Round Table II: In what ways do ideas about purity and filth correspond with notions of well-being, physical health or spiritual health?

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Heresiology and the Language of Disease in Late Antiquity

In this position paper, I will explore the connection between the rhetoric of illness / contagion and late antique heresiology. Heresiology was "the combative theological genre for asserting true Christian doctrine through hostile definition and ecclesiastical exclusion," in the words of J. Rebecca Lyman.¹ Although originally developed to distinguish Christian from non-Christian (or more accurately, creating these categories in the first place), late antique authors came to employ heresiology to delimit their own positions, invariably identified as orthodox, from all other understandings of the faith, which were described as heretical. But because 'heresy' often looked a lot like 'orthodoxy' and 'heretics' considered themselves and their beliefs 'orthodox,' the heresiologist, like the ancient ethnographer, sought to inventory the multiplicity of Christian belief and practice. This type of knowledge creation is intrinsically polemical; it described 'heresy' in its relationship to 'truth' and/or compared it with analogous forms of 'untruth.' In short, neither heresy nor orthodoxy were lived historical phenomena; they were situational and relational discursive constructs that existed only in relationship with each other. Christian heresiology inscribed the border between these constructs and the heresiologists acted as the "inspectors of religious customs" in the memorable phrase of Daniel Boyarin, policing the frontier between (their understanding of) authentic and inauthentic Christianity.²

One way the heresiologists policed these frontiers was by equating spiritual well-being (i.e., 'orthodoxy') with purity, and heterodoxy with pollution and impurity. They did this in part by appealing to medical metaphors, describing opposing theological positions as diseases. Outside the fields of ancient and Christian history, scholars have long commented on the tendency to medicalize deviance, including religious deviance. As noted by Peter Conrad and Joseph Schneider in the foundational work on this subject, the idea that "disease can cause deviant behavior, that deviant behavior can lead to disease, and that such conduct is itself an illness or a symptom thereof have existed in various forms for thousands of years."³ In the Late Republic and early Empire, the highly subjective nature of the dangers posed by disease together with the concern for ritual pollution meant that impurity emerged as a powerful weapon in Latin rhetoric, wielded by skilled

¹ See J. Rebecca Lyman, "Heresiology: The Invention of 'heresy' and 'schism'," in *The Cambridge History of Christianity 2: Constantine to c. 600*, ed. Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 296. For what follows, see the discussion in Samuel Cohen, "Eutychianorum furor! Heresiological Comparison and the Invention of Eutychians in Leo I's Christological Polemic," *Entangled Religions* 11, no. 4 (2020): 14.

² Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 2-3.

³ See, for instance, Peter Conrad and Joseph W. Schneider, *Deviance and medicalization*, Expanded ed. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), quoted at 261.

polemicists like Cicero to denigrate opponents.⁴ Perhaps the most famous example of this is Cicero's characterization of the rebellious (treasonous?) aristocrat Cataline as a dangerous *pestis*, which needed to be purged from the *res publica*.⁵ Traditional Greco-Roman religion had also developed various purificatory rituals intended to remove μ í $\alpha\sigma\mu\alpha$ (miasma, "stain" or "defilement"). These rituals also served to mark off sacred spaces from the profane, to create special occasions, and to unify individuals into a common group.⁶ The later use of similar rhetoric by late antique Christian heresiologists should be understood in the context of this traditional concern in Greco-Roman religions for purity and pollution.⁷

Indeed, historians of early Christianity have noted the pervasive use of medical metaphors to describe (and prescribe) religious deviance, although rather than stains, their emphasis was on sin and misbelief. Sin was a kind of sickness, and sickness was associated with sin. Late Antique Christian authors would likewise take up this type of language in their polemical writing against heresy, especially the use of medical metaphors. Recent work on this topic, such as the collection of essays published in a special issue of *Studies in Late Antiquity* in 2018, highlight several novel approaches to Christian medical metaphors that are noteworthy in the context of the present position paper (and this conference more broadly).⁸ First, many of the categories that scholars have taken for granted prove to be far more unstable and ambiguous than previously thought. Although it is tempting, for example, to imagine that the domains of medicine and religion were discrete the former concerned with the health of the body, the latter with spiritual wellbeing -a close reading of the surviving sources reveal that medicine and religion were both equally concerned with the health of bodies and souls. Thus, medical metaphors used to describe religious deviance were not *merely* metaphorical; late antique thinkers understood that spiritual and physical health were thought to be profoundly linked. Relatedly, the metaphors used were typically specific and technical, often referencing specialist knowledge of anatomy, physiology, diagnosis, and treatment. According to Kristi Upson-Saia, "late ancient Christians had a deeper familiarity with medical sciences than previously thought."9 Finally and like heresiological polemic more broadly, Christian medical metaphors, when employed to describe supposed heretics, inscribed the boundaries of the legitimate community.

Perhaps the most famous example of the use of medical metaphors in Christian heresiological writing can be found in heresy-hunting manuals such as the *Panarion*, written by Epiphanius,

⁴ Jack J. Lennon, *Pollution and religion in ancient Rome* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), passim, but esp 167ff.

⁵ Cic. Cat. *passim*, but for example, 1.10-11, 1.31.

⁶ Robert Parker, Miasma: pollution and purification in early Greek religion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 23-24.

⁷ Éric Fournier, "Amputation Metaphors and the Rhetoric of Exile: Purity and Pollution in Late Antique Christianity," in *Clerical Exile in Late Antiquity*, ed. Julia Hillner, Jörg Ulrich, and Jakob Engberg, Early Christianity in the Context of Antiquity (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016), 234-235.

⁸ A special issue of Studies in Late Antiquity, 2/4 (2018) was dedicated to examining this phenomenon. For the following observations on the recent scholarship, see esp. Kristi Upson-Saia, "Guest Editor Foreword: Rethinking Medical Metaphors in Late Ancient Christianity," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 2, no. 4 (2018). and Wendy Mayer, "Medicine and Metaphor in Late Antiquity," *Studies in Late Antiquity* 2, no. 4 (2018).

⁹ Upson-Saia, "Guest Editor Foreword: Rethinking Medical Metaphors in Late Ancient Christianity," 438.

bishop of Salamis, between 374 or 375 and 377.¹⁰ Epiphanius, who did not encounter the vast majority (any?) of the sects he catalogued, systematically described heresies as a botanist might record new and exotic plant life. This work and its analogues, such as Augustine's *de haeresibus*,¹¹ were not unlike classical medical and philosophical historiography in that they present a totalizing account of the opinions and teachings of various 'schools' as well as genealogies of their proponents.¹² The structure of Epiphanius' work may well come from the author's familiarity with various classical medical treatises.¹³ The title *Panarion* (Πανάριον, 'the medicine chest') explicitly invokes a pharmacology metaphor in which Epiphanius compared heresy to dangerous, venomous animals, especially snakes, whose 'bites' could be cured only with the antidote of the truth of Christian orthodoxy.¹⁴ And Epiphanius positioned himself as the skilled clinician who could diagnosis and ultimate refute/cure the almost innumerable iterations of error.¹⁵

Although his rhetoric is vitriolic and his portrayal of various supposed deviant Christian sects is often crude caricature, Epiphanius' description of heresy resulting from a poisonous bite paradoxically limited the (rhetorical) threat that these heresies posed. References to venomous snakes (and other malevolent beasties) would have, of course, evoked the very tangible danger posed by such creatures in the daily lives of Epiphanius' readers. They may have also been reminded of biblical stories of snakes, most obviously Genesis 3, but also John the Baptist and Jesus' condemnation of the Pharisees and Sadducee as a "brood of vipers" (*genimina viperarum*: Matt. 3:7; 12:34; 23:33).¹⁶ But if we follow Epiphanius' metaphor to its logical conclusion, the danger of the bite was endured *only* by the individual who had been bitten. Simply put, while heresy might be a poison, poison was/is not contagious.

Subsequent authors, in contrast, were more apt to portray heresy as a highly infectious disease incubating amongst an unknowing host. Unlike heresy-as-poison, which threatened only the individual, heresy-as-disease positioned non-conforming beliefs as an existential threat to the entirety of the Christian community. And that community was increasingly imagined as a physical body,¹⁷ which needed specialized interventions of religious authorities (usually bishops), who like

¹⁰ Epiphanius, *Panarion* (edited in three parts: 1–33, ed. K. Holl, GCS 25, Berlin, 1915; 34–64, ed. K. Holl and J. Dummer, GCS 31, 2nd edn, Berlin, 1980; 65–80, ed. K. Holl and J. Dummer, GCS 37, 2nd edn, Berlin, 1985. On the dating of the text, see Frank Williams' introduction to his translation of the Panarion, op. cit., xvi; Aline Pourkier, *L'hérésiologie chez Épiphane de Salamine*, Christianisme antique 4 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1992), 19, 47-51.

¹¹ Augustine, *Liber de haeresibus*, eds. R. Vander Plaetse and C. Beukers, CCSL 46, Turnhout, 1969.

¹² On catalogues of heretics, see W.A. Löhr's excellent entry on the subject and bibliography in Siegmar Döpp and Wilhelm Geerlings, "Dictionary of Early Christian Literature," (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 2000), 276-277.

¹³ Jürgen Dummer, "Ein naturwissenschaftliches Handbuch als Quelle für Epiphanius von Constantia," *Klio. Beiträge zur alten Geschichte* 55 (1973).

¹⁴ Epiphanius, *Pan.* Proem I.1.2: "I am drafting this Preface for the scholar to explain the "*Panarion*," or chest of remedies for those who savage beasts have bitten. It is composed in three Books containing eight Sects, symbolically represented by wild beasts or snakes." See also Pourkier, *L'hérésiologie*, 78ff.

¹⁵ Richard Flower, "Medicalizing Heresy: Doctors and Patients in Epiphanius of Salamis," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 11, no. 2 (2018): 252-253.

¹⁶ On these metaphors, see Joseph Verheyden, *Epiphanius of Salamis on beasts and heretics: some introductory comments*, vol. 60 (Peeters, 2008), 144-145.

¹⁷ The Christian community or church as body, or the body of Christ as Christian church, can be seen as early as the New Testament period itself, especially in the letters of Paul. See, for instance, Rom. 12:5, Cor 12:12.27-27, etc.

doctors, could diagnose maladies (heresies), and prescribe treatments that could restore that body to full health (orthodox belief). One variant of this language noted by imagined the "sickness" of incorrect belief threatening the body of the church, which required the "medicine of harmony" (i.e., synods and councils) to heal the sickness, which was closely associated with immorality. But imagining heresy as disease and the Christian community as a body encouraged the development of harsher rhetoric. If impurity threatens to pollute the body of the church, that pollutant must be expelled or even amputated before it could spread.¹⁸

This type of rhetoric can be found throughout late antique heresiological writing. But here, I would like to focus on several examples drawn from the letters of Roman bishops, which have been the focus of much of my own recent work.¹⁹ Innocent I, bishop of Rome from 401 to 417, for example, described the heresy of Pelagius to a group of North African bishops as a "detestable disease" (execrandus morbus). He continued: "When a doctor (medicus) sees a wound with gangrene...he cuts off the infected part with a knife to keep the rest whole and intact. We must, therefore, cut away the wound (sc. Pelagianism) that has attacked an entirely pure and healthy body (sc. The church), lest if it be removed later, the remains of this evil will have settled in the inner organs and be impossible to extract."20 Here, the teachings of Pelagius are likened to a malignant cancer, which without immediate and drastic action, could metastasise and ultimately destroy the body of the church from within. Later in the century, Leo I, bishop of Rome from 440 to 461, routinely described Manichaeism and its adherents using medical concepts such as contamination, uncleanliness, infection, sickness, and disease.²¹ They were also social and ethical deviants, according to the bishop, who practiced all manner of sexual perversions. This reflected Leo's reciprocal understanding of morality and theology: poor morality was a consequence of poor theology. Thus, heretics could be detected both by doctrinal and social deviance. And Leo was determined to stamp the contagion out before it could corrupt his flock. The secretive heretics, who had infiltrated the city in large numbers, must be exposed so that they can rightly be shunned and amputated from the wider community.²² Later in his pontificate in the context of the

¹⁸ Fournier, "Amputation Metaphors and the Rhetoric of Exile: Purity and Pollution in Late Antique Christianity," 234-235.

¹⁹ Elsewhere, I have explored several different aspects of heresiological rhetoric, including how it was employed to invent entirely new heresies out of whole cloth, the relationship between heresy and charity, ¹⁹ and the malleable nature of heresiological categories, which could either be ignored entirely or rigorously policed, depending on the circumstances. See Cohen, "Eutychianorum furor!"; "*Nostra Civitas*: Heresy, Charity, and Community in Fifth-Century Rome," *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 63 (2022 [forthcoming]); "Gelasius and the Ostrogoths: Jurisdiction and religious community in late fifth-century Italy," *Early Medieval Europe* 30, no. 1 (2022).

²⁰ Innocent's letter is preserved amongst Augustine's corpus as ep. 181, quoted at 181.3 (CSEL 44). This letter and its language is discussed by Fournier, "Amputation Metaphors and the Rhetoric of Exile: Purity and Pollution in Late Antique Christianity," 236-238.

²¹ Disease, contagion, infection: *tr.* 16 (CCSL 138, 61–67), §5; *tr.* 24 (CCSL 138. 109–116), §4; *tr.* 34 (CCSL 138, 178–187), §4; *tr.* 42 (CCSL 138a, 238–250), §5. cf. *ep.* 7 (PL 54, p620–622), §1. Leo sometimes uses medical imagery in his sermons to describe salvation brought by faith in Christ (a "*remediorum medicina*" offered to humanity in this life). See, for example, *tr.* 9 (CCSL 138, 32–38), §1. I discuss Leo's anti-Manichean polemic in detail in Cohen, "*Nostra Civitas*: Heresy, Charity, and Community in Fifth-Century Rome."

²² Shunned and exposed (*cavendi sunt* ... *prodendi sunt*): LEO I, tr. 9 (CCSL 138,32/8); excluded and cut off (*dilectissimi* ... *ab amicitia vestra penitus abdicate*): LEO I, tr. 16 (CCSL 138,61/7). cf. LEO I, tr. 9 (CCSL 138,32/8):

Christological Controversy, Leo would come to describe his opponents in the east as 'Eutychians,' a heresy invented by Leo and named after Eutyches (*c*. 380–*c*. 454), a Constantinopolitan archimandrite. Interestingly, the bishop of Rome described 'Eutychianism' as a species of 'Manichaeism,' both of which had to be cut off from the body of the Christian community before the infection could spread.²³ At the end of the fifth century, Gelasius, bishop of Rome from 492 until 496, likewise described heresy as a disease or a contagion. This took on new urgency given Gelasius' emphasis on *communio*, which represented the liturgical expression of fidelity to authentic Christianity, which was synonymous with the faith of the Church of Rome. Communion with the wrong people spread the contagion of heresy.²⁴ Communion, then, could be both a declaration of ones' orthodoxy and how heresy spread. Like a disease, heresy infected its unsuspecting victims through contact and thus threatened the entire body of the church unless it was isolated, cut off and ultimately destroyed.²⁵

These sorts of dramatic comparisons are not only found amongst ecclesiastical authors; by the fifth century, they are increasingly common in Roman law, which repeatedly calls for the 'infection' of heresy or other forms of non-conforming belief to be removed, often through banishment or other legal prescriptions.²⁶ Legislation routinely describes Jews and heretics as a "pestilence and a contagion" (*pestis, contagio*), which would spread if not for the intervention of the emperors.²⁷ "True and divine worship" could not be allowed to be defiled by the contagion of heresy (*contagione temeretur*).²⁸ Heretics have "infected with a contagion" (*contagione infecerint*) proper Christian rituals.²⁹ Christians who "have polluted themselves with Jewish contagions (*iudaicis semet polluere contagiis*) were to be harshly punished.³⁰ Jews, pagans, and heretics were barred from cities across the empire to prevent them from defiling those cities with their contagion (*contagione foedentur*).³¹ In the novel of Theodosius II (January 438) banning Jews and Samaritans from imperial service, the emperor justifies this drastic action using the language of

Non sinantur latere homines, qui legem per Mosen datam, in qua Deus universitatis conditor ostenditur, recipiendam esse non credunt.

²³ The portrayal of Eutyches as another instance of Manichean infection was made possible because Leo, like other heresiologists, imagined that correct and incorrect theology were explicable (and distinguishable) taxonomically and genealogically. See my discussion in Cohen, "Eutychianorum furor!".

²⁴ Samuel Cohen, ""You have made common cause with their Persecutors": Gelasius, the Language of Persecution, and the Acacian Schism," in *Heirs of Roman Persecution: Studies on a Christian and para-Christian Discourse in Late Antiquity*, ed. Éric Fournier and Wendy Mayer (New York: Routledge, 2019), 167-168.

²⁵ Gelasius, "JK 624 (Thiel *ep.* 8, pp. 337-339)," §1. "...antiquae fidei communionisque tramitem subaequentes, ut cavere valeant contagia perfidorum et nobiscum illibatum tenere consortium." Compare with Gelasius, "JK 638 (Thiel *ep.* 18, pp. 382-385 = CA *ep.* 101, pp. 464-468)," 4. "Noverit autem vestra fraternitas, ecclesiae Thessalonicensis antistitem, nostris adhortationibus saepius incitatum, contagia communionis externae nunquam declinare voluisse, nec apud nos nomen Acacii vel ceterorum similium perfidorum hisque communicantium congrua professione damnasse." ²⁶ Daniel A. Washburn, *Banishment in the later Roman Empire, 284-476 CE*, Routledge studies in ancient history ; (New York: Routledge, 2013), 54.

²⁷ CTh 16.5.44, given on November 24, 408.

²⁸ CTh 16.5.56, given on August 25, 415.

²⁹ CTh 16.6.4.pr, given on Februrary 12, 405. This law refers to the Donatist practice of rebaptism, which "contaminated" with repetition an otherwise valid sacrament.

³⁰ CTh 16.7.3pr.

³¹ Sirm. 6, July 9, 425.

infection. The Jews and Samaritans were "demented" (*mente captus*), so much so that "according to the ancient maxim, no cure should be employed for hopeless diseases" – that is, the Jews and Samaritans are so irredeemably 'sick' that no more time should be wasted trying to 'cure' them. Rather, they must be cut off so that they "do not spread wantonly into the life of our people."³²

This novel's reference to *mente captus* raises one final point I would like to emphasize here: the growing tendency to describe Christian orthodoxy as 'reasoned' and 'rational,' and heresy (and Judaism) as species of mental illness. At first glance, this type of rhetoric appears to be a return to that of heresy-as-poison. After all, mental illness is not typically communicable, at least not in the same way as viruses and bacterial infections. But misbelief was for Christian authors a contagious brain disease, which had to be brutally quarantined and destroyed before it could spread. Their minds were polluted (*pollutis mentibus*) and as such, they had to be purged from positions of authority within the church.³³ In law after law, heresy is equated with madness.³⁴ In the words of a particularly forceful pronouncement of Theodosius II, "the insanity of the heretics" (*haereticorum insania*) must be utterly supressed.³⁵ Heretics must be "recalled by reason" to the light of orthodoxy. If this was not possible, they would be "restrained by terror" (...*ut ab errore perfidiae, si ratione retrahi nequeunt, saltem terrore revocentur*).

Beyond Roman law, heresy-as-(contagious)mental illness evoked both the fear of the loss of one's mind, and a simple way for orthodox polemicists to denigrate their theological opponents as 'crazy' or 'insane.' This technique was wielded mercilessly, especially against Manichaeism, which was linked with foreignness, especially with the empire's eastern enemy, Persia, and it was routinely depicted in both legal and orthodox Christian sources as an unclean, polluting, and morally depraved heretical cult.³⁶ Leo, following Augustine, refers to Mani, the founder of Manicheanism, as *insania*, a pun on Mani's name in Greek (Mavής, μ avεíς).³⁷ And because Eutyches had 'caught' Mani's insanity, he too could be denigrated in the same manner. The "insane" (*insania*) Eutyches was, together with his support Dioscorus of Alexandria, tools of Satan and "soldiers of the Antichrist (*milites Antichristi*).³⁸ Following Leo, 'Manichaeism' and 'Eutychianism', both closely associated with pollution and madness (and each other), became

³² NTh 3.1.2, given on January 31, 438.

³³ CTh 16.5.23, given on March 30, 395.

³⁴ CTh 16.5.31; CTh 16.5.32; CTh 16.58; CTh 16.5.60, etc.

³⁵ CTh 16.5.65. On this law, see esp. Richard Flower, "'The Insanity of Heretics Must Be Restrained': Heresiology in the Theodosian Code," in *Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity*, ed. Christopher Kelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³⁶ See L. J. van der Lof, "Mani as the Danger from Persia in the Roman Empire," *Augustiniana* 24 (1974); Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*, 2 ed., Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 63 (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1992), 91-96; John Kevin Coyle, "Foreign and Insane: Labeling Manichaeism in the Roman Empire," in *Manichaeism and its Legacy* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 4-11,18-22.

³⁷ e.g. Leo I, *tr. 16 (CCSL 138, pp. 61-67)*, §4. "Sed cum in cunctis perversitatibus multiformem teneat principatum, arcem tamen sibi in Manichaeorum struxit insania." cf. Augustine, *de haeresibus*. "*Manichaeum discipuli eius appellare* maluerunt deuitantes nomen insaniae." See also *Confessiones*, §9.4.8; §13.30.45 and the analysis in van Oort, J. Gerhard van Oort, "Mani and Manichaeism in Augustine's de haeresibus," in *Studia Manichaea. IV. Internationaler Kongress zum Manichäismus*, ed. R. E. Emmerick, Werner Sundermann, and Peter Zieme (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 458-459.

³⁸ Leo I, "JK 486 *ep.* 109 (ACO II.4, pp. 137-138)," §1-2.

polemical epithets. Symmachus (bishop of Rome 498/514), in a letter to Emperor Anastasius, for example, claimed that the "madness of the Eutychians" surpasses that even of the Manicheans.³⁹ In the mid six-century, the hagiographer Cyril of Scythopolis described Saint Euthymius' battles with "the insane Eutyches" who confused the natures of Christ.⁴⁰

As these examples suggest, late antique Christian polemicist came to understand and describe heresy with contagious disease, and eventually as mental illness. A spiritual healthy individual was pure; the heretic, on the other hand, was polluted by the filth of misbelief. The emphasis on mental illness is particularly striking. Heath was purity; heresy was contamination, sickness, and disorder. These analogies to physical and mental health, and more broadly the rhetoric of illness and contagion, were crucial ways polemicists like Innocent I, Leo I, and many others, defined the boundaries of correct belief and proscribed their theological opponents.

³⁹ Symmachus ep. 10 = E. Schwartz (ed.), *Publizistische Sammlungen zum acacianischen Schisma* = Abhandlungen der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch– Historische Abteilung, Neue Folge 10 (Munich 1934), 154. For the use of this *topos* in the earlier lives in the *Liber Pontificalis*, see Samuel Cohen, "Schism and the Polemic of Heresy: Manichaeism and the Representation of Papal Authority in the *Liber Pontificalis*," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8, no. 1 (2015): 205-209.

⁴⁰ Cyril of Scythopolis, "Life of Euthymius," in *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, edited and translated by R. M. Price (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991), §26, pp. 36-37.