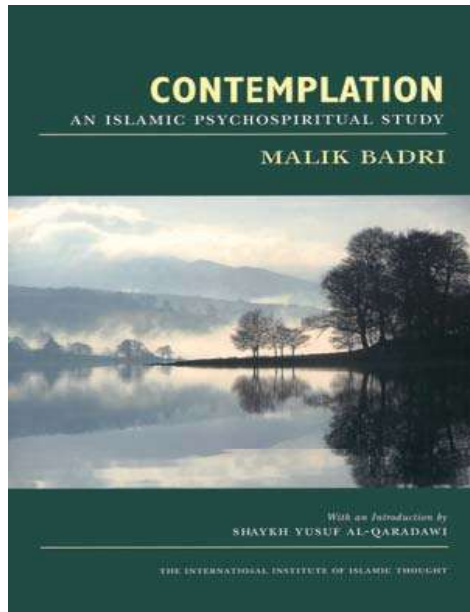


CONTEMPLATION: An Islamic Psychospiritual Perspective, Dr. Malik Badri

Reviewer: Usman Mohamed*



The book, *Contemplation*, by Malik Badri takes the reader on a journey into the world of contemporary psychology. It comprises nine chapters that try to address two main issues. Firstly, the author reveals the limitations and obvious contradictions of the current prevailing schools of psychology that denies the existence of the soul and perceives humans as mere machines acting on external stimuli. The second part closely examines contemplation from perception to spiritual cognition by arguing that meditative contemplation is central to Islamic spirituality and thus one of the highest forms of worship as it takes the believer from the level of Iman to that of Ihsan.

The opening chapters begin with advice to Muslim professionals in various branches of modern science. Muslim professionals are reminded that as a result of secularization of modern sciences it becomes imperative for them to take an independent line of study to these teachings and adopt an attitude of inquiry and constructive criticism rather than one of passive acceptance and uncritical assimilation. This attitude will help them gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of their respective fields of study. By Islamizing the knowledge they have acquired, they make them more beneficial.

The author goes on to make an important distinction between Islamic meditation and other forms of meditative procedures derived primarily from eastern religions. While these other forms of meditation focus on bringing relaxation through an altered state of consciousness as an end in itself. Islamic contemplation in addition to achieving the relaxing benefits of meditation differs fundamentally from the eastern meditative procedures in that its main objective is more cognitive and intellectual. In Islamic contemplation, altered states of consciousness are not an end in themselves, as the goal is a deeper insightful knowledge of God as the Sustainer and Cherisher of the universe.

The author then takes a close look at the obvious inadequacies in the dominant perspectives of modern psychology. Malik Badri is very critical of the behaviorist, psychoanalytic and neuropsychiatry perspectives in particular. He argues that by adamantly clinging to the naïve concept of stimulus-response psychology, these perspectives fail to explain many important aspects of human behavior such as cognitive and emotional activities that are not subject to laboratory experiments. The author submits that the inherent contradiction in these perspectives of psychology makes it nearly impossible to appreciate Islamic meditative contemplation in the light of modern psychology.

The book also looks at contemplation and the works of early Muslim scholars with particular focus on Al Ghazali, Al Balkhi and Ibn Qayim. He points out that these scholars were able to recognize the influence of thinking and

cognitive processes in shaping human beliefs, attitudes and external behavior centuries before such awareness dawned on western psychology. For example, Abu Zayd Al Balkhi showed the influence of contemplation and inner thought on health, a discovery that was only developed more than ten centuries after his death. Prominent among these works are books like "The Sustenance of Body and Soul, The Key to the House of Bliss and The Revival of the Religious Sciences by Al Balkhi, Ibn Qayim and Al Ghazali respectively.

The later chapters examine contemplation as an unrestrained form of worship, and see it as the beginning and the key to all good. This is because one who contemplates learns a lesson from everything. He stresses that although Islamic contemplation is a free form of worship that has no limitations to what human beings can experience, there is nevertheless one restriction, namely the contemplation of the Divine Being Himself, Allah (swt). He makes it clear that not only is it forbidden but also impossible as only Allah knows what He really is. Moreover Allah is free from the limits of time and space which confine humankind. This becomes evident when we remember that in spite of monumental breakthroughs in science and technology we still know very little of the brain and nervous system that characterize us as human beings.

In the final parts of the book Malik Badri states that there are individual levels of contemplation which vary in degrees determined by personal, social, cultural and environmental factors. He argues that the determining factor in the depth of contemplation is one's level of faith. Deep faith and God-consciousness are the backbone of contemplation. The other elements are secondary factors that derive their influence from the strength of that faith. He posits this argument in refuting the claim of some modern scholars particularly those designated as neo-mutazilites who claim that contemporary Muslims are more capable than their pious predecessors (companions of the Prophet and earlier generations of Muslims) in contemplating the nature of things as a result of great advances achieved in modern science and technology.

The author concludes on a rather positive note by alluding to what he describes as the advent of contemporary cognitive revolution in modern psychology. This is because western psychotherapists are finally beginning to recognize the great influence of consciousness and mind in their patients which might eventually lead them to appreciate the role of religious beliefs in shaping human thought and behavior. He restates the need for Muslim scientists to be aware of the secular trend in modern science that has become an inseparable part of its materialist disposition. As Muslim professionals, we should be careful in following such a trend and never lose touch with our spiritual background.

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