

### Christian Influence on Medieval Medicine

For centuries, human beings have been driven to learn more about how the human body functions, especially regarding how the body reacts to illness. In an effort to prevent and treat different ailments, humans are continuously searching for new and effective medical practices. In the modern world, medicine is based upon empirical knowledge which is used to diagnose and treat disease. However, in the Middle Ages, religion had a much larger influence on the field of medicine. During this time, the Christian church held power over many different aspects of life, which included medicine. As a result, medieval medicine generally followed the rules and instructions of the Church, and religious leaders determined what medical beliefs and practices were to be accepted. This determination came from what physical explanations still complimented Christian beliefs, and any empirical theories that challenged these beliefs were rejected to maintain the power and control of the Church. While examining the medieval interpretations of medicine, we observe the ways in which the Christian church influenced the accepted medical practices of the time. This religious influence on medicine created a unique combination of natural and religious theories which were used unitedly to diagnose and treat illnesses.

In the Middle Ages, illness was very common, and many people suffered from a wide variety of chronic diseases. These high rates of illness were caused by several factors including poor living conditions, inadequate hygiene, and a lack of vitamins. The deficiency of vitamins came from the inadequacies in the ordinary person's diet and was especially an issue in the

winter months when particular foods were scarce. For example, a deficiency in vitamin A caused a condition referred to as “dry eyes,” which caused night blindness in its early stages. Other illnesses caused by a lack of vitamin A included, “conjunctivitis..., painful bladder stones and urinary tract infections” which were “regularly reported among premodern populations” (Scott 12). People living in the Middle Ages also suffered a wide variety of diseases caused by their particular trades. In a time prior to modern safety precautions, peasants were regularly exposed to dangerous and toxic work conditions that caused several health issues. On top of these common illnesses, medieval Europe also battled a constant threat presented from plagues such as the Black Plague. Unfortunately, because of the inaccuracies of medieval medical knowledge, all these ailments were widespread and oftentimes fatal. In order to cope with the uncertainties that accompanied disease, people in the Middle Ages ultimately turned to God for guidance.

The Christian stance on health care evolved throughout the Middle Ages from a belief that humans should not intervene with God’s will, to a feeling of responsibility to care for God’s creation which included the human body. In the early opinions of the Church, it was believed that everything comes from God, including the suffering of illness, and for this reason, humans should not attempt to heal the body. Instead, Christians should accept illness as a part of God’s plan. However, over time, the Church’s opinion on this matter changed to reflect how humans were expected to care for God’s creation, and so man must care for the human body. This ideology also supported what medieval Christians believed about following in the footsteps of Christ. While Jesus was alive, he dedicated his life to serving those who were most vulnerable and healed many people through miracles provided by God. Medieval Christians saw this as a justification for developing medical practices to heal those who were ill, as it followed what Jesus had shown as an example. Even with this new interpretation, it was still crucially

emphasized that any medicine that heals man ultimately comes from God's creation, and thus is still a part of God's will.

Many medieval ideas about medicine derived from ancient Greek and Roman texts which were preserved and studied in monasteries. This thus instituted a close relationship between the Church and medicine, and as a result, these monasteries became a center for medieval medical knowledge. The most widely accepted theory that was also approved by the Church was the theory of the four bodily humours, which was proposed by Greek physicians Galen and Hippocrates. Hippocrates, commonly referred to as the "father of medicine," explained that the human body was composed of four humours – blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Hippocrates argued that the four humours determined the behavior of the body, and as long as they were in balance, the body remained healthy. However, if these humours were put off balance for whatever reason, it resulted in illness.

There were several outside factors that were thought to affect the balance of the four humours. From the modern perspective, some of these factors seem quite outlandish. For example, in his writings, Hippocrates discussed the influence of the weather on the well-being of the human body. He noted that "a south wind affects the sight and hearing," and "if the north wind prevails – coughs and sore throats ensue" (Coxe 83). The interaction of the four humours were also related to a variety of attributes, including the four elements (air, water, fire, and earth), the four seasons (Spring, Autumn, Summer, and Winter), the four stages of life (adolescence, maturity, childhood, and old age), and the four combinations of hot and cold, and dry and moist. Different emotional dispositions could even be explained using the theory of the humours by proclaiming that certain emotions were caused by an excess of a specified humour.

The theory of the four humours set forth a physical explanation for the human body composition and was both studied and practiced within monastic communities. In the early Middle Ages, monasteries served as centers of hospitality and offered treatments to monks, pilgrims, and many others. Monastic healers used a combination of the physical treatments based on the ancient Greek theories, as well as practices rooted in religious and spiritual beliefs. Based on the notion in the humoral theory that illnesses were caused by an imbalance of the humours, physicians attempted to heal ailments by putting the humours back into balance. Most common of these practices was bloodletting, which was considered a standard treatment for a variety of conditions. There were two main procedures for bloodletting, generalized and localized. The generalized method was done by drawing blood from major arteries using sharp instruments. In the localized procedure, physicians used a method called scarification which involved scraping the skin with small blades and then using cupping or leeches to draw out blood (Greenstone).

Another important aspect of monastic healing was the use of medicinal herbs. Herbalism was a practice that involved combining specific herbs to make concoctions that were used to treat various illnesses. Based on the theory of the four humours, certain herbs were thought to cure illnesses by restoring the balance between the humours. Many monasteries had herb gardens just for this reason. Physicians in monasteries honed their skill in herbalism over many years and wrote various books that listed the treatments they created. In these books written by monks, it describes the different herbs that were used for cure specific conditions. For example, headaches were treated with herbs that had a sweet smell such as “rose, lavender, sage, and hay” (Hajar). Fevers were reduced with coriander, and stomach issues were treated with mint.

As stated before, the Christian faith influenced a spiritual element to these treatments on top of the physical remedies. The herbalism practiced in monasteries also held a religious base as

Monks noted how God caused these herbs to grow and therefore their usefulness was essentially spiritual. They believed that God created these natural remedies and showed us how to use them, so the healing properties were a part of God's will. Monastic medicine also involved bloodletting as mentioned before. While this treatment was heavily based upon the non-religious theory of humours, it was also shown as a spiritual treatment. In medieval depictions of bloodletting, physicians were shown administering the treatment while a kingfisher watched. The bird "symbolized a resurrected Christ, thus adding a spiritual aspect to the medical care" (Silverman 12). These are important reasons why the Church was accepting of the theories set forth by the ancient Greek physicians, as they still complimented Christian religious beliefs.

The architectural design of these monasteries was also proof of the close relationship between medicine and religious belief. The buildings were designed so that people who were ill could still maintain a close relationship with God. The building oftentimes included a chapel for the sick where people could pray and therefore receive spiritual healing in addition to the physical treatments they were given.

Our modern-day hospitals evolved from these monasteries where people went to receive spiritual and physical healing. The houses attached to the monasteries that originally sheltered the poor eventually transformed into places where the sick would go to receive medical treatment from a physician. This is where the term "hospital" comes from, and it essentially refers to the general care or hospitality given to people inside monasteries. Over time, the key responsibility of these houses became entirely focused on providing treatment for the ill, and from this, modern day hospitals were formed.

Because the physical medical treatments of this time weren't always very reliable or effective, many people turned solely towards prayer for healing. Christians in the Middle Ages

believed that God was the source of all miracles, but for ordinary people it was intimidating to think about making requests directly to Him. So, instead of appealing directly to Him, people used a more indirect route through saints to pray for miracles. Saints were much more approachable, and they believed that saints were better at understanding and empathizing with human requests since they were at point also humans. Saints were believed to have a special connection to God, so if they appealed to a saint for a miracle, the saint could talk to God on their behalf. Contrarily to a typical person, it was thought that when a saint died, their presence remained in our world as well as in heaven. Thus, saints had a unique influence on both the human world and in heaven with God.

However, requests for miracles from saints didn't come for free. When a person would appeal to a saint for help, they would leave gifts for them which were seen as a declaration of appreciation for that particular saint. People hoped that the gifts would act as a sort of payment for the saint to appeal to God on their behalf for a miracle. They believed that the act of leaving gifts for the saint "created an obligation for the saint to reciprocate" (Scott 33). People hoped that if the saint accepted their gifts, this would mean that they owed them a favor from God.

When a person was deciding which saint to appeal to, there were many factors to consider. Firstly, it depended on what type of medical issue the person was experiencing as some saints specialized in specific types of miracles. For example, Saint Roch or Saint Sebastian specialized in helping people who were suffering from the plague, and Saint Clare was known for curing diseases relating to one's eyes (Scott 35). In the same way that the medieval world had a hierarchy in the feudal system, they also believed that there was a similar hierarchy among the saints in heaven. In this belief, the higher the saint, the more influence they had with God. So,

when a person was deciding which saint they wanted to appeal to, they tried to choose one who was highest up on the hierarchy and had a specialty in what type of miracle they wanted.

In order to optimize their chances, in addition to choosing the best saint to appeal to, a person would also find the right time and place to pray for their miracle. It was thought that a saint was the most responsive to prayers near the place where their relics were. A saint's relics were physical objects that were connected to the saint in their life in some way. This could mean the actual remains of the body, or an object that the saint had physical contact with. Medieval Christians believed that a saint's relics made it possible for people on earth to connect with the soul of the saint. This connection was through a force called *virtus* which tied the saint's soul to their relics. Thus, in order to have the strongest connection to the saint, people went to see the relics in person and have physical contact with them. Also, the best time to go and see these relics was on the saint's feast day as they were thought to have the strongest presence during that time.

On top of the theory of the four humours which explained the physical causes of illness, many people in the Middle Ages also acknowledged the greater cause for all illnesses which came from sin. A prime example of this is the Black Plague. In the Middle Ages, Europe was hit by various plagues which were extremely contagious and oftentimes fatal. The "Black Death" was a global epidemic of the bubonic plague that devastated Europe and Asia in the 1300's. In the span of five years, the Black Plague killed nearly one-third of Europe's population ("Black Death"). The Bubonic Plague attacked the lymphatic system, which caused blood- and pus-filled swellings of the lymph nodes. In a book written in 1348 entitled "The Decameron," an Italian man named Giovanni Boccaccio described the symptoms of the black death when it struck Florence. He noted "the emergence of certain tumors in the groin or the armpits" ("Bubonic

Plague (Article)"). With current medical knowledge, we now know that the Bubonic Plague was transmitted from person to person through the air. However, at the time, people didn't have an accurate idea about how the disease was spread or how to effectively treat it. As a result, the disease spread rapidly, and the effects were fatal.

In response to this horrific event, many people turned to religious explanations for how and why it was happening. This again proves the unique interaction between religion and medicine in the Middle Ages. One common explanation was that the plague was a punishment from God for their sins. From this belief, they thought that the only way to end this punishment was to beg God for forgiveness. There were two interpretations for how to go about doing this. In one approach, people turned inward to punish themselves for the sins they had committed, and in another approach, people placed blame on others.

One way that people attempted to overcome the Black Plague was by repenting for their sins through penance. The process of penance was a core Christian discipline in the Middle Ages, and the practice included punishing oneself for one's sins in order to reconcile with God. When the Black Plague hit, the Flagellants, a religious group that were known for whipping themselves as an act of self-punishment, would go from city to city showing the townsfolk how to repent for their sins ("Black Death"). It eventually reached a point where the Church had to condemn the movement because their influence was threatening the Church's authority. The second way people tried to cope with the tragedies of the Black Plague was by pushing blame onto others. Many people persecuted and massacred heretics by the thousands in an attempt to "cleanse" their communities. Jewish people were the most targeted, and many were forced to flee these areas.



Thus far, only physical ailments have been discussed, but in the Middle Ages, there also existed medicine for diseases of the soul and spirit. As mentioned previously, penance was a common practice in the Middle Ages used to reconcile with God. To be forgiven of their sins, people had to first punish themselves for their wrongdoings. In the same way a certain medicine was prescribed for a physical disease, a medicine was given to counteract a particular sin. These treatments were listed in handbooks called *penitentials* (Anderson 156). Those who had committed a sin were thought to be sick, and the Penitentials provided the remedies to cure this sickness.

In the modern world, medicine applies scientific information to diagnose and treat disease. However, the influence of religion still exists within medicine today, just in a different way. The Christian church no longer holds power over the same aspects of life as it did in the Middle Ages, and religion no longer makes the rules for modern medicine. Nonetheless, many people who become ill still turn to religion for healing. This thus introduces a complex relationship between religion and contemporary medicine and remains a debatable topic. Some people refuse certain aspects of modern medicine because it conflicts with a personal religious belief. For example, some Jehovah's Witnesses refuse blood transfusions, and some Amish people don't allow heart transplants (LaMotte). There are also some people who take the more extreme side of things and reject modern medicine all together. For example, there are some Christians today who believe that God is the ultimate healer, thus prayer is the only medicine they need.

In current events, the COVID pandemic has shown some of the remaining relationship between religion and science in our modern society. Some people have chosen to reject the scientific recommendations for lessening the spread of the virus because they believe that God

protects them from getting it. Some churches have insisted on staying open, arguing for freedom of religion, and claiming it as a safe place. However, the unfortunate truth is that the virus will spread in any situation where regulations are not followed, and the people who make these claims are putting lives at risk.

On the other side of things, religion has also helped many people today cope with these unprecedented times. Participation in religious practices can help provide reassurance in times of uncertainty, and it can also contribute to a sense of community. What many people feel today in response to the stress of the pandemic is probably similar to what people felt in the Middle Ages. Therefore, we see a trend in both eras of turning to religion to guide us through unpredictability.

In conclusion, during the Middle Ages, much medical knowledge was based upon a unique combination of natural and religious theory. The Church determined what medical beliefs and practices were to be accepted, and much of this determination came from what physical explanations still complimented Christian beliefs. Overall, we observed a trend among medieval Christians to turn towards religion during a time of uncertainty and instability to provide comfort and reassurance.

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