

## **A BOOK REVIEW: CONTEMPLATION; AN ISLAMIC PSYCHOSPIRITUAL STUDY.**

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**Accepted date:** 16 November 2017    **Published date:** 8 January 2018

**To cite document:** Mamat I., Mukhtar M. (2017). A Book Review: Contemplation; An Islamic Psychospiritual Study. *International Journal of Education, Psychology and Counseling*. 2(6), 258-267.

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**Abstract:** *This is a book review for English translation entitled “Contemplation; An Islamic Psychospiritual Study”. Its original Arabic edition is Al-Tafakkur min al-Mushahadah ila al-Shuhud. In this work, the author approaches a highly important subject from both an Islamic and modern psychological perspective. He examines the Islamic injunction to contemplate and judge according to the guidance of honest and calm thought.*

*He also examines the meaning and importance of contemplation as a form of worship. Delving into the true meaning and experience of Islamic spirituality, based on a person’s awareness and recognition of his existence and place in creation, the author reveals the limitations and contradictions of the current prevailing school of psychology that deny the existence of the soul and perceive humans as mere machine acting on external stimuli.*

*Combining the rich traditional Islamic wisdom with contemporary knowledge, the author advances a unique approach to the understanding of the human psyche and the self that gives a central position to meditation and contemplation as forms of worship in Islam. This book is addressed to anyone who is interested in the Islamic approach towards the urgency felt by modern societies who are yearning for the rediscovery of the long-forgotten and neglected spiritual aspects of their lives.*

**Keywords:** *Contemplation, al-Tafakkur, Psychology, Psychospiritual, Behaviourism*

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## Introduction

This book is written by Malik Babikir Badri (known as Malik Badri), He was born on 16.2.1932, married with 7 children ranging in age from 4 to 38 years. He obtained B.A. (with Distinction) from the American University of Beirut in 1956, Diploma of Education (Distinction) from the American University of Beirut in 1956, M.A. from the same university in 1958, and Ph.D. from the University of Leicester, England in 1961. He holds a Postgraduate Certificate of Clinical Psychology from Academic Department of Psychiatry, Middlesex, Hospital, Medical School, London University, 1967.

He was a Fellow of the British Psychological Society (F.B.Ps.S), 1977 (Division of Clinical Psychology), Chartered Psychologist (C.Psychol.) of the British Psychological Society, 1989. He got a valid Practising Certificate of the British Psychological Society. He is a Clinical Fellow Behaviour Therapy and Research Society, Temple University, USA, since 1985.

He was an Assistant Professor in American University of Beirut, Lebanon (1962–64), a Visiting Professor and the Head of the Department of Psychology, University of Jordan, 1965. He was an Appointed Reader in Psychology in the Department of Psychology and Education and Director of Counseling and Guidance Unit, Omdurman Islamic University, Sudan (1967–71), promoted to Full Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology and appointed Director of the Psychological Clinic, University of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 1971–73 and 1974–77, appointed as a UNESCO Expert in Psychology, Academy of Pedagogy, Bahar Dar, Ethiopia, 1973–74, the Dean of the Faculty of Education of the University of Khartoum and the Head of the Department of Applied Psychology, 1977–80, a Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology and senior clinical psychologist in the Medical Clinic of Imam Mohamad bin Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 1981–82 and 1984–85.

He was the Dean of the Faculty Education and acting Vice Chancellor, University of Juba, Southern Sudan (on secondment from the University of Mohamad bin Saud), 1983–84, and re-appointed as a professor of Psychology, Department of Psychology, University of Khartoum, Sudan, 1985–92. During the academic years 1986–89 he was asked to establish the Faculties of Islamic Studies and Education in the International African University, Khartoum, and to serve as Dean to these two Faculties besides his job as professor in the University of Khartoum.

He joined the Department of Psychology of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), in June 1992 and served as professor of psychology until July 1999, appointed as a professor of psychology in the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in July 1994, a postgraduate Institute affiliated with IIUM.

He is also a member of the Editorial Board of the Egyptian Journal of Psychological Studies, published in Cairo, editor of the Ahfad University Journal, published in Khartoum. Member of the Editorial Board of al-Nafs al-Mutmaina, Journal of mental Health, published in Cairo, member of the Editorial Board of al-Muslim al-Mu'asir, published in Cairo, member of the Editorial Board of Changes, a British international journal of psychology and psychotherapy, published by the British Assoc. of Psychology and Psychotherapy.

### ***The Aim and Central Idea of The Book:***

This book was first published in Arabic edition, *Al-Tafakkur min al-Mushahadah ila al-Shuhud*, in Cairo in 1991. In this work, Malik Badri approaches a highly important subject from both an Islamic and modern psychological perspective. The Arabic title, which can be translated “Contemplation from perception to spiritual cognition”, reveals the author’s intention to progress from the stage of sensory perception, which is the basis of experimental science, to the stage of cognition and insight which is implied by the Prophet in his explanation of *ihsan*: “It is when you worship God knowing that, even if you cannot see Him, He sees you”.

This book with the title “*Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study*”, with an introduction by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, was first published by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) and printed by Cambridge University Press, London, in 1420 / 2000 CE. It is published in Malaysia by Madeena Books by the permission from IIIT.

Malik Badri examines the Islamic injunction to contemplate and judge according to the guidance of honest and calm thought. He also examines the meaning and importance of contemplation as a form of worship. Delving into the true meaning and experience of Islamic spirituality, based on a person’s awareness and recognition of his existence and place in creation, Malik Badri reveals the limitations and contradictions of the current prevailing school of psychology that deny the existence of the soul and perceive humans as mere machine acting on external stimuli.

### ***The Methodology and Style of Presentation:***

It contains 9 chapters, and several sub-topics for each; notes, bibliography, index of Quranic citations and general index for easy reference, in 136 pages. As being mentioned by the author in his introduction, this book is, in many ways different from the original written in Arabic, as he has updated and rectified some of its content, including the title, and he has also added new material amounting to more than fifty-two pages – almost half of its original size.

Writing for English readers requires slight change in content and style because of having to produce a faithful translation to the verses of the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad SAW, also applies to quotations of beautiful Arabic prose and poetry. This is because Arabic is a very articulate language with words and expressions that are not found in English, for instance the words *khushu’*, *istislam*, *yaghibit*, *hasad*, *tafakkur* etc.

In his work, as commented by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, the author has chosen to liberate himself from the pressure of the behaviorist school of psychology which was established by J. B. Watson and is endorsed by many universities and research centers. The behaviorist school reduces all human intellectual and complex activities to a series of stimuli and responses, in order to turn psychology into a strictly experimental science.

They have even gone so far as to consider human beings as mere instruments that simply need to be exposed to certain environmental stimuli in order to obtain the responses expected by the researcher.

The author criticizes this approach, stating that modern psychology has lost its mind after having lost both its soul and its consciousness. He also denounces the attempt of the materialists to turn psychology into a material science, like physics or chemistry, because he believes strongly that, unlike matter, human beings cannot be controlled. He refutes their claim that the thinking mind is nothing but reflections of the inherent changes in the chemistry of the brain and its electrochemical reactions.

He uses historical, analytical and comparative approach. He has made use of the achievements of cognitive psychology which override all the schools and tried to imprison human behavior in a narrow theoretical impasse, and proves that was already established by Islam: namely that contemplation of the signs of God, of the self and of creation, is central to an individual's faith and is the source of every good.

He has successfully invalidated the wrong concepts of modern psychology by highlighting those concrete authorities from al-Quran, al-Hadith and those of great scholars of Islam like Ibn Qayyim, Al-Ghazali, al-Balkhi and others. In some cases, he appreciates a few aspects of modern psychology.

As far as this great work is concerned, the author uses a very consistent and effective methodology, where he, in some chapters, highlights the connection between the chapter with the previous chapter in the beginning; and concludes the chapter by giving the summary of the content of that respective chapter as well as the main idea of the next chapter.

### **Analysis and Evaluation of The Contents**

The Arabic edition, *Al-Tafakkur min al-Mushahadah ila al-Shuhud* has generated a very positive response and at times spirited remarks from scholars. Some admitted that the book had greatly improved their practice of worship and believed that it would have the same effects on others. Since then, the book has been reprinted and has been reviewed in various professional journals that have considered it a best seller. It has also been used as a postgraduate reference for Islamic psychology and education in various Arab universities.

The author hopes that the exposition made in this book will be helpful to Muslim lecturers who still teach Islamic ethics from Western psychoanalytically oriented textbooks on the psychology of religion. Though they claim to be Islamizing psychology, they may be unknowingly secularizing Islam.

This book is extremely important, not only for those directly involved in the field of psychology, but also for all Muslims, because it gives a very clear picture regarding the Islamic concept of psychology and the status of 'contemplation' as a form of worship.

Yusuf al-Qaradawi states in the introduction of the book that, it is an example of how human sciences can support faith and spiritual values, and how, when a mind is guided by the Quran and the Sunnah, it will be graced by the light of faith and the light of revelation, as well as the guiding light of reason.

In his other book "*The Dilemma of Muslim Psychologist*", Malik Badri undertakes the discussion on psychology in a rather different content and approach. In that book, he highlights the phenomenon of 'the Lizard's Hole' within the Muslim ummah, which signifies the blind following of the ways of the Christians and Jews, as mentioned by the Prophet in his Hadith, in spite of the obvious absurdity and unIslamic qualities of some of these ways.

At the academic level, in the field of social science, this phenomenon of unadapted wholesale copying is most clearly illustrated. Theories and practices which are largely the product of Judaeo-Christian Western civilization have long tenure and have dominated the social science departments of universities in Muslim countries. In addition to it, the press, radio and television have helped to establish these alien concepts among the Muslim masses.

In this book, he discusses about the dangers of the blind copying among the Muslim psychologists. He also gives some concrete examples from his own experiences both as a university professor and a psychotherapist. He says that, unthinking repetition of Western theories and practices in the discipline of psychology probably presents one of the most serious threats to the status of Islamic ideology among our Muslim scholars and laity.

He says that, Western psychologists propound theories about man's personality, motivation and behavior which are in many ways contradictory to Islam. These theories and their applications are carefully sugar-coated with the attractive cover of "science". Besides the dissimilarities, both books give special emphasis to behaviorism and psychoanalysis since these are the main schools dominating psychology in the West and in the Muslim world. He introduces the readers to the modern father of behaviorism, Skinner, according to whom, man's religious life is reduced to nothing but conditioned responses and reflexes. Some behaviorists even explain man's belief in God and prayer rituals which exalt Him, in such lowly terms as the superstitious behaviour of hungry pigeons, endlessly repeating specific movement which just happened to coincide with a reinforcement in a Skinner's box.

In both books Malik Badri stresses that, when studying Western academic psychology, the Muslim psychologist should make an effort to study the philosophical background and history of behaviorism. Besides, he also should guide against the blind acceptance of allegedly experimentally based psychological theory about general human behaviour and practices, and should critically examine the disguised beliefs and culture-bound assumptions behind their formulations.

However, according to Malik Badri, Muslim nations can make use of some contributions of the Western psychologists, without being affected by their philosophical background. He gives some examples of those contributions, *inter alia*, in the disciplines of physiological and psychiatry. Those disciplines have developed efficient techniques for dealing with psychological sufferings. Though, as we have seen, the philosophy underlying some of these

methods may be an anti-religious one, at least in a disguised implied manner, the very useful techniques that have evolved from them have acquired some sorts of autonomous neutrality.

In those books also, he gives an account about some of the useful activities which a Muslim psychologist can carry out in order to put his professional training in the service of Islam and the welfare of Muslims. Those are regarding psychotherapy in the service of Islam, the Islamic psychometrician, educational psychology in the cause of Islam, the Islamic social psychologist. This is what, according to him, a Muslim psychologist, outside the lizard's hole can do. Malik Badri has introduced three distinct phases in the process of getting into and out of the lizard's hole; these are the infatuation, reconciliation and liberation phases, to conclude his discussion in this book.

### ***Summary of The Contents:***

In Chapter One, (*Contemplation: A Modern Psychological Perspective*), the author states that, since the Muslim laity and most students of psychology in the East are still dazzled by whatever is exported to them from the west, he realized the importance of starting the book with this chapter (p.1). Although Islamic contemplation can achieve the relaxing benefits of meditation, it differs from all other forms of meditative procedures, the goal of which is a deeper insightful knowledge of God as the Sustainer and Creator of the universe.

Malik Badri highlights the stand of behaviorist school, where learning could be studied via stimuli and observable responses and became the basis of psychology. Humans were considered as mere machines that, when exposed to specified stimuli, would react with responses which the researcher could control and predict (p.2). They emphasize the role of the environment as the only influence responsible for the development of human personality and behavior. The cognitive psychologists are more concerned with the meanings produced by these experiences. They affirm that people's conscious thinking and inner dialogues influence their feelings and emotions, and form their attitudes and beliefs.

This chapter simplifies and summarizes the latest achievements of psychology in the field of human thinking and cognitive activities to show the contemplation, as a form of worship, in directing the behavior of Muslims and enhancing their faith. He concluded the first chapter by stating that, if the discussion is transferred from the cognitive therapy of the emotionally disturbed to the cognitive activity of normal Muslims, one can clearly see the great influence of the cognitive process involved in contemplation in remodeling the psyche of individuals, especially if the spiritual or faith factor is added (p. 20).

The author starts off Chapter Two (*Contemplation: The Works of Early Muslim Scholars*) by stating that, it took Western psychology more than seven decades to return to the 'common sense' recognition of the influence of thinking and cognitive process in shaping human beliefs, attitude and external behavior. Indeed, cognitive principles and practices which have only recently impressed modern Western psychology were already known centuries ago by early scholars of Islam, like Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, al-Balkhi, al-Ghazali, Mishkawayh, Ibn Taymiyyah and many others (p. 21).

The author further lists down the works of these scholars which are notable and far more advanced compared to those of Western scholars. Those Muslims scholars mentioned the importance of notions, reflections, and ideas that cross the mind and can grow to become drives and incentives that are carried out in real life, and when repeated become habits. They have genuine advice to those who wanted to perform good deeds, urging them to watch their notions and internal ideas to remember God constantly, and to meditate on and contemplate the creation of the heavens and the earth (p.22).

Malik Badri presents an outline of the four stages through which believers pass in their journey from perception to recognition: sensory perception, appreciation, then awe-inspiring contemplation and cognition. He then says that, people's contemplation does not have to be limited to the contemplation of beautiful or exquisitely constructed object in this universe, which contains both the beautiful and the ugly, the great and insignificant, the good and the evil (p. 34). Later on, he illustrates his point by referring to the story of Qarun as mentioned in the Quran (28:76-82).

Chapter Three (*Islamic Contemplation and Modern Procedures*) has a close connection with the previous chapters. The main aim of meditation as an Islamic form of worship is cognitive, intellectual and spiritual: to elevate the Muslims' cognizance of their Creator. These cognitive aspects mentioned in Chapter Two are discussed in detail in this chapter.

The author discusses the negative and positive influences of passions, emotions, beliefs and other cognitive activities that involve the process of contemplation on human psychological health. He has summarized several studies that show how people can afflict themselves with psychophysiological maladies or weaken their immunity system to microbial diseases, or how they can cure themselves and raise themselves into a higher level of existence. He also emphasizes the role of contemplation in the West and mentioned some of the simple steps that can be adopted for the practice of meditation as a therapy (34-44).

It is a very touching statement by the author when he highlights that, "the directions given by the therapists in books and educational tapes of 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 *salah*, absorbed in contemplating the grace of God, His grandeur and the precision of His creation incessantly repeating the words of praise and glorification of the Almighty" (p.44). This is capable of making us feel grateful of becoming a Muslim.

He also says that Islamic contemplation is based on the progression from meditating on the creation to its Creator. It is a smooth rational movement, since the Islamic faith is uncorrupted by any association of creatures or object with the Almighty or any polytheistic deviation (p.49) Islamic contemplation is a form of worship that binds the mind with the heart, the rational with the emotional and the sensible with the passionate, so that sober contemplators may be in a better spiritual state in which their prayers will be more acceptable. Malik Badri proves the Islamic concept of contemplation by referring also to some statements of al-Hasan al-Basri, Ibn al-Qayyim and Ibn Taymiyyah.

Chapter Four (*The Quran and the Contemplation of God's Creation*) consists of several sub-topics. Under the first sub-topic *Inspiration of the Nature of God and His Exalted Attributes*, the author lays down some Quranic verses which repeat the doctrine of, that true Islamic

contemplation can only spring from a heart that believes in God and a mind that submits to Him and His Exalted Attributes, not to others.

The sub-topic *Reminders of the Favors of God* is about the Quranic verses regarding the contemplation that can generate a feeling of compassionate mercy and love, by mentioning the graced and favour of God. The other sub-topics are about *Reprimand for Unrelenting Hearts*, *Praise for the Pious*, *Appeals to the Innate Aesthetic Sense*, *The Almighty's Own Faith in His Creation* and *Islamic Encouragement to Self-Contemplation*.

The shortest chapter, Chapter Five (*Contemplation as an Unrestricted Form of Worship*) shows how contemplation of the universe is an unrestricted spiritual activity. 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 of time, place or the nature of things. He shows how the Quran encourages the practice of contemplation in a number of verses.

Concerning the freedom of contemplation, the Quran calls for meditation on the natural creation of God in which the human hand plays no part, such as the heavens, the mountains and the seas. 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*) discusses the issue of whether the contemplation of unseen phenomena is also free from any restriction. The findings reveal that believers are prohibited from contemplating the Divine being, but they are free to contemplate everything else. In proving so, the author highlights the very authentic evidences from the Quran, Sunnah, statements from Sahabah and doctrine of some proponent Islamic scholars like al-Muhasibi, Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and al-Ghazali.

Chapter Seven (*Individual Levels of Contemplation*) is further sub-divided into several sub-topics, which are rather, the nine dimensions and variables that seems to interrelate in the formation of the differences between individuals in the degrees of contemplation and meditation. Those are *Depth of Faith*, *Depth and length of Concentration*, *Emotional and Mental State of the Contemplator*, *Environmental Factors*, *Influence of Culture*, *Believers' Knowledge of the Subjects of Contemplation*, *Good Example and Influence of Companions*, *Nature of the Objects of Contemplation* and *Familiarity of the Objects of Contemplation* (pp.67-91).

Malik Badri concludes the chapter by saying that, "although this chapter has examined the most important factors leading to individual differences among believers, it is obvious that each believer has his or her own circumstances and individual life experiences which have their own bearing on the entire process of contemplation (p.91).

Chapter Eight (*Experimental Science and Religion: The Cosmic Laws*) is the second last chapter. It undertakes a comparative study between the experimental science and religion. Dr. Malik Badri says that, some of those people - whose hearts, ears, eyes and minds are closed to the distinct signs of God, even though these are displayed before them – may have knowledge of the signs of God through the laws they discover relating to matter, energy and biology.

However, this knowledge does not take them beyond the superficial external aspects, or transport them from the wonders of the creation of the Creator.

This crossing from the observed physical, psychosocial and biological phenomena to the Creator marks the difference between the practice of non-Muslim experimental scientists and Muslim contemplation.

Besides, there are some similarities between these experimental science and Muslim contemplation. For example, in the use of conscious and close observation using the senses of hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch in the early steps; in their initial observation, that, they are not looking for the diverse and unrelated detailed components of the objects of study, but their general and more pertinent aspects.

He further shares with the readers some experiences of Muslim psychologists in comparison between those of the experimental scientists. The experiences reveal that Muslim scholars like al-Ghazali, Mustafa Mahmud, Ali bin Abi Talib, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah al-Zamakhshari, are much more successful in their efforts. Those are also examples of the profound contemplation of early scholars and worshippers which show their ability to delve into great depth to discover the laws of His Creation (pp. 92-100).

He also adds that both Muslim and non-Muslim researchers will receive the same material reward and renown and both will find pleasure and exiting fulfilment in overcoming the problems of their research. However, sincere Muslim researchers their reward will be more meaningful, for the are actually performing the highest form of worship, all their efforts will be rewarded, they will be more motivated and such useful contribution to community will be considered as a constant charity. Unfortunately, Muslim students do not seem to understand and realize this. He mentions the wrong concepts propounded by some Western thinkers and compares it with the findings of Muslim scholars and supports them with some Quranic verses. He also recognizes a few opinions of non-Muslim scholars regarding the God and religion.

The materialistic secular had inverted the warm attachment between mankind and the nature to become a perpetual war and struggle. He suggests that the modern world urgently needs to terminate the war by reuniting science and nature in eternal harmony. Then, the genuine scientist and scholars will be like Ibn al-Haytham, Jabir ibn Hayyan and al-Khawarizmi, who attain their great scientific achievements by contemplating God's creation with open heart and discerning mind.

The concluding chapter, Chapter Nine (*Conclusion*) tries to summarize and conclude the whole discussion given in this great small book. The author addresses his hopes and suggestions to the readers and the whole aspiring readers to benefit from what he has served them in the book. Some of those suggestions and hopes can be summarized as follow:

To benefit from the discussion on the individual differences between Muslim contemplators in attaining a high degree of cognitive insight and the nine factors that influence this activity.

To explore the spiritual endowment, inherited ability to concrete and the positive environmental conditions.

To look for bad habits and other disturbing aspects that deter him from contemplating in order to get rid of them and neutralize them with counter factors.

To improve the ability to contemplate as well as in the practices that are more suitable for them.

That the first two chapters to be an eye opener for those in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy, particularly those who are still emulating Western models.

He stresses that Western scientists hold on to say the materialistic explanation because they do not want to transcend the physical; God, or even the “spiritual” are not recognized as possible means to explain a phenomenon. We, as Muslims should take his advice that he mentions in the last sentences of this book;

“As Muslim professionals we should be careful in following such secular trend. Even if a psychological event or theory have been repeatedly confirmed the 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 Quran” (p.118).