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THE UNYIELDING POWER OF LOVE: CHRISTIANITY'S IMPACT ON SOCIAL WELFARE AND HEALTHCARE

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Abstract

This article explores the revolutionary impact of Christianity on social and medical assistance, emphasizing the profound influence of Christian values in shaping society. The Church played a crucial role in establishing institutions to care for the vulnerable, laying the foundation for modern state social and medical assistance systems. Christianity's emphasis on love, compassion, and the inherent worth of every human life as image of God remains relevant and transformative in the modern world. The Church's continued role in society is essential, as these values cannot be formalized or reduced to secular concepts, but stem from a deep conviction in God's initial love for humanity. The article discusses the revolutionary impact of Christianity on social and medical assistance, asserting that these services were born within the Church out of love. Christianity introduced the value of love as a new commandment and emphasized the absolute value of the human person, leading to the establishment of institutions like orphanages, homes for the elderly, and hospitals. The "Epistle to Diognetus," a 2nd-century Christian writing, is highlighted as an early testimony of Christian values that set believers apart from the prevailing Roman Empire culture. The article also explores how Christianity shaped the concept of humanity and the dignity of the human person. The belief in the Incarnation and the Imago Dei elevated human worth, contributing to the development of human rights, compassion, and care for the vulnerable. Early Christian communities established hospitals, and monastic communities played a significant role in providing medical care. Moreover, the Byzantine Empire's contributions to healthcare and hospitals are examined, showcasing how Christianity integrated medical science with spiritual healing and emphasized compassionate care for the sick and vulnerable. In conclusion, the article emphasizes that the values of love and care for the vulnerable remain relevant and continue to shape modern society, with the Church's role in promoting these values remaining essential.

Keywords: Christianity; social assistance; medical assistance; Christian values; Church;



1. INTRODUCTION

The modern state has built social and medical assistance on the model of Christian orphanages, homes for the elderly, and hospitals. And it did well. However, all these were born within the Church out of love. Christianity is the revolution of love, which gave rise to Christendom, a civilization nurtured on Christian values, especially the value of love as a new commandment of the incarnated Love, and the absolute value of the human person, made in the image of God. Unborn and deceased individuals are also part of the Christian society. We do not abort our children, we do not abandon the born ones, we take care of the elderly, and we maintain a ritualistic relationship with the deceased, burying them in our cemeteries. These things are not self-evident, nor are they immediate expressions of human nature. They were not like this before Christianity, and they can easily disappear when people abandon the values that founded them. Removing the mentioned categories from the community through abortion, child abandonment, mistreatment of the elderly, and neglect of the deceased is a sign of forsaking these Christian values.

Therefore, the Church continues to play an essential role in society. Love cannot be formalized, it cannot be reduced to compassion, tolerance, or other secular values in the name of which so many sins against the truth are committed. It comes from the belief that God loved us first.

2. THE CHRISTIAN REVOLUTION OF VALUES

Christianity, as the religion of love, has produced radical changes in the world. It is, as written by a persecuted Romanian Christian philosopher during the communist era, Ernest Bernea, the only true revolution that fundamentally changed humanity's conception of the world.¹ One of the first Christian writings, "Epistle to Diognetus", is a testimony of this rapid revolution of values produced by the Christian faith in a loving God that sent His eternal Son to save the world.

The "Epistle to Diognetus"², holds a unique position in early Christian literature, and it can be argued that it is indeed one of the first writings that addresses Christian values of love and kindness towards the children and the elderly, while also highlighting how these values set Christians apart from the prevailing culture of the Roman Empire. This epistle, written around the 2nd century AD, stands as an essential document in the development of Christian thought and the revolutionary impact of Christian values in the Roman Empire and the world at large.

The "Epistle to Diognetus" is a significant early Christian text that defends and explains the principles of Christianity while emphasizing the transformative power of Christian values. It portrays Christians as living examples of a distinct way of life, marked by love, kindness, and a profound devotion to God, which sets them apart from the prevailing culture of the Roman Empire. The letter invites the reader to consider the unique truth and beauty found in the Christian faith and its impact on the lives of its adherents.

The epistle begins by presenting Christianity as a hidden and mysterious truth that God, in His wisdom and love, chose to reveal at the right time. It contrasts the inadequacy of pagan beliefs and human philosophies in understanding the divine with the profound revelation of God's plan through Jesus Christ.

The author highlights the distinctiveness of Christians from the world, emphasizing that they do not conform to the cultural and religious practices of the Roman Empire. Despite living in the world, Christians are not of the world; they maintain a higher moral standard, guided by their faith in Christ and the teachings of the Gospel.

One of the central themes of the letter is the transformative power of Christian values, particularly the virtues of love, kindness, and compassion. The author showcases how Christians love both their fellow believers and all people. This love sets them apart from the prevalent attitudes of the time, where unwanted children were often abandoned, and the elderly were disregarded.

The author addresses accusations of immoral behavior levied against Christians, clarifying that their actions are characterized by purity and righteousness. Instead of engaging in illicit and idolatrous practices, Christians worship the one true God, whom they believe revealed Himself through Jesus Christ.

¹ Ernest BERNEA, *Criza lumii moderne*, Editura Predania 2011, București, p. 28.

² *Epistle to Diognetus*, in Jeffrey HENDERSON (ed.), *The Apostolic Fathers*, volume II, pp. 121-160, Harvard University Press, London, England, 2003.

Furthermore, the "Epistle to Diognetus" defends the rejection of pagan idols and exposes the folly of idol worship. The author asserts that God is the creator of the universe and cannot be confined to man-made representations. Christianity, therefore, advocates for the worship of the invisible and incorruptible God.

The letter concludes with a description of the Christian way of life. It highlights the humility, love, and unwavering faith of believers. The author encourages Diognetus to embrace this way of life, asserting that it is through living according to these Christian values that one can fully understand the divine mystery of God's plan for humanity.

Thus, Christian faith played a pivotal role in the development of Western civilization. It introduced a revolutionary understanding of the cosmos, humanity, and God, challenging the prevailing pagan beliefs and philosophical systems of the Greco-Roman world. Throughout history, Christianity has contributed significantly to the rise of reason, the pursuit of knowledge, and the emergence of the scientific method. Many of the greatest thinkers, scientists, and artists in Western history were shaped by Christian ideas.

Christianity is presented by the American orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart as a revolution of love and values in his book "Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies"³. The book also addresses the misconception that Christianity was inherently intolerant and oppressive. Hart acknowledges instances of misuse of religious authority but argues that Christianity's core teachings, centered on love, compassion, and human dignity, provided the moral foundation for the eventual rejection of oppressive practices and the advancement of human rights. David Bentley Hart challenges prevailing misconceptions about Christianity's role in history. Through a rigorous examination of the Christian revolution's impact on Western civilization, Hart presents a compelling case for the positive contributions of Christianity to culture, reason, science, and ethics. The book encourages readers to reevaluate the common misconceptions surrounding the Christian faith and its role in shaping the world we live in today.

Especially in the third part, entitled "Revolution: The Christian Invention of the Human",⁴ David Bentley Hart explores the profound impact of Christianity on the conception of humanity and the dignity of the human person. Hart argues that Christianity brought about a revolutionary change in how human beings were perceived in the ancient world. Before the Christian era, pagan societies did not recognize the intrinsic value and worth of each individual; rather, human worth was determined by social status, power, and utility. With the advent of Christianity, a new understanding of human beings emerged. Hart contends that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, where God became human in the person of Jesus Christ, elevated the status of humanity. This belief imbued every human life with inherent dignity, as each person became a reflection of the divine.

Christianity championed the sanctity of human life and established the moral foundation for concepts like human rights, equality, and individual freedom. The belief in the *Imago Dei*, that every person is created in the image of God, was a revolutionary departure from the prevailing pagan worldview. Moreover, Hart argues that the Christian concept of love and compassion, exemplified in the teachings of Jesus, further emphasized the value of each person. This transformative ethic led to the development of institutions like hospitals, orphanages, and care for the destitute, which were unprecedented in the ancient world.

In the face of criticism from the New Atheists, who often portray Christianity as a regressive and oppressive force, Hart defends the Christian revolution as a profoundly positive development for humanity. He attributes the remarkable growth of human dignity, compassion, and the respect for individual life to the revolutionary ideas introduced by Christianity.

Christianity brought revolutionary changes to the conception of human worth and dignity. By emphasizing the Incarnation and the idea of the *Imago Dei*, Christianity elevated the status of humanity and laid the groundwork for the development of human rights, compassion, and care for the vulnerable in society. Hart challenges the notion that Christianity hindered human progress and argues that it was, in fact, a significant catalyst for the development of a more humane and compassionate civilization.

³ David Bentley HART, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press, New Haven&London, 2009.

⁴ David Bentley HART, *Atheist Delusions...*, pp. 111-210.

3. CHRISTIAN VALUES IN ACTION: THE EVOLUTION OF HOSPITALS AND MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

Throughout history, Christianity has played a pivotal role in establishing institutions dedicated to caring for the vulnerable and those in need. Christians firmly believed in the inherent worth of every human being, seeing them as made in the image of God. This belief fueled the desire to care for others, irrespective of their social status, ethnicity, or beliefs. The profound sense of care for others led to the creation of charitable initiatives within the Christian community. The essence of these initiatives was to reach out to the less fortunate, the sick, and the marginalized. One of the earliest manifestations of social assistance within the Christian community was the establishment of orphanages and homes for the elderly. Abandoned and orphaned children, as well as the elderly without family support, found refuge and care in these Christian institutions. Christians considered it their duty to extend their love and familial support to these vulnerable individuals.⁵

The Christian community was also at the forefront of developing medical assistance. Christians believed that tending to the sick was a reflection of Christ's healing ministry. This conviction led to the establishment of hospitals and clinics, where the sick and suffering received compassionate care and medical attention.⁶

As time passed, these Christian initiatives grew in influence and scope, ultimately impacting the broader society. The values of love, compassion, and care for the vulnerable permeated Western civilization, shaping its ethos and establishing the foundations for modern social and medical assistance. The historical development of hospitals within Christian communities is a testament to the profound influence of Christianity on healthcare practices. From their humble beginnings in the early Christian era to the sophisticated medical institutions we have today, hospitals have grown and expanded over time, driven by a commitment to care for the sick and vulnerable.⁷

The roots of hospitals in Christian communities can be traced back to the early centuries of Christianity. Inspired by Jesus Christ's healing ministry, the early Christians felt a moral obligation to care for the sick and suffering⁸. During the Roman Empire's early Christian period, makeshift infirmaries were established within Christian households, where the ill were provided with care and comfort.

With the spread of Christianity, monastic communities played a significant role in the development of hospitals. Monks and nuns embodied the compassionate spirit of Christianity, devoting themselves to serving the sick and needy⁹. In the 4th and 5th centuries, monastic hospitals began to emerge, providing medical care and spiritual support to travelers, pilgrims, and the poor.¹⁰

The medieval era witnessed a significant expansion of hospitals within Christian communities. As Christian values permeated Western societies, the church took on a central role in organizing and operating hospitals. In this period, some of the most notable hospitals were established, such as the Hospital of St. John in Jerusalem (founded in the 11th century) and the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris (founded in the 7th century).

Ferngren's book, "Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity", provides valuable insights into how early Christians approached health, illness, and care, emphasizing the integration of physical and spiritual well-being. The book sheds light on the development of early Christian healthcare practices and the enduring influence of these beliefs and practices on the history of medicine. Ferngren demonstrates that early Christians perceived health and illness through a theological lens, believing that physical well-being was interconnected with spiritual and moral aspects of life. They saw illness as a consequence of sin and believed that healing could be attained through prayer, the laying on of hands, anointing, and

⁵ John S. DICKERSON, *Christianity and the Origins of Hospitals and Modern Medicine*, *Christian Research Journal*, volume 42, number 3/4 (2019).

⁶ Roy PORTER, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind: A Medical History of Humanity*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1997.

⁷ Guenter RISSE, *Mending Bodies, Saving Souls: A History of Hospitals*, Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁸ Richard B. HAYS, *The Social Vision of the New Testament*, Harper Collins, 2013.

⁹ Gary B. FERNGREN, *Medicine and Health Care in Early Christianity*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009. This comprehensive book explores the historical development of hospitals and the role of monastic communities in establishing and operating these early medical institutions.

¹⁰ Lester K. LITTLE, *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*, Cornell University Press, 1978. Little's work explores the economic and social aspects of Christian monasticism and their involvement in charitable activities, including the establishment of hospitals.

other spiritual practices. He explores the role of miraculous healings in early Christianity, discussing the accounts of healings found in the New Testament and early Christian literature. He examines the theological significance of these healings and how they were interpreted within the early Christian community.

Furthermore, the book highlights the charitable and philanthropic activities of early Christians in caring for the sick and the poor. He also examines the relationship between early Christian thought and medical ethics. He explores the teachings of prominent early Christian figures such as Hippolytus, Basil the Great, and John Chrysostom, who addressed medical and ethical issues such as abortion, infanticide, and the care of the vulnerable.

The development of hospitals was further propelled by the establishment of universities and medical schools, many of which were founded by Christian institutions. In the Middle Ages, medical knowledge and scientific inquiry flourished in Christian educational centers. These institutions not only provided medical training but also contributed to the advancement of medical research and practices.¹¹

During the Renaissance, in the West, hospitals continued to grow and evolve. Advances in medical knowledge and technology led to the establishment of more specialized hospitals, catering to specific medical needs. Additionally, the concept of public hospitals, funded by governments and local authorities, gained prominence, broadening access to healthcare for the wider population.

In the modern era, hospitals have become highly sophisticated medical centers, equipped with state-of-the-art technology and specialized medical services. Christian communities, religious orders, and charitable organizations remain actively involved in the establishment and management of hospitals, continuing the tradition of compassionate care.

The historical development of hospitals within Christian communities is a testament to the enduring commitment to the values of compassion, love, and care for the sick. Today, hospitals stand as symbols of hope and healing, embodying the transformative influence of Christianity on healthcare practices, and exemplifying the ongoing dedication to serving the needs of humanity.

4. HEALING BODY AND SOUL: HEALTHCARE AND HOSPITALS IN THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE

The Byzantine Empire, with its rich cultural and historical legacy, made also significant contributions to the development of health care and hospitals. Building upon the foundations laid by the Roman Empire and influenced by Christian principles, Byzantine healthcare evolved into a sophisticated system that integrated both medical science and spiritual aspects of healing.¹²

One of the most renowned hospitals in the Byzantine Empire was the Pantokrator Hospital in Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), used as a mosque today. “This 50-bed hospital was built in the early 12th century during the Byzantine period by Empress Irene and her husband Emperor John II Komnenos inside one of the largest monasteries of its time. The monastery housed one of the first hospitals and schools of medicine and included a nursing home, ophthalmologic health center, library, and cemetery. After the Empress died, her husband continued to enlarge the complex to its current state. Soon after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the complex was renamed after Zeyrek Mehmet, who was ordered by Fatih Sultan Mehmet (Mehmet II or Mehmed the Conqueror) to convert the monastery into a mosque, constructing a Fatih Medrese for a short period of time. The hospital, however, remained untouched, and its rooms were used for Koran lessons. The building was fully restored from 2009 to 2017 and is still used as a mosque today. We would like to introduce the Pantokrator Monastery, maybe the only remaining hospital of the Byzantine era.”¹³

¹¹ James GRUBB, *The Growth of Medical Thought*, Charles C Thomas Publisher, 1971.

¹² For an overall view see: Timothy S. MILLER, *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985; Bianca KÜHNEL, *Hospitals and Urban Societies in Late Antiquity and Byzantium (4th-12th Centuries)*, Brill, 2017; Averil CAMERON, *Byzantine Matters*, Princeton University Press, 2014; John SCARBOROUGH, *The Byzantine Medical Tradition: Iconography, Images, and Texts*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991; Nikols OIKONOMIDÉS, *Medicine in Byzantine Society*, in “Byzantine Medicine”, edited by Oleksandr I. PETRUNENKO, 1-19. BRILL, 2018; Isabelle POMERANZ, *Medical Ethics in Byzantium: Euthanasia and Infant Exposure in the Byzantine Empire*, Routledge, 2017.

¹³ Ayda Parnian FARD, Hatice TÜRE, Uğur TÜRE, *Pantokrator Monastery—Zeyrek Mosque: The Preserved Byzantine Hospital in Istanbul*, World Neurosurgery, Volume 165, September 2022, Pages 45-50

The historical development of healthcare and hospitals in the Byzantine Empire offers valuable insights into the intersection of medical practices, hospitals, medical ethics, and the integration of medicine with religious and social aspects of Byzantine society.

The Byzantine Empire inherited and preserved much of the medical knowledge of the ancient Greeks. Ancient Greek medical texts, particularly those of Hippocrates and Galen, were studied and translated into Greek, contributing to the dissemination and preservation of medical knowledge in the Byzantine world. Byzantine physicians were well-educated and highly regarded, with medical schools established to train new generations of doctors. Medical practices included a combination of empirical observation and the application of medical theory based on the four humors.

Hospitals, known as *xenones* or *xenodocheia*, were an essential part of Byzantine society's healthcare infrastructure. These institutions were often located in major cities and were designed to provide medical care to various groups, including the sick, the poor, and travelers. The state supported many of these hospitals, emphasizing the government's commitment to the well-being of its subjects. Hospitals were staffed by skilled physicians, surgeons, and nurses, providing a wide range of medical services and care for the patients.

In Byzantine society, healthcare and medicine were closely intertwined with religious beliefs and practices. Byzantine Christians viewed health and illness through a theological lens, connecting physical well-being with spiritual and moral aspects of life. Illness was often seen as a consequence of sin, and healing was sought through prayer, the laying on of hands, anointing, and other spiritual practices.¹⁴ Hospitals often had chapels or small churches attached to them, emphasizing the importance of spiritual healing alongside medical treatment.

Byzantine medical ethics were influenced by Christian teachings and moral principles. Physicians were expected to adhere to a code of ethics that emphasized compassion, honesty, and the sanctity of life. Early Byzantine medical texts, such as the "Oath of Hippocrates," contained moral obligations and professional standards for physicians. Medical professionals were encouraged to prioritize the well-being of their patients and to act ethically in their medical practice.

Christian monastic communities played a significant role in providing medical care in the Byzantine Empire. Many monasteries had infirmaries where monks and nuns cared for the sick and injured. These monastic medical centers offered not only physical healing but also spiritual support and solace to patients. Monasteries often had access to herbal remedies and botanical knowledge, contributing to the development of pharmacology and medical treatments.

The Byzantine Empire also implemented public health initiatives to combat infectious diseases and protect the health of its population. Measures such as quarantine for travelers, regulation of public hygiene, and the establishment of leprosia (hospitals for lepers) aimed to control the spread of contagious diseases and improve public health.¹⁵

The historical development of healthcare and hospitals in the Byzantine Empire reveals a comprehensive and sophisticated healthcare system that integrated medical science with religious and social aspects of Byzantine society. The emphasis on medical knowledge, the establishment of hospitals, the integration of medicine with religious beliefs, and the role of monastic communities all contributed to a thriving healthcare infrastructure that shaped the healthcare practices of the Byzantine Empire.

5. CONCLUSION

The revolutionary impact of Christianity on social and medical assistance is a testament to the profound influence of Christian values on Western civilization. Christianity's foundation of love, compassion, and care for the vulnerable has given rise to institutions that continue to shape our society to this day. The Church's role in establishing orphanages, homes for the elderly, and hospitals laid the groundwork for the modern state's social and medical assistance systems.

At the heart of this revolution of values is the understanding that every human being is created in the image of God, imbuing each life with inherent worth and dignity. Christianity challenged prevailing cultural norms, advocating for the protection of the unborn, the care of the elderly, and the respect for the

¹⁴ Stanley HARAKAS, *Health and Medicine in the Eastern Orthodox Tradition*, Light and Life Publishing Company, 1982.

¹⁵ Timothy S. MILLER and John W. NESBITT, *Walking Corpses: Leprosy in Byzantium and the Medieval West*, Cornell University Press, 2014.

deceased. These principles were not self-evident, but they emerged from the profound belief that God loved humanity first.

The historical development of hospitals within Christian communities is an extraordinary journey, starting from makeshift infirmaries in early Christian households to the highly sophisticated medical centers we have today. The Byzantine Empire's contributions to healthcare and hospitals demonstrate how Christianity's integration with medical science and spiritual healing shaped a comprehensive healthcare system. As we continue to navigate the complexities of modern society, the values of love, and care for the vulnerable remain ever-relevant. They have the transformative power that continues to shape our world and calls us to uphold the dignity and worth of every human life. The Church's role in society remains essential, as love cannot be formalized or reduced to secular values. It is a profound conviction that stems from the belief in God's initial love for humanity.

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