

## SUMMARY

### IMPRESS

#### **Beyond Ideological Conflict: Religion and Freethought in the Belgian Medical Press, 1840-1914**

IMPRESS is a digitization and digital history research project on the role of religion and ideology in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical sciences (<https://impressmedicaljournals.be/>). The project involved a partnership between KU Leuven (Kaat Wils, Michèle Goyens, Joris Vandendriessche and Jolien Gijbels), the Free University of Brussels (Cécile Vanderpelen, Joffrey Liénard and Valérie Leclercq) and the Royal Library of Belgium (Frédéric Lemmers), and was coordinated by KU Leuven.

The project led to the digitization of 186.000 pages or 286 volumes of scientific journals from the collections of the Royal Library of Belgium. The team selected three journals for digitization because of their special value as scientific heritage and their potential for historical research: the *Bulletin* of the Royal Academy of Medicine, whose membership included both Catholic and freethinking physicians, the *Journal de médecine, de chirurgie et de pharmacologie*, whose editors embraced liberal ideas, and the *Journal des sciences médicales de Louvain*, which was published by the Faculty of Medicine of the Catholic University of Leuven. The digitized volumes were made accessible to the wider public through the newly launched platform *BelgicaPeriodicals* of the Royal Library. IMPRESS further acted as a catalyst in the development of an open data policy.

The selected journals – to which additional sources were added – were subjected to intense historical scrutiny to answer the central research question on the role of religion and ideology in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical field. The team focused on scientific debates on gynecology and obstetrics, mental illness, and vaccination, combining digital and classical hermeneutical text analysis and interpretation. For its digital analysis, the team explored a range of tools (LancsBox, AntConc, Mallet etc.). This resulted, first, in an article on digital methodology for journal analysis, which will appear in the journal *Digital Studies*. Second, the team opted for AntConc as the tool with which to continue the project's digital historical research (the PhD research by Jolien Gijbels and the postdoctoral research by Valérie Leclercq).

Partly thanks to the use of digital tools IMPRESS showed the undeniable presence and impact of religion and ideology in 19<sup>th</sup>-century debates within the medical sciences. The project revealed the intertwining of ideology with the production of knowledge in medico-ethical discussions over difficult births, post-mortem caesareans, (mandatory) vaccination, and mental illness. Scrutinizing these debates, the team uncovered a process of secularization through the reformulation of ideological beliefs in scientific terms. At the same time, the influence of religion and ideology was never clear-cut or well-defined. The team's historical analysis revealed that, precisely because ideology was so strongly connected to the questions that drew physicians' attention, it could never be left out of scientific discussions (in spite of physicians' attempts).

IMPRESS also shed new light on the chronology of ideological conflict in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century medical sciences. On the one hand, its results confirmed the hypothesis that the shifting intensity of political struggles between Catholics and liberals, including peaks such as the School War (1879-1884), was noticeable within the scientific field, in particular in a series of debates on cerebral pathologies. On the other hand, the team found that the scientific debates also followed an internal logic (e.g. driven by

technological innovation), which resulted in intense debates on gynecological interventions in the politically relatively 'stable' 1850s and 1890s. The team also found that the most explicit expressions of religion and/or ideological beliefs occurred in the margins of scientific journals, i.e. in the review section, the obituaries and the news section. This proved an editorial strategy that allowed the journal to profile itself ideologically, but at the same time allowed editors to shield off core parts, in particular their sections with original articles, keeping these 'purely' scientific.

The output of IMPRESS comprised a PhD thesis (by Jolien Gijbels), different academic articles (including for *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, *Annales de démographie historique*), and chapters in edited volumes. The team shared results with a wider public through blog posts, articles for heritage magazines (*Faro*, *Tijd-Schrift*), radio-interviews, podcasts and public lectures. Team members organized workshops in Leuven and Brussels, and international colloquia and panels (Haarlem 2020, ESSHC 2021). The online international conference 'Faith, Medicine and Religion' (7 to 10 September 2021) constituted the final event of IMPRESS.

**Keywords:** digital humanities, history of medicine, religion, medical journals, 19<sup>th</sup> century Belgium