‘FOR THE LIFE OF A CREATURE IS IN THE BLOOD’ (LEVITICUS 17:11).
SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON BLOOD AS THE SOURCE OF LIFE
IN SIXTEENTH-CENTURY RELIGION AND MEDICINE
AND THEIR INTERCONNECTIONS

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Summary

This article studies the different meanings of blood, focusing on the Early Modern period in which the unravelling of its secrets worked not only at a medical level, but also in relationship to philosophy and religion. My points of departure are the works of two sixteenth-century medical authors, the Dutchman Levinus Lemnius and the Italian Andrea Cesalpino. It is claimed that they were much more interested in physiology than in anatomy, and that only in that context can we fully appreciate the value of blood. Inspired by recent work on the role of blood in religious history, such as Caroline Walker Bynum's Wonderful Blood, I present blood as a substance that, due to its immense value, tended to lose its materiality and took on spiritual aspects, which made devotional interpretations inevitable. By exposing its non-corporeal aspects, the association with God, especially with the Holy Spirit and its terrestrial emanation, becomes evident. No matter how much they exploited not only Aristotle, but also Galen, the arguments of both Lemnius and Cesalpino had at their centre a spiritualisation of blood. In his extensive regimina, the more traditional Levinus Lemnius emphasised the spiritus vitalis that determined the quality of blood. At its most refined stage, it approached the spiritus universalis, and almost converged with the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the Aristotelian Cesalpino placed the heart and the spiritualised human fuel, blood, again and again at the centre, bringing everything back to its origin, God: the deus rotator.

In recent publications on the Early Modern period, anatomy has been at the centre of attention. The opening up of bodies during the Renaissance, which took place despite existing taboos or merely because of an urge to find material evidence for either medical complaints or religious miracles, has proved to be a fruitful subject of research from a medical-historical perspective. In this respect, the ingenuity of Andreas Vesalius’ self-display still reverberates today. This self-acclaimed and, until now, widely-endorsed view that anatomy played the star role may explain the relative neglect of blood in medical-historical studies. The fact of the matter is that, until the seventeenth century when Harvey made his breakthrough...
on its circulation, blood was a minor topic in elite western medicine.\(^1\) Anatomical textbooks hardly dealt with the blood and, when they did, the authors mainly enlarged upon the spirits it carried through the body. This does not mean that blood was completely disregarded in premodern medical science and practice. Indeed, I would argue the reverse. But, in order to expose the value of blood for that period, medical historians should avoid the temptations of anatomy and study early modern physiology in combination with natural philosophy.

This is what Jean Fernel did in his *Physiologia* (1542), a survey that carefully discusses the generation and function of blood, as well as the different varieties of the liquid itself. In his comprehensive *Universa medicina* (1567), Fernel defined physiology as follows: ‘So as the five parts of a complete medicine are set in order, physiology will be the first of all; it concerns itself with the nature of a wholly healthy human being, all the powers and functions’.\(^2\) This statement shows that, during the sixteenth century, physiology was judged to be far more important than anatomy. Early modern anatomy investigated the parts of the body that are within reach of the senses. By exploring their structure, action and use, anatomists tried to answer the question of how they functioned, and in this way attempted to unravel the sources and secrets of life.\(^3\) Physiology built on the results of anatomical research, but itself aimed higher, claiming to penetrate the nature of things. Its central principle was to establish why the body was constituted and functioned as it did. Its practitioners showed by logical demonstration how, as a branch of natural philosophy, it revealed not only the causal operations of the body, but also the causes of human nature. Of course, at this time anatomy and physiology were related, sometimes being practised by the same person. For this paper, however, it seems crucial to carefully distinguish between them and to concentrate on the latter.

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