded as the primary source of sacred power and therefore of all other benefits, such as, for example, life, health, happiness, and wellbeing. Therefore, physical and psychic disorders are naturally considered as a result from a spiritual crisis, caused by the broken connection between the sick person and the sacred world. In this vein it could be suggested that the underlying mechanism of any religious healing is actually one and the same: accomplishing contact with the sacred and returning to the primordial state of communion with the perfect reality of the divine. The variety of rituals and techniques for doing so is actually based on the different methods and intercessors for the achievement of this contact.

Sacred Times and Sacred Spaces

One of the possible patterns for communication with the sacred is through the categories of time and space. In the light of Eliade's model of the *sacred* versus *profane* dichotomy, time and space are perceived as discrete, heterogeneous and symbolically charged. The periods of sacred time refer to **the feasts** which commemorate certain divine events of supreme importance (*sacred precedents*) and thus connect ordinary human time with the transcendental one (Eliade 1959). As a consequence, it is assumed that the curing power of a sacred place is the greatest on its patron saint's day. Actually, people go to shrines in search for healing at any time when they are in need, but most often healing rituals and practices are performed during feasts, especially on the day of the patron saint of the holy place, or on the night before.

The idea of a sacred space is usually embodied by **the shrine** which forms a center of divine power, as opposed to the profane periphery of mundane areas (Eliade 1959). This general theoretical principle is clearly visible on the empirical level since healing rituals and practices are concentrated within the area of the shrine (church, monastery, chapel) and its locality. The desire to stay at a holy site is one of the main motifs of **pilgrimage** – a ritual activity with great

importance and high symbolic value in many religions, including Christianity in its Orthodox and Catholic variants[9]. Among all the aspects of pilgrimage, such as social, political, cultural and strictly spiritual, a therapeutic side is also present. As interviews and written accounts demonstrate, one of the main reasons for the decision to take up a pilgrimage journey is the hope of solving physical or mental health issues of the pilgrim or to help beloved people, usually children, or other family members, to get cured.[10] The act of movement to the holy site, despite the facilities of modern transportation nowadays, traditionally contains an element of effort and sacrifice. More often than not holy destinations are situated at higher elevations so the pilgrim has to climb and struggle in order to get there. Thus, the very process of travelling to the sacred site also acquires a ritual dimension. The effort of the body, the perspiration, the shortness of breath, the feeling of fatigue, as well as the persistence to go on and reach the final goal, are associated with redemption and both bodily and spiritual purification. At the same time, physical climbing becomes a symbolic expression of the pilgrim's ascension from the 'low' to the 'high' levels of being, from the profane to the sacred realm.

A specific variant of pilgrimage is practiced by visiting the so-called **Stations of the Cross (Calvary)** typical of the Catholic tradition. Those are objects of devotion which commemorate the Passions of Christ[11]. These sanctuaries attract

[9] Pilgrimage has emerged as one of the most widely discusses topics in contemporary humanities and social sciences. The works of Victor and Edith Turner are still emblematic in this field (cf. Turner 1974, Turner and Turner 1978, Turner 1992). For a survey of the abundant research on this subject and the different approaches towards it I refer to the reviews made by: Eade and Sallnow 1991 (2000); Coleman and Eade 2004; Badone and Roseman 2004; Winkelman and Dubisch 2005; Margry 2008 and cit. lit. I deal with the topic of pilgrimage on Bulgarian material in Баева 2001; Baeva 2014; see also Bakalova & Lazarova 2009, Георгиева 2012, Баева, ред. 2014.

[10] See Баева 2001. Similar observations are shared by Jill Dubisch from her fieldwork in Tinos (Dubisch 1995: 87, 90). The connection between pilgrimage and healing is explored in depth on the basis of different cases in the eponymous volume (Dubisch and Winkelman, eds. 2005).

[11] According to historical evidences, the alleged route walked by Jesus in the outskirts of Jerusalem on Good Friday was ritually tracked by pilgrims in the early ages of Christianity. Subsequently, especially after the Holy Lands were captured by the Ottoman Turks, replicas of *Via Dolorosa* were built, initially by the Franciscans and gradually spread out into the whole Catholic world. At first, the number of the stations used to vary between seven and 30, but finally 14 stations were officially confirmed, each one reproducing an important moment of Christ's passions: from his sentence by Pontius Pilatus to the laying of his body in the tomb. Sometimes the Stations of the Cross are in the form of small icons or plates inside the churches, but they can also consist of real-size sculpture groups erected in the open, often inside special pavilions or chapels. The latter type is usually built on steep slopes and hills and is known as Calvary (see

both individual pilgrims and whole processions that go through them, stopping at each station and pronouncing specific prayers. The pilgrimages to Cavalry are greatest during Lent and especially on Good Friday, but are also performed throughout the whole year. My fieldwork experience with this kind of shrines is from the Calvary at Marianka near Bratislava, Slovakia, (including 14 chapels with 50 figures, built from 1930 to 1936), and the famous Calvary of Wejherowo in northeast Poland (which has been extended to 26 chapels of which the eight oldest were erected by the founder of the town, Jakub Wejher, from 1649 to 1655). In the first case I observed routine pilgrimage visits of small groups of people or families who walked the way of the cross, stopped at each chapel, occasionally kneeled and prayed, and sometimes read from special prayer books. A few people also carried wooden crosses – some seemed to be specially constructed, while others were obviously made on the spot by tying tree branches together. A pile of crosses left at the twelfth station, the site of the crucifixion, showed that it is a habitual practice at that shrine. The ritual actions of the pilgrims closely follow the model of Christ on the last day of his earthly life, just before his ascension to heaven. The actions of the *God-Man* give a model of crossing the border between worlds and their ritual reproduction is interpreted as a way to achieve unity with the sacred and thus, obtain blessing and healing.

I was unable to observe any pilgrimages during my research visit to Weherowo. However, *Kalwaria Wejherowska* is known for a special ceremony for the healing of the sick which takes place on the first Saturday and Sunday of July. The main event is a liturgy for the redemption of sins served on Sunday morning at one of the chapels, *Kaplica Kajfasza*. Many ill people are brought there by their relatives and friends with the hope of a cure or in order to receive the last anointing – another example of the connection between the Calvary pilgrimage, redemption and healing.

In certain cases of pilgrimage the element of redemption is further emphasized by practices of (more or less symbolic) **self-inflicted suffering**. Several of the most popular Marian pilgrimages, both Catholic and Orthodox, include the custom of going to the holy place barefoot, kneeling, or crawling on hands and knees, in hope for healing, or in fulfillment of a vow given for the sake of healing[12]. I have personally observed such practices in the Eastern Orthodox shrine at the Holy

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stations_of_the_Cross; http://www.catholic.org/prayers/station.php; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvary_hil).

[12] Some of the most prominent examples include Fatima in Portugal (cf. Gemzöe 2005 and cit. lit.) and Tinos in Greece (cf. Dubisch 1995; Håland 2012). The importance of the vow in healing won't be specially considered here, since it goes beyond the sphere of the body techniques; for a discussion of this subject see Dubish 1995: 76-100; Gemzöe 2005: 28-35; Баева 2013: 112-122.

Mount of Grabarka in Eastern Poland. Some of the pilgrims there, predominantly younger people and a few middle-aged women, circumambulate the main Church of the Transfiguration on their knees. They circle around the building three times, after which they go inside and pay homage to the miracle-working icon. Some of the pilgrims wear trousers or special bandages on their knees, but others are bare legged, so their knees become sore and bleed. Afterwards the devotees traditionally go to the sacred spring in the vicinity of the monastery and wash their wounds with holy water seeking relief of the pain.

Another custom, for which Grabarka is famous, is that **pilgrims carry crosses** which they leave on top of the hill where the church is situated. The crosses are made of different materials, most often wood, and their size varies from two to three meters to a few centimeters. The larger crosses are driven into the ground, while the smaller, usually in the form of rosaries or medallions, are hung on the big ones. This tradition has allegedly originated at the beginning of the eighteenth century after a miraculous salvation from a plague epidemic, so that now a real *Forest of Crosses* (*Góra Krzyży*) has formed around the temple. According to a nun in the adjacent monastery of Sts. Martha and Maria, one can hear stories from the pilgrims about sick people cured after bringing a cross to Grabarka and also of sons and grandsons taking care of the crosses which were brought by their ancestors[13]. Despite that it is not openly stated, climbing the steep hill with a cross – just like in the case of Marainka, described above – follows the sacred model of Jesus climbing Golgotha and carrying the Holy Gross. This 'ritual imitation', along with the element of symbolic and sometimes also real physical suffering and effort, is expected to provide connecting to the sacrum and healing.

A specific practice associated with the sacred space of the temple and its curing potential, is the **ritual of unlocking of the church gates.** This practice has been documented in central western Bulgaria (the regions of the capital Sofia and the nearby town of Samokov), and according to interviewees is performed 'for health' and 'good luck'. The person who would carry out the ritual should be the first to enter the church for the day. He or she is given the key for the church gates by the priest or by the women who take care of the church. The performer makes the sign of the cross three times and inserts the key into the keyhole with the right hand in order to open the gates and enter the nave with the right foot first. Afterwards the usual acts of veneration are performed in the temple such as lighting up candles and paying homage to the icons; in some cases a liturgy for health is served as well. (cf. Рангочев 2005; Баева 2008)[14]. In

[13] I'm grateful to my colleague Katya Mihaylova who conducted this interview during our teamwork at the shrine.

[14] For local variants of the ritual see Gergova 2015: 256.

this case the influence of folkloric magical practices is easy to notice in elements such as the magical number three and the right side (good, proper) as opposed to the left (bad, dangerous). Fieldwork interviews show that unlocking the church gates is interpreted as a symbolic 'opening of the way' of the performer and is alleged to provide healing, as well as success in new undertakings and material acquisitions, for example a new home. Additionally, the opening of the church gates could be construed as overcoming the border between the sacred sphere, symbolized by the temple, and the profane world of the ordinary surroundings.

The **incubation** (ritual sleeping inside the shrine) is traditionally practiced in the Balkans up to modern times in monasteries and parish churches which are believed to possess special powers due to their miracle-working icons or relics[15]. In some cases from Bulgaria and Macedonia the monastery authorities do not allow the pilgrims to sleep in the temple, but they are able to stay in the monastery guest dormitories or on the spacious porches.[16] As is also the case with other healing rituals mentioned above, this practice is performed year-round with the permission of the priest, but the number of participants is the largest on the eve of the patron saint's day. Usually the church stays open during those nights and people with different diseases and disabilities stay overnight along with locals who traditionally come with the customary motivation '*for health*'. In some cases midnight services are held after which the devotees lay down their blankets and coverlets on the floor of the nave or on the balcony and go to sleep, or sit up praying. Occasionally a special mystical atmosphere is created owing to the pious crowd, the late hour, and also the candle light and the smell of incense. Some individuals might sing religious songs while others chat with each other and share various stories, among which narratives of miracles, and especially healings, are quite common. The element of **dreaming** is also present: traditionally devotees expect to have miraculous dreams in which sacred figures such as Mary or the saints appear to cure the sick, or give them concrete advice on how to treat their sufferings[17]. In the rite of incubation the combination of sacred time and sacred space is added to the special status of sleep as an intermediary state between the worlds, and of dreaming as a 'communication

[15] I have observed the practice in the Bachkovo Monastery (no longer preserved nowadays because of the all-night service) and in a number of parish churches such as those of the Annunciation and the Golden Apple in Asenovgrad and St. Anthony in Melnik, as well as in the St. Zone chapel near Melnik.

[16] Such is the case of the monasteries of St. John of Rila and St. Joachim of Osogovo.

[17] On contemporary religious dreaming in Orthodox Christian context and the corresponding narratives see Баева 2013: 134-145; Георгиева 2012: 152-160. Stories of miraculous healings were traditionally recorded in some of the large incubation centers of early Christianity (Гергова 2015: 59-62 and cit. lit.) For similar Greco-Roman incubation and dreaming practices see Le Goff 1985.

channel' with the beyond. In this way the border between the sacred and the profane is overcome and healing is ritually obtained.

Sacred Images and Relics

A significant amount of healing practices is concentrated around miraculous objects, which are assumed to posses more 'concentrated' sacred power and therefore wonderworking capacity. They become to be emblematic for the corresponding shrine and to constitute a major part of its *symbolic capital* (after Pierre Bourdieu), and thus attract large numbers of local devotees and pilgrims. The miraculous objects could be both artifacts and natural formations which are to be found inside the temple or in the surrounding landscape.

A central place among the group of artifacts belongs to **miraculous images: icons** (emblematic of the Orthodox tradition) and **statues** (among Roman Catholics). These are visual representations of sacred characters or events, which according to dogmatic teaching, should make it easier for the believer to understand and relate to the transcendental glory of the sacrum. Alternatively, in popular milieu the holy images, especially those of Mary, are recognized as individual sacred entities that possess particular characteristics and agencies, even living lives of their own. Both icons and statues are claimed to stir or move from one place to another, weep, shed blood, perspiration, tears or myrrh, and to give off fragrance. The belief in the images' miracle-working powers is expressed in specific devotions which are distinctive from the veneration of the saints themselves[18]. My fieldwork observations on miraculous images refer to several Marian icons from Bulgaria (from Bachkovo Monastery, Asenovgrad, Melnik[19] and Rila Monastery[20]), a newly painted icon from Grabarka (replica of the Iviron Theotokos – Portaissa), and the miraculous statue of Mary from

[18] On the enormous literature concerning the veneration of icons in the Orthodox world I refer to the summarizing observations made in Dubisch 2005: 65-73; Бакалова 2016: 88-102 and cit. lit. Research referring Bulgarian material is offered in Bakalova 2001; Georgieva 2009; Gergova 2012. Anthropological studies concerning miraculous statues still need further research; for now I refer to several Catholic authors: Durham: 1995; Cruz 1993; see also an introductory article in the Catholic Encyclopedia: http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07664a.htm (accessed 08.04.2017).

[19] For a detailed ethnography and analyses of those local devotions see Baeva 2000; Bakalova 2001, Баева 2012, Георгиева 2012; Гергова 2012; Баева 2013, Baewa 2016; Бакалова 2016 and cit. lit.

[20] On the devotion to the Marian miracle-working reliquary icon from the Rila Monastery see in Bakalova 2001; Гергова 2012; Бакалова 2016 and cit. lit.

Marianka. According to my surveillance and published research, devotion to the icons is usually expressed in a set of bodily gestures including kneeling and genuflections, touching and kissing, lighting candles, and also prayers and offerings of money, clothes, oil, jewelry and special ex-votos. The miracle-working statue of Mary in Marianka is situated in a high and inaccessible place on the altar, so the devotees can't have any direct contact with it, so they just stay in front of it, looking up and praying.

The miracle-working images are traditionally taken out of the churches in ceremonial processions on certain festive days. The icons are usually put on special carriers and decorated with flowers. It is believed that those who carry the icon will receive healing and blessing, so people crowd and jostle around the carrier trying to get a hold or at least touch the holy image. The flowers from the decoration are also considered to have curing qualities so many people, largely women, take them home after the ceremony. A copy of the miraculous statue of Mary in Marianka is taken out of the church to the nearby Lourdes Grotto on the day of the Holy Trinity. It is exhibited for veneration, but still unreachable for the worshippers who nowadays perform the universal modern 'ritual' of photographing it with their cell phones.

An essential category of miraculous objects are the **graves and relics** of holy men and women. A significant body of research has scrutinized the central place of saints' relics in both Orthodox Christianity and Roman Catholicism and their long tradition that spans from the early ages of Christianity up to the present day.[21] It should be noted that the graves and sarcophagi where the holy bodies are preserved in their entirety, or at least in the main part, function differently compared to the reliquaries with tiny body particles. In the former case the devotion is more developed, the rituals are richer, and allude to the idea of the grave as a symbolic equivalent of the saint himself or a 'home' where he continuously resides. My fieldwork research refers to cases from Bulgaria (the grave and the relics of St. John of Rila in the Rila monastery, the tomb of the new saint Archbishop Seraphim Sobolev in the Russian Church in Sofia and the sarcophagus with the body of the so called St. King in the cathedral of St. Nedelya in Sofia) and Macedonia (the tomb of St. Joachim of Osogovo in the eponymous monastery near Kriva Palanka, the grave of St. Naum in the eponymous monastery near Ohrid and the relics of St. Clement of Ohrid[22]). Many

[21] Here I refer to just a few basic books from the vast literature on the subject: Brown 1981; Бакалова 2000; Лидов 2003 and cit. lit. For the Macedonian field see Вражиновски 1999, Луческа 2014.

[22] A detailed survey on the devotions to those saints and their relics with bibliographical review see in Баева 2017.

of the devotional practices are similar to those related to icons: prayers, offerings and bodily gestures such as candle-lighting, kneeling, touching and kissing the reliquary or the tombstone. Some worshippers also lay their heads on the graves or press their foreheads against it. On the one hand those ritual actions express respect and reverence to the holy people, while additionally they are believed to bring recovery from various illnesses so they also have a therapeutic meaning.

A peculiar form of body contact with the saint is the custom practiced at St. Naum's grave: visitors lay their ears on the tombstone in an attempt to hear the saint's beating heart. If successful, it is interpreted as a sign that they are pious enough and their prayers will be heard. Even now many citizens of Ohrid are convinced that St. Naum's heart is still beating – an attitude that points to the underlying concept of his literal presence in his burial place as a *living saint*[23]. A specific feature of the saint's body which is officially considered as a marker of sanctity is that it is incorruptible, fragrant, and sometimes also myrrh-flowing. Inhaling the divine aroma of the relics can bring curing[24] as also anointing with the miraculous myrrh.

Idiosyncratic objects

In some sanctuaries peculiar healing practices have emerged which are related to unusual holy object incorporated in the local cults. A noteworthy example is to be found in the Dormition of Mary Church in Gorni Voden (a quarter of the Bulgarian town of Asenovgrad) which is known for the **miracle-working apples and belts used for childbirth**. The peculiar custom is linked to the *Golden Apple* feast celebrated locally on the holiday of the Akathist to Mary[25] 15 days before Easter. With the beginning of Lent village women make garlands of greenery and apples and decorate the miraculous altar icon of Mary; meanwhile other apples are brought to the shrine as gifts by visitors. On the holiday those apples are ritually eaten by couples with reproduction problems. The spouses should divide the fruit in half and eat it with the seeds on an empty stomach after having fasted

[23] The category of 'living saint' and its place in folk cosmology I studied in depth in: Ivanov & Izmirlieva 2003.

[24] A narrative of curing bronchitis after inhaling the sweet aroma of St. Kral's relics from St. Nedelya church in Sofia is available at: http://www.blitz.bg/article/434 (accessed 14.09.2016).

[25] The Akathist to Mary is a hymn dedicated to the Virgin which is split into four parts and sung consecutively during mass on the first four Fridays of Lent. On the fifth Friday and the fifth Saturday, known as the holiday of the Akathist to Mary, the whole text is performed (cf. Петканова, съст. 1992: 19; http://www.pravoslavieto.com/rechnik/index.htm#акатист).

for Lent or at least part of it. It should be noted that in Bulgarian and European folklore the apple emerges as a symbol of love, sexuality, fertility and offspring which gives a clue to its meaning in the ritual[26]. The other curing holy object is a belt made of white thread, with which the building of the church has been circumambulated three times. The woman has to wear the belt on her waist under the clothes for 40 days and it is believed that if the ritual is performed correctly and with 'strong faith' she will conceive and give birth to a healthy child. The belt has rich symbolism in traditional culture associated with rites of passage, family and fertility but is also related to the official cult to the Holy Girdle of Mary, a relic which is purportedly kept at the Vatopedi Monastery on Mount Athos (cf. Баева 2012; Баева 2013; and cit. lit).

Another idiosyncratic practice draws on the ritual use of **healing chains** which has been preserved up to the present day in the church of the Kuklen Monastery of Sts. Cosmas and Damian near Asenovgrad and the church of St. Anthony in Melnik. According to historical accounts, up to the first decades of the twentieth century people with mental disorders were brought to sleep there and chained, as a part of the ritual, to a stone block in the narthex (Kuklen) or to a column inside the nave (Melnik). In the past similar activities were conducted in St. Petka 'the Old' Church in Sofia where 'madmen' were chained to *St. Therapon's trunk* that is still kept inside the temple – a log where the local martyr was supposedly decapitated during Ottoman rule. According to some explanations, patients were chained because they were delirious and dangerous, but certain authors also suggest a symbolic dimension of the ritual that interprets the trunk or the column as a representation of the *Tree of Life* symbol which should restructure and harmonize the diseased psyche (Вълчинова 2005; Георгиева 2012: 285-286). Those practices are now abandoned but the belief in the miracle-working chains is still maintained and expressed in a new form: believers touch the chains to the aching parts of their bodies, such as heads, necks, heart, and reproductive organs. In the case of Melnik my colleague and I have also observed individuals sleeping on the chains in order to heal anxiety and depression. Despite the skepticism of the local clergy and their continuous attempts to discourage the devotees, the local healing practices are still active, and even gain new popularity through the media and internet[27].

[26] I pay special attention to the symbolism of the apple in Baeva 2013.

[27] On the Kuklen monastery and the healing chains see Гергова 2015, Lubanska 2016 and cit. lit; the case of St. Anthony in Melnik in comparison to Kuklen is currently studied in our joint project with colleague Yana Gergova: cf. Гергова 2016; http://antonymelnik.blogspot.bg (accessed 10.04.2017).

Sacred Landscape

A considerable group of healing rituals is performed at sacred places in the shrine's adjacent landscape. Many of those are attached to **holy waters** – a powerful medium for healing which Christianity has conspicuously inherited from pre-Christian traditions. In both Catholic and Orthodox rites water is sanctified during church service and plays an important role in church rituals, such as baptism and the blessing of persons, places, and objects; it is also claimed to be a means of repelling evil. Although not actually holy water since it has not been blessed by a priest, many Christians believe that water from specific springs can bring healing.[28] Usually those holy springs (popular in the Balkans with the Greek word *agiasma*; in Bulgarian *аязмо*; Macedonian *ајазма*) are located in a sacred space on the territory of a shrine and are connected to some sacred figure and/or a miraculous event. The examples are numerous, as it actually seems that most of the renowned pilgrimage centers have their own sacred springs. The traditional practices include drinking the holy water or pouring it into bottles 'to go', as well as washing the sick body parts or bathing. In the Orthodox tradition, especially in the Balkans, devotees throw coins into a holy spring – *for health*, but also as a symbolic sacrifice or 'repayment'. Another form of symbolic sacrifice is to leave pieces or bits of clothes on the trees near the *ayazmo* which is motivated by the belief that the suffering will 'remain' there.

Near the Kuklen Monastery of Sts. Cosmas and Damian there is a fountain devoted to the saints. In the past the two rooms attached to the site served as male and female wards where mentally ill people were soused with holy water as part of their treatment (cf. Гергова 2015: 261-267). Above the main buildings of the Bachkovo Monastery there is a spring whose miracle-working water runs into a basin incorporated in a special chapel dedicated to Mary's Protecting Veil. The water is used for drinking and bathing. During my visit in May 1996 with colleague Albena Georgieva we saw a group of elderly women in their underwear bathing in the icy water and singing religious songs. Near the Forest of Crosses in Grabarka there is also a holy spring, part of which is caught and used for drinking by worshippers who fill their glasses and bottles. The rest of the water runs in a small river where pilgrims rinse their bruised knees and sore feet or wash aching body parts with special handkerchiefs dipped in the water. Afterwards the handkerchiefs are left near the river – probably with the same hope to leave the ailment there. The Catholic shrine of Marianka is also known for its holy spring (*Sväta studňa*) which, according to legends, acquired

[28] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Holy_water (accessed 11.04.2017) and cit. lit.

its powers because of the miracle-working Marian statue that spent many years in it. The rituals there are not as rich and complicated as the Orthodox ones, but there is still in front of the fountain a queue of pilgrims waiting for their turn to drink and fill in their containers from the healing water.

Other key loci for healing practices are **caves, rocks and stones** to which extraordinary properties are ascribed. Some of the representative cases include: *Kluviyata* above the Bachkovo Monastery, where the miraculous Marian icon was purportedly found (Baeva 2000; Баева 2013); the cave of St. John near the Rila Monastery where the hermit spent his pious life (Bakalova & Lazarova 2009); and the cave of St. Petka near the town of Trun where the holy woman was hiding from her persecutors and where her *pita* bread, miraculously petrified, is still preserved (Вълчинова 1999). In all three caves, which are situated at higher elevations, the devotional practices imply climbing and squeezing through a narrow opening which is believed to manifest the righteousness of the devotees and bring them purification and healing[29].

For more than a century, the most prominent sacred cave for the Roman Catholics is probably the grotto in a rock called Massabielle near Lourdes where in 1858 Mary, introducing herself as *The Immaculate Conception,* appeared to a 14-year-old peasant girl named Bernadette Soubirous. After the apparitions were officially approved by the church authorities the fame of the place increased and spread across the borders of France to reach a European and global scale[30]. Lourdes' immense popularity gave impetus to the reproduction of its main emblem so a large number of the Grotto replicas were distributed all over the Catholic world. One of those, known as *Lurdská jaskyňa*, is located in the vicinity of Marianka as an important landmark in the sacred landscape where holiday masses are served and numerous believers light candles and pray. As a material sign for prayers heard and miracles performed, the rocks around the cave are covered with memorial plates expressing the givers' gratitude. This tradition is widespread all around Slovakia and I have documented it in other Lourdes grottoes such as those in Bratislava and Nitra. The inscriptions on the plates give an idea of the devotees' concerns and requests, and a large part of these refer to health, curing or protection from different diseases.

Although not as popular as the springs and caves, certain **miraculous trees** in sacred domains also attract devotees who look for solution of their health issues. One of these was already mentioned above, St. *Therapon's trunk* in St. Petka 'the

[29] The speleologist Aoleksey Zhalov summarizes published data and gives an inventory of the different types of cave sanctuaries in Bulgaria used by different religions (Жалов 2008).

[30] On the history of Lourde and the contemporary processes developing there see Harris 1999; Claverie 2008; Eade 2012; Harris 2013 and cit.lit.

Old' Church in Sofia. The tree is believed to posses healing qualities and apart from the tradition of chaining mentally ill individuals to it, people slept next to it for healing and chipped off splinters of its wood to fumigate the ailing. On the eve of St. Therapon's holiday (27 March), the log is taken from its usual place in a glass-protected niche in the church walls and is exhibited for veneration in the centre of the narthex (cf. Вълчинова 1998: 72 and cit. lit.). A miracle-working tree also grows in the yard of the Bachkovo monastery. Locally known as *dzhindzhifir*, it belongs to the rare for Bulgaria species of *Diospyros lotus* (date-plum, Caucasian persimmon). Its fruit ripen in January and are claimed to cure women's sterility quite like the apples from the Gorni Voden church. Stories about miraculously cured women are told in support of that popular belief which attracts female pilgrims to the monastery (Баева 2013: 47-48; Георгиева 2012: 191-192). Similar properties are also attributed to an old vine that grows in the yard of the Rozhen Monastery near Melnik (Баева 2013: 149-151). A 1300-year-old plane-tree (*Platanus Orientalis*) grows by the church of St. George in the village of Zlatolist near Melnik where a holy woman, Reverent Stoyna, spent her life[31]. It is whispered that the tree has enormous power and energy and can take away any pain or illness. The healing practices there involve hugging the trunk, rocking in the swings that hang from its huge branches (for health and childbirth), and writing letters with requests and sticking the pieces of paper into the rugged tree bark[32].

Intermediary objects

A common technique for connecting to the sacrum and healing is through indirect contact, i.e., through objects or substances which are not miraculous *per se*, but play the role of intermediaries as they 'absorb' the healing power of the sacred object and then transfer and emit it into the body of the sick. In Orthodox churches believers habitually leave new **clothes** in front of the miraculous icons and later take them back to put on or give to others who are not able to visit the shrine personally. A widespread practice is that pilgrims take from the holy place **pieces of cotton** with which the holy relics, or at least the lid of the reliquary, were wiped – a custom based on the belief in the holy myrrh. This tradition is connected to the relics of St. Clement of Ohrid and St. John of Rila. In support of this method, stories of healing are distributed orally and even more often

[31] On the life of Reverant Stoyna and the construction of her cult see Ivanov & Izmirlieva 2003.

[32] Fieldwork observations from October 2011. See also http://viaranews.com/2017/03/15/изцеления-стават-в-храма-на-преподобн/ (accessed 14.04.2017).

recently, in virtual space[33]. Another comparable example of an intermediary is **oil from the oil lamps** near a saint's grave; the sick anoint their foreheads with it to get rid of physical or mental afflictions. Sometimes **the soil near the grave** is also considered to be miraculous and believers take it to their homes 'for health' or even drink it dissolved in water[34]. **Pieces of red thread** consecrated by the icon of St. Zone in Melnik are kept in pockets or purses for health and good luck or are tied to the waists of infertile women for conception (Баева 2012: 147-151).

Another form of mediation between the religious man and the divine world is through the written word. At some shrines the pilgrims leave their **letters or notes with requests** which are often concerned with healing. This custom might be performed near miraculous icons and even holy trees, as in Zlatolist, but is most common at saint's graves. It is emblematic for the Russian Church in Sofia where the new saint Seraphim Sobolev is buried. In the antechamber to his crypt a special 'writing room' has been furnished with chairs, tables, pieces of paper and pens. The worshippers write their requests (*wishes*) to the saint and drop them in a special 'mailbox' set next to the sarcophagus (Баева 2014; Baeva 2014). The practice to leave little letters to St. John of Rila is still active in the Rila Monastery, at the saint's *ayazmo* and in the cave where he resided and which is situated next to his grave[35]. In other places, such as the church in Zlatolist and the Osogovo Monastery, the believers can write their requests or express their gratefulness to the saint in special notebooks left in the sanctuary by the church authorities. The thanksgiving plates, left by the Lourdes Grottoes in Catholic Slovakia, could be also regarded as an example of this type of intermediary objects.

Conclusion

The examination and analysis of diverse healing practices observed at both Orthodox and Catholic sanctuaries in the Balkans and Central Europe confirm the preliminary suggestion that the basic mechanism of religious healing is **attaining contact** between the person and the sacred domain. While high theology emphasizes the spiritual communion with the transcendental, in popular faith a rich diversity of practices and body techniques has developed under the influence of pre-Christian heritage, folklore, and local cultural specificities. In search for healing and wellbeing the common believer aspires to reach the sacrum through

[33] See http://www.blitz.bg/article/434 (accessed 21.09.2016).

[34] http://www.blitz.bg/article/434 (accessed 14.09.2016).

[35] Description and analysis of this practice see in Bakalova & Lazarova 2009.

a series of intercessors: sacred times and spaces, holy images and relics, more or less common miraculous artifacts or elements of the sacred landscape, as well as a variety of intermediary objects. Religious healing practices involve **versatile body techniques** such as ritualized travel and effort, sometimes to the point of pain, as well as kneeling and genuflections, sleeping and dreaming, eating and drinking, or alternatively fasting, washing and bathing, anointing and fumigating. Furthermore, there is a rich spectrum of gestures of direct contact, even intimacy, with the sacred entities like touching, kissing, inhaling, carrying, wearing, or pressing. Thus the person aspires to be fully imbued with the sacred and merge with it in order to sanctify his or her body and mind.

The element of **purification** is also present in healing in its different aspects, such as cleaning of the body through washing, perspiration and fasting, but also as redemption of sins and spiritual renewal. Essential elements of the healing rituals are also objects with deep **symbolic implication** in the performers' culture such as the water, the cross, the tree, the apple, the belt, the thread, and the key. With their archetypal connotations they participate in the ritual and produce meaning which affects the participant's psyche and whole personality, and consequently his or her body, in order to bring healing. It is also important to note that the ritual actions are not performed mechanically as just a set of exercises, but with deep confidence and belief in the power and grace of the divine. The element of **faith** is always underlined in interviews by people who claim that '*without faith nothing can happen*' and '*faith is curing'*. Accordingly, healing practices can be viewed as bodily expressions of faith, or metaphorically speaking, as messages to the sacrum which people compose by using the language of their bodies with the hope of receiving a divine answer in the form of healing.

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