

Religious beliefs focus too much on self

January 17 2008

Moving away from traditional religious beliefs to trendy, self-focused religions and spirituality is not making young adults happier, according to new research.

A UQ study has found that young adults with a belief in a spiritual or higher power other than God were at more risk of poorer mental health and deviant social behaviour than those who rejected these beliefs.

Young men who held non-traditional religious views were at twice the risk of being more anxious and depressed than those with traditional beliefs.

The study was based on surveys of 3705 21-year-olds in Brisbane under the Mater-University of Queensland Study of Pregnancy.

They were asked a range of questions such as: did they believe in God, or in a spiritual or higher power other than God, how often they went to church, how often they took part in religious activities, their current religion and about their mother's affiliation.

Study author, UQ School of Population Health PhD graduate Dr Rosemary Aird said her research was the first in Australia to examine young adults' religious and spiritual thoughts, behaviour and feelings.

Dr Aird found only eight percent of young adults attended church once a week which reduced the likelihood of antisocial behaviour in young adulthood among males, but not females.

Young adults with traditional religious beliefs enjoyed no major benefits while Pentecostals were less likely than other religions to adopt non-traditional beliefs in adulthood.

She said individualism was the common thread in the shift away from traditional religious thoughts to non-religious spirituality.

This focus on self fulfilment and improvement over others' wellbeing could undermine a person's mental health with many people feeling more isolated, less healthy and having poorer relationships.

“My generation was about social responsibility and collective interests compared to the Me Generation,” Dr Aird said.

“New Spirituality promotes the idea that self-transformation will lead to a positive and constructive change in self and society.

“But there is a contradiction — how can one change society if one is focused on oneself?”

“This study suggests that new forms of religiosity demand further research attention as a means to understand the extent that religious change is linked to population mental health and social behaviour among younger generations.”

She said youth were mix and matching or borrowing practices from many religions.

Television and popular culture was also increasingly influencing religion with the rise of Scientology and new religious affiliations.

She said she did her research to explore connections between religion, spirituality and mental health.

Dr Aird is a 51-year-old agnostic from Closeburn, who now lectures in the School of Public Health at the Queensland University of Technology.

She spent last December teaching in Vietnam at the Hanoi School of Public Health and is currently conducting health research in Borroloola in the Northern Territory.

Source: University of Queensland

Citation: Religious beliefs focus too much on self (2008, January 17) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2008-01-religious-beliefs-focus.html>

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