

The Relation of Religion to Health

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Religion, as expressed by Christianity, has been through a long period of what we have called "other-worldliness." In spite of the affirmations that Christianity is a religion of optimism, there can be no gainsaying the fact that it has been through periods when the dregs of the cup have been examined more closely than is consistent with the faith in the goodness of God which is one of the first tenets of Christianity. In the old time Calvinism, there is an overdose of pessimism, which seems to regard the world as a place of sin, and life as a period of evil and long-suffering which we must submit to with patience, while we wait patiently for the deliverance at the {??} of death from this vale of tears. So deep has been this pessimism that they have not felt some of the deliverance from the evil of the world by death. In that strange, weird, morbid doctrine of election we have the pessimism expressed in its blackest terms. Not only are we doomed to the allotted three score years and ten of life and sin and punishment here, but most of us are foreordained to the delightful experiences of eternal damnation in the world to come. Truly Jonathan Edwards' picture of sinners in the hands of an angry God is enough to make the cold chill of pessimistic despair run up and down our spinal column. Out of this wreck and ruin of the world in general, there would be a few favored ones, upon whom God would bestow his abounding grace, to whom the other world would mean eternal joy. The sum total of it all is this. Life here is a dismal failure. There may be hope in the hereafter. But in spite of the gloomy ideas of life as set forth by these dejected theologians, and the equally gloomy, and far more revolting notions of the saints of the ascetic life, there have been at all times men who have really seen something worthwhile in life as it is. Sometimes they have gone to the extreme of this worldliness just as the ascetic has gone to the extreme of other worldliness. They have done a cash business, taking their pleasure where they found it, caring

nothing for the morrow. "Take the cash, and let the credit go, nor heed the roar of the distant gun." said Omar Khayyam and thousands have joined the chorus with him.¹ These two extremes of pessimistic Calvinism and a sort of Epicureanism, have lumbered along through the centuries, like an cow and a mule joined together dragging behind them the plow which served to dig up many of the choice plants of this fair field of life.

For the most part, people in general have not paid any great attention to this ungainly pair as they have wandered aimlessly here and there. The great number of people live quietly in some spot, happily unmolested by this black spectre of pessimism. They are contented to work in the garden of life, caring quietly for the fruit-bearing plants, and disposing of the weeds as they make their appearance in among the more precious plants.

If, however, it happens that this mismatched pair, dragging their ugly machine of destruction behind them in their selfish wanderings, pass near some group of quiet beautiful workers, and ruthlessly tear up the growing plants of the spirit whose fruit is, as Paul says, "love, joy, peace, long-suffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control,"² its natural consequence is something of a disturbance. The result is something like the effect upon a crowd on the street when the police patrol passes by. Some pay but little attention to it, others stop to look after it for a moment and then go about their business. Still there are others who drop all thought of their own business and run after the patrol cart looking for some new cause of excitement. In much the same way when this blank cart of pessimism drawn by the mismatched pair passes by, many people just go about repairing the loss; others stand and look, while still others leave the old spots, and follow along in the furrow

¹ This proverb, slightly misquoted here—see below—is from Edward FitzGerald's (1809-1883) translation from Persian to English of a selection of poems attributed to Omar Khayyam (1048-1131). First published in 1859 under the title, "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam," The stanza reads, "Ah, take the Cash, and let the Credit go, Nor heed the rumble of a distant Drum!"

² Galatians 5:22-23.

picking up stray worms, and bits of broken plants to satisfy their craving and curiosity.

Now it happens that this strange team has been roaming about in this country. Sometimes we have been situated so that we could see the lank big-eared mule of religious pessimism that has been presented to our view as the team passed, and sometimes it has been the placid cow of self-indulgence and indifferentism.

For the past hundred years there has been a tremendous effort to take up the work after the passing of the dark cloud of otherworldliness, which for near two hundred years hung over this country like a specter of death. In spite of the declarations of total depravity, men have come to see that human nature is capable of goodness, tenderness, love, long-suffering and self-control, which are the fruits of the spirit. In spite of the fact that the hand of Calvin pointed to the other world for the Kingdom of God, men have still felt inclined to give ear to the words of Jesus, the Kingdom of God is within us.³

The natural reaction from this extreme otherworldliness of Calvinism, has been to try to make this world we live in a better place than it is. I need not tell you how this spirit of feeling that God is here, as well as there, that he is in you and me, as well as in Jesus, I need not tell you how that spirit broke out into the great reforms for removing the conditions which make sin, suffering, and crime more hideous even than the Hell of the Reverend Bede.⁴ You know how the New England reformers, whose source of inspiration was in Channing, began the transformation of this dear young country of ours. Is it necessary to say that from that little circle of friends of Channing there emerged Dorothea Dix to transform and revolutionize the methods of dealing with criminals and insane, of Horace Mann, who revolutionized your methods of education, of Joseph Tuckerman and Charles Francis Barnard who ministered to the poor, and their children, of Lydia Maria Child, the

³ See Luke 17:21.

⁴ Saint Bede, or Bede the Venerable (c.673-735) was an English Benedictine monk, most famous for his work *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed about 731.

woman anti-slavery leader. We might add Theodore Parker William Lloyd Garrison who gave themselves to the cause of the slave.⁵

This great philanthropic movement, not alms-giving, but giving of body and soul to the work of making this world better, and clearing away the rubbish so that the soul can grow here as it ought to grow, began about 1830. It has spread and become a great nationwide movement, based upon these two ideas, that man is divine, and that life here in this old earth of ours is divine. It is a return to this own homeland of ours to do the jobs that need to be done here.

But the question has been asked if religion can do so much towards removing the causes of disease as they exist outside of us, can it not be applied to remove the causes of disease as they exist within us? I am very {???) to say that such a question is a very sensible one, and one that it would do well for us to answer with the greatest care. Prof. James in his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, says of this,

The advance of liberalism, so-called, in Christianity, during the past fifty years may fairly be called a victory of healthy-mindedness within the church over the morbidness with which the old hell-fire theology was more harmoniously related. We have now whole congregations whose preachers, far from magnifying our consciousness of sin, seem devoted rather to making little of it. They ignore, or even deny, eternal punishment, and insist on the dignity rather than on the depravity of man. They look at the continual preoccupation of the old-fashioned Christian with the salvation of his soul as something sickly and reprehensible rather than admirable; and a sanguine and "muscular"

⁵ Earl Davis' 19th century reformers following the preaching and teaching of William Ellery Channing (1780-1842): Dorothea Dix (1802-1887); Horace Mann (1796-1859); Joseph Tuckerman (1778-1840); Charles Francis Barnard (1808-1884); Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880); Theodore Parker (1810-1860) and William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879).

attitude, which to our forefathers would have seemed purely heathen, has become in their eyes an ideal element of Christian character.⁶

But this idea of healthy mindedness, which is part and parcel of what is commonly called liberal Christianity, there has been developing during the last few years a number of sects which rest upon this idea as the fundamental basis. "Gospel of relaxation," "Don't worry movement," "Youth health and vigor," "New thought movement," "Faith cure," "Prayer cure," "Mental science." "Mental healing" "Divine healing," "Christian science," and the rest of them, until one begins to believe that this movement is of as many colors as Joseph's famous coat, and will become a close rival to Protestantism.

But these various movements ask to be tried by their fruits, by the actual results. Each one of them presents an array of cures that are clear enough demonstration to anyone that they are resting on fairly solid ground. Dr. H. H. Goddard of Clark University after a careful examination into the movement, not only into its modern appearance, but its more primitive manifestations, says as a summary of his investigations,

Christian Science, Divine Healing or mental Science, do not, and never can in the very nature of things cure all diseases; nevertheless the practical applications of the general principles of the broadest mental science will tend to prevent disease... We do not find sufficient evidence to convince us that the proper reform in mental attitude would relieve many a sufferer of ills that the ordinary physician cannot touch; would even delay the approach of death to many a victim beyond the power of absolute cure, and the faithful adherence to a truer philosophy of life will keep many a man well, and give the doctor

⁶ William James (1842-1910), *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, New York: The Modern Library, 1902, Lectures IV-V, "The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness."

time to devote to alleviating ills that are unpreventable.⁷

This is the conclusion of an unprejudiced observer. In essence it is this. There is truth here. It is not any special peculiar miraculously revealed truth sold in copyright books. You can go to any one of these places and get your truth, or you can start a new cult yourself. The main [point] about it all is to have something to do, to have something to think about besides yourself. It is simply the old idea of the expulsive power of a new affection, the awakening of the body into performing the functions for which it was made to perform. You can get all the benefit of this power right in your own home, or right in your own church, if you will but give up the morbidness which your self-inspection, your listless moaning of ills which do not exist, but which you concoct as a means of soothing your conscience, which pricks you for your inactivity.

People whose sole occupation is to kill time and move listlessly about half of the time and follow wildly after some engrossing excitement the rest of the time, who are mad seekers after pleasure, or so engrossed in the humdrums of life that they know not when or how or why they live, then are the people who absorbed by the expulsive power of this new affectation. Many and common are the diseases which may be cured by this very simple remedy of thinking about something that is really worth thinking about. Let me prescribe now. I can do it as well as anyone else. If you are in anyway affected by these nervous diseases, or diseases which are the results of inroads upon your physical well-being by foreign substances, whose opportunity to work then is the lack of proper mental activity upon your part, just keep your mind filled with thoughts that are worthwhile. Read Emerson. Read Phillips

⁷ Henry H. Goddard (1866-1957). This quotation is taken from William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 95fn. And, note, Goddard was a Ph.D. student at Clark from 1896-99; he was not a faculty member there.

Brooks' works.⁸ Read any strong robust optimistic writings. Then put your thoughts into action. Be of service to the world, with the sick, minister to the poor, be kind to those who are suffering. Forget yourself. Get into God's out of doors, and become a real live acting human being. That is all there is to this great smoke about the relation of religion to disease. The normal active human being can and does free himself from many of the ailments with which they are afflicted. There is nothing mysterious about it. It is that same power of love and devotion, which carries the man into battle, which makes the mother work for her children, which carried Jesus of Nazareth to the death of the cross. It is a great and a powerful force in solving the problems of life. It is doing many people great good. It is not confined to a few sects, or to one sect, but is a wide far-reaching movement.

But there lurks one danger in this which is very grave. I do not mean that it leads to moral laxity, or antinomianism, but that it leads to forgetfulness of others. It does not emphasize that method of Jesus which says that [one] must save our life by forgetting it, but rather that we must save our lives by remembering them. The great results of our sin, the ones that are lasting and eternal, do not manifest themselves in the diseases of our body, or in the diseases of our mind. The great cruel results of our sins are the results of disease and moral death which are visited upon the shoulders of others. It is perfectly easy for one who has plenty of money, a good home, a round of friends, to cure himself of the sins of the flesh, but this power of healthy mindedness, but that does not remove the burden of disease from those who have born the burden of his prosperity, and carried away upon their shoulders the ashes of his sin. It would be perfectly easy for a man like a McCall or a McCready to administer to his conscience the anesthetic of mental science and free himself from the remorse of conscience by his blind belief that evil does not exist. Yet upon other shoulders rests the burden that he has placed there. It would be a comparatively easy thing for the man who has sinned the

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), American philosopher and essayist. Phillips Brooks (1835-1893), American Episcopal clergyman and author.

sins of the flesh, and gone his way to convince himself of the non-existence of pain, and suffering, but along the way where he has trod are many spots where the green grass cannot grow, and there are many burdens of pain, suffering and moral depravity that he has helped to make, but the power to forget these which comes from this new affection, does not remove the burden from the shoulders of the stragglers along by the way. The illusion of evil may no longer exist for him, but it still exists for those to whom he has made it an eternal reality.

This relationship of religion to health is not a final and all-inclusive relationship. Good health is but a part of the equipment of the religious life. He who limits the confines of his religious life to this one thing is hardly more than the fat slick and contented man whose contentment is a sign not of tremendous power, but lack of insight and appreciation, a public confession that life is regarded merely as bounded by the comforts of the body and the flesh.