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Mohsinah Shaikh

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BOOK REVIEW: PSYCHOLOGY FROM THE ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

Mohsinah Shaikh*

Aisha Utz. *Psychology from the Islamic Perspective*. International Islamic Publishing House, 2011. pp. 351, AUD 28.00. ISBN: 978-6035010993.

Abstract: This review examines Dr. Aisha Utz's *Psychology from the Islamic Perspective* (2011), a foundational work for understanding human psychology through Islamic epistemology. Unlike previous attempts that merely adapted Western psychological models to Islamic contexts, Utz constructs an indigenous psychological system grounded in Qur'anic and prophetic teachings. The 351-page work systematically progresses from epistemological foundations through personality theory, developmental, social, and therapeutic applications across 18 chapters. The key theoretical contributions include the inclusion of the *nafs* (soul) as a developmental construct, supernatural influences as psychological phenomena, and Islamic practices including prayer, remembrance, and pilgrimage as psychological interventions. This review analyses the book's scope, examining its treatment of core psychological domains while critically evaluating its empirical foundations and methodological approaches. While acknowledging limitations, including the relative absence of empirical validation, the review positions Utz's work as a watershed moment in Islamic psychology. The book serves diverse audiences, including mental health practitioners, academic scholars, Muslim educators, students, and general readers interested in indigenous psychological approaches. It concludes that *Psychology from the Islamic Perspective* establishes Islamic psychology as an academic discipline with distinct theoretical foundations, making a significant contribution to Islamic scholarship and the broader movement toward culturally grounded psychological frameworks.

Keywords: Islamic psychology, psychology, *nafs*, Islamic therapy, mental health

* Mohsinah Shaikh is an Assistant Professor at KBP College, Vashi specialising in clinical psychology and with a strong interest in the intersections of disorders, environmental influences, culture, and personality. Beyond her research endeavours, she has experience in counselling, psychological assessment, and mental health awareness initiatives.

Psychology from the Islamic Perspective was published in 2011 by the International Islamic Publishing House as a 351-page hardcover volume. *Psychology from the Islamic Perspective*¹ is one of the works of Dr. Aisha Utz, an American revert to Islam and a prominent figure in the field of Islamic psychology. The book establishes a complete theoretical and methodological framework for understanding human psychology through Islamic epistemology and is foundational material for instruction in Islamic psychology for many courses on the subject. It addresses a critical lacuna in psychological literature by proposing an indigenous Islamic approach to understanding human nature, behaviour, and mental processes. The book emerged during a period of growing interest in indigenous psychological approaches, particularly following increased recognition of the limitations of applying Western psychological models universally across diverse cultural and religious contexts.

The book begins with a pronunciation and transliteration chart, an account of Arabic honorific symbols used in the book, and clarifying explanations for the term “Lord” used throughout the book and when “*jihad*” refers to fighting. This is followed by the publisher’s note and preface, with the former emphasising the integration of Islamic teachings with modern psychological theories, and the latter detailing Dr. Utz’s personal journey from her dissatisfaction with over 250 secular psychological theories to discovering the comprehensive Islamic approach to human nature. The book is organised into 18 chapters beginning from an introduction to psychology to the last chapter on summary and conclusions, which is followed by references and a glossary of Islamic terms.

Psychology from the Islamic Perspective caters to diverse readerships. Academic scholars will find chapters 1-3 valuable for challenging foundational psychological assumptions, with the aid of the reference and glossary sections. Mental health practitioners can use chapters 13-17 for culturally congruent therapeutic approaches with Muslim clients. Muslim students and educators can use it as an academic text and spiritual resource for courses and personal growth. General readers interested in comparative psychology will benefit from its critique of secular psychology and presentation of spiritually informed alternatives, with numerous sections in the book assisting with technical Islamic terminology.

This review begins with a brief review of all 18 chapters, including the preface and introduction, after which focus will be given to some important chapters. Finally, the book is critically assessed depending on several factors.

Chapter 1 is on the Introduction to Psychology and establishes the theoretical groundwork by providing a general definition of psychology, exploring the relationship between psychology and *tawhid* (belief in the Oneness of God), and identifying the main weaknesses of secular approaches to psychology.

Chapter 2 details the True Nature of Humans and develops Islamic anthropology through lessons from the story of Adam and Eve. It extensively examines the concept of *fitrah* (innate

¹ Aisha Utz, *Psychology from the Islamic Perspective* (International Islamic Publishing House, 2011).

human nature), provides evidence for this, explores the primordial covenant, and establishes the purpose of life as worshipping Allah.

Chapter 3 discusses Personality and is one of the book's most substantial theoretical contributions. It explores the relationship between *'aqeedah* (creed), *eeman* (faith), and psychology. The chapter examines belief in and love of Allah, belief in the hereafter, and how *eeman* increases and decreases. It provides detailed analysis of the nature of the soul, mysteries of the soul, concepts of good and evil, and levels of the soul. Particular attention is given to the *qalb* (heart) as a psychological construct, including types of hearts, signs of sound versus diseased hearts, and poisons of the heart such as unnecessary speech, unrestrained glances, and overindulgence in food. The chapter concludes with an extensive discussion of soul purification, free will and accountability, *qadr* (Divine decree), the importance of intention, and comprehensive analysis of positive (kindness, truthfulness, humility) and negative (showing off, hypocrisy) character traits.

Chapter 4 details the Forces Working on the Heart and Soul and examines the various influences affecting human psychological functioning, including Allah's influence through inspiration and angelic assistance, misguidance from Satan, and the soul's inherent desires and doubts. Chapter 5 discusses motivation encompassing spiritual drives and psychological motives, and Chapter 6 elaborates on emotions with a focus on anger management. Chapters 7 and 8 examine Intelligence, Reason and Wisdom and Learning and Modelling, exploring the concept of *'aql* (reason) in Islam, the significance and meaning of knowledge, wisdom in the Qur'an and prophetic tradition, classical and operant conditioning, and spiritual modelling as learning mechanisms. Chapter 9, titled "*Trials and Tribulations of Life*" addresses the purpose of trials and afflictions and the benefits of religious coping strategies. Chapter 10 tackles Consciousness, Sleep and Dreaming and covers altered states of consciousness, the significance of dreams in Islamic psychology, and principles of dream interpretation.

The book then includes a discussion of developmental and social psychology from an Islamic viewpoint on topics such as lifespan development, including detailed treatment of death experiences in Chapter 11, and social psychology covering family dynamics and community characteristics in Chapter 12. Chapter 13 is another unique contribution of the book as it discusses supernatural entities, which are typically not a topic included in contemporary psychology. It delineates the species of Satan, jinn and humans and provides coverage of supernatural influences on psychological functioning, examining Satan's goals and methods, *waswas* (whispering), magic, evil eye and envy, jinn possession including signs and symptoms, and methods of protection from malevolent supernatural influences.

Redirecting to more conventional frameworks, the book tackles Abnormal Psychology and Mental Illness next in Chapter 14 and addresses the definition of mental illness from an Islamic perspective, suicide, causes of mental illness, and the relationship between religiosity and mental health. The following chapter is on Counselling and Psychotherapy and logically follows the treatments for the aforementioned disorders, conventional and Islamically

modified. It presents practical therapeutic applications, discussing mechanisms of action in Islamic psychotherapy and religious psychotherapy with Muslims.

Chapters 16 and 17 focus on Islamic Therapeutic Practices and the Benefits of Worship for Humans, providing detailed examination of seeking nearness to Allah, ritual prayer, supplication, Qur'an recitation and remembrance of Allah, fasting, *zakat* (obligatory charity), *Hajj* (pilgrimage), repentance, reliance on Allah, contemplation and reflection, spiritual light, and achieving "*a good life*." Lastly, the book concludes with a summary chapter and conclusions, followed by a complete reference section and a glossary of Islamic terms, an effort to make the work accessible for readers unfamiliar with Islamic terminology.

Dr. Utz makes several significant theoretical contributions to the emerging field of Islamic psychology. The most notable of these is that she attempts a reconceptualisation of psychology through the Islamic framework rather than previous superficial attempts at Islamisation of Western psychology. She does not shy away from discussing concepts native to Islam such as *fitrah*, supernatural influences, but includes them in her Islamic psychological framework. Utz's work is a novel development in Islamic psychology, distinct from adapted Western models or critiques from an Islamic viewpoint like Haque's critiques² or Keshavarzi and Haque's adaptations of cognitive-behavioural therapy.³

She also uses many indigenous Arabic terminologies as substitutes and supplements to English terminologies while maintaining readability for non-Muslim populations through comprehensive translations, explanations, pronunciations and transliterations throughout the book. The integration of Islam and psychology in the form of this thorough work is a significant contribution to the field, especially in view of secular psychology's long understood inability to address many phenomena due to its neglect of the spiritual and religious spheres.

The author's treatment of the *nafs* as a central psychological construct is particularly noteworthy. Rather than simply correlating it with Western concepts like the ego or self, Utz develops an indigenous understanding of the *nafs* as a dynamic entity capable of spiritual and psychological development through various states like *ammarah* (commanding self), *lawwamah* (self-reproaching soul), and *mulhimah* (content soul). This provides an alternative model for understanding human motivation, moral development, and psychological growth that differs substantially from Western developmental theories. The book is notable for its broad theoretical scope, extending beyond the focus on the soul seen in frameworks like Rothman and Coyle's.⁴ Utz's system includes personality theory, developmental psychology, social psychology, and therapeutic interventions.

However, the book's effectiveness could be enhanced with a few modifications. The work would benefit from more explicit discussion of hermeneutical principles governing the

² Amber Haque, "Psychology from Islamic Perspective: Contributions of Early Muslim Scholars and Challenges to Contemporary Muslim Psychologists," *Journal of Religion and Health* 43, no. 4 (2004): 357.

³ Hooman Keshavarzi and Amber Haque, "Outlining a Psychotherapy Model for Enhancing Muslim Mental Health Within an Islamic Context," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 23, no. 3 (2013).

⁴ Alexander Rothman and Adrian Coyle, "Toward a Framework for Islamic Psychology and Psychotherapy: An Islamic Model of the Soul," *Journal of Religion and Health* 57, no. 5 (2018).

interpretation of Islamic texts for psychological purposes. While the author demonstrates familiarity with classical Islamic scholarship, the methodology for deriving psychological principles from textual sources could be more systematically articulated.

Another limitation of the current work is the relative scarcity of empirical validation for the proposed theoretical constructs. While the author provides compelling theoretical arguments for Islamic psychological concepts, she does not cite empirical support for them. It is important to note that the nascent field of Islamic psychology has yet to produce vast literature validating and supporting its principles through rigorous research endeavours, which may be one of the reasons for the lack of research cited in the book. Nevertheless, the work would have furthered discussion on current and past research in the field had a review been included, especially since the author establishes research and empirical evidence as one of the important sources of information for Islamic psychology. The book could also engage more extensively with contemporary neuroscientific findings and their implications for Islamic psychological theory. How do modern discoveries about brain function and neuroplasticity relate to Islamic concepts of the *qalb* (heart) as the seat of cognition and emotion? Such integration could strengthen the credibility of Islamic psychology in contemporary academic contexts and circles.

These shortcomings aside, this work represents an important milestone in the development of Islamic psychology as a distinct academic discipline. Dr. Utz demonstrates that Islamic psychology can offer more than simply the application of Islamic ethics to Western psychological practice; it can provide fundamentally different ways of understanding human psychology grounded in Islamic worldview and methodology. As the field of psychology continues to grapple with issues of cultural relevance and universal applicability, works like this remind us that human psychology may be best understood through multiple, culturally grounded lenses rather than any single theoretical framework. Dr. Utz has provided an important lens through which psychologists can better understand the human condition in its full complexity.

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