A POWERFUL MEANS TO AN END?
HEALING, MISSIOLOGICALLY INTERROGATED

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It is taken for granted nowadays that healing belongs to the very ministry of the Church. All the respective activities are easily identified with the healing brought about by Jesus of Nazareth and with the charismatic gift of healing present during apostolic times. Such identification as understandable as it is, is highly questionable though. It is an unhistorical simplification of a very intricate matter equating a socio-cultural phenomenon typical of late 20th century with the hellenistic θεῖος ἄνθρωπος and its peculiar adoption by early Christianity. To corroborate this hypothesis and in order to initiate a soberminded theological discussion I firstly will give an overall assessment of the phenomenon of healing as it appears today. In the second part of my presentation I will focus on one particular aspect of healing, medicine and mission, namely medical missions. Drawing from the material thus presented the third, the final section focuses some topics deserving further theological discussion in this context.

A. The Phenomenon of Healing in late 20th Century

It cannot be denied that the present interest in and the occurrence of the phenomenon of healing as it is experienced today is inseparately linked with the global socio-cultural situation in the fall of the 20th century. The interest healing receives nowadays is linked to high-tech civilization, medicine especially, as well as to the strive for national and cultural identity, especially on the African continent. The longing for individual healing, the fear of pain and the efforts taken to protect one own’s health correspond with the desire for healing on a non individualistic level, namely for reconciliation with nature, politics and history at least in the affluent countries of the world. The high-tech civilisation has brought about a menace to all mankind in a degree unexperienced and unknown so far.

In the wake of the upsurge of alternative models of science and politics trying to stem the disastrous consequences of our scientific-technocratic century, healing methods other than the scientifically substantiated one receive public interest too. Such quest for «alternative» methods of healing and the longing for a «wholistic medicine» originates in the dissatisfaction with the established

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1 As in Acts 3, 1-10; 5, 12-16; and 1. Cor. 12, 9 f i.
medical model, and took on a religious momentum in Japan. For most of the 400 or so « New Religions », « Modern Religions » (as they officially labelled by their government) which have come up during our century (Seicho no Ie; Sekai Kyuseikyō f.i.) healing, in the sense of « faith healing », plays an important and constitutive rôle. No doubt, these religions compensate the loss of roots and the alienation experienced by the individuals in urban industrial settings and at the same time help overcome personal frustrations; an observation identical to that of the syncretistic religions in Latin America, like the Umbanda (Brasil) and the Voodoo (Haiti). The scope of diseases acquired in a quickly urbanized and industrialized area entailing alienation and homelessness, slum and pavement dwelling – the scope of diseases acquired here and for which healing is being sought are of a kind for which scientific medicine is not adequately equipped. The more our diseased civilization spreads around the globe, the more non-medical means of healing are required.

The « New Religions » and the syncretistic religions of our time put much emphasis on the so-called « faith healing », very often contrasting it in a polemic manner with scientific medicine. But the more the aspect of « faith healing » is stressed the more it becomes obvious that the interest in healing in this context is a mere reaction against the secularized and rationalistic impact of modern civilization. Healing as a means for an individual or a small group of like-minded people to avoid the toilsome struggle with the intricate reality; healing as a most effective and therefore powerful means to escape and deny the responsibility for changing the disease causing conditions.

The problem of enlightened civilization and secularization plays a dominant part as well in the Charismatic Movement. Here too we find the tendency to avoid explanation and the predominance of personal or insider group experience over soberminded reflection. And as alternative models of healing challenge established medical models, so charismatic healing established churches and theologies indicating the newness of the phenomenon, not necessarily its principal relevance. The following examples shall illustrate some of the severe difficulties in handling the issue by the established churches. In June 1986 under the heading « Rwanda Roman Catholic Bishops disapprove women’s faith healing » the Ecumenical Press Service (EPS) reported: « Rwanda’s Roman Catholic Bishops have issued a statement disapproving of the healing activities of 22 year old Eugenia Mukakalisa. The Bishops say her healing gifts are « dubious », object to the title Mukiza (savior) supporters have given her, and warn about poor sanitary conditions at Coko where she is based. « Christ cannot approve of such disorder », the Bishops say, asking Christians to be

« very cautious of people who pretend to have supernatural visions or to be invested with a divine mission. We do also remind you that none is allowed to preach in churches or on the hills without the explicit permission of his Bishop ».