Is Religion Delusion?

Veronica Vioude

Goodwin College

7-2015

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.goodwin.edu/hsr_stu_cap

Part of the Mental and Social Health Commons, Religion Commons, Social Welfare Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Is Religion Delusion?

Veronica Vioude

Goodwin College
I chose to research the topic of religion and delusions because of the experiences that I have had at my internship site. For my bachelor’s degree I completed my internship with Inter Community in East Hartford, CT. Inter Community is a mental health organization that provides not only therapeutic counseling but medical care and rehabilitation programs for clients all in the same building. I really liked spending time at Inter Community because their programs were very different from other organizations in the state. It is very rare that a client can see their medical doctor, therapist, and attend their day program for rehabilitation all without leaving the building that they are in. Inter Community has two buildings 281 Main Street and 287 Main Street. I spent the majority of my time at 287 where the clients received medical and mental health treatment upstairs and they utilized Common Ground where I did my internship. Common Ground is a rehabilitation day program from 9:00 am- 4:00 pm where the clients can hangout and attend therapy groups and take field trips with the rehabilitation counselors. During my time at Common Ground I met so many different people, all whom come from various backgrounds and ethnicities with various mental impairments. I began to notice a trend in the clients when I was there; they were all extremely religious but when they spoke it sounded more like delusion than actual religion. One client in particular that really stood out to me and made me question could religion cause delusion or add to delusion that already existed in people with psychosis? I will refer to this client as David Jones a fake name for the protection of his identity, he is a 36 year old African American male that has been utilizing Common Ground for years. David was born with schizophrenia and he often states he hears voices in his head. When David was a child he was involved in a very serious car accident that led to even further brain damage; now he is incapable of caring for himself and must have some kind of supervision at all times. He lives at home with very strict and traditional Jamaican parents who are very religious. David attends
church with his family every Sunday and states that it makes him very happy. He loves to listen to music so hearing the choir sing is one of his favorite activities on Sunday. What caught my attention were the religious delusions I noticed that David would have throughout the day at Common Ground. There would be times where Mr. Jones would sit in a chair and stare for hours at a time. When asked if he was okay he would simply reply that God is talking to him and he must listen. David would also get urges to rewrite the Bible word-for-word on blank sheets of paper, and sometimes he would rewrite and recite these verses without even referring to a Bible because that is how many times he has done it. I met David’s mother on one occasion and she was extremely unfriendly. When she spoke to David she was cold and short, but I have no doubt that she loves her son and he loves her because it is very evident that he needs her and she takes very good care of him because he is clean and well-dressed every day and always has a packed lunch.

I wondered if David was to sit and rewrite the bible as punishment while he is home if he did something his parents would consider as wrong because he would write word-for-word without referencing the Bible as if he did it often and he was used to it. David would also approach me as well as other staff members saying things like he feels that the devil is trying to tempt him, or he would randomly begin stomping his feet on the ground saying he is stomping out the evil. Granted I know that David is diagnosed as mental ill as well as the other clients but it made me think was the problem a lot deeper than just mental health. Could the delusion of God and the devil add to the problem that is mental health management?

A delusion is defined as “a false belief based on incorrect inference about external reality that is firmly sustained despite what almost everyone else believes and despite what constitutes incontrovertible and obvious proof or evidence to the contrary. The belief is not one ordinarily
accepted by other members of the person’s culture or subculture” (Rossano, 2005). When reading this definition what seemed very clear to me is that a delusion is something that is made up in someone’s mind; this thing is not common to the rest of society so therefore it makes it untrue or false. To me the definition holds true but oddly at the end it states that an article of religious faith is not defined as a delusion. To me that was a delusion within itself. How could it be possible that made up stories could be defined as delusion but the stories from the Bible were not classified as delusion as well? So I took my research a little farther to try to understand. I wondered if believing in the stories in the Bible and following a set of guidelines or rules from an unknown source or a source that has no proof of existence qualify as a delusion. What effects do these stories and rules have on a mind such as David’s that already suffers from delusion and is very vulnerable? Religion has been around for millennia’s and has slowly changed with mankind. There are various types of beliefs and religions such as Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam, Protestant and Judaism just to name only a few of the vast religions defined in the world. Each has their own set of beliefs, rules and guidelines and even their own versions of a God or deity that they worship. “Stompe states that religious delusions vary in prevalence with the predominant religious affiliation of the particular society and notes that ‘religious delusions are most common in Catholic societies, with Islamic and Protestant societies reporting fewer delusions with religious content” (as cited in Bhavasar, Bhugra, 2008). There is always the possibility that with a certain cultural belief and religion the delusion can be much more severe than for a family that goes to church only on holidays for example.

Society does not recognize anything related to religion to be classified as a delusion or a made up venture because the majority of society has some kind of religious or spiritual belief no matter how much one believes or not, religion is viewed as a normal practice. “These findings
support the idea that religious delusional themes are more sensitive to alterations in social and cultural forces” (Bhavasar, Bhugra, 2008). I asked myself why society looks at David as delusional and mentally ill because he believes he hears God speaking to him, when in actuality many people believe that they have been touched by God’s presence or say things such as “God will make a way” or “I’ll leave in God’s hands” does this not count as a delusion because it is deemed acceptable by societies' terms? It can be very difficult to pin point if delusions are more common in one religious group, social class, or ethnic or cultural background because religion is so diverse. Anyone from any background has the right to choose what religion they want to be, even if the religion differs from the religion in which they were raised. In today’s society an individual can convert from one religion to another simply by taking classes and making lifestyle changes.

(According to Bhavasar and Bhugra 2008) there is the implication that religious delusions are expressed evenly within each society; however El Sendiony found class differences in the prevalence of religious delusions in a sample, with 54% in the lower-class group, 33% in the middle class group and 16% in the upper class group. Religious delusions have also been found to differ in prevalence within different religious affiliations which may reflect the effects of differing religious practices and community relationships.

To me the idea that one religion may cause more harm than the other does not make much sense to me. During my time at Inter Community I saw firsthand the guilt and shame that many of the clients had associated with their own personal beliefs and stories. All the clients at Inter Community all come from very different socio economic backgrounds, as well as races, ages, and gender, but they all had one factor other than their treatments in common and that was the guilt that they felt regarding religion. There was another client I have grown to know very
well for the protection of his identity I will refer to him as John Doe a fake name. John was raised by a strict catholic mother and stated his father left the picture when he was young. John was a heavy drug user at one point in his life. John was found in a hotel room by a friend practically dying from cocaine overdose. Ever since that day John has stated to me that he credits all of his healing and soberness to God. When I asked John if he gives himself any credit for his healing he became very manic and began to preach to me that nothing was possible without God and that he’s alive to this day because of God. I was very respectful of John’s belief so I left the conversation there, but at the same time the researcher found herself to be a little frustrated as I have heard similar stories at Inter Community before. None of the very religious clients I have spoken with will give themselves any credit for how far they have come in life or the positive choices that they have made to sober up and seek help. To me this was frustrating because they all worked so hard and none of them truly believed in themselves. They all saw themselves as worshipers of their God (as they would say). God had mercy on them and that’s the only reason they are alive. Could the idea of feeling less than or so much weaker than the deity being worshiped contribute to further anxiety and guilt is the question I asked myself considering I saw it almost every day for two months. “Religious delusions have been viewed in terms of the relief of communal anxieties, fulfillment of social roles and the development of new religious movements. Littlewood goes on to argue that the individual with psychosis can be an agent for social change” (Bhavasar, Bhugrap, 2008). The fear of doing wrong or displeasing the deities or breaking the rules weighs heavy on someone with psychosis or any mental diagnosis so it must be extremely difficult for those whom already hear so much in their heads. Guilt and shaming is a huge part of religion and it affects the clients greatly. One afternoon the whole Common Ground club house went outside for an activity. We walked the clients down to
Goodwin Park in East Hartford, and it was on this day that John had a horrible experience with what he referred to as “displeasing his father”. John and another client from Common Ground were jogging ahead of me. The two guys began to discuss their children and the topic changed to them wanting to meet a nice girl and settle down. John made the comment jokingly saying that he and his buddy should go to a couple bars and see if they could meet women. Soon after that John caught a bad leg cramp and needed to sit down to catch his breath; he immediately began to blame himself and beg forgiveness from God. He believed that his comments regarding meeting a woman at the bar was God punishing him for what he had said. I tried to make him feel better by saying that it was extremely hot outside and that the running combined with the lack of water made his muscle cramp and that it was very common. By then the damage was done and John beat himself about the comment for the rest of the afternoon. “From the mental health perspective religion provides much needed guidelines, which can help individuals to devise a course for their lives. Stresses as well as uncertainties of life can be tolerated more easily by the believer” (Behere, Anweshak, Yadva, & Behere, 2013).

Each client other than their own personal reason for being at Common Ground all have a similar thing in common when it comes to the strict religious beliefs that they follow and that is their families. How an individual is raised and what they are taught have very strong ties with how that individual grows into an adult. David was raised by very religious traditional Jamaican parents, John was raised by a strict catholic mother whom taught him that he is nothing without religion, and finally there is a client that I will call Jane Doe for her privacy and protection. “The family is likely to be an important determinant of the use of religious signifiers or symbols in the individual experience of psychosis” (Bhavasar, Bhugra, 2008). I met Jane when I began my therapy group on Fridays at Common Ground, she is an older woman with children and
grandchildren and she is always very quiet unless she is spoken to. She would always enter the group and sit very quietly as the other group members would engage and go back and forth. I wanted to learn more about Jane and see if there was anything that I could do while I was at Common Ground to help her in any way. I would ask her how she is feeling or how her weekend was from the following week and I would always get the same thing, a very short hurried response. I did not want to push her and make her feel uncomfortable so I would leave it at that. One day Jane approached me after the group and asked me could we talk? I was very happy that she was finally ready to open up as I could see the sadness on her face every time she came into group. She told me about her rocky relationship with her father and how his death five years prior still affects her to this day. Then entered the religion and the guilt. Jane is trying to quit smoking and has joined a group at Common Ground that helps anyone who wants the help with quitting. Jane stated to me that a very hurtful conversation with her daughter is what prompted her to want to quit. She said her daughter shamed her and told her that she is displeasing God because she is damaging the body he gave her by smoking. Jane was very saddened and hurt by this statement and now she felt that she was “not deserving of God’s mercy” and that she “should let the cigarettes kill her”. I felt very sorry for Jane and informed her that I would half to let the staff know of the comment that she mad about the cigarettes killing her; she did not protest it as sadly she meant it. She wants to please her family and God and she felt very depressed because she felt that she had let everyone down. While doing my research I found that very religious families can make psychosis and even addiction worse because of the shaming. Jane knows that she’s harming herself by smoking and this makes her feel bad. Her family believes that she is doing both them and God an injustice and Jane said she can’t bear to look at herself in the mirror. “Family units are likely to affect the framework in which interval events are interpreted and
explained. According to the model presented the construction of a religious appraisal scheme is likely to be related to the way in which a family interacts with the individual”. (Bhavasar, Bhugra, 2008). I continued to speak to Jane on a one-on-one personal level with each week that past and she told me more about her family and things she wanted to work on. She is doing much better and when I do give her any advice I try to make it as unbiased as possible because I know that religion is not a bad thing and for some of the clients all they have is their hope and faith, and I do always try to empower them by letting them know that they too have pulled themselves out of very bad situations and made their lives better and that when they are giving gratitude to God and their families to not forget to thank themselves and recognized that they wanted better for themselves. Being at Inter Community for two months was extremely eye-opening and each of the clients has taught me so much and inspired me to do my research paper on the topic that I have chosen.

In conclusion I have found that religion can affect psychosis in many ways and that the family of the individual with the psychosis plays a huge part in how deeply religion and spirituality are entwined in a family unit. Religious guilt and shaming has even driven some individuals into psychosis. The constant worrying and fear of doing wrong and breaking the rules has added to some client’s anxiety and for others can be a primary reason for self-hate because they feel that they are not “good enough” or “worthy”. There is also the debate that states that religion is good for those who suffer from mental illness because it is a healthy outlet that can be focused on rather than negative psychosis. “Religion encourages community integration which promotes healthy psychological functioning. Indeed most imperial studies confirm that religious people tend to be happier and healthier as well as financially, socially, and interpersonally more successful than their non-religious counterparts” (Rossano, 2005). With time, this debate will
continue all across the world because there are so many different opinions regarding the subject. The researcher has witnessed firsthand how stressful the shaming and guilt is on the minds of those that it affects. Throughout this researcher’s time at Inter Community she has met with multiple clients all dealing with the same problems regarding religion and that is simply being a good person that breaks no rules and never has any bad days or human bad habits that can make you a very unholy person. This need to feel that they have pleased God leaves out the most important factor in their healing process. They should be rewarded and told every day that they are the reason that they are where they are, with religion being a positive force in their lives that helped them along the way. “Shanfranske and Malony (1990) found that one in six client’s present issues with religion or spirituality” (Allmon, 2010). This proves that the already fragile and complicated minds that suffer from any form of psychosis, whether it be schizophrenia or a personality disorder, have a hard time grasping the concepts of what can be extreme religion in some cases.

What should be taken from this topic is not if religion is good for or bad for psychotic persons but what is needed to help them heal and rehabilitate outside of religion. During my time at Inter Community the clients did things like cook, arts and crafts, play basketball, and went on field trips. Common Ground tries to involve them in things such as advocacy and how they can better stand up for themselves and advocates for causes that are close to them such as the budget for mental health in the state of Connecticut. They really enjoy going to the capital and the legislative office building and rallying and learning about the new ways that they can help themselves and their peers that are in the same situations that they are in. I feel these are much healthier outlets than constantly talking to them about why they feel that God should or should not have mercy on them. Either way at the end of that therapy session or church session they will
still have the same number of problems in front of them and they need to be able to trust themselves and feel that they are capable. Leaving the politics out of the issue and focusing on those in our society that need help should be the focus of both believers and non-believers alike rather than pointing fingers. Author Grisham states “personally I think the word delusional should be reserved for someone who has delusions that are dangerous or that inhabit someone from functioning in society” (Grisham, 2013). Many would agree with author Grisham that the wrong words are being used because religious people are simply not delusional and it does not contribute negatively to those that suffer from psychosis, but then there is the point of view from a man known worldwide for his theories and professional opinions that many would say they would agree with also. “Sigmund Freud in ‘Moses and Monotheism’ stated that belief in a single God is delusional” (Sims, 2007). This indicates that the debate will continue and that what should have our attention is how do we help those in need so that we can stop stereotyping the delusional and psychotic as dangerous, because just like religion and psychology it is too misunderstood and poorly researched by many.

My time in the professional field is really just beginning and so far it feels that there are so many different opinions and theories, more than solutions and treatments. I enjoyed my time at Inter Community because I was able to learn so much information simply just by listening to the clients without trying to diagnose them or tell them what it is that they should be doing with their lives. They have taught me to not be so judgmental and hard on those that are very religious because there may be reasons why unbeknownst to me where religion actually does benefit them and makes them really happy. I want religion to be integrated into healing and therapy for those that want it to be a part of their lives. Separating the guilt and shame from religion can make it a beneficial outlet for those that feel that closely to it. Overall it should be about understanding and
this research paper has made me realize that if I am going to work in this field I need to educate myself a lot more on the different kinds of religions and the science behind psychosis and religion because it seems that they are deeply intertwined. From all that I experienced at Inter Community I do not think that it is coincidence that almost all of the clients were brought up with very strict religious backgrounds and have semi unhealthy relationships with religion. As professionals in the field of social services and human services it is our jobs to understand and know for the benefit of those we will serve.
References


