Religion and Health

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Before we can speak of religious values in health we must clarify the atmosphere around the concept of religion. Every intelligent human being should construct to the best of his ability a philosophy of life. By a philosophy of life we mean an interpretation of life, a view, provisional at least, of the main purpose of life and the undergirding principles by which life must be supported. If we are to cope successfully with the obstacles of life we must have some concept as to how these difficulties should be met before they come.

Every serious philosophy of life involves a positive or negative view toward God and religion. A philosophy of life may be termed a religious philosophy if the view of God holds a central and all-important place. An orientation toward life is nonreligious when some other goal takes the place of first importance in life.

When we think of religion as an adequate philosophy of life, it is easy to see its implications for healthful living. A philosophy of life becomes the dominating principle of thought and of conduct. Life thus has an end, a purpose, an object, toward which it moves. The quest for meaning is one of the basic needs of life. When the quest is frustrated, life itself becomes a meaningless speck on the ocean of uncertainty.

Urgent psychic problems of patients have given impetus to recent advancements in psychosomatic medicine. Medicine is beginning to recognize that it cannot confine itself strictly to the functioning of the physiological organism. Life is unitary; that which occurs in the realm of the psyche also carries its implications to the soma. A former false dualism is now giving way to the present organismic approach to the patient.

To understand a neurosis, or a state of stress, it is necessary to know that its origin and causes are psychic. The cure for such disturbances must therefore deal with psychic implications as well as the organic.

Jung has said: "A psychoneurosis must be understood as the suffering of a human being who has not discovered what life means for him."

If this definition of a psychoneurosis is correct the sufferer is seeking for something which will take possession of him and provide meaning and structure to a confused disorganized state of existence.

In the past clergymen were called upon to minister to people in a confused state of mind. Certain theories of life were almost universally accepted in our culture. The Bible usually provided an organization of life for the framework of culture. Divine revelation was generally conceded. The scientific age, however, has led many to reject former religious concepts. Having cut these former ties, men are not at peace, because life has lost its meaning. Today
many patients who would not think of going to clergymen, come to physicians. Therefore not only must the physician of a necessity deal with strictly organic problems but also he is forced into the realm of the patient’s philosophy of life. To minister successfully to such patients with a disorganized view of life, the physician himself must have a philosophy of life which will aid his patients in the process of reorganization.

It should be remembered, however, that in the realm of an adequate meaning of life which has religious implications the physician cannot proceed on the same basis that he can in giving the ordinary physical prescriptions. A physician may give a prescription with religious implications, but the problem still remains as to how this "medicine" shall be administered. One thing is certain: it cannot be administered at any time and to any patient as one would administer a pill or so many injections of drugs. It seems unnecessary to say that religious prescriptions without genuine religious convictions on the part of the patient may lead to greater conflicts rather than to a resolution of conflicts which already exist.

Jung\(^b\) makes this observation on the significance of religion: "I should like to call attention to the following facts. During the past thirty years, people from all the civilized countries of the earth have consulted me. I have treated many hundreds of patients, the larger number being Protestants, a smaller number Jews, and not more than five or six believing Catholics. Among all my patients in the second half of life—that is to say over thirty-five—there has not been one whose problem in the last resort was not that of finding a religious outlook on life. It is safe to say that every one of them fell ill because he had lost that which the living religions of every age have given to their followers, and none of them has been really healed who did not regain his religious outlook."

Jung further observes, "It seems to me, that, side by side with the decline of religious life, the neuroses grow noticeably more frequent."

Dunbar\(^a\) says: "In medicine, we find it necessary to consider, not merely the objective environment, but also its subjective counterpart within the organism, which we find in its most integrated form in the Weltanschauung of the individual. . . . Physicians in general . . . are beginning to call attention to the importance of Weltanschauung from a purely practical point of view."

Dr. Dunbar\(^b\) continues her discussion with many quotations from psychiatrists who hold this point of view. She says: "C. M. Campbell has called attention repeatedly to this aspect of our problem, saying that 'the study of "beliefs" is part of the general study of the mechanism of man's adaptation to his environment.' The term, health, is now coming to include sanity of beliefs as well as soundness of body. . . . Man's environment to which he must adjust, includes, not only (a) supplies to acquire, and (b) hostile organisms to fight, but also the spiritual forces of a social environment. . . . Man's beliefs add to the quality of life and give it value, and may also prolong it. . . . Beliefs affect the actual length of life of individuals and groups, and to scrutinize them is the 'most important and the most difficult task in the field of public health.'"

It is now a well-known fact that emotions may disturb physiological functions. When life does not move toward specific goals which are considered worth while by a patient, emotional disturbances are much more likely to occur. Concerning the influence of disturbed emotions upon the functions of the organism, Dr. Dunbar\(^c\) says, "We know now that bodily changes may be brought about by mental stimuli, by emotions, just as effectively as by bacteria and toxins, and that physio-
logical changes accompanying emotion may disturb the function of any organ of the body.

Referring to the prophylactic value of religion, Dr. Sadler says: "No one can appreciate so fully as a doctor the amazingly large percentage of human disease and suffering which is directly traceable to worry, fear, conflict, immorality, dissipation, and ignorance—to unwholesome thinking and unclean living. The sincere acceptance of the principles and teachings of Christ with respect to the life of mental peace and joy, the life of unselfish thought and clean living, would at once wipe out more than half the difficulties, diseases and sorrows of the human race. In other words, more than one half of the present affliction of mankind could be prevented by the tremendous prophylactic power of actually living up to the personal and practical spirit of the real teachings of Christ."

With increasing understanding of the emotional and environmental aspects relating to disease, comes the realization that the patient's outlook on life is highly significant. Emotions result from attitudes. Attitudes constitute a state of readiness to respond and are linked with one's views of life. At this point the relationship of religion and health emerges. A way of life and the direction in which it leads an individual may lead to sickness or health. Religion is primarily concerned with an individual's over-all reactions to life. Man's questions move in two major realms: (1) the realm of sensate knowledge, or so-called scientific facts, and (2) the realm of values. Values are of religious import and transfuse themselves into the optimal functioning of the physical organism. The word religion means etymologically a binding together. Religion offers a man the opportunity to bind divergent elements into a meaningful pattern. Religion provides a means whereby life may be uncluttered from meaninglessness. In actual illness the will not to get well, or the desire to die, may be a more potent influence than any medicine which a physician can prescribe, but how shall a patient rally without a meaningful reason?

In this connection it should be said that emphasis needs to be given not only to the intellectual content of religion but also to its emotional significance. The religion which will really minister to good health has a functional significance in the realm of emotional belongingness to the cosmos. Man is a denizen of two worlds simultaneously. He must have a terrestrial as well as a cosmic orientation to life. Wise counsel combined with healthy religious attitudes and beliefs may be of great value in meeting both the need for security and the need for love, which are crying needs in this age of disillusionment. Indeed, it is not wrong to say that the basic problems of this age involve the meaning of life and the reasons for prolonging the struggle.

Concerning the value or contributions of religion to health, Dr. Earl D. Bond says: "There is no integration which compares with that which comes from religious faith or the religious goal."

In the same vein speaks Hadfield: "I am convinced that the Christian religion is one of the most valuable and potent influences that we possess for producing that harmony and peace of mind ... needed to bring health and power to a large proportion of nervous patients."

Dr. Harlow Brooks writes: "The spiritual side of the case must not be neglected in this disease [angina pectoris] in which emotions play so important a role. The developments of a philosophy of life, of the power of adaptation of desire to possibilities, the cultivation of suitable hobbies of a restful character, are of real medical benefit."

Strecker says: "It is not an overstatement to say that fully 50 per cent of the problems of the acute states of an illness and 75 per cent
of the difficulties of convalescence have their primary origin not in the body, but in the mind, of the patient.'"

From these foregoing statements we are safe in saying that there is no such thing as a purely organic illness. It is also hard to conceive of a purely psychic illness unaccompanied by organic stress. In every illness there is a living experience in the whole organism which is significant only because the psychic and the somatic are united in a living unitary movement.

The true medical practitioner must practice not only with an analytical head but also with a sympathetic heart which has found its home in the universe. Religion binds together and synthesizes. Medicine must pass from purely analytical procedures to those of synthesis which move in the realm of values. John G. Sinclair has written thus in his "Heart or Head."

"Tell me how is beauty read
To best advantage? By the heart
Which asks and sighs and will not part
Or by the analytical head?

Heart, possessive, seeks essentials,
Feels reciprocal dependence,
Waives sartorial resplendence,
Gives but cannot be impartial.

Head, aware, through symbol logic
Unifies its world of objects,
Stars and atoms in its projects,
Guides electro-mass panurgic.

Heart when headless pants for breath
Head when heartless conjures death."

The analytical, mechanistic medic may con-jure death, whereas the practitioner who takes into consideration a combination of the heart and head will make for a far better prognosis.

There are three fundamental entities with which we must reckon in the universe: matter, energy, and life. To deal only with matter and energy is to leave the most important element untouched. There is a vitalistic principle in the organism which defies scientific analysis. Life adds to the matter-energy combination the power to observe, to think, to convert thought into action. Matter and energy alone do not make up a patient. There is much more to life than can be comprehended in energy or matter. Life moves in harmony with a predetermined complex plan even as physical laws operate in the realm of energy and matter. An exploration of the laws of life will yield large results. These laws are understood and seen in the realm of religious values which are not fully discerned by sensate procedures.

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