

# ISLAMIC COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

## TRENDS IN THEORY DEVELOPMENT

Islamic counselling and psychotherapy is a discipline that is vaguely defined. Information that is available on this topic is often limited in quantity and perspective to form the theoretical basis necessary to constitute a model of intervention for Islamic Counselling. Indeed in discussions with social service practitioners this lack of a coherent Islamic counselling methodology is frequently expressed. It is not unusual to find that counselling professionals find themselves at a loss to intervene effectively with clients who adhere to an Islamic value system especially when it is at variance with their own. For the client this situation is commonly experienced as an inability on the side of the practitioner to fully understand him/her. Given that Islamic counselling is not yet in a form where its actual implementation can be monitored, it first requires guidelines that can be integrated into a theoretical framework, a purpose to which this article is directed.

Islamic counselling is not a new concept. When studying its historical location, a distinction may be made between cultural and professional modes of Islamic counselling. In the former, counselling is not an explicit exercise, but alluded to in the religio-cultural rituals of Muslim communities. In the case of the latter, we set Islamic counselling as a formal discourse, comparable with mainstream, predominantly western counselling paradigms.

### **Islam Counselling –Cultural Mode**

If counselling is to be equated with giving advice and guidance then it dates back to the beginning of time, having an array of practitioners including shamans and sangomas, friends and family, prophets, priests and soothsayers. Islamic counselling in a cultural mode is not an explicit process. It manifests as part of ritual healing practices. While these practices do not constitute formal counselling, it has been shown to hold the same therapeutic value as mainstream counselling approaches. This has been attested to by case studies drawn from the Negev, India and Morocco all in the psychotherapeutic

validity and healing capacity of such practices.<sup>1</sup>

In the Islamic cultural counselling model, the main “working framework” is an understanding of mental illness as spirit or *jinn / jnun* (pl.) possession. The existence of *jnun* is attested to in the Quran and thought of as spiritual beings composed of vapour or flames. They are imperceptible to the senses but have the capacity to make themselves visible in various forms. *Jnun* may be both male and female and are believed to physically strike or possess a person, quite incidentally, with the person her/himself ignorant of the misdeed that leads to such an affliction. *Jinn* possession is also thought to occur either through sorcery or on account of the *Jinn*'s own desire for a person. The result is incapacitating physical and psychological symptoms that interfere with the personal, social and spiritual well being of the person.

In the treatment process a healer relies on a repertoire of ritualistic communication with the spiritual world. Interventions is based on dialogue with the spirits, reading the Quran, invocation of saints for assistance, prayer, playing music, dancing, and beating spirits out of the “clients” body. The use of geometric and natural symbols as well as an array of talismans and amulets to protect the “client” and avert the spirits, add to the efficacy of the healing process. Visits to saint’s tombs to obtain the blessing (*baraka*) of a saint thought to have intercessionary power with God and therefore able to grant special favours to the “client”, as well as following Islamic principles throughout the course of recovery, are other important aspects included in the healing process.

It is clear in these cases how Islamic religious resources can be therapeutically and effectively used in helping processes. The cultural model functions as a system of therapy in so far as it employs a structured set of procedures to rehabilitate individuals. While the language is different from that employed in Western psychological idiom, the alleviation of symptoms and the restoration of personal and social functioning are as effective. In this context, then, it is asserted that when clients from non-western societies are referred to western mental health services for treatment, they do not abandon their perceptions, culture or belief systems of disease or medicine. Where this is overlooked, or mental health practitioners are unfamiliar with a client’s culture, miscommunication between the client and practitioner results, which lead to problems in therapy. Collaborative efforts between modern therapeutic models and the help of

traditional healers can prove effective in leading to the recovery of clients.

The cultural counselling practices add weight to a rationale for Islamic counselling in a modern context. They provide guidelines and prescriptions of what is expected in Islamic cultural counselling and identify considerations that should be borne in mind when working with Muslim clients. However, modern clients do not necessarily want to participate in such practices and therefore a more explicitly defined method of Islamic counselling is necessary consistent with professional standards.

### **Islamic counselling – Professional Mode**

Islamic counselling and psychotherapy from a professional perspective is of recent origin. Few scholars have addressed this area of study in a significant way, beyond assertions that Islamic counselling needs to be developed into a well structured discourse that captures the breath and spirit of Islam in helping people. These contributions are usually directed at the presence of mainstream western counselling paradigms as a dominant force in counselling and social intervention. The following short exposition contextualises this discussion.

Professional counselling and psychotherapy are two separate but closely linked disciplines that are for most part treated equivalently. They are generally understood as disciplines that involve help and healing, and by which counsellors interact with clients to assist them to learn about themselves, deal with their environments, and understand the roles and responsibilities inherent in these relations. The role of emotions in causing psychological and emotional disturbances is central to understanding and helping clients. Individuals, are thus aided to recognise their potential, learn how to utilise this potential, and work towards removing obstacles that block full realisation of their capabilities.

The counselling profession evolved at the turn of the twentieth century in the United States in response to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation with its concomitant human resource needs and humanitarian concerns. A confluence of social and economic problems together with a milieu of a new and emerging democracy resulted in increased pressure to assist people to make choices in various areas of their lives. Frank Parsons, a

pioneer of the vocational guidance movement of this time, and instrumental in addressing the prevailing concerns through formal vocational counselling, is credited with giving professional counselling its historical roots.

Interestingly, from a global perspective, this view is radically challenged by writers who locate the roots of modern concepts of vocational counselling to a tenth century Iraqi text, the *Rasa'il Ikhwan al-Safa wa-Khillan al-Wafa* or Treatises of the Brothers of Purity. They identify this text as the earliest in Arabic concerned with the fundamental tenets of Parson's work. It contains fifty-one Arabic treatises written around 955 AD by Muslim reformers from the Basra region of Iraq who called themselves the *Ikhwan al-Safa*<sup>2</sup>. In attempts to reform the sciences in the tenth century Islamic world they surveyed all the learned disciplines and classified it under two headings viz. traditional and foreign. The former pertained to disciplines based on the Quran, the latter to those emerging from human invention. Vocational psychology was located in the foreign science category and included treatises on human character and personality. Based on this information these writers have concluded that the basic elements of vocational counselling was identified a millennium ago by Islamic philosophers.

Be this as it may, if Islamic counselling is thought of in professional terms, it could be assumed that what would constitute Islamic counselling, is a confluence of the above elements of counselling and psychotherapy with the central tenets of Islam. This is acceptable in as far as it provides a broad purpose for Islamic counselling by linking it with an overarching intent of helping clients attain positive change in their lives. However, as counselling theories take on various philosophical positions such an analysis can become quite problematic. This is especially so given the nature and scope of Islam as a religious worldview, and debates on Islamic counselling that call for the rejection of western counselling theories. Application of Islamic principles to theories outside the realm of Islam or using concepts from mainstream counselling to inform an Islamic approach is therefore discouraged.

In such arguments it is often asserted that Western psychologies are devoid of religion and foster distorted concepts of humankind that are rooted in materialism. Counselling that is based on Islam is then forwarded as a feasible alternative.

However, given the difficult task of articulating an Islamic counselling methodology writers of such positions do simultaneously concede that western psychotherapy and psychiatry has its merits in dealing with psychological suffering and behaviour modification. What is proposed then is that Muslims use the positive aspects of western counselling, integrate it with the spiritual, and develop Islamic psycho-spiritual counselling methodologies that would facilitate positive change in Muslim clients.

Exploring the Quran, the Sirah of the Prophet and his traditions, as well as the biographies of the Prophet's companions, will provide detailed instructions for implementing successful therapy. In the main, though, it is Sufism (tasawwuf), the mystical tradition of Islam, which is credited with providing the basis for Islamic psychology. It is forwarded as the main frame of reference from which to develop a professional Islamic counselling approach.

At a fundamental level Sufism posits human spiritual development through a series of stations and states to attain nearness to Allah. The Quran and *hadith* are continuously reflected upon and union with Allah (*ittihad*) and the realisation of the oneness of Allah (*Tawhid*) are essential goals. This process, it is asserted, can be used as part of Islamic counselling to develop an Islamic personality that is balanced and directed towards pleasing God so that negative behaviour can be successfully overcome. Ultimately, absolute and constant contentment, which is possible through a consonance of the human psyche with Allah, should be sought. This remains the current focal point for theory development of professional Islamic counselling

## **Conclusion**

Clearly many dilemmas and opportunities are raised in attempts to formulate an Islamic Counselling paradigm. What is essential is that further efforts in this regard need to be directed to pertinent details of Islam and social concerns, with focused attempts that can see the concrete realisation of an Islamic counselling methodology.

It is worth noting that in the helping professions, the role of culture, diversity and identity is increasingly being emphasised as important factors that determine how people relate to themselves and their environments. As such, there have been many calls for the inclusion of cultural, religious, spiritual and similar issues into processes of social and personal change. Certainly, this broad area of cross-cultural counselling provides a

platform and a rationale from which to fervently begin to develop an Islamic counselling and psychotherapy methodology that would integrate varied levels of this discipline, be it theoretical or practical. This is particularly relevant in societies where secularisation of psychotherapeutic processes and detachments from spiritual origins have not occurred. Here traditional secular psychotherapy fails to meet the needs of religious clients and thus efforts towards rapprochement between religion and psychotherapy is necessary. Where agencies and helping professionals can embrace such paradigms, a humanness is promoted that encourages the positive exploration of diversity and culturally relevant intervention.

## ISLAMIC COUNSELLING PRACTICES IN THE WESTERN CAPE

The practical manifestation of Islamic service delivery by Muslim organisations is very different from the cultural and professional tenets indicated above. While counselling may reflect on some of the aforementioned assumptions, it is not the overarching focus. Many Muslim organisations are involved in Islamic counselling service delivery based on approaches that integrates Islam with general counselling techniques. Here the *Shariah*

Provides directives in how Muslims are to conduct themselves on various socio-legal matters and techniques from the overall disciplines of counselling and psychotherapy. This is particularly the case where professional social workers are employed at Muslim agencies. Alternatively a purely *Shariah* based approach is implemented in an instructive manner. In this latter instance Imams and Shaykhs (pl.) are more commonly individually involved in such counselling.

In the Western Cape the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) is the largest provider of Islamic counselling services in the form of marital counselling. It has a Social Welfare Department where clients are seen from Monday to Wednesday, and where urgent cases are attended to on Friday mornings as well. *Shariah* Court hearings are held on Thursdays to make decisions on the status of certain cases for *talaq* or *fasagh*. An estimated total caseload of 150 cases per week have been indicated. The Muslim Assembly likewise offers marital counselling together with structured ongoing counselling sessions and follow-up to clients. This service is conducted by a professional Social Worker and a judiciary consisting of four *Imams* and *Shaykhs* who make decisions on divorces. Counselling may also extend to affected persons e.g. children in cases of marital discord or divorce. Additional services offered are behavioural counselling, stress management and drug counselling and support.

The Islamic Dawah Movement of Southern Africa offers drug counselling as well. Marital counselling is again the focus of the Islamic Social and Welfare Association (ISWA). ISWA provides professional social services to communities of the Western Cape in general and to Muslim communities in particular. The organisation started in

1986 to seek solutions for an alarming increase in the divorce rates amongst Muslim people, as well as to respond to an overwhelming need for structured social services for Muslim clients. It has since developed into a fully fledged social welfare agency and includes in its services, general psycho-social counselling, specialised marital counselling, training of community workers, family reconstruction programmes, setting up of self-help projects, and childcare awareness programmes. A counselling service is also provided by the Mustadafin Foundation. However, here counselling is restricted to the presenting problems stage only and clients are referred to other appropriate agencies. It is important to note that all these agencies work closely with other state or private social welfare agencies. This is especially the case where presenting problems are beyond their field of expertise.

The above constitutes the main counselling service provision agencies for Muslim in the Western Cape. Counselling is not however limited to these agencies and many other Muslim agencies may be involved in counselling. The Islamic Unity Convention is generally acknowledged as a counselling service provider for Muslim clients. Details of which still needs to be verified. Usually most Muslim organisations or leaders do interact at the level of counselling with clients as a referral agency or as a first contact. In essence counselling is an active available social service that exists for Muslim clients. The extent to which it is implemented along Islamic lines are varied but essentially an integrative approach of Islam and general models is the preferred, and under the circumstances, the most workable and unavoidable model for now.

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