

RELIGION AND MEDICINE THROUGH TIME

- Chaz Throughout history, I think religion has damaged medical advances.
- Maz No, I disagree. I think it has had some bad effects, but it has also had some good ones.
- Chaz OK then, what about prehistoric medicine? It was all religion, shamans and pointing bones. Surely any proper medicine coming out of that was just a lucky accident?
- Maz Well, I just don't agree. Religion had a huge effect on medicine. Mummification was the beginning of formal anatomical knowledge. In Egyptian times priests were the starting point for doctors. And Egyptian priests kept themselves clean, which was the beginning of public health.
- Chaz You see, I don't agree. These priest-healers weren't being doctors, they were trying to please the gods. While the priests might have been keeping clean, their followers were wearing charms made from rotting fish; not a very positive effect of religion on public health, I would say.
- Maz In Greece, Thucydides declared that prayers were useless to stop the plague, and Greek doctors concentrated on the four humours.
- Chaz Well yes, except they still had the gods.
- Maz And the *asklepieia* which turned into health resorts, with a gymnasium, a stadium and baths.
- Chaz But the Greeks were turning to the gods because their medicine couldn't heal them. The Romans were the same, they had their public health, which was a step forward, but at the same time they had an *asclepeion* in the middle of the River Tiber. Religion was what you turned to when medicine failed.
- Maz In the Middle Ages, religion definitely helped medicine. Many doctors, like Johannes de Mirfield, were monks. And the monasteries set up infirmaries for the sick and had good public health systems.
- Chaz I couldn't disagree more. The Medieval Church forbade dissection, it forbade people to disagree with Galen, it encouraged people to rely on prayers and superstition, and hope for the afterlife actually stopped people trying to find cures. The monks set up infirmaries because they wanted to please God, not because they wanted to develop their understanding of medicine. What about that abbot who, when he got the plague, gave all his monks a kiss of peace before he died?
- Maz The Crusades meant the Muslim doctors could spread their knowledge and they were the best in the world at that time.
- Chaz Yes, but the Europeans killed the Muslim doctors. And what about the Renaissance – advances occurred in Renaissance times because doctors began to overthrow the Church and develop scientific methods. And even then, the Church was trying to stop it all. Servetus discovered that blood flowed through the lungs, but it did no good for medicine because the Church declared him a heretic and burned all his books. And when they were faced with a disease that medicine couldn't cure, like the 1665 plague, people were still carrying charms and lucky hare's feet. It's religion and superstition, I can't see any advance at all since Egyptian times.
- Maz Religion certainly helped medicine advance during the industrial revolution. The Quakers were so shocked by the way mental illness was treated that they set up the York Asylum to pioneer kinder ways of dealing with it, and religious leaders like John Kellogg made huge strides in developing healthy lifestyles.
- Chaz Nonsense. Medicine advanced in the 19th century because of the scientific research of people like Pasteur and Koch, and because Darwin's ideas about evolution and Mendel's discoveries about genetics broke the control of the Church over the concept of what life is and our right to manipulate it.

Religious leaders like Mary Baker Eddy were trying to convince people that disease was all in the mind. And the weight of the Church was thrown into trying to tell people that anaesthetics and contraceptives were a wicked meddling with God's order.

Maz
Chaz

You can't say that religion had no positive effects on medicine. What I think is that any plusses were just chance, because in fact they were going down the wrong route, the religion route, not the medicine route.