

## A Trans-disciplinary Perspective on the History of Religion and Medicine in Eastern and Western Cultures

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### Abstract

This article aims to be a contribution on the transdisciplinary perspective of the history of Religion and Medicine in Eastern and Western cultures, emphasizing the importance of these two complementary cultures in the treatment of the patient. On the one hand, Western medicine has given more prominence to the empirical and “scientific” side in medical practice based on the biomedical model. On the other hand, Eastern medicine (Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine) has given more relevance to the philosophical aspect in medical practice, namely with the conceptions of “interdependence” and “cycles”. In this regard, it will be mentioned some recent models of Western medicine, namely the Biopsychosocial model and the Integrative model that seek to take into account the perspective of Eastern medicine in medical practice.

**Keywords:** History of Religion and Medicine in Eastern and Western Cultures; A Transdisciplinary Perspective on Health; The Interconnection Between Spirituality and Medicine

### Introduction

In modern and contemporary societies, the study of religion and medicine has been carried out separately [1]. However, throughout history these two areas of knowledge were interconnected when the patient’s soul and body were simultaneously cured by the priest and physician [2], and expressed through the well-known phrase «Mens sana in corpore sano» (“A sound mind in a healthy body”) [3]. In this regard, it should be mentioned that the concepts of soul and body in Eastern and Western cultures have different perspectives that have contributed to different modes in medical practice [4]. Thus, medical practice has involved a mixture of religious and philosophical concepts, on the one hand, along with effective empirical treatments, on the other hand. In fact, the terms "Religion" and "Medicine" are related etymologically because the words "holiness" and "healing" share the same idea of "holistic" [5].

### A Brief History of Religion and Medicine in Eastern Culture: An Overview

In Eastern culture, namely in Ayurveda (in India) [6] (in Sanskrit, Life (Ayur) Science (Veda)), medical practice has appeared interconnected with religious and philosophical knowledge, particularly based in the Holy Books of the Vedas (particularly the Atharva-Veda) and the philosophy Samkhya (which claims that a patient’s body is linked with the natural environment). Ayurveda has three great medical treatises that were written by sages, such as, the «Charaka Samhita» (internal medicine treaty), the «Sushruta Samhita» (surgery treaty) and

the «Astanga Hridayam» (Ayurveda philosophy). One of the main Indian philosophical concepts is that of "Karma" (from the Sanskrit "Action") that emphasizes the importance of the personal various interconnections and interdependence with others (personal, family) in the practice of Ayurveda and that will be described in more detail in heading IV. Furthermore, in Ayurveda the term "doshas" (which interconnects the “mind” with the “body”) – designated by vata, kapha, pitta - has particular relevance in the diagnosis of the patient's disease, and so in his holistic treatment. Meanwhile, in the XVIII and XIX centuries - during the strong influence of Western culture in India - the practice of Ayurveda went into decline because it was unable to cure effectively some diseases of Western origin. In the XX century, after India's independence, Ayurveda was once again practiced as an integrated method of traditional medicine, called AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga, Unani, Siddhi and Homeopathy) that has complemented the treatments of conventional medicine. It should be stated that the medical assumptions of Ayurveda have contributed to the construction of some current models of Integrative Medicine [7].

For its part, the theoretical formulation of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) [8] was made during the Zhou Dynasty (1000 BC-221 BC), where the emblematic book «Huang Di Nei Jing» (the Emperor's Yellow Classic) of TCM was written. This book is divided into two parts, namely the «Su Wen» (the Essential Questions that encompass the Theory of Yin and Yang) and the «Ling Shu» (the Miracle Axis that includes Acupuncture).

Another important TCM book is «Shennong Bencao Jing» (the Divine Farmer's Treaty of Medical Matter) which describes the various medicinal herbs and their therapeutic actions.

It should be noted that the teachings of the sages Confucius and Lao-Tze contributed to the philosophical concepts of TCM, namely the “Yin” (the philosophical feminine principle) and “Yang” (the philosophical masculine principle) - complementary principles - that give rise to the cycles of the natural world described by “Wuxing” (the Theory of the Five Elements). Thus, a good health is linked with a perfect balance between the body and the environment that will be described in more detail in heading IV.

Meanwhile, the Zhou Dynasty was followed by the Han Dynasty (221 BC-220 AC), during which some other TCM texts emerged, such as the «Shang Han Lun» (Cold Disease Treaty) and the «Mai Jing» (Pulse Classic). In the Tang and Song Dynasties (618-1279), the book «Beiji Qianjin Yaofang» (Essential Formulas for Urgencies) was written which describes several Chinese pharmacopoeias that are used in TCM. During the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the book «Bencao Gangmu» (Great Compendium of Medical Matters) was written, which refers to various useful indications on preventive medicine. Meanwhile, these traditional medical practices were eliminated from Chinese High School, and only regained relevance in the XX century, after some political changes in China. Nowadays, TCM is used to complement conventional medicine treatments, for example, in cases of allergies and arthritis [9].

### **A Brief History of Religion and Medicine in Western Culture: An Overview**

In Western culture, some religions, such as Jewish claims that "physical cleansing" is linked with "spiritual cleansing" and therefore avoid the ingestion of certain foods, such as pork [10]. In fact, in the Medieval Ages, some physical diseases were seen as a sin committed by the sinner who needed to be “cleaned or forgiven” by the priest. In this regard, it should be noted that many clerics were also physicians, such as Petrus Hispanus who is attributed the authorship of the emblematic book «Thesaurus Pauperum» for the use of low-income patients. Furthermore, some religious institutions, such as monasteries were used as medieval hospitals to cure the soul and body of the poor, the elderly, the disabled and pilgrims. At that time, medical knowledge was transmitted essentially through encyclopedias, such as the «Etymologiae of Isidore» which addressed theology along with themes on philosophy and medicine.

Islamic culture also contributed to the exchange between theology, philosophy and medicine, as it was the example of the work designated by «Mishneh» of Maimonides. At the beginning of the Renaissance period [11], namely with the appearance of the press, there was an easy diffusion of texts on medicine and philosophy, in Latin instead of those written in Arabic. Some examples on these works are «Medicina ad Henricum II», «De abditis rerum causis» by Jean Fernel and «On Anatomical Procedure» by Johann Guinther von Andernach (who was one of Vesalius's scholars), as well as, Jacobus Sylvius who sought to stimulate innovation in the study of medicine. So, the study of Anatomy and the knowledge of new drugs from American and Indian plants became an integral part of medical education. However, in the XVII century, the philosopher Descartes attracted by Harvey's theories, proposed the separation of mind and soul (the exclusive area of philosophy and religion) and the

body (the exclusive area of medicine and science), where the body is treated as a "machine". Since then, religion and science became separate areas in the study of the human being [12]. Thus, it was defended that mental disorders should reside only in the body and not the mind. This is the “Paradigm of conventional medicine”, although some experiments in the brain area have challenged this Cartesian perspective. In the XVIII century and beginning of the XIX century [13], three perspectives on medical philosophy emerged, namely that of Friedrich Hoffmann who defended “mechanism” (use exclusively the physical-mechanical principles to preserve the patient's well-being), Georg Stahl who defended “animism” (human body should take into consideration the agent of conscience - the soul (Anima)) and Boissier de Sauvages who had an intermediate position between these two perspectives. Meanwhile, it was in these centuries that an effective medical means of preventing diseases was discovered: vaccination. In fact, in 1796, the physician Edward Jenner established the scientific basis for vaccinology, for bovine smallpox. In the XIX century, Pasteur discovered the vaccine for rabies. Since then, several vaccines against infectious diseases have been developed, such as tuberculosis, diphtheria, tetanus and yellow fever, among others. Currently, there are more than fifty vaccines.

Finally, in the XIX century and beginning of the XX century some witchcraft practices condemned in previous centuries by the Catholic Church were seen by psychiatric medicine practitioners as mental disorders that needed medical treatment [14]. So, the book entitled «Traité physician-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale» by the psychiatrist Pinel is an example of this change in perspective, as it seeks to interconnect mental disorders with the patient's physical illness. In the XX century, these investigations were complemented by the works of Freud (on hypnosis) and Jung (on the connection between symbolism and psyche).

### **A Transdisciplinary perspective on the History of Religion and Medicine in Eastern and Western Cultures**

It should be mentioned that the old “mechanistic” perspective based on classical science still remains effective in the current medical practice, while the new transdisciplinary perspective of reality seeks to propose an interdependence and interconnection between spirituality, science and medicine [15]. For example, the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic highlight the importance of this “network of interconnections”, where the successful healing of the people of each country will determine the global health situation. In this regard, it should be noted some words of a holy Indian woman [16] who claims that “the world is a family. The real perception is to see ourselves as a member of that family and to consider each member related to us, as part of ourself”. She adds in relation to Covid-19: “This situation is not happening just in one country-it is in many countries”. This thought is shown in Figure 1.

In fact, nowadays some research works seek to highlight the interdependence between spiritual (our soul), psychological (the mind) and biological/physical phenomena (our body). There are some research studies that show that biological systems (such as, humans) are self-poietic, that is, the self-awareness of each biological entity that constitutes the network will determine the network's self-organization structure, according to Figure 1, previously mentioned [17].

From a transdisciplinary point of view, each member of a family is interdependent with the other ones with which is interconnected, and so what happen to a certain member of the fam-

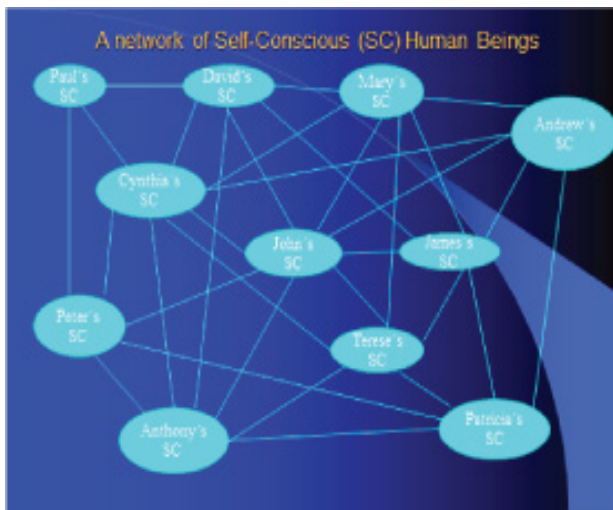


Figure 1: A network of Self-Conscious Human Beings.

ily, it will influence (non-locally) the other family members with whom the person is "intricate" by family ties. The Indian philosophies designate these "family ties" by "family karma", whose philosophical principle is the root of the self-awareness of each being that constitutes the "family network" and that is an important element in the practice of Ayurveda that was referred to above. For its side, each family has its manifestation cycles, whose philosophical principles are fundamental for TCM, described above. In fact, for TCM, the disease is not only an organic problem, but also a way through which we could become more harmonious within ourselves and with the environment around us. The cycles and seasons indicate the best time to achieve this inner balance. It should be noted that the philosophical foundations of Ayurveda and TCM have remained unchanged over time and considered timeless.

### Conclusions

In this article on Transdisciplinary perspective on the History of Religion and Medicine in Eastern and Western Cultures, the researcher's point of view sought to highlight the interdependence between spirituality, medicine and mental and physical health [18], [19].

In fact, Western medicine practice has been based upon the "paradigm of conventional medicine", with the separation of the psychological from the somatic (or mind from body), that is, the patient is treated exclusively in his physical and biological side through the Biomedical model, as mentioned earlier. In this regard, the need for a new medical model arose, and it was called by Biopsychosocial model [20], where the causes and progress of the patient's disease are studied considering both biological factors (genetic, etc.), but also psychological factors (personality, behavior, etc.) and social factors (family, socioeconomic, etc.). Furthermore, it should be stated that a future biomedical model – designated by model of Integrative Medicine [21], [22] - might also need to take into consideration the global dimensions of the patient – body, mind and soul - to make the diagnosis and treatment in a holistic way [23], and so to understand the interdependence and interconnection of the several members of a given family, as mentioned above.

Thus, conventional medicine based on Biomedical model might cure the patient's body (with allopathic medication, surgery), while Ayurveda and TCM that supports the Biopsychosocial model might help the patient to relax the mind (with meditation and positive reinforcement). Furthermore, some concepts of Ayurveda and TCM, mentioned above and that are in accordance with the model of Integrative Medicine might

give a greater quality of life to the patient (shorter convalescence time) and eventually give him a broader perspective on life based on the spiritual side of each human being [24].

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