

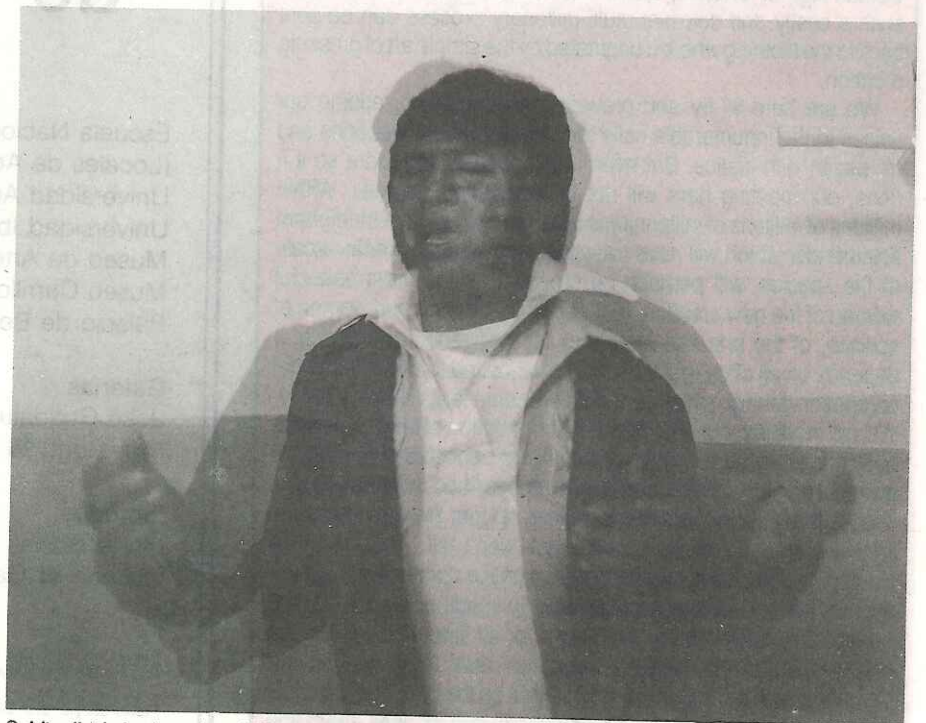
Silvia Ortiz

# Spiritualists Use their Faith to Heal

Accused of quackery, segregated from other religions, labeled the product of ignorance, in Mexico the spiritualist religion is one of the most deeply rooted beliefs of people from all social levels. Despite the contempt shown towards it, this religious practice has its own philosophy of the world and of man, and has developed forms of spiritual healing which deal with the moral evolution of its believers and involve a humanistic attitude towards life which searches for a balance between material and spiritual forms of existence. Seen from a different angle, the spiritualist religion finds its source in folkways and folk knowledge, and maintains its validity when compared to the other beliefs which make up the religious and cultural plurality of Mexico. In this number Silvia Ortiz, author of *Spiritual healing in Mexico* offers an advance on her investigation of Spiritualism, which she has worked on for almost fifteen years. Sergio López Ramos, psychologist and university professor, has written a description of the Spiritualist temples in Mexico which was approved by long-time adepts of this religion before publication.

The process of cultural confrontation which began in Mexico in the 16th century, initiated the penetration and domination of the western culture over local cultural groups. Today's multi-cultural society demonstrates various levels of penetration, assimilation, incorporation and resistance by dominated cultural groups, in spite of repressive mechanisms used by the dominant group in the past and up to the present.

In the area of health and medicine, the current co-existence of different medical systems offers various alternatives for healing which have generated in the melting pot of cultural diversity. Modern health services refer to the prevention of and attention to illness in the framework established by western culture in the scientific development of medical science, in contrast and in opposition to traditional medicine which



Researcher, National Institute of Anthropology and History.

Spiritualist in body and soul. Photo by Mariana Yampolsky.



A spiritual healing. Photo by Mariana Yampolsky.

persists in various parts of the society. This medicine includes various empirical, traditional medical practices, which have been maintained continuously and permanently in these cultural groups.

Western medicine established its dominance with the support of the State, constructed its official character with the endorsement of constitutional laws, and imposed its dominance in the creation of a sole medical model. That is, as an exclusive therapeutic system, which logically excluded other existing healing practices, with the aim of ensuring its social, economic, political and ideological dominion and reproduction.

The dominating medical ideology is based on scientific validity, with increasing technological development and advancing specialization. The great advance of medical science and its technological resources in capitalist development has an important role in the consumer market with its monopolization by an elite, and the possibilities of access to this medicine - either private or institutional - is reduced for the poorer social classes.

For these marginated classes, the real possibility of health attention in this

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kind of medicine is limited to access to the lowest levels of its scientific capacity, either in mediocre private medicine or in the state health institutions, where medical efficiency is limited due to the fact that demand is greater than real capacity.

The problems suffered in Mexico in the field of medical care are well known, and present a severe contrast between rural and urban areas. Medical science, linked as it is with social, economic and political interests of ideological reproduction, prefers to attend those cultural groups and social classes with a certain inclination in favor of the project of cultural homogenization.

The supremacy of this medicine has not managed to satisfy the demand for

medical services of the entire population, nor has it eliminated the forms and processes of traditional medicine. These systems of traditional health care co-exist with medical science in the global social structure, for some as a residue of the past and in opposition to their integrationist purposes, and for others as a principle of cultural ideological autonomy.

### Spiritual Health Care

Religious healing is one system among many traditional medical practices, and its healing techniques are mainly based on symbolic efficacy and the use of empirical cognitive abilities rather than customary therapies and medicines. Here we will examine one kind of religious healing, that practised in the Trinitary Mariano Spiritualist Temples.

The origins of this group are urban, but it has currently spread to all states of Mexico, in rural and urban communities, with several million proselytes. There are also spiritualist temples in communities of Mexican workers in the United States.

The Spiritualist Movement was founded as a church in Mexico City in 1866, as a dissident group from the Catholic Church, with the name of the Mexican Patriarchal Church of Elias. This church was divided into seven churches or seals, following the model of St. John's Apocalypse.

The founder, Roque Rojas Esparza, became the charismatic leader of the new doctrine, and is recognized as the Mexican Messiah, the promised Elias or Messiah of the third epoch, with the mission of saving the humble and dispossessed of the Mexican nation, considered the new Jerusalem. The third epoch of humanity is characterized by the development of human spirituality before the impending Apocalypse, which, like a grand hectatomb, will show the way to a definitive change and recognition for the followers of the divine laws.

The belief that the change of millennium will bring great change and the establishment of the reign of God on earth, after a total transformation, promises believers liberation from oppression and the beginning of a new age of justice, prosperity and happiness. Its messianic, millenary and apocalyptic doctrine is laid out in the sacred Book of Revelations of God to Roque Rojas - known as the Last Testament.

The Church was well established by the time of Roque's death in 1879, with a group of male and female priests and a number of faithful who were considered members of the 12 lost tribes of Israel. The death of the charismatic leader was followed by divisions among the priests with personal antagonisms and intrigues revolving around the struggle for leadership of the new Church, and subsequently numerous branches developed, each with their own interpretation of the ideology of Mexican Eliasmism.

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#### **Health Through Purification**

The growth of the group "Sixth Seal", originally led by the woman priest Damiana Oviedo, was named Trinitary Mariano Spiritualism from 1922 onwards, and is the group which today has the largest number of followers. The Sixth Seal used Roque Rojas' doctrines as their base, and then formed their own dynamics and religious practices. The main objectives of the spiritualist cult include teaching of doctrine, healing and spiritual advice. The objectives are linked to the ideas of regeneration and individual purification through the observance of a moral code contained in the 22 laws given by God to Roque Rojas as the only means of attaining collective salvation.

Healing ceremonies held in spiritualist temples constitute one of the main characteristics of the religious expression through which the Church carries out the exaltation of its faith and its efforts to find converts.

The fundamental metaphysical idea behind these healing practices is that of an individual's duality: a physical being and a harmonious being: man consists of an essential and primordial being which is the spirit capable of learning and of evolution in his development, and of a physical or material part which contains him temporarily - the body,

flesh or "wrapping". The sacred conception of healing, of illness and its treatment, lies in the idea that the body can be transformed by the will, with the help of supernatural and divine influences.

Spiritualist healing has a more complex idea of illness than that described by the dominant modern medical science, inter-relating its ideas on health and illness with a wide number of cultural concepts held in traditional medicine. The religious cosmivision conforms a special notion in the definitions of health and illness. Disease is a social category assigned to individuals who show certain culturally recognized symptoms, while health is that which gives people harmony with the divinity, with nature and with society.

The infraction of the divine, natural and social laws causes disequilibrium, indisposition and disease, with this last being considered a state of deviation. Thus, obedience to the rules of the established doctrinal code is the way of recuperating equilibrium, harmony and health.

The main emphasis of the healing is not restricted to illnesses of the physical body with its organic dysfunctions, rather, its action is directed towards the treatment of the spirit as a vital entity within the religious cosmivision. One spirit can influence another for good or evil. There are various categories of this influence, ranging from the proximity of a spirit to the arbitrary possession by a foreign spirit. This situation can be positive or negative according to the importance given to the spiritual world: if it refers to a spirit of light, a protector or benefic influence, it is positive, and it is negative if it is a being of darkness with evil intentions. These presences can be detected in the dichotomy of the antagonic energies *hot* and *cold* - a principle which is applied in order to recognize the opposing qualities of supernatural beings. One feels cold all over the body, especially in the limbs, and a kind of anxiety when a negative

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spirit is out and about; heat and calmness when a spirit of light is near. The influence of the first causes physical pain, problems and symptoms of illness, that of the spirit of light lends well-being, health and success in social relations.

In prehispanic Mesoamerica, there also existed an idea of spirit or soul as an entity considered independent of the material body or as a kind of energy which exists in all things. This vital energy was divided by the ancient Mexicans into the categories of *hot* and *cold*.

An individual can become possessed by a malign spirit when his or her own spirit leaves its physical "wrapping" due to unforeseen circumstances, and another takes over the body in situations such as dreams, fright or a strong emotion. In this way there is a connection between the traditional idea of "loss of the soul" and the spiritualist conceptions.

In the same way as traditional ideas on the ethiology of disease have been incorporated and given new functions in this religious healing, spiritualists have also taken ideas from other medical systems (allopathy, homeopathy etc.) and have incorporated them into their functional healing system - for example, surgical operations or the injection of solutions which, reproduced on a spiritual level, seem to non-believers to be just an imitation of the respective actions, but to the believers, these "operations" "injections" have the efficiency of modern science without its risks.

#### **Against "Negative Spirits"**

According to the spiritualists, many mental and physical illnesses are due to a greater sensibility to vibrations of spiritual energy which the individual cannot handle, and thus he or she needs intermediaries who, with supernatural help, can channel these forces or extract

them from the bodies where the spirits have lodged and caused organic dysfunctions and disease. This action is not only limited to the extraction of evil spirits from the bodies of the victims, but the evil spirit should also receive illumination and wisdom, and be transformed into a positive force in the interminable struggle between good and evil. When the attempt to cause evil is more powerful, the intention and obligation of the healer to change good for evil has to be that much stronger. Certain symptoms of mental illness, such as hallucinations, hearing of voices, loss of consciousness, can be seen as a normal state of health instead of as pathologies or as symptoms of an unbalanced mind, and they can even be interpreted as an

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indication of innate capacities for the development of divine powers.

The power to prevent acts by negative spirits is acquired with spiritual evolution through religious practice and with the appointment of protector spirits granted by the divinity, as well as

through ritual proceedings to purify the physical body and balance its vital energy which is its spiritual entity. This is where the "cleansings" (*limpias*), the "throwing out" (*desalojo* or *despojo*), and the "fluidic massages" acquire their relevant and specific functions. The *limpia* cleans the patient's physical body, while the other practices purify the spirit, even to the point of providing protection against various illnesses and social problems.

In the spiritualist temples of Mexico City, the *limpia* (with a bunch of aromatic herbs and flowers such as rue, rosemary, basil, pepper tree leaves and white or red flowers) has been observed to be the most frequently used healing technique, applied in the cleansing of both people and buildings (homes, workplaces and shops). Other specific kinds of "cleansings" are done with holy water, aromatic lotions, candles (where the number and color of candles to be used varies), the passing of an egg over the body (usually to make a diagnosis), as well as with chiles, lemons, cotton wool balls, garlic, fire. The spiritualist healer develops his or her work with a divine vision and a quality of metaphysical transcendence due to direct communication with guardian spirits or with God through the healing process or through trance or extasis. Besides, the healer is an ideological agent who sanctions social relations in the patients' community by manipulating notions of divine rewards and punishments. With his/her sacred character as an intermediary with divinity or with benefic spirits, the healer can re-establish health and social equilibrium through the handling of magical/religious symbols, producing in the patient states of emotional catharsis, obtaining stimuli of relief in relation to the anxiety or the psycho-somatic symptoms of loss of harmony.

#### Temples Give Ideological Support

In the densely populated marginated areas of the city, the shamans or traditional witch doctors are being rapidly displaced by the spiritualist healers, whose activities are in the open and easily accessible with the protection of a Christian doctrine which has given the group cohesion and strength without any social stigma.

The emotional support that the patient receives in the treatment of his/her problem in a sacred atmosphere and with the participation of agents who



Altar in a spiritualist temple in Mexico City. Photo by Rosa María Torres.

## CULTURE

come from the same culture, are factors which increase confidence in the healing process, along with the prompt diagnosis without the complication of technological apparatus. Medical hospitalization is a feared event among these social groups, where people try to attend their diseases within the family, which represents the main area of social relations.

The attitudes and advice of western medical practitioners, part of a clearly defined different and opposing cultural system, enter into conflict with the social norms and cultural values of these patients, who prefer to find health treatment within their known ideological parameters.

There are various reasons which motivate patients to look for the spiritualist healer: such as those who feel a real aversion for modern medicine or who have been declared beyond recovery in that system, and

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those who seek health care in both modern scientific methods and in the hands of the spiritualist healers, discriminating between those ills which can be treated in one system or the other. The preference for the spiritualist type of healing is more of cultural than economic origin, although the lower cost of the consultation and medicine is not an insignificant factor.

In the range of alternative methods of health care, spiritualist healing is located in the opposing camp to modern medical science, which is considered "materialist", profane and false, while the spiritualist healing system is seen to be sacred and "true", and therefore worth a great deal more in the religious cosmovision of its participants.

It is important to underline that the sector where these healing processes are used, is constantly growing, and consists of people who, for economic, social and cultural reasons, do not have access to medical science. The concept of a real social medicine has to consider the study of these elements so as to take its action to those parts of the population which have been marginated from its benefits, but this will only occur when modern medicine no longer represents a mechanism of ideological and economic domination at the service of the dominating class. ■