

THE PRIEST-PHYSICIAN IN MALTA AND ABROAD

PAUL CASSAR

Hon. Fellow of the University of Malta

The association of healing with the deity and the combination of healer and priest in the same person are as old as the emergence of organised religion in the history of mankind. This derives from the fact that early man ascribed disease from within — physical and psychological — to a supernatural agency, as the possession of the body by an evil spirit or demon, and to punishment for sins committed both by the individual and by the community. The priest who was in the privileged position of being in contact with the supernatural was, therefore, the only person that could effectively exorcise the devil and induce the gods to grant a cure from illness. Even right down to historical

times, biblical accounts frequently refer to the problem of sin in terms of disease and equates the healing of the body with pardon from sin.

In ancient Egypt, medicine, as all Egyptian wisdom, was closely linked with religion. Imhotep was venerated as the god of health and as long as 1400 BC incubation or temple sleep was practised as a therapeutic measure by his priests in temples dedicated to him (Saunders, 1963).

Among the Jews, both in the biblical and the later Talmudic periods (AD 200-600), various aspects of the healing art were applied not only to control the spread of dermatological diseases and to foster

the maintenance of personal and communal hygiene, but also to many legal and ritual ordinances of Judaism; hence the union of the medical and the religious functions in the person of the Rabbi (Snowman, 1929).

In Greek mythology the god Apollo, and later Asklepios (c 1250 BC), were associated with medical practice and the management of disease. The temples of Asklepios in Greece and Asia Minor were the focal points for sick people who sought deliverance from illness through divine intercession. These temples, where prayer, bathing, exercise and dieting were prescribed, formed the germ of the first crude hospitals and nursing homes.

The surgeon and the lay medical practitioner began to emerge by the side of the priest-doctor in Babylon at the time of King Hammurabi (1948-1905 BC) but the first man who tried to free the theory and exercise of medicine from the priesthood was the Greek physician Hippocrates (BC 460-355) who was himself born in a sacerdotal family in the service of the temple of Asklepios in Cos. With the Graeco-Roman Claudius Galen (c AD 131-200) the gap between rational medicine and religion became wider but not complete for Galen himself still regarded the body as the mere vehicle of the soul (Guthrie, 1946a). In spite of these pioneering efforts, therefore, medicine remained embodied in the matrix of religious ritual and belief.

Not only the ancient pagans but also the early Christians equated illness with sin and healing with pardon from guilt. Indeed, we find the apostles being given power to cure "all manner of diseases and all manner of infirmities" (St. Matthew, Chap 10, v 1). This merging of minister of religion and healer persisted far into the Christian era when the health of the soul was regarded as being more valuable than that of the body and when it was held that disease was God-sent, serving the purpose of punishing the sinner to make him a better man. Remedies against disease were despised but it was believed that their success depended entirely upon the will of God (Kudlien, 1974). A close link between the realm of the spiritual

and the art of healing is to be found in the figures of such early saints as Luke, who is reputed to have been a physician; the two brother saints, Cosmas and Damian, who were also medical men; in the veneration, right down to the later Middle Ages, of the saint protectors against the plague as St. Roche and St. Sebastian; and in the foundation of monastic orders such as that of St. Benedict where apart from his purely sacerdotal duties the monk or friar was engaged in the care and nursing of the sick and infirm and in the transmission, through copying and translating, of the learning of Greek medical authors.

The separation of medicine from religion became definite with the lay foundation, about the ninth century, of the medical school of Salerno which reached its zenith in the eleventh century. No one was admitted to the course of medicine before he had reached the age of 21 years and had studied logic for three years. The medical course lasted five years with an additional year of practice under the supervision of an older practitioner. Having passed successfully the prescribed examinations, the candidate became entitled to call himself a doctor and to practice medicine. Through the influence of Salerno, the lay medical schools of Padua, Pisa and Bologna in Italy, and Montpellier and Paris in France, eventually came into being. Medicine thus assumed a distinct identity, separate and independent from the ecclesiastical function; this is not to underestimate the influence which the Christian church continued to exert on the moral and scientific thought of all forms of academic learning in succeeding centuries; or to overlook the fact that the secularisation of medicine did not preclude the same individual from following theological and medical courses at universities and from graduating in both these disciplines. Thus one recalls that King William I (1027-1087) was attended in his last illness in Normandy by Archdeacon Gilbert who is said to have been one of the most skilful physicians of his time (Dobson, 1970). Arnold of Villanova (1235-1312) was a graduate in theology and law as well as in medicine from the University of Montpel-

lier; Petrus Hispanus (c 1277) was another theologian who was also a physician and who ultimately was raised to the Papal Chair as John XXI; Theodoric of Lucca (1205-98) was a theologian and a medical man who eventually became bishop of Cervia (Guthrie, 1946b); Thomas Linacre (1460-1524), medical founder of the College of Physicians of London, was ordained priest in 1509; Simon Ludford, originally a Franciscan friar, was a doctor in medicine of the University of Oxford (d 1574) and William Delaune (d 1610), a French Protestant clergyman, was admitted a Licentiate of the College of Physicians of London (Munk, 1878); while Niels Stensen (1638-86), the discoverer of the parotid salivary duct, studied both medicine and theology and became Bishop of the Catholic Church (Poynter, 1963; Quattrin, 1961). In England members of the clergy sought to take degrees in medicine after losing their ecclesiastical benefices in the period of the Civil War (Medical History, 1969).

Yet, in spite of the occasional emergence of men like these with a double qualification, a point had been reached where the theological and the medical disciplines were no longer combined in the same person, in other words the kinship between the priest and physician came to an end.

A parallel cycle of events evolved in the Maltese Islands where since prehistoric times the beginnings of medicine are inextricably interwoven with the rise and growth of religious belief and ritual. In fact, the earliest evidence of primitive medical practice in our Islands is associated with the neolithic temples of Mnajdra, Hagar Qim and Hal Safflieni Hypogeum that date back to about 2400 BC. This testimony takes the form of a number of "ex-votos" representing parts of the human body, such as legs and torsos, that were excavated from Mnajdra temple where the sick are believed to have gathered to pray for deliverance from sickness. Modern counterparts of these votive offerings are still to be seen in our Christian churches where they have been deposited by devotees in thanksgiving for recovery from disease.

There are strong indications that the hypogeum at Hal Safflieni was a temple-hospital where incubation or temple-sleep was practised. In these underground chambers the sick were put to sleep by the priests after praying to the deity. While in the hypnotic state the god inspired the patient, by means of dreams, with the kind of therapy to be followed. This is how archeologists have interpreted the significance of the two clay statuettes found in the Hypogeum showing women reclining or sleeping peacefully on a litter or couch (Cassar, 1964). The so-called Oracular Chamber that forms part of this underground complex may also have played a part in these procedures. The oracular voice — proceeding from one of the priests may have provided the patient with a prognosis and prescribed the reward or fee due to the temple.

The healer-priest comes into a sharper focus during the Roman occupation of Malta. In fact, the first written record concerning the medical state of Malta in AD 60 comes from the physician St. Luke in the Acts (Chapter 27 & 28) and the healer is no less a personage than Paul of Tarsus, the apostle, who following his shipwreck on Malta, healed the father of Publius, the Roman delegate of the Praetor of Sicily, from fever and a "bloody flux". Other miraculous cures were effected by Paul for Luke informs us that "those that had diseases in the Island came and were healed" by the Apostle.

After the Roman period there is a very long gap in our medical history but it has been alleged that about 200 AD a certain Don Pietro, who was a physician, was consecrated Bishop of Malta by Pope Victor I and died in Valencia (Cassar, 1965a).

The foundation of the earliest hospital known to have been established in Malta, under the title of "Santo Spirito", is linked with the Order of the Minor Conventuals of St. Francis. It was set up in close proximity to the convent and church of this Order at Rabat in the early fourteenth century and the Franciscans continued to hold its rectorship until 1506. There is no evidence, however, that the friars, apart from their administrative duties, exercised

any clinical or therapeutic functions.

In the fifteenth century the Jews formed an important element of the Maltese community. Besides engaging in commerce they appear to have monopolised the profession of medicine. Some of these physicians, such as Braccone Safaradi ("floit" 1446) and Abraham Safaradi ("floit" 1485), combined the practice of medicine with the religious duties of Rabbi who was the spiritual head of the Jewish group in the Island (Cassar, 1965b).

The religious and chivalric Order of St. John of Jerusalem, founded as a nursing order in the eleventh century came to Malta in 1530 and founded the Holy Infirmary of Valletta in 1574 but the Order's outstanding contribution to Maltese medicine was the creation of the Chair of Anatomy and Surgery at this infirmary in 1676. This Chair was entrusted to a priest-physician, Dr. Fra Giuseppe Zammit, Chaplain of Obedience in the Aragonese Language, physician to several Grand Masters and Chief Government Medical Officer of the Island.

In the eighteenth century we come across "Dr fisico e sacerdote" Fra Antonio Grana, likewise member of the Order of St. John, who flourished about 1703 ("Arch" 647). Another contemporary physician (1709), who was in addition a Doctor of Theology, was Dr. Filippo Giacomo Gauci whose tombstone is still extant in St. Dominic's Church at Rabat ("Ms" 142E; "Ms" 721).

Dr. Bartolomeo Mifsud (1708-1781) from Żebbuġ qualified as Doctor of Laws and Doctor of Medicine, probably at Rome, and subsequently joined the Capuchin Order of St. Francis under the name of "Padre Pelagio" (1742). It is not known whether he continued to practice medicine after he became a friar (Mifsud-Bonnici, 1960-68a; "Ms" 147; Ciappara 1882).

Two priests-physicians — Dr. Joseph Briffa and Dr. Joseph Ellul — were in practice at Hal Luqa in the first three decades of the eighteenth century. I am unaware where Dr. Briffa pursued his medical studies but it is likely that he did so in Italy like his brother Dr. Jacob Briffa who studied medicine at Naples. Dr. Joseph Briffa

died at Luqa at 33 years of age on the 15th June 1734.

Dr. Joseph Ellul left Malta in 1711 for Naples where he followed courses in medicine and theology being ordained priest in 1703. He continued his medical training in Rome. He was back in Malta and practising as a physician at Luqa in 1715. He appears to have been very much in demand in neighbouring villages but the people complained that he charged fees to both rich and poor though the parish priest of Luqa declared that Dr. Ellul did treat poor patients gratis. He died at 49 years of age on the 17th April 1737 (Micallef, 1975).

A contemporary member of the clergy and of the medical profession was Dr. Francesco Mamo who on the 21st April 1742 applied for the post of physician at "Santo Spirito" Hospital at Rabat where he was eventually appointed "Secundus medicus" ("Arch" 1188).

Dr. Fra Luigi Pisani, born on the 12th July 1776, was the last medical man who was also a priest and a member of the Order of St. John. He was the brother of Dr. Salvatore Pisani, who died of the plague in 1813, and the uncle of Dr. Aloisio Pisani (1806-65), who subsequently became Chief Government Medical Officer. Dr. Fra Luigi Pisani had joined the government service as "Medical Practitioner for the Poor" at Birgū on the 1st January 1808. He was still active as a physician in 1850 (Mifsud Bonnici, 1960-68b; "Libr 19).

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