

## THE RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS OF MENTAL ILL-HEALTH\*

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It is often customary at the beginning of a speech to say: 'I don't feel worthy, I don't feel equipped, I don't know why I was asked to speak.' It is true that I don't feel worthy and I don't know why I was chosen to speak—but I would like to say at the outset that on this particular problem of 'The religious implications of mental ill-health' I do feel equipped to speak. I say this not because I happen to wear a minister's garb, not because I have spent quite a number of years in dealing with religious matters—but because I myself have had the misfortune (and good fortune) to be 'brought to my senses' by a certain degree of mental disorder.

It would be easy for me, on an occasion like this, to adopt a dogmatic attitude, to talk down to you, to pronounce the dictates of religion; and then to indicate the relationship between religion and the work that is being done for mental health. This is not my purpose nor my intention. I am here not to speak dogmatically, but to discuss with you this particular problem of the relative contributions of technical scientific work done to promote the mental health of the community, and of work at the strictly religious level.

## MADNESS AND BADNESS

Once upon a time there prevailed the notion that madness, in just about every form, indicated possession by an evil spirit. The priest would be called in. An exorcism would be performed and possibly in some or other case an evil spirit would be cast out. Sanity would return to the person thus dispossessed, and it would be attributed to the removal of a moral evil. There were of course the many others who were not cured in this way. As a result of their insanity they were isolated in asylums, and left there indefinitely to deteriorate until time itself brought an end to their madness by ending their lives.

We may say 'once upon a time' as if we were entirely enlightened on this subject. Unfortunately right in this present year of 1963 we find that in many ways this notion of some moral evil, something of the devil, is associated with mental illness. There are those who would shun a mentally ill person as they would shun a leper. There are many others who are perhaps more enlightened, more *blasé* about the question; but, in the ultimate analysis, they adopt the attitude that unless there is some sort of divine intervention—unless religion can work overtime—there is no point in hoping for a cure. On this point I protest that any overstatement of the truth is the worst kind of error. If religion, however important and necessary it may be, makes an overstatement of its case, it destroys its case. It is better to claim less and achieve more than to claim some extraordinary prowess and then be proved impotent.

## RELIGION IN PROPER PERSPECTIVE

Religion is naturally, from my point of view, of the utmost importance in every human life. I would not be loyal to my cloth or my calling if I were to cast any sort of disrepute on genuine religion. But I must state at this

point that I do not defend religion where it makes itself defenceless. I do not defend religion where it would intrude into the strictly scientific and philosophical spheres and dabble at that level with those sciences. I would like to establish clearly, in the minds of everyone present, that my attitude towards psychiatry, towards psychology, towards all the advances that have been made in the technical treatment of mental illness, is an attitude of deep respect. Without these technical sciences and advances religion would fail to know where to meet its own particular problem at its own proper level.

It is a fact that many forms of religion cause their adherents to look askance at psychiatry. Unfortunately these particular forms of religion only too often accentuate and increase the incidence of mental ill-health. A religion which sets itself up to dictate at all costs, to leave nothing to the individual, to give no liberty of thought whatsoever, to impose itself as a persuasion without giving conviction—such a religion can lead to intense anxiety and hence to all sorts of mental and nervous aberration. In the work that I have been privileged to do over the past few years, I have been acutely aware of this problem. The big question that always comes to my mind when I have to deal with a person who is mentally disturbed is whether or not the moment has arrived to introduce the discussion of religion. As I mentioned, in spite of the fact that I am a minister of religion, I did have the experience of a mental disorder. I regard it now as a great blessing, but at the time I regarded it as shameful, because of my ignorance, that I should have to have recourse to the help of a psychiatrist. It was only after this episode that I came to the full realization that God Himself is at His best only when we are relaxed. This might sound strange. How can our state of relaxation affect God? It does not require much imagination to realize that a mental disorder of any kind distorts reality. If the God whom I seek through religion is a distorted reality, it is better that I do without Him. Praying about troubles in certain states of mental disorder is but a subtle way of thinking of oneself. Therefore it is not a bad thing at times, even when one is a minister of religion, to pretend to be an atheist—to pretend that there is no God!—in order to come down to an appreciation of the potential of technical work at the natural level to promote the well-being, both physical and mental, of man.

Unless we reach a point where we are convinced, and not merely persuaded, that there is a force greater than ourselves, that force is just a convenience when we need it, and a nuisance when we don't. It is thus no harm for any one of us to be reduced to a state where we feel that God has abandoned us. It is only from evidence that we can check the credentials of One whose word we accept.

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If we look for it, we shall find clear evidence for the reality of a force greater than ourselves. Call this force what you will, God, Energy, Being, Love—it is an irremovable reality that can never be dismissed.

#### THE STATE OF HUMAN SOCIETY

As we sit here on this evening of 14 May 1963, it is not necessary for us to be religious to know that human society is in a state of distressing disorder. Within our very selves we are conscious of disorder. This is a fact we cannot deny, a fact we must face. But whence comes this disorder? How is it to be explained? Only too often we turn a blind eye to this problem—we are not sufficiently concerned or interested. We content ourselves with the present moment, distracting ourselves from the underlying causes of disturbance and disruption.

Anyone who begins to think seriously of the causes of things, whether this be at the technical level as a psychiatrist or at the religious level as a minister of religion—anyone who takes an interest in mental health problems and the contribution of hereditary factors in mental disorder, must pursue effects and causes until the ultimate cause is reached. This is a philosophical development of thought—a working back, with the help of science, through secondary causes to the cause beyond which there is no other cause. In other words, to that Being in which alone the complete explanation of all other beings is to be found.

From the religious point of view (I speak here not as a Catholic or non-Catholic or Jew, but purely at the level of natural religion), disorder is best explained in terms of a breakdown in communication between the creature and its Creator. The way in which we define religion depends upon our philosophy, but there are certain elements in such a definition that cannot be omitted. I would like to put forward a definition that meets with my acceptance. Religion, as I understand it, in its most general form, is essentially a voluntary subjection of oneself to a higher being. The commonest term for this Being in the English language is God. Call it what you like—but you are not religious unless you are subject to a higher being, and unless your subjection is voluntary.

We might regard religion as the oil poured into the engine of a motor vehicle. Provided all the parts of the engine are properly adjusted, the supply of oil will enable those parts to coordinate and produce the desired effect. The moment, however, that the engine is deprived of oil, friction sets in between the parts—and a breakdown of proper communication of part with part is the result. There must be a dismantling, an analysis, and a replacement. When, once again, the parts are properly adjusted, they will coordinate correctly and fruitfully, provided the oil supply is maintained and replenished according to need.

Religion began with the creation of rational beings who were able not merely to subject themselves to their Creator in a slavish manner, but who, because of their free will, could make this subjection voluntary. The disorder arose when there was a breakdown in proper relationship. And this was the result of the omission on the part of the creature to keep himself properly tuned with religion, which is the oil of the spirit. By an act of insubordination—a refusal to keep his proper place—man disrupted his

communication with God.

#### ADAM'S BADNESS — MAN'S MADNESS

Whether or not we accept the Bible story of Adam and Eve, our philosophical investigation of causes and effects will lead us to conclude that there was a first man who brought most of the trouble down upon us. If we accept that his action was bad—inasmuch as it was an act of insubordination—then we must accept the fact that one of the results of that action was the madness of humanity, using this expression in its broadest sense, to include every disorder in man. We don't like to use the term 'madness' unduly, but it does express the situation in which humanity finds itself. The mad things we do, even when we are reputedly as normal as our neighbour, are many in number.

If we are fanatically religious, we attribute all madness to badness. It is here that, only too often, I have found many ministers of religion, in good faith, make a very serious mistake of assessment. They fail to realize clearly that there is a breakdown—there is disorder—and that we inherit this. They forget that very often it is the factors over which the particular person has no control that cause his apparent refusal to submit to the will of God. They call upon the patient to say his prayers. They condemn him for his evil actions, they break his spirit. The last state of that man is inevitably worse than the first.

If we could go back to the beginning of mankind and start afresh we might indeed be able to bring the full force of religion to bear upon our development and thus maintain good mental health. One of our old and wise professors of theology used to discuss this problem with us when we criticized Adam for the unfortunate legacy of disorder he left us. He always concluded the discussion by saying: 'Look, if Adam hadn't done it for you, you would have done it for yourselves!' Even if we could go back and take the place of the first man we should probably cause a disruption of communication with the Creator—because of our pride of life—and would probably finish up just as we are today.

However, it is a fact that we do start life at a disadvantage inasmuch as the damage has been done before we arrive on the scene. In considering mental ill-health, therefore, we are not dealing with an exclusively moral problem. We may well be dealing with certain aspects of morality, but we must not think of mental illness as sinfulness. When we are confronted with a genuine case of mental disorder, whether neurosis or psychosis, we must never overlook the hereditary and environmental factors that have contributed to it. We cannot blame the illness entirely upon the individual afflicted by it. He is only to blame in so far as he has deliberately aggravated his condition or knowingly refused to take the means to improve himself.

Considering this, we must never lose sight of the fact that disorder exists at every level. Therefore, in dealing with problems of mental ill-health, if I discover a disorder at the psychological level, it is pointless to attack that disorder at the religious level. We must at all costs give religion its due, but never at the expense of well-founded psychological techniques.

I have come upon instances where certain attitudes on the part of ministers of religion have led superintendents of hospitals and institutions to ask them not to visit the patients under their care. In most of these instances my sympathies have lain with the hospital authorities. Only too often the confidence of the patient in the psychiatric treatment he is receiving is destroyed by the reflection cast upon psychiatry by the critical or even thoughtless remark of the minister.

#### CONCLUSION

It is not for me to tell you that you all have suddenly to become fanatically religious. But if your minds are sound, if you can judge clearly and will freely, then religion can be of the greatest value. It is not a resort or a refuge, it is not a form of slavery. It is an acceptance of the revealed Word of God.

If you are a neurotic, then you must ask yourself these questions: 'Am I sufficiently relaxed to allow religion to play a part in my life? Is my judgment clear? Is my will free? Is my attitude towards reality sound and equilibrated so that in accepting religion I shall not warp or twist it to suit myself?'

Finally, if you are psychotic there is no point in being

afraid of the possibly drastic treatment necessary to restore mental health. There is no sense in maintaining that God would be displeased with you for seeking the natural help you need.

May I take this opportunity of expressing my appreciation of the wonderful work done by psychologists and psychiatrists and by the teams of workers who assist them to make their work effective and enduring. May I apologize to them for the many possible disturbances I might have caused and others of my calling might have caused, through our lack of understanding and appreciation of the real value of psychiatry. This science has obviously not reached a climax, it is not perfect, it still has a long way to go. But I wish to compliment psychiatry and the psychiatrist for the tremendous contribution they have made to the re-establishment of the natural mental equilibrium of thousands of patients. Without this help a disturbed person is incapable of being safely and soundly religious.

To you all I extend the wish that your health may always be good, and the suggestion that if you are ill you do not hesitate to find help where it is to be found. In particular may your mental health be excellent, and may your religion prosper.