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The Sick Person and Science: Religion's Role in Medicine and Society Today

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Oral Presentation O6.4

**THE SICK PERSON AND SCIENCE: RELIGION'S ROLE IN MEDICINE
AND SOCIETY TODAY**

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The secularization thesis predicts that science will eventually render religion useless due to inherent incompatibilities. This language has been imposed on medicine. Modern discourses have created a conflict between scientific competence and more humanistic aspects of medicine, making it a practical, real-world battleground for the articulation of this debate.

I will use the secularization thesis to analyze the unusual role of medicine as both a scientific discipline and a venture into the moral realm, emphasizing the fact that it includes a very human element driven by particular beliefs and motivations. Both of these have been influenced by religion. The way humans understand nature directly impacts the possibility of the scientific method, and these understandings have largely been shaped by religious assumptions about the world. Similarly, religion has affected the role of the sick person in society, which involves healing, the body, ethics, and a community responsibility towards the sick. Though individuals have always been healers, institutionalizing healthcare through the creation of hospitals indicates a profound shift of values. The Greeks did not share these convictions, and thus did not have a true science or a community responsibility towards healing. We cannot assume these modern values; the philosophy of Nietzsche from the 19th century is an example of an alternative framework where the sick had no place in society.

I will show how the language of the secularization thesis has been imposed on medicine, creating the distinct categories of science and non-science. Further, the secularization thesis indicates that medicine's future is as a purely scientific discipline. I will use it to show medicine to be both a scientific and moral endeavor, but will argue that both aspects of the dichotomy are valuable, and that that non-science underpinnings (moral, religious, and humanistic) are ancient; these contributions cumulate in ancient Greece around the 5th century B.C. I will evaluate the integral connection between religion and medicine by showing the positive contributions of a non-science tradition—specifically, Christianity in the West—to both the scientific and non-scientific traditions in medicine. Christianity has contributed to this structure by building upon the contributions of the ancient Greeks, bringing forward shifts in both realms—(1) assumptions about nature that allow modern science and (2) a new understanding of sickness—that have created the paradigm in which modern medicine exists. Medicine is a practical example of the secularization thesis applied and overcome; it illustrates how a “scientific” discipline is inextricably bound to religion, both historically and in contemporary expectations. These scientific and moral foundations of medicine have never gone away; assumptions provided by religion remain crucial for the scientific and moral capacities of the modern doctor. Christianity thus shows that the secularization thesis is a myth regarding Western medicine, which corresponds to many scholars' conclusions about the thesis more generally. This is a lens to look at the role of religion and ethics in scientific conversations in today's pluralistic and secular society.