

Contemplation: An Islamic Psychospiritual Study

Malik B. Badri.

London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2000. 136 pages.

The book under review is a translated version of Badri's Arabic edition, *Al Tafakkur min al-Mushahadah ila al Shuhud*, first published in Cairo in 1991. This English text is intended for general readers as well as specialists, in the hopes of discussing and developing the author's ideas on Islamic contemplation. The book is divided into nine chapters with a section of notes at the end of the book, bibliography, index of Qur'anic citations, and a general index.

Chapter 1 deals with contemplation from a modern psychological perspective. It differentiates between Islamic contemplation and the meditation procedures offered by secular psychology. While meditation is primarily derived from eastern religions and aims at altering states of consciousness, Islamic contemplation is derived from Qur'anic injunctions and aims to seek insightful knowledge of God as the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Different schools of psychology are discussed in their inability to successfully deal with inner cognitive thought and feelings. This, the author contends, is a logical outcome of psychology's constant attempt to claim itself as "science" and its neglect of people's consciousness, mental processes, soul, and their spiritual essence. Although cognitive processes are now studied in psychology, modern psychology falls short of the spiritual vision of humankind and is obsessed with the "scientific" model, while ignoring the spiritual component, despite mounting evidence of its role in human lives.

Chapter 2 summarizes the works of certain early Muslim scholars and attempts to give a rationale for contemplation based both on recent scien-

tific developments in psychology and Islamic religious perspectives. Badri points out that what cognitive psychology has now achieved was already known to early Muslim scholars like Ibn al-Qayyim, al-Balkhi, al-Ghazali and Miskawayh, among others. Abu Zaid al-Balkhi, for instance, showed the influence of contemplation on health, and Ibn Qayyim wrote how any human act begins as an inner thought – this idea is now called “automatic thoughts” and claimed by Aaron Beck as his discovery in the 1970s. Ibn al-Qayyim asserted that actions could be sound when internal thoughts originate from a contemplation immersed in spiritual relationship with God. The chapter also covers al-Ghazali’s contributions to the theoretical and practical aspects of contemplation. Badri explains here that Islamic contemplation passes through four stages in the stated sequence: direct sensory perception, state of wonder at the excellence of the object, feelings of submission to the One who created the object, and finally “spiritual cognition,” which magnetizes the person towards God.

In chapter 3, the author compares Islamic contemplation with modern meditation techniques and discusses the benefits of meditation and its relationship to contemplation as an Islamic form of worship. At first, he discusses how Islamic rulings protect believers not only from alcohol, fornication and sodomy but also aid them in keeping themselves physically clean as a result of ablution etc., and physically fit, through five daily prayers and fasting. Next, he discusses recent research showing the value of thinking on a person’s physical and psychological health. Badri quotes findings of a scientific study in which the calming effects of Qur’anic recitation on the contemplator were recorded by sophisticated machines.

Chapter 4 is more specific about Quranic injunctions regarding contemplation, quoting many verses related to the nature and attributes of God, His favors upon humankind, reprimands for unrelenting hearts, praise for the pious, appeal to the innate aesthetic sense, God’s faith in His creation, and encouragement for self-contemplation. The author emphasizes that contemplation of God’s creation can be considered the greatest form of worship in Islam. He contends that if there were nothing else to contemplate except the existence of human beings it would be sufficient to cause people to submit to their Creator.

Chapter 5 consists of three pages only, and refers to contemplation as an “unrestricted” form of worship, which according to the author signifies that a person should travel through the earth unraveling God’s creations, thinking about the already extinct nations and the hereafter. The Qur’an

encourages us to think about the alteration of night and day, sailing of the ships in the oceans, the rain coming down from the sky, and says that indeed in them there are signs for the wise. This unrestricted contemplation would lead to a clearer vision of one's self and the universe, ultimately leading to a closeness with God.

In chapter 6, the author contends that the limit to unrestricted contemplation is the contemplation of God Himself, as "He only knows what He really is." While human beings imagine events, in reference to a certain time and place and from their own past experience, God is beyond such limitations. Badri points out that since humans have limited knowledge about the mind and soul in this world itself, how can they contemplate on the One Whom "no vision can grasp, but His grasp is over all visions (6:103)"? The author quotes a Hadith, which reads, "Contemplate the creation of God and not God Himself, for you can never give Him His due." Muslims are encouraged to contemplate death, barzakh, and the hereafter, because, although invisible, these are the creations of God and have similitude in this world.

Interesting questions are addressed in chapter 7 on the different degrees of contemplation and whether the level reached is proportionate to the effort made, whether there are individual differences in the ability to contemplate, and whether some creations are easier to contemplate. The author describes nine interrelating dimensions and variables determining human differences in the art of contemplation. The main factor in contemplation is faith: all other factors are secondary. This, the author explains in his equation as follows:

$$\text{Depth of Contemplation} = F (C+K+Q+...)$$

F represents faith measurable by identical units that increase or decrease according to the circumstances of the contemplator. C represents the ability to concentrate, K is knowledge of the object under contemplation, and the symbol Q represents the quality of the object. The equation tries to show that as the faith increases the depth of contemplation will also increase. If, however, factors besides faith increase, they will have a limited additive effect on contemplation resulting from the difference between adding figures versus multiplying them. When F is zero (total disbelief), the other factors will be worthless no matter how large, as multiplying them by a zero would result in a zero.

Chapter 8 is about experimental science, religion, and cosmic laws. The author laments the conditions of those who, despite immense knowledge, cannot go beyond the external meanings of things and their hearts, ears, eyes, and minds remain closed to the distinct signs of God. Crossing from the superficial meaning of things in one's surroundings and learning the secrets of the Divine law governing God's creations differentiates a Muslim from a non-Muslim scientist. Badri points out that to look for the signs of God and to explore how cosmic law operates is in the very nature of human beings and that is why scientists often speak the language of worshippers. Contemplative knowledge led Muslims to make discoveries in many fields, forming the basis of modern civilization.

Chapter 9 is the conclusion of the book, describing what is covered in previous chapters. Badri reiterates the significance of contemplation as evidenced in the Qur'an and in the sayings of the Prophet. A true contemplator, Badri argues, will see, through physical and spiritual means, how everything in the universe totally submits to God, and this perception will bring the ultimate happiness for the contemplator. Badri encourages his readers to explore their spiritual endowments, abilities to concentrate, and the environment in which contemplation could take place.

Although there are numerous books on the topic of contemplation written by different scholars, Badri's work is a breath of fresh air as it brings forth an Islamic perspective. A major strength of his work lies in referencing recent scientific studies which prove the points he is trying to make, foremost among which is the need for integrating science and religion. Another major contribution is Badri's materials on the early and medieval Muslim scholars in the area of psychology, which the modern West is either unaware of or has failed to acknowledge.

While the book is lengthy enough to give a comprehensive view of Islamic contemplation, it is concise enough to keep the reader focused. The language used is simple yet effective. The claim at the beginning of the book that it is meant for specialists as well as general readers holds well. One is guaranteed to be moved by the message Badri is trying to give to his readers. The book is no doubt a "must buy" for serious readers and especially those interested in the area of contemplation or psychology in general.

Amber Haque
Department of Psychology
International Islamic University Malaysia
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia