

EARLY MUSLIM SCHOLARS' CONTRIBUTION TO PSYCHOLOGY AND MODERN CHALLENGES FOR MUSLIM PSYCHOLOGISTS

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ABSTRACT

The profound intellectual contributions of early Muslim scholars are substantial and it can be measured by their extensive body of works written about the nature of humans (*Ilm-al Nafsiat* or Self Knowledge). Notably, many of their nuanced and insightful works were merged with Islamic philosophy and religious ideas, which otherwise seem to be their original ideas for the numerous contemporary psychological presumptions and practices. This research paper, through historical and analytical exploration, not only covers the outstanding share and impact of early well-known scholars to the discipline of Psychology but also summarizes the problems and impediments which Muslims are facing nowadays far and wide in acclimatizing to the theories of West. This paper explores the contribution of early Muslim scholars to psychology and delineates the complexities introduced by Western psychological paradigms for Muslim professionals and client.

Key Words: Psychology, Islamic Psychology, Native Psychology, Muslim Scholars

1. INTRODUCTION

From an Islamic standpoint, the Qur'an serves as a fundamental basis for all types of knowledge. The *Qur'an* is the code and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) is its illustration. As per the guidance in the *Qur'an*, God has manifested His signs upon the 'horizons' or the macro-cosmic world and also within the soul of man, for He has "breathed into man" His own spirit (38:72). To be fully human is to stand on the vertical axis of existence and to seek *tawhid*, to see reflection of the one in all that makes up the manifold order from the angelic to the mineral. The doctrine of unity (*tawhid*) is

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manifested in all the expressions of Muslim thought whether they are art or science, language or culture. The doctrine of *tawhid* proclaims that all existence and all reality is based on *tawhid* and it proclaims that all existence and all reality is based on divine principle which is none other than God Himself and there is no duality in Him. This oneness is reflected in the unitary character of Islamic psychology which is interrelated and contributes to a wholesome understanding of the human behaviour. In a profound sense, Islamic Psychology is nothing other than the realization of *tawhid*. Understanding the dimensions of man's inner self—ⁱspirit, soul, and heart are the main sources of Islamic psychology.ⁱ

Classical works literary or philosophical are generally those which adhere to the established standards and principles of their times. They are of high and excellent standards. They are related to the most developing stages of human civilization and culture. Though written at a particular period of time, yet have a lasting recognition. Such works have a universal appeal and touch the very core of man by integrating the themes, understood by readers of wide range backgrounds and levels of experience. The ancient Greece, Rome, Medieval Europe and the Muslim East have produced a good number of the classical works and scholars who contributed lot in the area of natural and social sciences. They are imbued with deep vision, superb thoughts and exquisite art.

1. ASH'ATH BIN QAIS AL-KINDI (801-866 C.E.)

Al Kindi (Latin: *Alkindus*; c.801-873) was an Arab Muslim philosopher, mathematician, musician and physician. He has numerous works (numbering about 270) to his credit and among them some are lost. Ibn al-Nadim and following him al-Qifti classified his writings, most of which are short treatises, into seventeen groups and one among them is Psychology.ⁱⁱ Some of his treatises that are related to Psychology are “Sleep and Dreams and the Eradication of Sorrow”.ⁱⁱⁱ Al Kindi was the first to explain the term “sorrow” as a ‘spiritual grief’ that is caused by a state of deep distress, disappointment and suffering. He further explained visible pain is curable.^{iv} Islamic theology greatly influenced Al Kindi's ideas. He believed the soul might only find contentment when it no longer lust for the world and seeks intellectual treasures. Al Kindi was an idealist who believed that human senses are sometimes deceptive and what we gain through our senses can be easily lost. Moreover, Al Kindi used cognitive strategies to combat depression and defined the soul through free will. His ideas of the soul were derived from Aristotelian and Platonic ideas. Al Kindi expanded on Aristotelian and Platonic ideas of the soul and further perceived the upper and lower worlds differently.^v In upper world he included the divine nature, intellect and soul, while in the lower world he

perceived physical being, the body, creation and matter and form that are finite.^{vi} Al Kindi believed that God cannot be captured through rational thoughts or human intellect as it pushes God far away which subsequently leads to negativity.

2. ALI IBN SAHL RABBAN AT-TABARI (838-870 C.E.)

At-Tabari was a Persian^{vii} Muslim Hakim^{viii} and Psychologist, who produced one of the first influential book on medicine entitled as “*Firdous al Hikmah*” (Paradise of Wisdom). At-Tabari's writings greatly influenced the field of child development. His influential book, “*Firdaus al Hikmah*”, which he wrote in Arabic called also “*Al-Kunnash*”, is related to medical writings in which psychotherapy is discussed and the ideas related to psychotherapy were derived from ancient Indian texts on medicine.^{ix} At-Tabari accentuated the need for psychotherapy for an efficient and thoroughly healing. He believed the importance of psychotherapy to cure illness, especially the illness due to hallucination.^x He was in favour of psychotherapy and counselling. Through wise counselling and proper medical treatment, patients can be cured. At-Tabari was the first to demonstrate the importance between medicine and psychology.^{xi}

3. ABU ZAYD AL-BALKHI (850-934 C.E.)

Abu Zayd Ahmed ibn Sahl Balkhi was a Persian Muslim polymath, physician, mathematician, geographer, psychologist and scientist. In Islamic psychology, he was the first who introduced the concept of “mental health and mental hygiene”, and related it to spiritual health. He laid emphasis both upon soul and body and said that “if the body gets sick, the *nafs* (psyche) loses much of its cognitive and comprehensive ability and fails to enjoy the desirous aspects of life” and that “if the *nafs* gets sick, the body may also find no joy in life and may eventually develop a physical illness”^{xii}. Related to the concept of soul and body, Al-Balkhi mentioned few Hadith's and some verses of the Qur'an such as:

— “*In their hearts is a disease*”.^{xiii}

— “*Truly, in the body there is a morsel of flesh, and when it is corrupt the body is corrupt, and when it is sound the body is sound. Truly, it is the qalb [heart]*”.^{xiv}

— “*Verily Allah does not consider your appearances or your wealth in (appraising you) but He considers your hearts and your deeds*”.^{xv}

Abu Zayd al-Balkhi was the first to differentiate between neurosis and psychosis, and the first to classify neurotic disorders and demonstrated in detail the importance of using rational and spiritual therapies to cure each of these classified disorders.^{xvi} Al-Balkhi categorized neurosis into four emotional diseases: fear and anxiety, anger and aggression, sadness and depression, and obsession.^{xvii} He believed an interaction between physical and psychological disorders and demonstrated in his writings that these interactions result in psychosomatic disorders.^{xviii} He stated that a balance between the mind and body is prerequisite for good health and vice versa. Al-Balkhi also introduced the concept of reciprocal inhibition (*al-ilaj bi al-did*), which was re-introduced over a thousand years later by Joseph Wolpe in 1969. He further categorized three types of depressions: normal depression or sadness (*huzn*), endogenous depression originating from within the body, and reactive clinical depression originating from outside the body. Al-Balkhi also wrote that a healthy individual should always keep healthy thoughts and feelings in his mind in the case of unexpected emotional outbursts in the same way drugs and First Aid medicine are kept nearby for unexpected physical emergencies.^{xix}

4. ABU BAKR MOHAMED AL-RAZI (864-932 C.E.)

Ibn Zakariya Al-Razi was a Persian Physician, Chemist, and philosopher who was renowned in the West by the name Rhazes. He was a student of At-Tabari and adopted many of his ideas of psychotherapy. Al-Razi was generous, humane towards his patients, and charitable to the poor, so that he used to give them full treatment without charging any fee.^{xx} Al-Razi encouraged physicians to develop a positive relationship between patients and provide them with hopeful comments which will lead to faster recovery.^{xxi} He was an expert in prognosis and psychosomatic medicine and anatomy.^{xxii} Further, he was interested in intelligence and wrote widely on the measure of intelligence. It was said that his book “Kitab Al-Hawi” was most influential book ever written in Islamic/Muslim Medicine and he was known in the West as a medical expert up to the 18th century.^{xxiii} He compared the medical work of Greek scholars such as Hippocrates and Galen with Arab scholars.^{xxiv} Al-Razi was also known for his writings “Al-Tibb Al Mansuri” that focused on medicinal healing art, “Mujarabbat” a book on hospital experiences and he also discussed treatment of moral and psychological ills of the human spirit in his book “Al-Tibb Al-Ruhani”.^{xxv}

5. ABU NASR MOHAMMAD IBN AL-FARAKH (AL-FARABI) (870-950 C.E.)

Al-Farakh known in the West by the name Alfarabius was a well-known Turkish scientist

and philosopher. His influential work shaped Social Psychology, especially well-known dissertation Model City.^{xxvi} He wrote *Social Psychology* and *Principles of the Opinions of the Citizens of the Virtuous City*, which were the first treatises to deal with Social Psychology. He stated that, "an isolated individual could not achieve all the perfections by himself, without the aid of other individuals," and that it is the "innate disposition of every man to join another human being or other men in the labor he ought to perform." He concluded that to "achieve what he can of that perfection, every man needs to stay in the neighbourhood of others and associate with them. In his treatise *On the Cause of Dreams*, which appeared as chapter 24 of his *Principles of the Opinions of the Citizens of the Ideal City*, he distinguished between dream interpretation and the nature and causes of dreams.^{xxviii} Al Farabi also wrote a treatise, *On the Meanings of the Intellect and the Therapeutic Effects of Music on the Soul*.^{xxix} Apart from all, al-Farabi wrote commentaries on the Greeks, independent treatises, and denounces some of the works of philosophers and theologians through his powerful pen.

6. ABUL HASSAN 'ALI 'ABBAS AL- MAJUSI (D.995)

'Ali ibn al-'Abbas al-Majusi also known as Masoudi, or Latinized as Haly Abbas, was a Persian Physician and Psychologist from the Islamic Golden Age, most famous for the *Kitab al-Maliki* or *Complete Book of the Medical Art*, his textbook on Medicine and Psychology. 'Ali ibn 'Abbas al-Majusi was a pioneer in Psychophysiology and Psychosomatic medicine. He described how the physiological and psychological aspects of a patient can have an effect on one another in his *Complete Book of the Medical Art*. He found a correlation between patients who were physically and mentally healthy and those who were physically and mentally unhealthy, and concluded that "joy and contentment can bring a better living status to many who would otherwise be sick and miserable due to unnecessary sadness, fear, worry and anxiety."^{xxx} Majusi, the Persian physician, while discussing the psychological disorders illustrated the anatomy, physiology and diseases of the brain including sleeping sickness, loss of memory, hypochondria, coma, hot and cold meningitis, vertigo epilepsy, love sickness, and hemiplegia.^{xxxi} He was of the view that health of an individual should be preserved by preventing disease transmission, and maintaining healthy environment. Further, he also emphasized on natural healing rather than medical treatment or drugs and medical treatment/drugs, he opines, should come as a last option.^{xxxii}

7. ABU ALI AHMAD B. MUHAMMAD B. YA'KUB IBN MISKAWAYH (941-1030 C.E.)

Ibn Miskawayh was a contemporary of Ibn Sina and al- Biruni who wrote on a abundant number of subjects including Psychology. He studied Philosophy and History as a means

of investigating Truth (al- Haq) like so many other intellectuals of his time. He worked in the Islamic Neoplatonic tradition and placed immense importance on ethics. In order to bring soul into harmony, he described diverse ways and formulated various rules for the preservation of moral health. Ibn Miskawayh's work on ethics is far more important than his works on metaphysics. His *Tabarat al- a'raq* (Purity of Dispositions), better known as *Tadhib al- akhlaq* (Cultivation of Morals, ed. C. Zurayk, Beirut 1967, Fr. Tr. M.A. Arkoun, 1969), explains, in detail, the path to acquiring the correct balance to morally correct actions in an organized and systematic manner. He contrasted the liberating nature of reason with the deception and temptation of nature. He tied prosperity to justice and destruction to injustice. His books like *Tadhib al- akhlaq* (Cultivation of Morals) and *Al- Fauz al- Asgar* (The Lesser Victory), gives psychological advice on certain issues, such as the fear of death, the need to develop traits to restrain oneself from faults, and the concept of morality. With reference to development of virtues, he blended Platonic and Aristotelian notions with an interior aspect of Islam (Sufism) and considered virtue as perfecting the aspect of soul representing humanity, i.e. reason that distinguishes humans from animals. He suggests that humans to control their emotions and develop traits to restrain themselves from faults. Ibn Miskawayh introduced what is now known as "self reinforcement" and response cost. Ibn Miskawayh narrated that a Muslim, who feels guilty about doing something pleasurable to his *al-nafs al-ammara*, should learn to punish himself by psychological, physical or spiritual ways such as paying money to the poor, fasting, etc.^{xxxiii}

9. CONVENTIONAL/WESTERN PSYCHOLOGY IN MODERN TIMES AND THE PREDICAMENT OF MUSLIM PSYCHOLOGISTS

Anyone who is well placed in modern Psychology is aware of the fact that Psychology was forked off from philosophy in the late 19th century. The roots of modern-day Psychology can be traced to classical Greece. In fact, the word *psychology* itself is emanated from the Greek word *psyche*, meaning the soul or breath of life and *logo* meaning study. So, it is evident psychology at first studied soul as its major chapter and content. The earlier 14th century Christian history depicts that the term "psychology" referred to a branch of pneumatology, the science of spiritual beings and substances.^{xxxiv} But not until the late 1800s did Psychology develop as a formal, scientific discipline. When the first formal psychological laboratory was founded in 1879 by Wilhelm Wundt, a psychologist and philosopher at the University of Leipzig in Germany, the seeds of modern-day psychology were planted.^{xxxv} The lab's founder Wilhelm Wundt and his students studied the mind via 'introspection', or observed their own thoughts and feelings as they occurred. But this view of Wilhelm Wundt was challenged by psychologists, in particular John B. Watson, who felt

that introspectionism had failed. Their field had lost its original identity as the “science of consciousness.” He believed that it was impossible to either prove or disprove the results obtained by introspection. If one person’s introspection produces different results from another, it does not necessarily mean that one set of results is correct and the other is incorrect. As a result Watson suggested that psychologists should confine their studies to what can be measured and observed by more than one person, behaviour.^{xxxvi} Prior to 1960s, the impact of Watson’s behaviouristic psychology stayed vibrantly indomitable, particularly as supported and advocated by the B.F. Skinner through his operant conditioning methods and techniques. During the 1960s and 70s, cognitive developments led to technical measurements of cognitive activities such as vision, thoughts, dreams, memory and so on. Other scientific advancements leading to correct measurements of body functions such as heart rate and blood pressure, as well as brain neural function have affected psychology. Psychology, in short, became an autonomous subject due to the influences from Physiology, Psychiatry (e.g, the psychodynamic viewpoint of Freud) and, above all, the influence of positivists who succeeded in separating philosophical concepts from the natural and human sciences.^{xxxvii}

This secularization process of the Psychology abandoned the importance of ethical and spiritual dimensions contained by man and left it up to the individual to practice divine obligation i.e. religion. Moreover this led to the advancement of speculations that are deterministic and left no option for human desire or will. In Islam there is an imperative space for free will of humans but this secularization concept is opposing to that. Western Psychology is also adopted by Muslim social scientists who are trained in secular education under the influence of the scientific frame of mind. For instance, Malik Badri highlights problems that Muslim psychologists face in the practice of psychology, the most significant being that Muslim psychologists or social scientists confine themselves to Western psychological frameworks. He cautions against this tendency and argues that western psychologies like psychoanalysis and personality theory, foster distorted concept of humankind. They are rooted in materialism and culturally bound to western culture and therefore not applicable to Islam’s unique culture.^{xxxviii} Badri also states that due to the absence of the spiritual aspect in studying humans from Western perspective, psychology textbooks and journals are full of contradictory results. The greatest challenge to the Muslim psychologists is Western psychology which inherently is imbued with the atheistic philosophy and concepts, so Muslim psychologists should take good care of that and should examine the behaviours of humans through the perspective of Islam.^{xxxix} So by studying and comprehending the human behaviour through the framework of Islam, will actually lead the Muslim psychologists to the sources which are pertaining to their ancestors and the sources which are related to their ancestors were actually based on Islamic structure. Muslim

psychologists need to work both in letter and spirit in order to bring back their own original or native psychology. In letter, Muslim psychologists need to recognise their stance on knowledge on the whole and develop a profound/intense awareness about the nature and rationale of knowledge. This would result in, explaining/elucidating core beliefs of Muslims and makes one understand the real difference between Islam and materialism. Muslim psychologists also need to shed light on the discipline and content of psychology through the perspective Islam by using the paradigms of *tawhid*—this would mean examining and scrutinizing “Nafs” (soul), repeatedly, from an Islamic perspective.^{xi}

10. CONCLUSION

During medieval times, Muslim scholars made invaluable contributions not only to Western intellectual traditions but also significantly impacted the field of Psychology. Figures such as Fakhr Al-Razi, Ibn Miskawayh, and Ikhwan Al-Safa played pivotal roles, wielding considerable influence on Western psychological theories and practices. Islamic Psychology, shaped by the amalgamation of Greek philosophies and Islamic theological perspectives, has profoundly influenced Western thought. This research paper comprehensively examines the selfless and outstanding contributions of renowned early Muslim scholars to the field of Psychology. Additionally, it addresses the contemporary challenges faced by Muslims globally in assimilating Western theories and suggests ways to make psychology more culturally relevant to Muslim societies, aligning with Islamic values for meaningful implementation in people’s lives.

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