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Identitary Immunity and Strategic Immunization

Lépra and Leprosy from Biblical into Medieval Times

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In the history of the “Occident”, diseases, above all epidemics, have been viewed not only as an endangerment to the individual body, but always also as a threat to communities. Thus, those mechanisms of political as well as religious communities that are used for reconstruction and restabilization can be studied through an analysis of how epidemics are handled[1]. What threatens a particular social or political order when? Against what danger does one attempt to protect oneself and in what way? In respect to epidemics, it also always depends on how contagion is imagined, in the medical as well as the metaphorical sense. Only rarely is the community protected by just keeping that which is contagious either at a distance or excluded. In fact, that which is contagious is usually brought into the community for the very purpose of protection or for salvation in the religious sense, while at the same time it is isolated. Both protective strategies can be strategies of *immunization*[2].

In the following I will limit myself to one aspect of my larger-scale research project. My thesis here is that in the Gospels of the New Testament a Christian figure of immunization already becomes apparent, a figure that in modified form seems to have retained its validity up to the present day. This figure is manifested, in Christianity, in the social, cultic, and religious-imaginative function of *lépra* and leprosy.

Foucault's thesis

Michel Foucault developed three paradigmatic models of power based on the specific handling of three great epidemics: leprosy, the plague and smallpox. The handling of smallpox stands as an example of the governmentality of modernity, that of the plague for control and discipline; leprosy stands for Foucault as an example of the exclusion practices of traditional sovereignty (Foucault 2007, Sarasin 2005). For him the handling of lepers marks a dominance of the binary split, through the clear drawing of boundaries between an inner and an outer, an own and an other. Accordingly, the fear of infection has the effect that lepers are stigmatized, cast out to the social periphery and radically ostracized, expelled from the community and quarantined in special living quarters, the so-called leprosariums, beyond the boundaries of the city or village, and left to their own devices (Foucault 2006). Foucault does not stand alone with his exclusion thesis. In international research, particularly in the research of the history of medicine, up until only a few years ago the preferred interpretation was that rigid exclusion practices were at the core of the social meaning of this infectious disease. (Schelberg 2000: 15ff.).

In the social sciences and in cultural studies, Foucault's thesis of the inclusive or exclusive binary split is even now the criterion for

the social positioning of persons marked as abnormal, different or alien. Foucault treats leprosy as a kind of precedence case for binary exclusion practices in the Christian "Occident". The question is, however, whether the handling of lepers is a valid indicator, or whether even at the very beginning of Christianity there are indications of a dynamic beyond the binary. In leprosy research itself, for the most part focused on exclusion, examples are pointed out that suggest an ambivalent function of the lepers that is not completely consistent with the exclusion thesis. At the present time, positions beyond binary categorization also seem to be finding attentive ears – positions that focus on ambivalences and sustain them (*inter alia* Schelberg 2000, Jütte 1995).

Among these, positions are to be found that do not understand leprosy solely as a type of "infectious counter-principle" (Sarasin 2005: 94) to the principle of order. It must be qualified, however, that such theories only apply to the time from about the 11th c. onward. After this time, lepers in the Christian Occident were not predominantly expelled and thus segregated from the so-called healthy persons. On the contrary, the lepers became paradigmatic objects of Christian mercy and care. Contact with a person sick with leprosy was now considered to be healing in the sense of bringing salvation and was not seen only in the negative sense of being endangering and infectious. My thesis is thus that the handling of lepers stands for a Christian figure of immunization, the genealogy of which can be found in the message of the New Testament. This is not the least because the "Christian message of Salvation" was a code of action that was not called into question until the end of the Middle Ages.

The transmission of *sara'at* **to** *leprosus*

At the end of the 4th c. Hieronymus introduced the terms *lepra, leprosus* in his Latin Bible translation, the Vulgate. He transliterated the words *lépra, leprós* (in Greek these terms could also mean "scaly", "raw") from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, where they were used in place of the Hebrew *sara'at*.[3] With this choice of terminology in the Latin, Hieronymus laid the groundwork for the canonization *and* the dramatization of the ambiguous Old Testament term for uncleanness given in the Levitical Codes (Lev. 13-15). *Sara'at* was only *inter alia* a term designating scaly skin diseases[4]; *sara'at* could also refer to an impureness occurring on textiles and buildings (Lev. 13, 47-59 and 14, 33-53). The implementation of the term *leprosus* to a certain extent shifts the focus from the field of the "religio-ritualistic" and the cleanness concepts dominated by ritual (cf. also Douglas 2008), to the realm of an earthly disease which with the gradual increase in knowledge became ever more clearly defined as an – infectious – "epidemic"[5] (Schelberg 2000: 12 ff., 115 ff.).[6]

This disambiguation occurred at a time in which Christianity was stepping out of its outsider role, was elevated to the status of state religion and was setting out on a centuries-long search for identity in respect to defining the boundaries to the non-Christian. In its handling of the actual lepers, however, this search was to muddle all the way through into the 11th c., when these sick persons, through alms-giving, became one of the central figures of Christian charity. The Church Fathers had already further developed the teachings of the New Testament with their doctrine of alms-giving, but not until the High Middle Ages did the concept of *Caritas* come into full flower. Alms-giving came to function as a sacramental exculpation of sins, at the same time as it was a factor in the structuring of social life (Rassem 1992: 604). In the course

of this development, leprous persons (*Aussätzige*[7]) were segregated ever less rigorously, increasingly taking on a "salvific-historical" function as interpreted out of the New Testament.

The poor and saintly Lazarus

In neither the New or the Old Testament are any stories to be found concerning the medical healing of a sickness as such – this pertains to *lépra* and leprosy as well. In existing lists, those designated as being *leprós* are even recorded in *addition* to those who are "sick". In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus instructs his disciples, "cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers [*leprous katharizete*] (...)" (Matthew 10:8). The lepers (*leproí*) are the unclean[8]. Through the use of the translated term „leprosy" in sites such as these in the New Testament, just as in places in the Old Testament as well, an analogy is drawn between the sickness of leprosy and uncleanness. In the Latin translation, the once cultic concept of "uncleanness" takes on an epidemiological meaning. As the concept of charity starts to assert itself in the Christian church, so too does the figure of Lazarus embodied by the leper, take on a changed meaning (Geremek 1991: 32; Schelberg 2000: 147; Winkle 2005, 16).

In the story from the Gospel of Luke, "The Rich Man and Lazarus" (Luke 16:19-31), a rich man disregards the death of a leper (*leprós*) lying at his front door, that same Lazarus, not offering him any assistance. Whereas after his death the rich man must endure the tortures of Hell, Lazarus rests securely in the lap of Abraham. The message of this parable is: Do good deeds for the poor during your life here on earth, so that you will be exonerated in the life to come, so that you can enjoy Salvation in Heaven, the promised "Kingdom of God".

But this example contains even more: because of her/his earthly afflictions and sufferings, the leper of the 11th c., symbolized by Saint Lazarus, was understood as being particularly close to God and thus, from this intimacy and closeness, in an especially good position to intercede for her/his benefactors. The act of "mercy" towards the leper in some measure constituted a greater "salvation-capital" than alms-giving to the commonplace poor. The ambivalent figure of the leper that emerges thereby is marked on the one hand by stigmatization and thus in a certain way by exclusion, but on the other is endowed with the special function of providing redemption to those non-excluded healthy persons who through their acts of mercy can accumulate "salvation-capital" for the life beyond. In this way the leper is simultaneously once again included in the community. The condition for this special function within salvific history is the self-understanding of the Jesuanic message and the way in which the Christian community constitutes itself.

The immunity of Jesus

Jesus of Nazareth does not come up in the story of Lazarus. But all the evangelists do tell other stories about Jesus' encounters with the unclean. Matthew, for example, tells the story of "The Healing of a *Leprós*" as follows: "Now when he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him. And behold, a leper [*leprós*] came up and worshipped him, saying, 'Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me clean.' ". After this appeal for cleansing and "healing", Matthew, in this story, marks a decisive difference to the Levitical Code and allows things to happen that are of importance in this context, for "...stretching forth his hand Jesus touched him,

saying, 'I will; be thou made clean'. And immediately his leprosy [*lépra*] was cleansed" (Matthew 8:1-3).

Here Jesus is doing something which is strictly forbidden, even to priests, under the Levitical Code (Leviticus 13-14). The unclean is not to be touched. Through contact the priest would have defiled his cultic cleanness and lost the power invested upon him by God. Matthew ends the story explicitly with a reference to Old Testament ritual and so formally maintains the obedience to the old *sara'at* ordinance. In the Torah the priest, after he has *looked at* the inflicted areas of the skin, decides whether he will judge a person "clean" or "unclean" (Leviticus 13). Matthew marks the "New Covenant" that Jesus is demonstrating, in that he refers to the importance of the priest, but at the same time seems to devalue him with Jesus' warning to the newly "healed" cleansed one: "And Jesus said to him, 'See thou tell no one; but go, show thyself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded, for a witness to them'." This story implies that the priest will confirm the healing of Jesus of Nazareth, without knowing about it. In other texts of the Gospels, too, Jesus touches the unclean, not heeding the Old Testament interdiction against touching.[9] By investing him with the power to transform the unclean to the clean, to "heal", through contact, the texts of the Gospels are portraying Jesus of Nazareth as one who defies cultic-ritualistic rules and thus shows himself to be *immune*[10]. He does not infect himself, for his immunity is God-given. That he is immune marks him as the "Son of God", for he is not endangered by contact with the unclean. He not only remains unharmed and "clean". Far more: he *handles* the *leproí*, he touches them with his *hand*, he establishes contact and does not cast them out. Through this gesture of touch the *leproí* are invested with a salient function in the exonerating healing and cleansing practices of Jesus. Through an act of mercy, quasi through an act of

cleansing, he brings those who have been excluded back into the community (cf. also Schelberg 2000: 142 f.).

It appears that Jesus' *immunity* as the "Son of God" is to be manifested through this touching of the *leprós* in particular. Never did he need to touch either the lame or the feeble in order to heal them[11]. These accounts in the New Testament of Jesus' encounters with the *leproí* imply on the one hand a – self-assured – infringement of the rules and reflect the socio-religious self-understanding of the time. Thus this extraordinary "healing" power that is portrayed here is a testimony to and evidence for the God incarnated in him. And finally, these passages belong to the central revelations concerning the Christian understanding of "salvific history". In spite of their complexity, the implications of the problem presented here shall be shortly outlined here:

1. Based on his immunity to the unclean, as defined by the New Testament, Jesus "heals" the *leproí*, which 2. is understood simultaneously as proof and promise of his divinity, and 3. it is here pronounced that through an act of mercy, through touching or being touched, the non-excluded, the healthy – to some measure also with egoistical ulterior motives - can participate in the forging of their own salvific future. Thereby the "cast out" leper becomes at once a subject of value to the community, a cause worth investing in; additionally, her/his status as outcast is revoked.

In touching the unclean, Jesus breaks one of the strongest taboos stipulated in the Old Testament, namely that taboo that as a constituent of the "Covenant with God" was to secure the purity and sacredness of the Jewish community. According to the understanding of the Old Testament this community was threatened by impurities which were transmitted by bodily contact

or, in today's understanding, by "infection". Physical contact with the unclean at the same time endangered the "Covenant", the contract which God had made with his "chosen people".

In contrast, according to the understanding of the New Testament, it is this very risk – the contact with and the touching of the unclean – that does not threaten the "New Covenant", but rather even promises salvation and deliverance. The *leproí* no longer need to be banished. They have become a medium and instrument for the manifestation of the immunity of Jesus.

In that Jesus breaks the old laws, he shows that the Messiah is he who will make the "New Covenant" as prophesized in the Old Testament and will thereby also draw up new – not just cultic, ritualistic, etc. - "salvific rules". His provocative act of touching does not mean infection nor does it mean the transmission of the poison of uncleanness to himself. On the contrary: it is he who "heals" and who at the same time liberates the unclean from ritual uncleanness. This means: Jesus does not just *have* the antidote, but rather, as the incarnation of God, he *is* that antidote. Only the Son of God made man possesses this immunity. Jesus is the exception. But this is only one aspect of the community-building function that in Christian self-understanding can be accredited to Jesus. The other is the wounding of the immune.

The immune, wounded gift of violence

Ostensibly Jesus' immunity is a patrilineal bestowal on the son as a sign of his chosenness, a divine gift to the incarnated One. Through Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the cross his body becomes a wound. And as a wound, this *corpus* is perpetually damaged. Though he is protected against sin, uncleanness and evil, it is by

these very elements that he is wounded. Thereby his immunity becomes a damaged protection and will always be associated with guilt. His blood and his wounds bear witness to the violent sin against divine immunity. For this reason his sacrifice, the "*corpus* of Christ", is as a sacrificial offering always an offering of violence, a gift of violence, a gift in which violence is immanent (cf. Girard 1977). Hence, his *corpus* at once connotes both an offering (up) as well as a poison. For the wound and the flow of blood symbolize the damage, the violence and the sin that was inflicted on the immune Son of God in his self-sacrifice and his selfless offering (up)[12]. Admittedly, this immunity can not ultimately be destroyed by human hands; certainly there is still the account of the Resurrection, an event that is the basis for reconciliation.

The incorporation

Jesus' body transports a double message. The moment in which this becomes clearest is the Eucharist, the ritual of the Last Supper, in which the Blood and the *corpus* are the central focus[13]. In the Eucharist a fundamental paradox is manifest: on the one hand Communion, the collective receiving of the Last Supper, constitutes the Christian community. All those who partake of the sacrament share, through the receiving of the consecrated wine and bread, in the "*corpus* of Christ". On the other hand, this consecrated bread, as the violated *corpus*, perpetuates the guilt associated with the sacrifice and thereby forever connects the receiving of the "*corpus* of Christ" with the desire for salvation. The fact that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of all human beings, means a never to be exonerated guilt for the immune cleanness that was killed, for his innocence that was sacrificed[14] (Freud 1967). The incorporation of Christ's *corpus* thus always means two things: the partaking and reconciliation, as well as the perpetuation

of the sacrifice. The remembrance of the sacrifice always commemorates the violence as well. Through the receiving of the gifts in Communion, the poison of violence is supposed to be neutralized and transformed to an antidote, to protection and reconciliation. In addition, through Communion, every single person is brought into the community, is incorporated[15].

But the state of immunity in which the Jesus of the Gospels is understood to be, is not something that is possible for the receiving partakers. What seems to be possible, and of this Communion is a reminder, is only the auspicious promise of salvation in the life to come through a continuous, but ever unstable, immunization here on earth. Within this dynamic, every person in the Christian community strives for immunization, without ever being able to attain the immunity of Jesus. The promise of salvation is not redeemable, by the very fact that sin and violence co-constitute the community. Thus only the unending process of immunization is possible, but never the state of being or the identity of immunity.

The idea of transubstantiation, the change of the substance of the bread and wine, asserted itself in the Christian church through the course of the Middle Ages until finally in 1215 it was elevated to the status of dogma by the 4th Lateran Council under Innocence III[16]. This same council, by enacting special clothing regulations for Jews, manifested the Christian anti-Judaism that had existed since the time of the early Church and continued with hardly a change into the Middle Ages (Ebach 1988: 301)[17]. Since the time of Constantine, anti-Judaism has been a “consistent constituent” (ebd: 300) of Christian teachings, and the accusation of deicide and cannibalistically fantasized “ritual murder” a

recurring polemic with far-reaching consequences (Lotter 1998) [18].

The violence that remains immanent in the "*corpus* of Christ" in the Eucharist is split off from it by an anti-Judaic logic, and the Christian community constitutes itself through the imaginary threat of constant violence from the outside. Through the construction of an alienated violence, each participant, through the ritual incorporation of the wine and bread, in the transubstantiation, in the real existing presence of Christ, is able not only to partake of this presence but also to become part of his *corpus*. The Christian community becomes a single *corpus*. But the state of freedom from sin and guilt, the purity, wholeness, inviolateness is not attainable for the believers. Instead of clearly acknowledging this, the desire, the striving for, the phantasm of oneness and intactness in the Eucharist is, in an immunizing gesture, maintained. Thus one can say that not only murder is a constitutive factor in Christianity, as above all Sigmund Freud and Réne Girard have shown[19], but also immunity.

The "real" action of Christian incorporation can be understood as an extremely influential, quasi "cannibalistic" practice in "Occidental" Europe[20]. The consumption of bread and wine as the "*corpus* of Christ" - an act that can be interpreted as cannibalistic - shows an attempt, through the incorporation of a piece of the *corpus* to secure Jesus (cf. Freud 1967) and through this unification to draw up a kind of "social or societal contract" (Röckelein 1996: 12), an alliance that is renewed with each Eucharist. At the same time and the other way around, with the accusations of ritual murder and deicide, those who have been excluded from the Christian contract, who have been construed as being different and alien, become "blood-thirsty man-eaters" (bid.: 13; cf. Erb 1993; von der Heiden 2005: 52).

In the dissociation of violence as a constituting element of community, the figure of immunization through incorporation seems to be first and foremost a Christian figure, one which up into the present day, secularized and in innumerable excrescences, has remained hegemonic.

The infectious promise of salvation

What does this mean for the charitable practices for lepers? Since persons with leprosy did not embody the "*corpus* of Christ", and alms-giving to these poor with the concomitant promise of salvation had nothing to do with incorporation in the Eucharistic sense – how is this salvific dynamic to be understood? The Christian concept of charity of the High Middle Ages[21] offered, next to the Eucharist, a strategy of immunization in this life promising salvation for the life to come. The possibility for the healthy to further increase their salvation-capital, bestowed a conditioned entry into the Christian community upon those who had been excluded because of sickness [22].

The leper embodied the testimony to the prophetic promise that Jesus was the Messiah. No longer did she/he bear only the sign of an uncleanness that had to be shut out, but she/he now became an object of Jesus' mercy. Following Jesus' example, the impoverished person infected with leprosy was now, through *caritas* – thus, primarily through alms-giving – brought back into the community. Not however - as she/he had been brought in through Jesus – as one who was cleansed and "healed".

Lepers were still considered a threat, but now at the same time bringers of salvation. And exactly in this ambivalence, the leper seems to have been infectious in a different way;for it was he who

would lead to the promised salvation through the contact mediated by the alms. Accordingly, in the Middle Ages leprosy could also infect one with salvation.

Integration and being brought into the community meant, for example, that the lepers were asked to take part in important religious processions. They were allowed to beg for alms in front of the churches and on certain squares inside and outside of the city and were thereby able to earn a respectable sum for the leprosariums that were in turn an integral part of the communal economy[23]. This kind of inclusion in the non-lepers community did not mean an end to stigmatization, but rather – compared to binary structured exclusion – a functional handling of a threat within the Own.

A similar dynamic is described in what Christina von Braun has called "the paradox of the Occident": namely that phenomenon, especially in the history of Christianity, which combines the tendency to exclude outsiders and aliens with their subsequent reintegration (Braun 2001: 288)[24]. In the practice of alms-giving to lepers, alms that for the benefactor bear the promise of salvation, the paradox of the "Occident" becomes clearly apparent in the form of a constant, unstable strategy of immunization.

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[1] For critical commentaries I am grateful to Susanne Lanwerd, Margit Leuthold, Elmar M. Lorey and Gerald Raunig. I alone take responsibility for any shortcomings of this text.

[2] Under immunization I understand among other things (sovereign) protective strategies for defense and healing in respect to endangeredness and vulnerability of communities. These are strategies which are explicitly or implicitly based on analogies to individual or collective bodies. For a preliminary systemization of different figures of immunization see Lorey (2007).

[3] *Lépra*, *leprós* were also used in the Gospels of the New Testament, which were originally written in Greek.

[4] When one now speaks of a scaly skin disease, usually psoriasis is meant. The actual disease of leprosy was called *elephantiasis Graecorum* in ancient times. Neither the Old or the New Testament (originally written in Greek) are referring to the latter. Nor does the Corpus Hippocraticum speak of an infectious, mutilating disease, but rather of a scaling skin disease. Also, the concept of contagion was not known in Graeco-Roman medicine (Bayer 1950).

[5] Because infection with this bacteriological disease is only possible after intensive contact and because of the long incubation time (from 3 months to 40 years) it is doubtful as to whether one can really speak of an “epidemic” (cf. Schelberg 2000: 14).

[6] Since the 1960’s, theologists and historiographers of leprosy have designated the equation of the Hebrew and Greek terminologies with the nosology of leprosy as being historically incorrect (Schelberg 200: 116; Seidl 1982: 86-88).

[7] The Middle High German noun, *ûzsaz*, and the adjective, *uzsetzic,* developed from the Old High German *ûzsâzeo*, the literal term for *aussässig (sitting on the outside)* (Schelberg 2000: 117).

[8] Other sites in the Gospels: Matthew 11:5, Luke 7:22. All the Bible citations (in the English translation) are from the St. Joseph’s Catholic Bible, 1962.

[9] Further sites in the Gospels in which leprous persons are “healed”: Luke 5:12-15; Luke 17:11-19; Mark 1:40-45.

[10] To the ambivalent portrayal of Judaism in the New Testament, see Ebach (1988: 300).

[11] For example: Matthew 9: 1-8; Matthew 9:19-21; Matthew 9:27-34; Matthew 15:30.

[12] From the writings of the New Testament it becomes clear that Jesus of Nazareth’s judgment and conviction to death was carried out by the Roman administration (Ebach 1988: 300).

[13] For the various interpretations and discourses in respect to the understanding of the Eucharist in the Christian churches up to the Reformation, see Kretschmer (1977) and Iserloh (1977).

[14] Based on the Epistle to the Hebrews in the New Testament, the death of Jesus on the cross is interpreted as a sacrifice, and was systematized in the 4th c. by Augustine to a theology of the sacrifice of the crucifixion (Cancik-Lindemaier 1990: 351).

[15] Ostracism occurs through excommunication or else from the very start due to other (religious) ideas.

[16] At the Council the decree concerning transubstantiation was supplied with the following explanation: "His *corpus* and his blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar in the form of bread and wine, after, with God's power, the bread has been transformed into the living body and the wine into the blood (*transubstantiatis*), so that we may receive from him that which he took from us, and the mystical union will be completed..." (cit. from Iserloh 1977: 93).

[17] In the 3rd Lateran Council it was decreed in reference to lepers, that they had to be buried in special cemeteries. In respect to the "Lazarus' dress", to make the lepers recognizable from afar, see Winkle (2005: 24f.).

[18] The drinking of blood can not be documented in the Jewish cult; indulgence in blood is strictly prohibited (Lev. 17:10-14); nor is there any evidence of the imbibing of blood at the official Roman and Greek cult banquets (Cancik-Lindemaier1990: 350).

[19] „One who hopes to find salvation from 'so-called evil' in religion is faced with the fact that the very foundation of Christianity is a murder, the innocent death of the Son of God, just as the Covenant of the Old Testament assumes the nearly consummated sacrifice of the son of Abraham. Right in the very

center of the religion fascinating, bloody violence threatens. (Burkert 1997: cit. from. Von der Heiden 2005: 53).

[20] In contrast: Zinser (1993: 331).

[21] Not until the 11th or 12th c., based on the teachings of the Greek Church Fathers, did the concept of the inner value of poverty develop, and at the same time, while poverty was increasing, increasing wealth on the other hand had to be justified (Geremek 1994). In the 12th c. Gerhoh von Reichersberg introduced two types of poverty into theological thought: on one side the "Poor with Paul", the voluntary poverty of the monastery, and on the other side, the "Poor with Lazarus", the poverty of the laity, symbolized by the figure of Lazarus, for which the lepers stood (ibd).

[22] Carlo Ginzburg has shown with the example of a conspiracy at the beginning of the 14th c. in France how the accusation of contaminating the wells, of poisoning could be directed by the Christians at Jews just as well as at lepers (Ginzburg 1992).

[23] For short individual studies see among others Vergouw (2003/04), Biniek (2003/04), Müller (2000), the chapter on leprosy in Winkle (2005) and above all Schelberg (2000).

[24] Such power mechanisms for the neutralization of threatening potentialities through integration did not however pertain to the Jews under Christianity.