

Reflection on Religion's Role in Society: Assessing Religious Function

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Abstract: *As an important segment of today's society, religion exerts a great influence on people. Religious belief has historically been an important part of social life, and its influence on people has continued to the present day. However, even though people have the freedom to choose their religion or not to practice it in nowadays, people have always disagreed about the impact religion has had on society. Despite discussions based on the historical significance of religion, human rights, and modern science, however, few have conducted a comprehensive analysis of the impact of religion on human relationships. Therefore, this paper will focus on analyzing the impact of religion in terms of people's social relationships. This article summarizes more than twenty papers and demonstrates the positive role religion plays in social relationships from the perspective of its impact on people's mental health, physical health, and interpersonal relationships. This article can help people understand more generally the impact of religion on today's society and promote research on ways to promote religious beliefs appropriately and with approximately maximum benefit for society.*

Keywords: *Religion; Stress; Interpersonal Relationships; Social Relations*

1. Introduction

As a large part of people's life, religion almost affects every aspect. According to data surveys, religion is one of the institutions that have the most extensive influence on people around the world, with about 84% of people belonging to it [1]. As Atran and Norezayan [2] point out, religion shapes our culture and modern society. For a long time, researchers have conducted a lot of research on the positive religion's effect on society. Religion has different influences on different societal aspects, for example, religion plays a positive role in social stability. Religious belief, according to Sigurvinsdottir et al. [3], reduces crime rates while also promoting social development. Religion can also help to strengthen social bonds. Adolescents with religious beliefs exhibited better moral standards and behaved more compassionately toward others, according to Ebstyn and Furrow [4]. Furthermore, religion can help in the happiness aspect. As Singer and Benassi [5] pointed out, having mystical ideas can assist people in reducing mental tension and increasing happiness levels in uncertain situations. However, despite the fact that most individuals tend to think religion has a positive impact on people's lives, there are still some dissenting voices. Religious belief systems, according to Cooray and Potrafke [6], limit people's freedom of thought and create psychological stress. Furthermore, Beckford [7] claimed religious beliefs do not appear to be well integrated into modern culture. Gradually, people began to waver about the positive effects of religion on society. Therefore, this paper will argue the benefits of religious belief in the role of people in modern social relations and discuss in detail its impact on people's mental health, physical health and interpersonal relationships. The thesis of this paper is that society should encourage religion to help people achieve better social relations because religion can relieve psychological pressure and establish good living and moral standards.

2. The Implications of Religion on People's Mental Health in Society

Religion is an important part of society that has a great influence on the psychological state of people in their daily lives. Religion is believed to relieve stress and improve mental health because it can give people a sense of control over their lives. A healthy mental state is an important factor in establishing social relationships. People with a healthier and positive mental state are often more likely to get along with others and establish better and broader social relationships. Therefore, as one of the most

authoritarian institutions, religion can generally help people relieve their pressures in adversity and guide people to face life's uncertainties and losses with a more positive attitude via promoting people's sense of control and safe, thus effectively improving people's mental health, which further promotes people to establish good social relations.

2.1 Religion's mitigating role in people's anxiety

Regular rituals and faith in religion promote a sense of control over the future and the unknown in people's daily lives, which effectively reduces anxiety, alleviates psychological stress, and enhances people's mental health. Haney et al. [8] pointed out that people with high religious belief tend to have a more positive psychological state, while people without religious belief are usually more prone to anxiety, depression, impatience, and other symptoms, which is a universal result. On the one hand, the regional and cultural universality of the spiritual state promoted by religious belief is achieved by the fixed rituals in religions. Although different religions have different rituals, the effects they bring to people are almost the same fixed rituals in religion can increase people's sense of control and reduce anxiety in their lives. Brooks et al. [9] defined certain behavioural patterns without obvious goals and symbolism as ritual actions in the experimental group and found when participants performed these rituals, they experienced a significant increase in mood and a decrease in anxiety levels, compared with no significant change in the control group. In a subsequent questionnaire, Brooks et al. [9] also found participants in the experimental group experienced a significant increase in their sense of control over their lives. Therefore, since people's sense of control over life is positively correlated with mental stress such as anxiety, religious rituals can help people improve their sense of control over uncertain factors in life, thus alleviating anxiety and restlessness caused by uncertain factors, and further promoting people's mental health.

Even more, through clever guidance, religious faith can be used to treat mental illness and reduce prejudice against different groups, promoting the overall stability and development of people's social relationships. Religious belief, through the proper application, will not cause people to have mental stress but can help treat mental diseases such as anxiety and depression. Stanley et al. [10] found through telephone interviews that approximately 80% of older adults (55+) preferred to include religious intervention in anxiety and depression treatment. Furthermore, by actively discussing with anxiety/depression patients their attitudes towards religious and occult beliefs, psychotherapists can help bring religious beliefs into therapy and effectively improve treatment effectiveness. Therefore, the combination of religion in the treatment of depression in the elderly is conducive to improving the elderly's acceptance of psychiatric treatment, so that they are more likely to seek the help of psychotherapists in the state of depression and anxiety, and more actively cooperate with the treatment, which is more conducive to improving people's mental health.

2.2 Religion serves as psychological support for people in distress

On the other hand, not only in the face of uncertainty but also when people lose what they value in life, religious belief, as a spiritual pillar, can often generally help people to feel a sense of control over difficult situations, thus relieving psychological pressure. Park [11] recruited students (religious and non-religious) who had recently lost close relatives and tested their mental states and happiness levels. The researchers found that religious students reported better mental health and a relatively high level of subjective well-being. Religious belief makes it easier for people to find the meaning of life, and students who have lost relatives are more likely to seek benign explanations for the loss of close relatives and find corresponding resources [11]. Therefore, when losing a close relative, religious belief guides people to understand and deal with their suffering in a benign way, so that people can gain a greater sense of control in the painful adversity, reduce the torture brought by the loss, and help them to face it with a more positive attitude. In a word, since religious rituals and beliefs can effectively promote people's mental health, and when establishing good social relations, mentally healthy people are usually more likely to obtain a virtuous circle of social relations, therefore, religion can promote a positive role in dealing with social relations. What's more, it is worth noting that religious belief not only promotes social relationships in terms of mental health but also has a significant impact on people's physical health.

3. The Impact of Religion on People's Physical Health in Daily Life

Religion should also be able to help people to establish a more regular lifestyle, eating habits, and encourages people to exercise, thus improving their health. People who are physically fit have more

opportunities to maintain or form new social relationships. The positive influence of religion on people also generally applies to the improvement of physical health. In fact, the fixed rituals and belief concepts in religion can promote people to eat and live more regularly and strengthen physical exercise, which increases people's health, thus providing more social space for people to develop social relations.

3.1 Religious facilitation of people's healthy dietary habits

Religion can provide emotional support through rituals to promote healthy eating and help people maintain a regular life. Debnam et al. [12] conducted a follow-up survey of African Americans' religious status, social support, and health habits. The results showed that religious African Americans had significantly more social support and healthier lifestyle habits (vegetables and fruits in particular), and that people with higher religious participation tended to have more regular lives. This is because people get more social support from regular religious ritual activities, which increases people's sense of belonging and gets better emotional support from it. Escarfulleri et al. [13] also pointed out that emotions were positively correlated with diet control and quality. Therefore, when people get better emotional support from religious activities, the quality of their diet improves as well as their physical health. Moreover, in order to regularly participate in religious activities, people will plan their lives more consciously and actively, thus imperceptibly improving the regularity of their lives and ultimately promoting their health.

3.2 Religious contributions to the healthy lifestyle of people

In addition, some religions (such as Buddhism and Taoism) encourage people to exercise, eat a balanced diet and get closer to nature directly. Chen [14] found that religious belief significantly promoted the physical health of people over 65 years old. For example, Chinese Taoism stresses the harmonious coexistence between man and nature and encourages people to return to nature more often. Moreover, Buddhism encourages people to eat more vegetables and less meat and to control their total daily intake of food. As a result, Taoist people (especially the elderly) are more conscious of activities close to nature such as going to parks, climbing mountains, and travelling to the countryside, which leads to more physical exercise and better health. Due to the basic concept of eating less and more vegetables, people who believe in Buddhism usually take the initiative to control the intake of oil in their diet and consciously plan their food intake, thus improving their health. As Liu [15] points out, people who engage in more physical activity usually perform better in social relationships. Healthy people are more likely to have a more positive attitude, a wider range of activities and more opportunities to participate in social activities than those who are relatively weak. Therefore, religious belief promotes the development of social relations by improving people's health levels. Another important role that religion plays in fostering social relationships is interpersonal relationships.

4. Religious Ramifications for Interpersonal Relationships of People in Society

Religious belief should be able to promote interpersonal relations between people and increase their mutual understanding, thus making society more harmonious. The maintenance state of interpersonal relationships directly affects people's social relationships, so it is very necessary to learn the method of maintaining good interpersonal relationships. Fortunately, religious belief could universally improve social relationships by promoting interpersonal relationships via increasing prosocial behaviour and helping isolated people form new interpersonal relationships.

4.1 Religious facilitation of pro-social behaviour

People with higher engagement in religious activities are more willing to help others, which is beneficial to maintain people's interpersonal relationships. Andriani and Sabatini [16] found that people who have a strong belief in authority are more intended to participate in prosocial activities. Thus, when people had higher levels of religious belief, they were more likely to engage in prosocial actions. Petrovic et al. [17] supported this idea by finding that when religion was of high personal importance and attendance at religious services was high, people generally volunteered for more time and showed greater willingness to volunteer. Part of the reason is that when people frequently participate in religious activities, they have a stronger sense of belonging to religious belief and an increased sense of trust in religious institutions. Therefore, a high degree of participation in religious activities can promote the formation of people's prosocial behaviour. As prosocial behaviour can strengthen people's subconscious

that self plays an important and irreplaceable role in society [18], it can make people more confident and positive in interpersonal communication, thus significantly enhancing the benign interaction between people and helping to strengthen interpersonal relationships. Therefore, a high level of religious belief can promote the development of interpersonal relationships.

4.2 Religion acts as a dynamic force in building or rebuilding interpersonal connections

When people are socially isolated and have lost their personal relationships, religion can help them reintegrate into society and form new relationships. Chan et al. [19] found that when socially isolated people turn to religion, strong religious belief can help people re-establish the meaning of life and meet their need for belonging. More importantly, the promotion of religious piety will increase the frequency of people's participation in religious activities. Therefore, people who had lost contact with society will not abandon themselves to solitude but will connect again with people through various religious activities, thus increasing their communication opportunities with the outside world. Moreover, Wilcox et al. [20] stated that people usually generate a more positive attitude when they feel stronger belonging. Therefore, since most of the people that the isolated people meet in religious activities practice the same religion, socially disconnected people are more likely to make positive judgments about their surroundings and people because of the same beliefs and belonging so that they can develop new relationships and return to society.

What's more, the effective use of religion can also reduce prejudice between groups and rebind the relationships between those groups. Clobert et al. [21] stated, in the West, the ideas of generosity, gratitude and charity emphasized in Christianity can arouse people to communicate with people of different groups on an equal basis, which is more conducive to their understanding of foreign groups and reduce prejudice. The prevailing Buddhism in the East emphasizes people's tolerance and sympathy for others and the idea that all living beings share the same identity promotes people's equal and tolerant treatment of different groups [21]. Therefore, subtly guiding people to pay attention to the idea of equal treatment in religion will appease prejudice between different groups and promote the fairness of social status and resources. Therefore, having healthy interpersonal relationships is necessary to promote social relationships, and people should promote religious faith in society because it can help people effectively build positive community relationships and promote the harmonious development of society.

5. Subtlety and Guidance in Promoting Religion

Through clever guidance, religious faith can be used to treat mental illness and reduce prejudice against different groups, promoting the overall stability and development of people's social relationships. Religious belief, through the proper application, will not cause people to have mental stress but can help treat mental diseases such as anxiety and depression. Stanley et al. [22] found through telephone interviews that approximately 80% of older adults (55+) preferred to include religious intervention in anxiety and depression treatment. Furthermore, by actively discussing with anxiety/depression patients their attitudes towards religious and occult beliefs, psychotherapists can help bring religious beliefs into therapy and effectively improve treatment effectiveness. Therefore, the combination of religion in the treatment of depression in the elderly is conducive to improving the elderly's acceptance of psychiatric treatment, so that they are more likely to seek the help of psychotherapists in the state of depression and anxiety, and more actively cooperate with the treatment, which is more conducive to improving people's mental health. Effective use of religion not only reduces anxiety but also prejudice between groups. Clobert et al. [23] stated in the West, the ideas of generosity, gratitude and charity emphasized in Christianity can arouse people to communicate with people of different groups on an equal basis, which is more conducive to their understanding of foreign groups and reduce prejudice. The prevailing Buddhism in the East emphasizes people's tolerance and sympathy for others and the idea that all living beings share the same identity promotes people's equal and tolerant treatment of different groups [23]. Therefore, subtly guiding people to pay attention to the idea of equal treatment in religion will not aggravate the prejudice between different groups but will promote the fairness of social status and resources and promote the progress of social relations between different groups. Overall, benefits of religious belief far outweigh the disadvantages. Therefore, from the point of view of social relations, people should encourage the propaganda of religion.

6. Conclusion

This paper summarizes the effects of faith on people's mental and physical health and social relationships. In general, religion can be effective in relieving people's mental stress, promoting their psychological health, improving their healthy routine and eating patterns, promoting trusting relationships and pro-social behaviour, and helping people to establish new, virtuous social relationships. Furthermore, the effective use of certain characteristics of religion can help people treat anxiety and strengthen relationships between different groups. Therefore, generally, religious beliefs should be promoted and encouraged. However, currently, research on how to promote religious belief is not enough in place. Based on promoting religion, researchers should also focus on the characteristics of religion, that is, which factors in religion are very beneficial to people's social relations, and which characteristics may hinder social development. At the same time, researchers should focus on how to maximize the benefits of religion and minimize its negative effects on people. Researchers may consider including optional courses on religious beliefs in basic education to promote understanding of religion and to guide people to a positive (rather than extreme) perception of religion.

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