

Religions 101-02 Term Paper:

The Definition of Health Care in A Religious World

In an excerpt on the definition of Religion, religioustolerance.org used Clifford Geertz quote to define the cultural system of religion.

"A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."

When it comes to culture the word religion is always associated with it. This is because religion creates separate cultures, acts, and beliefs. This is no different when it comes to religion and health care. According to The World Health Organization, "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and is not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". This statement promotes the wellbeing of every person no matter his or her differing beliefs. Personally I have found our health care system to be adequate, responsive and respectful to all walks of life. Our country is a mix of different races, cultures, and religions. Due to the extreme differences that compile our country, our health care system is quite monotonous. Just as with different cultures, there are different approaches to medicine in the religious communities. I focused my research on two categories, eastern and western religions and the differing belief systems with health care. My research is based from medical studies, scholarly journals on religion and interviews. I was fortunate enough to interview two people from different religions and obtain personal accounts of health care in their lives.

I was raised into a family that was religious and had a belief in modern medicine. It was never a question of how or where to seek medical attention based on our religion. Our church never once discussed the differing ways to care for the ailments of the physical body. There was always assumption of modern medicine as the only health care system. This assumption does not derive from the church it is a cultural dogma. My interest in researching the relationships between religion and health care came from the assumption that there is only one way to provide health care and that there seems to be zero communication between religion and health care. I believe that is wrong, there should not be a separation but an understanding of how religion and health care are related. Through my research I found that Eastern religions are based primarily on traditional approaches to health care, while western, new age religions are more commonly associated with modern medicine.

The World Health Organization defines Traditional Medicine as, “The sum total of knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures that are used to maintain health, as well as to prevent, diagnose, improve or treat physical and mental illnesses”. Traditional medicine is also referred to as alternative medicine; it often involves herbal materials and supplements.

The traditional approaches to health care are often found in eastern religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese, Confucianism, and Shinto. However in present day the focus on natural and herbal approaches to preventive health care has spread to every continent. The traditional natural approach of medicine has been around since the BCE time period unlike the alternative modern medical approach that was introduced only a couple of centuries ago.

There were two studies I used in the focus of eastern religions and traditional medicine, a comparative Study of Two Virechana Yoga In the Management of Eka Kutha (Psoriasis) by Pooja Shah and Emerging Paradigms on Mind-Body Medicine by Charles Shang. The first study is a traditional medical approach called Ayurveda. My Religions of the World lectures helped break down the word Ayurveda, Ayu meaning life and Veda meaning knowledge. Therefore, Ayurveda is the understanding of life. It is a medical approach that not only assesses physical ailments but also emotional balance and wellbeing. I decided on this study because of the disease. Psoriasis a skin disease is a common occurrence in present day diseases. It is commonly treated with modern medical approaches such as creams and prescription medication. Virechana Karma with yoga as the exercises is used to help eliminate toxins in the lower gastrointestinal tract. Virechana includes the importance of daily intake and elimination that is Dinacharya, and the seasonal diets, which is Rutucharya. There were two groups of 10 yoga patients. Each were tested with Virechana Karma one group with Ichhiabhedi Ras and the other group with Trivritadi Churna. Their results showed that a higher age was reported having Psoriasis and more commonly in males. However with each study the two groups saw an overall relief with Virechana Karma, a traditional medical approach.

The second study was the observation of the human body with acupuncture, yoga and qigong. Yoga and qigong are very similar in mind-body relaxation and intervention. Acupuncture is another traditional medical approach that targets acupuncture points on the meridians, Meridians are points located throughout the body that affect, stimulate and suppress human organs depending on the ailment. Emerging Paradigms In Mind-Body Medicine article suggests that mind-body interaction helps with meditative and

acupuncture traditional medicine and shows health beyond just the absence of disease. Traditional medicine is commonly known as a medical practice that creates the absence of disease rather than curing a current, chronic or recurring disease. In this study, acupuncture focused on mental health and how tension, frustration and sadness pose a greater risk for myocardial ischemia during activities. Stress and hostility can also increase the risk of atherosclerosis and earlier mortality. The Emerging Paradigms In Mind-Body Medicine article concludes that, “Techniques involving the manipulation of the meridian system, such as acupuncture, yoga and qigong, may activate the self-organizing system of an organism and improve its structure and function at a more fundamental level than symptomatic relief”.

In English, this translates to explain that acupuncture, yoga and qigong were shown to affect meridians and organs and ailments affecting organs in a positive manner; this was effective to the point that the minuscule cells making up organs were structurally changed. This shows that these traditional approaches can do more than just absence of disease; they can change diseased organs, mental health issues and common ailments due to tension and depression. This is all due to non-invasive acupuncture and yoga exercises.

On a personal account, Pandit N. S. Satish Kumar, a priest from the Sri Ganesha Hindu Temple of Salt Lake City, UT contests to how traditional medicine affects his life. He is a vegetarian and remains in contact with a physician from India who prescribes him herbal supplements and alternative approaches for his physical and mental well being, such as meditation.

To sum up these two studies and a personal account of Traditional Medicine, these approaches derived from eastern religions. Ayurveda, Yoga and Meditation are

commonly associated with Hinduism and Buddhism, while Acupuncture is associated with Chinese religion. Both studies showed positive effects from the patients with non-invasive alternative medical practices. Kumar's traditional healthcare lifestyle choices show the reality of how traditional medicine and religion are connected.

Modern medicine has a completely separate approach. It was not founded from religions or directly connected with any but founded from academia and science. There is less involvement with religion and more focus on innovative scientific medical care. Modern medicine has many studies to prove its benefits to society. The western religions that are part of a society that rely on modern medicine, neither affect nor deny the benefits of innovative medicine. Overall Christianity has a positive relationship with the modern approach to medicine. However, small denominations of the Christian faith are more inclined to pray and have faith of the supernatural for healing of physical and emotional health. These faiths include Christian Science, and the beliefs of faith healing. Faith healing is spiritual means to healing. Christianity is the religious foundation that these denominations derive from, but these faiths believe in the new testament of the bible as a literal translation. There are claims that faith and prayer can cure cancer, developmental disorders, deafness and blindness, etc.

According to The American Cancer Society, "available scientific evidence does not support claims that faith healing can actually cure physical ailments." Through my research I have to agree with the American Cancer Society. Compared to my research on traditional medicine and its impact on the eastern religions, western religions, especially Christianity has had little or no impact on health care and the mental well-being of individuals. The overall Christianity belief according to Wikipedia, Faith Healing, is that

“god heals through people through the power of the holy spirit”. This terminology of Christianity is referred to as divine healing, and miracle healing. Again, the research does not point to this type of health care as valid, accurate or knowledgeable to the anatomy of the human body. It is all a belief of the supernatural for the knowledge of health care. There are some Christians that do acknowledge how rare the Holy Spirit intervention of physical and mental wellness is. Their argument is that complete and utter faith in the divine is the only way that miracle healing will occur. There have been cases where the priests were arrested due to practicing medicine without a license. These examples show how separate western religions are from modern medicine, there seems to be no positive relationship between the two.

Another denomination that is known with praying and sacral rituals is Christian Science faith. According to the Christian Science, From “Conspiracy Theories in American History” article, they are known for the belief that only the mind and spirit exist in reality, and the pain, disease and even death are illusions. This denomination practice religious healing in place of medical intervention. The founder of Christian Science based the religion on her experiences with a mesmerist and faith healer that cured her frequent mental and physical disorders. In the late eighteen hundreds, practitioners were trained to heal the sick according to the Christian Science belief and spread the word of the religion. Due to their belief on the illusions of sickness, there have been many controversial issues with this religion. Their policies allegedly led to the death of several children whose parents were involved in the faith.

As well as focusing on Christianity facts and subjective information with health care, I interviewed Deacon George Reed of Saint Ambrose Catholic Church. His

personal experiences on health care allowed me to better understand the relationship between western religion and modern medical health care. In his opinion the Catholic Church has a positive relationship with health care, whether it be mental or physical. The Catholic Church is lenient on the individual preferences for medical decisions however, Catholics do not believe in euthanization. From conception to birth it is god's call. They are a faith of protecting life. The Catholic Church is also known for its hospitals, yet there is some controversy towards women services and using contraception, options with pregnancies and facilities providing abortions. This relationship between health care facilities and the Catholic Church has provided both a positive and negative connection.

My final study I used in my research was by the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, Religion, Spirituality, and Mental Health: What We Know and Why This Is a Tough Topic to Research. Based on western religions and the gap of a connection with the modern medical world, this article examines why there is such a separation and confusion between the two. I chose this article because mental health is often associated with religion, whether it be spiritually or by a "divine intervention". Dr Koieing reviewed extensive literature on religion and or spirituality and there seems to be a positive association between mental health, religion and spirituality. Their research does not ask the controversial and obvious questions on whether god exists, or about the predominant faith of Christianity. There seems to be a level of personal spiritual feelings when understanding this study and how their authors understand the connections of spirituality and mental health. Using this study in my research helped me to understand how difficult it is to connect the religious world with the medical world in present day. The

relationship is undoubtedly there, but without a spiritual understanding, it is an intricate relationship to comprehend.

I realized how complex the world of religion and medicine is through this term paper, my research studies, and personal understanding of the medical world, both traditional and modern, and eastern and western religions. Civilization began with beliefs; Eastern religions had gods and goddesses, western religions had the Holy Spirit. Eastern religions blame ailments on bad karma and daily routines. Western religions blame these physical and mental ailments on the decisions of god or the illusions of reality. The relationship between traditional method of medicine and eastern religion is less intricate because of the belief that the human body is a religious part. On the contrary, Western religions solely rely on faith in the supernatural; there is nothing physical to those religions. The approach to modern medicine is also based on innovative, factual studies. It seems that western faiths do not agree in innovative factual motives for curing ailments. Overall, the definition of health care differs in each religion. Nonetheless, whether positive or negative, there are relationships between religion and medicine.

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