EDITORIAL

Christmas 1982: religion, science and faith

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The practice of medicine is rooted in careful observation and correct reasoning, but its acceptance by patients and its effect in treating illness depend greatly upon an imponderable ethic — the Golden Rule. Although there were many healers in the preceding millenia, medicine as we now know it began when Hippocrates harmonized a scientific approach with this imperative, the central teaching of the founders, scholars and philosophers of religious belief. Erikson,[1] in a lecture on the Golden Rule, considered ethical rules to be "based on a love of ideals to be striven for — ideals that hold up to us some highest good, some definition of perfection, and some promise of self-realization". Although the word "religion" is burdened with innumerable connotations, some of them negative, it can still be called on to stand for the impulse that inclines us to seek the highest good, perfection, and self-realization, the impulse that elevates the practice of medicine from a technique to an art, that compels the physician to look beyond the canons of science for understanding and guidance.

In many ways science and religion appear to differ vastly in style and substance: while religion can be authoritarian, science tries to be democratic; while most religious systems are committed to absolute beliefs, the scientific method continually challenges and dethrones accepted concepts, often despite the dogmatism of the individual scientist; while religion grows through mass acceptance, science progresses through the intellectual effort of a few; while religion is divided into thousands of sects, science works for, and sometimes finds, consensus. Although none of these contrasts means that science and religion are rivals competing for the same territory, they certainly may distract the medical practitioner from seeing the essential unity of science and religion.

The link between science and religion is faith. One of the most impressive medical agnostics of our era was Homer W. Smith, a noted renal physiologist. His best known book, *Man and His Gods*,[2] was an exposé of the genesis and institutionalization of religious beliefs, but in a smaller work, *Kamongo, or, the Lungfish and the Padre*,[3] he came to grips with the problem of faith. Joel, the agnostic, tells the Padre that, while not denying the possibility of an Unknown, he feels it would be harmful to shape his life in any way on a postulate that cannot be tested. As the conversation proceeds, however, he characterizes life as a whirlpool, charged by sunlight, seeking homeostasis, beginning as a slave to its environment and eventually gaining domination over it. The Padre could have interrupted to say that Joel was organizing his emotions around certain assumptions, and that this process was a faith. Faith is the extension of human knowledge that is needed to deal with our environment and personal lives.[4] Reason alone cannot prove the truth of anything; we can only accept something as true in the ever-changing context of what we know — and believe. Pascal,[5] referring to proofs of the existence of God, wrote "Always to have proofs ready is too much trouble. . . .The reason acts slowly, with so many examinations, and on so many principles which must always be present, that every hour it falls asleep, or wanders through want of having all its principles present."

In honouring Max Planck on his 60th birthday, Einstein said: "There is no logical path to these laws [of physics]; only intuition, resting on a sympathetic understanding of experience, can reach them. . . .The state of mind which enables a man to do work of this kind is akin to that of the religious worshipper or the lover; the daily effort comes from no deliberate intention or program, but straight from the heart."[6] This is not to say, as Einstein points out in another essay, that phenomena are not to be explained through reason: "Scientific research can reduce superstition by encouraging people to think and survey things in terms of cause and effect. Certain it is that a conviction, akin to religious feeling, of the rationality or intelligibility of the world lies behind all scientific work of a higher nature."[7]

Whitehead[8] saw this faith as springing from the very nature of things: "The faith in the order of nature which has made possible the growth of science is a particular example of a deeper faith. This faith cannot be justified by any inductive generalization. It springs from direct inspection of the nature of things as disclosed in our own immediate present experience." Browne[9] considered that revealed religion and nature (science) are parallel paths to God: "Thus there are two Books from whence I collect my Divinity; besides that written one of God, another of His servant Nature, that universal and publick Manuscript, that lies expans'd unto the Eyes of

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all: those that never saw Him in the one, have discovered Him in the other."[9]

When science and religion are harmonized, it is the intellect, the supposed enemy of faith, that progresses: "Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone, he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism."[10]

Further, the complete commitment of the intellect to this faith offers the greatest personal fulfilment. After an evening in Mexico with Hans Zinsser, Hart Crane, one of America's most powerful and lyric poets, wrote a brief rhapsody flashing with images of Zinsser's life and his study of typhus. He concluded by paraphrasing what the agnostic Zinsser said as he was contemplating his own untimely death: "You cannot heed the negative, so might go on to undeserved doom... [You] must therefore loose yourself within a pattern's mastery that you can conceive, that you can yield to — by which also you win and gain mastery and happiness which is your own from birth."[11]

Whoever enters the temple of healing, then, has two reasons to have faith: the unceasing moral force that bore the ethic of Hippocrates intact to us through 25 centuries, and the glimmering, ever-growing structure of scientific knowledge. This faith will help the physician to play a creative role in the "inescapable predicaments", "fated conditions" and "vital choices" that doctor and patient must share,[12] to gain strength from truly ethical acts that enhance a mutuality between the "doer" and the "other",[13] and to contribute to the conquest by the human intellect of those forces in the order of nature that promote disease and distress.

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