Islam, Sufism & Psychotherapy:

In Search of Unifying Values and Epistemologies

Ghena A. Ismail

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Dedication Page

In memory of Rola
With all my love and gratitude
I dedicate this dissertation
To my parents: Adel and Samar
And to my siblings: Alia, Bassem and Mohamed
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Abstract

An ongoing debate is taking place in the field of psychology about the possible reconciliation between psychology and religion. Much has been written up to date about integrating psychology within the context of the Christian faith, and as pertinent to professional practice in the West. Christian scholars drew upon post-constructivist literature directed at criticizing the hegemony of the scientific method and uncovering values and motives associated with the use of a given method to the exclusion of other methods. Whereas much can be learned from the ongoing dialogue surrounding the question of integrating psychology and religion, exploring integrative attempts within the context of the Islamic worldview could shed light on further directions to be considered. This study constitutes an attempt at exploring the contemporary endeavor of integrating Islam with psychotherapy. A review of the relatively limited material that has been published on the topic up to date is augmented it with one-to-one interviews with a selected group of scholars and/or practitioners in order to explore how a psychotherapy integrated with Islam is like. It would appear that principles of empathy and acceptance, integrative bio-psycho-social approaches and aspects of cognitive, behavioral, psychodynamic, interpersonal and humanistic therapies – all are possibly relevant to an Islamic approach to psychotherapy. What seems to be a key point of emphasis in the Islamic integrationist endeavor is stressing the significance of attending to clients’ spirituality. Overall, the emphasis on spirituality that emerged in this study seemed to converge not only with Christian, other religious, and transpersonal psychotherapies but more significantly with the spiritually-informed medical approaches that are flourishing
within the more spiritually open Zeitgeist in the mental health professions in the West. The findings were discussed against the backdrop of the academic reality of psychology programs. Future directions for developing this research internally (i.e. at the level of Muslim scholars) and externally were also tackled.
Introduction

The scientific culture in the West emerged as a revolution that has among its martyrs the scientists who opposed the traditional teachings of the Church, women accused of witchcraft, and other victims of the infamous inquisition set up by the Church (Shah in Murken & Shah, 2002, p. 244).

The history of psychology, as taught in American universities, confirms the above statement as it communicates a narrative of progress whereby the schism between religion and science is introduced as an intellectual evolution experienced by a growing number of enlightened scholars who chose to rebel at the authority of the church, in particular, and religion in general in order for them to meet the demands of objective and free knowledge.

Leahy (1991) contended that:

By the end of the 19th century, the newer scientific, rationalistic tradition arose… Psychology sought to break all ties with its philosophical roots and to be the objective, empirical and “value-free” science of human nature. We thought we had found a philosophically neutral psychology; but rather, says Leahy, we had merely substituted “the values of scientism.” (Nicolosi, 2006, p. 1)

This study entitled, “Islam, Sufism and Psychotherapy: In Search of Unifying Values and Epistemologies” is embedded within an overarching quest to consider frameworks in which the schism between science and religion is not treated as a pre-requisite for objectivity and progress. As I set out to explore the history of psychology outside the parameters of the above narrative, I turned to the Islamic civilization, paying special
attention to contemporary attempts made by Muslim scholars and/or practitioners within the field of psychology. In the earlier documents I happened to review, it became apparent that the Muslim world has long had a well-documented legacy of treating the mentally ill. This seemed to be partly evident in the widely spread *bimaristans* (i.e. hospitals) whose establishment dated back to the seventh century. Asylums for the mentally ill were founded in Fez, Morocco since the 8th century, in Baghdad, since 705 A.D., in Cairo, since 805 A.D., and in Damascus and Aleppo, since 1270 A.D. According to Al-Issa (2000), the *bimaristan* (i.e., the hospital) gave Muslim physicians the opportunity to observe a large number of patients for a long period and to evaluate some of the mainstream knowledge of their time. References to distinctive syndromes and symptoms delineated during the eleventh century by Al-Razi, Al-Majusi, Ibn ‘Imran, Ibn Sina, among other physicians were reported by Al-Issa (2000). In addition, it would appear that early Muslim physicians used simple and compound versions of antidepressants and stimulants known as *mufarreh an-nafs* (Al-Issa, 2000).

Likewise, Muslim physicians have long been well aware of the complex interplay between biological and environmental factors of mental illness as well as recommended practices and attendant controversies (e.g. the Galenic interpretation of mental illness and its treatment) (Al-Issa, 2000; Badri, 2000; Syed, 2002). Moreover, and consistent with non-medical approaches to the treatment of mental illness, cognitive based interventions have often been employed (Badri, 2000). For instance, through the lens of two-way interaction theory, Al-Ghazali has observed that once the individual behaved in a certain manner, even if he feigned what he did, the effect of that behavior would impact his thinking and emotions; that is, when the individual’s thinking and feelings change, so
does his or her observable behavior and countenance. Other approaches seemed to include a focus on modifying fundamental concepts of self and imagining oneself achieving a desired end-state in order to promote subsequent behavior that is conducive to this hoped-for outcome. Recognizing that it is hardly possible to be free from thought, ancient Muslim scholars have stressed the value of sustained contemplation in order to focus on good thoughts and filter out negative thoughts; among other benefits, this form of contemplation has been described by ancient scholars as first-aid medicine for unexpected health emergencies (Badri, 2000). From an institutional standpoint, Syed (2002) and Al-Issa (2000) noted the approach taken by the bimaristan staff to pacify patients’ nerves, distract them, and entertain them with songs, special choirs, live music bands, and comic performers. Finally cultural and systemic dimensions of ancient therapies were reviewed, shedding light on a widely spread tendency amongst ancient Muslim scholars to encourage patients’ frequent contact with family members (Al-Issa, 2000) and, to facilitate involvement with the larger community (e.g., to try and embed the patient within a larger social/interpersonal network) (Shafii, 1972).

In addition to pointing out such ancient Muslim contributions that bore directly on the area of clinical psychology, some contemporary scholars sought to highlight the epistemological bases for research that resulted in significant discoveries in the general field of psychology. Khaleefa (1999), for instance, presented Ibn al-Haytham’s Kitab al-Manazir as a source of innovative concepts and theories as well as methods of measurement. To illustrate this point, Khaleefa (1999) presented five experiments conducted by Ibn al-Haytham regarding the errors of vision, as analogous to what is known in contemporary psychology as “visual illusion.”
Commenting on the tendency amongst many scholars to delineate past scientific achievements in the Muslim world, the Muslim philosopher of science Nasr (1980) noted that the question is not whether what is called “scientific method” today was used or not. The question is whether this constituted the only method and whether there is a single methodology in the Islamic sciences. A related primary question to be considered, concerns the relationship between methodologies used and the paradigm which has given way to their use. If we are talking about an Islamic paradigm then we are inevitably considering the ‘tawhidic’ i.e. unity based worldview (Nasr, 1980).

Upon taking a broad outlook on how the question of mental health has been addressed in the Muslim world it becomes apparent that the study of the human self and its constitution had long been a preoccupation by both the academic and practice communities, including philosophers/physicians such as Ibn Sina (Prothro, 1954; Murken & Shah, 2002; Syed, 2002), theologians such as Al-Ghazali (Ansari, 2002; Rizvi, 1989; Murken & Shah, 2002), and mystics like Ibn ‘Arabi (Rizvi, 1989). Characteristically within this context, and perhaps a point of differentiation with the non-Muslim world, theologians, mystics, and physicians typically perceived no conflict in borrowing from and adapting each others’ work and perspectives. It would appear that despite the various approaches and epistemologies considered in the Islamic civilization, there was an underlying agreement that it is for the sake of the knowledge of God that different forms of knowledge are sought (Bakar, 1995). Note the famous hadith by the prophet Mohamed: “He who knows himself (nafsahu) knows his Lord,” which implies that self-awareness is not an end in and of itself, but rather a means towards moving beyond it. To Muslims, generally speaking, what exists beyond the human self or soul is an objective
and transcendental reality. This belief not only influences how Muslim lay persons and scholars conceive of the human soul, but also how they conceptualize the self in relation to the world at large. "As above, so below" reflects the traditional and firm belief that every level of reality in the outside world has a corresponding internal match at the level of self (Smith, 1992; see Figure 1). This fundamental contention is expressed in the so-called doctrine of unity, known also as the *tawhidic* paradigm, which sought to unite the most disparate aspects of the Islamic intellectual tradition (Umar, 1986). So central has this doctrine been to the Islamic tradition that Muslims historically have not distinguished between religion and paganism but between those who accepted this principle of unity and those who denied or ignored it. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that within the worldview of Islam, thinkers such as Plato and Pythagoras were considered "unitarians" (i.e., in a sense sharing the worldview of Islam, in its universal aspect) and that medieval Islamic thinkers such as Suhrawardi (Nasr, 1981) could search for perennial wisdom in all religions without violating the boundaries of the worldview to which they belonged.

Perhaps recognizing the inextricable connection between the question of the self and the question of worldviews, increasingly, a number of contemporary Muslim scholars and practitioners are stressing the significance of drawing upon the so-called *Tawhidic paradigm* for developing an Islamic discourse on psychology (Haque, 2004). Sufism seems to provide the primary frame of reference for Muslim scholars who are seeking integration (i.e. an Islamic approach to psychology).
As Abdullah (2002) has noted:

Exploring the Qur'an, the Sirah of the Prophet and his traditions, as well as the biographies of the Prophet’s companions, will provide detailed instructions for implementing successful therapy. In the main, though, it is Sufism (tasawwuf), the mystical tradition of Islam, which is credited with providing the basis for Islamic psychology. It is forwarded as the main frame of reference from which to develop a professional Islamic counselling approach. (p. 2)

As such, it becomes necessary to introduce what Sufism is, clearing away obscurities that may be associated with the term. Sufism or tasawwuf, as it is called in Arabic, is generally understood by scholars and Sufis to be the inner, esoteric, mystical, or purely spiritual dimension of the religion of Islam (Yachnes, 2008).

Sufism is said to comprise both a doctrine and a method. Sufi doctrine is defined as the ‘Transcendent Unity of Being’ which holds that all things are theophanies of the Divine Names and Qualities and derive their existence from the One Being. As elaborated by Nasr (1972),

All Muslims believe in Unity as expressed in the most universal sense possible by the Shahadah, La ilaha ill’ Allah. But it is only the Sufi, he who has realized the mysteries of tawhid, who knows what this assertion means. It is only he who sees God everywhere. (p. 43)

Along somewhat similar lines, Lings (1999) stated:

Every Muslim is obliged to believe in theory that there is no reality but the Reality, namely God; but it is only the Sufis, and not even all those who are
affiliated to Sufi orders who are prepared to carry this formulation to its ultimate conclusion. The doctrine which is based on that conclusion is termed ‘Oneness of Being’, for Reality is that which is, as opposed to that which is not; and if God alone is Real, God alone is, and there is no being but His Being. (pp. 64-65)

Just as the Sufi doctrine has been defined in terms of the Shahadah, Sufi methods have been expounded as inseparable from the obligations of Islam which include first and foremost the shahadah in addition to the formal prayers, fasting, paying the alms and the pilgrimage to Mecca if circumstances allow.

To emphasize the inter-relatedness between formal Islamic prayers and Sufi prayer of the heart, Nasr (2008) stated:

Not only do the canonical prayers possess an interior dimension, but they also serve as the basis for other forms of prayer which become ever more inward as man progresses upon the spiritual path leading finally to the "prayer of the heart", the invocation (dhikr) in which the invoker, invocation and the invoked become united, and through which man returns to the Center, to the Origin which is pure Inwardness.

Central to realizing unity seems to be a process of identification facilitated by meditation. Note Arasteh’s (1990) following description:

Through meditation on Allah’s attributes, a new pattern of behavior and a rich source of positive attitude are created within the human system, which affect even our physiological expressions ... By gradual identification with these attributes, he will further become aware of ultimate Unity, the One and the All-Allah. Thus, Allah becomes a believer’s object of desire. He knows that by thinking and
analytic discussion he cannot reach Him, but by devotion and zekr he can gradually identify with Him. (p. 30)

In reiterating that meditation is at the heart of Islam, Sufis would often cite the prophet’s hadith in which he had said, “One hour of meditation is better than 70 years of worship.”

Within the context of highlighting the interface between Sufism and psychology or even more generally speaking between Islam and psychology, reference has commonly been made to the following popular hadith of the prophet, in which he said to Muslims returning from a battle that now they have returned from the lesser jihad (i.e. struggle) to the greater jihad (Ansari, 2002). When the prophet was asked, “What is the greater struggle?” he answered, “The struggle against one’s self (nafs), which is between the two sides of your body.” Godlas (2008) would add:

Needless to say, in Sufism these two struggles are mutually reinforcing and occur simultaneously. In particular, the practice of ‘engaged surrender’ in the ‘greater’ struggle with one’s own nafs diminishes certain obstacles in the consciousness of the Sufi, obstacles that – if not struggled against – will hinder the Sufi’s capacity to engage in the ‘lesser’ struggle in their life in the world (http://www.uga.edu/islam/sufismstruggle.html).

Admittedly the above saying of the prophet “has something for everybody” as most Muslims would claim that they were engaged in this type of inner struggle. Lings (1999) would point out, however, that to resist temptation from time to time is one thing but to keep up a methodic opposition to one’s lower possibilities so that the whole soul may be ‘for God’ is yet another thing. “The Greater Holy War in its full sense is Sufism, or more precisely, it is an aspect of Sufism” (Lings, 1999, p. 29). Elsewhere, Lings (1999) stated:
The mystic could be defined as one who has asked himself the question: ‘How can I transcend myself?’ It is as an answer to this question to this question that Sufism exists, and for no other reason, for it is by definition the way of most direct approach to God. (p. 28)

The inter-relatedness between transcendence on the one hand and ascent or progress on the other hand is heuristically captured in the following poetry lines by the famous Sufi master, Jalaluddin al-Rumi:

I died from minerality and changed to the vegetative state.

I died from the vegetative state and became animal.

I died from animality and became human: Why, then, should I fear? When have I become less by dying?

At the next stage I shall die from human form, that I may soar and lift up my head amongst the angels;

Then, will be freed from being an angel: everything is perishing except His face.

Once more I shall be sacrificed and die ... I shall become That which enters not into the imagination.

Then I shall become non-existence: Non-existence saith to me, ... Verily, unto Him shall we return.
A Poem by Jalaluddin al-Rumi Modified
and adapted from Nicholson’s Translation,
*Mathnawi, Book III*, pp. 218-219 (Shafii, 1995)

Ultimately what seems to be key for an understanding of Sufism in general and Sufi-based psychology in particular is that there exists within the soul a so-called heart, intellect or some faculty via which direct as opposed to merely rational knowing may be realized. A mystical world view asserts that:

within the human subject— in the soul (nafs), the heart (qalb), the spirit (rūḥ), whatever the terminology—there exists, at least potentially, a power to know and to reach truths and realities to which the mind qua reasoner-of premises has no access. In such a perspective reasoned-out knowledge is still knowledge, but it is not the loftiest, most sure knowledge. A mystical vision of things asserts that the truest understanding available to man comes from an un-mediated encounter with the Absolute. In relation to this highest wisdom the process of reasoning and rational demonstration can serve a laudable role, which is to say that reasoning is a good in itself but also a means to a higher good. There is a hierarchy within the human subject as well as a hierarchy of knowable objects, and the inherently ‘mystical’ aspect of this is that reason does not occupy the highest part of the hierarchy of the subject, and reasoned concepts do not hold pride of place in the hierarchy of objects of knowledge. (Dagli, 2006, p. 3)
It is in light of its focus on reality as inter-related yet hierarchical and its emphasis on unitive knowing being a function of integration of paradox rather than rational reduction that Sufism in particular and mystic tradition in general have been distinguished from pantheism or philosophical monism (Burckhardt, 1995).

Before concluding this section on Sufism, a few clarifications need to be made in terms of Islam’s relationship to Sufism in contemporary times given that Sufism “has suffered at the hands of a sustained critique in the Islamic world during the twentieth century (CE) ... A common criticism of Sufism is that it is bid’ah (innovation) and thus is not authentically Islamic” (Godlas, 2008). It is interesting to note that this idea converges with orientalist writings on Sufism that were especially common in the beginning of the past century and which were refuted by a number of scholars (e.g. Arberry 1905-1969). Commenting on this phenomenon, Nasr (1972) stated:

In the thirteenth/nineteenth century the Islamic world was affected by the impact of the West coupled with the rise of indigenous puritanical movements of a rationalist and anti-mystical kind. There came into being an opposition to Sufism, which was blamed for nearly everything that some of the modernists felt was wrong with the Islamic world at that time ... Aided by the activity of certain orientalists, this movement sought to revive Islam by rejecting all the spiritual and metaphysical aspects of its teachings, reducing it to he narrowest possible interpretation of the Divine Law or Shari’ah. (p. 12)
In undermining Sufism, many Muslim scholars seemed to replicate the western rationalistic tendencies which equated that which is non-rational with its being irrational or at the best subjective/sentimental. Ultimately, such scholars seemed to gloss over the intellectual history of the Islamic civilization in which a key theologian/philosopher such as al-Ghazali, himself, embraced Sufism – not to mention that foremost rational and peripatetic thinkers such as Ibn Sina were in the most reserved estimate not opposed to Sufism as evident in the highly mystical language used in many of their treatises (Dagli, 2006). Paradoxically speaking, that element (i.e. Sufism) which was understood to provide the basis for holding various elements of Islamic thought and civilization together came to be seen, especially by puritanic Islamic movements, as no more than an alien element to be rejected.

There is no room to elaborate further on the different stances taken vis-à-vis Sufism in the Muslim world (see Godlas, 2008 for further references on this controversy). Suffice it to note here that despite the ongoing debate surrounding Sufism and its relation to Islam, the presence of Sufism in the Muslim world is evident in the vast legacy of Islamic science and arts (Nasr, 1972) as well as the spread of Sufi orders across different parts of the Muslim world. Interestingly over the past few decades many sheikhs started to establish Sufi orders in the West. A less formal way in which the Islamic Sufi legacy seem to have reached the western world is Sufi poetry (see Lings, 2005 for a bilingual Arabic-English edition of a diverse selection of poetry; see Fadiman & Frager, 1997 for an accessible and broad-ranging collection of Sufi sayings, poetry, aphorisms and short stories by ancient sages including the popular Rumi as well as Ibn ‘Arabi, al-Ghazali, Hafiz,
Attar and also contemporary western Sufis). Amongst the most foreknown Sufi masters/poets in the West is Jalaluddin al-Rumi who is said to represents the Sufi pathway of love. Finally, the Islamic Sufi legacy is evident in the contributions made to advance a contemporary Islamic approach to psychology. Note Amjad’s “My thesis derives mainly from Sufism because it is essentially concerned with the inner dimension of man, hence its relevance for psychology ...” (Amjad, 1996, p. 75). Describing the status quo of contributions made up to date to the area of professional counseling and psychotherapy, Abdullah (2002) stated:

Few scholars have addressed this area in a significant way, beyond assertions that Islamic counseling needs to be developed into a well structured discourse that captures the breath and spirit of Islam in helping people. (p. 1)

A review of studies which seek to integrate Islam and psychotherapy not only affirm the accuracy of Abdullah’s statement, but illustrate that many scholars/practitioners have in fact provided theoretical foundations that are necessary for such integration. In the absence of formalized and sustained discourse, however, each of those attempts seems to stand in isolation, not benefitting from two-way dialogue among professionals and scholars, which is necessary for refinement and dissemination.

As such, this study which seeks to investigate contemporary attempts to integrate Islam and psychological treatment is significant for the following reasons. First, it constitutes an opportunity to shed light on the Islamic rich and long-term legacy of addressing the question of the human self and the related question of counseling; this legacy is not reflected in the history of psychology or communicated in the standard
history of psychology textbooks as taught in the West or even in most parts of the Muslim world. Second, the lack of a deliberate schism between science and religion in the Muslim intellectual history helps illuminate why the current relationship with western psychology—which has deliberately eschewed its religious and philosophical roots—and Islam is ill-defined at best and fractious at worst. Third, the emergent discourse on integrating Islam and psychology, which is in its formative stages, could benefit from a formal review of points of difference and convergence that are both establishing and emerging.