Religion, Culture and Mental Health

Are religious practices involving seeing visions and speaking in tongues beneficial or detrimental to mental health? Do some cultures express distress in bodily form because they lack the linguistic categories to express distress psychologically? Do some religious practices encourage clinical levels of obsessional behaviour? And are religious people happier than others? By merging the growing information on religion and mental health with that on culture and mental health, Kate Loewenthal enables fresh perspectives on these questions. This book deals with different psychiatric conditions such as schizophrenia, manic disorders, depression, anxiety, somatisation and dissociation as well as positive states of mind, and analyses the religious and cultural influences on each.

Kate Loewenthal is Professor of Psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London. She has published numerous articles and spoken at international conferences on her research areas of the impact of religious and cultural factors on mental health, and of family size in relation to well-being. Her research has also earned her funding from the Economic and Social Research Council, the Wellcome Trust, the Leverhulme Trust and the Nuffield Foundation. She serves on the editorial board of several journals concerned with the psychological aspects of religion, and is an editor of Mental Health, Religion and Culture.
Religion, Culture and Mental Health

Kate Loewenthal

Royal Holloway
University of London
Contents

List of figures vii
List of tables viii
Acknowledgements ix
Note about ‘G-d’ x

1 Introduction 1
Some questions 1
Definitions of culture, religion and mental health 4
How does culture affect the relations between religion and mental health? 9

2 Schizophrenia 11
Definitions and symptoms, and an overview of causes and relations with religion 11
Visions, voices, delusions and schizophrenia 15
Spirit possession, demons 24
Afro-Caribbean schizophrenia? 34
Diagnostic issues 39

3 Manic disorder 49
Definitions and causes of manic disorder 49
Religious factors and manic disorders 50

4 Depression 55
Definitions, symptoms, causes and relations with religion 55
Religious coping beliefs 60
Some gender issues: women, religion and depression 67

5 Anxiety 74
Definitions, symptoms and causes 74
The overall anxiety-lowering and anxiety-heightening effects of religion 76
Obsessive-compulsive disorder and religion 81
Are religious people seen as more anxious? 85
## Contents

6 Somatisation
- Definitions, symptoms and causes 87
- Between-group variations in somatic and psychological symptoms 88
- Explanations of these variations 96

7 Dissociation
- Definitions and causes of dissociation and dissociative personality disorder 105
- Religious factors in relation to dissociative states and tendencies 107
- Religious factors in relation to dissociative personality disorder 110
- Religious possession and trance states: are they dissociative? 118

8 Positive states
- Religion and positive mood: definitions and associations 125
- Purpose in life, and hope 127
- Forgiveness 132
- Authentic happiness 136

9 Conclusion 140

References 142

Index 164
Figures

4.1 Distress stimulates religious coping beliefs, which can then affect levels of distress  page 64
4.2 Some relations between stress, religious coping beliefs and mood  66
4.3 The alcohol-depression hypothesis  71
5.1 Common themes of obsessions in different cultures  82
5.2 Clinical judgements made about people high and low in religious activity  86
8.1 Purpose in life in relation to religious belief and time since conversion  129
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tables</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Changes in religious activity among first-onset schizophrenia patients</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1 A treatment plan</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1 Similarities and differences between demon (dybbuk) possession and dissociative personality disorders</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

Thanks to my family: my dear parents, my husband Tali Loewenthal and our children – Esther Cadaner, Leah Namdar, Yitzchok Loewenthal, Chana-Soroh Danow, Moshe Loewenthal, Rivka Lent, Brocha Werner, Freida Brackman, Sholi Loewenthal, Mendy Loewenthal, Zalmy Loewenthal – who were always interested – and to their husbands, wives and children. Gratitude is due to leaders of the Jewish community, especially the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rav J. Dunner, Rabbi S. Lew, Dayan A. D. Dunner and Rebbezen Hadassah Dunner, Lady Amelie Jakobovits and the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks. My dear friends and advisers Naomi Futerfas, Kerry Bak, Joyce Paley, Feigy Rabin, Shoshana Segelman, Evadne Stern and Yael Kestecher are among many who shared experiences, wisdom, practical support and many laughs.

Almost last, but certainly not least, thanks to many academic colleagues and collaborators: Professor Michael Eysenck, Professor Andy MacLeod, Dr Marco Cinnirella, Vivienne Goldblatt, Esther Spitzer, Professor Stephen Frosh, Dr Caroline Lindsey, Micky Herzog, Diane Heywood, Jeffery Blumenfeld OBE, Guy Lubish, Dr Simon Dein, Dr Chris Lewis, Professor Ken Pargament, Tirril Harris, Dr Joseph and Shree Berke, Professor Robert Kohn, Professor Ely Witztum, Professor David Greenberg – and many others, each of whom has had an influence which would need a much longer book than this one to describe.

Special thanks to Sarah Caro and her colleagues at Cambridge University Press, for inspiring and nursing this book along.
When you start reading, and wonder about ‘G-d’, here is the explanation. I could write a book of stories solely about my adventures as an author writing on the psychology of religion, who is also an orthodox Jew, and who wishes to follow the prescription of Jewish law not to write out any name of G-d in full. One reason for this prescription is to avoid the possibly of a sacred name finishing up in a place which is not fitting or respectful, euphemistically termed a rubbish heap in some sources of Jewish law. Probably a cesspit or similar is the horrible fate devoutly to be avoided. Some editors and publishers have chosen to edit in the full name of G-d in full to avoid confusion on the part of the reader. For this book, the reviewer and editors have decided that readers are unlikely to be confused or irritated by ‘G-d’, or ‘L-rd’. This note is to explain why.