



Evolution of religion

Sir,

It was really very nice to go through the editorial of the January-June 2020, Volume 11 Issue 1 of the Open Journal of Psychiatry & Allied Sciences (OJPAS®).[1] My teacher and mentor Dr HR Phookun sir has described in a very simple language the psychology of religion. It was an interesting read, and to have an insight about the need and purpose of religion, particularly from a psychiatrist's point of view. It is worth mentioning that the author has very nicely analysed the core function of psychic and religious operations – to control and contain raw energy, wishes, desires, and urges without thinking about the consequences.

Although psychology and religion appear different, they both provide with an important way of better understanding of world around us. Religious belief in an omnipotent God and psychological theory are based on assumptions that cannot be proven. Religion claims that an omnipresent God exists and psychology is based on presuppositions regarding human behaviour.[2]

I would like to submit few points regarding the evolution of religion. Religion is the result of many cognitive and social operations which have been beneficial in human development.

COGNITIVE OPERATIONS

Cognitive decoupling

Cognitive decoupling originates in childhood through imaginary play. It is the capacity of being able to imagine the mind of someone we know. Gradually, it enables us imagining an omnipotent, omniscient, human-like mind – especially, if we have religious texts which tell of their past actions.

Anthropomorphise

The ability to anthropomorphise objects is an important adaptive mechanism that help in the evolution of religious beliefs. The capacity to attribute human forms and behaviours to non-human things shows we also readily endow non-human entities, such as Gods, with the similar qualities that we possess which make it easier to connect with them.

Neurochemistry

Formal rituals also alter brain chemistry. These rituals apart from increasing social unity, also increase levels of serotonin, dopamine, and oxytocin in the brain – chemicals that make us feel good, generate positive feedback, and provide a closeness to others.

SOCIAL OPERATIONS

The ritualistic behaviour that is prevalent in collective worship is a pleasant experience and may be repeated to get the pleasure. Dancing, rolling on the floor, behaving as if possessed by a spirit and achieving trance-like states were quite common in earlier days and are still reported in some societies even today. One case of mass trance and possession syndrome was reported at Silchar, Assam, India amongst the students during mass religious practices.[3]

But, religion and spirituality are not synonymous. Religion is the formal belief, group behaviours, and rituals which most people experience and practice. Spirituality, on the other hand, is a personal quest for universal truth and finding a meaning of life.[4]

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