

# *Contemplation*

An Islamic Psychospiritual Study

## CONTEMPLATION

AN ISLAMIC PSYCHOSPIRITUAL STUDY

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MALIK BADRI



*With an Introduction by*  
JEREMY HENZELL-THOMAS

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IIIT Books-In-Brief Series

# CONTEMPLATION

An Islamic Psychospiritual Study

**Malik Badri**

Abridged by Wanda Krause

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## IIIT Books-in-Brief Series

The IIIT Books-in-Brief Series is a valuable collection of the Institute's key publications written in condensed form designed to give readers a core understanding of the main contents of the original. Produced in a short, easy to read, time-saving format, these companion synopses offer a close, carefully written overview of the larger publication and it is hoped will stimulate readers into further exploration of the original.

In **Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study** Malik Badri approaches contemplation from an Islamic, modern, and spiritual perspective and from the field of psychology. Western psychology has developed over the decades allowing the human condition to be analysed, especially with regard to the effect of childhood experiences on later life. However, this knowledge of the human psyche is still largely the product of its historical cultural environment, that is a secular humanist vision that prefers to see the mind more as machine that can be 'understood' and can even be mimicked by Artificial Intelligence algorithms in a computer. The mind is far more than the 'sum of its parts', not necessarily something mysterious but more connected to a heart and 'soul', whose greater potential and workings within the human body require far more study.

The quantifiable machine-like understanding of the mind is seen as safe territory, whilst the unquantifiable can be somewhat daunting for those schooled in the scientific method as applicable to the field of psychology. In the Western psychology tradition the expectation has always been high that given time the riddle of human nature would be solved. Commendable efforts have been made by some great scholarly minds in advancing the understanding of the mind but many questions are left unanswered. Given the worldwide rise in rates of psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety, fear, and suicide to name a few, with trends predicting worse to come, it is abundantly clear that there is far more study urgently needed in order to understand human nature. In the case

of those with psychological disorders, more effective support and therapies need to be developed to heal the afflicted. In traditional Western psychology, the machine-like understanding of the mind has neglected the “spiritual” dimension of human nature, but some Western psychologists are beginning to recognize what Muslims and those of faith have always believed regarding the human ‘spirit’ and its significance to human life. This marks the beginning of a hugely stimulating area of study that could bring hope to many – not just those suffering from psychological disorders – but help others understand what it is to be human, both during their best times and during their darkest hours.

Malik Badri, in this impressive study, seeks to address the neglect of the spiritual dimension in Western psychology, and argues that in the idea and practice of contemplation (*tafakkur*) we have a powerful tool, linking the mind with heart and ‘soul’. Through contemplation, particularly in the reflection of God, we can reach deep into the psyche to bring solace and healing to psychological disorders afflicting mankind, and which are better thought of as a ‘sickness of the soul’. Badri profiles many elements of contemplation, including its historical demise, makeup in Eastern traditions, and even a nascent return to these philosophical aspects in modern psychology. However, it is in the Islamic tradition that *contemplation* becomes *tafakkur*. That is it transmutes into so much more, a path to self-knowledge that becomes a quest for healing through an inner vision of God as the object of our search and devotion, than healing through the silencing of negativity, and a focus on the conceptual understanding of, and our place in, the wider universe.

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## Chapter One

### **Contemplation: A Modern Psychological Perspective**

#### *Islamic Contemplation and Secular Psychology*

Islamic contemplation (*tafakkur*) is one of the most exalted forms of worship in Islam. So to discuss it from the viewpoint of modern Western psychology which is essentially a secular and largely culture-bound discipline may seem odd at first. However, since western cultural paradigms bear down on most forms of academia in the Muslim world, including the study of psychology, it is important to begin a discussion on contemplation from this view.

So, in terms of contemplation, Western psychology has recently seen an interest in meditation procedures and their ability to bring about altered states of consciousness. Islamic contemplation can achieve the relaxing benefits of meditation, but as we shall see later, it differs from all the other forms of meditative procedures which are derived from Eastern religions in that its main objective is more cognitive and intellectual. In Islamic contemplation, altered states of consciousness are not an end in themselves, for the goal is a deeper insightful knowledge of God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe.

The field of cognitive psychology, in its unrefined form, was the focus of the early schools of psychology before behaviorism became dominant. In those days, psychology was used mainly to study people's consciousness, their feelings, the content of their thoughts and the structure of their minds, attending to the question of learning only through these vistas. The behaviorist school introduced a totally new approach, where learning could be studied via stimuli and observable responses and became the basis of psychology. Feelings, the components of the mind, and the process of thinking were considered

questions that could not be observed directly. Consequently, the methods used to study them (such as introspection, and the observation and reporting of inner experiencing) were criticized as being vague and unreliable and could not be controlled by experimental procedures.

Accordingly, the behaviorists who wanted psychology to become an exact experimental science, like physics and chemistry, restricted their work to phenomena that could be observed in the laboratory. The responses that could be measured and controlled became the focus of their experimental and scientific concerns. This effort to emulate physical and biological sciences by ignoring a person's spiritual and inner cognitive activities was unequivocally established by J.B. Watson, the founding father of behaviorism.

Influenced by this constricted perspective, and encouraged by Ivan Pavlov's contributions to learning by conditioning, behaviorists went on to explain every human mental and psychological activity through the vision of stimulus-response connectionism. The principal aim of this dehumanization of people was to mould psychology into a scientific cast. Another major objective was the secularization of Western societies and their emancipation from the grip of religion. Though other dominant perspectives and schools of psychology such as psychoanalysis and the biological perspective had, and still have, bitter disagreements with the behaviorists, they are in complete harmony when it comes to secularization and the downgrading of conscious thinking.

Traditional neuropsychiatry, which is strongly based on an 'organicist' biological perspective, also depreciates the significance of conscious ideation, freedom of choice, and the unchanging spiritual moral standards of a human being. Biological determinism, in its exaggerated form, claims that anything, normal or abnormal, that people do is fully governed by their inherited genes, their nervous system, and inborn biochemistry. If studying Islamic contemplation from the psychological point of view necessarily deals with the conscious inner cognitive thought and feelings of people, then the dominant perspectives of Western psychology (behaviorism, Freudian psychoanalysis and neuropsychiatry) can offer little or no help.

### *Islamic Contemplation and Cognitive Revolution*

Psychology had to undergo a complete revolution to be able to reinstate its 'mind' and rediscover its inner conscious cognitive activities. This

revolution is the contemporary cognitive revolution. Scholars began to show more interest in thinking and inner cognitive processes from about the middle of the twentieth century, but it took psychology several decades to recognize the superficiality of stimulus-response behaviorism and the unscientific distorted nature of the theories of psychoanalysis. This new perspective in psychology is particularly important in that it shows the value of contemplation from both the scientific and religious points of view.

It is interesting to note that although psychology and other social sciences continue to support the secular reductionistic view of human nature, they have changed their image of the human being according to progressive developments in technology. Here, scholars compare people's thinking, inner cognitive and emotional processes and memory to a computer. They are describing the fact that they receive various stimuli from their environment, then code, classify and store them in their memory, to retrieve them when they need to solve new problems. This computer model of the human being is clearly more realistic than the behaviorist model, since it tries to restore to modern psychology its 'mind' and 'consciousness'; yet, it obviously falls short of the true spiritual Islamic vision of humankind.

However, the real revolution in psychology will come when it regains its 'soul' and liberates itself from the constricted scientific and medical models for erecting an image of human nature. But, even the revolution of cognitive psychology, which attempted to free the discipline from its constricted approach, still limits itself to this trio of psychological, biological and socio-cultural components of human behavior and mental processes. It has also ignored the spiritual component, despite increasing modern scientific evidence regarding its importance. Even without the spiritual faith factor and despite the advance of knowledge, the study of these internal mental processes will always be a highly complex field where stimuli and their responses, causes and their effects interact in a manner which defies any sophisticated method of observation or measurement.

### *Contemplation and the Body/Mind Enigma*

The study of the internal psychological and mental world of the human being brings us face to face with one of humankind's most difficult questions: what is the connection between the body and the mind? Though we know very little about the activities of the human brain, the materialists claim that the human being does not possess a 'mind',



unless this word is used to mean the material ‘brain’ inside the skull. They also claim that what we call a ‘thinking mind’ is nothing but the reflections and ‘translations’ of the minute changes in the chemistry of the brain and its electrochemical nervous pulses – their justification being that people’s thinking, and indeed their entire characters, change when the brain is damaged.

The opposing group affirms that there is a ‘mind’ that controls the brain and, ultimately, a person’s behavior and thinking. Chief among this group is the neurologist, John Eccles, who won a Nobel Prize for his outstanding research on the nervous system. This scholar and the scientists who uphold his assertion affirm that their researches on the activity of the human brain and the nervous system can only be fully explained by the existence of a ‘mind’, a ‘realizing soul’, or what Eccles calls a ‘self-conscious mind’.<sup>1</sup>

Eccles and various other scholars often use the image of the relationship between a broadcasting station and a television set to explain the relationship between the mind and the brain. According to Eccles, the non-material, self-conscious, mind continuously scans, probes and controls the brain.<sup>2</sup> As Eccles has asserted, what takes place after the death of the brain is the ultimate question that will continue to haunt scholars as well as lay people. When asked about the spirit, Prophet Muhammad (ṢAAS)\* received the following revelation: “They ask you about the spirit. Say, ‘The spirit is of the command of my Lord. It is only a little knowledge about it that is communicated to you’” (17:85).

Another complication raised by modern biological research about the relation between body and mind is the role of the human heart in influencing the brain and shaping neural behavior. According to Joseph Pearce in his thought-provoking book, *Evolution’s End*, he says: “Actions in the heart precede the actions of both body and brain...We know now that the heart...controls and governs the brain action through hormonal, transmitter, and possibly finer quantum-energies of communication.”<sup>3</sup> According to Pearce, when we are in deep spiritual contemplation, we are drawing from our spiritual universal heart, which influences our physical heart, that communicates with our brain and influences our cognitive activities.

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\* (ṢAAS) – *Ṣallā Allāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam*: May the peace and blessings of God be upon him. Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammed is mentioned.

*From Cognitive Activity to Established  
Normal and Abnormal Habits*

Both cognitive psychologists and computer scientists are concerned with the study of the human capacity to analyze, classify and store information in the memory so as to retrieve it when needed. Some of their studies have clarified many aspects that the behaviorists had chosen to ignore because they felt it was impossible to identify its contents, and have produced many theories and explanations that challenge the naïve concept of stimulus-response psychology. One inroad has been into better understanding that every intentional action performed by the individual is preceded by an internal cognitive activity. Their studies have also proved that the human mind never stops this cognitive activity at any moment of the day or night, whether the individual is aware of it or not.

In addition to this discovery that every action begins with an internal cognitive activity – be it a notion, a memory, an image, a perception, or an emotion – it has also been shown that when this cognitive activity gains strength, it can become a motive or an incentive for action; and if the individual performs this motivated action repeatedly, then these internal ideas can easily and spontaneously make it become a rooted habit. This habit is not necessarily a skill; it can be an emotion, a spiritual feeling, or an attitude.

Cognitive psychology, therefore, affirms that people's conscious thinking and inner dialogues influence their feelings and emotions, and form their attitudes and beliefs – in short, they can even shape their values and vision of life. Through contemplation, Muslims can refine their own 'reward and punishment' psychospiritual strategies in their spiritual development. They do not need a worldly reward or an electric shock to change their unwanted habits and replace them with more worthy ones. By devoting their internal cognitive and spiritual aspirations to the contemplation of God's majesty and perfection in contrast to their laxity and unworthy behavior, they will certainly develop the sentiment of love of God and the refined feelings of contentment, happiness and tranquillity.

### Contemplation: The Works of Early Muslim Scholars

Once it is realized that internal thinking, emotions, perceptions, imagination and ideas all influence the formation of an individual's behavior – his or her tendencies, beliefs, conscious and unconscious activities, good and bad habits – it is possible to see why the Qur'an and the Sunnah are so concerned with meditation and the contemplation of the creation of the heavens and the earth, as they fill the heart and mind with the majesty of the Creator and the nobility of His attributes. It took Western psychology more than seven decades to return to the 'common sense' recognition of the influence of thinking and cognitive processes in shaping human beliefs, attitudes and external behaviour, although these achievements were not unknown to the early scholars of Islam.

In his book *Al-Fawā'id* (The Spiritual Benefits), Ibn al-Qayyim explicitly says that anything a person does begins as an inner thought, a concealed speech or an internal dialogue, for which he uses the Arabic word, *khawāṭir*. The word *khawāṭir* is the plural of *khāṭirah*, meaning a fast, inner, concealed reflection, notion or subvocal thought, which may come fleetingly. Modern cognitive psychologists can compare this with the idea of 'automatic thoughts' which the cognitive therapist Aaron Beck claims to have discovered in the 1970s! In his classic book, *Cognitive Therapy and the Emotional Disorders*, he devotes six pages to a section titled 'The discovery of automatic thoughts' to describe how he arrived at this 'discovery'.<sup>4</sup>

Ibn al-Qayyim advises the Muslim to lead a happy and righteous life by fighting the negative *khawāṭir* and *wasāwis* (insinuating whispers) of inner fleeting thoughts before they become an emotion or an impulse. In addition, Ibn al-Qayyim gives a good description of inner cognitive activity, and warns his readers that God has not given humankind the ability to totally eradicate fleeting thoughts and reflections, for they are as irresistible as breathing. He further states that actions and deeds can only be sound when their internal and contemplative notions originate from a warm spiritual relationship with God. Much of the literature by early Muslim scholars is based on knowledge acquired from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, which is moulded into useful psychological principles.

Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī contributed much to the theoretical aspects of contemplation therapies, but he also turned to their practical aspects by giving several realistic examples. In *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, he says that the Muslim who wants to adhere to good behavior has first to change his ideas about himself and imagine himself in the desired condition. According to al-Ghazālī, since the origin of every action is a cognitive, emotional, or intellectual mental activity, those who are given to long periods of contemplation will perform their acts of worship and obedience quite easily. Consequently, those believers who are absorbed in deep Islamic contemplation perceive the things they are contemplating in terms of their previous experiences, as well as through the symbols and expressions they acquired from their use of language, and their imagination of what they used to be and what they could become in the future.

Islamic contemplation passes through three interconnected stages, leading to the fourth and final stage which I call the stage of 'spiritual cognition' (*shubūd*). The first stage is when knowledge of the contemplated object comes through direct sensory perception – via sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste – or indirectly, as in the case of imagination. The second stage of contemplation starts when a person takes a closer look at these data, inspecting their aesthetic aspects and particular qualities. The third stage is when the meditator crosses the boundary between the created object of contemplation and its Creator. He or she is then carried away by feelings of submission to and appreciation of the One Who brought the appreciated object of contemplation, as well as everything else in this universe, into being because of the meditator's realization that there is nothing in existence save God and what He has originated. From the perspective of learning and habit-formation, it can be said that believers who regularly contemplate will reach the fourth stage, because meditation, strengthened with constant remembrance, becomes a deep-rooted spiritual habit.

However, people's contemplation does not have to be limited to the contemplation of beautiful or exquisitely constructed objects in this universe, which contains both the beautiful and the ugly, the great and the insignificant, the good and the evil. Perception can also involve painful, frightening or disturbing experiences, even if appreciation will be emotionally to the contrary. Contemplation can concentrate on the lessons learned from unpleasant experiences and teach the contemplator how to avoid them. In fact, witnessing terrifying scenes or undergoing personal hardships lead one to contemplate and learn lessons probably

in a more effective manner than when one is prompted by a placid appreciation for example of the beauty, size and precision of a building.

### Chapter Three

## Islamic Contemplation and Modern Mediation Procedures

The practice of transcendental meditation and similar procedures has become extremely popular in Europe and America in recent years – a phenomenon unprecedented in the history of these nations. This came about after it was established that this kind of meditation, which has ancient oriental and Indian roots, had very positive effects in the treatment of maladies connected with emotional, cognitive and physical disorders. There are several proven benefits of meditation and, indeed, they are related to contemplation as an Islamic form of worship.

Modern medical research has also shown that Islamic prescriptions, rules and desirable behavior have their undisputed value in protecting the physical and psychological health of believers. For example, bodily cleanliness, which believers acquire as a result of ablution (*wuḍūʿ*) before the five daily prayers, the ceremonial bathing (*ghusl*) before Friday prayers and after marital intercourse, and other Sunnah practices, have their obvious sanitary aspects. Indeed, hundreds of books and research papers published in the late twentieth century stress the value of meditation combined with the faith factor in treating psychological, psychophysiological and organic disorders.

A very interesting and revealing study in this connection is reported by S. Wolf, and shows how the patient's belief can even reverse the effect of drugs.<sup>5</sup> Modern research has conclusively shown that chronic psychological stress, which is collateral with anxiety, depression, severe loneliness, and loss of self-confidence, has a serious effect on human immunity against all diseases. Research has led to the emergence of a new discipline, psychoneuro-immunology, which brings together two different fields of specialization for the first time, namely, the field of social sciences and psychology, and that of the chemistry of human immunology.<sup>6</sup> Simple meditative instructions were known and followed by Hindus and Buddhists thousands of years ago.

Many experimental studies conducted in clinics and medical laboratories, using the latest methods in measuring psychophysiological

changes, have proved that concentrative meditation such as transcendental meditation is really a medical revolution in which patients use their mental, cognitive and spiritual powers in curing their ailments and enriching their psychological life.

The directions given by therapists in the books and educational audios and videos on meditation and relaxation combined with the use of the faith factor, which have become popular in Europe and America, are similar to those used by a Muslim worshipper, sitting down after performing the ritual prayer (salah), absorbed in contemplating the grace of God, His grandeur and the precision of His creation, incessantly repeating words of praise and glorification of the Almighty. A contemplating, practising Muslim can achieve a high level of meditation with minimum time and energy. Just listening to the poetic words of the Qur'an chanted by a beautiful voice can bring about all the fine meditative responses in a few minutes. After a series of sophisticated experiments conducted at Akbar Clinic in Florida in the United States, Dr. Ahmed Elkadi concluded that when Muslims listen to the recitation of Qur'anic verses, whether they are Arabic speakers or not, they experience all the physiological changes indicative of the release from stress and anxiety, as well as warm feelings of tranquillity and an increase of immunity against disease, and the other changes described earlier about transcendental meditation.<sup>7</sup>

The similarity between contemplation, as an Islamic form of worship, and other forms of Eastern and Western meditation is in fact only superficial, because the bedrock of Islamic contemplation is the belief in the Oneness of God. Islamic contemplation is based on the progression from meditating on the creation to its Creator. It is a smooth rational movement. Contemplation is a spiritual practice in which all cognitive and spiritual faculties are activated in pursuit of the true cognizance of the Almighty. It is not an irrational or emotional endeavor to cure a disorder, nor a painful exercise in which the body is tortured. Believers know that every atom in this universe glorifies and praises the Almighty. The Qur'an states: "...there is not a thing but celebrates His praise; but you [O humans] do not understand how they declare His glory!" (17:44). Though contemplating believers cannot decipher the glorification of God by the universe, they feel the harmony between their glorification and that of all other creatures. This feeling becomes deeper with the continuation of contemplation until it reaches spiritual sublimity and a sense of joy and spiritual pleasure that is incomparable to any worldly bliss.

### The Qur'an and the Contemplation of God's Creation

The contemplation of God's creation is one of the greatest forms of worship in Islam. Thus, many Qur'anic verses encourage this activity using various methods in order to appeal to every temperament and spiritual state. The aim is to encourage people to witness the signs of their Lord in the universe with insight and impressionable hearts through various methods.

However, true Islamic contemplation can only spring from a heart that believes in God and a mind that submits to Him and His Exalted Attributes. This is the unwavering faith of oneness (*tawhīd*), which is to bear witness that the Almighty is the One and only God Who created, governs and sustains the universe. It is essential to establish strong uncorrupted faith in God before embarking on the spiritual journey of Islamic contemplation, for it will be a guiding light to the believer as well as a firm root preventing him or her from being led astray.

The Qur'an attempts to soften human hearts in many ways. One of these is by mentioning the grace and favors of God. Contemplation of these can generate a feeling of compassionate mercy and love. The reminder to contemplate the mercy and love of God towards humankind and all other creatures that inhabit this globe immediately moves the hearts of those who are sensitive, appreciative and wise. Most of these verses begin with the question "Have they not seen?" or "Do they not see?" For example: "Do they not look at the camels, how they are made? And at the sky, how it is raised high? And at the mountains, how they are fixed firm? And at the Earth, how it is spread out?" (88:17–20).

Conversely, some verses offer encouragement and praise to the mentally alert, who see nothing in the world that does not teach them a lesson and remind them of the innumerable favors of God. The Qur'an also urges people to contemplate the Divine signs in the universe by awakening the innate aesthetic sense in them, for example 35:27-28, which aims to inspire people's genuine feelings and emotions so as to enable them to observe the beauty of everything on the earth – whether the various colors and shades, plants, animals, or even inanimate objects. Or after showing His favors to humanity in creating

the cattle for their sustenance and use, God reminds His slaves to contemplate their beauty, as in for example: “He Who has made everything which He has created most good: He began the creation of man with (nothing more than) clay” (32:7).

However, the most important point regarding the level of contemplation is that God Himself swears by some of His creation. This is the greatest call to ponder over this creation, probe its depths, and think deeply about its content. The Almighty swears by the dawn, the mid-morning, the twilight, the moon, the figs and the olives; He swears by the winds, the stars, the sky, the break of day and the descending night.

Moreover, while there are many Qur’anic verses which encourage meditation on the heavens and the earth, in general, and where the human being is considered the most important creation, there are also many verses which are specifically concerned with contemplating the creation of humankind. As for the cruel-hearted and the arrogant, the Qur’an addresses them with similar reproachful questions: “Does not man see that it is We Who created him from sperm? Yet behold! he (stands forth) as an open adversary!” (36:77). Concerning the arousing of the aesthetic aspect of human nature, the Almighty says: “We have indeed created man in the best of moulds” (95:4). The Almighty also makes oaths: “Then, by the Lord of the heaven and the earth, this is the very Truth, as true as the fact that you can speak” (51:23).

The simpler psychological phenomena whose effects can be recorded in the laboratory – like learning, memory, emotions and motivations – are still not fully grasped by psychology. Furthermore, the tangible biological and material aspects of humankind can only be understood at the superficial level. The divine call, which questions how people can be blind to the miraculous creation of their own selves – “And in your own selves, do you not see?” (51:21) – will always remain as new and challenging as when it was first revealed.

## Chapter Five

### **Contemplation as an Unrestricted Form of Worship**

Contemplation of the creation of the heavens and the earth and all that is included in them is a practice which cannot be impeded by changes in time, place or the nature of things. It is a free, unrestrained form of worship. It is also a cognitive and emotional process that enlivens the



heart and enlightens perception as the mind ascends from contemplating the signs of God in the universe to their Creator and Lord. Such is the real meaning of contemplation.

The Qur'an encourages the practice of contemplation of the beginning of creation: "Say: 'Travel through the earth and see how God did originate creation; so will God produce a later creation: for God has power over all things'" (29:20). In addition to encouraging believers to contemplate the present, the Qur'an invites them to contemplate the destinies of extinct nations: "Do they not travel on the earth, and see what was the end of those before them? They were superior to them in strength..." (30:9). While ordering the believers to contemplate this world, the Qur'an also calls for meditation on the hereafter: "...Thus God makes clear to you His signs, in order that you may consider (their bearings) on this life and the hereafter" (2:219-220).

The Qur'an is concerned with the freedom of contemplation and calls for meditation on the natural creations of God in which the human hand plays no part, such as the heavens, the mountains and the seas. The Qur'an also draws the believers' attention to the bounties with which people have been favoured. No human discovery or invention can ever occur outside the natural laws established by God. For example, "Your Lord is He That makes the Ship go smoothly for you through the sea, in order that ye may seek of his Bounty. For He is unto you most Merciful" (17:66). Moreover, God says in the Qur'an that it is He Who created human beings and whatever the human mind and hands have made: "God has created you and all your handiwork" (37:96). Contemplation of the universe is an unrestricted spiritual activity. However, this world also contains unseen beings and phenomena that provoke the curiosity of Muslims and form essential aspects of their faith.

## Chapter Six

### **Contemplation of the Invisible and Its Limits**

Though Islamic contemplation is a free form of worship as there are no limitations to what a human being can experience or imagine – whether it is visible like the sun, the rivers and the planets, or invisible, like the angels and jinns – there is, nevertheless, one restriction, namely, the contemplation of the Divine Being Himself. Not only is it forbidden, but it is also impossible since none but God Himself knows what

He really is. The Almighty says about Himself in the Qur'an: "(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth...There is nothing whatever like Him, and He is the One Who hears and sees (all things)" (42:11).

God is free from the limits of time and space that confine humankind. Indeed, human beings cannot visualize an event without reference to a certain time and place, nor can they visualize anything without reference to a previous experience of their own. People still know very little about the brain and the nervous system that characterize them as human beings. The knowledge about their minds, souls and psyches are hidden secrets and protected treasures. Scholars also affirm that whatever one imagines about the Divine Being, He is totally different from that. Ibn 'Abbās said: "Some people tried to contemplate the Almighty, but the Prophet said to them: 'Contemplate the creation of God and not God Himself, for you can never give Him His due.'"<sup>8</sup> The Attributes of God are of the same nature as His Being. Since the reality of the Divine Being can be known and understood only by Him, so can His Divine Attributes.

Our world is like a large womb, where the body plays the same role as the placenta in the womb. When the hour of death comes, the soul moves into a higher dimension of life in the barrier, which is so much larger and more complex than this world that it no longer needs the body (in the same way that the newborn no longer needs its placenta), and the body is buried. Thus, human beings keep moving from one stage into a higher one like a rocket, part of which, at the end of every stage and the consumption of its fuel, separates from its main body to make it go faster, with a lighter weight and a greater energy. Similarly, the bliss of paradise and all its fruits, flowing springs and beauties, have their similitude in our present world, although, of course, they are but trifles in comparison with what is offered in paradise.

Many early and modern scholars and worshippers have recorded their experiences of meditating on the nature of death, the barrier and the hereafter. The Muslim can contemplate these and the pleasures of the hereafter in spite of the fact that their reality is beyond human comprehension, as these are creations and not the Creator. Nothing exists in this universe save God the Creator and His creation. As such, believers are prohibited from contemplating the Divine Being, but they are free to contemplate everything else.

### Individual Levels of Contemplation

There are different levels of contemplation people experience. The first factor affecting the depth of contemplation and meditation is dependent upon the level of faith of the individual and his or her closeness to God. The greater the individual's faith, love and veneration of God, the deeper the contemplation of and meditation on creation.

The second factor is related to the personality of the believers and their innate ability. This quality depends mostly on the nature of the nervous system. Introverts prefer activities which do not require them to mix with people and participate in exciting activities, such as reading alone, or working in the garden, or in the library. They enjoy their routine work without getting bored. If they are also meditative believers, they can engage in deep contemplation on the creation longer and more deeply than other people.

Extroverts have a nervous system whose reticular formation inhibits or weakens the nervous signals and stimuli that go to the upper centers of the brain. Consequently, and contrary to the previous type, such people need intense and exciting experiences in their environment. However, this does not automatically mean that extroverts are of a lower standing. Indeed, by virtue of their nervous and psychological system, they may surpass the introverts in Islamic endeavors that demand mixing with people and making friends or speaking in public.

A third factor that affects the depth of contemplation is a psychological one. Indeed, contemplation requires peace of mind and tranquillity, as well as both psychological and physical health. Physical health is without doubt essential for enhancing the depth of contemplation. Indeed, it is obvious that the sick person, the overeating obese individual, or the one suffering from drug addiction cannot elevate his or her spiritual status to a high level of contemplation. The believer who is afflicted with anxiety, depression, obsession, or any other psychological disorder cannot be expected to contemplate with a high degree of concentration. The fourth factor is the effect of the environment on believers, and concerns how they deal with the needs and problems of everyday life, and the extent to which these needs can impede or enhance their ability to contemplate.

A fifth factor is influence of culture. The childrearing practices of some

cultures, whether they are Islamic or not, inculcate in their people, from early childhood, the love and appreciation of natural and artificial artistic beauty. Adults who grew up in such cultures then spend much of their time and money enjoying and contemplating such things as a picturesque landscape or they buy a beautiful painting. On the other hand, there are cultures that bring up their people to be attracted by very little beyond the physical beauty of women and maybe the appreciation of poetry and local music. It is sad that many of our Muslim societies fit into the second category. The sixth factor depends on how far people are acquainted with and have knowledge of the objects of their contemplation. They will more easily choose and appreciate objects of meditation that are in their familiar surroundings.

The seventh includes the examples of people with whom we surround ourselves. As the Prophet said, “A man is the like of his companion, so be careful whom you befriend.”<sup>9</sup> Further, the spiritual influence of the companionship of a sage can dramatically change the worldview of his disciple and increase his Islamic meditative ability. The eighth factor that affects depth of contemplation is the nature of the object of contemplation and meditation. Some natural phenomena immediately stimulate thought and strong feelings, shaking the psychological and spiritual aspects of human beings to the core, and imposing themselves on their hearts and minds.

Finally, although knowledge and understanding of the objects of contemplation can encourage deeper contemplation, it should not be surprising that the opposite is also true, namely, that extreme familiarity with the object can be a hindrance to contemplating it. The greater our familiarity with our surroundings, the heavier the veil over our vision and awareness, and we fail to observe or remember very important things. Undoubtedly, the importance of any of these factors depends on the circumstances of the contemplators themselves. However, if people are sincere and highly motivated, they will surely be guided to surmount all the obstacles to worshipping the Almighty and contemplating His creation.

## Chapter Eight

### **Experimental Science and Religion: The Cosmic Laws**

When one considers the high position given by Islam to the contemplation of God’s creation, one realizes the woeful position of those whose hearts, ears, eyes and minds are closed to the distinct signs of God,

even though these are displayed before them, day and night, throughout the universe: “And how many signs in the heavens and the earth do they pass by? Yet they turn away from them!” (12:105). But this knowledge does not take them beyond the superficial external aspects, or transport them from the wonders of the creation to the Creator. The Qur’an describes them as follows: “They know of the outer [superficial] things of this world; but of the hereafter they are heedless” (30:7).

What moves the heart of believers most are the secrets they learn about the Divine laws that govern God’s creation, whether it is the discovery of the chemical language of a tiny ant or the discovery of the orbit of a huge planet. This innate nature, which God implanted in the hearts of all human beings, is perhaps the reason why some present day scientists speak a similar language to that of worshippers. For instance, Cecil Hamann asks of the nest of the Baltimore bird and who taught it that fine art. To reveal the relationship between contemplation and astute observation, in his discussion on ants, Ibn al-Qayyim relates an interesting anecdote reported by a worshipper deeply interested in observing and contemplating ants and their activities. He carried out a scientific experiment which led him to conclude that ants have a special language of communication, and that they impose a rigorous punishment upon the one who brings wrong information and, in doing so, misleads the community of ants. Scholars, such as he, did not stop at contemplating visible creatures, but went on to meditate on abstract concepts, including the process of contemplation itself. Al-Ghazālī, for example, pondered over the wisdom of the Almighty in limiting the faculties of the mind in newborn babies.<sup>10</sup>

The search for cosmic laws is shared by both the contemplative worshipper and the modern scientist, despite the difference in objective and religious conviction. Indeed, the laws and principles which govern the universe are sought by modern experimental scientists to help them predict the cosmic events with great precision. However, when Muslim researchers are truly sincere in their work, their incentives for research and the consequent reward will be much more meaningful than those of their non-Muslim colleagues. Indeed, when they discover the intricate relations within the material, biological and psychosocial phenomena, and observe the work of God and His laws in them, they are actually performing the highest form of worship. To them apply the words of the Qur’an: “Those truly fear God, among His servants, who have knowledge” (35:28). If such students sincerely direct their research to the service of God, all their efforts of observation, meditation and

contemplation (performed in the laboratory or in the field) will be greatly rewarded.

Unfortunately, Muslim students do not seem to understand this sacred message, nor do they realize that they will not be able to achieve much without perseverance. If Muslim researchers viewed their task of observation and contemplation as a form of worship for which they can secure the pleasure of God, then they would be more motivated. If a believer discovers or invents something which is useful to humanity, it will be considered by God as a constant charity; he or she will be rewarded for it both in this life and in the hereafter – as his or her work will continue to benefit all those who use it. Any research performed by a Muslim is also an adherence to the Prophet's directive: "The search for knowledge is the duty of every Muslim."<sup>11</sup>

The positive relationship between refined constant contemplation (as an advanced form of worship) and the progress of scientific knowledge is confirmed by the history of progress in the experimental sciences in the Muslim world. Indeed, there is no doubt that the discoveries and inventions made by Muslim scientists in every field taught Europe the scientific method which forms the basis of modern civilization. There are numerous examples of the development of experimental science in the Muslim world, in an age when the contemplation of God's creation and the laws by which He sustains the universe formed the basis of that scientific renaissance. It was a mature, balanced civilization in which the physical and the spiritual interacted in a harmonious and homogeneous way, based on the realization of the innate dual nature of the human being as a rational animal and a spiritual being.

The alienation of Islam and the spiritual roots of its civilization are most unfortunate, for such has resulted in the tragic split between the physical and the spiritual, and between science and religion. Never was there such a balanced civilization as the one which prospered under the guidance of Islam, when human knowledge and religion presented themselves in an unprecedented harmony under the aegis of submission to the One Almighty God. We can see the contrast between the healthy combination of science and religious belief among early Muslim scholars, and the present situation in the modern secular world and much of the international scientific community. Sadly, many 'secularized' Muslim scholars have also chosen to follow and adopt the Western model. Nevertheless, and ironically, at the time when Muslims are shying away from the bold integration of their human, social and

scientific disciplines with Islamic spiritual, ethical norms, the modern secular world is beginning to recognize the social defacement caused by the schism between science, religion and secularization.

Recent discoveries in Western science, which originally came to demote and replace religion, are, in turn, causing a new scientific revolution and a return to this earlier position. Ironically, this process is spear-headed by physics, the ‘king’ of the exact sciences. Unfortunately, only very few scientists, having deeply penetrated the outer layers of their specialization to arrive at its very core, are beginning to question their previous arrogant position of subduing nature. Whilst the majority of [Western] scientists call themselves atheists, a famous scientist once said: “A little science estranges men from God, but much science leads them back to Him.”<sup>12</sup>

An appropriate reform which will bring happiness to humanity cannot be achieved fully unless scientific progress is based on a balance between human endeavor and divine guidance. Indeed, this is the only way that scientists will return to and rediscover the love for, commitment to and unity with all of God’s creation. In this respect, the Qur’an declares: “And He [the Almighty] has subjected to you all that is in the heavens and on earth. Behold, in that are signs indeed for those who reflect” (45:13).

## Chapter Nine

### Conclusion

I have tried to delineate the significance of *tafakkur* or meditative contemplation of God’s creation as a religious duty for all Muslims, and show that the Qur’an and the hadiths of Prophet Muhammad abound with teachings that urge Muslims to regularly worship God by reflecting on His creation. These teachings use all kinds of methods, such as praising the worshippers who are engaged in this blessed activity and condemning the unbelievers who do not reflect on their own creation or the creation of the world in which they live. If Muslims wish to ascend the spiritual path of devoted worshippers in their transcendental journey to the stage of spiritual enlightenment and insightful cognition (*shuhūd*), they will find no substitute for deep meditative contemplation. Indeed, as they gradually refine their contemplative endowment from mere sense perception to actual insightful cognition, they will reach the blessed stage in which their heart and mind become overwhelmed with the love and glorification

of the Almighty, and will see with both their physical sight and spiritual insight that everything in this universe totally submits to God, subservient to His will and tendered by His mercy and compassion. As many Muslim scholars and sages have testified, worshippers who attain this level are the happiest of people.

Western psychology, in general, and psychotherapy, in particular, have for many years been led astray by secular theories and practices that were finally discredited as inappropriate, useless or at times outright harmful. However, with the advent of the contemporary cognitive revolution, Western psychotherapists are finally beginning to recognize the great influence of consciousness and mind in their patients, which would eventually lead them to respect their religious and spiritual beliefs. Thus, after many years of wandering in the desert of soulless theories, psychotherapy is finally returning to the common sense practices of cognitive healing that has always been used to help the emotionally disturbed. These cognitive therapeutic methods were meticulously studied and described by our ancient Muslim physicians and healers.

Many young science students think that scientists must strictly follow the steps of empirical, inductive and deductive methods when striving to invent new technologies or discover new phenomena. However, these clearly defined steps for identifying a problem, formulating a hypothesis, experimenting and collecting data and testing the hypothesis – which are thoroughly studied by all undergraduate science students – are simply broad guidelines. In fact, deep thinking and contemplation which involves intuition are much more common than scientists would be willing to confess.

As Muslim professionals, we should be careful in following such a secular trend. Even if a psychological event or theory has been repeatedly confirmed by empirical evidence, we need to remind ourselves about the One Who created this psychological reality and look for the divine wisdom for such a principle. In accepting any learning theory or practice, we should always attribute it to the principles and ways that God has chosen to bestow us with knowledge and be thankful to Him, since no human will gain any form of knowledge without His permission as He states in the Qur'an.



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## Notes

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