

Dualism Set Medicine Back in the West (Archbishop Lazar Puhalo)

[Ξένες γλώσσες](#) / [In English](#)



In the first few centuries of the Christian era, medicine developed more rapidly in the East than in the Latin West. The author of this paper presents the suggestion that, in great part, the difference lies in the respective concepts of what actually constitutes the human person.

While the Orthodox Christian Church was convinced of the unity of body and soul, which mutually complement each other, the Latin West became influenced by the Gnostic and Platonistic concept of “dualism”—the idea of a radical dichotomy between body and soul in the human person. This Gnostic idea tends to see an enmity between body and soul, indeed, between all matter and that which is said to be spiritual. It conveys the idea that the body is a sort of prison of the soul, and that the soul is *liberated* from the body by death (or, at least partly, by extreme asceticism), whereupon, it experiences new freedom, rises to new heights, experiences new discoveries and wanders freely, now that it is, according to Gnosticism, free of its sinful body. In Gnostic thought, the body and soul are seen as separate entities and, indeed, in many of the Gnostic sects, the soul was thought to have a “subtle physical body”¹ of its own. This is the source of the unscriptural notion that the soul of a deceased person becomes an angel, with a

complete, though subtle, physical body. Such an idea negates the general resurrection, as well as the Second Coming and Last Judgment by Christ.

In some extreme cases, the Gnostic and neo-Platonists concluded that, since the soul has a “subtle body,” the general resurrection is only metaphorical, for there would be no reason for God to reunite the soul with its old enemy, the body.

Among the Gnostic sects and neo-Platonists, there developed a separate “ascetic theology” which is generally at odds with major principles of the “patristic theology” of the great Church fathers. The very term “ascetic theology” can often be a synonym for “Gnostic sect.”

The development of bio-medicine (and of the psychological sciences) was greatly hindered by such concepts, because the body was conceived as being almost at odds with the soul, and therefore had to be treated separately, and in a lesser manner or not at all. Active research into physical illnesses and their treatments was not so important, since the destruction of the body was beneficial for the soul. Some element of this idea of dualism was still present when Descartes (1596-1650) erroneously separated the mind from the body and asserted that the body could function quite well without the mind.² Such dualism appears also in the epistemology of John Locke, one of the fathers of modern democracy, as well in the thought of several other Western philosophers. From them, it entered into the general consciousness of the West. Protestantism appears not to have comprehended the danger of such teachings.

In the Orthodox Christian concept, expressed by the holy fathers, soul and body are a single, harmonious unit which together make up the “person” — the human being. Thus, treatment of the illnesses of both soul and body were equally sacred acts and desirable. Christ Himself often cured one by treating the other. Thus, the healing of a bodily infirmity might be accomplished by the forgiveness of sins (*Mt.9:2-7*). Christ and, following Him, the saints of the Orthodox Church had the concept of what in our own time is called “holistic medicine.”

It is interesting that even the concept of a so-called “*partial* judgment” at death and the “actual judgment” upon resurrection, directly reflects this Orthodox concept, so important to scientific medicine, of the unity of soul and body. The *person* cannot be judged and rewarded when he is dissolved into two components, body separate from soul. Therefore, the soul, which remains alive at the death of the body is only a *part* of the person, but not the person, and so it can only be assigned to a state proper to itself at death, that is, a condition of joyous expectation or of dread. No judgment can be passed or rewards received until, in the resurrection, soul and body are reunited as the “person.” This “assignment” of

the soul is called a “partial” judgment precisely because it is dealing with only a *part* of the person. The Ortho-dox Church fathers are especially adamant in declaring that the soul alone is not the person, nor is the body.³ Thus, there is a “partial” judgment , which consists only in the soul becoming aware of its condition and the destiny it will share with the body in the resurrec-tion, and an *actual* judgment can come about only when the reunion of soul and body restores the actual person.

Gnostic sects (such as the proponents of a separate “ascetic theology”) are inclined to the pagan idea that the soul, having, they suppose, a “subtle body” of its own, actually constitutes the complete person, and the body is only fictionally necessary. While this Gnosticism appears period-ically among some monastic writers in the Orthodox Church (usually those under the influ-ence of Augustinian-ism), it actually entered into the general theology of the Latin West. There one can also trace it to the influence of Plato ‘s *Timaeus* and *Phaedros*.



Nevertheless, eventually, the medical theories of the ancient Hellenic physician Galen were dogmatized in the West, and exposure to the Islamic schools in Moslem Spain, and during the Crusades, spurred on Western medicine. The rise of humanism in the West also compensated for the problem of Gnostic dualism, and the awakening of the Western mind to science brought constant developments in medicine to the fore. After the destruction of Constantinople by the Crusaders in the 1200s, Byzantine learning was eclipsed by both Islam and Western Europe as all the Eastern Empire expended all of its energies on the struggle for survival and efforts to stave off its political and economic decline.

This article was originally published as the "Preface" in Archbishop Lazar's book The Impact of Orthodox Christian Thought on Medicine (Synaxis Press, 2006). It is posted here with permission.

Notes

[1.](#) Ironically, one or two of the holy fathers, in refuting certain of the Gnostics, also used the term "subtle body" in relationship to the soul. However, the fathers were using this term to refute the teaching of certain Gnostics that the soul was a "pure spirit" like God. Unlike the Gnostics who were attempting to assert that the soul is the actual person and, having a subtle body, does not need the physical body, the holy fathers used the expression "subtle body" simply to assert that the soul is not a pure spirit like God, but belongs to the realm of the created, material order. For the Gnostic, the term "subtle body" was intended to teach a total self sufficiency of the soul, while for the holy fathers, it was used to assert that the soul is created and not a pure, eternal spirit like God Himself.

[2.](#) René Descartes (1596-1650). see Damasio, Antonio, *Descartes's Error*, (Grosset/Putnam, N.Y., 1994). Interestingly, Rene Descartes's radical dualism was opposed by his student Princess Elizabeth of Palatine.

[3.](#) see *The Soul, The Body and Death*, (Synaxis Press, 1996) chapter 11