

The final session was chaired by Mrs. Rashidah Begum Fazal Mohamed, Chief Librarian, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Only two papers were presented at this session. They were presented by Assistant Prof. Dr. Shaheen Majid, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore and Associate Prof. Philip Calvert, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. In his paper on "Status of Continuing Professional Development Activities Undertaken by Library and Information Science Programmes in the ASEAN Region," Dr. Shaheen surveyed fifteen LIS schools from six ASEAN countries. He found that continuing professional development activities were mostly undertaken on an ad hoc basis and they were not part of the core responsibilities of the LIS schools.

Mr. Calvert in his paper on "A Successful Library Science Student Exchange Programme," commented on his experience with the student exchange programme between Nanyang Technological University of Singapore and Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand that allowed library science students to study for one semester at the partner institution. He believed exchanges benefit the institutions by offering diversity to the educational programmes. The two-day conference was officially closed by Professor Dr. Mohd. Kamal Hassan, Rector, International Islamic University Malaysia.

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International Conference on Religion and Mental Health

April 16-19, 2001, Iran University of Medical Sciences, Tehran

The first international conference on "Mental Health and Religion" was organised by the Tehran Psychiatric Institute, University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran. The conference was also supported by the World Health Organization (WHO), Research Institute for Rehabilitation and Improvement of Women's Life and Red Crescent Society of The Islamic Republic of Iran.

The conference was inaugurated by a high-ranking Islamic scholar who emphasized the need for spirituality and religion to encounter the growing stresses of everyday life. He pointed out that religious rituals

are the source of spiritual development leading to psychological stability of the people. Welcoming the delegates, conference secretary Dr. Jaafar Bolhari emphasized the need for including spiritual and religious beliefs in understanding psychological needs of the clients. He was of the view that an effective and comprehensive mental health services couldn't be provided by excluding the religion from psychology and psychiatry.

The four-day conference was a special event to coincide with WHO's health day (April 7, 2001) on mental health. It was for the first time in 52 years that WHO choose mental health to mark its health day with the motto "Stop Exclusion, Dare to Care." It was the first conference on mental health and religion held in Asia. The major reasons of the conference were to highlight the importance of religion vis-à-vis spirituality in mental health that has been neglected so far under the predominance of Western psychological and medical approaches. Moreover, the conference was thought to provide an opportunity to share the findings of studies on religion and mental health done in the developing and the developed countries. The conference was thought to serve as a platform to promote collaboration among the researchers from different countries in the area of religion and mental health. The delegates belonged to different professions including academicians from universities, professionals from the fields of psychology, psychiatry and general medicine, clergymen, priests, social workers and members of NGOs. The papers presented included academic research papers about the role of religion in mental health as well as reports about the practical use of religious beliefs and spiritual experiences to deal with the problems of marital discord, alcoholism, addiction and disorientation in life, reports of rehabilitation programmes for addicts and alcoholics using religious beliefs, experiences of clergymen and priests using religion to deal with the social psychological problems of people, empirical research findings indicating the impact of religious practices on the mental health of people, correlational studies about the relationship between religion, spiritual experiences and mental health and theoretical papers on religious and spiritual therapeutic approaches.

A large number of papers presented by the Iranian scholars indicated that great importance is attached to religion and spirituality in mental health in Iran. Excellent arrangements were made for simultaneous translation from English to Persian and vice versa. The organizers received a total of 242 papers out of which the academic

committee selected 168. A total of 140 papers were presented simultaneously in three halls over the four days whereas 28 papers were presented as posters. Everyday three sessions were held in the main hall and parallel sessions and workshops were conducted in other halls. The papers were grouped according to the following themes.

- Religious psychology and Islamic psychology
- Worship, religious ceremonies and mental health
- Field research in the domain of mental health and religion
- Research in the domain of mental health religion and young
- Worship and mental health
- Stress and religious coping
- Addiction and substance abuse and religious psychology
- Research in mental health and religion
- Treatment and counselling with religious approach
- Different religious and spiritual views in the mental health services
- Anxiety, depression and religiosity
- Teaching and religious training
- Attitudes, religious belief and mental health
- Mental health, religious psychology and vulnerable groups

The conference was given wide coverage by the mass media. The reporters of Iran Television as well as of national newspapers interviewed international and local delegates on various issues pertaining to religion and mental health. Iran Television also recorded round table discussions about the growing impact of religion in mental health during the conference. The peak of the median coverage was a live talk show organized by Iran television in its programme "Pertau" on the 3rd day of the conference to discuss the current issues related to religion and mental health. The issues discussed were the role of religion in mental health, especially the incidence of depression among the religious and nonreligious people. The participants were of the view that spiritual orientation of people has immunizing effect against the psychological illnesses. They mentioned empirical studies that showed low incidence of anxiety and depression among religious people as compared to non-religious persons. It was also pointed out that one of the major reasons of high incidence and prevalence of different psychological and mental illnesses in the Western countries was the alienation of people from religion. The participants of this live show were; Dr. Jaafar Bolhari (Iran), Prof. Dr. Ashiq Ali Shah (Malaysia) and Prof. Dr. K.H. Reich (Switzerland).

The vice-chancellor of Tehran University of Medical Sciences hosted a dinner on the second day of the conference. A variety of

delicious Iranian food was served. The dinner was also attended by the members of the executive committee of World Association of Psychiatrists.

A special session was held at the end to review and to evaluate the conference. A group of local and international delegates were invited to share their opinion with the participants of the conference. The panel included Dr. Jaffar Bolhari & Dr. Mehrdad Kalantari (Iran), Prof. Dr. Ashiq Ali Shah (Malaysia), Prof. Dr. Karl Helmut Reich (Switzerland), Prof. Dr. D. Wedding (U.S.A.) and Dr. Sabastian Murken (Germany). The panelists commended the management of the conference programme, the translation facilities and the sightseeing tours at the end of each day. As regards the structure and organization of the conference programmes they noted that no time was allowed for questions and answers at the end of paper presentations. They were of the view that it would have been more fruitful if some keynote addresses and panel discussions were part of the conference programme. They also indicated that the poster presentations should have been given a time slot not coinciding with the conference sessions in order to enable the authors to be present at the venue to answer the questions of the viewers. The views about the quality of the papers were overall satisfactory.

However, a number of weaknesses were identified and some suggestions for future research were given. The major criticism was directed toward the correlational approach adopted in a number of empirical papers. It was argued that correlational findings could not demonstrate a causal relationship between religious practices and mental health. These researches obscure the role of research variables because of their mixing with the third or moderator variables. The nature of samples used in these studies consisted of specific groups vulnerable to regression effects. It was suggested that a hypothetic-deductive approach might be adopted in the future studies to postulate hypotheses in the context of specific theories. The control and comparative groups may be employed to study the causal links between religious constructs, values, practices and mental health. The ideas of hypothesis driven research were advocated by the adherents of positivistic approach. Their unawareness of the alternative Islamic methodology was the main reason for them not to understand the methodology of some of the papers. Nevertheless, the exchange of ideas by the delegates from the East and West was a good opportunity to understand each other's perspective.

The honourable speaker of the Parliament of Iran Hujatul Islam Mehdi Karrubi graced the closing ceremony of the conference. He presented the certificates of appreciation and gifts to the local and the international participants with outstanding contributions toward the conference. He lauded the efforts of the conference organisers and thanked the delegates for their valuable contributions to make the conference a success.

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