

## The Religion of Chiropractic: Populist Healing from the American Heartland

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*The Religion of Chiropractic: Populist Healing from the American Heartland*, by Holly Folk. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. xii, 351 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 paperback.

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Iowa holds a special place in medical history as the wellspring of the chiropractic movement. In the late nineteenth century, D. D. Palmer, the self-proclaimed “fountainhead” of chiropractic, introduced a new medical philosophy as well as its premier training facility in Davenport, Iowa. In *The Religion of Chiropractic*, Holly Folk takes on D. D. Palmer and his son B. J. as well as the ways they and other chiropractors perceived and publicized their field. Folk contends that D. D.’s “discovery” of chiropractic as well as its early success must be seen within the context of the late nineteenth century, “in which science, religion, and political sentiment . . . fused together” in a vitalist outlook of “Body, Mind and Spirit” (2, 17). As medicine became less individualistic and more institutionalized, alternative medicine, Folk argues, served as a “form of cultural resistance” for those struggling to come to grips with post-industrial society. The autodidactic Palmers’ commingling of metaphysics and populist rhetoric with health care resonated because it echoed established thinking. It also limited the boundaries of chiropractic’s appeal.

The Palmers play a starring role in Folk’s book. Although D. D.’s first chiropractic treatment allegedly cured a patient of deafness, he was slow to feature spinal adjustments, a core feature of the “straight” chiropractic theory later taught at the Palmer school. In fact, D. D.’s medical theories shifted markedly over the years. The one constant for the free-thinking D. D. was his belief in a “divine force connecting all reality” that fused health care with religion. Like his father, B. J. also combined metaphysics and chiropractic, claiming that the spinal cord served as a vibratory “cable transmitter” of life force or God (233). B. J. navigated the Davenport school through several schisms with rival chiropractors, including his own father, and developed a “chiropractic empire” through aggressive salesmanship and shameless self-promotion (193). Folk argues that B. J. made chiropractic protest against organized medicine “fun” with populist crusades, such as encouraging state-sanctioned chiropractors to “go to jail for the cause” (196). Such anti-establishment rhetoric never penetrated the mainstream, although it did align chiropractic with other oppositional social stances, including racist and nativist movements.

Folk moves beyond the Palmers to chart the evolution of chiropractic. Thirty thousand strong in the 1930s, chiropractors’ numbers dwindled in the 1940s and 1950s only to rebound again in the 1970s and 1980s as

the public lost faith in various institutions, including established medicine. In 1987 the AMA lost an antitrust suit that ended their longstanding campaign against chiropractic. Victims of their own success, chiropractors have struggled in recent decades to compete against holistic and allopathic practitioners who “learned from the chiropractic story” and incorporated touch-based therapy and even spinal manipulation (256). Folk admits that chiropractic has a “poor track record for healing structural damage to the spine” and may best be viewed as “condition management” (254). Although chiropractic has modernized and professionalized in many respects, Folk shows that it remains connected to its spiritual and populist past. For example, contemporary chiropractors “form a sizeable contingent” of the right-wing “Tea Party, Sovereignty, and Tax protest movements” (263). The Palmers’ embrace of metaphysics, although often shielded from the patient, also persists among many chiropractors today.

Folk has done her research, scouring popular health and religious literature from the late nineteenth century as well as the special collections at the Palmer School of Chiropractic. Her coverage of chiropractors’ metaphysical views makes for fascinating reading, although including the outlook of patients would have added greater depth. *The Religion of Chiropractic* was clearly a personal endeavor for Folk, a self-identified religionist who shares “lifestyle habits associated with alternative health movements” (8). Despite frequent editorializing, Folk skirts criticism of the Palmers’ controversial beliefs, including their rejection of vaccinations and the germ theory and B. J.’s embrace of gadget quackery. Folk also dismisses D. D.’s theoretical vacillations as only “unsettling if one prefers consistent thinking” as well as B. J.’s plagiarism as “common” within “populist intellectual writing” (89, 210). Folk does, however, critique the Palmers’ personalities if not always their beliefs. She admits that “there is no way to hide” their “strangeness and remain intellectually honest” (52). Both were eccentric — particularly B. J., who collected phallic relics, housed alligators in his basement, and iconized himself as a Greek god on cigar boxes. Each was so “selfish, dishonest,” and “provocative with people,” concludes Folk, that “it is hard to decide which of the two . . . was worse” (235). In the final analysis, *The Religion of Chiropractic* helps demystify chiropractic medicine by placing the Palmers and their movement within a broader historical context. Those interested in the history of alternative medicine as well as chiropractic’s fascinating founders will appreciate Folk’s work.