

Of Vultures, Souls, and Galen: Theology and Medical Cures in Early Medieval Europe

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The question of how medical cures in early medieval Europe reflect the theology of the time is one that involves examining the origins of medical thought in the period. It also requires taking a look at the prevailing views of how the body was related to the soul, as well as what medical cures looked like and how they responded to the theology and thought that surrounded them.

Galenization and Depaganization: A Conversion Story

Alongside Hippocrates, Galen of Pergamon remains one of the most influential characters in the history of western medicine. He had successfully funneled the ideas of “humors” and other fundamental theories from earlier Greek sources to a wider audience and had published extensively in philosophy and other topics of medicine.¹ Unfortunately, to begin with, Galen was pagan. During Galen’s life in antiquity (129 CE to c. 210 CE) and into the early Medieval centuries, pagan medicine (any form of medicine practiced by pagans, but especially that containing rituals or sacrifices to gods) was considered a force to be actively countered; some shrines were destroyed and replaced with churches and Christian-operated clinics. St. John and St. Cyris (of the fourth century CE), for example, set up a free surgery clinic across the road from the healing shrine of Isis at Menuthis for the purpose of catching those who otherwise would be tempted to accept the pagan services of the shrine.²

As an overt follower of the healing god, Asclepius, Galen was initially inseparable from the rest of the pagan healing world. In the fourth century CE, Eusebius recorded that a group of Christians were disfellowshipped for attempting to reconcile Galen’s teaching.³ However, the

¹ Hannam, James, *The Genesis of Science: How the Christian Middle Ages Launched the Scientific Revolution* (Washington, D.C. Regnery Publishing, Inc: 2011), 10.

² Nutton, Vivian, “God, Galen, and the Depaganization of Ancient Medicine,” *York Studies in Medieval Theology III: Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (York: York Medieval Press, 2001), 21.

³ Nutton, “God,” 25.

eventual acceptance of Galen into Christian circles depended on his acknowledgement of miracles in medicine; this background of divine influence was easier to reconcile with Christianity than was an agnostic or atheistic posture. His recognition of the apparent purposefulness of the human body and universe was a valuable virtue: “Who could be so stupid or so hostile and antagonistic to the works of Nature, as not to recognize at once, from the skin of one’s hands first of all, the skillful handiwork of the Creator?”⁴

After Galen’s death, his writings were progressively adapted and edited to fit a Christian frame by removal of passages or insertions of replacements for offensive words, making his work acceptable for wide reading and use: ninth-century Arabic Christian Hunayn ibn Ishaq characteristically added clarifying phrases to redirect Galen’s meaning: “sacrifices are offered to God *in the name of* Asclepius; medical cures are attributed *to God through* Sarapos and Asclepius.”⁵ After further adaptation and reading of “corrected” texts, a folklore surrounding Galen emerged that further cemented his seat in Christianity. Despite the fact that Galen was not born until 129 CE, a story emerged and circulated in Greek (as reported by twelfth-century historian Michael Glycas) that he had spoken with Mary Magdalene about one of Jesus’s miracles; he had informed her that Jesus knew a great deal about minerals, which had allowed him to use mud to heal the eyes of the man born blind.⁶ Similar stories were not uncommon. “With these legends, the depaganization of Galenic medicine is complete. Galen ascends to heaven, and his medicine is passed for a Christian to use.”⁷

⁴ Galen, *Usefulness of the Parts of the Body, II*, 729, quoted in Vivian Nutton, “God, Galen, and the Depaganization of Ancient Medicine,” *York Studies in Medieval Theology III: Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (2001), 24.

⁵ Nutton, “God,” 27.

⁶ Nutton, “God,” 30.

⁷ Nutton, “God,” 32.

The induction of Galen into Christianity and society was born of a recognition that his medicine, his view on the body, and how to cure it, were ultimately helpful. And as is logical, once he himself was made legitimate, his collected ideas of humors were adopted. Seated in cosmological climate (the four seasons, four winds, four corners of the earth, four classical elements of earth, wind, fire, and water) and evolving slightly from the classical humors, the humors came to be: Blood, made of hot and moist, Choler, made of hot and dry, Phlegm, made of cold and moist, and Melancholy, made of cold and dry.⁸ It is within this matrix that cures can be examined and their relationship to the theology that had adopted Galen, the messenger of the matrix.

As some historians note, it is unusually difficult to generalize medical philosophy (and by extension, or vice versa, theology) of the early Medieval Europe.⁹ After around 700, papyrus ceased to be available north of the Alps, and parchment supplanted it as the standard writing matrix. With the Carolingian explosion of penned documents came a greater volume of preserved materials, but not necessarily of quality; authorship ascribed to particular passages evolved and arrangement of passages abounded, making the surviving body of work difficult to analyze and generalize. With the exception of clergymen who were amateur healers and learned about medicine in a monastery, little is known about how practitioners learned their trade. Local magic healers and others who were probably the most prevalent practitioners learned their trade primarily through oral tradition or clinical experience – the relative importance of the

⁸ Lewis, C. S., *The Discarded Image: an Introduction to Medieval and Renaissance Literature*, Canto ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 170

⁹ Horden, Peregrine, “What’s Wrong with Early Medieval Medicine?,” *Social History of Medicine* 24, no. 1 (April 2011): 17-19, <https://academic.oup.com/shm/article/24/1/5/1665954>

practitioner seems inversely correlated to the volume of written evidence that exists about them.¹⁰

This lack of written evidence on this topic in this period makes all the more important studying the borders of the topic in time (thus the importance of examining Galen on the front end of the Medieval age). Early Medieval medicine was essentially ancient medicine. When Pliny the Elder records, in 77 CE, that when one has a cough, one may spit into the mouth of a tree-climbing frog and release it, and the cough with it (an interesting case of disease transference), his words filter through the generations to the Medieval ages. This is so with his cures involving live fish and conditions of the spleen, sucking puppies being applied to diseased organs, and vultures (invaluable for a plethora of ailments).¹¹ Early medieval cures were a series of footnotes on ancient writers such as Pliny the Elder.

To gain a complete picture of theology in relation to these cures, we must triangulate off more than the front end of the period; much of its theology is most clearly seen on the trailing end into the high middle ages.

Bodies and Souls:

To begin with, we can ascertain that the body-soul problem lay somewhere on a continuum of views of body and soul – Thomas Aquinas denied any real connection between the living body and the deceased corpse, consistent with the theology of high-middle-age Italian theologians, who saw the body and soul as sharply parting ways at death. Northern people and theologians of this time, however, held that death was gradual, a slow decreasing of selfhood and

¹⁰ Horden, “What’s Wrong with Early Medieval Medicine,” 18-19.

¹¹ Horden, “What’s Wrong with Early Medieval Medicine?,” 13.

sensitivity throughout the year after burial.¹² Not until the early modern period did the separation of body and soul don a class distinction; as doctors more often performed autopsies to discern the cause of death or purity of its subject, the higher class, more able to afford professional medical help and thus, gradually adopted the Italian view that those whom they autopsied were separated from their personalities and souls.¹³ The lower class, in contrast, held to the long-standing view that some degree of person-hood dwelt in the body until well after death.

But the soul and body were seen as inseparable during much of the medieval period. The problem of where the soul ended and the body began was answered by a *tertium quid*: spirit, or more often spirits (distinct from external occultic spirits or ghosts), knit the two together, being palpable enough to act on the physical body, yet fine enough to be receptive to the immaterial soul.¹⁴ As Bartholomeus Anglicus observed (in the thirteenth century, again, late, but evidently reminiscent), “From blood, seething in the liver, there arises a ‘smoke.’ This, being ‘pured,’ becomes Natural Spirit, which moves the blood and ‘sendeth it about into all the limbs.’¹⁵ Thus, there was no hard division between the soul and body; the spirits offered a thick mist, and presumably a bridge, to close the chasm between the two. To affect one, therefore, was to affect the other.

Again, Bartholomeus Anglicus: ‘Sickness of the body may sometimes be the result of sin’, and spiritual healing of the body has an effect of the receptiveness of the body to physical healing.¹⁶ He elsewhere recommends, for physical healing, studying moral or theological

¹² Park, Katharine, “The Life of the Corpse: Division and Dissection in Late Medieval Europe,” *The Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Science, Inc.*, (1995): 115. <https://academic.oup.com/jhmas/article-abstract/50/1/111/748042?redirectedFrom=fulltext>

¹³ Park, “The Life of the Corpse,” 131.

¹⁴ Lewis, “The Discarded Image,” 166.

¹⁵ Lewis, “The Discarded Image,” 168.

¹⁶ Horden, Peregrine, “Religion as Medicine: Music in Medieval Hospitals,” *York Studies in Medieval Theology III: Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (2001): 140.

narratives in addition to the singing of songs and other activities that “bring delight.”¹⁷ As translated from thirteenth-century Arnau de Vilanova, “Since reasonableness cannot exist in the human person without the health of the body, which demands temperate humors that can only be regulated by the help of medicine, it is patent that the art of medicine is necessary and more dignified than theology.”¹⁸

Vultures and other remedies:

To discuss the importance of medieval cures necessitates an acknowledgement that this is, in many ways, a modern discussion. Like the body and soul, the prognosis and diagnosis/cure in medieval medicine were seen as inseparable, in contrast with the sharp distinction and favor of the latter collection in current medical training.¹⁹ Prognosis was the preferred emphasis of the two intertwined disciplines in early medieval training and was based on personal skill and strategy, as opposed to case symptoms. The ability to “see” into the future was accompanied by an individual’s ability to “sense” a critical point.²⁰ These and other descriptions resemble the traditional view of prophecy (though as medicine evolves, it becomes more tied to numerology and “science”: “Whether the crisis on the fourteenth day is stronger than one on the seventh day...”).²¹ Such medical prophecy was practically important because it could increase the doctor’s reputation, absolve him of blame, and (secondarily) aid in curing.²² Offering “ritual support” for the dying and their families was also another incentive for accurate prognosis; predicting the day or time of one’s death could help the community coordinate when to attend to

¹⁷ Horden, “Religion as Medicine,” 150.

¹⁸ Ziegler, Joseph, “Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages.” *York Studies in Medieval Theology III: Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (2001): 6.

¹⁹ Demaitre, Luke, “The Art and Science of Prognostication in Early University Medicine,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 77, no. 4 (2003): 766. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44447845>.

²⁰ Demaitre, “Prognostication,” 775.

²¹ Demaitre, “Prognostication,” 783.

²² Horden, Peregrine, “What’s Wrong with Early Medieval Medicine?” *Social History of Medicine* Vol. 24, No. 1 (April 2011): 15, <https://academic.oup.com/shm/article/24/1/5/1665954>

the family or bedside of the dead or dying.²³ While some prophetic prognosis was based off physical appearances, changes, etc., others were based off numerical speculation, such as lunar cycles and converting the patient's name into a numerical value and calculating prospects accordingly.²⁴

To answer the question of how early medieval medical cures reflected the prevailing theology (and by extension, sociology) of the time also requires defining the historically ambiguous phrase, "medical cures." It also involves acknowledging and subsequently setting aside the notion that a medical cure must be an herb, seed, or even edible animal morsel and stepping within the early medieval frame of mind that sees sacrament and incantation as no less real than the objects (for internal or external application) it employs. Recent medical history has seen sacramental medicine as different from 'real' medicine, consistent with the "otherness" that accompanies the popular frame of "dark age" obscurity. This Cartesian approach sees a juxtaposition of *medicina del corpo e medicina dell'anima* that could be described as anachronistic; again, as with the soul and body problem, there is no distinct division between the two at this time.²⁵

Many remedies required cooperation with Christian moral standards; the recipient must be sober or have confessed their sins.²⁶ The treatment process also required liturgical prayers, the use of religious gestures, or the reciting of the Lord's Prayer. These consecrations, however, appear to be focused on justifying the cure itself, not the healing of the recipient in conjunction with the cure. Remedies held powers in and of themselves, an acknowledgement of the power of

²³ Horden, "What's Wrong with Early Medieval Medicine?" 16.

²⁴ Horden, "What's Wrong with Early Medieval Medicine?" 15.

²⁵ Horden, "What's Wrong with Early Medieval Medicine?" 139.

²⁶ Brévar, Francis B., "Between Medicine, Magic, and Religion: Wonder Drugs in German Medico-Pharmaceutical Treatises of the Thirteenth to the Sixteenth Centuries," *Speculum* 83, no. 1 (2008): 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20466146>.

the occult. Consecration legitimized these and thus, the enchanted was permitted and exhorted to do its healing work through the added matrix of Christianity. The harvesting of the medicinal plant *vervain* stands as an excellent example of this process:

Whoever wishes to harvest this plant must first encircle it with gold and silver and recite a Pater Noster and creed. Then he must say, “I command you, noble herb vervain, in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti and by the seventy-two names of the almighty God, by the four angels Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Antoniel, and by the four evangelists John, Matthew, Luke, and Mark, not to leave any of your virtues in this earth and to place all these virtues with which God has created and endowed you under my power. Amen” Throughout the night until the next morning you must leave that silver and gold with the plant, but before sunrise dig up the roots, making sure not to touch them with an iron implement. After that, wash the plant with wine, consecrate it [have it consecrated?] on the day of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, and take great care of it.²⁷

The plant is now ready to cure insomnia, stiffness after riding a horse, labor pains, and stifle sorcery, along with a host of other common ailments, according to this thirteenth-century Munich transcript.

Vultures, similarly, involved a blend of occult power and Christian sanctification. In the first treatise of the *Epistula de vulture*, one is exhorted to utter the words “Angelus, Adonai, Abraham, on your account the prophecy is fulfilled,” immediately before killing the bird with a stick from an elderberry bush. (The phrase should be uttered again before dismembering the vulture.) This justification of the bird allows it to then perform any number of wondrous tasks: pulverized vulture’s eye and bill will cure toothaches (“Your teeth will never bother you again”), the liver, lungs, and heart will cure epilepsy, and adding a bit of the brain to virtually any other medication will strengthen its potency. If you wish to make yourself more good-natured, you may take the right eye of the vulture and carry it in your left hand or tie it to your left arm. It

²⁷ Brévar, “Medicine, Magic, and Religion,” 10.

should be noted that the bird must be killed without use of iron, and it must be caught unaware of its dire situation; if it realizes its life is soon ending, it will quickly swallow its own brain.²⁸

The tolerance for the occult in Christian spheres does not assume its the wholehearted embrace by clergy. Medieval preachers often argued that cures were obtained more speedily through divine intervention than by other, non-divine means.²⁹ Nevertheless, there appears to be a curious connection with saints and remedies made from oils and petroleums. The names of saints were often fused with healing oils, such as the “Balm of Mary Magdalene,” in reference to Mary anointing the feet of Jesus at the dinner table.³⁰ Master Thietmar, a thirteenth-century pilgrim, reported seeing oil flow from the grave of fourth-century St. Catherine on Mount Sinai. The saint was seen floating in her coffin, which was filled with oil. Monks from the site gave him a small flask of the oil; similar gifts were received and prized by others, as the oil would aid in healing those who were too sick to travel on pilgrimages themselves. It was believed that the saint’s power no longer remained solely in their bodily remains, but had been infused into the oil and was capable of curing.

Cures were not always a physical object enlivened by a supernatural force. Sometimes, as with music, they were not physical to begin with. “A psalm consoles the sad, restrains the joyful, tempers the angry [in true Aristotelian-Galenic fashion], refreshes the poor...To absolutely all who will take it, the psalm offers and appropriate medicine...effective in the cure of disease by reason of its strength...”³¹ Music was not the most common of cures – while there are numerous examples of its use, to say it was widely used would be inaccurate. In addition, its slow evolution

²⁸ Brévar, “Medicine, Magic, and Religion,” 39-40.

²⁹ Brévar, “Medicine, Magic, and Religion,” 23

³⁰ Brévar, “Medicine, Magic, and Religion,” 23.

³¹ Niceta, *De psalmodia bono* 5, ed., 236-236, quoted in Peregrine Horden, “Religion as Medicine: Music in Medieval Hospitals,” *York Studies in Medieval Theology III: Religion and Medicine in the Middle Ages* (2001): 147.

throughout the medieval ages meant that it was only primarily used in formal settings such as hospitals and monasteries in the high middle ages and later. However, like the plant vervain, it provides a valuable window through which to see how earlier cures and theology interacted. “Music has medicinal properties and performs miraculous things. Music cures diseases, especially those which arise from melancholia and sadness. Through music one can be prevented from falling into the loneliness of pain and despair...Music calms the irascible, gladdens the sorrowful, dissipates anxious thoughts and destroys them. What is greater still, music terrifies evil spirits and banishes them, just as David the string player...expelled the demon from King Saul when he was possessed by a devil.”³² Here, as with the physical cures, music appears to possess some power in and of itself. But it is nonetheless also bound to Christianity.

The continuity in the idea of this and other medicines as dual-effecting can again be traced back through the age to fourth-century Basil of Caesarea; the healing of the body is a model for the therapy of the soul, a model that is provided by God and not merely metaphorical. The ideal physician is ambidextrous, being able to cure diseases of both the body and soul.³³

Upon investigation of the connection between early medieval cures and contemporary theology, it can be noted that the cures to the diseases Galen described trailed in after him, though held, as presumably with a decomposing vulture brain, at arm’s length. They occupied an interstitial space between Christianity and overt paganism and reflected a confluence in origins in the theology of the soul. As body and soul were inseparable, religion and cure were indistinguishable.

³² Horden, “Religion as Medicine,” 152.

³³ Horden, “Religion as Medicine,” 145.

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