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THE VIEW OF RELIGION ON MENTAL HEALTH: THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The Bible is the standard for Christianity otherwise known as the inspired word of God written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This paper seeks to assess the impact of biblical Christian teachings on mental health. It also seeks to review the modern Christianity view on mental health and compare them with scientific views. The paper was guided by the social psychology theory which posits that social influences, perception and interaction are vital in understanding social behaviour. The paper adopted a secondary research design to gather the required data for the topic. Documents review was the main method of data collection. This paper established that the Christian religious teachings had a positive view on mental health in the sense that they gave hope to the mentally ill and prescribed remedies which in turn helped in bringing about and or maintained mental health. This paper recommends that Christian religious beliefs should be upheld to improve mental health.

INTRODUCTION

The issues of mental health and illness has always been in existence on earth. It was historically recognized even before the civilization age and the scientific age (Shorter, 2008). From the perspective of religion, the biblical writers narrate how mental illness was perceived and the ways in which it was dealt with.

Research has significantly shown that members in a population that define themselves as predominantly religious or spiritual have lesser tendencies for contracting mental illnesses (Corrigan *et al.*, 2003). However, there are also studies that have shown that being religious or spiritual can actually increase the chances of one

becoming mentally ill (Cinnirella & Loewenthal, 1999).

The main determinant for whether religion and spirituality become positive or negative to the mental health of the prescribing population is in the tenets and the actual beliefs inscribed in the said religions and spiritualities.

Mental health can be defined as the cognitive, behavioral and emotional wellbeing of a person (Hackney & Sanders, 2003) and can be sometimes used to refer to a state of mind where there is no mental disorder. Mental health as a topic is important because it affects individuals' lives, their relationships with others, their societal view and even their overall physical health and wellbeing.

Mental illness, on the other hand, can be seen as the opposite of mental health where an individual is not sound cognitively, behaviorally or emotionally (Ruggeri *et al.*, (2000).

According to Mental Health America (2019), some of the signs and symptoms of mental illness in adults include social withdrawal, confused thinking, dramatic changes in eating habits, strong feeling of anger, dramatic changes in sleeping habits, strange delusional thoughts, hallucinations, suicidal tendencies, inability to cope with daily problems and activities, excessive worries, anxiety and fear, substance abuse and prolonged depression. The signs slightly vary for older preadolescence children and for younger children.

The purpose of this paper was to determine the effects religiosity, Christianity and spirituality have on mental illness and mental health in general. Religiosity can be defined as the state or act of being excessively religious. Spirituality, on the other hand, can be seen as an orientation towards religious and sacred things. It can then be argued that religiosity is a subset of spirituality because religiousness in itself is an orientation. Christianity, on the other hand, can be defined as a religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, with the beliefs and practices entrenched in the bible as the main source of reference (Setzer, 2004). This study paper approaches the topic of mental health from the biblical perspective with a Christianity worldview.

The methodology involved a systematic review and the metasynthesis method. This method involved the synthesis of the Bible on the topic of mental health and mental illness. This is reading the scriptures and understanding what the Bible says about mental health generally, its causes, signs and symptoms, prevention and remedy. The paper was guided by the social psychology theory which posits that social influences, perception and interaction are vital in understanding social behavior.

Biblical Causes and Reasons for Mental Illness

One cause of mental illness in the Bible is sin. According to the Bible, God is holy and detests sin. He, himself threatened the Israelites that he would

smite them with mental illness if they sinned against him. Israel was God's own chosen generation and He was their God. Some of the evidence is in *Deuteronomy 28:27-29* which says that the Lord will smite you with madness, blindness and bewilderment of heart. Another one is in *2nd Thessalonians 2:11* which says that God will send upon them a deluding influence (delusion) so that they would believe what is false. A good example is king Nebuchadnezzar who literally lived in the wild and walked on four limbs like a wild animal for disobeying God. From these biblical examples, it can be deduced that sin is sometimes punishable by mental illness.

God also ensured victories in wars for Israelites by striking the opposing forces or enemies with blindness. In the process, the offending enemies would start killing each other in psychotic waves of disillusionment and confusion. God literally caused confusion in the camp of the enemy to save His people. This then means that opposing God or Gods people could earn one mental illness. An example is in *Deuteronomy 7:23* which says that, But the Lord your God will deliver them before you and will throw them into great confusion until they are destroyed.

It is also evident in the Bible that God sometimes lets his people undergo suffering of sort for His own glory. God's glory comes in when healing is received in His name after prayers or calling upon his name and even trusting him for healing.

Such an example is when Jesus heals an aggressive personality who had reached the extent of bruising himself with stones. This person who clearly had a mental illness was not staying with people in houses but in caves and in solitude. His aggressiveness made him very dangerous as it is one of the norm with some people suffering from mental illness. Most of the times, Christians comfort themselves that some forms of mental illness are the will of God and thus patiently keep hoping for a miracle of healing (Mark 5: 1-20).

In the same vein, mental illness is considered as a test of faith for the Christians. Christians believe that misfortunes, mental illness inclusive are meant to test if they can still believe and trust in God despite challenges of life and mental illness might just be a part of them. These conditions also keep

the Christians hope alive that God at his opportune time will come through and intervene in the situation. In such a case, the Christians are kept on track, living a holy life and offering persistent prayers consistently for the miracle of healing. The Bible says in Hebrews 11:1 (NKJ) that, faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

In the process of exercising faith and hope in God, a Christian learns the virtue of patience (Galatians 5). Christians who are affected with the challenge of mental illness thus also believe that God is out to build patience in them, which is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. They believe that patience is one of the lessons in the school of God that one must pass before the mentally ill personality can get healed. It should not matter how long it takes for the healing to be realized. In fact, the scripture says that a thousand years are like one day to God and vice versa (2 Peter 3:8 NKJ). This means that it may even take forever for the healing to be realized.

It is also believed in Christianity that mental illness can be a generational curse in a given family lineage. It can be as a result of a sin committed in the past by someone in a family lineage. It thus becomes hereditary from one generation to another all the way from the person who earned it for committing the causative sin. The carrier of the curse might be very innocent and not aware of the sin committed that he or she has to suffer. The mentally ill are believed to suffer due to the mistakes of the parents or even the forefathers. According to the bible, children suffer the sins of their parents up to the fourth generations (Exodus 20:5-6).

Mental illness can also be a form of punishment to an offender as God's will. A good example is king Nebuchadnezzar who got disillusioned. He walked on four limbs and fed on grass like a wild animal. God himself had bestowed mental illness on him as a punishment for disobeying His will. In such a case, Christians believe that there is usually no remedy until God himself restores the victim back to mental health (Daniel 4). There is completely no humanly possible intervention in such a case.

Biblically, it is also right to say that stress was also a cause of mental illness since the days of the Bible. An example is King Saul after being rejected by

God. He got so insecure until he sank into depression that in turn affected him mentally. He became mentally ill as a result of the acquired stress. He often got disillusioned and sought to kill David. David was a potential threat to Saul's throne after being anointed by Prophet Samuel amongst Jesse's sons as God's choice of the King to take over the Kingdom of Israel. He persecuted David regardless of David's selfless faithful service to him as his musician whose music was the very cure of his condition (1 Samuel 18,19). He never thought that he would need this David to calm him in his hour of torment. That is a typical characteristic of mental illness. It deteriorates the efficiency of the mental faculties thus making their performance to fall below par.

The Bible talks of the greatest commandment which is the commandment of love without which one cannot see God (Mathew 22: 35-40, NKJ). Mental illness is therefore a test of this great commandment. People who suffer from mental illness need our love for them regardless of their challenges. One cannot claim that he or she loves God if he or she cannot love the mentally ill. According to the Bible, love is kind, selfless, doesn't keep record of wrongs and it is long suffering (1st Corinthians 13:4-8). This kind of love should endure throughout the period one is mentally ill unwavering and unailing.

Forsaking God can also earn one mental illness as in the case of Balaam who was going to curse the Israelites. He got disillusioned till he heard a donkey talking to him warning him against angels who were standing in their way. Surprisingly, nobody else heard the donkey talk. He also saw angels on the way and again, nobody else saw them. He was lucky to get restored after repentance (Numbers 22, NKJ).

Biblical Signs and Symptoms of Mental Illness

The Bible did not have the scientific explanations of the signs and symptoms of mental health. Nevertheless, the descriptions suffice the definition of mental health. One of the symptoms was sudden fits of rage and sometimes accompanied by irrational actions. An example is Saul who was a King living in the palace. One minute he would appear royal and calm and another minute he would

be pursuing David, an innocent local in his majestic service.

Another sign is aggression. This is evident when Jesus healed a boy who was demon possessed. In this case, the mental illness is seen as demon possession. He was cutting himself with stones and he was greatly feared.

In some instances, the mentally sick would not stay with people in homes. This can be seen from the previous example in which the boy stayed in caves away from people. Nebuchadnezzar also falls under this category whereby he went to live in the wild like a beast.

Biblical Remedy to Mental Illness

Biblically, one important remedy to mental illness like any other challenge is prayer. Not just any prayer but fervent prayers. The ingredients of fervent prayers include faith, persistence and hope. This would last as long as the problem persisted. When prayer alone did not work, fasting was added. Christians quote Jesus when he said that some demons or challenges in this case, would not leave unless by prayer and fasting.

Another remedy was music. Music is medicine to the soul as we can see in the case of Saul the king. The Bible records that whenever Saul got vexed with an evil spirit, David would play music skillfully on his lyre and the demon spirit would leave the former. King Saul would then have peace in his mind and soul.

To add to this, going to the house of the Lord was also a remedy. The house of God or the temple as it was commonly referred to can be compared to the church today. It is recorded that sometimes as Saul was pursuing David to kill him, David would seek refuge in the temple. When Saul reached the temple, the demon spirit would leave him and he would begin to prophesy. This, therefore, means that there is rest in God's house or in God's presence. This meant that the mere act of being in the house of God could cure mental illness.

Jesus the Christ himself dealt with mental illness by directly rebuking the demonic spirits out of the mentally ill. An example of this was the case in which he commanded the demon spirits to enter the

pigs and drown. This implies that an encounter with Jesus can be a source of healing from mental illness. An encounter with Jesus in the present day can be compared to salvation by faith.

Repentance due to past sins was also paramount. One would even repent on behalf of parents or forefathers in order to obtain mercy. Repentance would bring about forgiveness and hence healing from all kinds of infirmities, mental illness inclusive in Gods own time.

CONCLUSION

Mental illness has always existed since the biblical days. Biblical writers may not have had the scientific names and descriptions but the manifestation today is still as it was then. The Biblical writers gave it a spiritual approach and thus successfully managed the condition within their means. They used a psychological approach albeit without their knowledge. All the explanations given on mental health helped the people to cope with the challenge effectively. When it did not work, everything was left to God and this brought about peace within. Modern science should incorporate and embrace the Biblical way of dealing with mental health to supplement the scientific methods of remedy and management. This is because the former brings about acceptance and inculcates virtues such as love, hope and patience.

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