

Conference Reports

First International Congress on Religion and Mental Health

The First International Congress on Religion and Mental Health was held April 16-19, 2001 in Tehran, Iran. It was sponsored by the Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran Psychiatric Institute, World Health Organization Collaborating Center for Mental Health, The Research Institute for Rehabilitation and Improvement of Women's Life (Iran), and the Red Crescent Society of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Science and religion have generally seemed to oppose each other when it comes to an understanding and upliftment of human behaviors. The tide is turning however; as increasing number of research in the West is showing indisputable evidence on the positive influence of religion on human thoughts and behaviors, specifically, in the area of mental health. The present congress highlighted all this in its four-day meeting of scholars in the field of religion and mental health representing 23 countries from around the globe. The key feature of the conference was the presentation of empirical findings on the benefits of religion in fostering and maintaining positive mental health. The Islamic Republic of Iran, a country, known for its hard line approach toward secularism and sanctioned by the West in many ways, attracted some of the best scholars from the Americas and Europe.

The Congress Secretary, Dr. Jafar Bolhari, indicated in his speech that this conference has at least three objectives: (1) Presentation of scientific research in the area of psychiatry and psychology carried out in Iran, in the area of psychiatry and psychology, which can be beneficial to the Iranian as well as international community, (2) Presentation of integrated research done in Iran by the Muslim clergy and scientists collaborating together and discussion of its implications at national and international levels, and (3) Observation of April 7, 2001 as World Health Day with the theme of "Mental Health" declared by the World Health Organization (WHO). Since mental health professionals have generally ignored religion and spirituality, this conference was organized to deal specifically with these issues in the interest of the average person.

Out of 242 research papers received by the congress, the Scientific

Committee of the Tehran Congress selected 158. Seventy papers were presented in the main hall of the Razi Center, University of Tehran Medical Sciences Institute. Seventy other papers were presented in the two adjacent conference halls of the institute. In addition, 28 poster sessions and one workshop were presented simultaneously. Qualified translators interpreted papers into English and Persian for interested audience. The opening ceremony was conducted by a high ranking government official, followed by presentations from Dr. A. Okasha, president elect of the WHO Collaborating Center (Egypt) and Dr. A. Mohit, WHO regional advisor for mental health, Mediterranean Region, Cairo (Egypt). While Dr. Okasha talked about "Religion and Mental Health at the Turn of the Century", Dr. Mohit gave his speech on "Our Religions, Our Heritage Psychiatry and Mental Health in the Middle East: Past, Present, and Future". Both of these speakers highlighted the changing role of psychiatry and psychology in modern times and how changing times need professionals to be flexible in their roles as experts.

Parallel sessions were held on themes including religious psychology, Islamic psychology, cognition, and religious beliefs; religion and mental health researches in The Netherlands; worship, religious ceremony, and depression; cultural religious psychology, teaching and religious training, mental health and vulnerable groups; and religion and new achievements in Neuroscience. There were two to three sessions a day in the main hall and two sessions in Hall 2 on the first day, three sessions on the second and third days and again two sessions on the last day of the conference. On Tuesday, April 17 a workshop entitled, "The Application of Positive Thinking in Psychotherapy Using Islamic Perspective" was conducted in Hall 3 in Persian, while on April 18, two sessions were conducted in English at this venue. Morning sessions were followed by a tea break and second sessions were followed by lunch.

On the second day, the Vice Chancellor of the University of Iran hosted a dinner in honor of the conference participants. A group of WHO representatives attending a concurrent meeting in town, not related to this conference, also attended this dinner. Another lavish dinner ceremony hosted by the Research Institute for Rehabilitation and Improvement of Women's Life was given to a selected group of foreign and local delegates. Regional representatives of WHO and some high-ranking government officials were also present on this occasion. After a brief formal speech attendees were asked to introduce themselves and suggest ways on helping

the newly formed institute and on becoming an active member of the association. The dinner was followed by gift presentations to the guests.

Some international delegates were taken to the TV station for a panel discussion and live TV program about the congress. TV personnel also recorded interviews of many other participants throughout the conference. The overall organization and management was comparable to any other high level international conference. A generally good conference organization was complemented by friendly and helpful nature of the Iranian hosts who provided many free tour facilities to historical sites and bazaars in Tehran during the four days of the conference and then to Shiraz and Isfahan for very reasonable costs after the conference.

The conference no doubt, brought experts in the fields of religion and mental health together and provided a forum to exchange findings and new ideas on integrating research in the two areas. However, almost everyone felt that too many papers were cramped into the sessions and very little or no time was given for discussion, critique, or questions from the audience. This was, of course, possible after the sessions if one decided to meet the presenter in person. It was also felt that copies of papers and especially test instruments, questionnaires, etc., which the researchers have come up with, should have been available for interested persons. There was a booth for institute's publications where works of some foreign participants were on display. Being a conference with a broad theme like "Religion and Mental Health" one would expect several papers representing several faiths, however, only a couple were presented from Christian and Buddhist perspectives.

A closer look at the nature of papers indicates that a majority were research papers, which showed a cause and effect relationship between religion and mental health. Tests used in such research were constructed locally and standardized on the local population. The papers presented on review research were less in number and ranged from religious treatment of mental health in ancient Iran to the ways recommended by early Muslim scholars and then to the very recent findings, originating mostly in the West. Very few papers discussed methodology, test construction, validity, and reliability issues in measuring religious behaviors and even fewer addressed the more complex and much needed issue of theory building. A closer dialogue between psychologists and religionists would perhaps yield positive results someday in this very important area of inquiry.

Before official closing of the conference, a panel of four international

delegates discussed the proceedings and highlighted strengths of the conference. The discussants also noted that there should have been: (a) keynote speakers who are well-known experts in the area of religion and mental health, and (b) workshops conducted in English on how to address religious issues in psychotherapy. In addition, a majority of papers based on correlation research could have been improved by using more sophisticated experimental designs and statistical measures to answer the questions of causality. The Speaker of the Iranian Parliament who was present at the closing ceremony acknowledged and thanked the scholarly contributions of all participants and gave Certificates of Appreciation and gifts to the local and foreign delegates.

This conference was indeed a marvelous attempt towards integrating scientific knowledge and religion in the area of mental health. What is needed however is that organizations with similar interests should coordinate efforts jointly and continue such works on a more regular basis. It is hoped that conferences of this nature and magnitude are advertised more aggressively and that selected papers are published in international academic journals for wider readership. Last but not least, a more elaborate web page covering titles and a detailed description of oral presentations, workshops, and poster sessions would have helped. It would also have helped foreign delegates to know that Iran is one of those rare countries where travelers' checks are not accepted! A follow-up of these recommendations by organizations of any upcoming conferences of similar nature would lead to better results and higher satisfaction for the audience.

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