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The Ministry and Medicine

Imber, J.B. *Trusting Doctors: The Decline of Moral Authority in American Medicine*. Oxford: Princeton University press. ISBN: 9780697735748 Pp. XIX + 275. £21.95.

Jonathan Imber's *Trusting Doctors* is a book replete with erudition, particularly concerning the relationship between protestant and catholic clergy and the development of the medical profession in 19th century America. However a good deal of learning does not a great book make and there are a number of flaws which mitigate against this monograph successfully fulfilling its aims. Imber seeks to attend "to the making of the physician in a characterological sense – which involves tensions about the enduring basis of trust between patients and health care professionals in the context of a changing backdrop of increasingly institutional systems for providing that care." [1] This is a broad aim and coupled with the time span under consideration, roughly from a few decades prior to the inauguration of the American Medical Association (1847) until a couple of decades post the birth of bioethics (i.e. about 1990), one can see that this book is ambitious in its scope.

Divided into two parts the first section concerns 'The Religious Foundations of Trust in Medicine' whilst the second is entitled 'Beyond the Golden Age of Medicine'. These two sections do not interrelate a great deal. The division between the two is, we are to understand, to be some time in the 1950s. Perhaps given the chronological approach to the description and analysis the lack of interrelation is to be expected. Yet it seems that Imber's argument is that the moral authority of the medical profession has been declining over this entire period, and it has, particularly in terms of 'trust', accelerated recently. There is no explicit conclusion which would act to draw the two sections of the book together and indicate the continuity of

historical patterns the author is trying to bring to our attention. Consequentially rather than being one with a beginning, middle and end or even one with a reasonably continual socio-historical narrative this is a book which, first describes 'the golden age' and then the 'current state of affairs'. As such this is a book of two halves.

In the first part of the book Imber produces an excellent examination of the disruption science presented to the affinity that existed between the medical profession and the clergy. Here there are two chapters; one each on protestant and catholic influences on the early formation of the profession. His knowledge of this time is detailed and the appendices provide details for other scholars at work in the field. The next two chapters take up the advent of science, particularly that of public health which made use of the newly discovered statistical methods. The 19th century discussion of the disputed border between science and religion presented here demonstrates that the current debate in this area is not new, particularly in the polemicist inclinations on the part of scientist-philosophers. All four chapters in this first section are accomplished and well researched.

In his acknowledgements, which are printed at the end of the book, Imber suggests that "the calling of the ministry embodied in American Protestantism is by every cultural and historical measure the archetype for understanding the enduring meaning of the idea of vocation in all professions over the past two hundred years." [2] This is true of the 19th century roots of the medical profession and of the 19th century medical professional. However, Imber's tracing of the profession's developments in the first part of this book demonstrate movement away from this archetype. By the time he reaches the second half of the book this archetype is no longer sufficient to understand the realities of the medical profession. Multiple shifts have occurred and the relationship between the clergy, medicine and 'science' (knowledge about the world

and the conditions required to speak about it authoritatively) has fundamentally changed.

Whilst Imber is involved in tracing these changes some wider but highly relevant changes are largely ignored. In particular one might think of the integration of medical education into the university and the changes in the mode of a university education in general. If attention had been paid in this direction then the declining influence of religion over the other subjects taught at universities would have produced additional insight.[3] The integration of medicine into universities heralded a move away from the apprentice model of medical education towards acquiring knowledge of the basic medical science. Furthermore the nature of the apprenticeship changed with the creation of teaching hospitals associated with universities. The fracturing of the affinity between medical professionals and clergy at this time would seem to not be specific to medicine but indicative of a more general phenomenon within universities and perhaps within society.

Recent authors on trust and medicine have produced rather different books to Imber. Both Tallis[4] and O'Neill[5] have considered the issue from other perspectives and have come to rather different views. In part this is because of the differing approach that they have taken; they are philosophical rather than sociological. However it is also because their understanding of the profession and the professional is not overly wedded to that embodied by the ideals of the Anglican Ministry, which Imber's sociological view is. Whilst Imber's view is intensely appropriate when talking about the formation of the profession in the 19th century it is intensely inappropriate for discussing the profession in its present day (American) contexts i.e. post bioethics, post-professionalism, post specialisation, post managed healthcare and, potentially at least, in the context of deprofessionalization. The first half of this book concerning the historical origins of the American medical profession is excellent, unfortunately the second half fails to live up to its beginnings. Since Imber's

scholarship in the first half is first rate it is, I think, his view of what an ideal professional should be which undermines the second.

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1. Imber, J.B. *Trusting Doctors: The Decline of Moral Authority in American Medicine*. Princeton University Press, 2008. p.XVIII
2. Imber, J.B. *Trusting Doctors: The Decline of Moral Authority in American Medicine*. Princeton University Press, 2008. p.197.
3. See: Roberts, Jon H., and James Turner. *The Sacred and the Secular University*. Princeton University Press, 2000.
4. Tallis, R. *Hippocratic Oaths: Medicine and Its Discontents*. New Ed. Atlantic Books, 2005.
5. O'Neill, O. *Autonomy and Trust in Bioethics*. Cambridge University Press, 2002.