

Religion, body and health:

an interview with Thomas Csordas

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The American anthropologist Thomas Csordas is one of the great names of contemporary anthropology. He is a Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, San Diego. His vast areas of interest and research topics include psychological and medical anthropology; comparative religion; anthropological theory; cultural phenomenology and embodiment; globalization and social change; and language and culture. His fieldwork has included studies of Charismatic Catholics, of the Navajo People, adolescent psychiatric patients in the American Southwest, and contemporary Catholic exorcists in Italy and the United States. His work, based on his research into these communities, has engaged with a variety of themes, including therapeutic processes and cures; ritual language and creativity; sensorial imagination; self-transformation; bodily techniques, illnesses and their causes; and the experiences of psychiatric patients. Professor Csordas was co-editor of *Ethos: Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology* (1996-2001) and president of the Society for the Anthropology of Religion (1998-2002). Highlights among his publications include *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing*¹; *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*²; *Language, Charisma and Creativity: Ritual life in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal*³; *Body/Mind/Healing*⁴.

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Since the end of the 1990s, Csordas's works with the most repercussion in Brazil have been those dedicated to the theoretical and methodological delineation of the paradigm of embodiment, as well as texts dedicated to the analysis of religious healing and possession rituals. His book *Body/Meaning/Healing*⁵ was translated into Portuguese in 2008. Recently, the journal *Debates do NER* published a translation of one of his most relevant articles: "Asymptote of the Ineffable: Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion"⁶. Together, these two works – in addition to Csordas's contributions to the field of Public Health – mark the principal overlap that characterizes his work: that of religion, body, and health. In this interview, we aim to highlight certain aspects of Csordas's academic trajectory, as well as his ethnographic research, his principal theoretical concepts, and possible points of connection and dialogue with other anthropologists, in addition to other traditions and conceptions relating to the body. Thomas Csordas very amicably agreed to answer questions put to him by Rodrigo Toniol, Regina Matsue, and Pedro Paulo Gomes Pereira.

Perhaps you could begin by telling us a bit about your trajectory, which is briefly summarized here. How did you come to anthropology?

Perhaps I've always been an anthropologist. I was very conscious of growing up in an immigrant Hungarian community in the United States, attending a Hungarian Catholic church and being surrounded by the language (though like many third-generation immigrants in assimilationist America I didn't learn to speak it as a youth). Soon after I had learned to read my parents gave me a series of book about little children growing up in American Indian tribes, and I felt an affinity for them that never left me and drew me toward anthropology. In high school the cover of our Geography text showed an African tribesman with elegant body adornments and paint, and I was spellbound by the image. Then in my first year of university, with youthful exuberance I sat down with a fat catalogue of courses, determined to go through it from A to Z till I found courses I liked. I got as far as the A's, and when I read the description for Anthropology I immediately knew I had to enroll. The course included Ruth Benedict's⁷ *Patterns of Culture*, and this is still a book I would use to teach students in an introductory course.

In the introduction to your book *Language, Charisma, and Creativity*³, you mention that your initial plan was to research Native American religious movements, but that one of your professors discouraged you from pursuing this plan. Could you tell us a bit more of this story?

In planning my undergraduate honors thesis I asked my advisor, Erika Bourguignon, about the possibility of studying the Native American Church peyote religion among the Navajo. She suggested that I write to David Aberle, the anthropologist who had written an important book on the topic. He wrote back saying that the Navajos had been overstudied and didn't need more studying, least of all by an undergraduate. I was crushed, and turned instead to a study of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which was active in the city where I attended university. Decades later in the Navajo Healing Project I did finally work with Native American Church healers, and I even met David Aberle, though by then he was old and frail and I decided not to mention our old correspondence. In any case, I realized that at the time there was so much interest in altered states of consciousness (Carlos Castaneda's *Teachings of Don Juan* was being passed from hand to hand among university students all over the country) that he was probably getting letters like mine every week, and had no ways to distinguish between serious students and thrill-seeking hippies.

Later, you concretized your initial plan to study Native American religious movements. Could you speak a bit more about what was implied in the shift in your research from Charismatic Catholics to research focused on the Navajo healing?

Following my Catholic Charismatic study, the Navajo Healing Project was a direct extension of my research program on therapeutic process in religious healing. The program had been inspired by psychiatrist Jerome Frank's seminal work *Persuasion and Healing*⁸. Frank Proposed a comprehensive theory of psychotherapy that included all forms of indigenous and ritual healing, based on what I refer to as the "psychotherapy analogy," or the idea that these forms of healing were their societies' equivalent of what we recognize as psychotherapy. Most anthropological studies of religious healing presumed this analogy, but there had never been any systematic examination of precisely what the experience of participants in ritual healing had in common with the experience of participants in psychotherapy. My program combined experiential ethnography with psychotherapy process research, which was methodologically rather straightforward in the Charismatic study where patients came from a North American society in which psychotherapy is familiar and which even some of the healers had training as counselors or therapists. The Navajo Healing Project was motivated by the intellectual goal of extending the research to a healing system that is culturally more distinct and to pursue the extent to which the psychotherapy analogy could be sustained.

You argue that we become human through the body that we experience; a phenomenic body that perceives and expresses an array of feelings and meanings within itself. The body is the existential base of culture, given that its diverse means of being are culturally constructed even as the body itself produces particular sensations. The way in which we treat and use our bodies, and indeed the very possibility of using them, are neither arbitrary nor biologically determined; instead, they are culturally constituted. In your text "Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology⁹," you affirm that the body is the existential base of culture and that, therefore, it ought to be considered the subject of culture^(d). Could you speak more about this view?

^(d) Some anthropologists consider Csordas to give continuity to North American culturalism, because even though he affirms the necessity of considering the body within cultural processes, he seems to emphasize culture itself before the body. (His answers, after all, are based on culture)¹⁰.

^(e) Csordas believes that considering culture as, first and foremost, a symbolic system hinders the interpretation of experience. In his view, this analysis carries the connotation that the symbolic is not real. For example, the analysis of symbolic healing has tended to revolve around the manipulation of symbols, with little need of examining participants' real experiences.

The use of a definite article in referring to "the body" in itself tends to objectify bodies, whereas an insistence on using a pronoun and referring to "my body" or "our bodies" allows recognition of subjectivity (defined as the relatively enduring structure of experience) from the outset. Asserting that there is a subject of culture is a way of adding the dimension of experience to anthropological thinking, and avoiding a two-dimensional treatment of culture in which people and actors are incidental. This was the problem with Clifford Geertz' understanding of culture as a "system of symbols" that exists abstractly in the public domain, and to which embodiment presented itself as a conceptual basis for formulating an alternative approach^(e).

You are part of a generation of anthropologists for whom debates about language have become quite heated, drawing on themes such as the Geertzian emphasis on signification, the post-modern criticism of the anthropologist's position as author, ritual analyses through language, and so on. At the same time that you enter into dialogue with these traditions, we have the impression that your principal effort is toward bringing a new vision or a new proposal that observes experience and embodiment through a phenomenological means. In other words, a means focused on the body and on experience. Could you tell us a bit about how the increasing influence of phenomenological anthropology in your research?

You have it right that I'm concerned with promoting embodiment (again, not "the body") and experience by means of a phenomenological anthropology. That obviously does not mean that I exclude language. I only oppose the position that language excludes experience. Language can mask experience, shape experience, disclose experience, or express experience, but not exclude or replace it. This is most evident in song and song lyrics. Language and signification are not opposed to embodiment and phenomenology. A point that I've returned to repeatedly but have never yet elaborated sufficiently is that we can elaborate a phenomenology of language and that at the same time our bodies carry inherent signification. From the standpoint of embodiment, as Merleau-Ponty said language is as much about our sonorous being in the world as it is about signs and signification.

In your article "Somatic Modes of Attention"¹¹, you claim that the principle of indetermination undermines the duality between mind and body, between "myself" and the "other," and between subject and object. You also point toward the tendency of considering methodological and existential indetermination in recent ethnographic writings^(f). Could you speak about the consequences and the possibilities that this perspective brings for anthropology?

The main consequence of indeterminacy is to keep the horizons of our understanding and analysis open and clear. When we say "in the final analysis" we always have to add "for the time being" because every objectification, whether perceptual or ethnographic is made from a particular standpoint at a particular moment. Any self-critical anthropology has to acknowledge this, and it is for example why it became so common in postmodern ethnography to refer to everything as "shifting and contested" and to pluralize everything so that, for example, we were dealing with unspecified numbers of "modernities and publics."

Might we be able to utilize the Pentecostal Catholic process of therapeutic cures (the rhetoric of transformation) as a model for considering the process of cures in other groups of New Religions? One example of this might be Japanese New Religions, which emphasize curing through the notion of self-cultivation^(g).

I proposed the "rhetorical model of therapeutic process" based on my ethnography of Catholic Charismatic healing, with the idea that it might be

^(f) Csordas conceives of the paradigm of embodiment as an undetermined methodological field defined by perceptive experience and by the way in which we engage with the world. Thus, in addition to perception, the body is endowed with desires and affects. In this way, Csordas's thinking is aligned with recent tendencies in ethnography of considering lived sensations, memories, and affects¹²⁻¹⁴.

^(g) In his book *Body, Healing, Meaning*, Csordas utilizes certain analogies regarding ritual healing in Japan and the United States. First, he examines Japanese Naikan therapy, the rhetoric of which directly invokes traditional cultural values, and which Csordas considers to be secular psychotherapy. In another moment, Csordas analyzes healing rituals related to abortion and miscarriage among Charismatic Catholics in the United States and in the Japanese Mizuko Kuyo ritual. These ritual practices are directly related to the notion of self-cultivation, which originates in Confucianism and Buddhism and is present throughout different modes of Japanese thinking and religious practices. This concept conceives of body and mind as a single force. However, conscious effort and individual training – acquired through meditation or other forms of physical practices or ritualistic offerings – are necessary in order to allow both elements to exist synergistically. Some Japanese philosophers point to the importance of the experience of self-cultivation based on perception as a fundamental form of understanding mind/body, and as a continuous condition of the human experience¹⁵.

applicable to any form of ritual healing, not only those characteristic of New Religions. I carried the model forward in my work on Navajo healing, and have seen it used or at least referenced in other studies of religious and indigenous healing. I still am convinced that it offers a useful framework for understanding how healing works – if it does.

Could you indicate some general delineations and types of problematization within psychological anthropology?

The way I was trained, starting as an undergraduate, there was virtually no distinction between psychological anthropology and the anthropology of religion, because understanding religion always must include experience as well as symbols, meanings, and social forces. It was the imperative to find an intelligible way to talk and write about experience that led me to embodiment. So to the extent that Brazilian anthropologists interested in religion and embodiment read my work, they are engaging a mode of thinking incubated in psychological anthropology. It is an approach that does not focus exclusively on the individual, self, or person, but neither does it pretend that these are irrelevant to anthropology, as do some rigidly “social” approaches that ironically seem to exclude people from anthropology.

Your work deals with the implications of trying to account for the experience of people who pass through “cures”. Your search is one that approximates lived experience and signification, so that – in order to better understand cure – we ought to turn our gazes and senses toward perception. Could you elaborate a bit more on this theme? You make an effort to avoid dichotomies such as experience vs. language, subject vs. object, and body vs. mind. You aim to account for the interpretation of senses that might be able to account for both the lived and the signified. Is there a relationship between your formulations and those that, for example, Tim Ingold^(h) has developed?

^(h) Regarding the analogy between the theoretical conceptions that Thomas Csordas has developed in conjunction with the anthropologist Tim Ingold, see Steil et al.¹⁶

The advantage of beginning with embodiment as a condition and perception as the way our bodies take up the world (or have a grasp on the world as Merleau-Ponty might say) applies to everyday life as much as to the amplified moments of life we find in healing episodes. It is to allow for an understanding of our bodily being in the world as both active and passive, and to emphasize the aspect of immediacy that is too often abstracted from anthropological analysis. Tim Ingold's concern with the immediacy of perception, inhabiting, dwelling, skills, and life are certainly compatible with an embodiment approach, not necessarily the same analysis but perhaps on the same level of analysis. My colleague Otavio Velho once brought to my attention a paragraph in one of Tim Ingold's books in which he considered my work and concluded that I am a dualist, doubtless based on a too-hasty reading. To identify dualisms, attempt to collapse dualisms, and recognize dualisms as complementary does not make one a dualist. If anything there is an implicit structuralism in some of my work, just as there was an implicit phenomenology in Levi-Strauss (e.g., *The Savage Mind*). In this respect, I like to invoke William Blake's motto that “Contraries are Positives. A Negation is not a Contrary” which opens out on a generative, horizontal understanding of being in the world. Finally, I do not share Tim's urgency to distinguish between anthropology and ethnography, though I recognize the polemical value of the distinction.

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