

Blood in History and Religion

Classical Greek medicine

In classical Greek medicine, blood was associated with air, springtime, and with a merry and gluttonous (*sanguine*) personality. It was also believed to be produced exclusively by the liver.

Hippocratic medicine

In Hippocratic medicine, *blood* was considered to be one of the four humors, together with *phlegm*, *yellow bile* and *black bile*.

Bloodletting

Bloodletting and leeching were common unvalidated interventions used until the 19th century, as many diseases were incorrectly thought to be due to an excess of blood, according to Hippocratic medicine. In modern evidence-based medicine bloodletting is used in management of a few rare diseases, including hemochromatosis and polycythemia.

Myths, beliefs and religion

Due to its importance to life, blood is associated with a large number of beliefs. One of the most basic is the use of blood as a symbol for family relationships; to be ‘related by blood’ is to be related by ancestry or descendance, rather than marriage. This bears closely to bloodlines, and sayings such as ‘blood is thicker than water’ and ‘bad blood’, as well as ‘Blood brother’. Blood is given particular emphasis in the Jewish and Christian religions because Leviticus 17:11 says “the life of a creature is in the blood.” This phrase is part of the Levitical law forbidding the drinking of blood, due to its practice in idol worship by surrounding societies.

Mythic references to blood can sometimes be connected to the life-giving nature of blood, seen in such events as childbirth, as contrasted with the blood of injury or death.

In almost all religions, blood holds a very central place in their beliefs. Blood is supposed to have a purifying effect. In ancient times human and animal blood was used in worship and to ensure a bountiful harvest. Even to this day many religious rites across cultures use animal blood.

Indigenous Australians

In many indigenous Australian aboriginal peoples' traditions, ochre (particularly red) and blood, both high in iron content and considered Maban, are applied to the bodies of dancers for ritual. In secret, sacred male ceremonies, blood extracted from the veins of the participant's arms is exchanged and rubbed on their bodies. Red ochre is used in similar ways in less secret ceremonies. Blood is also used to fasten the feathers of birds onto people's bodies. Bird feathers contain a protein that is highly magnetically sensitive.

Blood employed in this fashion is held by these peoples to attune the dancers to the invisible energetic realm of the Dreamtime, because these invisible energetic realms and magnetic fields, because iron is magnetic.

Indo-European paganism

Among the Germanic tribes (such as the Anglo-Saxons and the Norsemen), blood was used during their sacrifices; the *Blóts*. The blood was considered to have the power of its originator and after the butchering the blood was sprinkled on the walls, on the statues of the gods and on the participants themselves. This act of sprinkling blood was called *bleodsian* in Old English and the terminology was borrowed by the Roman Catholic Church becoming *to bless* and *blessing*.

The Hittite word for blood, *ishar* was a cognate to words for ‘oath’ and ‘bond’. The Ancient Greeks believed that the blood of the Gods, *ichor*, was a mineral that was poisonous to mortals.

Judaism

In Judaism, blood cannot be consumed even in the smallest quantity (Leviticus 3:17 and elsewhere); this is reflected in Jewish dietary laws (Kashrut). Blood is purged from meat by salting and soaking in water.

Other rituals involving blood are the covering of the blood of fowl and game after slaughtering (Leviticus 17:13); the reason given by the Torah is: “Because the life of every animal is [in] his blood” (ibid 17:14).

Christianity

Some Christian churches, including Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism teach that, when consecrated, the Eucharistic wine actually *becomes* the blood of Jesus(symbolism). Thus in the consecrated wine, Jesus becomes spiritually and physically present. This teaching is rooted in the Last Supper as written in the four gospels of the Bible, in which Jesus stated to his disciples that the bread which they ate was his body, and the wine was his blood. “*This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.*” (Luke 22:20).

Various forms of Protestantism, especially those of a Wesleyan or Presbyterian lineage, teach that the wine is no more than a symbol of the blood of Christ, who is spiritually but not physically present. Lutheran theology teaches that the body and blood is present together “in, with, and under” the bread and wine of the Eucharistic feast.

Christ’s blood is also seen as the means for atonement for sins for Christians.

At the Council of Jerusalem, the apostles prohibited Christians from consuming blood, probably because this was a command given to Noah (Genesis 9:4). This command continued to be observed by the Eastern Orthodox.

Islam

Consumption of food containing blood is forbidden by Islamic dietary laws. This is derived from the statement in the Qur'an, sura Al-Ma'ida (5:3): "Forbidden to you (for food) are: dead meat, blood, the flesh of swine, and that on which hath been invoked the name of other than Allah."

Jehovah's Witnesses

Due to Bible-based beliefs, Jehovah's Witnesses do not eat blood or accept transfusions of whole blood or its four major components namely, red blood cells, white blood cells, platelets (thrombocytes), and whole plasma. Members are instructed to personally decide whether or not to accept fractions, and medical procedures that involve their own blood.

Chinese and Japanese culture

In Chinese culture, it is often said that if a man's nose produces a small flow of blood, this signifies that he is experiencing sexual desire. This often appears in Chinese-language and Hong Kong films as well as in Japanese culture parodied in anime and manga. Characters, mostly males, will often be shown with a nosebleed if they have just seen someone nude or in little clothing, or if they have had an erotic thought or fantasy.

Blood libel

Various religious and other groups have been falsely accused of using human blood in rituals; such accusations are known as blood libel. The most common form of this is blood libel against Jews. Although

there is no ritual involving human blood in Jewish law or custom, fabrications of this nature (often involving the murder of children) were widely used during the Middle Ages to justify Anti-semitic persecution and some have persisted into the 21st century.