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NATIONAL SECULAR SOCIETY

HOSPITALS & DISPENSARIES

NOT OF

CHRISTIAN ORIGIN.

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A VERY frequent question put to Secularists is, What hospitals have you built or endowed? And an equally frequent assertion is made to the effect that the world owes all those institutions for the care and cure of the sick to Christianity. A greater mistake was never made, as I shall try to show.

In the first place, I make bold to assert that mercy, compassion, humanity, and benevolence did not, and could not, spring from religion. All the Gods, or nearly all, were originally cold, callous, and cruel. They inflicted upon man (if fables may be trusted) all the horrors he endured, and then quietly and stolidly looked on while he writhed in his agony. No Gods sinned more in this respect than those of the Jews, in proof of which I refer to the story of the Flood, of Sodom and Gomorrah, of the Israelitish march through the desert, of the conquest of Palestine, and other tales of the Old Testament. It was only when man became civilised that the Gods forsook their barbarism, and the very mercy man learnt in civilised life was by-and-by ascribed to the Gods. Every kindly feeling man has must have been learnt in society—must have been produced there, for Nature knows nothing of kindness, mercy, or compassion. Nature and the Gods have not only inflicted flood, pestilence, famine, and fire, upon man and beast, but they never interfered to relieve the poor wretches of their suffering. Wherever man, therefore, learnt his humanity and pity, most certainly no God or religion ever taught him.

Secondly, as most religions have enjoined the belief in miracles and miraculous cures of disease, their very spirit has been antagonistic to the founding of hospitals, infirmaries, and dispensaries. No religion has done more

harm in this respect than Christianity. Look through the New Testament, and you will not find a single commendation of medicine, surgery, or any other healing art. All diseases are there to be cured by miracles ; the physician is dispensed with, and physic is entirely thrown to the dogs, and the priest and the elder are exalted as the miraculous healers of both body and soul. Had the spirit of Christianity been carried out successfully there would not have been a hospital or anything of the sort now in the world. If this religion had spread first among barbarians, instead of the civilised nations of the Roman empire, and if her converts had been docile instead of independent, we should have seen, long ere now, what a curse she was to man. But Christianity inherited all the learning, the arts and sciences, the laws and social institutions of Greece and Rome. All these (with few exceptions) she did her best to destroy, and when that proved impossible, she coolly adopted and claimed them as her own productions.

What has been said above will tend to show that we owe none of our best sentiments to religion ; but I will now proceed to exhibit a few facts which will set the matter at rest, and demonstrate that hospitals and kindred institutions are not the product of Christianity. In doing this I shall quote from, and refer to, an article in the current number (Oct. 1877) of the *Westminster Review*, on "Pre-Christian Dispensaries and Hospitals." The writer says :—"It is in the medical officers, appointed and paid by the State, that we find the earliest germ and first idea of the vast network of hospitals which has spread over the civilised countries of the world. These medical officers were an institution in Egypt from a remote antiquity, for in the eleventh century B.C. there was a College of Physicians in receipt of public pay, and regulated as to the nature and extent of their practice. At Athens, in the fifth century B.C., there were physicians elected and paid by the citizens ; there were also dispensaries in which they received their patients, and we find mention made of one hospital." Turn we next to India. "In the fourth century B.C. an edict was promulgated in India, by King Asoka, commanding the establishment of hospitals throughout his dominions ; and we have direct proof that these hospitals were flourishing in the fifth and in the seventh centuries A.D."—they flourished then for a thousand years. "Among the Romans under the empire physicians were elected in every city in

proportion to the number of inhabitants, and they received a salary from the public treasury."

Leaving the *Westminster Review* for a moment, I will quote an extract from Tacitus. Referring to the fall of an amphitheatre at Fidenae, in the ruins of which 50,000 people were killed or otherwise maimed, he says: "Now during the fresh pangs of this calamity, the doors of the grandees were thrown open, medicines were everywhere supplied and administered by proper hands; and at that juncture the city, though of sorrowful aspect, seemed to have recalled the public spirit of the ancient Romans, who, after great battles, constantly relieved the wounded, sustained them by liberality, and restored them with care."—"Annals," iv. 65. This extract shows not merely what the Romans did at this date, about 27 A.D., but points back to periods long past, when their forefathers regularly relieved and healed the wounded soldiers. Such a nation, though still dreadfully barbarous in some respects, did not require the aid of Christianity to set it on the path of humanity and mercy; the germs of those virtues had been there for ages, and only required time to develop. Those who wish to see what the best Romans, in the first century before our era, thought of benevolence may consult Cicero "De Officiis," Bk. I., 14, 15.

Turning again to the *Westminster Review*, we read that even the "ancient Mexicans had hospitals in their principal cities 'for the cure of the sick, and the permanent refuge of disabled soldiers.'" The Mexicans, by the way, and the Peruvians as well, were working out a splendid civilization for themselves at the time the barbarians from Spain discovered and ruined them. The more we know of those ancient civilisations the more we must admire them; and it cannot be denied that Spain herself was, at the time of the conquest, more superstitious and less civilised than Mexico or Peru; the eruption of those Christian savages into Central America threw back the civilization of the continent for four or five hundred years. I have nothing to say in palliation of either Mexican or Peruvian religion; but I must say that the Spaniards, in destroying those ancient creeds, put nothing better in their place.

It is remarkable, viewed from the Christian standpoint, that the Mohammedans were the first people known to have had asylums for lunatics. As Mr. Lecky says, "Most commonly the theological notions about witchcraft either produced madness or determined its form, and through the

influence of the clergy of the different sections of the Christian Church, many thousands of unhappy women, who from their age, their loneliness, and their infirmity, were most deserving of pity, were devoted to the hatred of mankind, and, having been tortured with horrible and ingenious cruelty, were at last burnt alive."—"Hist. European Morals," ii., 93. While this barbarity, the genuine and legitimate fruit of Christ's own action towards the "possessed," was practised wholesale among Christians, the Mohammedans were, as early as the seventh century, housing and nurturing the insane in asylums at Fez, and they founded another at Cairo, probably about A.D. 1304. The first Christian asylum for insane persons was erected at Valencia in Spain, in A.D. 1409, or 700 years later than those first built by Mohammedans. Thus, it was in the very country which the Mohammedans had conquered, ruled, and partially civilised, that the first Christian lunatic asylum was founded, and it is not difficult to recognise their influence in this humane act. It should also be remembered that the kind-hearted monk who founded the asylum in Valencia, did it to shelter the poor lunatics from the insults, jeers, and other persecutions of their Christian neighbours, who never allowed them to pass through the streets in peace.—(See "Europ. Morals," ii., 94-5. See also ii., 92).

To quote again the *Westminster Review*—"The most remarkable instance of a military hospital was one in Ireland. The palace of Emania was founded about 300 B.C., by the Princess Macha of the golden hair, and continued to be the chief royal residence of Ulster until 332 A.D., when it was destroyed. To this palace were attached two houses, one, the house in which the Red Branch Knights hung up their arms and trophies, the other *in which the sick were cared for and the wounded healed*; this latter was called by the expressive name Broin Bearg, the House of Sorrow."

What has been put forward above will be sufficient to show that we owe neither medicine nor hospitals to Christianity; indeed, I am not aware that any one ever ascribed the former to this religion, though it would be just as rational as to ascribe the latter to it. Neither Judaism (as found in the Old Testament) nor Christianity (as found in the New) shows any favour to medicine. The spirit of the Old Testament may be found in the following passage:—"And Asa, in the thirty and ninth year of his reign was

diseased in his feet, until his disease was exceeding great ; yet in his disease he sought not to the Lord, but to the physicians." (2 Chron. xvi., 12.) The context tells us he died ; the inference is plain—he lost his life because he preferred medical attendance to miraculous power. The Jews could not more strongly have condemned medicine than they have done in this passage, for not only did the patient die, but the physicians are set in direct rivalry with Jehovah. And here I may ask how it was that the Jews, who were so favoured of God, had to learn all their medical knowledge from other nations ? Their God revealed to them all those senseless ceremonies found in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, but never told them how to heal one single disease ! Four books, filled for the most part with a burdensome ritual or instructions in the art of worship, were vouchsafed by their divinity, but not a word about healing ! Large portions of those books, too, are occupied in directions for finding leprosy, but not a word about the cure of the disease (*See* Levit. xiii., 44-46). The whole dress of the priest was prescribed, colour, shape, texture, and everything—these were of supreme importance, and involved, of course, the weal or woe of the world—so momentous were they that their chief divinity went out of his way to reveal them ; but human suffering was of no concern at all, and their divinity forgot to reveal the art of healing. Indeed, he himself claimed the sole right to kill and make alive, to inflict or to heal disease. All this was fatal to the study of medicine.

The same remarks, slightly modified, will apply to the New Testament, where miraculous agency is the only recognised mode of healing. This may be due to the fact that the Jews went into captivity in Babylon, rather than in Greece or Rome, for "the Babylonians and Assyrians alone, among the great nations of antiquity, had no physicians. The sick man was laid on a couch in the public square, and the passers-by were required to ask him the nature of his disease, so that if they or any of their acquaintance had been similarly afflicted they might advise him as to the remedies he should adopt." (*West. Review, ibid.*) How much this resembles the Gospel story of the pool of Bethesda, leaving out the angelic descent ! (John v., 2.) The Babylonians were also fond of charms, for they mistook diseases for devils, as Jesus did. Mr. H. F. Talbot, in his "Assyrian Talismans and Exorcisms," quotes a tablet as follows :—

“God shall stand by his bedside; those *seven evil spirits* He shall root out and expel from his body; those shall never return to the sick man.” This superstition reappears in the Gospels:—“Then goeth he, and taketh with himself *seven other spirits* more wicked than himself, and they enter in and dwell there, and the last state of that man is worse than the first.” (Matt. xii., 45.) Jesus actually cast this number of devils out of Mary Magdalene. (See Mark xvi., 9.) In face of this most debasing superstition, people still worship Jesus as an almighty and omniscient God! And though he, beyond all men, taught the miraculous causes and cures of disease, his professed followers claim for him and his religion all the credit of originating the scientific treatment of human ills. For certain, science never met a more determined foe than Christianity; but science no sooner gains a victory than Christianity turns round and claims all the merit of inventing the very thing she did her utmost to destroy.

That people bearing the name of Christ have, in modern times, built and founded hospitals, I cheerfully acknowledge; it matters not to me what names men bear so long as they do good. But this I fearlessly affirm, that every hospital ever erected has been built on or by principles which Christ condemned, so that if he was right, the founders of hospitals must have been wrong. Not only did Jesus teach that diseases were to be healed by miracles (Mark xvi., 17, 18), but he strictly forbade the laying up of treasure: as pointedly as he forbade murder or adultery, he also forbade the accumulation of wealth. Without the wealth, hospitals could not have been built, nay, all must have been paupers. Religion and religious teaching, had they been obeyed, would have made the world bankrupt; but in Secular principles lies the salvation of man. Religion points to another world, to reach which we must renounce this; Secularism teaches to make the best possible—in money, intelligence, humanity, and morality—of this world, and to leave the next—a mere dream, most likely—to look out for itself. I admit there are good things in the Bible; but all the good it contains would have been outweighed a thousand times by a simple and effectual remedy for only one disease. Why did divine mercy omit such a remedy? Let Christians explain.