Unit 2 The Middle Ages

What was religion's role in medicine during the Middle Ages?

During the Middle Ages religion came to dominate all aspects of life throughout much of Europe. The Christian church established monasteries, which served as hospitals, and later began to provide training for doctors. At the same time, medical schools based on Islamic practice were gaining a high reputation at centres like Salerno in Italy and Montpellier in France.

The Christian Church saw it as the duty of all Christians to help the sick and needy, but they had no particular method for treating disease beyond faith and prayer. The population relied on local healers, who were often women. By 1200, the training of doctors had become established, in universities in Western Europe which were controlled by the Church. The work of Galen was translated from Greek into Arabic and then into Latin. His ideas about medicine fitted well with Christian beliefs by abiding by a set of pre-determined natural laws. By and large, the Christian church during this period resisted any change. Dissection, for example, was forbidden until the 14th century, and even then it was strictly controlled.

The Islamic religious influence was more positive in the Middle Ages. Islam reached the peak of its civilisation in AD1000, with Baghdad as its capital. Based on the Qu’ran, the religion gave clear instructions on social responsibilities, such as the rich providing for the poor, and the healthy caring for the sick. On this principle, many hospitals were founded.

At the same time, medical scholars greatly admired the works of the Greek doctors Galen and Hippocrates. They applied the Greek methods of observation to their treatments of disease. Rhazes was the first doctor to identify smallpox and measles in 900AD. Alchemists found new ways of purifying chemicals in their attempts to create gold. In Islamic cultures at least, religion furthered some aspects of the treatment of disease.

Think about this:

- How the early Christian church, despite its charity, hindered an understanding of disease and its treatment
- How the instructions of the Qu'ran encouraged charity and subsequent development of public health care
- Why both Islamic and Christian religions embraced the work of Galen.