



RELIGION AND MENTAL HEALTH

Searching on “mental health religion” on google returns over 80 million hits. These relate to many subjects which include:

- ✦ Mental illness and religious practices/beliefs
- ✦ Mental health benefits of religious practices/beliefs
- ✦ Religious practices/beliefs as ways of coping
- ✦ How religious ideas and beliefs affect the understanding/treatment of mental health
- ✦ How religion may be influenced/caused by mental/brain function

Those studying and writing about this are muddled as to what “religion” is, just as most people are. Sometimes it involves belief in the supernatural and in specific theological doctrines and sometimes not. Sometimes it is distinguished from “spirituality” and at other times not. “Religious” practices are usually not compared to similar “secular” activities. And selection effects are insurmountable because people cannot be randomized to having or not having different religious beliefs. Above all, many investigators are biased in favor of or against religion.

Some forms of mental illness are clearly related to supernatural and related delusional beliefs. People may literally believe that they are “possessed” or that their thoughts are influenced or controlled by outside forces, notably, in the modern age, by radios, television, satellites or devices they believe have been implanted into their brains. Auditory hallucinations or “hearing voices” is a hallmark of schizophrenia and often this is taken to be communication with supernatural entities. Abnormal activity in certain portions of the brain have been associated with “visions” of various kinds. Indeed, there has been much speculation about “Saint Paul” having suffered from temporal lobe epilepsy. Puzzlingly, among Tourette’s Syndrome sufferers who have vocal tics, profanity and “blasphemy” may be uttered involuntarily.

Similarly, obsessive-compulsive disorder is reminiscent of repetitive rituals that are a part of many religious practices. Among those who deliberately engage in such practices, there may be functional or even physical effects on the brain judging, for example, from studies of those who regularly meditate. These effects may be beneficial. Or not. And, again, it is difficult to know if they “work” generally.

Some unbelievers consider that religion itself

is a mental illness. This would make most people throughout history mentally ill. But it may be true depending both on what is meant by “religion” and by “mental illness.” There is no agreed-upon definition of “religion.” And there is an element of cultural influence on what is considered – or not considered – “mental illness.” To be sure, an effective socially/culturally – and even politically – encouraged belief in things that are not consistent with facts and reason would qualify as a mass delusion. But such beliefs can be about things not normally thought of as “religious.” The belief that “race” is biologically valid is one example, or that homosexuals can choose to be heterosexual, that some people are inferior (especially when we are at war with them!), that certain foods (or common substances in foods) are especially unsafe, or that tulip bulbs are the best investment.

The big problem with belief is that it’s entirely subjective. Many believers in supernatural doctrines are nominal believers only. They “believe” because it is socially acceptable to do so and because it is socially unacceptable not to do so. They “go along to get along.” But their lack of real conviction is not hard to see. Is this mental illness? It is, sadly, a part of human nature and, at the same time, obviously adaptive, at least in the short run.

As Daniel Dennett suggests in his book Breaking The Spell: Religion As A Natural Phenomenon, it is really time to examine these important issues from a sober facts- and reason-based standpoint. But even he defines religion unhelpfully as necessarily involving belief in supernatural being(s) “whose approval is to be sought.”

In addition, the scientific method involves the attachment of the highest value to “the truth,” which is to say, the most reasonable sense that one can make of a body of facts. This value is taken first as an end in itself and second as an engine of human progress. But this is clearly at odds with the idea of belief as a means to an end, as something that offers some sort of alleged benefit. That is, even if it could be proven scientifically that having a delusional belief was helpful in some way, it would not follow that such delusional beliefs should be encouraged, either as a matter of principle or of practicality.

These questions and their difficulties are linked to what is perhaps the most fascinating and important fact of the human condition: that it is rooted in conscious experience which gives rise to

all other facts as well as science, religion, and everything else. And yet no one has any access to anything but their own conscious experience. As T.H. Huxley pointed out:

“Thought is existence. More than that, so far as we are concerned, existence is thought, all our conceptions of existence being some kind or other of thought.”

ANTONIN SCALIA RIP
[3/11/1936 – 2/12-13/2016]

One need not be a Constitutional scholar or even a lawyer to appreciate that the Founders understood that they had established a government of “enumerated powers.” That is, that it was a government that could do what the Constitution said it could do, however vaguely and perhaps necessarily stated, but that it could do no more. This idea was the basis of opposition to the Bill of Rights: the fear that it would later be taken to mean that these were the only rights people had, which is why the 9th and 10th Amendments were added.

Sure enough, it has often been assumed that if a right was not listed in the Constitution and its Amendments, it did not exist and the government could disallow it. Mr. Scalia decried the Supreme Court’s “power to create ‘liberties’ that the Constitution and its Amendments neglect to mention ... You want a right to abortion? There’s nothing in the Constitution about that ... [which] doesn’t mean you cannot prohibit it.”

Here is the idea that rights are not “inalienable,” but conferred by the government. And that the government is entitled to do anything it is not expressly forbidden to do. It is the antithesis of the vision of the Founders and the Enlightenment thinking that inspired them. So much for “originalism.”

The deeper problem with “originalism” is that at the time the words of the Constitution and the Amendments were set down, people’s opinions varied just as they do today. Had the Founders been asked “what about if that happens?” or “what about this situation?” they would likely have offered a variety of answers. This does not mean that words can mean anything at all, that meaning is arbitrary. But there is an irreducible ambiguity to language that is consequent on the fact that no two users of it are exactly alike and interchangeable. If this were not the case, the Supreme Court could consist of one Justice instead of nine.

YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED, APPRECIATED, AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:
- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason’s Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today’s service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant “The Vineyard” - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: This is nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club April 23, 2016
THE BOOK: Science Fiction classic Stranger In A Strange Land by Robert Heinlein Location: Farina’s Winery, 420 S Main in Grapevine, TX.

Communitas Dinner Group: To be Announced!
Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read past bulletins and service presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at twitter.com/ntcof !

PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
“LAUGHTER”
Is Life with all its Difficulties and Suffering Really a Laughing Matter?
> Sunday, April 3, 2016 <
COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
(Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western; starts at 10:30 but come at 10 for fellowship!)

The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

Pastor (It’s a Job Description, NOT a title!) Tim Gorski
Presenters Fritha Robinson & Tim Gorski
Operations Coordinator Will Smith
Welcome Coordinator Mark Barnick
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