

# ISLAM AND COUNSELING: MODELS OF PRACTICE IN MUSLIM COMMUNAL LIFE

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the intersection of Islam and counseling. It argues that interventions comparable to Western counseling methods are evident in Islam and can be located in three sources of Islamic doctrine and practice. These sources are Muslim Personal Law (MPL), which regulates Muslim family life; Islamic traditional healing based on a model of spirit (*jinn*) possession; and Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. These disciplines each provide a framework for counseling in Islam and knowledge of its basic tenets as well as limitations in its application and can be useful for counselors, especially in Western societies, to achieve the goals of counseling when working with Muslim clients.

## **Islam and Counseling: Models of Practice in Muslim Communal Life**

Counseling is an important conduit for personal development. In its practice, a professional as a helper, and individuals or groups as clients, meet in an intimate encounter in which change is sought for the client. At the disposal of the counselor is a range of theories that s/he can draw on to achieve this end. In general, the traditional secular counseling paradigms of Psychoanalysis, Behaviorism, and Humanism have dominated approaches to guide this process. However, as studies in recent decades on counseling, particularly on multicultural counseling has shown, factors like culture, gender, identity, and religion are important aspects of well-being that influence the counseling encounter and its outcomes (Fuertes & Gretchen, 2001; Pederson, 1997; Sue and Sue, 1999). For clients to benefit fully from this process then, counselors would have to move beyond traditional counseling paradigms especially when working in diverse religious and cultural contexts (Alladin, 1999; Axelson, 1993; Tseng, 1999).

In society at present, assertions about diversity in counseling have profound relevance in the encounter between Western counselors and Muslim clients. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are inextricably linked in their origins in the Middle East. Yet, as current conflicts in this region and its global impact reveal, limited knowledge about Islam and Muslim communal life exists in Western societies and, in addition, is influenced by negative perceptions of Muslim people. (Hall and Livingston, 2006; Panagopoulous, 2006). At the same time, Muslim populations are rapidly growing in Western societies and as counselors increasingly encounter Muslim clients, and understanding how Islam intersects in the counseling relationship is important. Related to this is the centrality of Islam in Muslim help-seeking behavior; often clients' problems relate to religious concerns or Islam is their frame of reference to comprehend distress and to deal with problems (Inayat, 2002; Ypinazar & Margolis, 2006, p. 778). Further, war and violence with its concomitant traumas are escalating in Muslim societies. These traumatic experiences accompany Muslim movement and presence in Western societies as well, making appropriate counseling for Muslim clients an essential service.

To facilitate counseling intervention with Muslim clients, this article examines Islamic practices that resonate with traditional secular counseling. Focusing on two primary components of counseling, a theoretical framework and the counselor–client interaction, it surveys counseling forms in Muslim communities and presents this information as a means to assist counselors identify those factors which may affect their counseling outcomes with Muslim clients. The article argues that interventions comparable to Western counseling methods are evident in Islam and can be located in three sources of Islamic doctrine and practice. These are Muslim Personal Law (MPL), which regulates Muslim family life; Islamic traditional healing, based on the model of spirit (*jinn*) possession; and Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. Muslim Personal Law, Islamic traditional healing, and Sufism, are each an entrenched part of Muslim communal life in Islamic societies as well as amongst Muslim minorities in Western societies. They merge Qur'anic texts, the Prophetic example (*sunnah*), and Islamic law (*shari'ah*) in practices that are similar to traditional secular counseling methods and understanding these disciplines as Islamic counseling systems can support counseling outcomes with Muslim clients.

It is worth noting here that divergent views exist amongst Muslim communities about the validity of each of the above disciplines as intervention methods in contemporary Muslim society. Nonetheless, Muslims across a range of social strata participate in these services; often they choose them above traditional secular services because of their Islamic basis and only when they fail the client would secular services be an option (Hodge, 2005). Similarly, in the history of the Islamic world a record of medical practices in medieval times that included psychological treatment methods exists. Medieval Islamic medicine will not be covered in this paper as a source of Islamic counseling as it is not as distinct as the other approaches nor is it the basis of modern Islamic medicine, which as Adib (2004, p.701) observes, rely mainly on Western bio-medical models.

### **Muslim Personal Law as a Model of Counseling in Islam**

In Muslim communities, distinct avenues exist to deal with problems that require counseling. Given the collective nature of Muslim communities, elders or family members offer important support networks and resources to assist with problem resolution; however, one of the most common ways of seeking assistance is to consult with a religious leader or Imam for advice (Ali, Liu & Humedian, 2004; Johansen, 2005). In addition to offering spiritual and religious guidance, Muslims approach Imams for counsel on social and mental health issues and particularly marital and family problems (Osman, Milstein, & Marzuk, 2005). In this intervention, counseling takes on a particular form based on the teachings of the Qur'an, the Prophetic example, and Islamic law which are synthesized when the Imam advises the client on the fundamental tenets of Islam in relation to her/his problem. Since Imams typically deal with marital and family problems, MPL, the component of Islamic law that provides the legal framework for regulating family life in Islam, is the basis of their intervention. Marriage is at the center of MPL and consequently related matters including divorce, maintenance, child custody, and inheritance (Hodkinson, 1984; Nasir, 1990). Muslims consult with Imams because of their knowledge of MPL and their power to solemnize and annul marriages; they are therefore ideally suited to offer counsel in these matters.

The practice of MPL is similar to Western counseling as a milieu within which clients seek assistance from a suitably qualified person to deal with problems in their lives, while the Imam, in facilitating some sort of problem resolution, acts in a role comparable to that of a counselor. Consultation with an Imam is similar to counseling in its process of dialogue as well; clients communicate their concerns and the Imam listens and assesses their situation. In problem resolution, however, the Imam takes on a specific role as an advisor on MPL and informs clients about the dimensions of their problems and of possible solutions in relation to the precepts of MPL. His role in offering advice would be in accordance with the Qur'anic principles and teachings of the Prophet on sincere advice (*nasihah*), which emphasize a responsibility amongst Muslims to offer constructive advice to one another. Islam underscores the value of sincere advice in Muslim relations through recorded Prophetic sayings that state that Islam is sincere advice (Kamali, 2002; Siddiqi, 1971, p. 37).

An Imam may draw on various Islamic sources to guide his counsel, but MPL is primary in this process. In this respect, this intervention is notably more structured being firmly bound to specific legal rulings. In contrast to Western counseling models that are insight-oriented, MPL is then more direct and instructive. In fact, Dwairy (1998), in psychotherapeutic work with Arab clients, recommends that therapists limit discussion, take a directive stance and be more active in guiding treatment with traditional Muslim clients as this approach works better with these clients (p.157).

MPL is a common practice in Islamic and Western societies that resonates with traditional counseling, as a means to address problems of Muslim family life, it remains contentious. Difficulties emerge in the use in contemporary society of classical MPL as defined by its early patriarchal context to help Muslims, especially women, to deal with their problems. Classical MPL delineates gendered rights and responsibilities in Muslim family life. These include the requirement that women maintain a home and obey a husband, while men have the responsibility of financially supporting the family. Men also have power to impose their authority in their home and can limit the actions of a wife in certain matters like her presence in public (Hodkinson 1984, p.146; Nasir, 1990, p.39). Furthermore, a man may also marry up to four wives, and while different forms of divorce

exist in Islam that include options by which women can seek the dissolution of a marriage, men have the power of unilateral divorce over women. This divorce takes the form of a verbal repudiation “I divorce you,” which confirms a divorce. A larger framework of MPL laws determines the finality of divorce based on the number of time a man pronounces a divorce statement within specified periods. Divorce is revocable if a statement is pronounced less than three times and irrevocable after that. (Coulson, 1969, p.45). Lastly, when a marriage ends, a woman has to undergo a waiting period (*iddah*) and remains entitled to maintenance provision from her husband during this time. The husband has to continue to financially support his children while in cases of custody, by classical MPL, children are initially to stay with their mother and later with their father.

The practice of MPL in modern times is the subject of widespread debate. Scholars stress its context-specific nature highlighting its formulation in a society where roles and responsibilities were defined along strict gender lines; its principals follow gender divisions. These laws were also initial social reforms in early Islamic society as it moved away from prior excessive injustices against women; they are therefore subject to reinterpretation over time as societies change (Al-Hibri, n.d.; Esposito, 1982; Schacht, 1960). As a counseling form, though, MPL intervention is at the heart of Muslim family life and when Imams apply MPL in its classical form to assist clients, it becomes problematic as a counseling method, as it reinforces patriarchal relations and inequality against women in the family. For the counselor unfamiliar with Islam, cognizance of the practice of MPL can be helpful in assessing her/his intervention with Muslim clients. Accessing alternative resources within both the secular and Islamic environment to assist the client, as well as engaging in collaborative initiatives with appropriate role-players in a local Muslim community could likewise be advantageous.

### **Traditional Healing as a Model of Counseling in Islam**

Traditional healing, also referred to as indigenous healing, includes many therapeutic forms. Multicultural counseling provides a theoretical rationale for traditional healing models in particular, and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Illness, DSM-IV (2002), in its

formulation of culture-bound syndromes, outlines many conditions that relate to traditional healing as diagnostic categories. An in-depth overview of these diagnostic categories is beyond the scope of this paper, but they include, for example, conditions like rootwork that describes illness due to sorcery or witchcraft, *mal de ojo* or evil eye, and ghost sickness, all of which manifest in distressing physical and psychological symptoms.

Traditional healing in Muslim communities is widely practiced by local healers and many still access this service in the Muslim world (Ypinazar & Margolis, 2006, p.780). The model for understanding illness or personal problems here is spirit (*jinn*) possession. The solution is for a healer to exorcise the spirit, which then frees the person from an affliction. Jesus, who exorcised demons and spirits from those afflicted as described in the Gospels, offers a good example of this practice (Mathew, 12; Mark, 23). Islamic counseling, rooted in this culture, reflects this healing form. Here Islam merges with age-old cultural traditions of Muslim communities and healers known by different designations, which include *shaykh*, *derwish*, and *pir* depending on their geographical location, employ various rituals to heal a client. Like MPL, Islamic traditional healing is embedded in Muslim communities and is an option toward problem resolution for many. In general, though, its techniques, which include amulets to ward off evil spirits, trance states, and the ritual sacrifice of animals, make it controversial and it is often dismissed as quackery or, in some instances, banned in Muslim countries (Al-Issa, 2000).

The Qur'ān, in chapter seventy-two, attests though to the presence of spirits, which it describes as non-human beings made of fire and that are either good or bad in nature. In Muslim culture, as relates healing, these spirits are essentially bad, inflicting people with all sorts of maladies and affecting their well-being. Here the understanding of spirits is likewise that of imperceptible ethereal beings that may be male or female and composed of vapor but capable of manifesting in visible forms. Possession occurs either through sorcery or from the spirit's desire for a person. Malevolent penetrating looks by either human or spirit can have the same effect on those who are the target of such looks. Often spirits are thought to physically strike or possess a person incidentally with the person ignorant of the reason for the affliction in the first instance (Crapanzano, 1973). The result

is incapacitating physical and psychological symptoms that impede overall well-being.

A qualified traditional healer is a pious person conversant with the Qur'an and Prophetic example who knows relevant scriptural verses to apply in treatment. S/he is familiar with ritual techniques and by virtue of a special blessing as a gift from God that protects her/him from possession, is able to exorcise a spirit. In her/his intervention, the healer selects from a range of ritual techniques including communication with the spiritual world, dialogue with the spirits, invocation of saints for assistance and visiting their tombs, and prayers and Qur'anic recitation to facilitate the healing process (Al-Krenawi, 1997). The rituals are designed toward first driving the spirit from the body and later for the client to integrate into her/his life as part of ongoing recovery. While contentious, case studies affirm the efficacy of traditional healing as an Islamic counseling form and as having therapeutic outcomes similar to those of Western counseling, although within specific Muslim communal contexts only. Factors like a communal belief in these methods as Islamic, the view of a healer as a channel for the divine, the use of venues like a mosque, which radiates sacred space, as well as its cultural familiarity, which makes it less stigmatizing, facilitates effective treatment (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 1997; Crapanzano, 1973; Smith 1995).

In Islamic traditional healing, one can again discern elements of counseling in that a suitably trained person intervenes to restore the well-being of a client. The healer works within a specific understanding of health and applies associated methods to achieve change for the client. Studies support its value. At the same time, many Muslims do not believe in this healing form nor consider it Islamic, which in these instances would make its use inappropriate. Further, evidence suggests that Islamic traditional healing works mainly for treating neurotic symptoms and minor ailments, as opposed to severe mental or physical illness where it will fail (Razali, 1999, p. 472). For the counselor working with Muslim clients, knowledge of this healing system, knowledge of its idiom and local practice and how it may relate to a client's problems and behavior, can nonetheless support the counseling outcomes for the client.

## Sufism as a Model of Counseling in Islam

Sufism is the mystical tradition of Islam. Sufis trace their origins to Islamic teachings, which they believe succeeding generations of the Prophet passed on over time and established in Sufism. As a structured discipline, Sufism developed into a distinct system of thought and practice in the late 10th century, emphasizing a definable course of personal and spiritual development in relation to the divine with the ultimate goal of attaining union with the divine (Arberry, 1950; Nicholson, 1975). Sufism, however, extends significantly beyond this structured approach to spirituality, and has historically been influenced by its specific local contexts and diverse expressions of Islam (Morris, 1993). According to Murata and Chittick (1994), in its wider sense Sufism is an interiorization of Islam based on a vision of the unity of God (*tawhid*). Practically it requires adherents to follow the example of the Prophet and to embody the Qur'an in order to attain awareness of God in everything and to actualize the divine qualities within oneself.

This section concentrates on the structured approach to Sufism for it is in this form that it is associated with counseling. In this process, a novice with the assistance of a trained Sufi master (*shaykh*), as her/his guide, embarks on a path to God. The master is indispensable to the Sufi system, according to Michon (1987), "a condition sine qua non for spiritual success" (p.271). For the master, initiation into Sufism is through a chain of the unbroken transmission of esoteric knowledge directly from the Prophet. For the Sufi disciple, initiation may occur through personal resolve to take up the spiritual path or in rare circumstance as if divinely inspired. The disciple's initiation from the onset requires that s/he show a desire to serve God and humanity and show a commitment to act according to the master's guidance (Nurbakhsh, 1980). According to Ajmal (1987), in their interaction, a disciple expresses her/his concerns to the Sufi master who then deals with these concerns by directing the disciple to the goal of detachment from the world and to the presence of God (p.302).

In general, the process, starts with repentance (*tawba*) or the conscious resolve to abandon the worldly life and commit oneself to the service of God (Arberry 1979, p.75); or as al-Qushayri, who is credited with the classical formulation of Sufism notes, "to return

from that which is blameworthy to that which is praiseworthy” (Von Schlegell & Algar, 1990, p.2). The disciple, under the guidance of the master, passes through a series of stages of spiritual development based on both personal effort, and inspired experiences which God confers on the disciple, toward her/his goal (Arberry, 1979). There are various series in this development, but al-Qushayri identifies a forty-three stage development starting with repentance and culminating in a constant yearning for God (*shawq*). The process is a difficult one: transformation of the soul through tribulation, painful purification from the lower human qualities as symbolized by the lower self (*nafs*), affliction as a test of the purity of one’s soul, but eventual success because of determination to achieve the ultimate goal of the Divine presence (Schimmel, 1975, p.16).

The techniques a Sufi master employs to advance this transformation include the Islamic daily prayers and worship, with the most important being the rhythmic and continuous invocation of prayers and the names of God to elevate the spirit (*dhikr*). It is likewise important for the disciple to follow the Prophetic example and principles of Islamic law. The master may further facilitate the process through dream analysis or relaying to the disciple metaphoric stories that reflect an understanding of the disciple’s experiences as conveyed in the ongoing dialogue between them. The disciple can assess and internalize what is relevant in the story for her/his spiritual stage and so overcome obstacles that may interfere with the process (Jurich, 1998). A disciple completes the spiritual path, when s/he attains the final stage of spiritual attainment symbolized by the integration of the person to reflect divine unity and ideally, continues a Sufi lifestyle, displaying behavior that can influence personal and social change.

In its structured approach, Sufism is particularly similar to traditional counseling in integrating a counselor / client interaction and goals that advance personal transformation. In fact, scholars who question traditional secular counseling for Muslim clients frequently identify Sufism as the basis of an original counseling model in Islam (Badri, 1979; Jafari, 1993). Indeed Sufism can have therapeutic outcomes and aspects of its practice, especially *dhikr*, are part of counsel in MPL and Islamic traditional healing as well. Variations of this model are also common amongst its practitioners like those that merge Sufi principles and elements of cosmology, numerology, and

astrology in counseling (Baktiah, 1994) or as in the use of the poetic works of Rumi on divine love in counseling to facilitate personal transformation (Arif, 2007; Ozelsel 2007).

Sufism, like the two previous models, offers insights into how Muslims relate to spiritual well-being. The process resonates with traditional counseling, although participants do not view Sufism as counseling. In its structured form, it remains for them an elevated spiritual endeavor. For counselors, understanding Sufism as a system of Islamic personal transformation, and how its principles may have resonance in a client's life, would provide important indicators to guide their intervention with Muslim clients to support their well-being.

## **Conclusion**

Islamic counseling in Muslim communities manifests in ways that reflect traditional secular counseling methods. MPL, Islamic traditional healing, and Sufism provide sources for this counseling, which to varied degrees facilitate well-being amongst Muslim clients. These models find authority in Islamic sources and therefore have credibility in Muslim communities. However, there are complex aspects to all three models. Factors like gender, methodology, and its applicability in contemporary society give rise to controversy in its practice, and in specific forms, it may actually impede client progress when it in fact seeks to support the client. The need exists, therefore, to transform these services in Muslim communities.

At the same time, Muslims also access Western services. If counselors overlook these systems and how they connect to the life of the client, their counseling outcomes with Muslim clients may be impeded as well. The counselor / client encounter can be a point from which change can evolve. For counselors who encounter Muslim clients, understanding the dynamics of Muslim communal life and counseling trends within the community, and assessing them in relation to their intervention plans, as well as engaging in collaborative efforts with stakeholders in Muslim communities, can have significant mutual benefit in the counseling encounter.

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