Anjalika Chalamgari

Medicine and Spirituality Unified: What We Need in this Pandemic

“If God wants me to get this virus, then there’s nothing I can do to stop it.” This is a sentiment I’ve been hearing quite often lately. At face-value, it just seems like one of the countless excuses ignoramuses have been using to explain away their poor isolation technique. A casual statement they hope to be both logically infallible and impossible to argue against.

And it is, usually. What does one say to someone with an unassailable faith in religious predestination, in religious absolutism? Who ultimately has the most authority: God or medicine?

It is a question we have seen come up time and time again amidst the global pandemic. A Louisiana church near Baton Rouge recently refused to stop holding in-person services despite recommendations to practice social distancing. “Satan and a virus will not stop us,” so says the Reverend Tony Spell. “God will shield us from all harm and sickness. We are not afraid. We are called by God to stand against the Antichrist creeping into America’s borders...” (Plaisance). Meanwhile, on the Internet, the Christian blog site Christianity Today denounced our growing idolization of doctors, quoting Orthodox theologian Jean-Claude Larchet: “...[modern medicine] encourages patients to consider that both their state and their fate lie entirely in the hands of the physician...and that the only way they can endure their suffering is to look passively to medicine for any hope of relief or healing” (Denison).

It is an eternal conflict, a harsh juxtaposition. God as the physician or the physician as God.

I am reminded, in having this debate, of the philosophy of the Stoics, particularly of Seneca’s On Providence and On Firmness. The two treatises aim to answer the long-wrought paradox of theology: why does God make good men suffer? Seneca suggests that suffering is necessary to a man’s development, necessary to becoming a virtuous soul. He makes what I think is one of the first important connections of the physician with God:

[If you will reflect that for the sake of being cured the sick sometimes have their bones scraped and removed, and their veins pulled out, and that sometimes members are amputated which could not be left without causing destruction to the whole body, you will allow yourself to be convinced of this as well, that ills are sometimes for the good of those to whom they come. (Seneca, On Providence 1-2; sec.3)]

That the practice of the physician is inherently for one’s good directly translates to the work of God, who takes men through tribulations for their good. This direct comparison only furthers the doctor’s image of supremacy; the doctor is, like God, a benevolent, paternalistic figure.

“What physician gets angry with a lunatic...The wise man’s feelings towards all men is that of the physician towards his patients...And so, he is not even irritated if the sick...venture to be somewhat impertinent” (Seneca, On Firmness 2-4; sec. 13). The physician is the “wise man” who must deal with the “lunatic” -- he is never “angry” or “irritated” at their “[impertinence].” There exists increasingly the notion here of a paternalistic physician and a paternalistic God, of a benevolent physician and a benevolent God. The interchangeability is clear.

And yet, despite the doctor’s God complex, there always seems to be a sort of deference, an obedience to religion. The Hippocratic Writings is perhaps the earliest examples of this. A compilation of essays, case notes, and patient histories, the Writings attempt to establish medicine as a true, reputable science. It seeks to ward off the demeaning influence of quacks and nay-sayers through a logical presentation of facts and evidence.
The Sacred Diseases section is no different. It posits that certain maladies are not in fact the work of divine intervention, as has been claimed by so-called “witch-doctors” and the like. They require, as many other diseases do, the use of medical remedies and practices.

But the author doesn’t fully attempt to rid the reader of the role God plays in health either:

Personally, I believe that human bodies cannot be polluted by a god... But if the human body is polluted by some other agency or is harmed in some way, then the presence of a god would be more likely to purify and sanctify it than pollute it. It is the deity who purifies, sanctifies, and cleanses us from the greatest and most unholy of our sins... (240)

They argue that the “presence of a god would be more likely to purify [the body],” and that “it is the deity who purifies us from...sins.” God is still important to medicine, according to the author, as a healing agent, a “[cleansing]” agent. It’s an echo of the Louisiana Reverend’s sentiments, of the belief that God can act as the ultimate defense against illnesses and viruses as infectious as COVID-19.

So, who supersedes who? Is it, as the Stoics claim, the physician that is a God, or is it, as the Writings denote, God who is the ultimate physician?

I think it’s neither. That no one authority has all that power, all that influence. I agree with Dr. Rafael Campo, who in his The Poetry of Healing attempted to meld the humanities and medicine:

These days, my version of the physician’s “God complex” is to pray secretly at the bedsides of my patients, sometimes think myself silly for doing it, but finding it impossible not to do so. Whatever my religion may be...I understand now that one’s faith is intensely personal, in the same way each individual has his own hopes and dreams, and that in can be shared not only within the thick walls of churches but also in the open wards of a hospital. (61)

That an individual’s “hopes and dreams” should be shared in the church and the hospital; that the “physician’s ‘God complex’” isn’t a mark of supremacy but a common optimism, a prayer said “secretly at the bedsides of [their] patients.” Medicine will always involve the sustenance of the soul. It is inextricably linked to our faith in hope-- to some, our faith in God.

But we cannot put all our loyalty into one religious, one hope-based authority. We cannot ignore public health warnings for the belief that our trust alone will save us. Medicine, factual and evidence-based, is equally required.

Like Robert Burton writes in The Anatomy of Melancholy:

If any physician in the meantime shall infer... and find himself grieved that I have intruded into his profession, I will tell him in brief, I do not otherwise by them, than they do by us... It is a disease of the soul on which I am to treat, and as much appertaining to a divine as to a physician, and who knows not what an agreement there is betwixt these two professions.

There is an “agreement” between the “divine” and the “physician,” an aligned purpose: to treat the “[diseases] of the soul.” As the global pandemic takes the world into new, uncharted territory, now more than ever do we need that unified medicine and spirituality. It is only together that we will ever be able to deal with the scientific and social ramifications of COVID-19.

Works Cited

