

EDITORIAL

RELIGION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Religion is as old as mankind. Primitive man had primitive religions and he worshipped the elements of nature like sun, earth, air, cloud, water etc. Advances in civilisation led to institutionalised religions. The basic characteristics of all religions are similar. There is firm belief in a higher, unseen controlling power. Religion appears to be a psychological necessity for mankind. However, there may be a small minority who may transcend this need. These individuals could be genius who create new order or they may be even criminals. Religion which evolved due to basic psychological need of mankind later metamorphosed. To increase their influence over the believers the religious leaders institutionalised it into closed system and non-believers or believers of other religions were considered as heretics. This led to politicalisation of religion. Gradually religious practices developed into dogmas and superstitions. Though most religions continued changing with time many became completely fossilized.

From mental health perspective religion provides much needed guidelines which can help individuals to devise a course for their lives. Stresses and strains as well as uncertainties of life can be tolerated more easily by the believers. But many outmoded rituals and belief systems might inhibit positive growth and may lead to mental ill-health. Excessive sexual activity is decried upon by most religions and therefore it may arouse strong sense of guilt or anxiety in many. Similarly, any violation of religious rituals whether willingly or unwillingly can generate considerable anxiety. If religion has to fulfil the need for which it was generated it has to keep pace with modern times and technology. Only then it will serve the function of providing relief and succour to mankind.

Religious beliefs and practices are often contributory to the development of certain psychiatric disorders more so as regards to obsessions, anxiety and depression. Somehow, this aspect of psychopathology has not been given due consideration. For instance, Freud observed remarkable similarity between obsessive behaviour patterns and religious practices in view of their fixed, stereotyped and rigid character, their being meaningless and the anxiety that follows when specific action is not properly performed. Religion provides mechanisms for both intensifying guilt as well as alleviating it. Religion often creates guilt by setting high moral standards while on the other hand it also provides a number of methods of alleviating guilt such as confession, prayer, charity etc.

Enlightened religious practices appear to be an essential aspect of positive mental health. Sages and saints of almost all religions appear to have achieved a state of health wherein stressors of all kinds did not affect them. Though this state of emotional unpreturbability may not be achievable for average person yet religion can be greatly utilized in protecting emotional stability and positive mental health in large population.

Religious methods have often been used to treat the mentally ill. Initially the priest was the most important counsellor because he had the authority of religion along with psychological expertise. Faith and belief systems are very important constituents of psychological well-being and could be fruitfully utilised in psychotherapy. Their usage must be carefully evaluated. Hence, psychiatrists need to study religion vis-a-vis mental health more carefully as it is likely to increase the efficiency and acceptability of psychiatry to the masses.

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