

Magic-Religious Healing Rituals in Central Switzerland

by Kurt Lussi

It is not really visible from afar that the area at the foot of the Pilatus is covered with magic-religious significant points where spirits of the past live since the beginning of mankind. Except for the strange stones, the peculiar crosses and the godforsaken chapels, nothing can really be seen of this mysterious otherworld, which covers the country north of the city of Lucerne like an invisible net.

Certainly there are better known and for the foreigner more accessible regions than the Low Alps – and the country does have more legendary sights than the erratic block of Roggliswil which is hardly known outside the Canton of Lucerne.

Well known across the borders is the Devil Stone (“Teufelsstein”) of Göschenen. Only by chance it was spared from the blasting during the construction of the Gotthard-Tunnel. Pressed by the local population, the constructors moved the rock at that time. Now it stands a little lost between the freeway and the wild roaring river Reuss. Flagged and displayed it is merely a dead relict and a sign for the toll taken from the steadily increasing traffic. Every day passenger vehicles and heavy trucks drive across its pristine location, as if they had to prevent the return of a centuries-old myth.

The comparison between the erratic block of Roggliswil and the Devil Stone of Göschenen is a good sign of the contrasts, which define life at the foot of the Alps. Outwardly, Switzerland acts modern and open minded. However, for the outsider, hardly noticeable, there exists another world in secret which is largely marked by magic-religious views.

The belief in nature animated by gods and ancestors did not vanish after the adoption of Christianity. Instead, the newly introduced religion mixed with the pre-existing beliefs by reinterpreting pagan rites into Christian ones. On the other hand, people have interpreted many Christian beliefs in their own way and adapted them to the existing. Out of the mixture of Christian religion and the traditions arose a world view, in the course of time, which is neither purely Christian nor pagan. Numerous chapels, crosses and “Bildstöcke” (posts on ways or roads made of stone or wood with a crucifix or an image of a saint) which

define the living space of Central Switzerland until today, are not only holy places in Christian terms. Many of them are at the same time scenes of eerie tales where – in spite of the sacredness of these places – spirits without heads, black dogs and the “Türstzug”, the army of souls on their way to eternity, appear.

These conceptions had a very strong influence on the beliefs of the origin of illness and healing. The illness is caused by pagan powers with an obviously negative effect. The healing results from Christian rituals or from rituals, which are adapted to Christianity and are regarded as positive.

In this modern world, the human being is pulled back and forth. It trusts modern medicine but stays attached to tradition at the same time.

Traditional beliefs on illness and healing

Like most people in the world, people in Central Switzerland as well believe that sickness is caused by evil spirits or by the devil himself. According to this concept, illness is an independent entity, which can take possession of a person, grab him or her, tortures and annoys until he or she dies, unless the person is freed from the demon. This belief has been maintained in common language. People do not just get sick, but the illness grabs and throws them into bed.

This can vividly seen in nightmares (“Albtraum”). People who are infested with an “Alb” (“Alb” is a mythical creature, a kind of demonic spirit) feel as if demons are creeping up to them and crawling slowly from the feet up to the throat. A feeling like being seized arises.

The following experience shows that illness is regarded as “thing” or an “entity”:

“Maybe two months later I woke up again and half-asleep, I felt like there was something lying on my body. It pressed down on me and it took a lot of effort to regain control over my body. As soon as I had regained control, the pressure vanished. Before that, I could not even blink. This kept constantly repeating. There were times when I woke up by the trembling of my body, which perceived the presence of the entity before it reached my consciousness. The trembling only faded slowly after my awakening and I could not go back to sleep for another hour.

During the following ‘visits’ the pressure became stronger; I was literally pressed into the bed. My body was totally paralysed and only with strongest willpower – sometimes fighting as long as ten minutes – ‘I got my body back’. Always, when I had shaken off the pressure, I felt like I noticed the thing disappear in the bathroom.”

Along with demons and spirits, evil people can also cause illness by using magic. Moreover God can punish people for offences with sickness. This means that someone who does not live in harmony with God’s amendments will get sick. For this reason, penance pilgrimages are undertaken and people call upon the saints for protection and help.

The Healing

The magic remedies which can be used to expel illness are almost too numerous to overview. They can be subdivided into prayers (blessing prayers, magic spells), magic rites, objects (healing herbs and animals with magic effects), living humans (blood, urine, saliva, sweat), body parts (teeth of the dead) and the elements earth, water and fire.

Widespread and still in practice today are the ecclesiastical or magic-religious remedies and rituals. Part of these are the relic cults, the illness saints, pilgrimages, religious prayers (e. g. exorcism), patient blessings and objects that came into contact with sacred or holy artefacts. The anticipated goal of these prayers, rites and objects is to encounter the powers of evil in another state of consciousness.

The following three examples refer to the calling of illness saints, healing with sacred objects (Loretokind) and sickness exorcism. The interceding calling of an illness saint is the easiest and most practiced magic-religious ritual, exorcism the strongest. In between lies the use of objects which are sacred and have come into contact with a mercy image (Loretokind).

1. Saints as helpers during illness – St. Burkard of Beinwil

Saints are people who saw the light of God in their lifetime and became one with it after their death. They are represented with a light-disc, the Nimbus (halo). This form of presentation is not arbitrary but is based on real experience made by divinely gifted people in states of mystic depth. According to the teachings of the Catholic church, saints do not work wonders but they are the connecting link between God and human beings. Therefore in the Church prayers they are not addressed directly but always with the use of intercessions.

Special events in the life and death of a saint make him the patron of specific illness. The numerous saint legends and prayer books provide information about the competence of a saint. The fourteen most important Catholic saints are combined as a group, the fourteen helpers in times of trouble. Depending on the area and circumstances, some are omitted and replaced by others. The most important and common helpers (throughout the area of the Alps) in case of sickness are:

St. Blasius	problems with the throat
St. Erasmus	bodily pain (lower body, stomach)
St. Veit	epilepsy
St. Dyonisios	headaches
St. Margaretha	patron of the pregnant
St. Katharina	hard language
St. Sebastian	plague and plague-like diseases
St. Apollonia	toothaches

St. Burkard von Beinwil is a saint who is only called upon in Central Switzerland (Cantons Aargau, Luzern and Zug) for general sickness. It is not the first bishop of Würzburg but the affable priest of the same name of Beinwil in Freiamt (Switzerland). St. Burkard von Beinwil was born in Langenmatt, on a farm above the monastery Muri in the twelfth century. He died on the 18th of May 1192 with the reputation of holiness. 1228 he was already called “St. Burkard” in documents of the monastery Muri. The water from the well close to the church is known to have healing powers.

The healing process works with the concentration of the mind with the helps of prayers and meditation. To reinforce this procedure the patient drinks from the holy fountain by going there himself or having water brought to him. In the state of mythical depth the patient’s dialogue with god and the saint takes places. Now the invocation starts: the sick person turns to God with the following petition to heal him from his illness by intercession of the saint.

“Almighty God, you have honoured your faithful servant Burkard with wonderful gifts. I ask you, oh Lord, by the powerful intercession of your priest Burkard, liberate me and my people from all sicknesses and evil of the body and the soul; give me patience in my suffering, courage in all tests which you impose on me. Give me the power to serve you like he did, to praise you ever and ever and announce your mighty name. With Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.”

2. Blessings of the sick with the Loretokind of Salzburg

In Christianity, worship and reverence are reserved for God only. As long as the saints are not called upon in terms of intercession saint-reverence contradicts the teaching of the Roman-Catholic church. However, since people’s belief can hardly endure the admiration of only one god the church had to make some concessions over the course of time.

One of which is the worship of mercy images. According to Christian teachings, images do not work wonders. Nonetheless, there are signs of miracles showing, the catholic Handpostille (small reference booklet) says that they are signs of God being persuaded by the intercession of Christ, Maria or the saints, which they represent.

However, within people’s beliefs there is a vision, which dates back to pre-christian times according to which mery images are filled with special powers. The same is true for objects or pictures, which have been praised and have come into contact with the original.

Healing ritual with the Loretokind

A good example is the “Loretokind” in the Capuchin convent in Salzburg. A small ivory-figure (almost 10 cm in height) represents the child Jesus. It is kept in a wooden box, which is called “Stammenhaus” or “Stammhäusel”.

Outside the convent's trading area replicas of the mercy image or small devotion pictures are privately used to heal illness. They are distributed at the convent or sent by mail upon request. Before the shipment, the figures and the pictures are brought into contact with the original. During the actual healing, the picture is put on the head or the aching spot. While putting it there (the so-called "putting-on" [Aufsetzen]) the following prayer must be recited.

Every time when a cross appears in the text a blessing cross must be made with the small figure or the devotion picture. (The prayer is printed on the back of the pictures.)

Blessing prayer

"May you be blessed by God +, the Father who created you, + the Son who unbans you, + the Holy Ghost who has sanctified you. May the blessing of the most holy Trinity be with you on all your paths and prevent your body and your soul from all evil. Amen.

Bless us with your divine child, oh you immaculate Virgin Mother, Maria! Oh, almighty child Jesus full of God's abundance so that you are wholly love and kindness, opulent for all who call upon you.

You, wellspring of life and holiness, of complete solace, you, our peace, our conciliation, you salvation of all who believe in you, your heart I entrust (this soul, this concern, this suffering, ...). Look upon it and then follow what your love tells you.[...] Be our Jesus! Be our saviour! Amen."

3. Private exorcism

Unexplainable or long-lasting illnesses are often attributed to possession by a devil or demon. The kind of illness only plays a small role according to an exorcism booklet printed in Konstanz in 1729: "The devil can imitate all thinkable illnesses which means that a natural illness can hardly be different from an evil one." In order to find out whether the sickness has a natural or supernatural cause a religious person makes a cross above the patient according to the mentioned exorcist booklet. Then he or she commands the demon – if it is responsible for the suffering – to stop immediately. If the patient is freed from his pain for a short period of time the suffering is caused by supernatural powers which can be fought with means of the church.

Exorcism for the sick

The patient is healed by a specially authorized priest who calls upon the demon in the body in the name of God and commands it to leave the sick person. It is important that the priest strictly complies with church regulations. He must not only choose the right texts but must follow the correct order as well. Instructions and texts are found in the appendix of the official church benediction.

A simpler form is a private exorcism which may be spoken by everyone with the use of the cross sign and the holy water. In private exorcism the exorcist calls upon God and the saints as well. Then he commands the demon to leave his whereabouts and not to come back anymore.

Private exorcism

Before the exorcism starts prayer starts, a crucifix and holy water are provided. After some preparing prayers (psalms and All-Hallows-litanies) the exorcist speaks at the bed of the patient:

“In the name of Jesus and Maria I command you, you infernal spirits move away from us (them) and from this (that) place and do not dare coming back and to try us (them) and to harm us (them). Jesus! Maria! (three times) Holy Michael, fight for us! Holy guardian angels, save us from all the pitfalls of the evil enemy!”

Now holy water is sprayed. Then the following blessing is spoken and a cross sign is made with the crucifix at the marked spots:

“The blessing + of the father, the + love of the son and the power + of the holy ghost; the motherly protection of the heavenly queen, the assistance of the holy angels and the intercession of the saints – may you be with us (you, them) and accompany us (you, them) everywhere and forever! Amen.”

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Notes:

This document explains ancient healing practices of Central Switzerland, which have their origin in pre-Christian times. Similar rituals can be found in almost all cultures as far as they have been kept alive. Comparing the different practices can be an interesting method for sharing values in a human to human approach and therefore become a further platform for international understanding.

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