

The British Medical Association's annual conference of junior doctors has [declared that](#) homeopathy is witchcraft. They have voted a blanket ban and an end to all placements teaching homeopathic principles to training doctors (this debate is quite hot in the UK as you can see [here](#)).

Dr Tom Dolphin, deputy chairman of the BMA's junior doctors committee in England, told the conference:

"Homeopathy is witchcraft. It is a disgrace that nestling between the National Hospital for Neurology and Great Ormond Street there is a National Hospital for Homeopathy which is paid for by the NHS".

Although this comparison may be quite harsh for homeopathy, the connection between homeopathy and witchcraft may be of some interest from a Cognition & Culture point of view.

To this day, cognitive anthropologists have focused on some very spectacular cultural beliefs such as beliefs in God, in the ancestors or in witchcraft. In contrast, they have neglected other interesting but less spectacular beliefs such as superstitions, feng shui or homeopathy. This choice may have important theoretical consequences. Indeed, spectacular beliefs tend to produce spectacular outcomes (churches, sacrifices, etc.). From these outcomes, it is tempting to infer that the existence of spectacular beliefs is due to their effect: beliefs in God exist because they bind people together, beliefs in the ancestors exist because they make people obey social norms, etc. In other words, the study of spectacular beliefs naturally would lead to adaptationist or functionalist theories - theories stating that religious belief evolved because it benefited individuals or societies.

By contrast, when one is confronted with harmless and insignificant beliefs (well, not so harmless for British contributors!), it is hard to think that such beliefs have been selected in any way. These beliefs seem to call for by-product theories according to which beliefs in supernatural phenomenon are just a side effect of the way our brain works. For instance, homeopathy is based on the intuitive law of similars according to which the illnesses can be cured by small doses substances that cause the same symptoms (for example, since arsenic causes shortness of breath, then small doses of arsenic will cure disease that also cause shortness of breath). Other intuitions may be at work, for instance, the intuition that natural products are purer and softer, less polluted by the industrial society or less aggressive than industrial treatments. Of course, there are other complementing causes such as, in the case of homeopathy, a never-ending social demand for treatments, or the drawbacks of official medicine.

Studying 'small beliefs' is interesting for further reasons. 'Spectacular beliefs' are often quite institutionalized and generate lots of official discourse. Institutions and discourses create the impression that there is such a thing as 'religion'. Think about the European tradition that opposes

the Church and the State, the secular and the religious, philosophy and theology, etc. Official discourses on 'big beliefs' naturally suggest the view that there is such a thing as 'religion'. By contrast, the study of homeopathy and superstition suggests that there is no such thing as 'religion' (as Maurice Bloch noticed in [a previous discussion](#)) but rather a variety of cultural beliefs, some insignificant (such as the beliefs in black cats causing misfortune), other more important (e.g. the belief in God), some institutionalized and theorized, other not, etc. Furthermore, it suggests that there is continuity between folk theories and 'religious beliefs' and that, from a cognitive and cultural point of view, there is no differences between folk theories of medicine such as homeopathy (postulating the law of similars and the power of plants) or folk theories of society postulating that ethnic groups are based on an essence or that leaders have charisma and mana, and religious beliefs postulating the existence of supernatural agents.

Finally, the study of 'small beliefs' helps us to see the incomplete nature of most cultural beliefs. By incomplete nature, I mean the fact that people often do not have a full understanding of their beliefs (Dan Sperber would say that they are [semi-propositionnal](#)). Take the black cat superstition. Do people think that black cats have some special powers? What about black cats with a little bit of white in their fur? Do they cause misfortune too? And what if the cat has not seen you? Unlike religions that are often endowed by theologian explanations, 'small beliefs' often lack of any rationale. This shows that culture is often composed of bits and pieces rather than of fully integrated and consistent credo as the study of religion may suggest.

To sum up, we should take the British Medical Association's statement seriously. We should study homeopathy as witchcraft. But may be more importantly, we should study witchcraft as homeopathy!