Islamization of Psychology: From Adaptation to Sublimation

Louay M. Safi

This article argues that modern secular psychology with its antireligious origins depends on a limited ontology of human nature which excludes human volition as well as its transcendental and unchanging elements. This article challenges the negation of human nature by demonstrating how the metaphysical presuppositions of Freud and Skinner actually assume a specific conception of human nature while denying its existence. This conception of human nature undermines the possibility of human volition, effectively excluding responsibility, self-determination, and moral choice as factors that shape human action. This article then turns to the ideas on psychology embedded in the works of classical Muslim scholars to argue that Islamic psychology is based on volition and sublimation.

Modern Social Sciences and the Problematique of Secularization

Modern social sciences emerged in Western society as a result of the struggle between the scientific community, which emphasized the importance of observation and experimentation for ascertaining truth, and the religious community, which insisted that truth must be deduced from divine scripture and has to be upheld regardless of whether it coincides with observed phenomena. In the long run the scientific tradition triumphed over the religious tradition, gaining the upper hand in guiding public life. The process of secularization, which pushed out moral and spiritual religiosity from the public domain and confined it to the realms of private life, drew its strength from a new epistemology introduced by a Frenchman, René Descartes, and an Englishman, Francis Bacon. Descartes moved the locus of certainty from the objective world to the subjectivity of individual rationality, while Bacon confined it to empirical observation and inductive methods. The subjective rationalism of Descartes and the empiricism of Bacon were later unified by Kant who confined reasoning and rationality to the

Louay M. Safi *is an Associate Professor and Acting Dean of Research Institute at IIU Malasia.*

empirical phenomena. Kant, while declaring the autonomy of human reason and its ability to ascertain the truth on its own, insisted that reason can only comprehend the empirical world, thereby reducing truth to empirical truth.

The early founders of Western secularism were mindful of the importance of divine values. Descartes, for example, endeavored to predicate the multitudinal representation of the external world on the idea of God. Similarly, Kant insisted that ethical life finds its ultimate justification in the belief in God and in life after death. "Thus without a God and without a world invisible to us now but hoped for," Kant observed, "the glorious ideas of morality are indeed objects of approval and admiration, but not springs of purpose and action."[1] Therefore secularization was initially an attempt by Western scholars to undermine the dominance of the Catholic church over society and to respond to the irrational and superstitious elements of premodern Western thought. Gradually, however, the process gave rise to excessive empiricism on the intellectual level and to materialistic and hedonistic tendencies on the moral and psychological levels.

The advent of social sciences in modern Western thought represents an advanced stage in the secularization of Western knowledge. Not only did the advocates of these sciences deny the significance of transcendental values and metaphysical knowledge, but they denied the interdependence of the various fields of knowledge. With the development of modern social sciences, the unity of human knowledge was destroyed and the interdependence of the spheres of knowledge, which was maintained in the philosophical stage of modern scholarship, was henceforth done away with. Ethics was reduced to one of the various spheres of knowledge, independent of economics, political science, psychology, and all other fields of social sciences. Thus morality does not figure in economic studies as a legitimate concern for the specialist in the field. Economic transactions are valued or devalued in relation to the concern of utility maximization. Moral and ethical considerations are marginal

Secularization of Psychology

Like other disciplines of social sciences, psychology endeavored from its inception to examine its subject matter in isolation of the totality of human life and experience and to sever psychological phenomena from their transcendental roots. Thus writes an eminent psychologist around the turn of the twentieth century:

> The most striking fact about the world of human experience is the fact of change. Nothing stands still; everything goes on. The sun will someday lose its heat: the eternal hills are, little by little, breaking up and wearing away. Whatever we observe, and from whatever standpoint we observe it, we find process, occurrence; nowhere is there permanence or stability. Mankind, it is true, has sought to arrest this flux, and to give stability to the world of experience, by assuming two permanent substances, matter and mind: the occurrences of the physical world are then supposed to be manifestations of matter, and the occurrences of the mental world to be manifestations of mind. Such an hypothesis may be of value at a certain stage of human thought; but every hypothesis that does not accord with the facts must, sooner or later, be given up. Physicists are therefore giving up the hypothesis of an unchanging, substantial matter, and psychologists are giving up the hypothesis of an unchanging, substantial mind. Stable objects and substantial things belong, not to the world of science, physical or psychological, but only to the world of common sense.[2]

By denying the fact that the mental world is the manifestation of a transcendental mind, mainstream Western psychology gave rise to a deterministic conception of man in which the ideas of "human will" and "individual responsibility" are negated. Thus behavioralism conceives of human behavior in terms of a series of responses induced by external stimuli that can be explained solely with reference to environmental factors. In a similar fashion, psychoanalysis explains human behavior by attributing individual actions to mental activities induced by early childhood memories unconsciously stored in the human brain. Therefore, both Freud and Skinner rejected the notion of transcendental human nature as unnecessary and insisted that transcendental concepts of purpose, attitude, value, and the like are pre-scientific.

The denial of an essential element in the human psyche, the human spirit, with inherent qualities and intrinsic capabilities is influenced more by the ontological commitments and moral dispositions of the denying scholar than of any empirical evidence. Human experience demonstrates that certain human qualities can always be observed, regardless of the temporal or special conditions of the actors, including passion, empathy, courage, responsibility, and creativity. Yes, the form of expression through which essential human qualities are manifested may change and do change over time pursuant to circumstances and conditions. Yet one can hardly deny continuity and permanency on the account of changing forms or media of expression.

The only way to explain the dubious denial of permanent human nature by appealing to change in patterns of expression is to locate such claims within the larger context of secularization of science and life which has been going on in Western society for a couple of centuries. The denial of permanent and transcendental human nature is part of a process of secularization whose goal is to reject the relevance and possibility of metaphysical and religious truth and to confine the role of scientific endeavors to the ascertainment of empirical "facts," devoid of any metaphysical substance or essence. As we will see below, the efforts to deny a truth and essence that lie beyond the direct reach of the senses is ironic because it is based on a series of presuppositions of metaphysical nature which the denying scholar has to postulate to give coherence to his claims against a metaphysical and essential truth.

Metaphysical Presuppositions of Psychology

But is it possible for psychology to do away with the concept of transcendental mind, and can psychological research proceed without the notion of human nature?

The answer is an emphatic no. For even the most staunch opponents of the concept of a transcendental human nature presuppose in their theories and arguments a specific notion of human nature. Thus on examining Freudian psychology closely one can identify a set of metaphysical principles and a specific conception of human nature at the root of Freud's psychological arguments. Freud's metaphysical assumptions may be summarized in the following five points:

- human actions are caused by mental states;
- the most important mental determinants of individual action are unconscious;
- human personality consists of three domains: id, ego, and superego.
- human behavior can be explained by referring to a few basic motives, most notably, the life instinct (eros), the death instinct (thanatos), and the pleasure instinct (libido); and
- the experiences of infancy and early childhood are very crucial in the process of character formation.

It is true that one can justify the assumption of "mental states," "superego," or "death instinct" by reference to certain behavioral patterns that can be explained by such assumptions. But by the same token this is also true in the case of postulating an essential nature capable of recognizing good

and evil, right and wrong, apart from the type of preconditioning or stimuli to which the person is exposed.

Similarly, Skinner's conception of human nature can be summarized as follows:

- human behavior is determined by external conditions, hence, identical human conditions produce identical patterns of behavior;
- mental structures, such as intention or will, are insignificant to understanding human behavior; and
- therefore, the empirical study of human behavior is the only scientific method for making inferences about human psychology.

Both Freud's psychoanalysis and Skinner's behavioralism substitute a concept of human nature that emphasizes human volition, and hence the accountability of the human being for the actions he affects, with one in which human behavior seems to be affected by uncontrollable forces from within or from without.

It should be of great concern to us that the conception of human nature adopted by the most prominent schools of Western psychology undermines the idea of a human volition capable of restructuring individual behavior in accordance with a set of values and beliefs; such a conception has far-reaching consequences on the methods used in the areas of education and social conditioning. A psychology which denies self-determination and human volition is bound to emphasize adaptability, encourage submissiveness, and condone deviance.

It is true that humanistic psychology has attempted to overcome the limitations of psychoanalysis and behavioralism. But the contributions of humanistic psychologists continue to be eclectical and provisional, as they cannot break out from the secularist framework that forms the foundation of modern social sciences. Thus we see very clearly that leading figures in this school, such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, advance opposing views with regard to the basic structure of human nature. For while the former completely rejects the notion that man is the outcome of his social environment, so much emphasized by behavioralism, the latter strikes a balancing position between Skinner and Rogers. Yet the ideas of both are in direct contradiction to important Islamic ideas and aspirations. Rogers's insistence that people are intrinsically good is apparent in the following statement:

> In my experience I have discovered man to have characteristics which seem inherent in his species, and the terms which have at different times which seemed to me descriptive of these characteristics are such

> terms as positive, forward moving, constructive, realistic, trustworthy.[3]

Rogers, however, proposes that the intrinsic goodness of human nature manifests socially in the continuous improvement in the quality of the human species. Thus Rogers's perception of human nature corresponds with, and gives rise to, an evolutionary conception of history. Such an argument undermines the intimate relation between moral choices and good living, associating good life with modern man, while ascribing evil doing to antiquity.

Maslow on the other hand takes a markedly different position. While asserting the basic goodness of man, he emphasizes the corrupting impact of society.

> It is too simple to say "man is basically good" or "man is basically evil."... The correct way now would be to say "man can become good (probably) and better and better, under a hierarchy of better and better conditions." The fact is people are good, if only their fundamental wishes are satisfied, their wish for affection and security.[4]

While it is hard for anyone to dismiss the idea that good environment is conducive for the development of good individual character, one can hardly miss the social deterministic undertone of Maslow's arguments. Maslow completely overlooks the importance of the human will, influenced by certain beliefs and values, in determining the goodness of the individual, and predicates goodness on the satisfaction of psychological needs.

My point is simply this: while Western psychology can provide us with important insights into human nature it can never furnish us with a complete system of psychological ideas that can be meaningful. It is for this reason that the development of an Islamic psychology, or undertaking Islamization of psychology, becomes imperative. But how do we develop an alternative? Where should we start? Naturally, our point of departure should be an examination of the psychological views of early Muslim scholars. But while early Muslim psychological writings can suggest to us some useful models of how we can draw on Divine wisdom embedded in revelation, they do not (by any means) amount to a full-fledged theory of human psychology, as the subsequent discussion illustrates.

Psychological Ideas in Classical Muslim Scholarship

While modern Western psychology endeavored, for the most part, to obscure the transcendental elements of mental activities, the psychological writings of early Muslim scholars never lost sight of the interconnectedness of the empirical and transcendental aspects of the human psyche. What strikes us when we examine the work of early Muslim scholars is their emphasis on the concepts of "sublimation" and "volition" in explaining human behavior.

The difficulty, though, in studying classical Muslim psychological ideas lies in that classical Muslim scholars did not discuss psychological aspects of man under a distinct discipline, but scattered their psychological views in various works that deal with ethics, *aqidah,* and *fiqh.* Such works as Al-Mawardi's *Adab al-Din wa al-Dunya,* Ibn Al-Qayim's *Ma'arij al-Salikin,* and Al-Ghazzali's *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* are filled with psychological insights and wisdom. But because my aim here is not to undertake a survey of classical works on psychology, but to underline their views of human nature, I will focus on Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali's conception of human nature.

In *Ihya' Ulum al-Din,* Al-Ghazzali draws on both Qur'anic interpretations and empirical observations to identify the nature of the inner self or the *qalb.*[5] The *qalb,* he argues, refers to the intrinsic element that constitutes the human being, and that consists of his four parts: spiritual *(ruhi),* cognitive (*latifa 'alima*), psychic (*nafsi*), and biological (*ismi*). The cognitive element of the self is capable of perception and learning about the surrounding environment as well as of imagination; the psychic element induces feelings and emotions, such as desire or anger; and the biological element makes it possible for human imagination and desire to be actualized in the real world. The spiritual element is the sublime element where human knowledge and human volition unite.

Al-Ghazzali identifies four mental states that precede human action: *al-khatir* (impression), whereby an image or a thought is borne in the mind; *al-mayl* (disposition), whereby the impression takes the form of an urge desiring fulfilment and action; *hukm* (judgment), whereby the self evaluates the action in light of the deeply seated values and the interests of the individual; and *al-ham* (volition), whereby the action becomes imminent, hindered only by external conditions and circumstances.[6] This perception of the psychological roots of behavior underscores the importance of human "volition" in the determination of action. Human action no longer appears

as a spontaneous response to external or internal stimuli directly affecting the life of the individual, apart from his/her purposes and intentions.

Bringing the notion of "volition" (*iradah*) to the center of our conception of human nature has far-reaching implications for the fields of education and psychotherapy, for it opens wide the door for the possibility of "sublimation" (*tazkiyah*), i.e., the profound transformation of personality and character. Through adopting a more comprehensive approach to studying human nature, similar to the one developed by early Muslim scholars, we can free ourselves from the ethos of adaptation to which modern psychology has succumbed, and rise once again to the ethos of sublimation, transformation, and self-control.

The difference between the current predominant secular approach and an Islamically based approach can be brought to sharp focus in the area of psychotherapy. Modern psychotherapeutic techniques aim at overcoming the feeling of guilt associated with one's failure to fulfill internal aspirations (psychoanalysis) or external expectations (behavioralism). These techniques, interestingly enough, have great affinity to those used by the Catholic Church for releasing the feeling of guilt and shame resulting from committing sins through "confession." The object of both practices is to reconcile oneself with his/her human weakness. Clearly, the principle at work here is adaptation.

An Islamically-based conception of the human psyche is bound to give rise to a markedly different psychotherapeutic approach, as the emphasis moves from reconciliation with weakness to sublimation and transcendence. Although an Islamic alternative to secular psychotherapy is still in its infancy, some promising techniques and approaches have already been proposed by some contemporary Muslim psychologists. Al-Zubair Bashir Taha, for example, has already made a proposal for an alternative psychotherapy rooted in the Qur'anic concept of *tawbah* (repentance). In *Surat al-Furqan, ayah* 70, a specific course of action is prescribed to those who violate the requirements of a good life by accepting falsehood, taking innocent life, or committing adultery. In addition to being aware of the evil nature of the act committed, the Qur'an requires the repentant to strengthen his belief in and the desire for the good, as well as compensating the negative with a positive action. A positive action, whose aim is the good, reinforces one's commitment and takes the actor far beyond the state of awareness of human weakness that a confession can produce. Some Muslim psychologists have used the above therapeutic technique and have reported positive results.[7] Further experimentation and study of such new approach-

es and techniques can take the project of Islamization of psychology to new heights.

Notes

1. Immanual Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), 640.
2. Edward B. Tichner, *A Test Book of Psychology* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), 15.
3. Carl R. Rogers, "A Note on the Nature of Man," *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, no. 4 (1957): 200.
4. Abraham Maslow, *A Memorial Volume* (California: Pacific Grove, 1972), 88–95.
5. Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali, *Ihya Ulum al-Din* (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa, n.d.), vol. 2, 10–13.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. See Al-Zubair Bashir Taha, "The Qur'anic Technique of Cognitive Behavior," in *Abhath Nadwat Ilm al-Nafs* (Cairo: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1993), 61–68.