



CiS Student Essay Competition 2021

DOUBTS AND DEPRESSION: DOES FAITH HELP OR HINDER COPING
WITH MENTAL ILLNESS?

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Statement: I declare that this essay is my own original work and that any allusion to works
by other authors will be referenced accordingly.

Introduction

The relationship between faith and psychology has been interesting to observe over the centuries. From Marx to Dawkins, there have been very influential public figures who have vocalised their thoughts on how religious faith affects human psychology. This topic is especially poignant with around 1 in 4 people in England suffering from a mental health conditionⁱ. Since the start of the pandemic the incidence of depression in the UK has doubled from 10% to 21%ⁱⁱ, a sizeable proportion of the population. Mental health issues are devastating to the individual involved, capable of lifelong turmoil and therefore must be adequately addressed. As Christians, we believe that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to all people. Therefore, the question is: what does the Gospel have to say to those with mental illness?

The dangers of faith on mental health

It might surprise the reader to begin with the dangers of religious belief however, it is important to be balanced. Some religious beliefs can be incredibly harmful: when religious authorities destructively shame a person or group to a point where they feel they are beyond redemption. A belief in a God who was all judgement and demanded perfection from you or else he would throw you into hell. This is what caused Martin Luther to exclaim “*Love God? Sometimes I hate him!*” after reflecting on God’s holy standards during confessionⁱⁱⁱ.

Perhaps the most famous critic in recent times is the late Christopher Hitchens. He remarks that the idea of an all-seeing God is horrifying and compares it to a celestial North Korea. Furthermore, he quips that religious faith results in intellectual suicide. “*Religion is poison because it asks us to give up our most precious faculty, which is that of reason, and to believe things without evidence. It then asks us to respect this, which it calls faith.*”^{iv} These are heavy accusations levelled at religious faith which we need to consider.

The benefits of faith on mental health

Andrew Sims, former president of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, says: “*The advantageous effect of religious belief and spirituality on mental and physical health is one of the best kept secrets in psychiatry and medicine generally.*”^v On what basis does he say this?

On the theoretical side, it is easy to see the benefits religious faith confers. I now speak as a Christian. First, the Christian faith, rather than asking people to believe from credulity without evidence encourages people to consider the evidence presented and believe in light of the evidence. You do not have to sacrifice your rationality to be a Christian but rather invited to exercise it. The purpose statement of John’s gospel says: “*But these are written*

that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.^{vi} and Luke undertakes the painstaking job of carefully interviewing eyewitnesses so that the reader can have certainty about what is written.^{vii}

Then, there's the Christian gospel. When you believe that God has loved you with an everlasting love^{viii} that He sent His one and only Son into the world to save you from your sins, wanting a relationship with you, watching over and caring for you every second of your life^{ix}, adopts you into His family forever^x, not only do you have a certain guarantee of God's love but also you experience the liberating effect of complete forgiveness and providential care. So rather than God's sovereignty being akin to a nightmarish celestial North Korea, it is *"the pillow upon which the child of God rests his head at night, giving perfect peace"*. For the Christian, there is now no condemnation^{xi} and we have peace with God right now^{xii} with a certain hope of salvation when Christ comes again^{xiii}. The world is struggling with being loved unconditionally and heavy laden with guilt. A study suggests more than a third of adult patients with major depression and 8.1% of those without experienced guilt feelings.^{xiv} The guarantee of God's love and the promise of full forgiveness is the pillow they need to rest their head on. The empirical data backs this up with 65% of studies revealing a benefit of religious faith on patients suffering from depression^{xv} and a meta-analysis of 2,073 studies conducted by Jim et al.^{xvi} showing significant physical and functional benefits for cancer patients.

Conclusion

Religion and psychiatry have experienced a complicated relationship over the years and at times the abuse of faith has harmed people's mental health but the data suggests that it can be a wonderful blessing to mental health and gives people the fundamental security that they need.

"You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you because he trusts in you.
Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock."

References

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- ^{iv} TOP 25 CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS QUOTES ON RELIGION & ATHEISM | A-Z Quotes. A-Z Quotes. Retrieved 24 August 2021, from https://www.azquotes.com/author/6756-Christopher_Hitchens#:~:text=%E2%80%9CHitch%2022%3A%20A%20Memoir%E2%80%9D%2C%20p.82%2C%20Atlantic%20Books%20Ltd,us%20to%20respect%20this%2C%20which%20it%20calls%20faith.
- ^v Is Faith Delusion, Continuum, London, 2009, p.xi
- ^{vi} John 20:31
- ^{vii} Luke 1:1-4
- ^{viii} Jeremiah 31:3
- ^{ix} Proverbs 15:3, Matthew 6:25-34
- ^x Romans 8:15-16, Galatians 4:4-7, 1 John 3:1-2
- ^{xi} Romans 8:1
- ^{xii} Romans 5:1
- ^{xiii} Hebrews 9:28
- ^{xiv} Luck, T., & Luck-Sikorski, C. (2020). Feelings of guilt in the general adult population: prevalence, intensity and association with depression. *Psychology, health & medicine*, 1–11. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13548506.2020.1859558>
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