

## The History of Psychology in Islam

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**ABSTRACT:** Early Muslim philosophers and scholars contributed great works to the pursuit of clearly understanding psychology and mental health. During the height of Islamic civilization, Islamic scholars were discussing psychiatry, psychology, psychotherapy, and their connection to holistic spiritual, mental, and physical health. Innumerable psychological and therapeutic components are incorporated in the Qur'an and the traditions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ). There are several early works and contributions of Islamic scholars that have contributed to what is now known as Islamic psychology, identified in Arabic as *Ilm al-Nafs*, which means the 'science of the self' or 'psyche'. Overall, the paper explores the legacy of psychology from an Islamic perspective, looking at the contribution of early scholars to contemporary Muslim psychology.

**KEY WORDS:** *History of psychology, early Muslim scholars, Islamic psychology*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The Islamic discourse on psychology dates back to the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, a time that marked the accelerated expansion of Islamic Civilization. The pursuit of knowledge received considerable support from political rulers who recognized the significance of the prophetic injunction to seek knowledge as far as China. During the next eight centuries, an intellectual pledge to uphold and propagate knowledge developed into the quintessence of scientific breakthroughs and philosophical discussions. Around that time, several ancient literatures were translated from their language of origin into Arabic at reputed academic institutions which was subsequently disseminated all over areas surrounding the Islamic Empire including the Iberian Peninsula, the Middle East and North Africa, Persia, and South Asia. This proliferation was enabled by exploiting resources such as paper from China, which turned into an important fabric for the Islamic civilization. Overall, the Islamic scholarly practices were subjected to critical scrutiny of various ancient texts. In this way, Islamic teachings and knowledge were bequeathed from one civilization to the next, accruing elucidations and improved applications notably by the Western intellectuals and civilization (Al-Issa, 2000).

There are several early works and contributions of Islamic scholars that have contributed to what is now known as Islamic psychology pronounced and identified in Arabic as '*Ilm al-Nafs*,' which means the science of the self or psyche. This science provides an Islamic perspective of the philosophical, biological, and medical study of the self or psyche, including the areas such as psychology, psychosomatic medicine, psychiatry, philosophy of the mind, and neuroscience. Researching what Islam has to offer to the world of psychology can not only enhance the effectiveness of therapeutic practice with Muslim clients, but it can also contribute to the advancement of the understanding of psychology and provide implications for psychotherapeutic practice.

### II. THE HISTORY OF PSYCHOLOGY IN ISLAM

Islam is a universal theme that encompasses political systems and methods of social organization as well as personal worship and consolation. It is instituted as a methodology to solve human spiritual, practical, and intellectual problems. Islam therefore comprises a civilization and a worldview embedded in numerous difference civilizations and the hearts and minds of believers throughout history as a living, dynamic, total system (Husain, 1998, p. 285). Many psychological concepts are deeply rooted within Islamic theology. Classical Islamic works delved into many of the sciences and served as the foundation for many subsequent research efforts, many of them involving the field of psychology (Ead, 1999; Faruqi, 2006; Iqbal, 2013). There was a time when students and scholars of other religious and cultural backgrounds from all over the world would travel to study various subjects from Muslims. The period of time between the seventh century and the 15<sup>th</sup> century was known as the "Golden Age of Islamic Civilization" (Faruqi, 2006). It was during this time that the Islamic Civilization was the most active civilization in efficiently and methodologically acquiring knowledge in various disciplines. They led the world in science for over five centuries, providing Europe with a wealth of knowledge in a variety of disciplines (Cobb, 1963; Faruqi, 2006). The Qur'an is a book that is not limited to religious teachings, but it encompasses subjects such as science, biology, geology, and astronomy,

and psychology. The Qur'an is viewed to have healing components and this is stated in the following verse, "People, a teaching from your Lord has come to you, a healing for what is in your hearts, and guidance and mercy for the believers" (Qur'an, 10:57). During the Golden Age of Islam, several Muslim scholars studied the sciences within the context of the Qur'an, the Islamic Holy Scripture, producing a rich amount of work that contributed to the growth of various sciences.

During the Golden Age of Islam, several Muslim scholars studied the sciences within the context of the Quran, producing a rich amount of work that contributed to the growth of various branches of knowledge. The European Christian world absorbed these Islamic contributions by translating into Latin the Arabic original sources of the works of well-known Muslim scholars, philosophers, physicians, and scientists such as Al-Kindi, Al-Ghazali, Al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Sina (or Avicenna) and many others (Diwani, 2005). Islam contributed greatly to the revitalization of learning and scientific exploration in Europe, which led to the Renaissance period in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries (Faruqi, 2006). As a result of this vast contribution, several milestones were achieved in the advancement of anatomy, medicine, chemistry, mathematics, astronomy, cosmology, physics, architecture, philosophy, and even psychology (Faruqi, 2006; Haq, 2009).

### III. EARLY MUSLIM PSYCHOLOGISTS

Muslim psychologists believed that psychological wellness is grounded in a broad and stable manner, akin to Hellenistic philosophy emphasizing an all-encompassing attitude to theorize cognition, body, and soul, which resulted in the development of an holistic approach to conceptualizing the mind, body, and spirit, embodied in the Roman vision of *mens sana in corpore sano* (a healthy mind in a healthy body) (Al-Isaa, 2000). Juxtaposed to the philosophical epoch that outlined the Hellenistic age, Muslim psychologists geared towards the use of theory in real life, thereby channeling their energy into learning about and recording the environments highlighting numerous psychological disorders such as delirium, memory disturbances, obsessive compulsive disorder amongst several others (Al-Isaa, 2000). Attention was particularly attributed to the assessment of depression, distinguishing it from psychosis and neurosis (Haque, 1998). The relevance of the emerging treatment approaches is probably embedded in traditional Islamic perspectives that Allah created a remedy for every disease.

While devising cures for psychological ailments, early Muslim psychologists have been the pioneers for the setting up of psychological treatment services in history. These facilities, strategically situated near cities and markets, promoted visits thereby preventing the danger of social isolation. To that effect, early Muslim psychologists acknowledged the curative potential of relationships and fostered the habit of positive reinforcement along with reflection. These interpersonal skills were thought to ease the healing process. Al-Razi (864-932), a Persian medical practitioner and philosopher reputed as Rhazes in the West, has been a prominent figure advocating to these relational skills. He was deemed proficient in the diagnosis of psychosomatic conditions (Hamarnah, 1984). Al-Razi has been the forerunner Islamic scholar initiating the movement towards the eradication of witchcraft practices and demons as described in mental health amongst the Christian believers at the time (Faruqi, 2006). Al-Razi, wrote about 184 books on various areas clinical observations he conducted as a physician, including human behavior studies. He distinguished between depression and confused thinking in his work *Kitab Al-Hawi*, where he wrote that the depressed person has "gone astray", while the confused person is "agitated with persistent mental confusion" (Haque, 1998). Al-Razi clarified that such a confused person is not epileptic, because persons with epilepsy are not confused between occurrences, and he negotiated the importance of achieving a balance between the mind and body (Haddad, 1991).

Al-Farabi, lived between 872-950 C.E., was born in Persian and was a well-known and influential Muslim theologian who was concerned mainly with the discipline of social psychology. This is evidenced in his most well known work, *Model City*, a metaphorical comparison of the components of a metropolis with the various functions of the human body (Haque, 2004). Al-Farabi promoted religion and philosophy as two paths leading to the same destination. His theory on the roles of imagination and spirituality accounted for the importance of diversity in religion, as well as the fundamental unity in philosophy across all revealed traditions.

In addition, Ibn Sina, the father of Modern Medicine (known to the West as Avicenna) also contributed vastly to psychology (Hajar, 2013). Ibn Sina was also one of the scholars that rejected the idea that mental illness was connected to the presence of demons; rather he viewed mental disorders as being connected to one's physiology (Haque, 2004; Sabry & Vohra, 2013). Syed Nasr, a leading researcher on Islam and the sciences, describes that "Avicenna was not only the supreme medical authority of the pre-modern era in both the Islamic world and the West, but also an undisputed master of traditional psychology, psychotherapy and psychosomatic medicine" (Bakhtiar, 2013). Ibn Sina developed Hellenistic theories and historically made "one of the first attempts to try to understand the way that the mind and reasoning operate" (Badri, 2000, p. 106) which foreshadowed modern cognitive-behavioral techniques, including talk therapy. In particular, he believed that a person could overcome psychological ailments through a process of "cognitive reframing" (Badri, 2000). Ibn Sina's *Canon* became the fundamental medical text for centuries in Europe as well as in the Muslim world (Faruqi, 2006; Hajar, 2013; Haq, 2009), and in *The Book of Healing* he analyzed the foundations of Greek

medicine, a traditional approach to medicine that is still being taught at various Islamic universities in India (Hajar, 2013).

Ibn Sina was known for his contribution to psychology, and he addressed the relationship between psychology and health (Hajar, 2013). He believed that the mind and body should exist in harmony, and interestingly advocated that the humans have the power to overcome the physical ailments by “psyching” themselves, with self-affirmations that they will improve (Shuttleworth, 2010). Ibn Sina also contributed the spiritual healing, where he believed physical illness may be cured by the recitation of the Quran and prayers. He was instrumental in coining the concept of psychosomatic illness, which significantly influenced the way modern day psychologist view ill health (Haque, 1998). His body of work emphasized in the field of memory disorders, hallucinations, and other neurotic conditions, and from a modern perspective it could be argued that his most lasting contribution was in the field of clinical psychology.

The understanding of the self and its suggestion for psychological wellbeing were addressed in the Islamic world around the eleventh century by Al-Kindi between 801-873 C.E. He wrote primarily on cognitive functions and about the soul. Psychology, or translated in Arabic as *ilm ul Nafs*, the science of the self or psyche, was taught in the fourteenth century at Nishapur University, and medical psychology as we know it to be psychiatry was taught in the fifteenth century (Skinner, 2010). Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) is regarded by many scholars and historians as one of the most prominent Muslim scholars of all time (Watt, 1953). He was a philosopher, theologian, and Sufi mystic, and wrote about 70 books over his short lifetime. His pioneering ideas on the psyche, self, and personality are still prominent in Muslim and non-Muslim circles. Among his major contributions to Islamic psychology is what can be termed “the structural theory of the psyche.” In his renowned book *The Revival of Religious Sciences*, based on his reading of the Holy Qura’n, Al-Ghazali (1995) suggested a general outline of the structure of personality, stating that the latter is composed of four constituents: *qalb*, *roh*, *nafs*, and *a’ql*, which can be translated as heart, spirit, psyche, and intellect, respectively.

Al-Ghazali established a foundation for a Qura’nic theory of personality (Haque, 2004) by delineating its potential psycho-spiritual structures. For Al-Ghazzali, the intellect was the key to all human functioning. He studied many facets of psychology, including interpersonal relationships, abnormal behavior, emotions, and social behavior (Vahab, 1996). Ibn Arabi also made a great contribution to the field of psychology with his immense work on soul, perception, imagination, dreams, and the nature of desire (Haque, 1998).

Furthermore, Muslim psychologists utilized expressive therapies such as music and olfactory therapies. By soliciting the sensory functions, the restorative potentials of the individual were promoted; in so doing, Muslim psychologists advocated for a holistic attitude to psychological treatment. While many psychologists integrated theological concepts into their practice of health, and accepted the healing powers of spiritual beliefs, many eluded the potential health dangers regarding religious tenets and fundamentalism. Instead, early Muslim psychologists emphasized more on increasing cognitive and somatic styles of therapy, and did not focus solely on the capability of prayer, although they acknowledged the power of treatment as related with the curative power of God.

Several early Muslim psychologists focused on the spiritual growth and development of the soul along with the different steps of enlightenment. This area of concern was illustrated by the way of *ihsan* which is commonly known as Sufism. *Ihsan*, accurately stands for beautification, an expression that the holy Qu’ran commonly uses to signify an enlightened state of God awareness. In view of the scientific attention of the Islamic academic practices, Sufism was strongly inclined towards documenting the spiritual phases of growth and development and investigated these patterns with the intention of developing a system which would be both quantifiable and reliable. In so doing, Sufism was regarded as a realistic and scientific approach akin to other fields at that time, given that it stems from a theoretical and philosophical perspective.

#### IV. PSYCHOLOGY IN ISLAMIC TEACHINGS

Innumerable psychological and therapeutic components are incorporated in the Qur’an and the traditions and sayings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011; Hodge & Nadir, 2008; Utz, 2011). There is a psychological dialogue incorporated in Islamic literature that provides understanding about the nature (or *fitrah* in Arabic) and human psychology and behavior (Mohamed, 1996).

Like Western counseling, which promotes specific values, Islam also has a number of values that it promotes through its teachings (Abdullah & Nadvi, 2011; Hodge & Nadir, 2008; Utz, 2011). Some of these predominant values are knowledge, reflection, moderation, self-control, community, prosperity, interdependence, complementary gender roles, and identity rooted in faith and spirituality. These values amongst many others provide several suggestions for clinical practice (Hodge & Nadir, 2008). The Qur’an itself has several psychological and therapeutic components that address the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual aspects of a human being (Al-Domi, 2012; Ahammed, 2010; Geels, 1997; Lubis, 2011). Muslims depend on the Qur’an to answer many of their life problems, and despite increasing suggestions by various authors to derive metaphors from different religious texts for therapeutic purposes; the Qur’an has not received much attention in this regard. The Qur’an offers the reader interpretations and understandings of circumstances and experiences in

life, while providing guidance on how to respond to those situations; for instance, Ahammed (2010) highlighted several therapeutic metaphors derived from the Qur'an that can be utilized in counseling.

Similarly, Al Domi (2012) emphasized several aspects of psychological security that result from the recitation, understanding, and implementation of the Qur'an. In addition to the Qur'an, many of the Prophet Muhammad's (ﷺ) teachings have been found to have positive psychological impacts in processing emotions such as grief, pride, and greed (Lodhi and Qureshi, 2011). In his efforts to introduce Islamic Psychology as a subject of study, Yasien Mohamed (1996) made the argument that Islam's rich psychological components, it would be manifestly beneficial to conceptualize and organize them and present them within an Islamic outline for use by contemporary psychologists, particularly to treat Muslim patients.

To take a step in this direction, Mohamed (1996) contributed an understanding of human nature (translated as *fitrah* in Arabic) from an Islamic perspective, emphasizing the importance of metaphysical principles in Islamic psychology, which encompass the human being's place in the universe as well as the fundamental spiritual nature and destiny of humans. *Fitrah* or human nature refers to the individual's natural and inborn reality. Another component incorporated in Islamic psychology is the dynamic of the psyche or the self, which is referred to as the *nafs* in Arabic. In Islam, the self or *nafs* is a metaphysical element. Yasien Mohamed (1996) points out that metaphysical elements are usually ignored in the Western world, where the entrenchment of the biomedical paradigm hampers progress in holistic care, particularly relating to overall wellbeing. In Islamic psychology, the spiritual component of an individual is crucial to the nature of a human being and is distinct from an individual's psychological and biological components.

The spiritual dimension in Islamic psychology that Yasein Mohamed (1996) is referring to is what Inayat (2001) identified as the *ruh*, or soul. Considered a religion centered on the nature of the human being, Islam's teachings are created to address and satisfy the needs of the individuals' human nature. Therefore, its teachings promote one's spiritual facets and tendencies without disregarding the biological and psychological components of one's human nature. A prominent Muslim philosopher and poet, Mohammed Iqbal (1940), also closely analyzed the concept of the self. In his distinguished book *The Secrets of the Self*, Iqbal highlighted the factors that strengthen and weaken one's self, derived from Islamic teachings. He focused greatly on the importance of self-realization and recognizing the potential that God has given to every human being. The central principle in his book is that enhancing one's spiritual facets is the key to a heightened sense of self (Dar, 2013).

Furthermore, Islamic psychology is equipped with teachings that not only address one's spiritual state, but their physical and psychological components as well. Islamic teachings place great emphasis on the power of one's mind and its relationship with the environment it is surrounded with. According to Islam, the mind, intellect, hearing, sight and all physical faculties are trusts given by God. It is the responsibility of the Muslim to take care of these trusts by not abusing them, being grateful for them and conscious of how they utilize these God-given tools. This has implications in psychotherapy for Muslims, because they know that the way they treat themselves, mind, and body is an essential part of their worship. The following verses in the Qur'an reflect these teachings:

Such is He who knows all that is unseen as well as what is seen, the Almighty, the Merciful, who gave everything its perfect form. He first created man from clay, then made his descendants from an extract of underrated fluid. Then He molded him. He breathed from His Spirit into him; he gave you hearing, sight, and minds. How seldom you are grateful. (The Qur'an, 32: 6-9)

Another aspect of cognition that is emphasized in the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) is the power of reflection. The words "reflect" and "mindful" are constantly repeated throughout the Qur'an. Muslims are encouraged to reflect on the intention behind their behaviors, for they know that their state of heart and intention is what God will judge. The Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) emphasized this concept by teaching that "Verily actions are by intentions, and for every person is what he intended" (Hijab, 2012). In addition, many verses in the Qur'an emphasize the importance of reflection. This is seen constantly throughout the Qur'an as exemplified by the following verse: "In this way God makes His messages clear to you, so that you may reflect on them" (The Quran, Al Baqarah, 2: 266).

A popular therapy approach utilized today that also emphasizes the power of reflection and being present with one's thoughts is mindfulness-related therapy. Despite significant overlap between Islam and Mindfulness, the genealogy of the latter is usually attributed to the teachings of Buddhism (Mirdal, 2012). However, the poetic masterpieces of Maulana Jalal-ad Din Rumi, known to the world simply as Rumi, the distinguished religious philosopher and spiritual poet of Islam, has gained much popularity all over the world for the healing and spiritual components of his writing, and is the best-selling poet in the US. Mirdal (2012) highlighted several mindfulness-based principals in Rumi's psychology and philosophy, including:

...acceptance and acknowledgement of both positive and negative experiences;  
unlearning of old habits and looking at the world with new eyes; decentering, changing one's focus from Self to Other; and attunement of body and mind through mediation.

(Mirdal, 2012, p.1206).

These aspects of Rumi teachings highlight central themes that are known to Mindfulness-based methods today. According to Islam and much of Rumi's writings, intentions play a crucial role in any change that takes place, which is very similar to recent mindfulness therapy methods such as acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), which facilitates a process that helps the client recognize their sincerest intentions (Mirdal, 2012). Psychology recognizes that one's attempt to avoid thinking about unpleasant experiences or flee from memories that are hurtful can worsen one's suffering and mental state. Rumi recognized this and wrote many poems such as the following, on the concept of accepting one's reality and staying in the present:

The cure for pain is in the pain

Good and bad are mixed. If you don't have both,

You don't belong to us.

When one of us gets lost, is not here, he must be inside of us. (Rumi, 1995)

There are aspects of western therapeutic modalities (such as strengths based, cognitive, and group therapies) that are consistent with Islamic values (Hodge & Nadir, 2008). Inayat (2001) highlighted several common areas between Western integrative and Islamic counseling. She categorized Islamic psychological concepts into two categories: human and spiritual abilities. Human abilities consisted of the following components (which are Arabic terms derived from Islamic teachings): (1) *insaniyyah*, which refers to personality, (2) *aql*, which refers to intelligence and cognition, and (3) *ilm*, which refers to deep understanding or knowledge (Inayat, 2001). Inayat identified the following Islamic concepts to be components of spiritual abilities: (1) the *ruh*, which is the spirit or soul, (2) *rouhinyyah*, which is spirituality itself, (3) the *qalb*, which is defined as the heart and tool of connection to God; and (4) *zikr*, which is the remembrance of God. According to the teachings of Islam, the remembrance of God has several healing abilities. Skinner (2010) confirmed these components studied by Inayat (2001) and identified the *qalb* or the inner heart, the *aql* or intellect, the lower drives (known as *nafs amara* in Arabic) and finally the body as the main dimensions of a human being. The concept of the inner self or inner heart in Islamic psychology is consistent with Jung's insights regarding the depth unconscious, which aims to uncover aspects of the self that were hidden or closed (Skinner, 2010). Within the inner self lies the element of human nature or *fitrah* and one's spiritual dimension or the "*ruh*."

Mohamed (1996) discussed the concept of cognition from an Islamic perspective by explaining that the organs of cognition are not just the intellect (*aql*) but also the heart (*qalb*). These two facets are what allow human beings to comprehend not just the highest foundation of knowledge (divine revelation), but the highest of three levels of human perception as well, all of which are inherent in Islamic psychology: sensory perception (hearing, smell, sight, etc.), intellectual perception (cognition, awareness, analysis, etc.), and spiritual perception (inspiration, intellection, intuition, etc.). To attain the sensory level of perception, one uses their eyes, ears, etc. To attain the intellectual level of perception, one uses their mind or intellect (*aql*). To have a spiritual level of perception, one needs to use both intellect (*aql*) and heart (*qalb*).

Islamic psychology, like Western psychology, recognizes both sensory and intellectual level of perception, but whereas Western psychology traditionally excludes the spiritual dimension, Islamic psychology embraces it and views it to be the highest level of perception, requiring the use of both mind and heart (Mohamed, 1996). This Islamic view of the various components of human nature and perception was highlighted in many of the famous works of Al-Ghazali in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE and by subsequent experts in Islamic metaphysics and medicine (Frager, 1999; Haque, 2004).

## V. CONCLUSION

Despite the strong evidence that early Muslim philosophers and scholars contributed great works to the pursuit of clearly understanding psychology and mental health. There are very few efforts in researching the integration of Islam and psychology into an effective psychotherapeutic approach with Muslims (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2010; Carter & Rashidi, 2003; Haque, 1998). There is a lack of psychological literature supporting a religiously integrated psychotherapeutic approach with Muslim clients. Furthermore, there are numerous psychological principals and values that are incorporated in the Qur'an, the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) as well as in the studies of early Muslim scholars. Despite Islam's strong connection with psychology, there is very little involvement of Islamic thought in many of the research efforts to incorporate religious philosophies into psychotherapy. The integration of Islamic thought into psychotherapy is an endeavor that needs to be pursued further in order to provide religiously sensitive and effective psychotherapeutic interventions to the Muslim population.

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