

Book Review

Contemplation and Psychology

Al-Tafakkur min al-Mushāhadah ilá al-Shuhūd (Contemplation from Witnessing to Bearing Witness). Malik B. Badri, Herndon, Virginia: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993.

This book, though small in size, is a powerful and intriguing—although a little belated—continuation of the work started by Badri in his book *The Dilemma of the Muslim Psychologist*. As the titles of the book and of the series to which it belongs (*Abhāth ʿilmīyah*) indicate, it is suitable for readers who are interested in learning something about metacognition (the ability to think about cognition) from an Islamic perspective, without undertaking a course of study in technical psychology. The style is straightforward and lucid, with a touch of Sufi rhetoric.

The main thesis of the book is that no clear understanding of human behaviour is possible without taking into account the spiritual component of the human psyche. As man is an honoured creation with a specific purpose in this life, his cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes are interpenetrated by the spiritual factor. With this understanding, the book discusses the role of contemplation (*tafakkur*) as a cognitive process in the worship and adoration of Allah (SWT).

Chapter 1, "Contemplation: A modern psychological perspective," describes how modern psychology, following the example of the natural sciences, attempts to accommodate contemplation within the realm of thinking. Consequently, man has been perceived either as a closed energy system (psychoanalysis), a machine (behaviourism), or a limited capacity information channel (cognitive psychology). The radical behaviourists, the psychoanalysts, and the humanistic psychologists have not been discussed. That was probably because the behaviourists subscribe to the concept of the "black box," and the psychoanalysts are more interested in unconscious experiences, making consciousness only a visible tip of

the iceberg, with the larger part of the mind concealed at the unconscious level by defensive barriers. Contemplation is clearly doomed in either case. It is not clear why the author has omitted the humanistic stance from his discussion. A comparative analysis of the concept of contemplation in view of "self-actualization" would have provided good food for thought. In this chapter the author also outlines the intimate relationship between language and thought. It must be noticed, however, that the example of language is not arbitrary, but rather a carefully selected one to show, according to the Qur'ān, how human beings have been honoured and endowed with gifts superior to those given to many other creatures (17:70). Language is not only a communication tool; it is the essential system used by man for thinking.

Chapter 2, "Between Thinking and Contemplation," shows that eleventh-century philosophy still has something to offer twentieth-century social sciences. The chapter compares and contrasts thinking and contemplation by drawing from the works of some early Muslim scholars, like Ibn al-Qayyim and al-Ghazālī and their concepts of the relationship between the cognitive, the affective, and the behavioral. Both the great thinkers have maintained that an action is easy to control when it is merely an idea and before it develops into a desire or a motive. Similarly, a desire is more easy to control before it is carried out as an act and before it develops into a habit. Thus, the difference between thinking and contemplation is a matter of degree. While contemplation makes use of all the cognitive processes involved in thinking, it traverses this life to the hereafter, and spans from the creatures to the Creator. Towards the end of this chapter, the author outlines three cognitive stages that a person must go through before attaining the stage of *shuhūd* (bearing witness). At stage one, cognition evolves around knowledge acquired through the senses (empirical knowledge) or through the imaginative powers. Stage two is characterized by a high degree of scrutiny and appreciation of the beauty and greatness of the creation of Allah. The final stage is attainable when an individual moves from the greatness of the creation to the omnipotent Creator with due deference and humility. When this state of high spirituality and godliness mediates between an individual and his/her daily interaction with reality in a routine manner, the final stage of *shuhūd* is attained. It is a stage of insight, discernment and bearing witness to the greatness of Allah deliberately and designedly. For such people the world is but a huge mosque. A problematic point for psychologists at this juncture, and one that has clear consequences for research, is the dual nature of *tafakkur* (contemplation), being both a goal and a method.

Chapter 3 differentiates contemplation from transcendental meditation and discusses the role of faith (*īmān*) in the optimization of *tafakkur*. The chapter also provides some useful discussion of the role played by cognitive processes in the proscriptio of psychosomatic disorders. In fact, the author does not propose a radically new interpretation of the reciprocal relationship between psychological health and physical well-being; rather, he articulates a better way of conceptualizing psychological processes vis-a-vis spiritual purity.

In chapter 4, "Some Qur'anic Directions that Urge for *Tafakkur*," the author cites some Qur'anic verses meant to break the state of habituation among worshippers. Human beings, being capable of organizing their perception in dealing with their surroundings, are prone to habituation and the inability to respond to highly repetitive stimuli. In other words, they tend to take many things for granted. Allah in His holy book, uses different tones and styles urging human beings to think about and ponder the greatness of the creation and the value of the divine gifts they have been endowed with. This addressing comes in tones compassionate (65-66); or upbraiding (34:9; 88:17-20); or highly affectionate and tender (3:190-191; 35:27-28). The author concludes this chapter discussing the Qur'anic invitation to human beings to ponder on their own selves (56:21), reiterating that man has been a mystery to himself throughout the models of western psychology.

If one goes by its length, chapter 5 "*Tafakkur* as a Free Worship," will hardly merit the status of an independent chapter, being only three pages long. However, this chapter and chapter 6, "The Limits of *Tafakkur* in the *Ghaybiyah*," venture into two important issues with some serious theoretical and methodological consequences. For instance, it is quite obvious that mentalism and the mind enjoy, at best, a very shaky epistemological status in modern psychology. *Tafakkur*, being simultaneously a subjective goal and a method for gaining knowledge, may be perceived as an inherently flawed tool for reliable and precise analysis. Mentalism fell into disfavour at the beginning of the twentieth century, as psychologists feared lapsing into irrationality. However, in the 1960s mentalism (and the method of introspection in particular) were restructured in greatly modified forms and subsequently have produced some sound conclusions.¹ These chapters would benefit from the kind of argument which has made studies of the mind or consciousness once again popular in psychology.²

Chapter 7, "Individual Differences in Levels of *Tafakkur*," lists eight variables potent of creating variation in levels of contemplation among individuals. These include the degree of *īmān* (faith), mental focaliza-tion

ability, emotional and mental state, environmental factors, level of knowledge about the object or subject of *tafakkur*, one's peer group, the nature of the subject matter, and familiarity with the surroundings. This spiritual-psycho-bio-social model might lend itself to empirical testing.

In the final chapter, "*Tafakkur* between Science and Religion," the author asserts that contemplation is a necessary prerequisite for fruitful scientific inquiry. He cited the examples of many great Muslim scholars whose extraordinary genius resulted in part from their skills in visualizing the possibilities of abstract conception. In religion-guided inquiries, scientists always proceed from the universal phenomena to the omnipotent, omnipresent Creator.

Although modern Islamic psychology is probably still too young to lend itself to any broad synthesis or sweeping conclusions, Muslim scholars interested in exploring the field of psychology will appreciate the book's attempt to identify some psycho-spiritual constructs. However many of these need further clarification. For instance, the concept of *shuhūd* is too abstract and its cognitive and behavioral correlates need to be outlined, if not operationally defined. Similarly, the import for applied psychology is never discussed; one would welcome a discussion of the utility of *tafakkur* in revising or improving educational, clinical, or psychometric undertakings. Furthermore, this book would be more compelling had it more explicitly shown how the discussion developed to elucidate the psychological processes implicit in *tafakkur* can be applied usefully to understanding, predicting and/or controlling behavior? How, as Malik Bennabi would argue, can *tafakkur* enable present day Muslims to stand up to the spirit of the age? How ideas generated from this psycho-spiritual state of mind relate to social dynamics "without making any concessions to the profane at the expense of the sacred."³

On balance, however, these concerns do not detract from what is a conscientious and welcome effort to redirect the orientation of psychological research and practice particularly among Muslim psychologists. Badri's *Tafakkur* provides new and insightful tools for exploring the complex dynamics of human cognition. Islamists and Muslim psychologists alike have a passion for the transcendental, but they seem to work in different worlds with vastly different methods and goals. Badri draws on his training and experience in both fields to provide Muslims with an intelligent and helpful book to redirect psychological research, particularly among Muslim psychologists. This book is extremely valuable as a guide, rather than a textbook, in the field of Islamic psychology. The book is recommended as an elaborate theoretical blueprint that consists of a carefully documented integration

of the spiritual, the cognitive, and the behavioural. It should be useful to people who wish to lift themselves spiritually and rethink their psychological knowledge, as well as those who are specifically interested in cognitive psychology or the philosophy of the mind.

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Notes

1. Lieberman, D.A. "Behaviourism and the Mind: A Limited call for a Return to Introspection." *American Psychologist*, vol. 34,(1979), 319-333.
2. Nelson, T.O. *Metacognition: Core Readings* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1992).
3. Bennabi Malik (1994) *The Problem of Ideas in the Muslim World*, tr. Mohamed T. El-Mesawi (California: Dar al Hadara), 87.