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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: (July 12, 2004)

New Scholarship Considers Religion's Central Role in Byzantine Healing

CAMBRIDGE, MASS.—While modern health professionals have only recently begun to question the notion that the mind, body and spirit can be treated separately, many holistic approaches to healing have their roots in fundamental ancient practices of Byzantium, according to a set of new research presented recently at Harvard University.

The Healing Initiative, affiliated with both Hellenic College and the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard, sponsored a conference recently on the subject of Byzantine healing practices as related to modern understandings of holistic health. The two-day conference brought together leading scholars and health professionals from throughout the U.S. for the first of three research seminars on integrative healing practices. The subject of this year's conference was historical foundations. The second conference, which will be held next spring, will focus on theological issues in healing, and the third conference the following year will address modern applications.

The Healing Initiative has secured funding for next year's conference through grants from the Center for the Study of World Religions at Harvard, the Lilly Endowment, the Metanexus Institute, and Hellenic College—all of whom sponsored the first of the conferences this spring.

This year's conference, *Holistic Healing in Byzantium: Epistemologies and Methodologies*, examined the history of Byzantine integrative healing approaches. The conference was held jointly at Harvard and at Hellenic College and Holy Cross School of Theology in Brookline, Mass. The presenters considered interdisciplinary questions such as: How did Byzantines understand the difference between scientific and religious

healing? And can holistic models of healing, such as those practiced in Byzantium, be reconciled with the specialized approaches of today's healing disciplines?

Professor of History at Salisbury University, Timothy Miller, Ph.D., author of *The Birth of the Hospital in the Byzantine Empire*, presented evidence for the relatively advanced scientific nature of Byzantine hospitals compared to their medieval Western counterparts. Whereas many hospitals in Latin Christendom were primarily institutions for caring, not curing, emphasizing confession of sin as well as weekly rites of aspersion with holy water, Byzantine hospitals had a decidedly more medical character—and as a result became training centers for physicians.

In fact, care for the sick was an innovative and central component of Byzantine monastic culture, according to research by Andrew Crislip, Ph.D., a professor of religion at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. Crislip suggests that monastic leaders wrestled less with the implications of sickness within their own bodies than with the treatment of the sick within society. The resulting concern and social inclusion for the sick and disabled within the community is well documented in writings from the fourth and fifth centuries.

However, as in modern times, the range of healing options pursued by individuals in Byzantium depended to some extent on one's abode and social class, according to research by Alice Mary Talbot, Ph.D. who is Director of Byzantine Studies at Dumbarton Oaks. Healing options varied from medical institutions to magic, traditional herbal medicine, and faith healing. Talbot's paper "Faith Healing in Byzantium" explored the religious aspects of Byzantine healing. She found that, "Accounts of healing miracles often stress the element of personal faith, that is, a pilgrim would be healed only if he or she believed fervently in the power of the relics or living holy man." Additional miracle accounts underscore the importance of shrines housing relics or holy icons of a saint, a healing spring, or a living holy person with healing powers.

Other presenters focused specifically on the holistic approach embodied in Orthodox Christian perspective. Maria Evangelatou, Ph.D. in her presentation, "Virtuous soul, healthy body: The holistic concept of health in Byzantine representations of Christ's healing miracles," examined the use of textual and visual artifacts were used to reinforce the holistic notion that sickness and infirmity were connected to faith and morality.

Evangelatou explained that holistic healing “acknowledges that human beings are made of both matter and spirit and accepts these two spheres.”

John Chirban, Ph.D., Th.D., a senior fellow at Harvard’s Center for the Study of World Religions and conference coordinator, addressed the integrative nature of Orthodox Christian holistic approaches. Chirban’s analysis contends that rather than viewing the world as divided between the scientific and the spiritual, Byzantine healers emphasized a broad range of human characteristics. Instead of focusing on one aspect of mind, body, or spirit, Orthodox Christian health practitioners attempted to address the whole self—the rational self, the emotional self, the self that experiences the world, the True Self at the core of one’s nature, and the self that is connected to others and God.

In conjunction with this research, Chirban and the Institute of Medicine, Psychology, and Religion have conducted a pilot study in the form of surveys of contemporary Orthodox clergy and health professionals in order to understand the diversity of professional perspectives on holistic healing and faith in modern times. He presented initial findings from this study at the closing of the conference. Work is under way to put the survey online and expand it nationwide.

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Other presenters at this year’s conference included Peter Bistolarides, M.D., surgeon; Rev. Nicholas Graff, director, St. Photios Shrine; Rev. Markos Nickolas, pastoral psychologist; Jeff Redigger, M.D., director of the Plymouth Clinic, McLean Hospital, Harvard Medical School; Susan Sered, Ph.D., director, The Healing Initiative, The Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University; and Rev. Nicholas Triantafilou, president, Hellenic College & Holy Cross School of Theology.

Papers from this year’s conference are being processed for publication. Audio and visuals from the conference are available on the Institute of Medicine, Psychology, and Religion website, [www.impr.com](http://www.impr.com).

To participate in the Healing Initiative's national study of health professionals and clergy or receive more information regarding the conference, please write to:

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