

Foreword

The world of mental health and illness is a strange place. It is strange, not because people are strange, but because it is essentially mysterious. What exactly do we mean by mental illness? How can a mind be ill? Indeed, how can something immaterial be either broken or mended? It is clear that whatever mental illness is, it is not the same as measles or influenza. It may be that some claim to have tracked down biological, neurological, or genetic causes for our psychological disturbances. But such explanations, whilst arguably telling us from where such experiences come from, do little to inform us of what they actually are. Asking the question “what does it mean to experience schizophrenia” is a quite different question from asking what causes it. The mistake we often make in relation to understanding mental illness is allowing ourselves to be convinced that once we think that we have discovered the pathological root of the condition, we know what it is. It’s really not as simple as that.

It is only relatively recently that the types of experiences that we now describe in terms of mental illness have come to be defined purely in pathological, bodily terms. If we trace the history of what has come to be known as mental illness, it becomes quite clear that the experiences that we now describe in terms of diagnoses and symptoms have been open to a multitude of different interpretations. At one point in history strange and mysterious experiences, behaviors, and ways of talking about the world were considered gifts from the gods, leading to respect, reverence and awe. At another point such experiences were assumed to be the product of demons, leading to exorcism and exclusion. Later the cause of such experiences came to be located in such things as poor parenting, pathological families, sexual abuse, and difficult social conditions, thus moving the mystery outwards into family and community. Nowadays we are taught that we should interpret unusual experiences in terms of biology, neurology, and genetics, thus turning the locus of interest inwards towards the individual. So we are constantly shifting the causes and outcomes of mental illness upwards, outwards, inwards. Each of our explanations requires of us a different set of understandings, and each of our interpretations has a profound effect on

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how we choose to live with those who experience things that are different from the accepted norm.

But the problem with any kind of explanatory framework is that whilst it allows you to see some things it inevitably prevents you from seeing other things. If we choose to interpret those clusters of experiences that make up the concepts of mental illness as pathology, then that is what we will see. But humans are much more than predetermined biological units. Even if the causes of mental illness were conclusively shown to be biological in nature (and Elahe Hessamfar in this book makes a strong case that this cannot be done), there would still be deep and profound issues that would require to be explored deeply before any claim of understanding mental illness could find justification. I repeat, finding the cause of something does not tell us what it is or what it means. That takes a different set of skills and a whole new way of looking at people. Mental illnesses are not biological entities any more that they are social, psychological, theological, or spiritual entities. They are occurrences that happen within the life narratives of real individuals in real situations who require to be recognized as whole persons within whom each of these aspects—biological, psychosocial, theological, spiritual—need to be recognized as fundamental building blocks that are necessary in order that we can truly discover what mental illness is, rather than what may or may not be its root cause. Working out what mental illness is and what it means requires a complex interdisciplinary conversation that simply cannot and must not be dominated by any single perspective.

One of the problems for the church is the temptation to overly prioritize one particular way of seeing and interpreting mental illness and to take that as its beginning point for pastoral care and understanding. Arguably this is precisely what has happened over the past forty years or so as psychology and psychological explanations for mental health issues has taken priority over the theological. We might choose to take psychiatric definitions as the beginning point of our theological and pastoral reflections. In that case we take common assumptions and interpretations of human behaviors that are classified by psychiatrists as illness and try to develop theological understandings and pastoral strategies accordingly. That is fine, except that psychiatric diagnoses and definitions are intended for psychiatrists, to enable them to carry out the particular tasks that they have been trained to do. It may be that within the realm of psychiatry understandings of mental illness that focus on neurology, genetics, and pharmacology are perceived as the right place to begin. However, is that the right place of the church to begin? Elahe Hessamfar challenges the church to begin from a different place; to recognize the hermeneutical complexities of mental health and illness and to boldly enter the conversation as theologians who may well challenge

established understandings, rather than as neutral bystanders who assume that conformation to established wisdom is the safest place to stand.

For Elahe the place to begin to understand mental illness and the nature of the churches response to it lies deep within Scripture and theology. There, alongside of some fascinating and I imagine, controversial, critiques of contemporary mental health care, she finds a new interpretation of mental illness. This new way of seeing mental illness will be deeply challenging to many. Some will see it as liberating, some will see it as threatening. Either way, Elahe's important book opens up some fresh, critical, and very important theological space within which new conversations can be begun which will undoubtedly lead to a deeper understanding of the role of the church in mental health care, alongside of new ways in which we can offer care which is truly theological and faithful. This is a deeply theological book that brings with it a new perspective and a new world within which we can seek to understand the mystery of mental health and illness. Whether you agree with it or not, this book will certainly challenge you and leave you with no choice other than to respond.

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