Between Theology and Physiology: Religious, Secular, and Post-Secular Health Imaginaries in the Long Nineteenth Century

International conference

Organization: Caroline Hildebrandt and Nicholas Manning

Institut des langues et cultures d'Europe, Amérique, Afrique, Asie et Australie (ILCEA4); Grenoble Alpes Medical Humanities (GAMES); Institut Universitaire de France (IUF)

Maison de la Création et de l'Innovation (MACI), Université Grenoble Alpes

October 7–8, 2027

Since the 1990s, and increasingly over the past decade, the history of medicine and the medical humanities at large have undergone a profound methodological renewal that has shifted the focus from accounts of medicalization and the triumph of biomedicine to the study of the "entanglements" between scientific knowledge, cultural and literary practices, and belief systems. Recent research has also helped challenge the grand narratives of secularization by showing the ongoing negotiations between scientific expertise and religious authorities, and the extent to which experimental physiology, psychiatry, and public health often developed within religious frameworks, in an Atlantic space characterized by intense exchanges of people, texts, therapeutic practices, and conceptions of health.

Similarly, secular and post-secular studies have shown how, in the United States and the wider Atlantic world throughout the long nineteenth century, theology and physiology developed in constant dialogue, shaping competing understandings of the body, the soul, and the concept of "human nature." Religious doctrines informed debates over heredity, race, health, sexuality, and moral reform, while advances in physiological and biological knowledge challenged established theological frameworks. Technological developments opened up new ways of being religious by displacing previously "religious" experiences onto the secular sphere. These exchanges crossed confessional, national, disciplinary, and ideological boundaries, linking scientific inquiry with missionary networks, abolitionism, colonialism, emerging medical institutions, and alternative medical practices. Work on biopolitics in the period, particularly in critical race, feminist, queer, affect, and disability studies, has drawn attention to embodiment and to the coexistence of several models of the body and of healing. Many of these studies share the idea that literary form and the imagination served as heuristic and aesthetic tools with which writers could confront, or move beyond, Cartesian accounts of the relation between body and mind, and could register the interplay of secular, medical, and religious discourses.

The Université Grenoble Alpes and the ILCEA4 research unit invite proposals for papers and panels on the relationship between theology, physiology, and health imaginaries in the long nineteenth century (ca. 1776-1914), although contributions may also look back to earlier episodes such as the Boston smallpox inoculation controversy of 1721. The conference is open to literary scholars, historians, art historians, scholars of aesthetics and of the history of ideas, and researchers in the medical humanities. Proposals from PhD candidates and postgraduate students are welcome. The event is held under the auspices of the Institut Universitaire de France and the Grenoble Alpes

Medical Humanities initiative (GAMES), and a selection of papers will be submitted for publication, as a collective volume or a special issue of a journal, to a publisher in the United Kingdom or the United States.

Possible topics for papers include:

- The place of and relationship between literary epistemologies and philosophy when thinking about health in the long nineteenth century; the role of specific literary genres in addressing these questions (e.g. the sentimental novel)
- Secularization; secular, and post-secular approaches to the relationship between medicine (as both a set of practices and discourses) and religious discourses; the links between "science" and "religion"
- The interplay between alternative medicines (such as homeopathy, hydropathy, magnetism, and mesmerism), religious movements (Spiritism, Swedenborgianism, or Christian Science), and (institutionalized) religions; the dynamics of transatlantic exchanges in the context of alternative medical practices and of religious movements
- The political import of health imaginaries and their interconnected scales, ranging from the singular to the collective, and from the intimate to the social; the biopolitics of a health imaginary; the role of public health crises in the shaping of a public discourse around health, and their representation in literary and cultural texts
- Moral treatment, religious models of madness, and the theological roots of early psychiatry
- The racialization of medical knowledge in proslavery and abolitionist writing, and the theological arguments on which both sides drew
- The moral and physiological education of children and adolescents in religious and secular writing on health
- Missionary medicine and colonial health archives, where evangelization and medical intervention went hand in hand
- Diet, temperance, and other regimens of self-government that were at once pious and physiological
- Death, dying, and mourning in theological and physiological thought, including conceptions of the soul and the afterlife

This list is merely indicative, and proposals will be considered across a wide range of subjects related to the ties between theology and physiology, in the broad senses of both of these categories.

Proposals of 300 words maximum for individual papers should be sent for consideration before 15 February 2027 to the following addresses: caroline.hildebrandt@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr and nicholas.manning@univ-grenoble-alpes.fr.

Notification of acceptance will be sent by 10 March 2027.

Confirmed speakers and panelists include:

Sari Altschuler, Northeastern University, USA
Thomas Constantinesco, Sorbonne Université, France
Michael Jonik, University of Sussex, UK
Justine S. Murison, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA
Cécile Roudeau, Université Paris Cité, France