

Epilepsy According to the Christian, Jewish and Islamic Religions: An Overview

Anna Vanzan PALADIN (*)

ÖZET

Hıristiyan, Yahudi, ve İslam Dinlerine Göre Epilepsi: Genel Bakış

Epilepsi konusunda eğilimlerimizi, ön yargılarımızı ve stereotipilerimizi şekillendirmede toplumsal inanışlar ve dini yorumlar çok önemli rol oynarlar. Bu yazıda üç büyük din olan Hıristiyan, Yahudi ve İslam dinlerinin epilepsiye yaklaşımı ve hastalıkla ilgili kavramları nasıl belirledikleri açıklanmıştır.

Sonuç olarak, bu yazıda dini geleneklerin epilepsi kavramını sorgularken daima doğal fenomenolojiden, fizik ötesi dünyaya kaydığı gerçeği vurgulanmıştır. Epilepsi hiçbir zaman sıradan bir hastalık gibi ele alınmamış, aksine dinlerin doğaüstü kültürel, filozofik ve antropolojik temellerine göre değişen kötü veya iyi ruhların varlığı ile nedenleri belirlenen bir durum olmuştur. Ancak, hala epilepsi konusunda bilimsel veriler ve stereotipiler arasında bir netlik oluşmadığı açıktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *epilepsi, din*

SUMMARY

Popular beliefs and magic religious interpretations have been crucial in shaping our attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes about epilepsy. This paper identifies the way in which the Christian, Jewish and Islamic religions have approached epilepsy and outlines the concepts about this disease within these three main religions of the Western world.

In conclusion, the paper stresses the fact that in the religious traditions examined the notion of epilepsy has always shifted from natural phenomenology to the transcendental world. Epilepsy has never been considered an ordinary sickness, but rather, a condition determined by the presence of supernatural causes; whether these causes were of demonic or celestial origin depends on the cultural, philosophical and anthropological basis of each religion. However, it is clear that there is still confusion between scientific data and stereotypes regarding epilepsy.

Key words: *epilepsy, religion*

Popular beliefs and magic-religious interpretations have been crucial in shaping our attitudes, prejudices and stereotypes about epilepsy.

The aim of this paper is to identify the way in which the Christian, Jewish and Islamic religions have approached epilepsy and to outline the development of the concepts about this disease within these three main religions of the Western world.

We begin with Judaism, since some of the general concepts about epilepsy were inherited by the Christian church and have become integral components of Christian religion as well.

To understand the Jewish view of epilepsy we have

to recall the general statement of the Jewish culture which says that every illness is a divine punishment due to a person's sin (Exodus, 25:26; Leviticus, 26:14-15-16-25; Mishnah, Aboth IV:3).

An illness is the mark of God's revenge, and, in the case of epilepsy, the exterior manifestations of the disease, such as the seizures, are the evidence of a demonic presence in the body.

In the Talmud, epilepsy is associated with leprosy: the holy text prohibits marriage with a woman who comes from a family in which either epileptic attacks or cases of leprosy have occurred. Both leprosy and epilepsy can be grounds for divorce, since a person who has one of these sicknesses is considered highly dangerous and not deserving of living with another person (The Babilonian Talmud, Lebamoth, 64b). Jewish law also associated epileptic with lunatics and

(*) International School of Neurological Sciences S.Servolo (Venice), S.Croce 1626, 30135, Venice, Italy

idiots in the case of legal testimony: none of these people, in fact, can bring evidence in a trial.

In the Talmud we also find an allusion to epilepsy as a consequence of a sexual sin: according to the Talmud, having sexual intercourse in a lit room may give birth to an epileptic child. Likewise, a child who is in the room where his parents are having sexual intercourse may develop epilepsy (The Babilonian Talmud, Pesachim 112 b).

The overall Jewish perception of epilepsy (called *nikhpah*, which means to be overturned) was that of a chronic and severe illness which is mainly determined by a demoniac presence, so much so that an epileptic was excluded from the priesthood ⁽¹⁾.

This Jewish concept of illness as a symptom of a spiritual disease, as an indication of a transgression and of its subsequent castigation was inherited by the Christian church. Mental illnesses, such as epilepsy, reinforced the idea of the presence and the action of the Devil as a result of God's condemnation. The New Testament presents several accounts of miracles received by people suffering from nervous diseases; Jesus Christ is said to have healed several people who had seizures by driving out the unclean spirit which possessed them (for example, St. Mark, ix, 14-29). These biblical references strengthened the popular connection between Evil and epilepsy.

We also have to bear in mind that Christianity, at its start, was deeply influenced by the Greek-Roman culture, from which it inherited the concept of the human body's harmony; thus, the possible manifestations of epilepsy, such as seizures with loss of consciousness, were crucial to shaping a negative image of epilepsy, which became a symbol of the corruption of the body and of its lack of harmony.

During the Medieval period, with its atmosphere of belief in supernatural powers, epilepsy, along with some mental diseases, was often mistaken for demoniac possession. Thus, some epileptic patients were condemned to the stake, in order to be liberated from their satanic master ⁽²⁾.

In addition to the "demoniac" component, Christianity provided other explanations for the advent of epi-

lepsy: for example, people born on the 25th of December were considered likely to develop this disease. Popular opinion held it to be a blasphemy to conceive a child on the 25th of March (Annunciation day), i.e., the day in which God's child was conceived, and epilepsy was the punishment for this sacrilege ⁽³⁾.

Negligence in reciting the ritual prayers or offending a saint were other possible causes of epilepsy; in particular, the relationship between this disease and Christian saints was very complex. The spread of the Christian religion led to an increasing belief in the saints' power: each saint was supposed to ward off a disease and his or her name was linked to the disease itself. Several saints were associated with epilepsy. Many of them were only of local fame, but the most famous ones, such as Saint Valentine and Saint Donato, shared a common feature: they were beheaded. There were many connotations associated with the head: it was the symbol of the origin of epilepsy, but, since Catholicism included a special cult of the saints' heads which were believed to contain mysterious and mighty powers, the connection between supernatural forces and the cerebral origin of epilepsy was reinforced. On one hand, the image of the head recalled that of Christ, (the Head of the Church), and thus was regarded as a symbol of perfection. On the other hand, to have a mental illness meant to go out one's head (mind), and also manifestations such as epileptic seizures were seen as something that went beyond the ordinary. Sometimes the epileptic fits were interpreted as a mystic crisis, but most of the time they were understood as subjugation to demoniac forces, and this attitude was predominant from the Middle Ages throughout the 16th century ⁽⁴⁾.

Another peculiarity of the connection between saints and epilepsy and of the negative value this illness had in the Christian church is evident from the biographies and writings of Medieval saints. Many holy persons used to implore God to inflict them with someone else's illness. This supplication was made only for leprosy and epilepsy which were evidently considered the worst things one could have; an example of this was Saint Gioacchino from Siena, who, according to legend, asked God to free an epileptic from his fits and to transfer them upon himself

(3). Even the imagination of holy men held epilepsy to be more possession than pathology.

We know that even until recent times official medicine based the care of epilepsy upon empirical remedies. Very often the epileptic patients were treated with folk medicine that turned to magic-religious rites. The Christian church also accepted some of these procedures to cure epilepsy. Although these rites never became part of the official liturgic ceremony, they nevertheless required the active presence of a priest who chanted prayers and litanies. Even after the Protestant Reform, when such ceremonies were prohibited by the local religious authorities, especially in Northern Europe, the priest did not disappear from the scene of the rite, but rather the rituals were moved to the church-square or the patient's house.

One of the most common modes of therapy was offer the sick person's favorite saint the equivalent of the patient's weight in wax, wheat, beer or gold. This would usually include a pilgrimage to the saint's sanctuary, where the epileptic and his family slept the night before the celebration of the rite (5). Sometimes the patient had to change his old dress with a new one in the saint's temple. The old clothes were left at the foot of the saint's image, in order to be donated to the poor, but such was the fear of contracting epilepsy that most of the time the garments were burnt (6).

Metals were commonly considered as effectual remedies against epilepsy: amulets, keys and horseshoes of iron or gold were hung around the patients' neck. Again, the metals used had a double interpretation: iron protected against negative forces, but it was also the symbol of dark powers; gold was the metal of illumination and divinity, but also the symbol of lust and greediness (7).

In the Middle Ages in the Renaissance there was also the custom of "donating" an epileptic child to God: it was the child's commitment to enter into the monastic life. An example of this is Saint James Philip Bertoni, who promised to become a friar at the age of two, when he became an epileptic. He recovered when he was nine, entered into the order of Saint Mary's Servants and later was beatified (3).

These frequent vows demonstrate the patient's parents deep guilt, and the use of the afflicted child as a sacrifice; only monastic life and divine aid could remedy this illness.

The clerical hierarchy's official attitude towards epilepsy has always been ambiguous; for instance, the Catholic church excluded epileptics from the priesthood until 1983, when the new Code of Canon Law was promulgated. But in a quite recent speech (1992), the Pope correlated mental illnesses with sin and transgression; talking about epilepsy, in particular, John Paul the Second has reintroduced the theory according to which epileptics-whose bodies are weakened by the illness-are more likely to succumb to the powers of evil.

"There is no sickness for which God did not provide a remedy" (8): this is a fundamental postulate of the Islamic faith, and Islamic medicine was established on this principle. The prophet Muhammed gave instructions on various aspects of healthcare, some of which are in the Koran, while many others were gathered by his disciples and published under the title *Tibb al-nabi*, "The Prophet's Medicine". In this collection of sayings ascribed to Muhammed, we find also a reference to epilepsy: the Prophet, in fact, recommended the inhalation of the narcissus flower, being a hot-dry substance, against epileptic attacks (9). Since Islamic medicine followed Hippocrates's pathology of the humors, the prescription of something hot-dry leads to the assumption that epilepsy was considered a cold-damp condition. The prescription must be seen not as a sorcery resort, but as a result of the pharmacology of the time which was mainly based on the use of herbs and animals' organs. On the contrary, Muhammed openly condemned the practice and use of magic in treatment (Koran, Sura 22).

Even more important is the fact that in the hadiths (sayings attributed to Muhammed), there is no mention of epilepsy as a sickness caused by demons. This fact is particularly important if we assume that the Muslim physicians in general was not only influenced, but determined, by the Prophet's words. As a consequence, the Muslim doctors (such as Razi, Abu 'Ali Sina, al-Tabari to name a few) maintained a more "scientific" viewpoint towards epilepsy, and

this led to the formation of a body of medical literature on epilepsy which kept alive the tradition of it as a natural disease caused by natural factors throughout the Middle Ages and up to the 1700's. Of course, exceptions occurred even in this tradition; for example, the surgeon Abu'l Qasim al-Zarrawi (Abulcasis, first half of the 11th century) was converted to the belief of a demoniac form of epilepsy, after he had long fought against this same theory. He seemed to recognize in Galen's works the indication of a sort of demoniac epilepsy against which the physicians were totally powerless. It is perhaps relevant that Abulcasis lived in Spain, and it is likely that the Spanish-Christian culture influenced the Muslim-Spanish physicians⁽¹⁰⁾.

As for the popular concept of epilepsy among Muslims, it should be mentioned that the word "epilepsy" must have sounded rather familiar to Muslims' ears, due to its similarity with the name Iblis, the Islamic word for the Devil. One could theorize that the very word *iblis*, for example, gave birth to one of the Persian terms for epilepsy-*iblisia*⁽¹¹⁾.

To remain in the Persian context, we recall a popular interpretation of the disease which relates to the bogeyman *Ummu'l sibiyan*, which signifies, by antonomasia, a child's epileptic attack. To exorcise it, the recourse available through folk practices was to invoke the aid of a *pari*, a good fairy who was often turned to for help. For this purpose, the *pari* was presented with special offers of bread, candles, incense, seeds of wild rue, eggs, and salt⁽¹²⁾.

If the fairies help people, one cannot say the same about the jinns, the creatures the Koran says are created from a smokeless flame and which may be good or evil (Koran, Sura 15). Not only in Persian, but also in Muslim folklore in general these fantastic beings, which are able to enter inside of people, are

responsible for various kinds of troubles ranging from innocent annoyances to great misfortune and for a long time were thought to be the cause of epileptic attacks. If it is taken into consideration that the term for madness is *majnun*, or "possessed by the jinn" it is easy to understand the identification, on a popular level, of the epileptic as a crazy person, one who is possessed⁽¹⁵⁾.

In conclusion, I would like to stress the fact that in the religious traditions examined the notion of epilepsy has always shifted from natural phenomenology to the transcendental world. Epilepsy has never been considered an ordinary sickness, but rather, a condition determined by the presence of supernatural causes; whether these causes were of demoniac or celestial origin depends on the cultural, philosophical and anthropological basis of each religion. However, it is clear that there is still confusion between scientific data and stereotypes regarding epilepsy.

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