The Interface of Medicine and Religion in the Greek and the Christian Greek Orthodox Tradition*

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THE TERM "INTERFACE" IS SUBJECT TO SEVERAL DEFINITIONS, including the one which defines it as "the facts, problems, considerations, theories and practices shared by two or more disciplines, or fields of study." Medicine and religion have much in common. Throughout history their alliance has been intimate and their concerns often overlap. The well-being of the human person has been the central objective of both.

In this essay I will focus more on historical precedents concerning the relationship between medicine and religion than on ways and means for their cooperation in the future. The examples of historical precedents will be drawn from the ancient Greek and the Christian Greek Orthodox experience. There are some striking similarities between the two Greek worlds which not only illustrate a persistent continuity but also similar responses of the human in times of crisis.

Medicine was described by the ancient Greeks as the philanthropotate ton epistemon — the most philanthropic of the sciences, and religion (threskeia) was perceived as the instinctive quest of the human being for the divine. As little birds instinctively open their mouths for food, human beings instinctively turn toward their gods, to paraphrase Homer.

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Religion and medicine were accepted as gifts of divine origin.

It is well known, of course, that medicine and religion have been catalysts in the history of humanity in general, from remote antiquity to recent years. In ancient Greece, religion was constantly searching and evolving, from anthropomorphic polytheism to philosophical monotheism to ethical Christian monotheism. Medicine was linked with religion and it was under the patronage of the god Asklepios. "For even this branch of learning had to be under the tutelage of something divine," writes the first-century Kornutos of Leptis. But Asklepios was a theios aner, a god-man, who could converse with the language of both divinity and humanity; who could empathize with the human situation, and heal and save. For this reason, in the early Christian centuries Asklepios was the chief antagonist of Christ. In Asklepios, physicians had a prototype of love and concern for the human being. Whether directly or indirectly, Asklepios' intervention in human affairs abounds in ancient Greek and Latin literature.¹

Throughout antiquity Greek society recognized the need of divine solicitude for humanity's infirmities. It was the individual in need of healing who would take the initiative and turn to Asklepios and subsequently to his physician-priests, the Asklepiadai, to perform the cure.

The cult of Asklepios became very popular in the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity, before and after the Christian era. Its purpose was to work a renewal in the human being and rebirth in health. Some modern medical terms such as clinic, hygiene, panacea, and iasis have their roots in the theories and practices of the Asklepios cult. The first principle of the Asklepios method was to put a patient on a kline (bed) in the Asklepios temple. Our term clinic derives from kataklinein, laying the patient down on a bed. During the

night Asklepios would appear to the patient as a tall, bearded man with a white chiton (a cloak much like a modern physician's) and a serpentine staff (the modern physician's emblem). He was often accompanied by his consort Hygieia (health — whence our term hygiene) and his daughters Panakeia thus our Panacea — medicine for all diseases) and Iaso (whence our isis — process or condition of healing).

Literary, epigraphic, and archeological evidence reveal that there were numerous case histories of healed persons from major sanctuaries such as Epidaurus, Kos, Messene, Pergamum, Mytilene, Athens, Aegina, the Tiber Island at Rome, and other Asklepieia. In every case the cure was considered as a mystery, and the rites and methods leading to the cure remind us of rituals and practices in the Christian tradition. The practice of incubation in Asklepios' temple, the pronouncement of Asklepios' sacred words (hieroi logos), the belief that both soma kai psyche (body and soul) are restored to harmony have been assimilated into Christianity.

Every case was different and the personal relationship between the divinity and the patient was emphasized. Every cure presupposed the presence of certain central principles — both spiritual and pragmatic: the ritual of incubation, which may be described as a total surrender to god's providence and will; faith in the possibility of cure, but also dietetic and therapeutic methods such as baths and exercises. It was the responsibility of the patient to take the initiative and visit his physician. Whether one was ill from arthritis, epiphysitis, rheuma, crisis, asthma, tetanos, anthrax, opisthotonos, mesocolon, dysenteria, pleuritis, hypochondria, a wound or any other of several more illnesses mentioned in the Hippocratic books one would turn first to a physician — the representative of physis — the physical. And the physical — without instruction or knowledge, does what is necessary.

Nature is the physician of diseases. But when the physical failed, and no physician was able to heal, the patient lost no hope. One would then turn to the metaphysical, beyond the physical, to God. Asklepios, the patron god of physicians, would heal either directly or through a physician. The patient would pray to Asklepios, and the physician would lend a hand. "Prayer indeed is good but while calling on the gods one must oneself lend a hand" as we read in a Hippocratic book. The direct healing was performed in the Asklepieion, the temple of Asklepios. The patient was taken to the temple where he was required to lie down in the sacred hall called the abaton, the "innermost chamber" or sanctum sanctorum and wait for the god to appear and either heal directly or give advice in a dream. It was a halfway encounter of the patient with God and an encounter with healing itself. Here are a few cases copied from a large marble stele found in the celebrated Asklepieion in Epidaurus:

Gorgias of Herakleia had been wounded by an arrow in the lung during a battle, and for a year and a half he had suppurated so badly that he filled sixty-seven basins with pus. While sleeping in the temple he saw a vision. It seemed to him that the God extracted the arrowhead from his lung. When day came he walked out well holding the arrowhead in his hands.

When Asklepios used a drug, it was a dream drug. Here is an illustration:

Timon was wounded by a spear under his eye. While sleeping in the temple he saw a dream. It seemed to him that the God rubbed down an herb and poured it into his eye and he became well.

Asklepios even practiced dream surgery. The following is one more appropriate illustration concerning the eyes of Antikrates of Cnidos.

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In a battle [Antikrates] had been hit by a spear in both eyes and had become blind with the spearpoint he carried with him sticking in his face. While sleeping he saw a vision. It seemed to him that the God pulled out the middle and then fitted into his eyelids again the so-called pupils. When day came he walked out sound.  

Because of his healing and philanthropic concerns, Asklepios was called Soter and Philanthropos, epithets widely used in Christian and Orthodox hymnography for Christ. The Asklepieia became the precedents of the Christian hospitals. It is an acknowledged fact that Christianity did not seek to destroy the past but, instead, to consecrate it. In its process of dissemination, Christianity adopted and absorbed much of the culture of the pagan past. Christianity did not destroy the pagan past. In the Christian Orthodox tradition there has been no antagonism between medicine as a pagan inheritance and religious faith, science and belief, reason and creed, faith and culture. Indeed, the striking persistence of ancient Greek thought, pagan images, and practices into the sixth century and even later serves as a reminder that Christian theology and art by no means obliterated the Greco-Roman heritage.

In the history of Christian Hellenism we discern attitudes similar with those that existed in pagan Hellenism. In both chronological periods medicine was viewed as a god-given gift for the benefit of humankind. Throughout the Byzantine era in which Orthodox Christianity formulated many of its present doctrines, ethical teachings and forms of worship, medicine and religion became catalysts in the daily life and civilization of the people. Orthodox Christianity assumed a positive stand toward medicine precisely because it had adopted the Greek mind which remained one of its permanent categories. The teachings of both Hippocrates and Galenos about medicine and

4Majno, The Healing Hand, pp. 201-03.
religion did not contradict any basic doctrines of Christian Orthodoxy. Hippocrates' recognition that an individual's constitution determines the nature of certain diseases and his emphasis on the sacredness and the healing powers of nature made him a source of reference throughout the Byzantine era. "Holy will I keep my life and my art" reads the Hippocratic oath. Hippocrates harmonized rational Greek inquiry and religious faith.

Galenos excelled in diagnosis and prognosis, and in physiology and anatomy, all of which he advanced through experimentation. But it was his reverence for the human person, his ardent belief in the divinity ("everything manifests God's glory," he writes), and his religious attitude toward the ailing person that contributed to the cultivation of a positive alliance between medical science and religious faith. Orthodox Christianity, unlike its Western counterpart, did not have to rediscover the value of scientific medicine because it had never left its native land and it preserved the high conception of the art of healing of the ancient masters.

History confirms that many rites and liturgical terms of the Christian Church were adopted from the religious beliefs, practices, and ceremonies of the people who, in adopting Christianity, changed little of their faith and culture. The terms Soter (Savior), Philanthropos (lover of the human being), poliouchos (protector of the city), patroos (fatherly), mysterion (mystery), hiereos (priest), thysia (sacrifice), analepsis (ascension), panegyris (festival), hierokeryx (preacher), ekklesia (church), naos (temple), myesis (initiation), pannychis (night service), thymiamata (incense), koirimeterion (cemetery), and many more religious terms in current use in the Greek and

5 Hippocrates, ""Oξος,"" ed. W. H. S. Jones, Hippocrates, 1, p. 298.
6 D. J. Constantelos, "'Medicine, Byzantine'" in Dictionary of the Middle Ages, Joseph R. Strayer, Editor in chief (New York, 1987), 8, pp. 244-46.
7 For these terms in the Asklepios' cult, see Alice Walton, Asklepios. The Cult of the Greek God of Medicine (Ithaca, 1894. Reprinted Chicago, 1974), esp. pp. 47-56.
Eastern Orthodox Churches reveal the unbroken continuity between pagan and Christian culture, between non-Christian and Christian Hellenism.

The practices of incubation, or sleeping in the Church, or at the feet of icons, and votives of legs, arms, or other parts of the body dedicated to icons of “Christos” or the “Panagia Parthena” remind us of similar models hanging in temples of Asklepios. Whether in Greek and Roman antiquity, in the Christian Middle Ages, or in modern times, people feel the need for a touch of the paionios cheir (divine hand) for the restoration to health.

There is nothing wrong with this heritage. Who shall say whether these customs are blasphemous and irrational, “pagan” or “Christian”? Christians, who have inherited a mass of customs directly derived from the thought and the ritual of the Greek healing god Asklepios need not apologize for this inheritance. In the last analysis these customs are neither pagan nor Christian. They are intensely human and universal, an utterance of the helplessness of persons in affliction and pain crying out for the aid of a power beyond themselves and other fellow human beings, whether physicians or priests, for hope, certainty and health realized.

Purity of body, faith, prayer, and especially love of the human being were prerequisites for effective healing. Hippocrates writes: “Where there is love of the human being, there is also love of the medical art.” The term philanthropia, in the sense of love for the human being, philein ton anthropon, was widely used in Byzantine writings, including theological and medical literature. And religion and medicine were both concerned with the health of the whole human being. Church and medicine received the human being as a psychosomatic entity.

Notwithstanding the scepticism of some conservative monks who questioned the efficiency of medicine and emphasized the effectiveness of “holy men” rather than physicians in

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8Ibid. pp. 76-77.
the cure of illnesses, the Orthodox Church has never doubted the usefulness of medicine. It has been rightly observed by specialists that in no other scientific field is the Byzantine contribution greater than in medicine. It is no wonder that several major church Fathers from the fourth down to recent centuries not only studied medicine but also made important contributions to health and health services. Among these are: Basil the Great, the founder of the first major hospital of the Middle Ages; Eusebios of Caesarea; Nemesios of Emesa; John Elemon, Pausikakos of Apameia, Photios and others described epidemics such as smallpox and diphtheria and made important contributions to clinical medicine and physiology, including a description of the nervous system. Many churchmen trained in theology and medicine used their medical knowledge in establishing hospitals, leprosaria, and other philanthropic institutions. Indeed the emergence of the clinic and the hospital proper was the result of the Greek Church’s positive attitude toward medicine.

There was no monolithic attitude toward the cause of disease. Some church Fathers and Christian lay physicians viewed illness as a punishment sent by the divinity, while others saw it having natural causes, such as food, occupation, climate, and environmental factors. While some physicians, clergymen, laypersons, and patients made a rational analysis of a disease and sought a logical and natural therapeutic approach, others confused the logical with superstition, the rational with the irrational. Diet, baths, exercises, and drugs were all prescribed along with an emphasis on religious faith, incubation of the patient in the church, the service of the Euchelaion (Holy Unction), and other religious formulas. The hospital and the Church cooperated closely in the task of restoring the ill to a healthy society. Hospitals were built next to churches and there were no hospitals without chapels for services and prayer.9

The close relationship between religion and medicine in

the Orthodox tradition is further attested by the existence of many physicians-priests as in Greek antiquity. Throughout the Byzantine era, many monks, priests, bishops, and even patriarchs, received a medical education and practiced the profession. And I do not mean popular healing saints such as Therapon, Panteleimon, Kosmas, Damianos, Kyros, Sampson, and Diomedes, whose names are cited even to the present day in the services of the Orthodox Church. There were numerous physicians who were also ordained clergymen and were highly respected. They were expected to be experts and practice the act of healing on "bodies and souls." In addition to Pausikakos mentioned earlier, the Patriarchs Politianos, Eutychios, Kyrillos II, Nicholas II, and Meletios Pegas, all of Alexandria, and Anastasios from Tralleis, Andronikos the deacon, and Gerontios of Nikomedia are but a few of the many physicians ordained priests, serving the needs of bodies and souls.10

The same practice survived until recent years. Again I will illustrate this with examples from the Greek experience which I know better than other traditions. We know the names of several prominent physicians who studied theology, were ordained priests, and played a leading role in the life of post-Byzantine Greece. In the eighteenth century, a physician named Parthenios Petrakes became a monk, subsequently received ordination, and founded a monastery which to the present day carries his name — Mone Petrake. The physician-priest Petrakes established his medical practices there for all Athenians who needed his services. After his death, the iatrophilosophos (physician-philosopher) Dionysios Pyrros was ordained a priest and in cooperation with the hegoumenos of the Petrake Monasteri, established there in 1812 the first scientific school of modern Greece. He taught medicine, pharmacology, hygiene, botany, and related sciences. It is interesting to note that in 1835 he was elected the first president of the Medical Society of modern

Greece.\textsuperscript{11}

Throughout the history of Orthodox Christianity, as a rule medicine was used not as a safeguard against demonic powers, or to prevent evil influences, or to propitiate the divine (as in primitive or underdeveloped societies), but as an experiential science in the Aristotelian tradition. The Aristotelian philosophy of science, which, from as early as the thirteenth century, dominated medical science in Western European universities, especially the University of Padua, never deserted its native ground. Thanks to the Orthodox understanding of the cosmos, medicine had found a ready association with religion.

The thirteenth century of our era marked a turning point in the alliance between medicine and religion. Medical studies were pursued with far greater vigor and propensity for innovation than before. Physicians were respected and valued, and hospitals and medical services were perceived as the deepest possible expression of love and concern for the human being. Anti-medical sentiment was very limited and rather rhetorical. It had its source in isolated monastic circles and heretical movements. The mainstream of religious thought considered medicine as proof of God’s philanthropia and the goodness of creation. Of course this attitude does not mean that there was no criticism of physicians. Patients complained then as they complain today that they paid exorbitant fees to physicians. We must note, however, that the high fees of physicians, their failure to cure medical problems, and the reputation of physicians for cupidity constitute a \textit{topos} in hagiography and various descriptions of miracles.\textsuperscript{12}

In any case it was under these circumstances that the faithful would turn from the physical — the physician — to the


metaphysical, to Christ who is described in the Liturgy as “the physician of bodies and souls,” to divine intervention through liturgical services, sacramental acts, relics, and intercessions of holy persons. “Lives of Saints” abound in miraculous cures, whether legendary or real. The following illustrations are from the miracles attributed to Athanasios, a fourteenth-century saint and former Patriarch of Constantinople.

Meletios Poteras, of Medea, fell victim to a terrible evil spirit, which did not simply possess him for several years, but filled his soul with terror and darkness and treated him despitefully in every way... He used to collapse frequently and fall down and suffered all “the ills” of men possessed by spirits: spasms, convulsions, attacks of dizziness...

... Meletios, disregarding all human assistance, sought refuge in God and his servant and came to the sanctuary where the precious coffin of Athanasios lies; he fell before it in supplication and bathed it in warm tears. Then Meletios made use of the drug which wards off evil spirits and all suffering, being truly the oil of mercy; he blended it with prayers and tears and straightway was freed from his demonic possession (epilepsy?).

Note that it was after Meletios had despaired of medical assistance that he sought the intercession of the saint. He prayed first and then he used the drug. Human assistance, divine help, prayer, and medication constituted the process of Meletios’ eventual healing.

The case of Ioannes Vlangenos, who suffered from a similar illness, reminds us of the incubation and dream therapies used in the Asklepicia. He sought refuge to the church where Athanasios’ coffin was laid. While in deep sleep, the saint appeared to him, took hold of his head, and bade him to open his mouth. Then... he said, “Behold you have been freed from the evil spirit; now that you have found salvation through your faith, depart in peace... As soon as Vlangenos awoke, he was liberated from the evil spirit.”
Once again, despaired of help, Ioannes Vlangenos sought assistance in the Church. It was the recovery of his faith that made him well, through the intervention of the saint.\textsuperscript{13}

In the last centuries of the Byzantine era, in addition to the use of medicine, the intercession of holy persons, and special services, the Church officially adopted a sacrament of healing. Even though belief in the miraculous was always present in the experience of the Church, it was after the thirteenth century that the sacrament of holy unction was officially adopted as the sacrament to be administered for the healing of illnesses of body and soul, with emphasis on the physical healing. Parenthetically, let me mention that at the Council of Lyons (1274), which sought to unite the Western and Eastern churches, the Greek delegation was asked to explain the doctrines of its Church. It responded by saying repeatedly that the sacrament of the Euchelaion was administered only to sick people for the restoration of their health. In fact the Greek Fathers criticized the Latin Church for administering the sacrament as a last rite.\textsuperscript{14} Because of the interrelationship between body and soul, the sacrament was dispensed for the forgiveness of sins and for healing of soul and mind. “Great are the benefits of this rite upon both soul and body,” advised Saint Symeon, Archbishop of Thessalonike (1410-1429).\textsuperscript{15} In any case, it is well known that the Church, through its many special services and prayers, is deeply concerned with the psychosomatic well-being of its members. Indeed one of its many characteristics is that the Church’s liturgical life has embraced the totality of the cosmos and humanity’s total spiritual and physical needs. From the moment of birth to the moment of departure from this life; for a single personal object to a public project; for the installation

\textsuperscript{13}Talbot, Faith Healing, pp. 78-79.

\textsuperscript{14}A. Theiner and F. Miklosich, Monumenta spectantia ad unionem ecle


\textsuperscript{15}Symeon of Thessalonike, “Περί τῆς τελετῆς τῶν Ἀγίων Ἐλάιων,” ch.
3 in Συμεών Αρχιεπισκόπου Θεσσαλονίκης Τὰ Ἀπαντα (Thessalonike, no date. Reprinted from the 1882 ed.), p. 228.
of the village mayor to the inauguration of the president of the Republic — for every occasion and every need the Church is in attendance, encouraging, educating, and sanctifying.\textsuperscript{16}

The alliance between medicine and religion is actively present in several Christian Orthodox societies today. Another illustration from Greece, which is one of the few more homogeneous societies where Orthodox Christianity is still the dominant religion is the Christian Union of Scientists and Professional Persons which includes many physicians committed to the principles of the Orthodox Christian faith. Their Institute of Psychology and Mental Health, under the leadership of Dr. A. Aspiotes, has published scores of books intended to help the faithful achieve physical and mental health.

The Orthodox Church sees the human person as a "synergize theou," collaborator of God because of its affinity with God. The human being is primarily a soul, a mind, a spirit with a body, not a body with a spirit. Thus the emphasis is on the spirit, the mind, and the soul over the body. Faith as a factor in the healing process; belief that "everything is possible to those who believe;" and faith as a surrender of mind and body to the Creator's providence are all teachings which are integrated into the belief system of the Orthodox.\textsuperscript{17}

But Orthodoxy means more than faith alone. It also means a way of life, a culture, an all-embracing cosmic-view which sees a harmonious union between the physical and the metaphysical, body and soul. It is the organic character of the union of body and soul that makes the alliance of medicine and religious faith meaningful and indeed necessary. Orthodoxy is radically opposed to any dualistic interpretation of the human being, to any view which identifies the present life with evil and sees illness as the result of the demonic. The God of Orthodoxy is a Philanthropos Theos, the source of a beautiful...

\textsuperscript{16}The Μέγα Εὐχολόγιον includes not only the sacramental services but also many brief rites and prayers for practically every occasion of man's life.

\textsuperscript{17}Mt 8.13, 21.22; Mk 9.23; Lk 8.50. See also Leonidas J. Philippides, Η πίστις ὁς παράγων βεβαιωτάς ἱδέως (Athens, 1947), esp. pp. 19-30.
and orderly cosmos — not a life-hating Devil.  

The relationship of the Orthodox world to modern trends in religious faith and health sciences is not meant to be a return to the past or an escape to ancient Greek Asklepieia or medieval Byzantine nosokomeia (hospitals), but a response to existential needs, even a reaction to a secularized and commercialized medicine. Health is no longer viewed as the absence of sickness, but the realization of human potential when the human realizes God’s kingdom “in us” and his presence “inside” us. Indeed, “in God we live and move and have our being,” as the ancient Greek poet Aratos put it and Saint Paul confirmed it (Acts 17.28). In the light of this, Orthodox Christian physicians should have no problem accepting the ministry of healing, either through the Sacrament of Holy Unction or other forms of liturgical prayers and services. In speaking of the ministry of healing, I do not mean “faith healing,” television style, which denies the value of scientific medicine. The ministry of healing is not self-sufficient. It acknowledges its limitations, and cooperates with medicine.

But is not modern medicine dominated by the rationalists and agnostics? Is it not irrational and unscientific to believe in the ministry of healing? Before we reflect on these questions, let me raise an additional question: What is faith, and what is healing? “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11.1). In the context of this definition, even rationalists and sceptics should admit that faith is indeed very much a major factor in the process of healing.

Every patient needs the reassurance of things hoped for, that is, healing, and the conviction of things not seen, but soon to be realized — such as the return of an injured or damaged part of the human body to its natural and normal

\[^{a}\text{For an excellent understanding of Christian Orthodox anthropology within the context of theology, see Elias Mastrogiannopoulos, } \text{Oi πατέρες τῆς Ἑσκλησίας καὶ ὁ ἄνθρωπος} \text{ (Athens, 1966), esp. pp. 71-285 and Paul Evdokimov, } \text{L’ Orthodoxie} \text{ (Paris, 1959), part one; Greek translation by A. T. Mourtzopoulos, } \text{Η Ορθοδοξία} \text{ (Thessalonike, 1972), pp. 56-61.}\]
state of being to the extent that it is possible. Faith as an attitude of the mind possesses tremendous powers. If properly utilized, the mind could undermine and even defeat illness, and enhance the health of the body, spirit, and emotions. We are told that physicians and other scientists who use new tools of brain physiology in order to check out the mind and its powers are no longer a small group of wishful thinkers.

It is widely accepted that negative emotions and attitudes are detrimental to health while controlled emotions and positive thinking contribute to the development of an immune system toward various physical and emotional illnesses. The links between brain and body, belief and immunity has long been recognized. Our ancestors relied more on prayer, intuition, and belief. We have added today experiential knowledge, science. The prayers of the Church invoke not only divine intervention but they also provide the ground for certainty, hope, and positive expectations; they strengthen the health system of the patient. In this light then, one may assert that the means of the Church for healing are not anachronistic but as timely as ever.

In recent years scientists have accumulated sufficient evidence indicating that thoughts, beliefs, and emotional states can affect one’s immune system. To visualize health promoting images, such as God’s touch healing the sick; to believe that God’s presence in the human being can expel intruders; to accept seriously the commands “Go; be it done for you as you have believed” (Mt. 8.13) and “according to your faith, be it done to you” (Mt. 9.29; see also Mt. 15.28) are positive instruments in religion as well as in medicine and psychology.

The dialogue between religion, medicine, and psychology must continue, for they have many elements converging in their interest for the well-being of humanity. A critical analysis of the teachings of Orthodox Christianity on the nature and destiny of the human being reveals but little that is antithetical to the pursuits and goals of medicine and psychology. The voice of the sacrament of holy Unction and of other liturgical services and prayers is a life-affirming voice, speaking the positive, looking not only for the holiness but
also for the wholeness of soul, mind, and body.

The healing approach of Orthodox Christianity is not necessarily the destruction or elimination of illness but the realization of human potential within the dynamics of God’s creation. In addition to the prayers for health, Orthodox Christianity also has prayers for the peaceful departure of the ill person from physical reality into a metaphysical perpetual existence. That is, the voice of the faith is not only life-affirming in time but also life-affirming in eternity. Should the inevitable come in spite of prayers and medical assistance, the patient must surrender to God’s spirit in peace and faith. It must be emphasized, however, that, whether in matters of life or death, the Church only petitions, and does not command it; it only invokes God’s intervention and mercy but it does not dictate God’s decision.

Another fruitful meeting-point between religion and medicine today lies in the fact that both accept the re-creative power of nature which brings healing. The Church never directly heals anybody. Prayers, services, holy persons, and celebrants are instruments of healing — not healers. On the other hand, physicians, surgeons, psychotherapists are not miracle workers and do not directly heal anybody: they seek by their skills and art to remove obstacles to nature’s healing energies, to correct chemical imbalances in the body, or take away diseased tissue.

The trend in Orthodox Christian thought today is to see scientific medicine and the spiritual dimension of man’s well-being in a wholistic perspective. The human being is viewed as the totality of reality, however small, as a microcosm of God’s creation in the process of deification by reason of his affinity with God. Soul and body are not two separate entities but the spiritual and physical elements of the same being.  


Though I possess no prophetic charisma and cannot predict whether this approach will be satisfactory to twenty-first-century medicine, I profess my personal satisfaction with what can be called modern Christian Orthodox anthropology. It is a well-balanced perception of the nature and destiny of the human being.

Changing technology clearly affects traditional values and ethical principles. Furthermore, the Church has a whole new set of medical ethical questions which it must address. Among them are included: euthanasia; the permissibility of removing life support systems and allowing patients to expire when death is imminent; the moral acceptability of conception outside of the mother’s womb; the termination of unwanted pregnancies; and AIDS and the administration of the Eucharist.

Notwithstanding the perplexities involved in the interface of medicine and religion today, the alliance between Orthodox Christian faith and medicine need not be abandoned in the present, and their creative dialogue must be pursued vigorously in the twenty-first century.