



PHILOSOPHY

God and Medicine

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I spent a beautiful fall day coaching a group of eight CEOs on how to lower stress and enhance longevity. The retreat was to conclude with acupuncture treatments. Although my plan to administer acupuncture was in the event marketing piece, I ran into some surprising resistance as the time grew near. Brad, who hired me, asked that I give an in-depth explanation of acupuncture and how it worked. I discussed, in terms CEOs could relate to, how the body runs on electromagnetic and chemical energy. These forms of energy are generated in the body by its own capacities, with the use of food, air, etc. After a few minutes, I saw visual relief on the faces of two members of the group. Everyone then agreed to participate.

"What happened there?" I asked Brad. "We sold this event to your group with the experience of acupuncture as a major highlight." Brad explained that several group members were devout Christians and didn't want to do anything that would conflict with their religious beliefs. My explanation clarified that the treatment would not call upon foreign deities and did not have religious connotations that might conflict with those held by my audience members.

This isn't the first time I have run into the "God" issue. On a lengthy flight, I was placed next to a woman who insisted, after learning about my professional life, that Jesus was the power in the acupuncture. A patient who was raised a devout Lutheran only allowed himself to receive treatment after saying the paraphrased Martin Luther quote: "Sin boldly and know God." His comment inspired me to consider how many people agreed with him. "How sinful can this be," I asked him, "if it harms no one and heals you of lifelong migraines?" He is still pondering this religious question, although with a clearer head.

There are many who believe that all metaphysical forces are an expression of the divine entity, be it God, Allah, Buddha, Krishna, the Christ or countless others. When patients come to you embroiled in the argument of *qi* vs. religious godhead, do you know how to address them? Can you climb across the vast chasms of religious thought over which some patients precariously dangle as they try to rectify lying on your treatment table? You are not the first practitioner to be confronted with these challenges

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Historically, ancient China was a religious melting pot. [Confucianism](#), with its disciplined perspectives on social and familial order, grew side by side with [Taoism](#), whose priests silently witnessed the boundless, ever-changing holiness of the Tao as it spontaneously effected each moment and sensation. The Confusion theoretical constructs became the structure upon which a society could be built. Taoism brought peace and awareness of the ever-moving, unbridled dance within that order.

[Buddhism](#) and [Hinduism](#) also played roles in the developments of Asian belief systems and the theoretical paradigm of Oriental medicine. These religions included deities with less stature than the supreme godhead(s). But these deities and saints were endowed with virtues. Their uniqueness helped define the human experience and gave specificity and direction to prayer. Each deity could support the individual in unique ways, and prayers would be directed for protection, support or healing from each.

Acupuncture in the U.S. is not thought of as a religious experience (though some may call it spiritual). While it affects that which is unseen, it is not considered prayer and we are not witches or metaphysicians, largely thanks to the medical research that documents our successes. But if we go back only a few hundred years in this country, our work would have been thrown into the realms of religious cause and effect.

In the 18th century, the [first surgical procedure using ether](#) was conducted by a "dentist" in Boston. Because the patient felt no pain and was thus not punished for the spiritual crime that resulted in his goiter, the physician was kicked out of town for having overshadowed the "godly desire" that the patient feel the pain of punishment. Ether wasn't administered to eliminate pain during surgery for another 50 years. Deep, traumatizing pain was considered an imperative component of illness for

without it, one would not pay penance for their spiritual crime - the causative factor. The co-mingling of medicine and spirituality has always been fundamental in the human perspective of health and illness. Up until the 5th century BC, illness was considered a spiritual problem and addressed through ritual, ceremony and prayers requesting that the patient be released from the malady.

It is very interesting that around this time, several discoveries were made by physicians, all of which lead to new understandings. Illness became, at least partially, a physical disorder that could be rectified through physical means. [Hippocrates' work](#) with herbs and lifestyle treatments took precedence over religious approaches. [Egyptian cultures](#) and the [native people of both Americas](#) also began using herbs, diet and other practical means to address the body's problems.

By the Middle Ages, [autopsies](#) were being done in both Asia and Europe, though interest was far less in Asia. Looking inside bodies was still considered to be a religious sin in Europe, and anatomists and artists would risk their lives to get a better understanding of how the body worked and what caused illness and death. By the Renaissance, exposing the insides of the human body was still considered a religious sin and moral crime.

At the birth of the 20th century, with the [discovery of antibiotics](#), the notion that illness is a physical problem caused by antigens had become a solid medical concept. Since that time, modern medicine has entirely eliminated metaphysics from practice. While [Bernard Siegel, MD](#), in his pivotal work, *Love Medicine and Miracles*, was bold enough to approach the subject of miracle healings and other physicians have approached the body/mind connection, the merging of God and medicine has taken on a very different perspective than it once had.

What is your core belief? How do you see the spiritual, religious and intellectual pursuits of medicine affecting your patients? What conclusions have you come to regarding the interaction of the physical and metaphysical realms? Gaining clarity on this subject may be helpful for those patients who are uncomfortable approaching what you do. Many fear generating wrath with their God and are uncertain as to whether acupuncture is anti-religious. Others who are less grounded religiously may cling to OM teachings for metaphysical understanding. This may put you in the guru position, which can be quite challenging.

When I am asked if acupuncture is a religion-based experience, I tell my patients that it is not. But I believe that with acupuncture, one can know the truth of one's own faith in a brighter way, with greater light shining from the self. It is not the ideology of the Tao flowing through the body that brings the body life. It is life itself that allows all beliefs to blossom and be expressed as our patients choose.

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