

IS RELIGION A MENTAL ILLNESS?

Acts 16:16-21

October 26th, 2008

I've been studying mental illness this past week and I'm worried. I thought I was mentally healthy, but now I'm not so certain. I have a lot of the symptoms I've been reading about.

For example, a person who hears voices telling them what to do is often diagnosed as a schizophrenic. Very worrisome. All my life I've been around people who heard voices telling them what to do. People were always saying "God told me this" or "God told me that." We even sang about it. "I can hear my savior calling, I can hear my savior calling." After this week, I'll never hear that hymn exactly the same. On several occasions in my life, I've thought I heard the voice of God. I never thought of this as a mental illness. I thought it was a sign of spiritual maturity.

Did you know a person who believes they are constantly being watched has a paranoia? I was taught they had a healthy fear of God. As a child, I learned there were angels watching over me. As a teenager, I was told Jesus went with me everywhere and I shouldn't do anything that I wouldn't do in front of Jesus. I was constipated for a week. Such thinking put a serious cramp on my dating life. Even today, if I do something wrong, I have a tendency to look over my shoulder. I didn't know I was paranoid.

A person who thinks they must immerse themselves to wash away the bad things they've done may have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. I didn't know immersing yourself was a mental illness. I thought that was good Baptist theology. Or how about a person who imagines they are drinking human blood and eating human flesh? Turns out the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation may be also be delusional behavior. Those Pentacostals who faint, fall on the ground, and shake may have a form of focal epilepsy. And all those people who call their pastors "reverend" and their priests "father" may have unresolved parental authority issues that led to co-dependency.

If you're a Quaker, this may be reassuring. We tend to avoid most of these extremes – we don't baptize, take communion, or have ecstatic outbursts. Unfortunately, a person who sits for long periods of time in silence may have a mild form of catatonia.

Friends, by the time, I was done reading about mental illness I began to wonder if churches were mental institutions and religious people were mentally unbalanced. Is religion a mental illness?

According to the Bible, it certainly can be. In the story we heard this morning, Paul was walking through the town of Philippi when a young slave woman began proclaiming loudly that he was “a servant of the Most High God.” Apparently, she followed Paul for several days, continually making this declaration.

Now, if someone followed me around today and continually announced I was a servant of the Most High God, I’d think they were nuts. I’d suggest they get counseling and, if they didn’t stop, I’d get a restraining order. In Paul’s day, the situation was more complicated.

The Bible tells us the woman “had a spirit that allowed her to predict the future” and that “she earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune telling.” In other words, she was an Oracle. In her day, this woman was considered spiritually mature, highly religious, and deeply respected. She wasn’t a nut. She was in touch with God.

Only Paul didn’t see her that way. He saw her as a person who needed to be healed. He thought she was plagued by an evil spirit. According to the story, Paul became so troubled by her outbursts that he turned and said, “In the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to come out of her.” And she was healed of her religion.

We know this because, according to the story, her owners dragged Paul into court and accused him of “advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.” In other words, they accused Paul of being hostile toward religion. Though the passage doesn’t say this explicitly, we know this from ancient Roman documents. Early Christians were often accused of being atheists – people who didn’t believe in the gods – and of being anti-religious.

If that’s hard to get your head around, what would we think if a psychiatrist came to a church, heard someone mention hearing God’s voice, and suggested counseling. That is equivalent to what Paul did when he cast the demon out of the Oracle. He cast doubt on the mental health of a predominant religious understanding of his day. Healing an oracle would be like suggesting the Pope needs therapy.

Ironically, Paul did this by casting out an evil spirit, something most of us would consider mentally unbalanced. That’s the problem with defining mental health. It all depends on the age and the society.

For example, when I was in seminary, we studied the mass suicide at Masada. In the first century, Jewish rebels resisted the power of Rome from this mountain fortress for eight years. When the Roman legions finally built a ramp up the mountain and prepared for their assault, the Jews in Masada

committed mass suicide rather than being captured. Their leader, Eleazar Ben Yair, ordered all his followers to be killed. Ten men are appointed to kill the others, then one of the remaining ten to kill the other nine, and then this final man to commit suicide. To this day, Masada is considered an example of religious faithfulness and courage.

Of course, when we were studying Masada, I couldn't help but think about Jim Jones and his followers in Guyana. They too thought they were fighting against an imperial power. They too chose mass suicide over surrender. Jones used almost exactly the same formula to kill his followers. Ten were appointed to serve the others the poisoned Kool-aid. One served the other nine. A final person shot themselves. The only difference between Jonestown and Masada is that we think Jones and his followers were nuts.

Or how about Deanna Laney, the Texas woman who killed two of her young children in 2003 and claimed God has commanded it? Eventually, the jury found her innocent on grounds of insanity. They concluded that killing her children was an act of mental instability and not religious faithfulness.

At the time, I wondered if Deanna Laney had been reading the book of Genesis, where Abraham is commanded by God to sacrifice Isaac. I wondered if she'd sat in churches where preachers constantly talked about God's willingness to sacrifice his only begotten son. I wondered why such imagery continues to be tolerated in Christianity if killing your children in obedience to God is insanity. The New Testament offers Abraham as a prime example of religious faithfulness. What would a jury say about Abraham? Was he faithful or mentally ill?

What constitutes mentally healthy religion?

This is a terribly important question. It is part of the reason we may separate from Western Yearly Meeting. Most of us think being gay or lesbian is not a mental illness. It is a legitimate lifestyle choice based on the way some people were born. Being gay and religious is not a contradiction.

However, for many in Western Yearly Meeting, this is not the case. They believe homosexuality is a mental illness that can be cured with treatment and prayer. Those who refuse this healing are sinful and disobedient. A Quaker meeting that tolerates such behavior is unfaithful and uncaring. Irvington is not mentally healthy.

We shouldn't be too critical of them for thinking this. As recently as 1973, the American Psychiatric Association considered homosexuality a mental disorder. Many of these people grew up hearing both church and society recommend therapy.

It is difficult to define mentally healthy religion when the ground keeps shifting. Indeed, I was surprised to discover the World Health Organization refuses to define mental health. They argue that cultural differences, subjective assessments and competing professional theories make it impossible to conclusively judge who's mentally healthy and who's not. They suggest as long as individuals are experiencing joy in what they do and able to function in society that they should be considered mentally healthy.

The problem with this loose definition of mental health is that it includes the BTK Killer. The BTK Killer was a man named Dennis Rader who bound, tortured and killed 10 people, mostly women, over a period of twenty years in Wichita, Kansas. When Rader was finally arrested, it was discovered that he has been an exemplary city employee, a respected family man, and a faithful member of his Lutheran church, even serving as its congregational leader. They also discovered Rader experienced joy in killing people.

So here's the problem. Rader enjoyed killing people and was able to function in society. Not only was he able to function, he was able to be a respected leader within his religious community. By every outward standard, Rader was mentally healthy. Or was he?

I don't think it is possible to murder ten people and be mentally healthy. Indeed, I'm beginning to think the true test of mental health is not experiencing joy in what we do or even functioning in society. It's not a sense of humor, or balanced life, or a clear grasp on reality. As admirable as all of these characteristics may be, the true test of mental stability may be directly connected to violent behavior and violent desires toward our selves or toward others. The more we are able to justify being violent, the more mentally unhealthy we are.

If this is the case, religions that celebrate, condone, tolerate, or encourage violence are also mentally unhealthy. When religion allows us to be violent, religion is a form of mental illness.

Fortunately, I believe religion is less violent and mentally unhealthy than it once was. There was a day when killing your children on an altar was seen as a highly religious act. There was a time when "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was considered the moral standard. There was a day when God was understood as one who ordered God's followers to kill others. There was a time when nationalism and religion went hand and hand. Today, more and more people would suggest such ideas are irreligious.

While Angie and I were on vacation, we visited Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. One of the plaques we read told the story of the Italian fisherman

who built the fishing industry in the early 1900's. When Pearl Harbor was bombed and Italy joined the war, these fisherman had their boats seized and were ordered to move at least 400 miles from the coast even though most of them had been Americans for several generations.

That plaque reminded me of our response to September 11th. As much as I disagree with President Bush on many issues, I was proud of him when he spoke on the day after that tragedy. In his national address, he made it clear Americans should not take out their anger on American Muslims, that the attack was not a religious act, but an inappropriate act of violence. In making this distinction, President Bush was acknowledging that religion and violence are incompatible.

While we are still a violent nation in many ways, this is progress. We did not put Muslims in concentration camps like we did to the Japanese during World War Two. Our response was mentally healthier.

If only religious folk were as discerning as President Bush. One of my continued concerns is how resistant Christianity and Islam have been to abandoning violence as a theme. Though I don't think the acts of September 11th represent Islam, I do think there is much within Islam that needs to be repudiated. Those commands that suggest killing others is a holy action should be rejected, even if Mohammed did commend them.

But before we are too critical of Islam, we must acknowledge our own complicity in promoting violence. A religion that argues that God can only forgive us if blood is shed has little room to be critical. Christianity needs to seriously confront all the ways in which its stories and theology celebrate and honor violence.

Abraham may have been a hero in his day, but he would be a monster in ours. It's time for Christianity to take Jesus seriously when he suggests we turn the other cheek and love our enemies. We have to decide if what he commanded is insanity, or the true sign of a mentally healthy person.

Gandhi said this:

Times change and systems die. But it is my faith that, in the end, it is only non-violence and things that are based on non-violence that will endure. Nineteen hundred years ago, Christianity was born. The ministry of Jesus last three brief years. His teaching was misunderstood even during his own time and today Christianity is a denial of his central teaching – that mankind can only be saved through non-violence.

The irony of Gandhi's words is that, regardless of what Jesus taught, Christianity decided to make the violent death of Jesus on the cross as the

means of the world's salvation. Christianity chose to adopt a future where Jesus returns with a sword in his hand to vanquish his enemies.

I think Gandhi was right. The world is changing. More and more people are abandoning violence as appropriate human behavior. If religion insists on celebrating either its violent past or a violent future, I believe more and more people will abandon those religions. And rightly so.

Violent religion is mentally ill.