

Religion* and Mental Health **(with special reference to child development)**

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ABSTRACT

An Islamic stand point is introduced with special reference to the possible influence on the general mode of existence and thus child development. The rationale is explained and the relation to some current psychological theories is indirectly touched.

INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

To know our children and how they developed we need first to revise courageously who we are. There is no other way but to go deeper in our structural make-up in order to assess the active variables influencing our children's make up.

Our children grow up in the matrix of our existence rather than within the limitation of what we believe to constitute our beliefs. Religion (in its proper sense as well as its defensive version) in our culture represents the core of our existence regardless of what religion one belongs to. This is also true whether one is a believer or not, a practitioner or not. On the other hand, religion for the modern western man seems to be handled as an epiphenomenon or as some intellectual (occasionally emotional) decoration (putting aside its use as a tool for mass provocation in political manoeuvres here and there).

In the scientific field we live the illusion that studies into the psychology

* An Islamic stand point.

of children aim ultimately at the betterment of the human race represented in the coming generations. Religious systems also claim something like that with a special extension beyond this life into what is called the after life. There is no logic in separating these two systems sharing such a common goal simply to avoid uncovering our hidden defenses.

This deliberate or unconscious denial* may postpone confrontation but it could never help in the solution of any basic problem. If the general theme of these meetings is really concerned with comparative study of medical and psychosocial status of 'whom it may concern' within the families of both states (U.S.A. & Egypt), we have to go deeper in what is beyond what we claim to handle. I have to refer to a mistranslation in the title of these sessions where the original English title did not restrict this comparative study to 'patients' and their families, while the Arabic translation put it as if it were exclusively for patients (and their families). I am inclined to accept this fault in translation as significant since it is both safer and more practical to study patients. However, I have gone beyond both the original title and the faulty translation to probe what is behind it.

Child studies (in health and disease) lack certain dimensions the neglect of which would devalue the whole effort put in their accomplishment. Two main questions are to be put forward at the outset if any study is hoped to be fruitful. First: what are the measures by which we assess what we consider to be healthy children. Second: how long, and how, are we going to establish follow-up studies to check what we have discovered or recommended. To my knowledge, without going into details about the definition of mental health and related problems, there are no valid follow-up studies to indicate that we have been going the proper way (at least for the last four decades). The test of time, that takes into consideration whether a creative outflow of a particular generation(s) has occurred or not seems the most reliable one (to me it is the only one) which could evaluate such efforts of enhancing child development. How-

I remember the late prof. A. Askar omitting 'religious history' from the psychiatric sheet when I proposed to add it in a revised proof.

ever, it should be born in mind that the disentanglement of responsible individual variables throughout that extended time scale is rather impossible.

Coming back to the place of religion in the present comparative or evaluative trial we have to confess and repeat that it is rather impossible to separate the value system away from the scientific system. The value system has direct implications on 'the how' of our mental organization which is the apparatus of our conceptualization about ourselves and the world. I am not going to discuss the philosophy of science relating the value system with the available experimental knowledge. It suffices for the present discussion to introduce what the word religion could mean in a sense that makes it relevant to our topic today. If we accept E. Fromm's (1977) definition that includes under religion "...any system of thought and action which... gives the individual the frame of orientation and object of devotion which he needs" we are going to include many ideologies including political or economic ones such as communism as well as certain systematic cognitive disciplines such as materialism or scientism. On the other hand, if we confine ourselves to the classical definition of religion (taking Webster's 1973, dictionary as an example) including "...the service of God or worship and practicing certain rituals" we are going to exclude the no-heaven religions which are widely spread in south-east of Asia (as examples). **That is why I prefer to use the expression "religious stand" rather than religious belief or simply religion.** By so doing I am trying to put forward certain overt or concealed attitudes that I have observed influencing my people, children as well as grown ups in health and disease to an extent that could not the least be overlooked. The source of my impressions is my clinical practice particularly through practicing group psychotherapy. For me the religious stand in life includes :

1. A conceptual system predominantly, but not exclusively, conscious, that covers most aspects of life activities.
2. An adequate belonging to this system usually considering it a

superior one for those who believe in it as well as for the potential believers (almost all human race).

3. A tendency to consider one's self as a unit of living matter having its spatial and temporal extension leading to a sense of immortality. This includes positive acceptance of individual limitations and objective perception of death as the realistic ultimatant of the individual human unit.
4. Believing in possible communication between the individual and other harmonious suprasystems.
5. Frequently practicing a particular system of behavioural commitments including rituals and social organizations. This system is basically made to reinforce directly or indirectly the above basic assumptions.

Psychological theories and religious stand :

I do not believe that much in such trials tending to prove or disprove religious beliefs by informations or speculations derived from another system of knowledge (particularly the so called scientific one). Religion and science, at least on the surface, are two parallel, occasionally complementary systems, each of which has its own language though they may basically share a common goal viz : human welfare. Certain psychological theories without apparent intension, tried to bridge the gap between the two systems. However most such theories are not the least scientific in the classical sense of the term. A few illustrations are :

1. The humanistic movement as a whole (mainly represented by A. Maslow, 1969) although overridealizing man per se, believes in such ultimate superior goal for man's existence that has some utopial as well as metahuman qualities. The peak experience described by Goldsien and Maslow is very near to special religious and mystical experience.

2. The volitional cognitive theory of Arietti (1974, 1976) surpasses the concept of self actualization to that of self expansion which may implicitly refer to what is beyond'.
3. The biosphere of Angyal (Thefford and Schucman, 1975) includes person and environment within it. This holism at a certain depth, transcends the individual to some suprasystem where it represents a unit in a superior unity at a higher level.
4. General systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1974) is very clear about the concepts of suprasystems which could be very relevant to the analogue of religious system.
5. Transpersonal psychology (Sutich, 1969, and others) considers the personality phase (including self actualization) simply as an intermediate phase in the development of the individual. In the transpersonal phase the individual transcends his limited personal entity towards 'others' and the universe. The latter refers to some relation with what is beyond a limited personal shell which is congruous with basic religious concepts.
6. Evolutionary Rhythmic Theory* (Rakhawy, 1981) uses terms like crescendo harmony, the mega expansion of human existence beyond the limited personal static existence.

An overall look at available literature concerned with child development will show how much such standpoint (religion at depth in scientific language) has been neglected or rather rejected.

Positive and negative aspects of religion assimilation or abuse :

Religion when applied to every day practice has been, either appro-

* A theory of human development and psychopathology constructed by the author (1981).

priately assimilated constituting definite positive reflection or abused representing an actual handicap for growth and has its bearings on all aspects of our lives which is most significant when reflected on our children. To enumerate some such tendencies we can mention among the positive aspects (1) Justifying dependency (2) Acceptance of the individual's deficiencies, (3) Allowing extension beyond the limited individual boundaries including super system orientation and (4) Cultivation of native internal judges of harmony.

Among the negative aspects; abuse of religion can participate in enhancing (1) Alienation, (2) Prejudice, (3) Massive repression as well as overuse of other mechanisms such as projection and reaction formation etc... (4) Overdependency up to loss of individual's will-power, and (5) Increasing handicapping guilt.

I am not that interested in weighing positive aspects against the negative ones. All what I need to show is how much important the role of religion could be both ways. It is so evident that such system is incorporated into our existence as a central core which seems to come first in the present comparative evaluation. The difference between the American culture and ours may not predominantly exist in the type of religion that dominates here or there but in the extent of influence of being existentially religious or defensively so, or not. I am inclined to believe that our guests representing some way or another, a Judeochristian civilization need to know more about the Islamic one to delineate the area of overlap, of difference and perhaps of opposition.

An Islamic viewpoint :

An Islamic point of view should not be considered as 'The Islamic view'. I am neither in the position nor at the level of taking such a responsibility. I would have rather called it a 'moslem's standpoint', but this looked too personal and perhaps bears implicit overevaluation of one's own ideas. However, introducing my own point of view is some sort of practicing the first principle of Islam I tried to introduce here (i.e. directness). Any moslem, having adequately known the language and the logic of his

direct relation with God and thus establish his own harmony, finding his own way within the broad lines of his faith. Western people, in part, seem to know about Islam from certain eccentric groups, prejudiced opponents or rigid authorities. I feel that the Islamic point of view I am introducing here is not restricted to Islam, but extends to what any religion before and beyond abuse and mutilation could say. This may explain how the word religion at large, could be synonymous with Islam. In the wholly (Koraan), there is a saying, "Religion, for God, is Islam"* (but not the least : Islam is the religion).

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS

1. — Directness :

As just mentioned, this principle emphasizes the direct relation between the human system and the suprasystem. In religious language, it is said that there is no, and should not be any, barrier between any individual and God. One needs not any intermediate authority to prove or disprove the right to ask God, depend on him, talk to him, apologize, or even bless him. (In Islam, the individual has the right to bless God in a process of mutual blessing**). Even praying in a well constructed mosque, is the least needed for a moslem. Earth, at large, is his mosque***. In the proper essence of Islam there is no religious leader. Those 'who know' are not the specialized religious scientists, but the deeply aware objective individuals, in harmony with themselves and the universe. This directness is apt to cultivate one's own integrity, dilute guilt, and promote extension of any central idea to its supraidea, up to its ultimatant.

(*) أن الدين عند الله الاسلام ، سورة آل عمران (١٩) .
 (**) رضى الله عنهم ورضوا عنه : المائدة (١١٩) ، المجادلة (٢٢) ،
 البينة (٨) .
 (***) جعلت لى الأرض مسجدا وطهورا : معنى حديث شريف .

2. — Monothelism :

"There is no God but God". This basic concept is not the least taken as an intellectual belief. It is put to be an existence, character, and daily practice. If so, it enhances real liberation and reinforces internal courage.

In child upbringing, one of the main handicaps for their march, is overidealizing intermediate objects (eg. authority, ideology, science, or status), up to their goddizing. Moreover children themselves could be taken as Gods for their parents. With proper religious practice, such obstacles could be eliminated.

3. — Cultivating Nature :

Islam says : 'Islam is but proper nature *

Also : "a human being is born naturally as a Moslem", then his parents judaize him, christianize him, or magianize him.**

(By now, and through the superficial abuse of Islamic discipline, one may add fairly '...or moslemize him').

This assumption is not the least, like Rousseau's fantastic paradise. It basically refers to the indispensable need to know what is natural, and what is not, in order to know what is Islam, and what is not.

Thus, fulfilment and actualization of optimum human nature in Islam seems to be the equivalent of optimum upbringing. If we become more and more interested in revising our concepts about nature, exclusi-

(*) « فاقم وجهك للدين حنيفا » فطرة الله التي فطر الناس عليها ،
لا تبديل لخلق الله : الروز (٨٠) .
(**) يولد الانسان على الفطرة واهله يهودانه او ينصرانه او يمجسانه ،
معنى حديث شريف .

vely derived from limited experimental activities or pseudoscientific modern illusions, things may change radically. Both history and religion, utilizing law of effect and unique communicating intuition, should be taken as valid sources helping to identify what is 'natural', thus helping to define the real goal of child upbringing as healthy (or as moslem).

4. — Personal Responsibility :

Islam, like most other religions, considers mature man responsible for almost all what he does. This goes hand in hand with a tendency to cultivate the "native internal judge", which is not synonymous with the conscience of superego. The basic principle "Man is his own judge whatever excuses he offers"*; that is, one can't deceive himself, of nature, even if he succeeds to rationalize what he does. This reference to a coherent system of laws, naturally present, and amenable to cultivation puts emphasis upon the mode of upbringing, that should aim at establishment of some internal coherence and harmonious relation with nature, even though, such assumption is the least scientifically handled.

The measure of the efficacy of such internally functioning awareness is promotion of growth, and prevention of pathological dysharmonies. Of course such system is reinforced by the prevalence of justice values, in society at large as well as, cultivating human-nature, relationship, by all other means (artistic and otherwise). No influence could be as important in child upbringing, as the real practice of one's own (particularly parents') internal freedom and responsibility, simultaneously.

However, personal responsibility is not an absolute dictum. One of the basic essentials in Islam, is to believe in fate and destiny. As if the offered Islamic solution says : You are responsible in as much as the laws of your subsystem, are concerned. As regards the laws of the suprasystems in which you are included, you are to accept your limitations, and thus

(*) بل الإنسان على نفسه بصيرة ، ولو ألقى معاذيره : (القيامة ١٤ ، ١٥)

just keep in harmony with other systems with the maximal degree of permissiveness.

In spite of the emphasis on personal responsibility, the role of guilt in Islam seems minimal in comparison to Christianity. Man is to be condemned to an endless reparation of some inherited sin. He is a sufferer; yes, but only when he is a foreign body in relation to cosmic harmony; he is primarily a creative growing individual, within the general harmonious discipline. Whatever dysharmony, which is the actual sin, is established, there is self punishment, since it is disturbing enough, and does not necessitate more and more reparatory compulsion, motivated by persistent guilt. This is again relevant to the basic concept of the positive nature of man, which is consistent with the humanistic trend in psychology. In child upbringing, if we uplift guilt and our children; then, basic concepts, are liable to change, probably, in the proper direction.

5. — Sex, body, and aggression :

The basic two instincts, sex and aggression, are considered in Islam, as basic, essential, and consciously appreciated and accepted, as well as, optimally controlled. Sex, is occasionally dignified, and sometimes considered as a praying to God, if performed in the proper social context. This may be directly related to emphasis on body awareness, where the body is the basic respectable vessel of our soul, having also its own dignity and independent role. Thus body is not the least condemned or denied.

The right to exhibit and practice justified aggression is also considered as a natural right of the Moslem. Then, and only then, he can forgive and redirect, rather consciously, such energy in a constructive channel.

Such values, if properly applied to children, could be preventive measures against undue repression of sex or aggression, or disembodiment.

self away from the body, or any other sort of body neglect or alienation. Such concepts are expected to be directly reflected on our growing children.

6. — Life and Death values :

In Islam, life is a gift from a suprasystem. Thus, one has no right to handle it with his own lower laws. Death, on the other hand, seems to be a realistic goal of everyone in the sense that it is the gate to merge into the mass of universe. Man, thus conceives himself as a temporary link in an endless system; or as simply representative of his species, over a limited period of time.

Could these concepts, be, practically, transmitted to our children in a trial to defend against undue development of the Western "Ego-mania", and its counter pole "Nihilism" ?

7. — Common goal, and interpersonal relation :

In Islam, most human activities (if not all), should be devoted to a common goal 'going towards truth (face of God)*'; fulfilling betterment of human beings. The interpersonal relation is tied altogether, according to the degree of overlap of the march towards such common goal. Exclusive dual or group dependency are not allowed to replace such togetherness towards the common goal, but may only be accepted as an intermediate means towards this ultimatant. If God is nearer to one's self than one's vein, as Islam says**, then this type of relation does not serve the least any real object avoidance, replacing it by some metaphysical object. On the contrary, it could be safer to relate to somebody who is relating to the other, while both representing a unit in the holiness of certain sub-system ?

(*) فأينما تولوا فثم وجه الله : البقرة (١١)
(**) ونحن أقرب إليه من حبل الوريد : ق (١٦)

8. — Special Rituals :*

No one man can conclusively interpret what a special religious ritual is set to achieve. A ritual may serve to establish a common language and establish some positive feed-back between faith and practice. However, Islamic rituals are so rhythmically organized and decently spaced, that they may help to reinforce circadian rhythmicity.

Can we hope to look deeper in to such rituals, instead of using them simply as defensive blocking of awareness or on the other hand altogether, as stereotypes or compulsion ? Can such a system of thinking construct a space for a child to benefit from the apparently irrational beliefs, and seemingly senseless performances ?

9. — Crescendo Harmony and Islamic Mysticism :

Mysticism and mystical practice are not an Islamic innovation. They can be traced back, before the known "heaven religions". Islamic mysticism includes varieties of systems that can hardly be included in one common discipline. Generally, most systems, specially, emphasize some hierarchy of existence, and grades of awareness, that may have certain parallels with different grades of consciousness. The Islamic mystical practice differentiates between the declared conformity including rituals (AL-SHARIAA); and the way to cultivate and expand awareness (AL-HAKIKA). This hierarchical way of thinking is frequently denied by traditional, and classical interpreters of Islam. However, it has its special correspondence in certain humanistic thinking, and its biological side-

* Many other illustrative examples could be suggested. The different levels of standing, bowing, and falling down in adoration, could be interpreted in terms of different circumferential circles of hierarchical harmonies existing around in the universe. Pilgrimage rituals, particularly, the 'atomic-like' organization circulating, around a common symbol; the 'in-and-out' program between the Safa and Maroua, have, all their correspondences in both, psychological theories, and cosmic arrangements.

view in the 'Evolutionary-Rhythmic Theory'. Proper mystical Islamic practice is judged by two main criteria : (a) increasing scope of awareness, and (b) reinforcing relation to reality, speaking the common language.

Is it worthwhile to take such concepts in consideration as valid religious informations, that some bearing upon human growth? Isn't it logic to take out whatever is practically applicable to our life, and particularly to our conceptualization about human development and growth?

To Conclude,

It seems logic to revise our knowledge about the goals of life and consequently, our models for child development in the light of what we bear in our macromolecular structure, and what our biological nature is setting us for. I believe that, the available scientific knowledge, represents, merely, one source of information. The Western civilization seems to have no real chance or obligation to check the adequacy of such scientific system. The test of time is a remote one by definition, and we should not be foolish enough to wait for its validating word. The present tragedies of our modern life, man becoming uprooted and swinging between Ego-mania, and Nihilism, should be the realistic motive for such revision.

Close :

As a matter of fact, religion is not in the least a system of beliefs. It is a way of living. If not, we can expect innumerable casualties resulting from the consequential double-bind situation. Such superficial repetition of religion's concepts, and defensive application of their basic assumptions, would set in our growing children, complications, such as, ambivalence, alienation, stereotypes, and compulsion, which ultimately predispose to disorganization.

Unfortunately, it seems that we are left in an awkward circular position : To make use of positive religious stand we have to be religious in the proper sense; and to be positively religious, we should have been brought up differently. Western people seem to avoid this situation by

putting the whole system aside, restricting awareness to the modest simple checkable scientific one.

Now, are we obliged to go the same way? Did our Western guests succeed, adequately, to present the proper model? Is there any alternative?

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الموجز

الدين والصحة النفسية

قدم هذا البحث وجهة نظر اسلامية مشيرة بصفة خاصة الى تشكيلها لنمط الوجود بصفة عامة وما يستتبع ذلك من تأثير على نمو الأطفال ، وقد شرح الباحث تبرير هذا المدخل كما أشار بطريق غير مباشر الى علاقة وجهة النظر هذه ببعض النظريات النفسية المتداولة حالياً .

ABSTRAIT

La religion et la santé mentale (avec une référence particulière au développement de l'enfant)

L'attitude islamique est introduite avec une référence spéciale à son influence possible sur le monde générale d'existence de l'individu et par conséquent sur le développement de l'enfant. La raison de cette notion en est expliquée, de même le relation de cette conception avec quelques théories courantes est indirectement traitée.

