

This week I am starting a new class at the University of Strathclyde called Madness and Society, from Ancient Times to the Present. The aim of the class is to introduce the history of mental health and psychiatry and demonstrate how societies have influenced what has been considered to be mental illness and how best to treat it. The lecture this week will be on Religion and Madness, and it got me thinking about the relationship between faith and mental health today.

For thousands of years, madness was considered to be a curse from supernatural powers, typically, God, the Devil, or devious individuals channelling such entities. Skulls from 5,000 years ago have been found with holes bored into them, presumably to release evil spirits causing madness. In Ancient Greece, a whole host of myths center on someone being driven mad by a spiteful god. Among the most well known of these is the story of Heracles, whose madness is caused by a vengeful Hera, furious that Zeus has been doing the dirty on her yet again. In the midst of his insanity, Heracles slays his own children, the punishment for which is undertaking his 10 labors. Incidentally, the very word furious comes from the Furies, the Latin name for the Erinyes: deities which drive people to vengeful acts.

The connection between religion and madness did not dissapate with the advent of Christianity. While there might be more cases of divinely-mediated madness in the Old Testament, the phenomenon is also a feature of the New Testament, with the Holy Ghost and the Devil battling for souls, resulting in insanity. Jesus himself drives 7 demons out of Mary Magdelene, which had been rendering her depraved. There is also the notion of "good madness," which is featured in prophets, ascetics, and visionairies, Joan of Arc being a later such example. Protestantism did not expunge the idea that madness was caused by the devil, as the witch hunts of the early modern period attest.

Ironically, it was these same witch hunts which started to make people skeptical about the relationship between madness and the supernatural, and other explanations eventually began to become more accepted - though just what causes mental illness remains a cause for debate. But should we simply dismiss the link between spirituality and mental illness altogether? It could be that the relationship also flows in the opposite direction.

In the western world, and especially in parts of Europe, societies have become increasingly secular, with the organized religion playing a less significant role in people's lives. Although there are exceptions, generally speaking, fewer people go to church, observe religious holidays, and, crucially, believe in heaven, hell, or God. For many, it could be argued that science is the new religion, answering some (but not all) of the questions once answered in the Bible. And not all the answers provided by science are all that encouraging. For many denominations of Christianity, the stairway to heaven was not too difficult to find: follow the 10 commandments, pray for redemption if you sin, and observe the sacraments, and you were likely to get there in the end. While the devil might well be in the detail, religious people at least had faith that something would happen to them once they died and, possibly, something really wonderful.

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A Short History of Mental Health.

For millions, if not billions, today, the promise of an afterlife is thought to be nonsense, flying in the face of physics and biology.

Nothing happens when you die. You simply cease to exist and, eventually, you are forgotten.

Surely there are some psychological ramifications of this when viewed in the light of what people used to believe!

Although this is completely speculative, I would bet that if one compared the rate of disorders like depression with rates of religious belief, there would be some kind of correlation, and that this connection could be traced back to earlier in the twentieth century, when faith in the west began to ebb and mental disorder became more prominent. I'm not saying that this is the only factor, not by any means. But it might be something worth considering in the light of the World Health Organization declaring that depression will be the world's number one health problem within decades.

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I am also not suggesting that everyone find religion. That would be hypocritical of me, since I am agnostic about such things at best (I'm also pretty agnostic about science, but that's another story). But what might help many people's mental health is finding some kind of meaning in their lives, a reason for getting through this day and the next, especially this dark, cold, uninspiring time of year.

Coming to grips with our mortality, perhaps by becoming more open about it, could also help. It's the one thing we all have in common.

Mental Health and Faith

Insanity used to be blamed on God; what's religion's role in mental illness now?

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Dear Christians

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