



Book Review

Towards an Islamic Psychology and Psychotherapy

Samuel Bendeck Sotillos¹ 

Institute of Traditional Psychology

¹ Mental Health Therapist, Writer, and Researcher. E-mail: samuelbendeck@yahoo.com

Developing a Model of Islamic Psychology and
Psychotherapy: Islamic Theology and Contemporary
Understandings of Psychology

By Abdallah Rothman, Foreword by Abdal Hakim Murad
New York, NY: Routledge, 2022, 224 pp., \$160.00.

Due to the destructive legacy of colonialism within the Islamic world, traditional or premodern wisdom has, in large part, been brushed aside in favor of a materialistic and reductionistic outlook based on the shifting sands of modern intellectual fashions. Modern Western psychology emerged through the secularizing trajectory of the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment project; all of which contributed to the purging of metaphysics and the human soul's intrinsic connection to the spiritual dimension within the discipline. Due to the growing interest in restoring this vital dimension, Islamic psychology—akin to other traditional understandings of the mind known as *perennial psychology*—addresses this need to understand human behavior in light of the sacred.

Corresponding author:
Samuel Bendeck Sotillos
E-mail:
samuelbendeck@yahoo.
com

eISSN: 2458-9675

Received: 08.09.2022
Revision: 05.10.2022
Accepted: 08.10.2022

©Copyright 2022
by Author(s)

Islamic psychology, founded on the Qur'ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet, offers a tripartite understanding of human beings in terms of Spirit (*Rūḥ*), soul (*nafs*), and body (*jism*). Central to this approach to the “science of the soul” (*ilm al nafs*) is a focus on our primordial nature (*fiṭrah*) as reflected in the Divine Law (*sharī'ah*). Within Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), known as the inner or mystical dimension of Islam, there is adherence not only to the Divine Law, but also to ‘the way’ or spiritual path (*ṭarīqah*), with a view to conforming to

Citation: Bendeck Sotillos, S. (2022). Towards an Islamic psychology and psychotherapy [Review of the book *Developing a Model of Islamic Psychology and Psychotherapy: Islamic Theology and Contemporary Understandings of Psychology* by Abdallah Rothman]. *Spiritual Psychology and Counseling*, 7(3), 409–416. <https://dx.doi.org/10.37898/spc.2022.7.3.182>

Reality or Truth (*ḥaqīqah*). The spiritual path is compared to a human being situated on the circumference of a circle (representing the *sharī‘ah*), where each point is connected to a radius (representing the *ṭarīqah*) that leads to the center (representing the *ḥaqīqah*). The Spirit (*ar-Rūḥ*), while transcendent, is also immanent within the soul (*naḥs*) of the human being (*al-insān*), and it is when the faculty of the Intellect (*al-‘aql*) is restored in the heart (*al-qalb*) that our primordial nature (*fiṭrah*) can be fully realized at the highest level. The term *‘aql* in Arabic is used to denote both reason and intellect, yet the relationship between them (the first being horizontal and the second vertical), is always recognized.

Abdallah Rothman is Professor of Islamic Psychology, Principal at Cambridge Muslim College, and Executive Director of the International Association of Islamic Psychology. This book consists of seven chapters. *Chapter 1: Beyond Islamization: Re-envisioning Western Psychotherapy within an Indigenous Psychological Paradigm* presents a framework for understanding Islamic psychology or the “science of the soul” from within the Islamic tradition (Qur’ān, Sunnah and exegesis (*tafsīr*)) and its application to mental health treatment in a manner that is not reliant on the assumptions of modern Western psychology. *Chapter 2: Islam and Psychology: The Development of a New Field* offers an outline of religion and psychology so as to better delineate the book’s thesis. *Chapter 3: Grounded Theory and Theology: A Methodological Approach to Constructing a Religiously Inspired Theoretical Framework* gives an overview of the qualitative research in this field and presents: (i) the author’s own methodology; (ii) how and why it was selected; and (iii) the criteria for evaluating relevant research findings. *Chapter 4: An Islamic Model of the Soul: Theoretical Foundations for Islamic Psychology and Psychotherapy* provides the findings for the initial phase of this study as informed by the Islamic tradition. *Chapter 5: The Nature and Structure of the Soul: Therapeutic Conceptualizations in Islamic Psychotherapy* conveys the first half of the findings from the second phase of the research. *Chapter 6: Stages and Development of the Soul: The Clinical Scope of Islamic Psychotherapy* shares the findings from the second half of the second phase of the study. *Chapter 7: Reflections Upon a Framework for an Islamic Psychology and Psychotherapy: An Agenda for Research and Practice* presents the findings from both phases of the study in its entirety.

Abdal Hakim Murad (Timothy Winter, b. 1960) has written an important foreword for the book that discusses the theme of mental health within the Islamic tradition. He draws on the connection between human identity, the mind and the Divine: “Humanity is traditionally said to ‘image’ God, so that the enigma of mind seems to reflect the enigma of God Himself” (p. xiii). It is through self-knowledge of pure intelligence or the transcendent intellect (*‘aql*) that the immanence of the Divine can be discerned, as indicated by God having “breathed into him of My Spirit” (Qur’ān 15:29).

Abdal Hakim Murad addresses the central concern of mental health within the three Abrahamic monotheisms as follows:

What is today called mental health has thus been for the monotheisms a matter of absolutely central religious concern, since we are ‘created to worship God’ ([Qur’ān] 51:56) and thus to know Him, and disorders in our inward equilibrium do not only generate sinful behaviour but obstruct our capacity to approach God, to be inspired by His qualities, and ultimately, for the mystical traditions, to perceive Him: the very purpose of our creation. (p. xiii)

He makes a vital point on the shortcomings of both contemporary psychology and psychiatry:

Biomedical science has made enormous strides in understanding the body and its disorders, but our comprehension of the mind and its needs has lagged far behind, and many modern pharmaceutical or behavioural remedies seem based more on empirical evidence of effectiveness than on any comprehensive understanding of the mind and the brain. (p. xiii)

Islamic cosmology and psychology offer a markedly different vision of the human being compared to what we find in modern Western psychology, in that its concern is with the nature of what it means to be human and with the very its purpose of existence itself. Although modern science and its psychology asserts to be neutral and value-free, it is often unaware of its own biases and presuppositions, which perpetuate its monopoly as a discipline and invalidate all other forms of psychology that are grounded on sacred epistemologies. Its hegemonic assumptions all too often go unchecked. Rothman explains how this hinders the theory and application of therapy: “Cultural adaptations of popular Western concepts of psychotherapy can only go so far in their effective application with Muslim service users with higher levels of religiosity” (p. 4).

Many individuals participating in therapeutic services who belong to a faith tradition may inadvertently fall prey to adhering to guidance that is antithetical to their own religion’s perspective and practices, which may be unknown to the mental health practitioner. This leads to an ethical dilemma for the discipline of modern Western psychology, which may lead to deleterious spiritual consequences for individuals with spiritual beliefs. A practitioner of Islamic psychology follows the lead of the individual participating in treatment to determine whether or not they wish to receive therapy that aligns with the Islamic tradition. This is emphasized in the Qur’ān: “There is no compulsion in religion” (2:256). Again, there is no obligation, as each human being needs to turn freely to the Divine of their own will.

The practice of one’s religion, whatever this revealed faith may be, is itself a complete and integral psychology or “science of the soul.” Rothman frames this

within the Islamic tradition: “It could be argued that Islam in itself is, or includes, a pathway to understanding the nature of the psyche and it could thus be considered that the study and practice of Islam are inherently an Islamic psychology” (p. 9). He adds, “Islam is understanding the teachings from the Qur’an and Sunnah which explain the nature of the soul or psyche and that the practices decreed in Islam are therapeutic methods for correcting maladaptive behavior, solving interpersonal problems, and achieving self-growth—all primary aims of psychology” (p. 9).

It is time for mental health practitioners to go beyond cultural sensitivity to also include the diverse knowledge systems of these cultures as informed by their religious and spiritual traditions. According to Rothman, “Perhaps more important than simply being sensitive to a service user’s relative orientation to their Muslim religion, is the notion of adjusting therapeutic interventions to concur with and align with their level of religiosity” (p. 24).

Muslims who are themselves mental health practitioners may be unaware of how their own education and training within modern Western psychology colors their outlook, which may be in direct conflict with the tenets of their religion. They may wish to adapt their understanding of the Islamic tradition in their clinical work; however, if they are unaware of the fundamental divergences between mainstream psychology and their religion, it could have potentially harmful outcomes. The secular training required for becoming a therapist can cause much doubt about the relevance of religion and its ability to integrate and heal the human psyche, if not lead some to compartmentalize or disavow their faith traditions altogether. With that noted, the opposite error could also be made; namely, where a therapist overlooks or minimizes what is indeed a mental health difficulty by dismissing it as a problem that requires a spiritual solution. A balanced and moderate approach needs to be taken by the mental health practitioner so as not to avoid these extremes which is difficult to do given the confusion that surrounds these delicate matters today. The author cites Malik Badri (1932–2021), known throughout the world as the “father of Islamic psychology,” regarding the reluctance of Muslim mental health practitioners to re-envision psychology according to Islamic principles:

Unthinking repetition of Western theories and practices in the discipline of psychology probably presents one of the most serious threats to the status of Islamic ideology among our Muslim scholars and laity. Western psychologists propound theories about man’s personality, motivation and behavior which are in many ways contradictory to Islam. These theories and their applications are carefully sugar-coated with the attractive cover of “science”. Muslim psychologists, like their colleagues in other parts of the world, have an anxious zeal to be introduced under the prestigious umbrella of the sciences. (p. 27)

Due to the colonizing force of modern Western psychology, numerous Muslim mental health practitioners have forgone their own religious orientations to adhere to the hegemony of modern science and its psychology.

It is often taken for granted or overlooked that notions about what is normal or abnormal depend on our understanding of human beings. They do not exist in a vacuum but are attached to a specific worldview and its way of seeing reality. Since its inception, modern Western psychology has never been, nor can it be, neutral. To assess and diagnose the psychopathology of individuals or our era requires standards of mental health, yet these are again integral to the essence of what it means to be human within a given culture and its religious or spiritual tradition. These too presuppose values and assumptions. According to Rothman, “The understanding of human nature and the relative conception of structural aspects that make up the human psyche or ‘soul’ determine much of how we make sense of behaviour and motivation and are fundamental to the philosophical underpinnings of theoretical approaches to psychology and psychotherapy” (p. 72). The sacred psychologies of the religious and spiritual traditions are all rooted in metaphysics, ontology, and epistemology, all of which inform our appreciation of the human condition.

In an increasingly pluralistic era, diverse forms of psychology need to be made available to accommodate the increasingly diverse needs of individuals. Modern Western psychology falls short here because of its entrenched epistemological biases which are severed from the sacred. Rothman notes, “In a time when societies are made up of greatly diverse groups of people who hold vastly different paradigmatic perspectives, it may be prudent to embrace multiple views of human psychology relevant to a given paradigm of the human predicament” (p. 31). Mainstream psychology has, thus far, been unable or unwilling to embrace the epistemological pluralism found across humanity’s cultures due to the absence of metaphysics in its worldview.

Mental health, as understood by the world’s religions, have a much deeper significance that is intimately linked to existential and metaphysical problems. Mental illness within Islamic psychology differs significantly from secular approaches to understanding the human psyche, as Rothman explains: “Imbalance or psychological ‘problems’ were not primarily seen as problems in and of themselves but were seen as symptoms, signals or signs of the real problem being a disconnection from God or disconnection from the awareness and remembrance of God” (p. 156). That a person’s disconnection from the Divine could compromise their psycho-physical health is still something that is not widely recognized outside of spiritually based therapies. Disharmony in a human soul (*nafs*) is often directly related to whether one is living in right relationship with the Divine Law. This also applies beyond the

individual to include the human collectivity and the society of which someone is a member. In other words, the culture itself can become ill on a large scale, thereby compromising the psychological health of the individual.

For this reason, an application of the “science of the soul,” in whatever form it takes, requires more from the mental health practitioner than does secular psychotherapy. Rothman writes, “Islamic psychotherapy requires more of a personal commitment from the therapist” (p. 159). To the extent that we do not know how to correctly think in accordance with a given spiritual tradition, our perspective will inevitably be skewed, no matter how knowledgeable we may be about secular therapeutic approaches. Furthermore, we can only provide treatment to others to the degree that we ourselves have faced our own trials, both as they apply to everyday life and to the spiritual path. Again, the role of the therapist in this context radically differs from what is expected in mainstream psychology; as Rothman observes: “The potential for a person to ‘polish their mirror’ by doing *jihād an nafs* [the war against the soul] and thus reflecting the light of the *rūh* in their soul, as well as the potential for a person to reflect back to a companion their own state of their soul” (p. 161). He explains, “an Islamic perspective of psychology is inextricably linked to the process of cleansing the soul” (p. 95). The goal in all traditional psychology is to increase a human being’s proximity to the Divine and thus effect a greater integration therein. Rothman asserts that the aim of therapy within Islamic psychology is to “assist the client in moving through the stages of the soul in a non-linear fashion with a focus on progression upward in the model towards the higher stages of the soul” (p. 168). He adds, “The primary objective of treatment in this model is for the client to reach equilibrium in their soul” (p. 170).

The purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) is of utmost importance, as we are reminded: “Surely the soul commands to evil, save whom my Lord may show mercy” (Qur’ān 12:53). Within the mystical dimension of Islam or Sufism, there are four degrees of the human psyche: ascending from the animal soul (*an-nafs al-ḥaywāniyah*), the passionate soul (*an-nafs al-ammārah* or “soul that incites” to evil), the discerning or intelligent soul (*an-nafs al-lawwāmah* or “soul that blames”), and the intellectual soul (*an-nafs al-muṭma’innah* or “the soul at peace,” the human psyche reintegrated in Spirit or *Rūh*).

According to the principles of Islamic psychology, “God alters not what is in a people until they alter what is in themselves” (Qur’ān 13:11). This is closely associated with the process of repentance (*tawbah*), to turn around the human soul inwardly and return to the straight path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*) as sanctioned by God. Through the “science of the soul,” as informed by the Islamic tradition, are transcendent principles

provided for both mental health practitioner and individual so as to instill trust in God (*tawakkul*), through remembrance (*dhikr*), mindfulness (*taqwā*) and meditation (*tafakkur*). In this way, individuals can adequately face the ordeals of the human condition, for they represent the many deaths of the false self or empirical ego in this temporal world (*dunyā*) in order that we may return to the Divine Unity (*Tawhīd*) or Spirit (*Rūh*).

Abdallah Rothman has accomplished the commendable task of providing a much-needed framework for the understanding of the theory and practice of Islamic psychology; and to do so in a way that is not vitiated by the truncated distortions of modern Western psychology. The time has come to put an end to modern Western psychology's monopoly, which claims to have the only valid method. In fact, it presents as an anomaly, in that it is the only psychology that has divorced itself from metaphysics and the spiritual dimension, thus forfeiting the status of a "science of the soul" that it once had, prior to the emergence of modernity and its establishment as a separate discipline divorced from philosophy and religion.

Islamic psychology is not about introducing religious and spiritual notions into the pre-existing structure of mainstream psychology, but rather a turn within the depths of the Islamic tradition itself, applying its own metaphysical, ontological, and epistemic principles in understanding the human being and its relationship to the sacred, utilizing its own unique treatment modalities. It is through the perennial psychology, in its distinctive Islamic form, that a renewal of the "science of the soul" is being rehabilitated as a discipline distinct from modern Western psychology (Ajmal, 1987; Badri, 1979; Bakhtiar, 2019; Lombard, 1999; Nasr, 2007).

To bring the discipline of psychology into dialogue with the Islamic tradition requires erudition and sensitivity on the part of mental health professionals. It is paramount that practitioners who seek to accommodate the spiritual dimension into their treatment options, such as is found within Islamic psychology, should always recall religious people's connection to those means that are indispensable to "healing for the (diseases) in your hearts" (Qur'ān 10:57).

References

- Ajmal, M. (1987). Sufi science of the soul. In S. H. Nasr (Ed.), *Islamic spirituality: Foundations* (pp. 294–307). Crossroad.
- Badri, M. (1979). *The dilemma of Muslim psychologists*. MWH London.
- Bakhtiar, L. (2019). *Quranic psychology of the self: A textbook on Islamic moral psychology*. Kazi Publications.
- Lumbard, J. E. B. (1999). The function of *dhikrullāh* in Sufi psychology. In Z. Moris (Ed.), *Knowledge is light: Essays in honor of Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (pp. 251–274). ABC International Group.
- Nasr, S. H. (2007). The integration of the soul. In W. C. Chittick (Ed.), *The essential Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (pp. 73–84). World Wisdom.
- Nasr, S. H., Dagli, C. K., Dakake, M. M., Lumbard, J. E. B., & Rustom, M. (Eds.). (2015). *The study Quran: A new translation and commentary*. HarperCollins.