

# “Health and Healing” in the Context of Early Christian Theology and Today’s Medicine”

Alexander Lapin

---

*“Health is a state of complete **physical, mental and social** well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”*  
**WHO definition of Health**

## Introduction

According to the WHO definition, Health is considered not only as “physical” e.g. somatic or bodily well-being, but it additionally includes the mental and social well-being. During the history of mankind and in almost all cultures, the profession of a healer and a priest was always embodied in one and the same person. The shaman or medicine man was a very honourable person, which is in some cultures appreciated till today. Therefore, the sharp distinction between the job of an M.D. and that of a priest can be considered as an historical anomaly. Nevertheless, despite remarkable success of modern medicine, the two aspects of health: the physical and the spiritual ones cannot be separated completely. From this point of view, it is justified to analyze this topic also from a historical point of view.

## Antiquity

In the high cultures of Antiquity, somatic medicine was always a matter of the priests. Babylonian priest-physicians were educated in temple schools. Their practice was mainly of exorcist character and was performed as strongly ritualised procedure. Despite of other aspects, the fact of ritualisation guaranteed the constant quality of medical procedures that had been applied over generations.

Moreover, the medicine of Ancient Egypt was the issue of priests and spiritual masters. However, the level of skills and knowledge of Egyptian physicians, especially concerning anatomy and surgery was remarkable. Additionally, it should be mentioned that health care was organized by public institutions which were submitted to the authority of the Egyptian state.

In clear contrast to these medical traditions, the medicine of Ancient Greece, associated with the name of Hippocrates of Kos (460-377 BC), was considered an independent art. Or to put it another way, it was the most noble art, an “ars nobilissima”. Therefore, a physician was an artist, being fully responsible for his oeuvre. At the same time, he was subjected to high ethical requirements. The Oath of Hippocrates has still got its legitimacy until our days.

Some time later, Galén (129-200), another Greek physician, postulated the logic of the Ancient Greek medicine. Thereafter, Health is understood as a harmony of body fluids. In contrast to this, illness means disharmony and death, an irreversible decay of the body. The physician’s task was to differentiate between physiology and pathology and the condition of health and illness of the patient. It is essential to recognize the pathology from which prognosis can be deduced. Thus, the therapeutic objective is, in an ideal case, the complete restitution of the patient’s health. All these notions are understood with a maximum of clarity and determination.

But in Antiquity, there was also another culture, which is older than the others and has got implications for today’s medical ethics and philosophy. Thus, in the Jewish history the rabbi was not only a religious teacher, but a judge, a military leader and – even a physician. The Jewish Bible, the Old Testament, reveals numerous passages which include matters of medicine. They deal with the description of diseases, but also include rules for hygiene and even therapeutic procedures.

Later, the Talmudic tradition known as “Halakhah”, which means the “way to go”, represents the entirety of the Jewish religious law. It determines in an explicit manner each conceivable situation of human life.

Recently, Czech medical ethicist Jan Payne analyzed the deeper significance of the notion of “Health”. In his study he compared the differences in understanding of Health from the perspective two historical languages: the Biblical Hebraic and the Ancient Greek respectively. Thereafter, in the Ancient Greek the understanding of Health is more determinative, while at the same time, in Biblical Hebraic, Health was seen in a greater social context as well as in the perspective of time. In today’s words, it means Health in the Ancient Greek understanding can be compared to the understanding of “evidence based medicine”, while in Hebraic understanding, it corresponds more to a relative notion such as “quality of life”.

## Christianity

In the period of late Hellenism, based on Jewish tradition in the midst of the Roman society - a society which can be described as highly civilized, but also characterised by decadency - it is the “Good News” of Jesus Christ, which can be heard here. The Gospels are addressed to the poorest and those at the base level of society preaching the hope for salvation in a Kingdom which is not from this world. Mercy, philanthropy and sharing with the Next are the words that Christians declare to the world.

Apologetics, and some times later Church Fathers were charismatic and courageous personalities. Some of them descended from rich families and obtained profound classical education. This means that they had a high level of competency in classical sciences such as mathematics, rhetoric, philosophy...and they were highly competent in medical science as well.

Basil the Great (330-379), bishop of Cesarea in Cappadocia, in Asia Minor was a “graduate” of Plato’s Academy of Athens, which at his time still existed. He acted as a key person in the time after the First Ecumenical Council, where the heresy of Arius (260-336) was condemned and he was also interested in Natural Sciences and Medicine. At the same time, Basil considered the subject of the Gospel with profound persuasion. It was Saint Basil the Great who postulated the rules for monastic life and spoke of the necessity to commit prayer for God and the work for needy<sup>1</sup>. It was in Caesarea, where the first asylum for leper was founded. This foundation soon set an example. In many cities of that time, in Edessa, Antioch, Ostia, Ephesus, Tébessa or Alexandria analogue institutions called “xenodocheia” and “nosokomeia” were established. Even in Jerusalem at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> century, a hospital having 200 beds was built. Thus, during the entire Byzantine history, different foundations of hospitals can be observed. Only in the Emperor’s capital, in Constantinople, there were several hospitals, often financed by influential persons of public life.

For the hospital of the Pantocrator Monastery in Constantinople, the book of “Typikon” has been preserved. It describes in a sophisticated manner how the institution of a hospital with several departments and a medical school got organised, where different medical specialists with a strong regiment were working for the patients` recovery.

---

<sup>1</sup> „theoria kai philanthopia“ – discourse with God and love for people. In Latin tradition as “ora et labora”

### Byzantine Medicine

It is a chapter of the History of Medicine, which is also well known, but almost not consciously seen, when speaking about roots of European medicine. But during the whole Byzantine history, which is a time gap of nearly 11 centuries, there was a “pleiade” of remarkable physicians working in various disciplines on different medical problems. Generally speaking, they continued the tradition of the medicine of Ancient Greece, but they complemented it by the social dimension of Christian ethics.

Thereafter, the ideal professional image of Byzantine doctors corresponded to a “special type” of a Saint of Ancient Church and/or of Orthodox Church. Holy “Unmercenary Wondermakers” such as Saint Panteleïmon or Saint Cosmas and Damian represent the type of pious Christians with profound interest in the medical Art of that time, always humble and self-sacrificing, ready to turn their own home in a Hospital of Christ.

Until today, the Orthodox Church venerates these Saints during a “proskomidia”, which is the preparatory part of the Divine Liturgy. It is a divine service which goes back to the time of Saint John Chrysostom as well as Saint Basil the Great. It means, it is celebrated every day throughout 17 centuries.

In this context, it is indicative that the Orthodox Church has saved other forms of liturgical procedures, such as “Anointing of the Sick”. It consists from 7 readings of the Gospel but also from unction of sick by oil-wine suspension on different points of the body. Apparently, at the time of the Old Church it figured as a specially intense and efficient application remedy – somatic as well as spiritual. In this sense, it is not surprising that a prominent contemporary Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos), concludes in his book “The Orthodox Psychotherapy” that in contrast to the Western theology, the Orthodox theology always uses the terms and language of medicine rather than the one of jurisprudence.

### Time of Anthropocentric Humanism

Historical events such as the Great Schism in 1056 and the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 mark a deep rupture in historical and cultural consciousness of Europe. From this time, the main focus of Christianity has moved to the West, while the former cradle of Christianity becomes a part of the Orient. Nevertheless, in the Époque of Renaissance the knowledge of new sciences such as astronomy, alchemy and

medicine came to Europe from the Orient. New knowledge of the medicine in this context, is considered as the heritage of Antiquity, and it should be stated that its heritage is always understood as “Non-Christian” heritage.

The period of Renaissance was also the time, when the Church (namely the Roman Catholic Church) got into conflict with the sciences, notably with some astronomers of that time. However, the work of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) can be considered as the origin of modern sciences.

The Age of Enlightenment and its scepticism can be seen as a reaction and consequence of religious wars in Europe. In the same time, it is the time of rapid development of natural sciences, which is dominated by rational humanism. From this moment, not God, Man with all his abilities has been in the centre of general interest.

### Paradox of Modern Times

Last centuries of our history opened the era of industrial and technological progress. Achievements of this development changed the World sustainably. Modern medicine became a science based profession or better said technology. All its methods have to be based on scientific findings which are based on experimental research as well as statistical evaluations. Success of this “evidence based medicine” is unquestionable. The time of deadly epidemics, at least in industrialized countries is over. Furthermore in the last century, the life expectancy of people in industrialised countries has doubled.

Nevertheless, even the realization of the eternal dream of mankind to live longer has caused a strange situation: healing people, restoring their potential chance for their future life (e.g. for the remaining life) are still the objectives of modern medicine. However even this has produced a huge change in the demographic constitution of the actual population. As life expectancy has increased tremendously, the number of elderly people has constantly been growing. Today, geriatrics, e.g. medicine for elderly people is the most growing discipline in medicine. Its objective is not more “to heal a patient”, but to optimize his “quality of the life”.

Interestingly, this trend can be observed not only in rich industrialized countries, but also in countries like China or Indonesia. “What to do with old people?” is a question

which is asked in a growing number of families. “Who should care?” and “On which expenses?” are the subsequent questions, which are asked regarding the general (or global) crisis that permanently changes the traditional family, our society, our way of life and even our traditions

But the global ageing is not only one phenomenon, which will change the existing paradigms. Never before in the history of mankind, mobility and migration have influenced our society so much as today. No historical invasion of Nomads can be compared with the daily movement of industrial transportation, labour migration, causing a flood of refugees and/or simply tourists. Never before, each of us has been confronted with so many different individuals coming from “foreign” cultures. This has significant consequences for all human beings living in our society. Being “old in the strange” or being confronted with individuals who come from different cultures requires reflection on the own moral positions.

For us Christians it is necessary, more than ever before, to see the Human, the Image of God, in every person living next to us. As a consequence, we all should learn how to exhibit empathy by being interested in the history of other people, their emotions and feelings, their familial relationship, their religion and religiosity, the social problems, the family and traditions as well as questions of intimacy and question of the future of our fellow.

In other words, the challenge for medicine, and not only for this, will require a greater openness for the question of human culture which we will encounter us in the future in a colourful diversity.