

RELIGIOSITY AND MENTAL HEALTH

Izet Pajević, Osman Sinanović & Mevludin Hasanović

University Clinical Centre Tuzla, Trnovac b.b, 75000 Tuzla, Bosna i Hercegovina

SUMMARY

Mental health is not considered only as absence of mental disorders, but rather as the achievement of higher standards of available psychical potentials. True devotion and obedience to The God give the one a huge and incredible strength, constant source of spiritual emotional and moral energy, which is of help in resisting destructive and slavery attacks of the environment and its materialistic-consuming tendencies, as well as social and mental disruption. According to the opinion of numerous worldwide recognized mental health experts, humankind of today is confronted with a number of problems, which are the consequence of spiritual and moral-ethical degradation of human being. Therefore, religiosity became the field of interest of mental health researchers. The results of new studies undoubtedly indicate beneficial effects of religion on life and mental health in humans. Religiosity reduces tendencies for risky behaviour, impulsive reactions and aggression; it corrects tendencies towards psychopathic and paranoid behaviour, reduces converse, depressive and schizoid tendency, and provides successful overcome of emotional conflicts. In comparison to low-religious adolescents, the factors such as inner conflicts, frustration, fear, anxiety, psychological trauma, low self-esteem, unbalance of psychical homeostasis, emotional instability, and negative psychical energy are less present in highly religious adolescents and neutralized in a healthier and more efficient way. Beneficial impact of religion on mental health derives from precise cognitive-behavioural patterns, which provide a clear life orientation, solid basis and safe frames for personality development, assuring human to be continually on the way to achieve its own generic essence and reach its own maturity and self-actualization.

Key words: religiosity – health – psychical stability – adolescence

* * * * *

HEALTH, MEDICINE, RELIGION

Contemporary medicine tends to be oriented more to the causes of medical disorders and less to their consequences, developing prevention. But, being secularized like consuming society to which it serves, medicine is becoming more and more self-sufficient, taking in consideration only disorder while neglecting its bearer - human being. Modern society, free of control mechanisms of moral and ethical standards reaching an unexpected scientific and technological advancement, does not offer safety and spiritual

peace to human, but it is exposing him/her to everyday stress, depression, chronic anxiety, and existential insecurity.

Diminishing traditional values, family, religiosity, moral behavior, moderation, and real values of human life, the modern social trends promoted by mass-media are mainly based on greed for material values and short-term pleasures, thereby supporting and generating dependence on transient contents, which lead to futility, absurdity and spiritual suffering. Confronted with catastrophic consequences which occur as a result of degradation of basic moral-ethical values on

which human existence is based on, and with ignorance of basic spiritual and psychical needs, contemporary medical practice must start accepting authentic principles of human behavior.

Beside all other given benefits, The Creator, through His Prophets, announced the Holy books, which present instruction to human, as a reasonable being, for healthy and happy life in this world and afterlife. Is there a need to particularly emphasize that physical and mental health and interpersonal relationships depend on how an individual and social life is adjusted to this instruction? All troubles that one is confronted with are the results of one's action that is not adjusted to God's order. Using available goods unintentionally, inconsiderate and ignorant people eventually destroy these goods.

SEARCHING FOR SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

A lot of people feel the necessity to return to spiritual values, realizing the importance of religion, and wishing to come closer to faith, to know and practice it. But there are a lot of obstacles on that way, which could discourage effort of a human in pursuit of personal spiritual identity. More than ever, it seems that today there are those who attempt to interfere between a human and His Creator (Magnificent God), and recruit him/her for their interest and aims.

Servants of consuming society, industry of entertainment and all kinds of blemishes, mass media and alike, do not choose instruments to realize their intentions and assumed plans and programs. With permanent attack to senses, in minds and hearts of humans they place the contents made and packed according to directions from centers for explorations of market and public opinion which, using the achievements of modern science, aim to find the most efficient way to shape our taste, benumb our awareness and consciousness, break "the chains" of shame, and introduce us in the circle of their faithful consumers, followers and fans.

The youth is exposed to a special attack in a

period of maturation while opening to the world, searching for the new life contents and new models, their own place in the adult world and definitely choose their way of life and select a certain life style. In addition, the techniques of fast "enlightenment", "spiritual purification", developing "supernatural ability", as well as large number of different psychotherapeutic schools are very popular today. Mainly with the aim of gaining material profit, their protagonists attempt to enforce them as a solution to a modern human for his/her mental trouble and constant feeling of inner emptiness and non-sense.

MODERN SOCIETY AND YOUTH

In modern civilized life there is no factor that acts in the way to direct a selection on the path of simple goodness and decency, except human inborn feeling for these values. In some mysterious way, disorders of moral behavior often lead not only to the loss of anything that we consider good and decent, but to active hostility against that. Modern civilization is undermined by the process of genetic degradation that is the consequence of absence of the factors that cause selective pressure on development and maintaining social and moral norms of behavior, although they, by development of socialization, become more and more necessary.

Having in mind that the mental image, which defines generation and people of one nation, is extensively determined by upbringing and education, and by upbringing we could achieve things which were never achieved before, there is a need to act and help the youth develop behavioral pattern, which - analogue to the creation of antibodies in cellular "state" - leads to eradication of socially harmful phenomena. (Lorenc et al. 1984, Jaspers 1990). Having in mind the trends typical for modern society and its negative reflection on mental health in general, we are the witnesses of completely opposite experiences in adolescents.

The prevalence of mental disorders in adolescents ranges between 15% and 20%. Two of five adolescents with mental disorders have

disorder of internalization (anxiety, depression etc.). Another two of five have disorder of externalization (behavioral disorders, attention disorders). Finally, one of five adolescents has combination of emotional and behavioral disorders. Complicated and over-demanding relations in modern society, which are rapidly going beyond the frame of traditional value systems, generate whole chain of dangerous and difficult problems that adolescents are confronted with. For example, today in the USA the commonest problems of adolescents include: accidents, suicide, abuse of alcohol and psychoactive substances, early sexual activity and unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, various forms of maltreatment, youth criminal, poverty, home abandonment, Satanism, low educational level, and serious behavioral disorders (Hogarth 1991).

RELIGION AND HEALTH

In the professional and in the layman circles, there is more and more awareness that without human returning to the basic moral-ethical standards of behavior in everyday life, the most of current health problems, which already seriously endanger a huge number of people, cannot be prevented. World experts are more and more returning to religion, perceiving its beneficial effects on physical and mental health and social functioning of people. The results of some of recent studies, confirm the impact of religiosity on human health, justifying such trends in the circles of professionals interested in these topics. Undoubtedly, these studies show beneficial effects of religion on human health (Larson and Larson 1994).

It has been found out that persons with high level of devotion to religion are less depressed. It has been proved that persons not going to religion services are more likely (four-times) to commit suicide, contrary to those who are going. Decline in religion services' participation on national level is predictor of higher suicidal rate. A number of researchers report that substance abuse is

connected to the absence of religion in one's life, and that devotion to religion reduces substance abuse. Regardless whether religion especially emphasizes if alcohol should be consumed or not, those who actively participate in some religious group are consuming less alcohol compared to those who do not.

The individual, who attended religious ceremonies, regularly reported on lower levels of sadness contrary to the individuals who rarely or never attended ceremonies. The same results were obtained regardless of age, education, gender, marital status and race. Studies confirmed a reverse proportion between devotion to religion and delinquency, and the frequency of religion service participation had the strongest impact. Young delinquents showed significant deficiency in religious education. More than a half of convicted persons (65.5%) did not have any or had insignificant religious education in their homes or environment. Most of them had fathers who were not any good examples in faith. All convicted persons had significant absence of basic religious experience. That is mainly expressed in trust, the meaning of life, pessimistic and resignation life attitude and in general mood. Almost all measures of devotion have positive correlation to the life satisfaction, existential prosperity and happiness (Larson and Larson 1994).

RELIGIOSITY AND PSYCHICAL STABILITY

Beneficial impact of religion on mental health is confirmed by studies about the impact of religiosity on mental balance in a human. Religious people show high level of satisfaction of basic psychical needs. Religiosity reduces the tendency to high-risk behavior, impulsive reactions, aggression; it corrects a tendency towards psychopathological and paranoid behavior, as well as conversed, depressed and schizoid behavior, and provides successful overcome of emotional conflicts. It exerts influence on changes in the structure of personality characteristics, defensive direction and the structure of neurotic dimensions,

thereby improving psychical development, expanding healthy, and narrowing unhealthy states, giving emotional stability, strengthening the control of impulses, developing moral consciousness and ethical values, and affirming educational and cognitive potentials of personality. Religious practice provides clear life direction, solid basis and safe frames for personality development, and thereby assures human to be continually on the way to achieve his own generic essence and reach his maturity and self-actualization. (Pajević 1999).

The result of studies has showed that religiosity has a positive impact on mental health and maturation in adolescents. The factors such as inner conflicts, frustrations, fear, anxiety, psychical trauma, low self-esteem, and unbalance of psychical homeostasis are less present in highly religious adolescents. Their neutralization of negative energy, in a healthier and more efficient way, provides right perception of reality, faster socialization, greater resistance to frustration, more efficient way of coping with conflict situations, greater pleasure, more aspiration towards higher goals, and rational use of psychical energy (Pajević 2003).

SALUTOGENIC MECHANISMS OF RELIGIOSITY

Religion is a system of reliance in existence and verity of Superior Transcendental Being, with basic dimensions of belief, to which all other dimension of personality are adapted. The term religion derives from the Latin word *religare*, which indicates the initiate or reestablished connection with the Divine Being, and from the Latin word *relegere*, meaning to discern, again to perceive the relationship and connection of a human with the Divine Being.

Achieving the awareness of the existence of God the Creator, one overcomes the feeling of existential insecurity, which constantly forces him/her to reach the proof of reality of its own existence through relation with objects in his/her environment. In fact, in order to be convinced in

his/her existence, one needs to have some other point, some other certainty to maintain that awareness. Therefore, a human is constantly attaching himself to objects from his direct environment (relatives, friends, sympathizers, property, job, hobby, pets, passions, pleasures, food, and addiction substances). Since these objects are inconstant and transient, they do not provide solid and permanent relation with reality. Therefore, a human is in constant fear of losing these objects as well as vital connection with reality. It is the fear of detachment (separation anxiety) that presents a basic source of dissatisfaction from which contemporary humankind suffers. In this context, a fear of death is separation anxiety indeed. Death cuts all connections with this world, thereby, if a human takes this material world as the only certainty, death presents horrible threat of losing this certainty and consequently a threat of disappearance in “nothingness”. On the other hand, losing any of the objects a human is connected to, suggests inevitable death, which will separate him from anything he loves and enjoys, thus, separation anxiety is underlying the fear of death.

A contemporary human attempt to exist beyond the frames of traditional system of values, like religion, actually has the function to properly satisfy a human’s need for attachment. Therefore, in the absence of connection with absolute, Eternal Existence (God), a human is trying to meet this need by connecting himself to transient objects, worthless idols, which he loses without doubt, again and again being exposed to separation anxiety and consequent feeling of guilt from which sorrow, sadness and depression derive.

Religion, faith in God as absolute and eternal value, teaches a human to bind himself to something that would never be lost, if his beliefs were true, and if he behaves to the codex which this belief requires. In this case, all human fears are reduced to the fear of God, i.e. the fear of breaking moral-ethical principles with certain actions, by which the connection to the Creator becomes questionable. In that way the awareness of short lasting and transience of all other objects and

relation with this objects is developing, which makes a human free from slavery to these objects, and to properly understand his place in universal order. The fear of death, as a basic fear from which all other human's fears derive, has totally different meaning for the one who is aware that after death another form of existence is coming in eternity. Believing in destiny, afterlife and the Day of Judgment, one is solving multiple dilemmas, which are constant source of insecurity and anxiety.

The impact of religiosity on mental health is multidimensional. Some of possible models, which have explained that statement, include the following:

Experimental model suggests that one's religious experience may exert an influence behavior. For example, worship (serving the God), feeling of being loved by God, and other similar experiences, can produce general change in behavior, possibly by meeting the needs that are unmet in other way.

Cognitive consistencies model, consistent exposure to religious doctrines, through participation in prayer and other devotion, is constantly reminding person to ideals. This need to behave in harmony with ideals and not by cognitive dissonance, helps continually to maintain these norms, and thereby to avoid harmful and unhealthy behavior.

Supportive subgroups model. Religious persons, in constant social environment, associate with others and they form supportive subgroups. Group pressure provides strengthening individual behavioral pattern.

Model of alternative cognitive and behavioral management of painful emotions. It is possible that religion prevents the beginning of mental disorder through the doctrines which forbid harmful deeds, and all in the frame of unique supportive environment. This prevention is especially expressed through provision of alternative cognitive and behavioral management of painful emotions, which present a basis of mental disorder (Koenig 1998).

A beneficial impact of religion on mental health, consequently, arises from precise cognitive-

behavioral patterns, which are seemingly known to all, but less and less present in everyday practice. For instance (Quir'an: VI/ 151-153; XII/23-28; XXXI/12-19):

Strongly believe in God, only Him adore, and express Praise to Him!

Be dutiful, gentle, and merciful to your parents, and treat them good!

Always watch out on justice, and take care of anyone's rights!

Do the prayer, recommend the good, prevent the evil, and patiently manage the trouble!

Do not approach to debauchery and anything that led to it avoid!

Do not commit infanticide, and do not kill anyone unfairly!¹

Treat the orphan and its property fairly – try to expand its property!

Avoid avarice and prodigality, measure and weigh properly!

Follow the straight way, perform your obligations, and do not interfere in anything unknown to you!

Do not behave with arrogance, avoid the exaggeration and indolence, and be steady!

True religious people know from experience, and researchers (Larson and Larson 1994) also confirm that religious practice:

Provides psychophysical relaxation;

Develops concentration and vigilance;

Disciplines and strengthens cognitive, emotional and volition function;

Strengthens group orientations and enables

¹ *Historically, The Magnificent God, through His prophets, announced that it is forbidden to kill people, and such laws were more or less passed by all state or social organizations, with the aim to provide peace and freedom for all people. No explanation can be found for killing the innocent because anyone has right to live! But, there were always people who were disobeying this decrees and recommendations by committing crimes against other people. Therefore, certain category of these criminals is punished by death and in some jurisprudence this punishment is still preserved. In certain situations, such as defensive wars for example, human is forced to perform such an act, and even then must keep in mind the principles of humanity and justice.*

individual for teamwork;
Helps adjustment of superego demands with reality;
Helps in solution of internal conflicts;
Liberates from tension, anxiety, phobia, and depression;
Helps adjustment to groups standards and values;
Develops self-esteem and helps in accepting own personality;
Helps in accepting and understanding others;
Develops the feeling of individual and collective responsibility;
Abets individual maturation;
Develops social consciousness;
Helps in preserving social values and standards.

FEW USEFUL RECOMMENDATIONS

It is not necessary to go far away to find our spiritual roots. Finding them in the frames of universal religious doctrines, which have been present since long time ago, it is possible to meet four basic human needs: origin, belonging, identity and orientation. On the contrary, there is a risk of developing spirituality on neurotic basis, because one cannot escape or annihilate what he is, and what he/her gain at birth.

Therefore, it is necessary to especially underline the importance of accepting the true belief, and proper way for expressing this belief, which can be achieved with good-intentional and

rational study of God's Books. Through example of God's prophets, may peace be upon them, and all sincere and devoted servants, the followers of magnificent God, we can reach the way of life which is in harmony with God's Law, which provides direction of psychophysical potentials to the straight way, finding the peace, well-being, and meaning of human existence in this temporary world.

REFERENCES

1. Hogarth RH. *Adolescent psychiatric nursing*. St Louis: Mosby Year Boo, 1991.
2. Jaspers K. *Opšta psihopatologija*. Beograd: Prosveta, 1990.
3. Koenig HG. *Handbook of Religion and Mental Health*. San Diego: Academic Press, 1998.
4. Larson BD, Larson SS. *The Forgotten Factor in Physical and Mental Health: What Does the Research Show. An Independent Study Seminar*, 1994.
5. Lorenz K. *Die acht Todsünden der zivilisierten Menschheit*, R. Piper u. Co. Verlag, München, 1974.
6. Pajević I, Sinanović O, Hasanović M. *The role of religiosity in the prevention of pathological response to stress in war veterans. The 12th Association of European Psychiatrists Congress, Geneva, Switzerland, 14-18 April 2004. Eur Psychiatry. 2004 Apr;19 Suppl 1:1s-254s.*
7. Pajević I, Sinanović O, Hasanović M. *The impact of religiosity on emotional stability during adolescence. The 12th Association of European Psychiatrists Congress, Geneva, Switzerland, 14-18 April 2004. Eur Psychiatry. 2004 Apr;19 Suppl 1:1s-254s.*

Correspondence:

Izet Pajević, MD PhD, Associate Professor of Psychiatry,
University Clinical Centre Tuzla
Trnovac b.b, 75000 Tuzla, Bosna i Hercegovina
E-mail: zikjri@bih.net.ba