



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Psychiatry

IS FAITH AN IMAGINATION? A BRIEF COMMENTARY

KEY WORDS: Faith, Different aspect of faith, Analogical imagination, Nishkam karma, pragmatic value of faith.

Dr. Madhav Rajee Consultant Psychiatrist & Psychotherapist

ABSTRACT

What is faith? Is it an imagination, arising from nothing or void? If it is, then faith may not be a significant element in human life. Most of us awaken with that conclusion to deny practical use of faith. However, many assume faith is a vital entity of human life but cannot convince scientifically how & why. Many assume faith is a subject domain of spiritual or philosophically active individuals and there is no pragmatic value of faith in today's high-tech life. Do you too hold such or similar views about 'faith'? Then this commentary is for you to read.

This commentary tries to explain with illustrations that faith is not a product of psychological or spiritual evolution. Neither is it a product of fearful mind. Commentary explains scientific roots of faith. It further narrates how faith can be modified for pragmatic purposes. It further suggests that psychotherapist can use this scientific information about faith during therapeutic sessions for the advantage of client as well as therapist. It also suggests that untrained elderly family member/s or parent/s too can be benefitted from this view point. Hence this commentary is for young/dynamic people (person who wants to change), psychologists, and for parents!

INTRODUCTION:

Many medical and non-medical experts say that faith is a subjective phenomenon. Faith depends on person's psych. Is it true? Does it have factual aspect? Let's discuss This brief commentary on faith would at the end clarify chaotic or blurred aura around faith. It would throw light on origin of faith, scientific comprehension of faith. This review cum commentary would ignite the curiosity to explore the more, facilitate ability to work 'scientifically' for the movement of faith. Last but not least, to moot utility of faith related psychological interventions or spiritual/philosophical biased psychotherapeutic interventions.

What is faith? Is it belief or something else? Is it like a long muscle with origin and insertion? Or is it like a sympathetic chain? Or is it merely a psychosocial concept?

Faith is basic component of anybody's existence. In fact, existence begins with faith or no-faith, Erick Erickson, a legendary psychoanalyst mentioned in his theory of 8 stages of life. Life goes on despite presence or absence of this essential component, meaning faith is not as vital as heart for life to continue. This being known to everyone, most of the individuals not frequently stops consciously or unconsciously to ponder and comprehend about faith, its origin, its impact, its correlates, its objectivity, its reproducibility in one's life and as a whole in life in-general.

All of us feel 'faith' in ourselves or in others. Faith can be expressed or retained sublimely. We know faith can turn around & change sides, like a sleeping person turns around without deliberation and knowledge. Turns and twists of sleeping person may not create ripples but faith does, when it changes sides. Alteration of faith attributes significant events in life because faith is intimately connected to one's assumptions or cognitions. Assumption stored deep in heart or cognitions shape or reshape our life. Review on faith in the times of turmoil or transition, i.e. during adolescence, upheavals in relationships/marriages/careers, after death of family member, after retirement, during terminal stage of life seems more than pertinent. These are the events when psychological aberrations are not unusual. Psychological interventions if merged with creation or substantiation of faith may bring promising results. If therapist don't undervalue scientific or biological element of faith then he/she may not hesitate to create or substantiate faith in client/patient then recovery of client/patient may become less challenging^{1,2}.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: THEOLOGICAL OR SPIRITUAL ASPECT:

The new strong expanded dictionary of bible words says faith means trust, confidence, assurance, belief. (p.1315). Bible says in Hebrew's 11:1 that faith is assurance of things we hope for but have not yet received. Bible further says faith is needed as long as we don't receive what we want. Faith works or exists before material things come into existence (Mathew 9:27.30).

Does that mean faith is a mere concept; self-declared state of mind, or belief in God? Answering such questions James says in Bible (James 2:21-22) that faith is more than a simple belief in God alone. It includes 'acting on' faith in real life. This view reflects in the discussion of Puritan Board. Dated 2ng Aug. 2005 staff of Puritan board explains that faith evolves from analogical imagination. Analogical imagination is derived from real life confrontation. Contra Mundum, staff of Puritan board further elaborates that thread of evolution of analogical imagination derives its original strength from univocal imagination/knowledge of God. So he stresses that all that we know is subsequent to God. That means theological basis of our knowledge is our belief in God. But this belief is truly analogical imagination, which originates from confrontation with reality.

Faith is a flip side of a coin called action or Karma, Lord Krishna says in "Bhagwat Geeta". Faith when embedded in Karma delivers the matter hoped for. This means faith do loses its value when it is idle, static, or alone or not associated with action. So " Bhagwat Geeta" promotes faith-filled action, e.g. prayer, Hawan, Dhyana-dharana, etc along with goal oriented actions to follow. Bhagwat Geeta further emphasizes detachment from result of action. This detachment essentially originates from firm or very firm belief either in God or psychological (prayer/Hawan/Dhyan-dharana/mindfulness) as well as physical action. So Geeta promotes action fuelled with faith with detachment about result of action. Detachment from result of action means lack of attachment (not lack of hope) towards expected result of action. It is called "Nishkam karma" in Geeta. Expected result or expectations remain subtle but not absent when detachment is mindfully trained by a believer. This mindful exercise later can become a strong wall like barrier against wide gap between expectations & reality. It is always this gap between expectations & reality which has potential to create negative belief which may attribute frustration or psychic aberration. So to avoid potential depression Geeta advocates mindfulness exercise of detachment from expectation arising out of 'karma' of belief. In short, Geeta says, which may appear intriguing, to work with firm belief but without expectations! This concept appears quite close to 'analogical imagination' expressed in Bible.

Quran considers 'faith' as foremost or integral part of being Muslim. Quran says faith in Allah Almighty is not negotiable, but irrefutable claim. It further mentions that proof of Allah is overwhelming which cannot be experienced without accepting or implementing faith itself! To strengthen this point Muslims consider righteous deed is inevitable result of sincere faith. Sharh Al-Aqida Al-wastitiya mentioned " true faith must manifest itself in the heart as sincerity, on the tongue as affirmation, & on the limbs as action". So Quran too associates faith with action while defining concept of faith.

Interestingly it's observed that faith in God is a universal

phenomenon despite different religions, varying expressions/nomenclature. All these religions mentioned above consider 'faith' and 'action' as if 'seed and plant'. This common to all thread provokes one to suspect if there is a common similar biological attribute? With this underlying thought scientific research on faith began in 1770. Since then religious research has remained no more a prerogative of theologians and philosophers!

BIOLOGICAL ASPECT:

Process of faith and its judging starts from the age of five, Saxe writes. (Neuroimage 2008). The process of thinking takes place at Rh. Temporoparietal region. Rh. Temporoparietal region along with precuneus facilitates conversion faith to moral judgment³.

Faith is created at frontal lobe, amygdala, and Hippocampus & at NMDA receptors. NMDA receptors & medial prefrontal cortex are involved in thinking process, Young & Saxe mentioned. Similar views are expressed by TSS Rao et al⁴. This finding is also confirmed from the facts observed when pathological lesions were taken of these regions.

Neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine plays vital role in processing belief system along with these parts of brain. Lower serotonin level make people open to religious practices & experiences (belief.com). DR. Larse Farde Proff of Psychiatry & author of "The serotonin system & spiritual experiences" corroborate this fact⁵. Similar observation is mentioned by Borg J et al. Borg J writes density of serotonin (5HT1A) is inversely related to spiritual faith or self-transcendence⁶.

Furthering the research beyond neural activity one geneticist claimed existence of 'God gene'. Warren S Brown of international society of science & religion (ISSR) too mentions that religious tendencies have genetic endowment. However, more research findings are awaited to ascertain this fact. Many researchers have observed making of faith is a biological activity. FMRI, SPECT, PET assisted studies conducted on subjects practicing meditation revealed increased neural activity across cortical & subcortical areas. Meditation was found associated with increased bilateral frontal lobe activity & reduced Rh parietal lobe activity. Decreased Rh parietal lobe activity is attributed to reduced sense of self, loss of orientation of time & place. This is the actual moment which meditating person experience & narrates as if merged with universe/God. (Many call it Ahim Bramhasmi in India).

Heightened activity is noticed in anterior cingulate during prayer. This increased neural activity of anterior cingulate (ACC) attributes to increased compassion & sympathy. ACC facilitates emotional attachment, neurobiologist Andrew Newberg observes⁷ (www.onfaith.com). Decreased fear & anger is also attributed to heightened neural activity in ACC. May be, it explains why seers & saints have less fear, anger and pervading peace! Heightened religious experiences or faith is also attributed to increased activity in Rh. Temporal lobe. So, one understands that making of faith is closely connected to neural activity. But faith is not static, it is dynamic. Meaning thereby, updating or evolving of faith too is possibly related to brain. Gurian M et al have observed this very fact.

PSYCHOSOCIAL ASPECT:

From early nineteenth century Sigmund Freud emphasized influence of family in making of belief. Freud mentioned that faith depends on person's motive, needs, wishes and tendencies. Depending on these personal parameters faith of person dwindles while acting on it. Freud had asserted development of faith is a replica of person's childhood's faith in his/her parents. Child overvalues parent's omnipresence, power, protection and care to begin with, only to realize later in life the error of judgment. Then he/she shifts that faith to God to be protected, helped, and reassured of comfort and peace. However, some may not shift their faith to God or unknown super power. Social culture and its impact further consolidate this belief in either way. So faith or no-faith remains a self-serving instrument. Coping mechanism which evolves as a result of interaction between self & society try to maintain inner peace or comfort within. But, when coping

mechanism when unsettles because of challenges, faith become focus of need or discussion.

Faith transcends from one to another through willingness, overt or covert. When it encompasses community, its impact appears all pervading, touching almost everyone around. Impact of faith transcends through behavior and physical activity.

Such social movement of faith meets with facilitators or opponents. Freud tried to explain who will accommodate or who will not to this movement by proposing his theory of defense mechanism. E.g. Intellectualization; a defense mechanism, Freud says will affirm or rule out acceptance to the movement of faith. Intellectuals who have dominant left hemisphere may not uphold concept of faith. They who are not in majority deal with challenges differently than that of upholders of faith. They may not have faith in God, but do believe in something, may be non-entity. But do hold belief in something! That is how they serve their motives.

British nun Ruth Burrows rightly says in her book on faith & prayer that upholders of faith have created caricature of God through self-serving motives.

Prof Rachel Blass of London affirms a-theistic approach to explain psychological construct of faith. She mentions that faith opens one's approach to world with 'love'. Faith promotes love. And love helps one and all. Thus, faith facilitates faith seekers to experience transcendence, i.e. sense something beyond materialistic world view or may one call it 'unconditional love' or pure love which expects nothing in return but believes in action.

UPDATING FAITH:

Michel Gurian observed role of Rh Hemisphere in updating belief/faith. He mentions belief updating takes place through perceptual integration with the help of pragmatic communication. That means, updating of faith readily take place among those people who have dominant Rh hemisphere which gives them ability to visualize, perceive images while listening to pragmatic communication of therapist. Female usually find it easy to update their belief. Or other way round, it may be brought to notice that dominant Rh hemisphere of brains may be vulnerable to induce changes in belief.

So it appears that updating of faith can take place at biological level. To make it happen, psychological &/or pharmacological interventions would be initiated. For exam, when pharmacotherapy alters level of neurotransmitters, updating of belief seems possible by psychotherapy. For example, Mr. T, 20 year old, depressed patient holds firm belief that memorizing answers from guide to pass examination should not be preferred & practiced even if one fails in the examination. Because he firmly believes that detail study must be done to appear in examination even if time is not available to do so. As a result of this belief Mr. T repeatedly fails. Failures attribute depression in him. Mr. T's depression is associated with lower levels of serotonin. Mere prescription of SSRI may not change this particular belief though depression would be recovered. Mr. T would still fail due to his method of study where he does not bother about memorizing answers of the questions. Unless the belief is changed by psychotherapy that learning fundamentals of any subject and preparing for answers to be written in the examination are two different action oriented goals, which needs to be dealt with separately. So it appears, without evolution of faith full recovery may not take place in Mr. T. To create 'faith' in Mr. T therapist may ask Mr. T to do prayer every day. Prayer done daily can trigger ACC of Mr. T, which in turn can ignite or generate 'faith' in Mr. T. Faith in one's own action if generated through prayer/s can build path of success in examination for Mr. T.

It is also every day's experience across the globe that psychotherapy alters belief/faith with or without pharmacotherapy being initiated. But in the above example Mr. T's belief appears more of issue of morals or that of moral judgment. All such beliefs which are part of moral judgment are very difficult to change even by psychotherapy. In such cases evolution of

religious or spiritual faith may be useful⁶. Prayers can ignite 'faith' in anterior cingulate, part of brain. Use of prayer in the session of psychotherapy can be considered a practical measure to help evolve or substantiate 'faith'. Subtle use of emotions and self-suggestions like love to self & others, forgiving to self & others, hypnotizing self to reassure about future, keeping focus on present moment/day to day activities, to keep prefrontal cortex continuously activated with goal/s purposefully and actively shutting the window of senses to perturbing negative news/events in social vicinity, will prepare one's brain & thinking process to re-shape or update to adopt to evolved faith.

Faith is self-serving instrument with available biological dispositions which tends to modify under the influence of psycho-social-cultural parameters.

BALANCE IN REAL LIFE:

Having understood these aspects of faith one may contemplate to update one's faith in adult life because it's a self-serving instrument.

Salient points of faith are (i) Faith is a creation of one's own brain, (ii) It is a vulnerably complex & dynamic structure contributed by impact of psychosocial movement, (iii) It has limitations on scientific, social & psychological grounds, (iv) It can be or should be updated if needed.

One may ascend or evolve using crutches of faith provided one's basis of faith is not threatened. Meaning thereby, one has to follow family's line of faith to begin the journey of evolution on scientifically illuminated path of faith.

TAKE HOME MESSAGE:

Carl Jung, a legendary psychoanalyst says 'if you are not aware of your unconscious then you may call events taking place in your life a 'fate'. Similarly, those who don't want to be victim of faith in either way need to update, modify their faith because one's faith is one's destroyer or a savior instrument.

REFERENCES

1. J. P. B. Gonçalves, G. Lucchetti, P. R. Menezes, and H. Vallada, Religious and spiritual interventions in mental health care: a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomized controlled clinical trials, *Psychol Med.* 2015 Oct; 45(14): 2937–2949.
2. KAREN KERSTING, Religion and spirituality in the treatment room, cover story, *American Association of Psychology*, December 2003, Vol 34, No. 11.
3. Liane Young and Rebecca Saxe, The neural basis of belief encoding and integration in moral judgment, *NeuroImage* (2008), doi:10.1016/j.neuroimage.2008.01.057
4. T.S. Sathyanarayana Rao, M. R. Asha , K. S. Jagannatha Rao , P. Vasudevaraju, The biochemistry of belief, *Indian J Psychiatry* 2009;51:239-41.
5. <http://www.beliefnet.com>
6. Jacqueline Borg, Bengt Andrée, Henrik Soderstrom, Lars Farde, The Serotonin System and Spiritual Experiences, *Am J Psychiatry* 160:11, November 2003.
7. www.onfaith.com
8. KAREN KERSTING, Monitor Staff, religion & spirituality in the treatment room, *APA*, December 2003, Vol 34, No. 11.