

# Miraculous Healings as a Time- and Space- Conditioned Category – The Example of St. Thecla

A. Muzur<sup>1</sup> and A. Škrobonja<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychiatry, Laboratory of Neurophysiology, Massachusetts Mental Health Center, Harvard University Medical School, Boston, USA

<sup>2</sup> Department for the History of Medicine, School of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Rijeka, Croatia

## ABSTRACT

*The phenomenon of miracle has been present in each time period and each civilization, and what has changed was not its definition but its content. Gautama Buddha, Apostle Paul, Mohammed, Church fathers from Origen and Augustine of Hippo to Gregory the Great and Thomas Aquinas were all studying miracles and trying to find out the rules and systematization for them. The present paper explores the intriguing differences (e.g., the proportions of miracle types) and similarities (e.g. saintly »specialization«) between some Eastern and Western miracle accounts, analyzing the possible underlying reasons. As a case study, the collection of miracles performed by St. Thecla (Basil of Seleukia, 5th c. AD) has been used. The major conclusion of the paper is that miracle accounts quite consequently reflect cultural differences between East and West.*

One of the ways to present miracles is the manner in which atheists present God – as the result of a human necessity, i.e. as a product of human weaknesses, complexes, and aspirations towards perfection. And indeed, what does *miraculous* mean to a human being? The victory over all that he is afraid of: resurrection as the triumph over Death and healing over Illness; mastery over wild beasts, demons, and *atmospheria* as the reflection of his everyday struggle; the produc-

tion of food as the protection from Dürer's Famine. Miracles are, according to this variant, the hallucinatory dreams and fantasies of a coward, a hypochondriac, a glutton: of a man. To that same weak soul, miracles can seem to be »designed to establish the innocence of the condemned« (*la justice de Dieu vient réparer le mal commis par la justice des hommes*).<sup>1</sup> Hence, miracles have the function of re-establishing the legal order,<sup>2</sup> but of the natural laws in general as well-off health,

of freedom for the innocent, of stable atmospheric conditions. A miracle was a necessary universal supernatural *corrigendum* of nature obviously perceived as imperfect.

On the other hand, one could consider miracles to be everything that imperils human knowledge of nature and its laws. Thus, Hume's claim that our experience is crucial for discerning miracles as opposed to natural phenomena<sup>3</sup> is not entirely correct. If one hears of a 130-year-old man, he will probably accept his existence as a possibility, although he had never before heard about a similar case. Nevertheless, if the same person is told about a resurrection of the dead, he will not believe in it, although he may have read many legends about it. The difference between the two reports is not in their isolated empirical support (which is absent in both cases), but in their contradiction or non-contradiction of the cultural fundamentals, which are the basis of an individual sense of order and security.

In the tradition of the Far East, *Gautama Buddha* had already differentiated between »the miracles of magic, the miracles of thought reading, and the miracles of instruction«<sup>4</sup>. According to this system, miraculous healings should be considered (along with levitation, going through walls, appearing and vanishing, walking on water, etc.) as a part of »the miracles of magic,« which were considered by Buddha as no more than tricks, the performance of which was characteristic to many monks. This strange and so imprecise tripartite division cannot be regarded other than as an intention to point out in an allegorical way the importance and the magnanimity of »instruction«. It is interesting that the Apostle Paul, in his view of the spiritual Church hierarchy, also orders miracle-performers only after apostles, prophets, and instructors.<sup>5</sup> When Mohammed was asked about his

miracles, he indicated the Koran as the only one, which once more corresponds to the tendency to glorify teaching. Consequently, »in early Mohammedan *Vitae Sanctorum* it is not uncommon to encounter sayings to the effect that miraculous powers are comparatively of small account«<sup>6</sup>.

In the Mediterranean cultural circle, miracles certainly do not phenomenological begin with the Bible, but the most vivid discussion of them and their exegesis probably does. Already Christ's admission that Pharisees and »false Christs and prophets« can also expel demons and produce signs<sup>7</sup> opened the gate of controversy.<sup>8</sup> *Origen* (3d c.) interprets miracles as the means without which the Apostles could not have persuaded their audience of the correctness of Christ's faith.<sup>9</sup> (The importance of this type of »proof« can be illustrated by the case of King Abgar of Edessa who had exchanged letters with Jesus and was prepared to accept Christ's religion attracted to it precisely by the healings.<sup>10</sup>) In this way the circle in which miracles provoke faith can be established, and faith is the major factor for the miracles' success.

For *Augustine of Hippo*, miracles are no longer, as they are for Origen, designed only to create an impression, but to »meet some human need« as well.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, he distinguishes between those miracles which cause only wonder (like a flying man, for example) and those »which procure great favor and good will« (as healings do)<sup>9</sup>. This question of the function of miracles actually never dies out.<sup>11</sup> Another problem – of how an invisible god can perform visible miracles – was solved by Augustine with the example of the creation of the world: *Neque enim audiendi sunt qui Deum invisibilem visibilia miracula operari negant; cum ipse etiam secundum ipsos fecerit mundum, quem certe visibile negare non possunt.*<sup>12</sup>

Gregory the Great (6th–7th c.) regarded miracles as necessary tools for conversions and as a phenomenon which increased in frequency during the periods critical for Christianity.<sup>13</sup> In the miracles described by Gregory (*Dialogorum liber quator*), a pedagogical note is obvious as well as the selection of the best examples, allegorical forgery on the one side and insistence upon testimonies on the other<sup>13</sup>.

While Augustine understands miracles as *signa Dei* within the frames of nature created by God, Thomas Aquinas teaches that they break through the barriers of the *ordo totius naturae*, and can be performed only by God.<sup>8</sup> The classification of Aquinas includes three groups of miracles.<sup>14</sup> The first group contains phenomena which are not feasible by any natural power (*quod sol retrocedat aut stet*, etc.); the miracles from the second group are events that can occur, but are unusual for this particular subject (e.g. a dog that speaks, a man who flies, etc.). The miracles of the third group, on the other hand, are those which are feasible by natural powers, but not in this manner or velocity (e.g., the instant cure of a leper). The only slight difference in the division found in the *Summa contra gentiles* is that here miracles are distinguished according to the three »degrees.« The principles of Aquinas' interpretation are still preserved in Western thought. Flew<sup>15</sup> defines miracles as phenomena by which the operations of the ordinary course of nature are overruled, suspended, or modified, which more closely resembles another division proposed by Thomas Aquinas – into *miracula supra naturam*, *miracula praeter naturam*, and *miracula contra naturam*. Although sophisticated, Aquinas' divisions are only relatively adequate for at least two reasons: first, they analyze miracles themselves and not reports of miracles, which supply the first and very often the only raw material for each investigator of the

miracle problematic. Second, they describe only the result of miracles and do not consider the mechanisms of the performances of miracles: of course, from Aquinas' point of view, the cause is God and the mechanisms are therefore inconceivable. In these purely philosophical distinctions, there is no mention either of the patient or of the healer.

Miracle is miracle, in the East as well as in the West. It is always that *phenomenon inexplicabile* – unexplainable. What changes are only our criteria, interrelated with our personal knowledge and the knowledge of the time we live in.

The collection of miracles of St. Thecla, attributed to Basil of Seleukia (5th century AD),<sup>16</sup> contains a mixture of pagan antique and Christian thaumaturgic elements, a blend that could be considered characteristic for Eastern-Mediterranean hagiography of that period. (St. Thecla's life is a prototype of an Early-Christian-Martyr life itself: In Iconium, Thecla hears Paul's preaching and for the first time encounters Christian ideas which deeply impress her. After Paul was imprisoned, Thecla escapes from home and, in spite of the intrigues launched by her fiancé Thamyris, Thecla decides to join Paul on his Apostolic ways. However, Thecla's flight is discovered and she has to face a trial: the Proconsul tries to force her to accept the marriage with Thamyris, but Thecla remains silent. Although confused, the Proconsul sends Thecla to the stake, but the fire is miraculously extinguished by an unexpected rain. After she left Iconium, Thecla meets Paul again and finally joins him as a disciple. At the gate of Antioch, they encounter Alexander, the city pimp, who immediately notices Thecla's beauty and attempts at acquiring her. Refused, Alexander succeeds at bringing Thecla to court, which assigns Thecla to a guardian Tryphaina. Very soon, Thecla stupefies the community by taming a lioness, and

Falconilla, the late Tryphaina's daughter, appears in her mother's dream and recommends the acceptance of Thecla, who intercedes by Christ in Falconilla's favor. Alexander succeeds to detach Thecla from her guardian and leads her to the beasts. Nevertheless, a lioness is tamed (again) and protects even Thecla from other animals. In a near seal pool, Thecla baptizes herself. From more beasts, a celestial fire protects Thecla, while women from the audience daze the animals by their perfumes. Because of these miraculous events, Thecla is questioned by the Governor. She defends herself from the accusations of sorcery, and is released and fully rehabilitated. Thecla leaves Antioch: at first, she joins Paul at Myra, but soon she settles down alone near Seleukia, where she dies.<sup>16)</sup>

Out of the forty-six miracles presented in Basil of Seleukia's collection (some of them are described already in Thecla's life), only fourteen are connected to healings (about 30%). How can this low percentage be explained? Benedicta Ward mentions that cures (as *ιασεις*; *signa*; *virtutes*) »are in fact singularly few« and »were a very minor matter in the desert.«<sup>17</sup> If they occurred, they were only a copy of Christ's healings.<sup>18</sup> In Cyrille of Scythopolis' collection of the miracles of Sabas, healings come only after the miracles of surviving lethal dangers and mastering beasts.<sup>19</sup> St. Anthony the Hermit refuses to help certain Martinianos with the words »Man, why are you crying in front of me? I myself am a man like you. If you believe in Christ, whom I serve, go, pray to God according to your faith, and that what you ask will come to pass.« The sixth-century Syrian stylite Maro also refused to cure the sick and possessed, claiming that the expelled devils are going to attack others and those others will come again to Maro asking for help: thus, the devils will only play game with him, and he, Maro, will become arrogant be-

cause of so many performed benefactions.<sup>20</sup> Obviously, the stylite wanted to have his peace. Elisabeth Malamut claims that the saints-healers were not a larger group than »the saints who travel following the appeal of their believers, in order to repair the effects of natural catastrophes.«<sup>21</sup>

The explanation for this »neglect« of curing miracles in the entire corpus of wonders could be various. The isolated life of the Desert Fathers could have posed a physical obstacle. However, this ceases to be a valid argument in the ninth or tenth century, when »a saint leaves the desert, circulates more freely [...], enters cities more resolutely.« Another, more speculative explication could be that the Eastern type turned away attention from the individual, stirring up fatalism and therefore decreasing the interest for healing stories. The geographic differences in human pathology should not be forgotten either.

It is, nevertheless, true, that some thinkers explicitly favored miracles of other types than healing. Apostle Paul, Mohammed, and Buddha were already mentioned in this work. The traces of this attitude can also be found in the earliest collection of miracle stories from the Japanese Buddhist tradition (ninth century), where only 5 out of 116 miracles treat healings.<sup>22</sup> Don Baker, analyzing the situation in Korea, has to conclude as well that miracles were propagated as healing »methods« only in the earliest periods of the establishment of the new religion in those territories.<sup>23</sup>

Salvation from danger (cc. 25%) and vengeance and the punishment of sinners represent a considerable group among St. Thecla's miracles. Such a high percentage of the »miracles of punishment« (*Strafmirakel*) is, none the less, no longer an exclusive Eastern-collections characteristic. We find this type of miracles abundantly represented in the Western-saints *Vitas*

and *Miraculas* as well, up to twelfth century (cf. St. Cuthberth's miracles from the eleventh-twelfth century, where healings, thanks to the large quantity of miracles of punishment, make up less than 20% of the total number of miracles<sup>24</sup>). The miracles of punishment could be more easily connected with the period of the establishment of a new religious system: as soon as it becomes more or less stable, they cede in favor of the healing miracles<sup>25</sup> (cf. the change of this ratio in the collections from the »transitional period« of the twelfth century: St. Foe's headings – 43%; St. Vulfran's – 75%; St. Gibrien's – 96%<sup>26</sup> etc.).

Christianity was spread by hope, rhetoric, threats, and force, and miracles certainly played an important persuasive role in this process (cf. the story of King Abgar of Edessa<sup>10</sup>). The use of miracles in the fight against competition is common for all religions. However, the Christian tradition obviously did not offer any efficient replacement for miracles in the following phase, differing therefore essentially from Buddhism, which comprised rich elements of Indian and Chinese medical heritage.<sup>23</sup> Thus, Buddhism could have used miracles only in the beginning, in order to eliminate the shaman competition, while after the consolidation of its positions, Buddhism turned towards regular and routine procedures.<sup>23</sup> For Buddhism, miracles were only a necessity of the given time. Christianity, on the other hand, continued to make use of miraculous healings on a massive scale after its consolidation period as well. This was either because it did not possess satisfying medical knowledge or a theological-philosophical-medical conception of health and disease, or for purely economic reasons (pilgrims as a source of incomes).

Another feature, which divides East and West, at least from the point of view of miraculous healings, is method. St. Thecla primarily visited her patients in

their dreams (*incubatio*) and advised them how to treat their illnesses. This type of saintly help, »where God shows Himself and grants health, or, more often, indicates a treatment to be followed,«<sup>27</sup> known only sporadically in Western collections, was widely spread among Eastern healers, especially Cosma and Damian, Cyr and John, Artemius of Constantinople, and others. Incubation was a very familiar method in Antiquity, practiced in Asklepios' temples. It can be connected with the general belief that dreams are some kind of an »intermediate state« where contact with a god can be established more likely and easily than while awake. According to one explanation, incubation is based upon the belief that, by night, saints visit the cities standing under their protection.<sup>25</sup> Since this belief was not established before the fourth-fifth century, this explanation can not be satisfying. In addition, it should not be forgotten that the states especially conducive to the effects of suggestion are »tiredness, sleepiness, semiconscious states immediately before falling asleep and immediately after awakening.«<sup>28</sup>

Incubation was not the only antique relic taken over by the early Christian (particularly Eastern) saints. The man of Antiquity would have understood the logic:

disease → medication + divine help  
→ cure.

Indeed, Asclepios was known to scrub the roots of herbs, prepare draughts, and mix ointments. In the early thaumaturgic pattern, this attitude was preserved, and St. Thecla recommended the use of healing oil and magic ointment; she has been described treating a diseased leg,<sup>16</sup> etc. Among miracles performed by Saints Cyr and John, there is often a mention of *pharmakon*.<sup>29</sup> When they appeared in a dream to a certain Epiphanius, they performed an apparent abdominal-surgical

operation.<sup>30</sup> Elisabeth Malamut writes about an Egyptian monk from the fifth century, who received »from our Lord the grace of healing by applying consecrated oil.«<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the dogmatized medieval Christian mind obviously lost the consciousness of any limits to God's potential, and material medications became less needed. This process of the de-medication of healing continued with a transitional period, during which consecrated wells were used,<sup>16</sup> as well as magic stones,<sup>16</sup> etc. Finally, saints began to cure only by touching or praying, and the competition from physicians had to be neutralized by stressing the doctors' professional impotence, as done by Basil of Sleeker or Gregory of Tours. The »settling of the accounts« culminated later in a clear anathema on medications (cf. *si bonus peregrinus esses, curam tui corporis Deo et sancto Fiaccio ex toto committeres, contemptis aliis medicis, et omnium illorum medicinis*<sup>25</sup>).

Thecla was, typical of the early Christian tradition, still a universal healer. In the West, probably due to competition among the increased number of shrines,<sup>31</sup> in the late Middle Ages, saints »specialized« in certain diseases or groups of diseases. However, in the East, loyal to the Asclepian custom, this specialization never reached Western dimensions and importance: saints (like Cosma and Damian, Cyr and John, Artemius of Constantinople) remained only healers – »general practitioners.« In certain regions of the world (Nepal and Punjab, for instance), Muslim saints specialized as well – Sakhi Sarwar for eye complaints, Makhdum Sahib for eye diseases and exorcisms, Shaikh Saddu for melancholy, Guga Pir and Madar Shah for snake bites, Pir Jahaniya for leprosy, etc.<sup>32</sup> The same occurred with Brazilian traditional

healers, *razadores*, who combine autochthonous Indian methods with Christian elements, and are strictly »specialized« in curing »earache, toothache, hemorrhage, burns, dermatosis, and for natural culture-bound syndromes such as *espinhella caida* (fallen espinhella)«. <sup>33</sup> In Buddhism, the division was made, but only up to the different faces of the same divinity (*Yaksa yorae* = the Buddha of Healing, etc.<sup>23</sup>), which can be compared to the ancient Roman »articulation« of Jupiter into *Jupiter Stator*, *Jupiter Tonans*, etc. Although the specialization of saints as a redistribution of divine power recalls a certain revitalization of pagan polytheism, this was never a serious objection made by the theologians. Could this fact be explained by the inextricable clew of the conception of the Unity of the Multitude and the Manifoldness of the Unity, which was extending throughout our civilization, from the late Neoplatonic doctrine of the hennadic gods<sup>34</sup> to Cusanus' teaching on God as containing all things in himself, culminating in the conception of Holy Trinity?

It seems sometimes that everything important started in the East – light, script, states, religions: even when the West collapsed under barbaric hooves, the East remained standing. However, during the centuries that followed, the theocratic rigidity of the society and constant undermining of the *antemurale* by various types of eastern »plagues« isolated the medieval East in a certain way, connected more firmly to the antique past than to the future. Even in one single miracle collection, the differences in developmental dynamics between East and West can be observed – in the ways of thinking, writing, and acting. These differences can be traced up to the present day.

## REFERENCES

1. ROUSSET, P., *Le Moyen Age*, 1–2 (1956) 33. —
2. SCHEIBELREITER, G., *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 74 (1992) 274. — 3. HUME, D.: An enquiry concerning human understanding. A letter from a gentleman to his friend in Edinburgh. (Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis, IN, 1977. — 4. MCHENRY, R. (Ed.): *The new encyclopaedia Britannica*, 15th ed. (Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., Chicago, 1993). — 5. DEMM, E., *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte*, 57 (1975) 303. — 6. NICKOLSON, R. A.: *The Mystics of Islam*. (Schocken Books, New York, 1975). — 7. UYTFANGHE, M.: *Hagiographie cultures et sociétés*. (Études Augustiniennes, Paris, 1981). — 8. MISCHO, J., *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie*, 12 (1970) 75, 84. — 9. BROWN, C.: *Miracle and the critical mind*. (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1984). — 10. EUSEBIUS OF CESAREA: *Histoire ecclésiastique*, trans. G. Bardy, *Sources Chrétienne* 31. (Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 1978). — 11. BOESCH GAJANO, S.: *Les fonctions des saints dans le monde occidental (IIIe – XIIIe siècle): Actes du colloque organisé par l'École française de Rome avec le concours de l'Université de Rome »La Sapienza«*. (École française de Rome, Roma, 1991). — 12. AURELIUS AUGUSTINUS: *De civitate dei*. (Paris, 1843). — 13. McCREADY, W. D.: *Signs of sanctity: Miracles in the thought of Gregory the Great*. (Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto, 1989). — 14. THOMAS AQUINAS: *Summa theologiae*. (Edizioni Paoline, Milano, 1988). — 15. EDWARDS, P. (Ed.): *The encyclopaedia of philosophy*. (The Macmillan Co. & The Free Press, New York, 1967). — 16. BASIL OF SELEUKIA: *Vie et miracles de Sainte Thecle*, trans. and comment. Gilbert Dagron, *Subsidia hagiographica* 62. (Société des Bollandistes, Bruxelles, 1978). — 17. WARD, B.: *Signs and wonders: Saints, miracles and prayers from the 4th century to the 14th century*. (Variorum, Hampshire, 1992). — 18. PATLAGEAN, E., *Annales: Économies – Sociétés – Civilisations*, 23 (1968) 117. — 19. FLUSIN, B.: *Hagiographie, culture et société*. (Études Augustiniennes, Paris, 1981). — 20. HORDEN, P.: *Maladie et société Byzance*. (Centro italiano di studi sull' alto medioevo, Spoleto, 1993). — 21. MALLAMUT, E.: *Sur la route des saints byzantins*. (CNRS Éditions, Paris, 1993). — 22. KYOKAI: *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition: The Nihon ryoiki of the Monk Kyokai*, trans. Kyoko Motomochi Nakamura. (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1973). — 23. BAKER, D., *Korean studies*, 18 (1994) 52. — 24. FOX, C., B. DICKINS (Eds.): *The early cultures of north-west Europe*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1950). — 25. RENDTEL, C.: *Hochmittelalterliche Mirakelberichte als Quelle zur Sozial- und Mentalitätsgeschichte und zur Geschichte der Heligenverehrung: Untersucht an Texten insbesondere aus Frankreich*. In *Germ. Ph. D. Thesis*. (Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin, 1985). — 26. SIGAL, P. A., *Annales: Économies – Sociétés – Civilisations*, 24 (1969) 1527. — 27. DELEHAYE, H.: *Les légendes hagiographiques*, 4th ed., *Subsidia hagiographica* 18. (Société des Bollandistes, Brussels, 1955). — 28. BRAUCHLE, A.: *Hypnose und Autosuggestion*. (Philipp Reclam jun., Leipzig, 1935). — 29. GOLTZ, D., *Sudhoffs Archiv: Vierteljahrschrift für Geschichte der Medizin und der Naturwissenschaften der Pharmazie und der Mathematik* 50 (1966) 394. — 30. PEETERS, P., *Analecta Bollandiana*, 25 (1906) 235. — 31. BUTSCH, M., *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie*, 27 (1985) 223. — 32. WILSON, S.: *Saints and their cults*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985). — 33. NGOKWEY, N., *Social Science Medicine*, 29 (1989) 518. — 34. STEEL, C., *Iamblichus and the theological interpretation of the Parmenides*. (Public lecture on Central European University in Budapest, March 11th, 1996).

A. Škrobonja

*Department for the History of Medicine, School of Medicine, University of Rijeka, Braće Branchetta 20, 51000 Rijeka, Croatia*

## **ČUDESNA OZDRAVLJENJA KAO PROSTORNO I VREMENSKI UVJETOVANA KATEGORIJA: PRIMJER SVETE TEKLE**

### **S A Ž E T A K**

Fenomen čuda prisutan je u svim vremenima i civilizacijama, a ono što podliježe promjenama nije njegova definicija već sadržaj. Gautama Buddha, apostol Pavao, Muhamed, crkveni oci od Origena i Augustina Hiponskog do Grgura Velikog i Tome Akvinskog proučavali su čuda i pokušavali za njih iznaći pravila i sistematizacije. Ovaj se članak bavi ispitivanjem intrigantnih razlika (npr. u proporcijama vrsta čuda) i sličnostima (npr. svetačka »specijalizacija«) između nekih istočnjačkih i zapadnih izvješća o čudima, raščlanjujući moguće razloge koji stoje u njihovoj pozadini. Za oglednu je studiju odabrana zbirka čuda svete Tekle (iz pera Bazila iz Seleukije, V. st.). Među najznačajnijim je zaključcima članka da zbirke izvješća o čudima prilično dosljedno oslikavaju opće kulturne različitosti Istoka i Zapada.