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THE RELATION OF "SANITATION" TO DEATH AND DISEASE

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THE subject of this communication forms the root of many questions modern public health has been trying so hard to answer of late years; first, what are the economic, efficient, procedures of real public health; second, what can we discard with profit from our old armamentarium; third, what new public health procedures should be adopted? I intend to discuss here chiefly the second, i.e., what can we discard?

The earlier conceptions of public health identified dirt with disease, holding that one made, or included in some way, the other. But as we go deeper and deeper into the real causes of disease, direct or indirect, dirt loses significance more and more, and we recognize that the saying, "Dirt causes disease," is one of those glittering generalities that really mean nothing or is even false.

We repeat, some of us often and as a public health maxim, "Cleanliness is next to godliness." But is it? In what public health sense is that saying true? This phrase on the surface seems to mean, is certainly usually used to mean, that cleanliness protects against disease; and that the protection is so good as to rank below nothing but godliness. But who would dare to claim godliness protects against sickness at all? Does the unvaccinated bishop escape smallpox or the vaccinated burglar succumb?

Are the ninety per cent. of our people who suffer from measles all godless? We average by the time we reach adult life over three infections apiece, counting only the accepted children's diseases! Are children more godless than adults? Godliness is no protection provided infection can reach us. Ungodliness does not produce disease, provided infection is excluded. It was not the heathen who suffered syphilis, tuberculosis; they were free until Christian nations, wallowing in both diseases, brought both to them. Then if godliness is no protection, why is cleanliness landed as being almost as good, since that merely means cleanliness is almost as good as zero!