

# IMPACT OF RELIGION ON MENTAL HEALTH

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## ABSTRACT

In the seventeenth century, a wave of depression seemed to affect the Western world, especially men of genius –Thomas Gray and Samuel Johnson in England, Rousseau and Baudelaire in France, Tolstoy in Russia, Weber in Germany, and William James in America, among others. Far from being an affliction of the famous, diseases strikes the poor more often than rich and women more commonly than men.

In Muslim Morocco, music, dance and trance are used to cure 'Paralysis, severe depression, and possession.' In Italy, treatment of Tarantella was more and passionate dancing. Suicidal bombing, bomb blasts at girls' schools, and Sufi shrines could be ascribed to the puritanical self-denial of the Wahhabi creed.

From the sixteenth century AD onwards Europeans forcibly imposed their culture and beliefs on the whole world. The African Diaspora to the Americas did not relinquish their traditions as Europeans desired and created blues, rock 'n roll, hip-hop, and jazz. Ten million Africans in Americas preserved and used their community celebrations as springboards for rebellion against white rule.

But the overall story is of cultural destruction. When the Russian navigator Thaddeus Bellingshausen visited Tahiti in 1820, he found the islanders wearing European clothes and women with shaved heads. Defeated, the Tahitians had little to do, but drink. This paper examines the intersection of religion and mental health via case studies of various religions in different parts of the world throughout history.

Keywords: ***Religion, behaviour, mental health, depression, colonisation, imperialism. rebellion***

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## Introduction

In the seventeenth century AD, a wave of depression struck Europe. It seemed to affect especially men of genius such as John Bunyan, Thomas Gray, John Donne, and Samuel Johnson in England, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Charles Baudelaire in France, Leo Tolstoy in Russia, Max Weber in Germany and in America William James. One Dr. George Cheyne lamented in 1733, 'Frequency and wanton... self-murders... by this distemper and attributed it to the English climate combined with sedentary life style and urbanisation... afflicting such numbers in any known nation' (Doughty 1926: 257-69).

Samuel Johnson had it in 1729, at the age of twenty, after being forced to leave Oxford for lack of funds (Boswell 1986:44). The English called it 'The English malady' though all of Europe was afflicted (Sanchez 1988: 157). The paradox that the enlightenment should be characterised by black gall and melancholy persons, was notable (Trossbach 1944: 90-120). Far from being an affliction of the famous, it strikes the poor more and women more commonly than men. World Health Organization estimates that depression is now the fifth largest cause of death and disability, with ischemic heart disease trailing it in the sixth place (Reuters 2001). The prevalence can be credibly related to the decline in opportunities for pleasure, such as carnivals.

## Religion, Culture and behavioural aspects

Among the Muslims, the emergence of suicidal bombing, senseless acts of terror such as bomb blasts at girls' schools and Sufi shrines, could be credibly ascribed to the puritanical self-denial of the Wahhabi creed. Hippocrates described it in the fifth century AD. Chaucer in the fourteenth century and late medieval churchmen knew it as Acedia which was regarded as a sin. Melancholy did not become fashionable until a full century after Burton (17<sup>th</sup> century AD) took it up and it became a subject for satire.

Physicians were eager to diagnose melancholy in their better off patients. The definitions in Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders seem to be fuzzy, but in Burton's (2012) account, melancholy and the modern definition of depression would seem to be the same. William Styron's (1900) lists 'self-hatred' as a symptom (James 1961: 136). Styron (1990: 45) also mentions externalisation of terror.

Lionel Trilling (1973: 45) wrote, 'Historians of European culture are in agreement that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD, something like a mutation in human nature took place.' All people, in all history, have some sense of selfhood, but we are talking about an intensification of the universal human capacity to face the world as an autonomous 'I' separate from 'Them'. European nobility had undergone this sort of shift in their transformation from a warrior to a courtier class. In the late sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries AD, it affected even the artisans, peasants and labourers.

Historians have attributed it to changes occurring in early modern period among the urban bourgeoisie. It was reflected in mirrors, self-portrait, and autobiography. Public spaces that guests may enter were segregated from private quarters. Decorous entertainment-plays and opera replaced promiscuously interactive carnivals (Hsia 1989). In medieval culture, you were what you appeared to be, and any attempt to assume another status was prohibited. Laws barred the wealthy commoner from dressing in colours, which were deemed appropriate only to nobles (Davis 1993: 40).

Upward mobility commenced in the late sixteenth century AD. The merchant could buy an aristocratic title. A system of etiquette was devised in royal courts in how to comport oneself. Books advised on how to choose a socially advantageous wife. The 'inner' is highly honoured in our own culture. Trilling (1973) called it 'the emergence of modern American and European man and of an untrammelled freedom to ask questions and explore, as the historian Tuan (1982: 139) has put it. But the price to be paid as Tuan (1982) writes is 'isolation, loneliness, loss of innocent pleasure reality has no meaning other than what a person chooses to call it.'

### **Fear of Damnation – a Creation of Religions**

One circumstance indisputably involved in the aetiology of depression, is precisely this sense of isolation or as Durkhiem (1951) calls it 'anomie' (Klerman and Weissman 1989:1119-30). He further says, 'originally society is everything, the individual nothing, but gradually things change' (Durkhiem 1951: 336). It ends up in isolation and depression. What seems to be of higher concern is the opinion of others. It would help explain the frequent onset of depression at the time of a perceived or anticipated failure. Even two hundred years ago, most people would have interpreted feeling of isolation and anxiety through the medium of religion, self as soul, gaze of others as God and melancholy as the fear of eternal damnation.

Catholics offered palliatives in the form of rituals; Lutherans offered an approachable God. Calvinism (Wahabism, its Islamic equivalent), instead of offering relief imposed a mind-set that if you felt isolated, persecuted and damned, it was because you actually were. Burton (2012) singled out religious melancholy, as an especially virulent form of the disease. As quoted by Brann (1980: 63-72), Burton says, 'the main matter which terrifies is the enormity of their offenses and God's heavy wrath; they account themselves already damned.'

Christianity and Islam require that every soul ultimately confront God alone. Calvinist soul wanders forever in solitude. Friends may turn out to be false. Weber (1992) calls, 'the strikingly frequent repetition against any trust, even

family deserves no lasting loyalty.’ In Bunyan’s (2003:15) *Pilgrim’s Progress*, Christian flees his home. One of Max Weber’s (1992:104) greatest insights was to see the compatibility between Calvinism and Capitalism. He notes, ‘the unprecedented inner loneliness that a competitive sink or swim economy imposed. Just as the soul struggled... the self-toiled and schemed along a parallel trajectory in the material world.’ He continues, ‘the most urgent task of Calvinism was the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment’ (Weber 1992: 119).

Carnival (in Wahabism, celebration of the birthday of the prophet of Islam, social gatherings to recite hymns, visiting shrines, asking for God’s favour after prayers and even reciting the Koran as group) was the portal to hell, just as pleasure in any form –sexual or gustatory was the Devil’s snare. The medieval peasant created festivities as an escape from work; the Puritan embraced work as an escape from terror. A late eighteenth century Scottish medical handbook states, ‘many persons of religious turn of mind behave as if they thought it was a crime to be cheerful’ (Jackson 1988: 37).

### **Depression and Breakdown**

A Calvinist mother raised Weber. In his mid-thirties, at the time of enviable academic success, he experienced a total breakdown. (Imam Ghazali, whose influence on Sunni Muslim thought is regarded as second only to that of the prophet Muhammad himself, also had a breakdown at the height of his academic career. He had to give up teaching for years. He recovered, but went on to condemn ‘Ijtihad’-innovation in matters religious, legitimising orthodoxy like nobody else had been able to, before or since) (Watt 1963).

Durkheim (1951) found that Protestants in the nineteenth century were about twice as likely to commit suicide as Catholics. Rise of a market based competitive economy favoured a more anxious and isolated kind of person, prone to depression and distrustful of communal pleasures. The death of carnival contributed directly to the epidemic of depression. The nineteenth century French historian Jules Michelet bemoaned a childhood devoid of festivals (Ozouf 1988:15). Speaking of hysteria, the historians Stallybrass and White (1986: 171) note that ‘carnival debris spills out of the mouths of these terrified Viennese women in Freud’s studies... Don’t you hear horses stamping in the circus.’ They continue to say, ‘Freud’s patients ...enacting desperate ritual fragments from festive traditions, the self-exclusion from which had been one of the identifying features of their social class’ (Stallybrass and White 1986: 176).

### **Festivity – An Effective Cure**

By abandoning their traditional festivities, people lost a potentially effective cure for depression. Robert Burton (2012: 482) suggests, ‘let them use

hunting, sports, merry company a cup of good drink now and then.’ A century later, even Adam Smith was advocating festivities as a means of relieving melancholy. To quote Robert W. Malcolmson (1973: 71), ‘the state by giving liberty, divert the people by painting, music easily dissipate melancholy...’

As quoted by Burkert (1987: 113) almost two thousand years ago, the Greek musicologist Aristides Quintilianus wrote, ‘this is the purpose of Bacchic initiation, depressive anxiety be cleared away.’ The Kung people of Kalahari Desert use their ecstatic nocturnal dances to treat the full range of psychological, emotional and spiritual illnesses (Katz 1982:54). In Muslim Morocco, rituals involving music, dance and trance are used to cure paralysis severe depression and possession (Crepanzano 1973:4-5). In Saudi Arabia men accumulate wives, while women take trips to Europe and America and take off the sack like covering off their body as soon as they land at a foreign airport.

In Christian Uganda in the 1990’s, dance rituals were used to rehabilitate children traumatised by the Lord’s resistance army (Global Youth 2001). In Italy treatment of Tarantula was more and passionate dancing. Hecker reports a similar syndrome and cure in nineteenth century AD Abyssinia, now Ethiopia. Similarly in second century Somalia, a married woman would go into depression, often precipitated by her husband’s intention to take another wife, and a female Shaman would be called (Lewis 1971:76-77). In brief, festivity could be an effective method of curing several ailments.

### **Religion in service of and as collaborator of colonial imperialism**

Sixteenth century AD onwards Europeans forcibly imposed their culture and beliefs on the whole world. (Muslims did that from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century AD). Driven by lack of food, religious intolerance and helped by technological advances, Europe gained supremacy. A historian of Tahiti described Protestant missionaries as followers of a ‘dour and cheerless creed’ (Howarth 1984:162). Sometimes European destruction of ‘native’ rites was incidental to their physical destruction. As cited by John Harris (1990:55), one missionary outpost was abandoned as ‘aboriginals becoming extinct in these districts.’

On the whole, though there was nothing incidental about the European campaign against the communal rituals of colonial people, it was deliberate (Janzen 1992: 164). Therefore, imposition of civilisation and Christianity was merely a plausible excuse. The idea was capture of land and resources. Anthropologist John P. Kirby (1994: 57-71) says, ‘missionaries in West Africa were too busy suppressing... ritual and beliefs to find out what they meant.’ Kirby (1994: 61) goes on to mention that ‘most missionaries considered colonial administrations as allies in the essential task of destroying existing structures, it was part of socialisation, to facilitate acceptance by natives of Europeans as superior, so would submit and work for the latter.’

Europeans tended to equate the ‘savages’ of the new world with their own lower classes. One of the goals of the crackdown on festivities was to instil work ethic in the lower classes, and use time hitherto wasted on festivities to productive labour. MacDonald (1969: 60) notes, ‘one of the chief difficulties experienced by employers in Africa is the undisciplined character of the native; Christian teaching can do much to remove this trouble.’ But the parallel between repression of their native lower class, and their colonial subjects went only so far. They regarded the former as fellow Christians, the latter were, “a species of tail-less monkeys’ or if human in any sense ‘nearest of all to Orangutan.’

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (1991: 101) note that Georges Cuvier, a nineteenth century Swiss comparative anatomist describes, ‘Negro race...manifestly approaches to the monkey class.’ This attitude helped to justify a casual attitude to genocide (Englehardt 2000: 25). They may have taken a leaf from the book of Arabs who called everyone else ‘ajam’ meaning ‘dumb’. In Europe, the lower classes could only be disciplined and not be destroyed as the rise of absolutism required soldiers and later industrial capitalism required labourers. The death toll from four centuries of European imperialism at an estimated fifty million is a much larger percentage of the world’s population, than the twenty or so million toll of the two World Wars in the twentieth century.

### **The Phenomena of Conversion**

Conversion was only to facilitate submission of the natives. When absolute power was already in hand, many North American slave owners would flog the slaves for attending church services or even for praying in private (Raboteau 1978: 61). The English initially opposed the entry of Christian missionaries, fearing that any challenge to Hinduism would threaten imperial profits. The degree of concordance between the conquerors who would exploit labour and resources and missionaries, who would destroy their culture, is striking (Raboteau 1978: 57). Imperialism is a matter of religion...we need Christian imperialism and commercialism, imperial Christianity and an economic religion, continues Raboteau (1978: 36, 151).

These slave owners shuddered at the collective strength rituals invoked, and dance was particularly distasteful, because of ‘vitality it represented.’ To quote Ward (1999:210) John Mackenzie wrote of Southern Africa that how Christianity weakened the communistic relations...and let in the...stimulating breathe of individualist competition. The African Diaspora to the Americas provides striking cases of such cultural resistance. They did not relinquish their traditions as swiftly and as completely as Europeans desired and created blues, rock n roll, hip-hop and jazz (Fenn 1988: 127).

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, at least ten million

Africans were forcibly transported, virtually naked, stripped of all cultural artifacts and kinship connections, thrown together with disparate national groupings; Yoruba, Dahomeans, Ibo and others. They were worked ceaselessly, and often forbidden to engage in any 'heathen' practices, including dancing. But they, somehow, managed to preserve some of their traditional forms of communal celebrations, and used them as springboards for rebellion against white rule (Thomas 1997: 138).

### **Rituals of Rebellion**

Christianity, itself, provided a disguise and a vehicle for ecstatic ritual. Both the secularised tradition of carnival and Africanised version of Christianity: Voodoo, Santeria, Candomble, became sites of black defiance and white repression. In protestant settings like in Jamaica, and the Southern United States of America (US), slaves used Christmas as an opening to establish their own festivity; Jonkonnu, as early as 1688 in Jamaica, with costuming and dancing 'rattles ty'd to their wrists and legs' (Fenn 1988: 127).

A little over a century later, whites agreed to do the chores of the slaves during the celebrations. During the festivals, as happened between Roman slaves and their masters at the feast of Saturnalia, 'the distance between masters and slaves appears to be annihilated' (Fenn 1988: 127). In the Catholic milieu, slaves quickly exploited the carnival period extending from Christmas nearly to Ash Wednesday. In Trinidad, it was an occasion for so much uninhibited revelry by the French settlers that from 1800 onwards martial law was imposed to contain white mischief (Fenn 1988: 138). People of colour, free or slave were barred from participation (Cowley 1996: 20-21).

For slaves who broke the law by wearing a mask, the punishment was one hundred stripes, and if done at night, twice as many. (Wahhabis mete out similar punishment if they find unmarried boys and girls strolling on a street). Trinidadian Blacks exhibited their courage by moving in on the White institutions, finally achieving full participation on the eve of emancipation in 1934. A similar take-over occurred in Brazil in the 1880s, using drums and tambourines. Whites reacted as they did in Europe in response to lower class celebrations, by retreating indoors to their own masked balls and dinner parties.

Interestingly 35 percent of all rebellions in the British Caribbean were planned for the Christmas period (Cowley 1996: 45). In Cuba, 1812 and 1835 uprisings were linked with carnivals (Bettelheim 1999: 66-75). African slaves developed 'syncretic' religions cobbled together bits of Christianity, and remembered fragments of their original religion. They used Catholic saints as a cover for the pantheon of African-derived deities. The collective practice of these religions was and remains Dionysian; ecstatic and danced religion in which music and muscles induce a state of trance which is interpreted as possession

by or transcendent unity with a god. To most Europeans, it looked like madness (Olmas and Paravisini 1999: 7).

Yet anthropologists agree that the rites were quite disciplined (Metraux 1960: 98). Anthropologists explained the promotion of new and defiant ecstatic religions as a form of escapism. It was a global phenomenon, from Indonesia to Africa, and Americas, and countries in between (Lanternari 1963: 143). Maori (of Oceania) Hau-hua cult arose under British rule in 1864, when many Maoris had converted to Christianity, but the British started driving the Maoris away from their land. Thousands died, and the Maori took up arms (Lanternari 1963: 251). Religion was used extensively in the 1857 Indian war of independence (John 2000). The Belgians burned a Congolese woman, who took the name of Donna Beatrice in 1706. She was the first leader of the 'independent' African Christian movement (John 2000: 42, 202).

As recently as the 1920's, the Belgians sentenced an African prophet, Simon Kimbangu to life in prison (Fields 1985: 140-41). The British in Trinidad launched an inquisition against Obeah and burned, hanged and amputated the ears and noses of the suspects (Campbell 1988: 7). Napoleon tried to eradicate Voodoo in Haiti (Laguerre 1989: 59). The Portuguese tried to suppress the Candombles (Murphy 1944). The British banned drums in Trinidad in 1884 (Juneja 1988: 91), but a more rational and military motive can be inferred, as they banned dancing, processions and 'any assembly' as well (Cowley 1996). Americans did it in Cuba in 1902 (Benitez 1999: 199). But the overall story is of cultural destruction. When the Russian navigator Thaddeus Bellinghausen visited Tahiti in 1820, he found the islanders wearing European clothes, women had shaved their heads as the lovely hair falling to their waists was deemed unsanitary by missionaries, liquor and tattooing had been banned where there had been unashamed free love, there now existed Christian guilt. Defeated, converted and reformed, the Tahitians had little to do, but drink (Moorehead 1966: 83-85).

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