

The Myth of a Catholic Religious Objection to Autopsy

The Misinterpretation of De sepulturis during the Renaissance

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Abstract. Was there resistance in the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages to human dissection? Was autopsy thought to be a desecration of the body? The belief that the Church is opposed to dissection was due in part to the misinterpretation of a papal bull issued during the fourteenth century. Dissection of a corpse and autopsy were never in fact decreed by the Church. Rejection of these was based not on Church teaching but on a perceived violation of social honor because of the unappealing public nature of the practices. To this day, the Catholic Church does not view dissection and autopsy as desecration of the body; the practices remain theologically compatible with Catholic doctrine. *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 12.1 (Spring 2012): 37–42.

Was there resistance in the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages to human dissection? Was autopsy thought to be a desecration of the body? The belief that the Church was opposed to dissection was due in part to the misinterpretation of a papal bull during the fourteenth century, a misinterpretation that, according to Katharine Park, has been “apparently impossible to kill.”¹ A prohibition of dissection and autopsy of a corpse was never in fact decreed by the Church. Any rejection of these was based not on Church teaching but on a perceived violation of social honor

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¹Katharine Park, “The Criminal and the Saintly Body: Autopsy and Dissection in Renaissance Italy,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 47.1 (1994): 4.

because of the unappealing public nature of the practice. To this day, the Catholic Church does not view dissection and autopsy as desecration of the body; the practice remains theologically compatible with Catholic doctrine.²

Many scholars have examined the Catholic view of dissection. Mary Alston, in her 1944 article titled “The Attitude of the Church towards Dissection before 1500,” notes that any direct evidence illuminating Catholic opposition to autopsy and dissection is “not easy to obtain.”³ Thus, development of Catholic attitudes toward the opening of dead bodies can be seen best by indirect evidence. Park writes that in Renaissance Italy, “there is no sign of a general (or even common) prohibition concerning the opened corpse per se.”⁴ Alston supports this conclusion and observes that “little is said in the canon about dead bodies and their treatment.”⁵ Many scholars argue that the Church has never held an opposing view. Alston concludes that there is no direct evidence of opposition to anatomy in fourteenth century Italy, noting that it is “hard, therefore, to find proof in the evidence from Italy . . . for the statement that the church opposed dissection.”⁶

In some ancient cultures, such as Egyptian and Greek, outward disfigurement of the body prevented the dead from entering into the afterlife.⁷ It seems plausible that such ancient views of the body were still present in the early Church. Early church fathers, including fifth-century North African bishop Augustine, did comment briefly about human dissection. In his *De cura pro mortuis*, Saint Augustine wrote that, “as for the burying of the body, whatever is bestowed on that, is no aid of salvation, but an office of humanity according to that affection by which ‘no man hateth his own flesh.’”⁸ If special care lavished on the body after death was no aid to salvation, then it would seem to follow that no disfigurement of the same would harm salvation. Lester King and Marjorie Meehan write in a 1973 article “A History of Autopsy” that although there was a general disapproval of the practice in the early Christianity, there was no formal opposition.⁹

Around the eleventh century, there was still no official Church doctrine regarding the dissection of humans. However, a declaration titled *Ecclesia abhorret a sanguine* (“The Church abhors blood”) Council of Tours in 1163 was likely to have

² Indeed, the practice of preserving the relics of the saints, in which the remains are distributed among churches for veneration by the people, should have alerted those who raised doubts about the matter of dissection that their concerns were likely unjustified.

³ Mary Niven Alston, “The Attitude of the Church towards Dissection before 1500,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 16.3 (1944): 222.

⁴ Park, “Criminal and the Saintly Body,” 10.

⁵ Alston, “Attitude of the Church towards Dissection,” 223.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁷ Elizabeth D. Schafer, “Ancient Science and Forensics,” in *Forensic Science*, ed. Ayn Embar-Seddon and Allan D. Pass (Salem Press, 2008), 43.

⁸ Alston, “Attitude of the Church towards Dissection,” 222.

⁹ Lester S. King and Marjorie C. Meehan, “A History of the Autopsy,” *American Journal of Pathology* 73.2 (1973): 521.

spread confusion over this issue.¹⁰ The declaration was misinterpreted by clergy, many of whom were also physicians and surgeons, to mean that they could not perform surgery on the living or the dead. *Ecclesia abhorret a sanguine* did allow for non-clergy physicians to perform autopsies, but misinterpretation would have prevented the clergy from doing the same.¹¹

Pope Boniface VIII's 1300 papal bull, titled *De sepulturis*, may have also given rise to confusion over the Church's position on dissection. This document forbade the boiling of bodies, which was a common way to transport distinguished individuals' remains back to Europe from the Crusades.¹² The bull was not specifically aimed at anatomists themselves but at the common procedure used by anatomists to remove the skin from bone.¹³ These Northern Italian funerary customs were described by the Pope as "cruel, inhuman and barbaric" and resulted in automatic excommunication.¹⁴ Park, in her 1995 article titled "The Life of the Corpse: Division and Dissection in Late Medieval Europe," notes that no theological basis or concrete rationale was given by the Pope for his reaction.¹⁵ Anatomist Mondino de Luzzi expressed his reluctance to remove skin, "owing to the sin involved therein."¹⁶ Anatomist Guido da Viegvano wrote, the "Church prohibits dissection."¹⁷ These errors were most likely the result of their misinterpretation of *De sepulturis*.

Later historians have identified why such a misunderstanding might have occurred. Thomas Merrigan, in his 1907 *Catholic Encyclopedia* article on anatomy, argued that the title of the bull was misread by anatomists, as well as was the following line: "Persons cutting up the bodies of the dead, barbarously cooking them in order that the bones being separated from the flesh may be carried for burial into their own countries are by the very fact excommunicated."¹⁸ Some assumed from the first part of this sentence that they could not continue with the practice of autopsies without incurring religious penalty. However, Mary Alston argues that *De sepulturis* was merely aimed at a specific practice—namely the boiling of bodies. This seems a logical conclusion, given that the bull as a whole never directly prohibited the dissection of the body or the dissection process itself.¹⁹

Boniface's bull, or more accurately, the misinterpretation of that bull, did not change the legal, medical, or clerical attitude toward dissection. King and Meehan

¹⁰ Katharine Park, "Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion," in *Galileo Goes to Jail and Other Myths about Science and Religion*, ed. Ronald Numbers (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

¹¹ King and Meehan, "History of the Autopsy," 521.

¹² Charles Joseph Singer, *The Evolution of Anatomy* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1925), 85.

¹³ King and Meehan, "History of the Autopsy," 521.

¹⁴ Alston, "Attitude of the Church towards Dissection," 224.

¹⁵ Katharine Park, "The Life of the Corpse: Division and Dissection in Late Medieval Europe," *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 50.1 (January 1995): 113.

¹⁶ Singer, *Evolution of Anatomy*, 85.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86; and Alston, "Attitude of the Church towards Dissection," 225.

¹⁸ *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1907), s.v. "anatomy" (by Thomas Merrigan).

¹⁹ Park, "Criminal and the Sainly Body," 10.

write that it was around this time that a few physicians began to participate in dissections.²⁰ Park and Merrigan claim that within ten years, any interpretation of *De sepulturis* as opposing dissection was considered irrelevant by Italian medical professionals and judges, and there is evidence that even some within the Church, including Pope Alexander and Saint Ignatius of Loyola, were autopsied after their deaths.²¹ Alston surmises: “If the opening of the human body was really forbidden by the Church, it could not have been done, surely, to the body of the pope.”²² The significance of Pope Alexander’s embalment and autopsy is evidence of how, if there had been any opposition to autopsy, the official position of the church seemed to have been one of acceptance by this time.

Heinrich Haeser, in *History of Medicine*, argues that it is wrong to assume that Boniface’s bull prohibited dissection since the practice continued on at Italian universities with no hindrance from ecclesiastical authorities.²³ For example, de Luzzi began to perform public dissections at Bologna, forming the basis for his influential textbook *Anathomia*, and the clerical leaders at Bologna expressed no opposition to the public dissections for local medical students and physicians.²⁴ Less ecclesiastical control at universities and broadening papal acceptance led to declining public opposition to human dissection. When the University of Padua was incorporated in 1405, the new institution was permitted by secular authorities to perform human dissections.²⁵ Padua was under less ecclesiastical control than Bologna, and skeletons could be adequately studied there without interference from either clerical or secular authorities.²⁶ Explicit papal approval of human dissections at Padua and Bologna was given later by Pope Sixtus IV.²⁷ Pope Clement VII maintained this position.²⁸

Additional evidence showing the lack of papal objection to human dissection is evident in the writings of Guy de Chauliac, a surgeon to three popes at Avignon. While working in the papal household, he wrote of the necessity of human dissection as a means for progress within surgery. There appears to be no papal regulation forbidding the practice at this time.²⁹ Chauliac’s writings could have been censored or rebutted by the Popes, but they were not. Meehan and King indicate that although autopsy was not actively encouraged by the Catholic Church at that time, autopsy was fully accepted by the Church.³⁰ There are even accounts from 1491 showing

²⁰ King and Meehan, “History of the Autopsy,” 521.

²¹ Park, “Criminal and the Saintly Body,” 11; and King and Meehan, “History of the Autopsy,” 521.

²² Alston, “Attitude of the Church towards Dissection,” 228.

²³ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “anatomy.”

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Singer, *Evolution of Anatomy*, 121.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ King and Meehan, “History of the Autopsy,” 521.

²⁸ Singer, *Evolution of Anatomy*, 121.

²⁹ *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “anatomy.”

³⁰ King and Meehan, “History of the Autopsy,” 521.

that a dissected corpse was given a full funeral mass.³¹ If Boniface's bull did in fact reject dissection, then surely Catholic tradition would not have allowed a funeral Mass for a dissected corpse.

Italy's first recorded autopsy was in 1240, whereas France and Germany had their initial autopsies most likely by 1500.³² In Italy, from at least the early twelfth century, the opening of the body had been a common funerary practice for embalming.³³ At the middle of the thirteenth century, there were cases in which nobility had autopsies conducted at inquest to investigate suspicious deaths; for example, autopsy was used to detect poisoning.³⁴ By the fourteenth century, the opening of the body was frequently requested by families for the purposes of autopsy and commonly used to embalm early saints, including Saint Clare of Montefalco.³⁵ Anatomical research in the form of human dissection appeared later and usually involved the complete disaggregation of the body; autopsies, in contrast, were focused examinations.³⁶ The more influential law faculties were interested in answering legal questions through autopsies. Later, the medical faculties followed suit when they realized its advantage for anatomical research.³⁷

Over the course of the fourteenth century, autopsy and dissection were becoming increasingly common. This could be because of the participation of public dissections by universities.³⁸ Medical students were required to attend one or more of these public dissections during their course of study. The University of Bologna was the main forum for public dissection from the thirteenth until the sixteenth century.³⁹ The papal affirmation of Popes Sixtus VI and Clement VII allowed for the opening of bodies with the approval of the ecclesiastical head of the universities.⁴⁰ With the increased audience in formal university dissections, the process was becoming truly public in nature.⁴¹

Throughout Europe, there were varying beliefs and practices regarding the human corpse. According to Park, the Northern Europeans saw the corpse as "a magical and semi-animate subject, still strongly identified with the self."⁴² The Italians recognized that at the instant of death the body "became insensitive and inanimate—a not-self."⁴³ This difference in attitudes between northern Europeans

³¹ Alston, "Attitude of the Church towards Dissection," 231.

³² *Ibid.*, 232.

³³ Park, "Criminal and the Sainly Body," 4.

³⁴ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "anatomy"; and Park, "Criminal and the Sainly Body," 5.

³⁵ Park, "Criminal and the Sainly Body," 4.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8; and *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "anatomy."

³⁹ Singer, *Evolution of Anatomy*, 87.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴¹ Park, "Criminal and the Sainly Body," 15.

⁴² Park, "Life of the Corpse," 126.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 119.

and Italians illustrates how attitudes toward the body changed according to geographic area.

There was often a more socially-constructed local attitude against autopsy. Park and other scholars suggest that objections were an expression of public concern about the possible violation of personal and familial honor during funerals.⁴⁴ The increasingly public nature of dissections at universities encouraged a sense of social dishonor.⁴⁵ And with the increasing attention to anatomy in the middle of the sixteenth century, anatomists were eager to dissect bodies as soon as possible after death; they wanted to find out how the body worked. These rapid dissection procedures were seen by the general populace as dangerous and unreasonably hasty, leading to an increasing fear of live dissections.⁴⁶

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives us the modern view: “The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity. . . . Autopsies can be morally permitted for legal inquests or scientific research.”⁴⁷ The Church continues to support autopsies for legal reasons, as they can provide a family with closure and enable law enforcement to rule out any foul-play in suspicious deaths. In addition, autopsies allow for the advancement of medical science, for example, when the pathology of disease is linked to specific microorganisms.

The Catholic Church has never prohibited dissection of the human body. The misinterpretation of *De sepulturis* and the fear of possible religious penalties against the anatomist may have led to the creation of this mythical Catholic ban. In addition, further social objections to the practice arose from the public nature of human dissection at universities during the sixteenth century. Despite these misinterpretations of Catholic teaching, the Church has been supportive of autopsy and dissection for specific well-defined purposes throughout its history.

⁴⁴ Park, “Criminal and the Saintly Body; and Park, “Life of the Corpse,” 126.

⁴⁵ Park, “Criminal and the Saintly Body,” 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., trans. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), nn. 2300–2301.