



BEYOND THE ANGLOPHONE WORLD

CHRIST AS A PHARMACIST: MEDICAL SYMBOLS IN GERMAN DEVOTION

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Abstract—The author reports on two German publications [1, 2] about the metaphoric use of medicines in Christian devotional literature and art in German society (16th to 19th century). Christ is depicted as a pharmacist dispensing ‘medicines’ which contain Christian virtues and symbols.

Key words—metaphor, medicines, pharmacist, Christian symbol, Germany

The symbolic power of medicine, health and illness and of pharmaceuticals in particular is increasingly being recognized. Susan Sontag’s famous essay [3] is a case in point. She points to illness as an inexhaustible source of metaphors which can be used in speaking about society. Illness terms are a popular means of expressing denigrating and pejorative feelings about anything and anybody. Cancer in particular proves an effective metaphor to convey disparagement for what is considered as decay in a moral, political or other sense. Examples abound. In the film ‘Sophie’s Choice’, one of the main characters, Nathan, shouts at Sophie that he would miss her as “trichinosis, as gallstones, as pellagra, as a brain tumor, . . . as death”. In a more recent essay [4] Sontag extends the argument to AIDS as a metaphor.

Several anthropologists have described how medical issues assume a wider significance and serve a purpose outside the strictly medical domain. Crandom-Malamud [5], for example, shows how in Bolivia medical dialogue is used to establish social and ethnic position. The diagnosis of a medical complaint is at the same time a ‘diagnosis’ of one’s identity. Social values are expressed with the help of medical terms. Taylor, in his study of Rwandan traditional medicine [6], shows that speaking about health (the free flow of bodily fluids) and illness (the blockage of fluids) is often a disguised speaking about the condition of society.

In a well-known article [7], Byron Good describes *narahatiye qalb* (‘heart distress’) in Iran as an idiom to express much more than simply a physical complaint. *Narahatiye qalb* is also an indication of a person’s social and psychological well-being. The pounding heart represents general anxiety. Here the distinction between the spoken metaphor and the physical sensation begins to diffuse. Etsuko’s article [8] on ‘fox possession’ in Japan reaches a similar

conclusion. The spirit of the fox is a core metaphor through which people express how they feel when caught in a process of radical transition.

The symbolic propriety of medicines is another case in point. If concretisation is the main purpose of metaphor as Fernandez [9] and Lakoff and Johnson [10] have suggested, it is then understandable that medicines should prove popular metaphors. As tangible substances they lend themselves eminently to metaphoric—and metonymic—use. They are, in Lévi-Strauss’ words, “easy to think with” [11]. Because they are experienced in such a direct physical way, their images are also likely to be used outside the strictly medical sphere. They become effective vehicles for expressing positive appreciation of things and people. Isaac Bashevis Singer has said that Yiddish has more ‘vitamins’ than other languages. Comforting words are called ‘balm of the soul’ and the economy needs an ‘injection’. An extremely rich and colourful collection of metaphors derived from the world of medicines can be found in German devotion books and religious images from the sixteenth to nineteenth century. The main purpose of this note is to bring two German publications on this fascinating phenomenon to the notice of an international audience.

CHRIST AS A PHARMACIST

Some years ago I visited the Pharmacy Museum in Heidelberg where I saw an intriguing oil painting portraying Christ as a pharmacist. The figure of Christ is a conventional one: long hair, beard, halo and the familiar long robe. What is unusual, however, is the entourage. Christ is depicted leaning against the counter of a pharmacy. In his left hand he holds a scale, a common tool in traditional pharmacy. On the counter are the symbols of Faith (a chalice with host),

Hope (an anchor), and Love (a red burning heart). An open book shows a bible text: "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it". A sheet of paper lies over the edge of the counter bearing the following text: "Come to me all who labour and are heavily laden and I will give you rest; call to me and I will listen to you; seek and you will find; ask and you will receive; knock and it will be opened to you". Behind the counter are three shelves lined with medicine bottles. On the bottom shelf we can read the labels of four bottles: *Augenwasser*, *Magenwasser*, *Herzwasser*, and *Kraftwasser* (eye water, stomach water, heart water, and power water). On the middle shelf are seven bottles containing *Freigebigkeit*, *Barmherzigkeit*, *Frölichkeit*, [*Freund*]lichkeit, *Inbrünstigkeit*, *Gutmütigkeit*, and *Freiherzigkeit* (generosity, mercifulness, joyfulness, kindness, fervour, good-naturedness, and full-heartedness). On the top shelf are again seven bottles containing the following 'medicines': *Grosmuth*, *Reinlichkeit*, *Tugendsamkeit*, *Gottesfurcht*, *Gehorsamkeit*, *Heilichkeit*, and *Beständigkeit* (magnanimity, purity, virtuousness, fear of God, obedience, holiness, and steadfastness). In the background is a picture of Christ healing a blind man in front of the temple.

The painting is an elaborate allegory. The objects of the pharmacy take on a spiritual meaning. The medicines become Christian virtues which are needed to achieve spiritual 'health'. One can obtain these 'medicines' from the pharmacist Christ. The book and sheet on the counter show us prescriptions, not for the body but for the soul. The scale, a conventional pharmacy instrument normally used to measure the correct dosage of medicine, is here a symbol referring to the Final Judgement where each individual will be weighed and judged. The outcome will be either salvation or eternal damnation. Harald Pfeiffer [2] has provided an extensive theological and bibliographic commentary on each detail of this painting giving exact references to relevant biblical and devotional texts as well as explanations of the various Christian symbols depicted.

The exact origin of the painting and the name of the artist are not known Pfeiffer writes that it comes from Austria. He suspects that it once hung in the pharmacy of a monastery and passed through several hands before being presented as a gift to the Heidelberg museum.

My initial idea that this was a very unique painting proved incorrect. In the museum bookshop I found a booklet by Wolfgang-Hagen Hein showing 30 reproductions of 'Christ as a pharmacist' and of the 'heavenly pharmacy' [1]. Each reproduction carried information on the origin and meaning of the represented image. A general introduction described the historical background of this religious motif and sketched how style and presentation had developed over the years. In 1992 a revised edition [12], with 40 reproductions, was published. Both editions are written in German and I have the impression that the

theme of 'Christ as a pharmacist' is hardly known outside the German-speaking world. According to Pfeiffer, only once has an English publication [13] been devoted to this topic.

Hein has identified a total of 133 representations of Christ as pharmacist. Most are oil paintings, while others are copperplates, drawings, or stained-glass windows. No less than 119 of these pictures are found in German speaking areas of Europe, mainly in Southern Germany, but also in places such as Alsace and the Austrian Tirole. Only 14 have been discovered outside the German-speaking area although it seems likely that several of these originate from Germany or were copied from a German original.

Hein distinguishes four types of representations of Christ as Pharmacist, which may be reduced to two basic depictions. In some Christ is alone, usually half hidden behind the counter. In others there are more figures in the picture. Christ is surrounded by angels who assist him or carry banners and books with edifying texts or shown with customers, poor sinners, who ask for medicines. The oldest example in Hein's book is a miniature from a French book dating from the beginning of the sixteenth century (see Fig. 1). The miniature shows a meticulously drawn copy of a pharmacy of that time. Christ is writing a prescription for Adam and Eve who represent humanity. Here, Christ is more a doctor than a pharmacist. In later examples the pharmacist image becomes dominant and certain features frequently recur. One of the most striking of these is the scale in Christ's left hand. The oil-painting in the Heidelberg museum is a typical example of this style. Figure 2 shows a stained-glass window (1630) from Switzerland which belongs to the same category. It portrays Christ with his right hand in a jar of *Kreuzwurzeln* (groundsel?, litt. 'cross roots') [14]. Other 'medicines' on the counter include truth, justice, grace, faith, love, mercifulness, steadfastness and patience. Above Christ are two references to Bible texts: "Come, buy and eat without money" (Isaiah 55: 1) and: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11: 28). Below it reads: "Wer glaubt verthrauwet und hofft in mich. Des Rechten warer Arzet bin ich" (Who believes and trusts in me and hope on me. I am the true physician of the just). On the left we see the coat of arms of the people who donated the window, Michael Weltz and his two wives, Maria Zündlini and Sussanna Federlim. The frequent recurrence of the scale and the other symbols in the devotional pictures suggests that the image of Christ as a pharmacist was commonly copied. Many of the copiers were amateur artists.

A copperplate in a devotion book entitled "Seelen-Apothek" (Pharmacy of the Soul; Nürnberg, 1653) shows a number of interesting details (see Fig. 3). Christ, standing behind the pharmacy counter, hands a passion flower to a sick person. The walls of the pharmacy are filled with shelves of medicine bottles whose labels are illegible. What can be deciphered are

the herbs in the foreground. Their names contain associations with terms and characters of the Christian faith: *Kreuzwurzeln* (groundsel?, litt. 'cross roots'), *Liebstock* (lovage, litt. 'stick of love'), *Himmelschlüssel* (primula, litt. 'keys of heaven'), *Jakobsblume* (Jacob flower?), *Augentrost* (euphrasia, litt. 'comfort of the eyes'), *Passionsblume* (passionflower), and *Gottesgnadenkraut* (hedge hyssop, litt. 'herb of God's grace'). Hein quotes a short poem that succinctly introduces the theme of the devotion book:

*Ein leiblich Apotheck kan grossen Nutzen geben
Uns, wegen unsers Leibs in diesem krancken Leben:
Mann fibt daraus Artzney [16], die stärckt das matte Herz,
Die Krankheit sie vertreibt, das hingehet aller Schertz.
Dat thut auch, ja viel mehr, die Apotheck des Seelen,
Hier heists probatum est, es kan durchaus nicht fehlen.*

(A pharmacy for our body can be of great use to us, because of our body in this life of sickness: one takes medicine from it which strengthen the weak heart, it drives away the illness, so that all pain will disappear. The same—but much more—does the Pharmacy of the Soul, here it means 'probatum est', it can never fail) [1, p. 32].

DEVOTIONAL TEXTS

Both Hein [1, 12] and Pfeiffer [2] sketch the history of this religious symbolism. The earliest references can be found in verses of the Old and New Testament. Pfeiffer quotes Exodus 15:26, "I am the Lord, your healer". This text refers to physical health and sickness as it is preceded by "I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put on the Egyptians . . ."



Fig. 1. A French miniature from Rouen (ca 1525) showing Christ as a heavenly physician writing a prescription for Adam and Eve who represent mankind. Source: Hein [1, p. 19].



Fig. 2. A stained-glass window (1630) from Switzerland showing Christ as a pharmacist behind a counter filled with Christian virtues as medicines (Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, Zürich). Source: Hein [1, p. 25].

[15]. Texts which pronounce that God or Jesus take care of people's physical health abound in both Testaments, but they do not yet touch the essence of the devotional theme. Jesus heals the blind, the lame, the crippled, the deaf and dumb, the mentally disturbed people, lepers and epileptics, yet true devotional inspiration is derived from his remark that spiritual health is infinitely more important than a healthy body. From that moment on his ability to heal physically becomes an index of his spiritual power. In Matthew chap. 9 Jesus forgives a lame man his sins. Some onlookers accuse him of blasphemy. Matthew continues:

But Jesus, knowing their thoughts, said, 'Why do you think evil in your hearts? For what is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he then said to the paralytic—'Rise, take up your bed and go home.' And he rose and went home (Matthew 9:4-7).

Such narratives feed the metaphoric capacity of medical terms to express thoughts about people's spiritual life. Body and soul are divorced but become one another's symbolic reference. On the one hand, the health of someone's body is contrasted with his spiritual state (he can be very sick and yet be in God's grace). On the other, the spiritual state is understood and imagined by likening it to physical health and illness. Close examination of biblical texts shows that indeed the use of metaphors derived from the domain of physical health and healing is a favourite way to speak about spiritual 'well-being' [16]. Pfeiffer quotes Psalm 41:4, "Oh Lord, be gracious to me, heal me, for I have sinned against Thee" and Solomon's Book of Wisdom 16:22, "Not herb or plaster healed them, but Thy word, Lord, which heals everything".

Church fathers and other theological authors in the first centuries continue this metaphoric use of medical terms. Pfeiffer [2, p. 5] quotes several examples. Bishop Ignatius of Antioch calls the Eucharist "a medicine for immortality". The Egyptian monk

Makarius the Great writes that Christ, “the only true physician and saviour” has come to the world “to cure the souls of the faithful from incurable passions and to clean them from the dirty leprosy of evil”. The famous Greek preacher John Chrysostom (347–407) writes: “Purchase bibles as medicines for your souls . . . When you are overcome by grief, look into this pharmacy full of medicines. Take from it comfort in your sorrow”.

Similar quotations are found in the Medieval Christian literature [17]. The following prayer comes from Thomas of Aquino: “I come to Thee, as a sick man to the physician of life, as a dirty man to the bath of mercy, as a blind man to the eternal light . . . Cure my sickness, wash away my stains, enlighten my blindness”.

From the sixteenth century onwards the image of Christ as healer and pharmacist becomes more popular in Germany. Luther calls the Holy Communion “eine Arznei der Kranken” (a medicine for the sick) [18]. Pfeiffer mentions the following German devotion books of between 1530 and 1612: *Seelen-Arznei* (Soul Medicine) by Urbanus Rhegius (Augsburg, 1630); *Trost- oder Seelartzneibuch* (Comfort or Soul Medicine Book) by Matthäus Vogel (Frankfurt, 1551), which is presented as a book containing ‘spiritual prescriptions’; *Antidotum oder geistliche Arznei*

für die Christen, so Anfechtung und geistliche Trübsal haben (Antidote or Spiritual Medicine for Christians in Temptation and Spiritual Sorrow) by an author called Weller (Nürnberg, 1564); *Würtzgärtlein der Seelen* (Small Herbal Garden of the Soul) by Nikodemus Kramer (Frankfurt, 1573); *Krautgarden für die Kranken und bedrohten Seelen* (Herbal Garden for the Sick and Endangered Souls) by Michael Bock (Hamburg, 1596); *Seelen-Paradies, oder Lustgarten, voll lieblicher und heilsamer Pflanzen und wohlriechender Blümchen des Christlichen Gebets in allerlei Not und Zustände* (Paradise of the Soul or Pleasure Garden full of Sweet and Wholesome Plants and Sweet-smelling Flowers of the Christian Prayer in various States of Distress) by an author called Wolder (Hamburg, 1600); *Geistliche Seelen-Arznei wider die abscheuliche Seuche des Pestilenz und andere Strafen* (Spiritual Soul Medicine against the Terrible Epidemic of the Plague and other Punishments) by Johann Arnd (Stuttgart, 1612). Jesus is presented as *Wahres Balsam-Oele* (true balm oil), *Arznei meiner kranken Seele* (medicine for my sick soul), *Arznei für die Sünden* (medicine for the sins), *Arznei aller Schmerzen* (medicine against all sorrows).

By the seventeenth century the ‘Pharmacy of the Soul’ had established itself firmly in German folk devotion. The number of prayer and meditation



Fig. 3. Copperplate by Peter Troschel in a devotion book “Seelen-Apotheck” (1653) written by Johann Jacob Rüdén, preacher in Nürnberg. Source: Hein [1, p. 33].

books portraying Christ as a pharmacist had by then become too many to enumerate. Their popularity continued through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some of these books also carry illustrations depicting Christ the pharmacist (see for example Fig. 3).

CONCLUSION

The principal aim of writing this note has been to bring an intriguing German phenomenon to international attention. My contribution has mainly been to summarise two German publications and to translate some of their most interesting passages. The theme of Christ the pharmacist in devotional literature and graphic art is the most prolific and elaborate example I have ever seen of the metaphoric transformation of medicine. That alone would have been sufficient reason for my—almost plagiarist—use of both publications. But there is yet another reason for writing this note. It would be interesting to hear whether such examples of the religious use of medical imagery are also to be found in other cultures, whether Christian or in any other religion. I hope that this note will inspire colleagues outside the Anglophone World to report on similar fascinating phenomena [19].

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13. Christ the apothecary. *Am. J. The Open Court* 24, 660–672, 1910.
14. *Kreuzwurz* (groundsel or ragwort?) is probably a general name of a number of herbs including *Enzian*, *Kreuzlabkraut*, *Schwalbenwurz*, *Bitterklee*, *Bleiwurz*, *Hanhechel*, *Kreuzblume*, *Kreuzkraut*, and *Quecke*.
15. For a more elaborate discussion on the origin and development of the concept of God as a healer in the light of Israel's history, see: Niehr H. JHWH als Arzt. Herkunft und Geschichte einer alttestamentlicher Göttesprädikation. *Biblische Zeitschrift NF* 35, 3–17 (1991).
16. Other symbols include: high vs low, light vs dark, warm vs cold, eternal vs mortal, rich vs poor, dirty vs clean, free vs imprisoned. See also: Bevan E. *Symbolism and Belief*. Allen & Unwin, London, 1938.
17. Gerard Mathijssen suggested an interesting parallel of Christ as a pharmacist in Medieval Easter or mystery plays. The women visiting Christ's tomb meet the *specionarius*, a person selling herbal balms to them. It could be speculated that this person is meant to be the risen Christ in disguise, as is the gardener (*hortulanus*) whom they meet a few moments later.
18. *Artzney* or *Arznei*, which is no longer used in contemporary German, refers to medical substances, medications.
19. Several more publications referring to Christ as a pharmacist were brought to my attention after I had completed this article. They include: Dumeige G. Le Christ médecin. In: *Dictionnaire de Spiritualite*, Paris, 892–902, 1980; Ferchl F. Christus als Apotheker, Doppelgänger und Bildgruppen. *Süddeutsche Apothekezeit.* 89, 209–216, 1949; Fichtner G. Christus als Arzt. Ursprung und Wirkungen eines Motivs. *FMASt* 16, 1–18, 1982; Gentz L. Kristus avbildat såsom AÅpotekare: Fataburen. *Nordiska Museets och Skansens Arsbok*. pp. 107–113. Stockholm, 1957; Guillet J. Jésus médecin. In *Christus* 19, (75): 371–377, 1972; Naegele A. Christus als Apotheker. Eine ikonographische Studie. *Anzeiger für schweizerische Altertumskunde* 27, 95–110, 1925. These and other publications could no more be integrated in the present text. They suggest, however, that the theme of Christ as a pharmacist is an extremely rich field of religious symbolism which deserves intensive study from an anthropological point of view.