

**MIGUEL PERDOMO NEIRA:
HEALING, CULTURE, AND POWER
IN THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ANDES**

David Sowell
Department of History
Juniata College
Huntingdon, USA

In late April, 1872, the *curandero* (healer) Miguel Perdomo Neira arrived in Bogotá amid widespread rumors that he had come to heal the terminally ill, or lead Conservatives in rebellion. The lay healer had traveled from town to town for the previous six years, performing operations and cures that some viewed as miraculous. Professional physicians on the faculty of the Universidad Nacional received him with so much hostility as to spark a minor riot. In this event, broad segments of the people fought medical students and parts of the official political community. At first, the social conflict evident in this event seemed to locate the unrest within the norms of a turbulent period of Colombian history. Such an interpretation led to questions about which groups were active? What did the crowd seek in their defense of Perdomo? What inspired medical students to take to the streets? In short, how did this incident relate to the sociopolitical history of the period? This analysis proved inadequate and further inquiry led away from sociopolitics to the history of medicine and medical ideologies, issues that seemed more central to the episode. Fundamentally, what was going on that led a significant portion of the *pueblo* and leading members of the medical community to clash? What was being contested? What values and ideologies are visible in this event? This incident illuminating the conflict between "traditional" and "modern" attitudes toward medicine and, in a larger context, the transformation of traditional Hispanic intellectual and social norms evident in the region's medical systems.

Miguel Perdomo Neira

Most of the life of Miguel Perdomo Neira lies beyond the reach of the historian's inquiries. Born in 1833 in the small town of La Plata, Colombia, Perdomo died in 1874 in Guayaquil, Ecuador.¹ Perdomo apparently labored as an empiric — a bleeder and dentist — medical occupations practiced by lay physicians. Perdomo claimed to have served in the civil war of 1859-62 under the command of Conservative warlord Colonel Julio Arboleda. This conflict pitted Conservative defenders of the church, regional autonomy, and a traditional social order against Liberal proponents of economic change, the liberalization of society, and secularism. Perdomo's medical skills reportedly came to Arboleda's attention, whereupon he was assigned to the army's field hospital. The brutal fighting offered Perdomo abundant opportunities to expand his medical experience, especially his surgical skills.²

It appears that the civil war served as a turning point in Perdomo's life. Apparently traumatized by his wartime experience, Perdomo sought refuge with an indigenous tribe in Caquetá after 1862. He stayed with the people some time, marrying a member of the tribe and learning many of their medical secrets. In particular, Perdomo acquired the knowledge of various medicinal herbs that reportedly allowed him to perform challenging operations without blood or pain and to quickly reduce inflammation. He also learned of a purgative that he called "El Toro" and a powerful emetic, "La Chispa." Accounts mention his collection of stimulants and depressants that some alleged to be "more powerful than those now in use," Indian pharmaceuticals not available in Hispanic pharmacies.³

In time, the *curandero* left Caquetá to travel from village to village, practicing his medicine on the inhabitants of an area in exchange for shelter and sustenance from the city council, local parish, or similar agency. In 1872 Perdomo claimed to have practiced in over 120 villages. The territory he allegedly covered is vast: Pinchincha and Guayas provinces, Ecuador, and throughout the Cauca, Antioquia, Tolima, Cundinamarca, and Santander regions of Colombia.⁴

¹ Madero Moreira, Mauro, *Historia de la medicina en la provincia del Guayas* (Guayaquil: Imprenta de la Casa de la Cultura, 1955), 237; *El Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 11, 1872; *La Ilustración*, February 19, 1875.

² *El Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 13, 1872.

³ *El Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 13, 1872, April 26, 1873; *El Tradicionista*, May 7, 1872.

⁴ *La Ilustración*, June 4, 1872; *Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 13, 21, 1872.

As Perdomo approached Bogotá in April 1872, news of his impending arrival sent waves of anticipation through the Colombian capital.⁵ For some, Perdomo represented the opportunity to be cured of their ailments. For many members of the Liberal party, which had dominated the national government since its victory over the Conservatives in the bitter civil war, the Conservative *curandero* inspired fears of insurrection against their rule. Perdomo's initial "office" soon attracted so many people that he had to move to a new location.⁶ Professionally trained doctors, alarmed at Perdomo's popularity, promptly expressed their skepticism of his abilities in a publicly circulated leaflet. The leaflet invited Perdomo to demonstrate his skills under controlled conditions so "that we, already old in the art of curing," could assess the "scientific usefulness" of his methods.⁷ A leading Liberal daily echoed the physicians' challenge by charging that Perdomo had only superficial knowledge and that he was "denigrating science and exciting [the people] against those who practice it."⁸

The publicist Manuel María Madieto also directed his editorial skills to an analysis of Perdomo. Public opinion, Madieto observed, was sharply divided. For some, Perdomo was a wise man, a wizard, a man of providence, or perhaps a demi-god. Others ridiculed these sentiments, claiming that he was nothing more than a demonic, audacious charlatan. Still others guarded their opinions, waiting for more information. Madieto agreed with the latter opinion, lamenting that Bogotá had become divided between the "applause of the masses and the ire of the professional doctors." Although much remained to be determined, Madieto was confident that Perdomo possessed important anesthetic and homeostatic knowledge that merited further inquiry. Perdomo's abilities, because they had been demonstrated in open, "like the barbers of Athens," could not be doubted.

If Mr. Perdomo really possesses a secret, even half a secret; but enough to revolutionize medical therapy, who are we to offend him, to anger him, to irritate him? . . . Our professors should approach this man, this poor man of the people, in whom the people believe and love.⁹

⁵*La Ilustración*, May 4, 1872; *El Bien Público*, May 22, 1872.

⁶*La Ilustración*, May 4, 7, 1872.

⁷*El Tradicionista*, May 14, 1872; *Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 8, 13, 1872.

⁸*Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 13, 1872.

⁹*La Ilustración*, May 8, 1872.

three physicians on the staff of the Hospital of Charity soon challenged Perdomo to demonstrate his surgical skills. They invited him to visit the hospital, or allow them to come to his office, so that they could form an opinion of “his ability in so difficult a science.”

We don't want to place Mr. Perdomo in the obligation of having to undergo an examination, because we know beforehand that he is ignorant of the structure of the human body, that he knows nothing of the three realms of nature, and that the medical progresses of the day are for him a problem lost in the darkness of ignorance. We only ask, then, practical proofs from him, but in the light, without circumlocution or mystification.¹⁰

Around this time, Tomás Sabogal, a middle aged man with a giant tumor on his side, sought out Perdomo's medical assistance. Perdomo removed the tumor in what some described as a difficult procedure. Observers of the operation were so impressed by the size of the tumor (Perdomo wrote that it weighed 14 pounds!) that they paraded it through the streets of the capital. Sabogal allegedly survived the procedure without complications and slept that evening in Perdomo's shop. The next morning he was found dead, with a knife wound in his side.¹¹

Who killed him? Perdomo's supporters insisted that a youthful accomplice of the doctors had murdered the poor soul to tarnish Perdomo's public success. Others alleged that the *curandero* himself had done the deed to hide his failure, a belief supported by an autopsy that determined that the wound had been made in an already deceased body. Perdomo's followers understandably rejected this finding by the professional physicians. Whatever the truth of the matter, Perdomistas took to the streets. Crowds surrounded and stoned the houses of several physicians, forcing at least one to flee the city. Medical students met the crowds, harassing them with cries of “*Abajo los perdomistas, los fanaticos . . .*” Governmental officials became so alarmed that they put the army on alert and called upon the state police to restore order. Those of the *pueblo* caught “disturbing” the peace were arrested. Perdomo himself helped to calm the crowd, only to leave what he called an “ungrateful city” several days later.¹²

Perdomo never returned to Bogotá. After a trip to the Santander region, he visited his native Tolima before making a final trip to Ecuador in early 1874.

¹⁰*El Tradicionista*, May 14, 1872.

¹¹*El Tradicionista*, May 14, 1872; *La Ilustración*, May 14, June 4, 1872.

¹²*El Tradicionista*, May 14, 18, 1872; *La Ilustración*, May 14, 16, June 1, 4, 1872; *Diario de Cundinamarca*, May 21, 1872.

Once again his surgical skills won him fame, but also legal problems. A woman died from an operation and Perdomo was jailed in Quito. Padre Luis Sodiro, a Professor of Botany at the Polytechnic School, apparently helped Perdomo gain his freedom in exchange for information about the plants he used in his practice.¹³ Perdomo left shortly thereafter for the port of Guayaquil, where he treated the scores of people who sought his assistance. On Christmas Eve, 1874, Perdomo succumbed to a rapid illness, perhaps yellow fever, leaving behind a reputation that lasted to the end of the century.

Healing and medicine are so central to human existence that we all have personal experiences that enable us to connect in some degree with the experiences of other historical actors. This connection allows for engagement and curiosity, keys that can draw us into the study of the past. The centrality of healing, while empowering as an entrée to the past, carries with it the danger of projecting the ideas, values, and structures of our own medical system(s) into the "reading" of previous lives, so that other medical systems are often interpreted simply in juxtaposition to the present, a reading that obscures their own cultural logics.

This account of Miguel Perdomo Neira is structured so as to offer insights into a critical period in the history of medicine in the nineteenth-century Andes. It draws upon the words of participants in the narrative and seeks to ascertain possible meanings to those accounts, especially in terms of the historical contexts that shaped the disputes that surrounded Perdomo. This era has many connections with our own. The scientific medical system in which most of us operate was just being institutionalized in this era, suppressing as it gained prominence the previously dominant Hispanic medical system. In this moment of encounter, differences are highlighted. The testimonials of people who sought the services of Perdomo speak both of the healing that he performed and of the social value of his mission. These were values and attributes less commonly associated with the scientific medical system. Moreover, the

¹³The Polytechnic School opened in October 1870, under Jesuit leadership, several months after Sodiro, Teodoro Wolf, and Juan Bautista Menten arrived from Europe. Sodiro, who had been born in Venice in 1836, became one of the Ecuador's leading botanists. After the school closed in 1876, Sodiro denounced his habits and remained in Ecuador until his death in 1909. César Bustos-Videla, *Church and State in Ecuador: A History of Politico-Ecclesiastical Relations during the Age of Gabriel García Moreno, 1860-1875* (Ph. D. dissertation, Georgetown University, 1966), 176-80, 182, 185. Sodiro's publications do not appear to mention either Alizá or Perdomo. *Contribuciones al conocimiento de la flora ecuatoriana* (Quito: Tipografía de la Escuela de Artes y Oficios, 1900) and *Una excursión botánica* (Quito: Imprenta Nacional, 1881).

testimonials often came from people whose voices are often absent from the historical record. These are rich sources of information about medical beliefs, even though their limitations require the researcher to speculate more than might otherwise be desired.

Certain aspects of “the case of Perdomo” are clear. After scores of years of relative stability, the Hispanic medical system was under transformative pressures that would in time create the medical pluralism of contemporary Latin America. In simple terms, this moment of transition juxtaposed a highly social, Catholic influenced set of beliefs that drew upon humoral principles with an emerging secular, scientific system that envisioned the body to be a knowable machine whose maladies could be corrected. These two sets of beliefs form the core of the “traditional/popular” and scientific medical systems today.

Healing was more than procedures however. It had been highly social, with knowledge diffused through large segments of the population. Knowledge became the privileged domain of the few professionals under scientific medicine. In the public mind, healing and spirituality had been intimately linked, so that Perdomo’s abilities in curing were inseparable from his Christian charity. Biomedicine separates the profane and spiritual domains. The ideological contentions that were part of this era of transformation were necessarily intense. Beliefs and social behavior are difficult to separate. Healing earlier had had an institutional facet, but the colonial authorities and structures paled in comparison to the legal and professional authorities that would be erected around scientific medicine. The transition also encompassed a profound shift of medical authority, which brought distinct “systems of truth” in conflict.

Truths in Conflict

There are nine monasteries for men, and three convents for women, the others have fallen into decay in consequence of the revolution, and the increase of knowledge and penetration of the natives, who are fast throwing off the yoke of bigotry and priest craft, and assuming the right of man to think and act for himself. A considerable number of these slugs are, however, still left to fatten on the plunder which they extract from the credulity of the populace, though it is to be hoped that the march of human intellect in the transatlantic world will not be long retarded by such drones, but that a short time will bring them total dispersion.¹⁴ Charles Stuart Cochrane, visitor to Colombia in the 1820s

¹⁴ Charles Stuart Cochrane, *Journal of a Residence and Travels in Colombia during the years 1823 and 1824*, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1825), II, 9.

Ideologies of healing are basic to cultural artifices. Such fundamental beliefs are generally cast as truth. Truth claims about medicine in the era of Perdomo were contentious, in part because they breached the divisive question of the proper role of the church in society or, put differently, the proper degree to which society should be secularized. Liberal anti-clerics attempted to eliminate all institutional authority of the church; many wished to reduce its social power as well. These advocates for change encountered strong resistance, in part because of the deeply Catholic nature of Andean society. The fusion of Catholicism and healing can be imagined in one early meaning of "salvation," which implied both medical healing and psychotherapy,¹⁵ a sensibility that is apparent in testimony about Perdomo.

Secularization produced social tensions in many regions of the world. June Macklin, in her discussion of the nineteenth century spiritualism in New England and Mexican spiritism, argues that these religious movements originated in the split between the increasing secularization of temporal life. The intellectual tendencies of deism, materialism, Marxism, anarchism, liberalism, and positivism imagined humans to be purely mechanical beings, a conception that clashed with traditional Catholic and Protestant beliefs.¹⁶ In Colombia, the split lay at the core of the differences between Perdomo and advocates of scientific medicine.

While supporters of Perdomo used the language of Christian charity to express their gratitude and their ideology of healing, many of his scientific opponents used the authority of science to level a rationalist critique against the curandero. Scientists and scientific physicians thought of themselves as "workers of progress" who labored to construct the "edifice of scientific emancipation."¹⁷ As Uribe Angel stated, "The discovery of the truth, then, is the objective of science, the noble and eternal aspiration of rational beings and the precise foundation upon which the civilized world works."¹⁸ After the heyday of liberal activism, the early 1870s were an era of widespread conflict between liberal and Catholic ideologies in Colombia. The civil war of 1876-77 had its origins in this ideological struggle. The 1880 election of independent Liberal Rafael Núñez to the presidency signaled the collapse of the Radical Olympus, which was definitively supplanted by the Conservative Regeneration

¹⁵ June Macklin, "Belief, Ritual, and Healing: New England Spiritualism and Mexican-American Spiritism Compared," in *Religious Movements in Contemporary America*, ed. by Irving I. Zacesty and Mark P. Leone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 383.

¹⁶ Macklin, "Belief, Ritual, and Healing," 383-87.

¹⁷ Obregón Torres, *Sociedades científicas*, 68; Abel, *Health Care in Colombia*, 13-14.

of 1886. Insofar as the church's ideology dominated the Conservative party, and quite likely characterized foundational tenets of popular culture, heated ideological contentions were common. These differences shaped the conflicts in the streets of Bogotá, as well as in halls of medical institutions in both Colombia and Ecuador.

By no means did proponents of scientific medicine share a common ideology. In the 1860s, for example, allopaths (the forerunners of biomedicine) and homeopaths expressed their differences in a series of heated public exchanges, a polemic that previewed the tensions surrounding Perdomo.¹⁹ Madiedo's 1863 homage to Hahnemann included bitter criticism of allopaths. Allopathic treatment — purges, emetics, and plasters — were, he alleged, dangerous, while those of homeopaths were much safer, in part because fewer and less powerful drugs were used.

The popularity of that allopathic medicine has enjoyed until now has been popularity born of monopoly. A system so repugnant, so painful, so dangerous, and so costly does not have the ability to be naturally popular.²⁰

Vargas Reyes countered that Madiedo spoke well of philosophy and the abstract sciences, but that he knew very little of science, an understanding that could only come from years of study.²¹ Vicente María Reyes, the son of the *Gaceta*'s editor, attacked homeopathy on several grounds. First, homeopathy was not a science, but “medical heresy.” Its treatment methodology was ineffective, because it was unscientific. Indeed, both Vicente and Antonio accused homeopaths of being charlatans. Homeopaths should not, they argued, be allowed to bring their medical practices into the Hospital of Charity.²² Indeed, homeopaths were blocked from the Hospital as biomedicists sought to make homeopathic medicine illegal.

¹⁸ Uribe Angel, *La medicina en Antioquia*, 82.

¹⁹ José Peregrino Sanmiguel contributed several pieces to this polemic. See his *Carta primera* (Bogotá: Imprenta a Cargo de F. Mantilla, 1866); *La medicina homeopática (Carta segunda)* (Bogotá: Imprenta de F. Mantilla, 1866); *Homeopatía* (Bogotá: Imprenta de Foción Mantilla, 1867); *Carta Cuarta* (Bogotá: Imprenta de Foción Mantilla, 1867); and *Polémica homeopática (Carta Quinta)* (Bogotá: Imprenta de Gaitán, 1869).

²⁰ Madiedo, *Un eco de Hahnemann*, 23.

²¹ *Gaceta Médica de Bogotá*, November 15, 1864.

²² *La Homeopatía*, 116, 232-33, 250, 253.

Madiedo replied in turn that both allopathy and homeopathy were scientific, but that they had different philosophies. "Allopathic materialism," he observed, "sees the body as a machine, in which the disease is identified as a problem with organs." It practitioners have "made all of man into a machine, denying that there is any more to it than can be found with the point of a scalpel." Homeopathy, by contrast, views changes in organs as a phenomena caused by disturbances in the vital force and seeks to changes those phenomena. "... in its effort to rehabilitate the lost harmony [of the vital force], Homeopathy does no more than obey the divine condition, stamped by God in his creations, as a universal revelation for the conservation of his works."²³ Homeopathy, as expressed by Madiedo and Sanmiguel, seems to have far less of the body-mind division of Cartesian rationalism than does biomedicine. It is perhaps not surprising that Madiedo and Sanmiguel were ardent defenders of Catholicism — and of Perdomo. By contrast, nowhere in the medical ideology expressed by medical professors of the School of Medicine does one find discussion of the unified body.

In a similar manner, Perdomo wrote that God created nature for the good of humans, who live within the laws of nature. Humans can discover the secrets of nature, as created by God, such as the plants to combat illness. This ability led Perdomo to insist that his "principles are those of true reason, my knowledge is that of the practical world, and my only book is that of nature." Some people, he wrote, "confuse the power of God with the jurisdiction of the earth; but if they know the latter, they will know God." Rationalism is for them the answer to natural science, but Perdomo believed "that God is the source of all reason." Mysterious then, Perdomo asserted, is the existence of the natural world; its organisms are sustained through the miracles of God.²⁴ Leandro M. Pulido, an ardent supporter of Perdomo, noted two facets of his healing, the visible (the cure), and the reaction to the divine. Both had to be considered.

If you only take into consideration the first, reason, poor impoverished reason, will go from door to door, like an impertinent beggar, asking of everyone the explanation of the facts; it will go tired, in its pride, when it ought to appeal to faith; in which man can only find the divine treasury of all solutions.²⁵

²³ Madiedo, *Un eco de Hahnemann*, 4, 24.

²⁴ Perdomo Neira, *La iglesia católica*, 5, 91, 97, 111.

²⁵ Leandro M. Pulido, "El Doctor Miguel Perdomo Neira," Nieva, August 10, 1869, in MPN, 148-49.

Such expressions were blasphemous to many scientists and liberals. Medardo Rivas, one of the era's most potent and prolific liberal authors, queried in 1883 whether Perdomo was a man inspired by God to spread his blessings among the poor and destitute, or an impostor who played upon peoples' credulity? Rivas thought the latter. His proof lay in science and rational thought. It was entirely conceivable to Rivas that Perdomo had uncovered here-to-fore unknown medicinal plants whose secrets had been guarded by indigenous peoples, perhaps comparable to quinine. If so, Perdomo should have earned the gratitude of an appreciative nation. If, however, he had cloaked that knowledge behind claims of mystical powers, should he not be condemned as a fraud? Rivas brought a profound rational skepticism to his analysis.

The periodicals and publications about Perdomo affirm that he exercised surgery with prodigious dexterity, skills that he could not have learned among the Indians; he forcefully removed cataracts, which requires a man's lifetime of learning; he extracted cancers, which requires, if it were possible, ability, dexterity, and practice; at the same time he removed goiters, restored sight and hearing, and alleviated [the suffering] of lepers; for each of these infirmities it would be necessary that he had acquired distinct surprising, marvelous, and extraordinary secrets. Reason rejects, or at least does not understand, that a human mind could embrace such surprising knowledge and at the same time this man would be such a genius that he could know infirmities at a glance, and of such ability to perform the most delicate operations; reason can not comprehend that a man could cure 300 sick people at the same time, [people] with different afflictions, most of them incurable; human reason, in sum, can not explain what happened with Perdomo.²⁶

Having rejected a rational explanation for Perdomo's reputation, Rivas suggested that it lay, perhaps, in human belief in the marvelous, in the mythical, and in the unexplainable. "These illusions are most fascinating when they offer the fewest guarantees of reality." After a survey of various people with seeming inexplicable powers, he rebuked them all. Rivas concluded that "the lesson left by Perdomo will remind the people to believe in science, which is the truth, and not allow themselves to be deceived by lies, which are fantasies."²⁷

One year after Perdomo left Bogotá, a correspondent from the State of Santander wrote a lengthy letter to the *Diario of Cundinamarca*, the leading

²⁶ Rivas, "Perdomo," 224.

²⁷ Rivas, "Perdomo," 224.

Liberal newspaper of the capital city in much the same tone as Rivas. "L. R. S." criticized Perdomo as a charlatan and an incompetent physician who had "the pretension of passing himself off as inspired by God who, knowing the credulity and simplicity of the people, has looked for the support of the fanatics . . ." Perdomo's reputation of "free" services, he said, was true, but he accepted donations, probably close to 5,000 pesos per year. (Daily wages at this time ranged between 1.5 and 3 pesos for unskilled and semi-skilled labor.)²⁸ L. R. S. suggested that Perdomo operated without knowledge or skill and seldom stayed in one place over two weeks, leaving before his medical shortcomings became widely known. His patients, however, soon realized the unfortunate truth as their illnesses worsened or as they died from his operations. If these charges were true, how did L. R. S. explain Perdomo's popularity?

The answer is easy: poor people are the same everywhere: simple, credulous, enthusiastic and easily fooled by hallucinations. The people are never bothered by analysis, they admire the impassioned and are always oriented toward the marvelous . . . [for example] in their belief in the marvelous accounts for their mass peregrinations to the waters of Lourdes in search of remedies for all their infirmities and cleansing from all their sins.²⁹

L. R. S. blasted the people's willingness to believe in which ever "mysterious" individual that appeared, always supported by members of the church.

How strange it that they admire him, that they see in him a mysterious man, approaching on their knees as if he were an alter, with him wearing a priest's collar and always surrounded by priests who have given him their parasitical devotion .³⁰

Liberal anti-clericalism joined rationalism in rejecting Perdomo's abilities and popularity.

While scientific rationalism came to dominate the nations' medical institutions, this ideology was not accepted by the bulk of the population, whose medical ideology was profoundly Hispanic. Predictably, Conservatives and others who were closely associated with the Church ardently defended Hispanic beliefs. Sergio Arboleda (1822-1888), the intellectual dean of nineteenth century Colombian Conservatism, served as a powerful and articulate voice for

²⁸ *Diario de Cundinamarca*, April 26, 1873.

²⁹ *Diario de Cundinamarca*, April 26, 1873.

³⁰ *Diario de Cundinamarca*, April 26, 1873.

Christian morality as the necessary foundation for public and private life. In addressing the relationship between science and religion, Arboleda insisted that science was the result of human mental labor and was of necessity founded upon moral laws. Those who strayed from moral laws threatened social disorder. Science, per se, was a noble practice, but those who loved science without recognizing a higher moral code corrupted its divine foundation. Arboleda claimed, therefore, that religious faith was the necessary base for a "good" science.³¹

Some people say that this can not be; it is against the laws of nature. Science! There is not a smaller nor more miserable thing than our present-day science, unless perhaps these small proud worms who call themselves learned men.³²

Perdomo's beliefs parallel those of Arboleda, especially in terms of the relationship between morality and public life. In his book, *La iglesia en presencia del siglo xix*, the emperic blasted Liberal regimes for having abandoned the Church as the moral guardian of the government. The moral code of the Church, Perdomo wrote, was the proper principle of society, one that sustains and stabilizes government. Liberals, however, had systematically violated that code. The government had refused to renew the concordat with the Vatican, had separated the church from the state, had declared freedom of religion, had removed the taxes that were intended to sustain the church, and had persecuted the church's ministers. These actions represented "pure crimes against God." In Liberal principles Perdomo saw the germination of positivism, which comes from not knowing God. The lack of morality under liberalism produces licentiousness, the freeing of human passions from moral restrictions.³³

All forms of government support the diffusion of the arts and support useful knowledge in order to form good citizens, scientific professors, and artists. But they must keep in mind that the special works that ought to serve as a test for all teaching, guiding with great scruples, that the first studies that children must have is a knowledge of God, relating it to morality in all possible ways, in order to imprint the indelible character with the sacred fear of God . . . philosophies or religions that do not support these ends must be rejected.³⁴

³¹ Sergio Arboleda, *Las ciencias, las letras y las bellas artes en Colombia* (Bogotá: Editorial Minerva, 1936), 53-55, 62-63; Martín Alonso Pinzón, *Historia del conservatismo* (Bogotá: Ediciones Tercer Mundo, 1979), 190.

³² Ricardo de la Parra, "Quien es el señor Miguel Perdomo Neira," MPN, 193.

³³ Perdomo, *La iglesia católica*, 77-80.

³⁴ Perdomo, *La iglesia católica*, 98.

For Catholics, the incompatibility between scientific rationalism without religion and traditional beliefs can be exemplified in the miracle of Lourdes. The editors of *La Caridad* poised a vexing dilemma for the “señores racionalistas.” In July of 1873, Mercedes Tórres of Fusagasugá, Colombia, who had been paralyzed and bed-ridden, was miraculously cured. Her illness, which had plagued her for years and which doctors had proven unable to cure, had become so grave that she had asked for her last rites, which the local priest delivered. Shortly thereafter she drank a few drops of water taken from the spring at Lourdes and within an hour was able to walk without the assistance of a crutch. Since that healing, the account continued, she had enjoyed perfect health. This case, the editors insisted, presented a troublesome situation for rationalists. “Science,” the article notes, “is interested in dispelling doubts; and the rationalists had the philosophical obligation to determine if the many witnesses to [this occurrence] are reliable; if they do not, they have no right to deny the power of the supernatural.” Rationalists had to prove:

- 1 Was the woman sick as had been assured; or
 - 2 Does the water of Lourdes contain some powerful substance that acts immediately to cure the ill whom science has declared incurable and who are in agony.
 - 3 In this case, they have to say what the water contains and how it works; or
 - 4 They must prove that the witnesses are crazy, or bribed, or foolish . . . and that they have been tricked;
- Or frankly confess that this is a supernatural influence caused by God and that Our Virgin of the Immaculate Conception is a great physician who, when she wants, cures with a few drops of water³⁵

This medical ideology flows from a Christian ideology that places the origins of illness in human sins and healing in the divine grace of the divinity. Faith, as opposed to the rational understanding of natural processes (itself a matter a faith), served as the cornerstone of this ideology. Proponents of liberalism threatened not only that faith, but the social order rooted in Catholic principles.

the liberal system is based upon Protestant principles that are contradictory and absurd (the independence of humans), in a way that sanctions the most humiliating tyranny, for when humans depart from their shared destiny and instead seek [individualist] goals that are spurious and ignominious, they

³⁵ *La Caridad*, cited in *La Verdad* (Quito), July 24, 1874.

practice absolute liberty, openly violating the true human liberties found in social life.³⁶

Not only were liberalism and rationalism bad for society, they were bad for doctors. Perdomo articulated a moral code for doctors that originated in a God-centered set of human relations. For him, the “sacred mission of the doctor is charity.” A doctor must recognize that God is the only source of healing. The doctor who tries to cure without the necessary knowledge, or who heals “motivated by the vile interests of money,” does a grave injury to his consciousness. According to Perdomo, it was better to do nothing at all than to attempt an unknown treatment, because the doctor might prolong or worsen the misery of a person whose life was given by God. It is wrong if a doctor asks a higher price than the value of the drugs, or if he thinks himself better than the rest of humanity, or if he delays in getting to the house of a sick person, or if he refuses to give a prescription because the patient can not pay for the services. For Perdomo, these wrongs were most likely when a person was separated from God and allowed his passions to rule, faults he attributed to many rationalist doctors.³⁷

This moral code served as the source of Perdomo’s criticism of professional doctors during the last ten years of his life. They also echo the comparisons Perdomo’s supporters made between himself and other doctors.

We do not intend to criticize our [professional] physicians, but with what we have seen and felt, we are convinced that the science of Hippocratic and Galen is not found in academic titles, but in the soul, in the heart, and in philanthropic sentiments, united by the happy predisposition to do well and to practice Christian Charity.³⁸

In this moral code, perhaps, lies one explanation for Perdomo’s enormous popularity. Healing was integral to the Catholic ideologies and traditions that were deeply entrenched within Andean society. To be recognized as “the people’s doctor” or “the new messiah” speaks of the profound social power of healing.

The Social Power of Healers

Latin American “folk saints” share both the enormous popularity and near adulation enjoyed by Perdomo. Folk saints are often reputed to be

³⁶ *La Verdad*, November 18, 1872.

strangers to a region, of humble social background, who cure and assist the poor in manners that often appear to be "miraculous."³⁹ These characteristics parallel the words of Ricardo de la Parra in his description of Perdomo.

He dispenses his forces in the name of Him who dispenses the sun, the air, the rain, and all the goods and bads. He does not make an exception of the persons [he heals, but] prefers the poor to the rich, the disgraced to the happy. His untiring diligence is greater and more sweet, and more benighted when the victim is more disgraced. He is a man of and for the people; the good of all; the consul of the disinherited and patient masses; the health of the people is his unique desire. Charity is the fire that animates him, and the love of his fellow man the spirit that vitalizes him.⁴⁰

A devotee of the healing cult of Dr. José Gregorio Hernández uses similar language to describe a "miraculous" operation years after Don Gregorio's death.

We were neighbors together in the town of Mene Grande and he [a young man] was operated on in his own home. A man and a girl dressed as a nurse appeared, exactly like in the pictures in the tableau. They went to look for a washbowl, cotton, and gauze. The man spoke to him and told him to lie down, and that he would fall into a deep sleep; and later feel well. When he woke, he had been operated on and found a written prescription by the bed. The staff of the Mene Grande hospital examined him; none of them had seen that type of stitch before. They could not explain what had happened.⁴¹

Don Gregorio has been "venerated" by the Vatican, the status preceding sainthood, in large part because of the many healing miracles attributed to him. Many Argentines hold "Madre María" in a similar light.⁴² Catholicism fuses healing and the sacred into an indivisible unity. This is seen most profoundly

³⁷ Perdomo, *La iglesia católica*, 91-93.

³⁸ Unos reconocidos, "El Señor Perdomo," Quito, October 26, 1867, in MPN, 114.

³⁹ Macklin, "Belief, Ritual and Healing," *passim*.

⁴⁰ Ricardo de la Parra, "Quien es el Señor Miguel Perdomo Neira," Guamo, November 3, 1871, MPN, 197.

⁴¹ L. Margolies, cited in Setha Low, "The Medicalization of Healing Cults in Latin America," *American Ethnologist*, 15:1 (February 1988), 143.

⁴² Manco Silverio, *La doctrina de la madre María: Cómo la difundía para curar las enfermedades del cuerpo y del alma (consideraciones científicas)* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Caymi, 1974).

in the image of Christ as healer, but it is also present in the lives of countless saints (SAINT NICOLAS)⁴³ and in the apparitions of the Virgin. This healing/sacred fusion is true both in the institutional Church, as well as in folk Catholicism's heavy emphasis upon folk saints.

The healing cult of Venezuelan Doctor José Gregorio Hernández extends through much of the northern Andes. Gregorio Hernández was a pioneer of scientific medicine who studied medicine in both Caracas and Paris before starting his practice in the Venezuelan capital in 1891, where he is credited with having founded "modern medicine and having introduced the use of the microscope in the country. He worked tirelessly in a clinic established for the poor, often offering his services gratis. Gregorio Hernández was a pious individual, living alone without the pleasure of drink, smoke, or family. He had twice attempted to enter religious orders and, having failed, dedicated much of his life to service to God through his medicine. A car, reportedly one of the first in Caracas, struck and killed the doctor as he attempted to cross the street to deliver medicine to a poor patient. His April 1919 death earned him eulogies as a "sainted man" and soon inspired a healing cult.

José Gregorio's healing cult extends throughout Venezuela, into Colombia, Panama, and Ecuador. Among some followers, he is called "Santo Gregorio," in keeping with his status as a Catholic folk saint. He often appears to people dressing in a dark suit, with a medical bag, and heals them, either through medicine or surgery. In some instances, holy water with curative powers is said to seep from his tomb. Promesas with his image are sold outside churches and in curanderos' shops. As the church has come to claim José Gregorio's powers, his image has appeared on murals, in many homes, and in automobiles. In Colombia the healing cult has more spiritist ramifications, such as in Brother Walter's Puerto Tejada "Centro Hospitalario de José Gregario" where he calls upon the doctor's spirit to guide him in his surgical procedures. Indian healers in Putumayo also use José Gregorio's curative powers.⁴⁴

A powerful healing cult also surrounds Costa Rican doctor Ricardo Moreno Cañas. During the early evening of August 23, 1938, a disenchanted patient assassinated Moreno Cañas and Doctor Carlos Manuel Echandi in their San José homes. Costa Rica mourned the deaths, particularly that of Dr. Moreno Cañas, probably the country's most popular and pre-eminent physician. By the 1940s, a "healing cult" had developed around the deceased healer, as vendors began selling *promesas* on cards with the image of the doctor, a prayer,

⁴³ Low, "Medicalization of Healing Cults," 137.

⁴⁴ Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 147, 149, 273, 279-81; Low, "Medicalization of Healing Cults," 142-45.

and instructions on how to petition for his healing assistance. By the 1970s spiritualists had also incorporated Moreno Cañas into their ceremonies. Many patients reported that Moreno Cañas healed them, sometimes performing operations upon them. Moreno Cañas is now revered as a "legendary figure who represents tender, sympathetic, respectful, charitable medical care that utilizes the newest, most highly developed scientific knowledge." Images of the doctor are sold along with those of Saints, and his name is invoked by both popular and professional healers.⁴⁵

In northern Mexico, a potent healing cult has developed around the spiritist healer José Fidencio Sintora Constantino. "El Niño Fidencio" practiced his healing arts in Espinozo, Nuevo León, in the 1920s and 1930s. Most of his cures involved herbs and humoral treatments, but he also practiced minor surgery. El Niño

Fidencio reported that he had been given curative powers by a bearded man (Jesus Christ) during a vision. Unlike Perdomo or Don Gregorio, who claimed no special powers, Fidencio's saliva and breath had curative powers, as did his touch. El Niño Fidencio was a powerfully aesthetic individual, who acted as a priest in Espinozo, including the baptism of residents. During his life many people treated Fidencio "as a saint, kissing his hands, feet, and the hem of his gown." Since his death, his birth and death days have developed into major festive rituals during which time hundreds of people flock to Espinozo to visit his tomb, converse with his spirit, or seek his curative assistance. "Fidencistas" operate throughout northern Mexico, serving as mediums so that his devotees might converse with El Niño Fidencio or seek cures.⁴⁶

These and other healing cults represent the mixture of Afro-American and Catholic religious beliefs and turn-of-the-century spiritism.⁴⁷ In some instances, healing cults emerge quite directly from Afro-American traditions, such as in the Bataque cults of Brazil or the Voodoo practices of Haiti. In other cases, cults

⁴⁵ Setha M. Low, "Dr. Moreno Cañas: A Symbolic Bridge to the Demedicalization of Healing," *Social Science and Medicine*, 16:5 (1982), 527; Low, "Medicalization of Healing Cults in Latin America," *American Ethnologist*, 130-42.

⁴⁶ June Macklin, "Folk Saints, Healers and Spiritist Cults in Northern Mexico," *Revista/Review Interamericana*, 3 (1974), 351-67.

⁴⁷ Sidney M. Greenfield, "The Return of Dr. Fritz: Spiritist Healing and Patronage Networks in Urban, Industrial Brazil," *Social Science and Medicine*, 24:12 (1987), 1095-1108. See also Diana Jean Schemo, "Live, in Brazil (Again): The Reincarnated Dr. Fritz," *The New York Times*, January 12, 1996, A4; Kaja Finkler, *Spiritualist Healers in Mexico: Successes and Failures of Alternative Therapeutics*, foreword by Arthur Kleinman (New York: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc. 1985).

have developed around practitioners of scientific medicine with strong relations with patients in lower socioeconomic levels. Moreno Cañas and Don Gregorio are part of the latter pattern. Both of these healing cults augment the adoration of healers by Catholics (especially in popularized religion) that are present in almost all Latin American societies. A further pattern fused non-Hispanic curative complexes with Hispanic healing traditions.⁴⁸

While many of the aforementioned healing cults attend primary to the physical aspects of healing, the Bataque cults of Brazil envision curing somewhat more broadly. The *cura* aspects of Bataque address the broad array of problems afflicting the quality of life for Brazil's urban poor, not just their illnesses. The Bataque mediums might seek to redress the trauma of family strife, alcoholism, the loss of employment, or problems with a boy or girl friend.⁴⁹

Scholars debate the meanings of healing cults, but their potency is indisputable. Duncan and Baruffuti suggest that healing cults represent "the incapacity of the state to satisfy growing social demands,"⁵⁰ while Low emphasizes Gregorio's cult as a "response of lay people to [the] medicalization of [health] care."⁵¹ Michael Taussig relates that cults surrounding early scientific doctors such as that of José Gregorio represent a response to modernity, in which the "magic of science and industry . . . holds out the promise of the power and wealth of the modern world . . . denied [to] the vast majority of their patients . . ."⁵² In all these healing cults, healing acts within a holistic religious frame. While scholars might attribute their emergence to particular structural or social processes, it might also be the case that devotees simply seek relief through a medium which they know has the power of healing, one that is intimately linked to their religious beliefs.

Medical Pluralism

Even the most casual comparison of the medical systems of the northern Andes of the 1790s and the 1990s reveals profound differences. In the late

⁴⁸ Pedersen and Baruffati, "Healers, Dieties, Saints and Doctors," 492; Low, "Dr. Moreno Cañas," passim; Seth and Ruth Leacock, *Spirits of the Deep: A Study of an Afro-Brazilian Cult* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday Natural History Press, 1972).

⁴⁹ Leacock, *Spirits of the Deep*, 250-284.

⁵⁰ Pedersen and Baruffati, "Healers, Dieties, Saints and Doctors," 492.

⁵¹ Low, "Dr. Moreno Cañas," 527.

⁵² Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man*, 281.

eighteenth century, Hispanic medicine dominated the colonial medical spectrum. Hispanic medicine used humoral knowledge within a holistic Catholic frame of understanding. Most healing took place within an informal social setting, using either domestic medicine, empirics, or curanderos. Shamans affected healing in areas with significant indigenous populations, and asserted an influence on Hispanic populations as well. Although a formal medical structure existed, with institutions, titled healers, and legal authority, its weakness meant that most people had little, in any, contact with formal medicine during their lives. Formal medicine had little social power. Only the Church, in both its institutional and ideological dimensions, bridged the formal and informal spheres. In any instance, medical knowledge differed hardly at all in formal and informal settings. Social and professional healers drew from the same corpus of knowledge.

In the late twentieth century, a variety of medical systems operate within Colombia and Ecuador. Depending upon the locale, biomedicine, homeopathy, popular medicine, spiritist healing, and a variety of indigenous medical systems are in operation. Generally speaking, the "options" available to urbanites are greater than for rural dwellers, although class, ethnicity, and religion belie the liberty of medical "choice." As it was 200 years ago, domestic medicine is the initial response to healing, but the *materia medica* now includes the incredible pharmacopoeia associated with biomedicine, as well as treatments from popular medicine. Biomedicine, officially endorsed by the authority of the state, is sustained by a vast institutional presence, including hospitals, schools, clinics, laboratories, pharmacies, professional associations, and a dense bureaucratic maze. Biomedicine is supported by a corpus of laws and decrees which fully vests it with the authority and power of the state. Biomedicine is fused with the state and is linked with a powerful international web of drug companies, medical associations, and suppliers of medical technology. Largely absent from official medicine is the Church, in both an institutional or ideological sense. Biomedical beliefs now dominate both formal and informal medicine, although humoral interpretations still influence the latter. Unlike the 1790s, the social and professional healers of the 1990s operate within fundamentally different "worlds."

How did this "Great Transformation" occur? A complete answer to this question is beyond the scope of this project, but the contestations that surrounded Miguel Perdomo Neira help to establish the critical juncture of change. John Janzen notes that the organization of medical systems are synonymous with social systems, and that inquiries into process and change are necessary for their analysis. In this, Janzen asserts that "the effects of politics upon structural change in a social system is absolutely critical." Politics

consists of the “exercise of power and authority,”⁵³ both of which are apparent in Perdomo’s life. Janzen uses Max Weber to identify three sources of authority: charismatic authority, which is vested in the character of a single person; authority that comes from a coherent set of beliefs and practices that are maintained by training and experience; and rational-legal authority, which originates in the laws, institutions, and bureaucracies of a state.⁵⁴

Scientific medicine was introduced into the northern Andes as an alien ideology representing the rational knowledge of western Europe. Espejo, Mutis, de la Isla, and others introduced this medical knowledge into the formal system of medical education, most effectively in the 1802 plan of studies for the School of Medicine in Bogotá, which was then inculcated into a first generation of scientific doctors. The introduction of the French anatomoclinical method into Bogotá’s Central University prepared a second generation, including Vargas Reyes, who were in turn responsible for the institutionalization of scientific medicine in Colombia. Whereas scientific medicine had little if any authority in the 1790s, by the 1870s it had acquired significant potency from a now institutionalized set of beliefs, practices, and education. It is at this time that Perdomo sparked the confrontation between the two medical ideologies rooted in distinct sources of authority. The institutionalization of scientific medicine in Ecuador was not accomplished until the early twentieth century, by which time scientific medicine in Colombia had acquired the rational-legal authority of the state. This was accomplished in Ecuador by the 1930s, when scientific medicine had become the official medicine of each country, assisted at each crucial step by political power.

Medical pluralism had replaced the colonial medical spectrum. For most people, this was not a traumatic process. It is widely acknowledged that “members of the popular level of society” are very adaptable and see few contradictions among healers of distinct medical systems within a pluralist framework, even though they might recognize the differing abilities of healers to treat different maladies.⁵⁵ Viesca Treviño notes that “the officialization of scientific medicine” in the different social realities of Mexico was accompanied by the resignification and enrichment of traditional medicine.⁵⁶

⁵³ Janzen, “Comparative Study of Medical Systems,” 124.

⁵⁴ Janzen, “Comparative Study of Medical Systems,” 127-29.

⁵⁵ Macklin, “Folk Saints, Healers, and Spiritist Cults,” 301; Press, “Classification of Medical Systems,” 47; Libbet Crandon-Malamud, *From the Fat of Our Souls: Social Change, Political Process, and Medical Pluralism in Bolivia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

⁵⁶ Viesca Treviño, 19.

Medical anthropologists (and others) often differentiate the concepts of disease and illness. Illnesses are the experiences suffered by a sick person, whereas diseases are the abnormalities in the function of the body as framed by a doctor. Disease, in this sense, originates in the mechanical representations of the body as portrayed by Descartes, Harvey, and countless other rationalists. The sick person becomes a patient whose diseased body is known to the doctors.⁵⁷ Knowledge of illness and knowledge of disease might well be seen as analogous to the differences between social and professional medicine. Knowledge in social medicine is acquired experientially, while knowledge in professional medicine is acquired through specialized institutional training. Vargas Reyes, in his belief in the anatomoclinical ideology, imagined the body to be a machine, about which Perdomo's "lack of knowledge" left him open to scientific critique. Scientific doctors, according to Gregory Pappas, acquire enormous power over a patients because of the disposition of the human body. "The patient becomes the docile body to be manipulated and explored; robbed of autonomy . . ."⁵⁸ Despite this profound power of the body and the intimate knowledge of scientific healing, medical efficacy is often as much a product of a belief system of a culture as of a specific medical treatment.⁵⁹ The placebo affect, or the psychotherapeutic benefit, is undoubtedly the greatest when the sick person and the doctor speak the same medical language, that is, in the practice of social medicine.

Perdomo would undoubtedly be classified as a "social healer" within a system of "medicina tradicional." Vargas Reyes certainly was a "professional healer" and part of "medicina facultativa." Perdomo had no formal training, worked within a familial network, and acquired his knowledge experientially. By contrast, Vargas was a consummate professional, with formal education, institutional affiliation, and with membership in a professional association. For the person suffering from an illness in 1870s Bogotá, further distinctions could be made. Perdomo, "el médico del pueblo," spoke the same language as the sufferer, had the same understanding of illness, and shared the same moral code. Vargas Reyes and other practitioners of scientific medicine most likely framed diseases differently than did their patients. Their biomedical knowledge did not correspond to the knowledge of Hispanic medicine. However, the sick

⁵⁷ Eisenberg, "Disease and Illness," 9-11.

⁵⁸ Gregory Pappas, "Some Implications for the Study of the Doctor/Patient Interaction: Power, Structure, and Agency in the Works of Howard Waitzkin and Arthur Kleinman," *Social Science and Medicine*, 30:2 (1990), 202.

⁵⁹ Eisenberg, "Disease and Illness," 19-21. Eisenberg notes that for some biomedical doctors, the word placebo is often an "epithet suggesting charlatanism . . ."

person who sought the assistance of either Perdomo or Vargas Reyes was perhaps less interested in knowledge, and more interested in curative relief. There is little to suggest that the efficacy of either doctor was noticeably superior than the other. The testimonials often praise Perdomo because he cured them when other doctors could not. There surely were people who would attest to the abilities of scientific doctors as well.

The most outstanding difference between Perdomo and professional doctors articulated in the testimonials lay in Perdomo's moral code - his attitude of Christian charity. Perdomo believed in a unified image of nature and God, one that saw God as the source of all cures. This ideology was shared by the ill people who sought his assistance and was deeply embedded within the Hispanic culture of the nineteenth century. The same belief system sustains the healing cults of Don Gregorio and others. If, as Carlos Viesca Treviño suggests, traditional medicine survives in Mexico because it offers a holistic vision of the relationship between humans and the world about them,⁶⁰ then the intensity of the clash between Perdomo and professional doctors becomes more significant. This confrontation laid bare distinct notions of healing, ideology, and power in the northern Andes. From this moment in the Great Transformation are to be found some of the divisions of contemporary Latin American society.

⁶⁰ Viesca Treviño, "La medicina tradicional mexicana," 21.