Magical healing in modern times

The case of a Dutch medium

By Jacques Janssen

In August 1965, *De Tijd De Maasbode* – the then leading Roman Catholic newspaper in the Netherlands – published an extensive report of a trip to Lourdes by journalist Herman Hofhuizen. Nothing remarkable in itself. Miracles, apparitions and pilgrimages were among the newspaper’s stock news items and new occurrences were regularly featured under bold headlines. The other Catholic daily, *de Volkskrant*, followed suit. When the humorously writer Godfried Bomans reports on ‘The Miracle of Syracuse’, though his contagious wit shines through in places, the headline and the tenor of his contribution are clear and unambiguous: ‘Scientific research incomplete, but … the lame walk and the blind see in Syracuse’ (*de Volkskrant*, February 20, 1954). And when a communist worker is cured in Lourdes and promptly converted to Catholicism, our correspondent reports: ‘Politburo in disarray’ (*de Volkskrant*, September 5, 1956).

Hofhuizen’s report exudes a different atmosphere altogether. Any trace of triumphalism has vanished and the article resonates with scepticism and above all ambivalence: ‘Lourdes is a sorry mess. I am of course also referring to the rows upon rows of shops and little stores. … But what is particularly messy about Lourdes is the inextricable mingling of evident faith and equally evident superstition, of sincere worship and insincere hysteria.’ The procession of the sick is depicted by Hofhuizen as ‘a shameless parade of all manner of human suffering’. He continues: ‘It was totally insane. It was barbaric. A carnivalesque assembly of damaged human beings, of mere fragments of human beings in some cases.’ On entering the baths of Lourdes, his reaction was: ‘I’m not just getting out of here, I’m getting out of Lourdes. This is atavistic nonsense, a kind of fetishism that could not be further removed from faith. (But) I stayed and I pushed the incongruity so far that I spent a long hour and a half trying to help people who had come to submit themselves to the appalling ritual.’

Hofhuizen’s outpourings unleashed a storm of condemnations and letters to the editor. His frankness cost him dearly. I should like to ponder his experience for a moment, for his reaction is not only of all times and hence also of this time, it also reminds me of my own ambivalence. Pilgrimages appeal to me, they move me. They prompt reflections that I would not wish to miss. Just last summer in Roncesvalles, for example, I passed the graves of the pilgrims who had expired along the route of the famous camino. And I thought, you can’t really die more graciously than that: on the road, moving in the
right direction, not yet there but reaching one's destination all the same. But when I see people in Lourdes staggering under overweight candles or lugging gallons of water like pack mules – 'viel hilft viel' [more helps more] as Kurt Tucholski (1957) observed on his visit to Lourdes – it bothers me. When I go to Tiel, a Dutch town in the neighbourhood of Nijmegen, to watch faith healer Jomanda do her stuff, and there is this man trying to see whether his paralysed wife can already stand on her own feet after Jomanda's first treatment, I feel sorry for these people but at the same time I am overcome by anger. Offering hope where there is none, what could be worse? How naive should people be allowed to be? How gullible? And yet: will this kind of critical analysis not kill any kind of religious life? Is it possible to breathe in an agnostic vacuum that questions everything and robs people of life's little pleasures? And is it possible to distinguish one from the other? Or is it all the same: one long stream of atavistic nonsense running from the Jordan, the mother of all rivers, to the river Waal that streams along Tiel?

I shall address these pressing questions analysing the Jomanda phenomenon, using Lourdes as a point of reference. I shall focus on two aspects which I believe actuate the ambivalence. In the first place, science is flouted: the lame walk and the blind see. Anyone who counts on this happening is a fool, anyone who promises it a charlatan. Michel de Montaigne thought that it should be possible to preserve one's clarity of mind and yet be a Catholic (1993[1588]) but is that still possible in an age when our world-view is dictated by science? In the second place, our aesthetic sensibilities are under fire. Kitsch seems to be an inevitable side effect of pilgrimages and apparitions. It hurts the eyes to see the things that are going on and they all look alike.

Scientific comments

Jomanda, 'the link between heaven and earth', started her healing activities in the early 1990s and has since become a household name and a member of the inner circle of 'well-known Dutch personalities'. At the height of her fame she staged mass healing sessions in a Tiel events hall attended by an average of 25,000 people a month (Janssen 1996). Though this number has since dwindled considerably, Jomanda has meanwhile set up shop in a chapel in Valkenburg and makes weekly appearances on Call TV, a Saturday morning talk show broadcast by Veronica, a commercial TV station. Her pretensions are unchanged. Jomanda can put us in touch with the higher world and that higher world can heal us using her as a medium. With Jomanda, the sky is the limit: any conceivable disease can be cured, including cancer and AIDS. Her brochures tell us: 'Medical science treats malignant cancer cells with radiation. Unfortunately, such treatment simultaneously damages the good cells. ... Jomanda, however, is a conduit for spiritual radiation that destroys only the evil cells', and further on: 'AIDS is a disease that can be cured by
the Divine world'. Medically hopeless cases are indeed over-represented among her clientele, with most people turning to Jomanda, only when they are through with doctoring. The hopeless case is her speciality. Scientific investigation of these claims is scanty, and what is known does not paint a pretty picture. The psychologist and physicist E. Vervaet (1995, 1997) reviewed all the cures claimed to have resulted from Jomanda's treatment and did not find a single case that could even remotely be called a miraculous cure. Some cases border on deceit: people who have never been blind regain their sight before our very eyes. Or as Jewish humour has it: the lame can see and the blind walk. True, it is possible to distinguish a wide range of effects on the continuum between deceit and effective healing. In particular I would not rule out the possibility that a visit to Jomanda can make you feel good and so activate the self-healing capacity that we all, thank God, possess (Janssen 1996). But as far as I am concerned, the heart of the matter is that Jomanda capitalizes on self-deceit and illusion. We are all sensitive to illusion, 'We who must die demand a miracle,' wrote W.H. Auden. We do so want to see our desires fulfilled and we would love to be the exception that proves the rule. Jomanda's healing service is a shameless exploitation of these desires. It is like a tombola: there is a chance of cure with new prizes to be won every week. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

That a lottery of human happiness inevitably leads to ethically distasteful practices should surely come as no surprise. Jomanda herself made my meaning painfully clear during a KRO Kruispunt television broadcast (March 19, 1995). She diagnosed – over the airwaves – a woman suffering from cancer and then proceeded to reassure her: she would overcome the disease. A short time later, the woman died. Her indignant relatives were then told by Jomanda that her prognosis had been correct at the moment it was given, but that the family had failed to renew contact with her at the moment when the disease took a fatal turn. In other words: those who get well, do so thanks to Jomanda's psychic intervention, those who do not have only themselves to blame. A reasoning both irrefutable and invidious. You come across it everywhere in the paranormal circuit. It is the hallmark of the charlatan.

But how about Lourdes? Is what happens there not essentially the same, followed by the same unwarranted claims. Let me relate a short history to elaborate this question. When Émile Zola attempted in his novel Lourdes (1894) to find a scientific explanation for what goes on in Lourdes, his book – a ranking best seller with 150,000 copies sold within five months of publication – was placed on the Index (Siebelink 1991). He had supposedly desecrated the miracle. In those days the Roman Catholic Church saw miracles as direct signs from God, interventions from above which came about not in keeping with, but rather in defiance of, prevailing scientific ideas. Accordingly, there was nothing contradictory about looking for a 'supernatural explanation' (Schellinckx 1933); indeed, this was in line with the tradition of the proofs of God. Lourdes was the living proof of the limits of science and an
indictment against a laicized society and secularized scientific rationalism. Enlightened circles also censured Zola for his sincere attempt to understand what was going on, derisively dubbing him ‘l’abbé Zola’. A well-known caricature by Théophile Steinlein portrays him as a devout pilgrim.

Zola had made a thorough study of the subject and visited Lourdes many times. He had had extensive conversations with Dr Boissarie, the founder and first director of the ‘Bureau des Constatations’, the medical board at Lourdes that kept and keeps a watch on miraculous recoveries (Boissarie 1907, Siebelink 1991). Each and every miracle is painstakingly screened: the disease must have been serious, the recovery sudden, total and without medical intervention. In consultation with every physician present at the occurrence, a board of doctors pronounces judgement on the miraculousness of any recovery. This procedure leads to almost continual disappointment. Every explicable recovery is rejected. Many patients have been grieved to find that their recovery is not acknowledged as miraculous and, as a result, the Bureau has become known also as the ‘Bureau des Contestations’: that is the contesting bureau. The total number of miracles (up to 1984) is 64, against some 6,000 recovery claims and over 2 million sick people. The number of recoveries, miraculous or otherwise, is thus fairly large: 1 in 333 cases (Dowling 1984). Something happens then, and fairly often. But only one in every one hundred cures is officially recognized as miraculous.

To this day, Lourdes continues to be the most popular place of pilgrimage in the Western world. Over 5 million people seek refuge there each year (Ostling 1991). However, the number of miracles appears to stagnate: given the current state of medical knowledge, the exacting procedure rules out virtually any chance of miraculous conclusions. Much is unknown, much is inexplicable, but the odds against medical processes running contrary to current knowledge appear to be overwhelming. Although not everybody is agreed on this. Bishop Bär testified to a big-hearted view of the matter, although one marvels at his reasoning. As he said: ‘If at a given moment science cannot explain a recovery, then such a recovery is certainly miraculous at that stage. As medical science advances there is – strange to say – less need for miracles. Then the number of inexplicable cures naturally declines’ (Tervoort 1991). Strange indeed. But even the old tradition of seeking ‘supernatural’ explanations for religious phenomena, if need be with the help of psychology, has not entirely vanished. Witness a recent study by the psychologist Van den Aardweg (1990). His book derives some authority from an introduction by Dutch cardinal Simonis, but very little from worldly, scientific psychology. Van den Aardweg appeals to parapsychology in order to explain the wondrous apparitions and occurrences at Fatima. He reproaches his adversaries for their ‘reflexive, irrational aversion’ to inexplicable phenomena (p. 31), i.e. a modern version of what used to be called ‘thaumatophobia’ (fear of miracles).

However that may be, the Roman Catholic Church has clearly changed tack since those days. Miracle cures have always been downplayed, not to
shed doubt on the power of divine intervention but to dampen the expectations of the sick. English anthropologists conducting field research into ritual practice at Lourdes concluded that the miracle discourse ('God intervenes to show us His might') was gradually watered down and has now been abandoned altogether (Eade & Sallnow 1991). It has been transposed into a discourse of suffering. The faithful who come to Lourdes now learn to accept their suffering, inspired by the example of Christ, who took up his own cross. Recovery has clearly been banished from the pattern of expectations. In such cases as may arise, today's stretcher-bearers have orders to contact the Bureau without further ado. The hysterical excitement that attended recovery in Zola's days is avoided. The patient coming to Lourdes transforms his suffering into a religious context. People pray: 'Lord, that I may see, that I may see your truth; Lord, that I may walk, that I may go your way; Lord, that I may hear, that I may hear your message'. Research has shown that in contemporary, classical pilgrimages, religious motives predominate (Pieper & Van Uden 1994). The atmosphere of eager agitation surrounding a Jomanda session is totally absent.

The culture and procedure observed in Lourdes are in my view preferable by far to the goings-on in Tiel, although some improvement is still possible. The 'Bureau des Constatations', for example, is a 19th-century relic, with pretensions that can no longer be maintained. Such miracles as survive close scrutiny are what Kurt Tucholski (1957) scornfully called 'Wunder von Ärzte': miracles that bear nothing but the stamp of medical ignorance. And if God really does intervene directly in our world, why does he not do it more often, as the English theologian Don Cupitt (1984) put it with characteristic understatement. I have now received support for my view from unimpeachable quarters. Miracles have recently become a source of unease for the Congregation for Beatification and Canonization in Rome. In order to be able to canonize someone, unless that person was a martyr, the congregation requires at least two miracles. But — small wonder — doctors all over the world, and particularly in the western world, are now less and less willing or able to supply the scientific statement of a miracle. Voices have been raised in the Congregation, therefore, to alter the procedure and drop the miracle requirement (NRC Handelsblad, December 27, 1997).

Aesthetic comments

Among a swarm of witnesses, the American sociologist Stjepan Meštrovic testified that postmodern culture will end in superficiality and kitsch. The religious alternative offered by the New Age movement is, he believes, only a surrogate religion. He refers specifically to the kitsch surrounding the recent apparitions of Mary in Medjugorje, which he contrasts with the authenticity of Lourdes and Fatima (Meštrovic 1991). And indeed, if we look at Tiel, the
overwhelming impression of a healing service is the sheer ugliness and banality of it all. Everything in our society degenerates into entertainment: after info-tainment, the format in which postmodern man wishes to be informed, we now have religio-tainment as well. Not ‘truth’, not ‘virtue’, not ‘beauty’, but ‘fun’ is the current criterion. One could use the term Milton coined in Paradise Lost, and describe the religion of many of our contemporaries as a ‘gay religion’, a joyful religion that brings salvation and absolution, happiness and good health. Away with suffering, conflict and ambivalence – this is the religion of the psychologists (Janssen 1998). The happy-go-lucky church. I thought this term was my own fanciful invention until I heard a minister or evangelist from the town of Baarn telling a radio reporter that they had renamed the children’s service the lucky church. So it actually exists. In contemporary sociology there is some cautious talk of a McDonaldization of society. Before long some progressive pastor will advertise the Holy Communion as a Happy Meal to draw a younger crowd.

The problem that Meštrovic refers to is both actual and real, but it is a problem of all times. One of the interesting books written about Lourdes is Les foules de Lourdes by Joris-Karl Huysmans, written in 1906. Huysmans was a conservative, if not reactionary, Catholic and had no problem seeing the hand of God at work in Lourdes. But the aesthete in him saw something else as well: the inexpressible ugliness of what went on there. The paintings, he wrote, were made by a Catholic drunkard and would just about do for a chocolate box; the church, built in Casino style, looked like a cross between a railway platform and a race track; the hymns people sang were the jingles of piety. The explanation that Huysmans gave for this ubiquitous ugliness is allegorical, but worth mentioning for all that. He said that just before Mary trampled it underfoot, the snake – at Lourdes Mary is depicted standing on a globe while trampling the devil, a snake, with her feet – had bitten her in the hem of her dress. Meaning that the devil gave the souls to Mary on condition of banality: ‘you shall have the souls, I shall have beauty’. A costly sacrifice in the eyes of Huysmans the aesthete, who is rumoured to have entered the church not through the door but through a stained-glass window.

It seems we are faced with an eternal paradox. Religion concerns people’s survival: it is their existence that is on the line. Religion is under a constant threat of being reduced to just that, a survival strategy, a banal form of ‘Katastrophenbewältigung’, ‘terror management’ as it is called in contemporary psychology (Pyszczynski, Greenberg & Solomon 1997). Human existence is difficult, but we have found a fix. In many New Age publications and practices – including Jomanda’s performances – the paradox of our existence seems to have been prematurely resolved. ‘Anything goes’, as long as we are nice to one another. There are no restrictions. This has a disastrous effect on both art and religion, which are inevitably reduced to kitsch and superstition.

This aesthetic argument is based on psychological and philosophical grounds. ‘An object will give rise to an impression of beauty,’ psychologists
Boselie and Leeuwenberg (1984) wrote, ‘when it is cognitively represented as having two qualities which according to the knowledge embodied in the representational system are incompatible’. That is to say: we find something beautiful if it incorporates two seemingly incompatible qualities. Take a statue by Michelangelo: it is the incompatibility of the hardness of the marble and the corporeality of the bosom hewn in it that determines the beauty of the representation. Art baffles us, it grabs us by the throat: this is not what it appears to be. Jomanda’s performance, on the other hand, is utterly lacking in such beauty. From an existential perspective, too, Jomanda’s performance is characteristically lacking in tension: what you see, is what you get. The all-embracing, simplistic positivity of her approach, which is after all supposed to bring a cure for incurable diseases within reach, is in stark contrast to human experience. Man seeks solace, to be sure, but true solace, according to philosopher Cornelis Verhoeven (1965), is drenched in grief: ‘to speak about solace is to speak about grief’. The most we can hope to achieve is to participate in the collective primeval grief. Jomanda’s message, according to Verhoeven, belongs to the category of amusement: ‘an obstinate denial of anything that reeks of melancholy, an attempt to shut man up in a wafer of joy’. This relaxation of tension is a threat to any religion.

Needless to say, Jomanda’s qualities as a visionary are limited and in terms of seriousness, consistency, sincerity and conviction a far cry from those of Bernadette, the girl to whom Mary appeared in Lourdes. Bernadette touched the hearts of many, including many non-Catholics (see for instance the biography Das Lied von Bernadette by Franz Werfel). The questions that might be asked about her psychological constitution are easily forgotten in the light of her sheer presence. She inspired writers, singers and poets. Leonard Cohen dedicated a beautiful song to her, that was recently recorded by Jennifer Warnes (Famous blue raincoat).

Song of Bernadette

there was a child named Bernadette
    I heard the story long ago
she saw the queen of heaven once
    and kept the vision in her soul
no one believed what she had seen
    no one believed what she heard
that there were sorrows to be healed
    and mercy, mercy in this world
so many hearts I find
    broke like yours and mine,
torn by what we’ve done and can’t undo
    I just want to hold you
won’t you let me hold you
    like Bernadette would do
In Bernadette’s wounded heart people recognize their own pain. Her pain is thus the starting point. That she was psychologically wounded seems plausible to me. There are sufficient indications to justify such a view (Carroll 1985). That her vision was, technically speaking, a hallucination strikes me as equally plausible. But that does not make it nonsense. On the contrary, it only makes her more convincing. Even if her experience lies in the realm of pathology, that does not mean to say that it is worthless. In his valedictory lecture, the psychologist of religion, Weima (1990), stripped the genuine vision of all hallucinatory and pathological aspects. In his view, seers ought to be psychologically sound. I don’t understand that. To start with, such a view gags psychologists. I cannot say anything about any other reality than observable reality. Besides, the sick human being is a reality, he or she is as real as the healthy person. The sick person may confront us with more questions and problems, but may also tell us more about our curious existence. In my view, to follow Weima’s approach would be to miss the point. Surely Van Gogh’s paintings were produced by a talent that was enhanced rather than obstructed by his pathology. Surely he touches us precisely because he was damaged. Had he been healthy and realistic, like ordinary people, his art would have become a trick: happy painting.

That ‘there were sorrows to be healed and mercy, mercy in this world.’ I can’t imagine such lyrics being written about Jomanda. Her personage is too transparent, too photographic. She is too mediagenic, too healthy, too smart and too rational. She’s nobody’s girl. As representatives from the other world go, Jomanda is the ideal guest on any TV talk show. Her pseudo-sermons can do no harm and won’t hurt the ratings: ‘as you say yourself, madam, if we would all just be nice to one another, the world would be a better place’. If ever a song is written about Jomanda, it will not be a ballad but a tearjerker. There is nothing more to it than that. The comparison may be unfair, but it is one that is forced on me. In all her appearances and all her aspirations, Jomanda claims to be our mediator with another world. I happen to know better examples, and why settle for less?

Stones for Bread

It is a sound Dutch custom to be critical, highly critical, of miracles and apparitions. Erasmus, for one, was renowned for his scepticism. From that same era stems the testimony of a Dutch monk who had come to Rome to protest against the practices going on in the Irish pilgrimage place of Lough Derg, where people were given to believe that they would have a first-hand experience of Saint Patrick’s purgatory. Our monk had experienced nothing and maintained that it was a cheap swindle. Dutch Calvinists did not wait for Calvin himself to be born! The protest was initially successful, for Lough Derg was closed down at the Pope’s behest in 1495. Success was short-lived,
however, and the numbers of pilgrims going to Lough Derg every year are still considerable.

How critical should we be? It cannot be denied that Jomanda's healing service caters to a demonstrable if dwindling need. Many are those who have found their way to Tiel. Some appreciation for Jomanda's performance has been expressed in ecclesiastical as well as medical circles. In my view, such broad-mindedness and appreciation is too often based on indolence. Jomanda has taken a far too complex load of problems on her far too fragile shoulders, a load that ought to be carried by doctors and pastoral carers. Many doctors, the psychologist Calis found, refuse to address the psychological aspects of people's suffering: 'they cannot deal with it', 'the doctor backs out' (Krol 1995). And he continues: 'there is simply an open market for people who can do something about that great suffering. In this respect, Jomanda meets a social need'. There is a gap of similar dimensions on the spiritual market. Tolerance is preached, particularly in Catholic circles. Jomanda is a Catholic, her ritual clearly draws on Catholicism and her supernatural gifts are gratefully accepted. In talking to various pastors, I found that they do not advise their parishioners against visiting Jomanda and even condone such visits, thinking 'there's no harm in it, even if it doesn't do any good'. It looks to me like a sign, not so much of broad-mindedness, but of impotence and buck-passing. And in thus giving people stones for bread, they contribute to the ongoing marginalization of the church. Just over a century ago, Émile Zola arrived at the same conclusion in the final pages of his novel Lourdes and little seems to have changed since then: 'Ah! Sad people; poor, sick, illusion - hungry humanity that knows - in the despondency of this ending century, desperate and injured because it has greedily swallowed an excess of science - it is being abandoned by the doctors of body and soul, while in grave danger of succumbing to an incurable disease, then makes a sudden retreat and looks for the miracle of its cure to the mystical 'Lourdes' of a past that is dead and gone forever' (my translation).

Literature


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