



## Islamic Origins of Psychotherapy: An Introduction

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Perspective

Volume 7 Issue 4

Received Date: November 23, 2022

Published Date: December 15, 2022

DOI: [10.23880/pprij-16000318](https://doi.org/10.23880/pprij-16000318)

### Abstract

Psychotherapy which is usually taken to be a recently developed branch of medicine, had already been highly developed by medieval Muslim physicians. Some of them specialized in it and made a systematic study of psychological diseases and their treatment. After the rise of Islam the Arab-Muslim physicians made tremendous progress in all branches of medicine including psychotherapy. Inspired and influenced by the Quranic psychotherapy-related teachings, they richly contributed to both the learning and teaching of medicine including psychiatry. They also introduced the psychotherapeutic means of treatment in the hospitals built and maintained by them. They also exerted a lasting influence on medicine and psychotherapy in the West through translations of their works in Latin and other European languages. But while their achievements in the fields of general medicine, pharmacy and surgery are adequately acknowledged by some historians of medicine, their contribution to the development of psychotherapy is comparatively little known even to the educated and cultured few all over the world. Some basic features of it are briefly introduced below.

**Keywords:** Psychotherapy; Qur'an; Law-Giver

### Psychotherapeutic Impact of the Teachings of the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad

As in other sciences, in this branch of knowledge also the Qur'an proved an effective source of inspiration to the Muslims. It prescribes a number of measures for the betterment of the general mental and physical health of man by correcting, sharpening and keeping busy the reflecting, meditating and imagining faculties in him on scientific and experimental lines.

Perhaps, the most important point the Quran teaches is that man is the most beautiful form of creation, who is created on the *fitrat* (naturalness) of the Law-giver (God) Himself as His vicegerent on earth. Another important point the Quran elaborates is that the rest of the created world including the angels are lower in rank and status than man, to whose use

all things in the heavens and on the earth have been made subservient. While man is empowered not only to correct himself and better his lot but also to influence the state of Nature in the universe and on the earth through his deeds and words with the aid of the guidance received by him from the Creator, the rest of creation is conditioned to respond as benefactors and malefactors to his constructive (justified and good) and destructive (unjustified and evil) deeds and words respectively. In other words if man remains manly, just, truthful, constructively hard-working, self-disciplined and sincerely faithful to the Law-giver's mission of creation, he would not only improve his own mental and physical health, but also simultaneously become a potent factor in affecting the global ecosystems to the extent of making Nature yield the seen and unseen blessings including the replacement of existing living species with more beautiful ones in the ever -ascending order. This point is clearly borne out by a

number of verses in the Quran. The following are mentioned as specimens:

“Anyone who has done an atom’s weight of good, shall see it; and anyone who has done an atom’s weight of evil, shall see it” [1].

“That man can have nothing but what he strives for; and the fruit of his striving will soon come in sight.” [2]

“Mischiefs spread on land and sea because of (the deeds) that the hands of man have earned” [3].

“If the people of the towns had but believed and feared God...We should indeed have opened out to them (all kinds of) blessings from heaven and earth; but they rejected (the truth), and We brought them a book for their misdeeds” [4].

Next, Islamic teachings aim at keeping man in his best mental and psychic conditions by eradicating the causes of mental disorder and nervous tension. It is with the explicit purpose of realizing this objective that Islam has enjoined faith in the unity of Allah (God), patience at the time of difficulty, calamity and diseases. Thus the teachings of Islam seek to develop an optimistic attitude towards life among its followers under all circumstances. The high level of optimism which Islam builds may be easily gauged from the low incidence of suicide rate in Muslim societies. This point is clearly borne out by the following statement of the distinguished scholar of Arab-Islamic civilization P. K. Hitti:

“In this uncompromising monotheism, with its simple enthusiastic faith in the supreme rule of a transcendent being, lies the chief strength of Islam. Its adherents enjoy a consciousness of contentment and resignation unknown among followers of other creeds. Suicide is rare in Muslim lands” [5].

It is quite evident from the above that the Quran develops a tremendous self-confidence in man and makes himself the architect of his destiny as well as controller of Nature. Faith in this Quranic concept of reward and punishment serves to make him optimistic, enthusiastic and self-disciplined, leading to his enlightenment by ridding him of the causes of fear and sorrow:

“Verily, those who say, our Lord is God and remain firm (on that path)...on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” [6].

Moreover, the Quran teaches man to remain sincerely attached to God which in turn is conducive to better psychological functioning: “And whosoever puts his trust in Allah, then He will suffice him”<sup>7</sup> Thus the Quran plays an

important role in the management of psychiatric and mental problems by exhorting man to remain hopeful even in the worst of circumstances: “...And never give up hope of Allah’s soothing Mercy: truly no one despairs of Allah’s soothing Mercy, except those who have no faith” [8]. Its ethical, behavioural and spiritual code of conduct is of great benefit in the treatment of psychological and psychiatric diseases.

Medical doses or no doses, one’s overall mental, psychological and physical health is bound to be affected by his faith in and practice on that concept. The Quran which is appropriately named after one of the attributes of the Law-giver as *Al-Hakim* (the Wise, the Curer) has the following verse in support of its curative importance in clear terms:

“We send down (stage by stage) in the Quran that which is a healing and mercy to those who believe” [9].

Likewise, Prophet Muhammad’s contribution to psychotherapy-related preventive medicine is too well-known to be repeated. It would suffice to mention here the following two traditions of medical and psychotherapeutic importance:

“O servants of Allah! Treat yourselves medically, for there is no disease but there is a curative for it except one disease and that is senility” [10].

“Entertain the hearts from time to time, otherwise they would become rusted as iron becomes rusted” [11].

“Verily, there is a small part in the body. If it is sound, the whole body is rendered sound, and if it is diseased, the whole body is rendered diseased. And this part is the heart” [12].

### Eminent Muslim Psychotherapists

The early Arab-Muslim physicians were greatly inspired by the teachings of the Quran and Prophet Muhammad in their medical pursuits. Some of them specialised in psychotherapy and contributed a great deal to its development. Their psychological methods of treatment are briefly introduced below.

#### Ali Ibn Sahl Al-Tabari (d. 861 CE)

He was the author of the earliest Arabic on medicine titled *Firdaws al-Hikmah* (Paradise of Wisdom). In it he has described psychological diseases as diseases of the head. Headache, loneliness, forgetfulness, hallucination, gloom and cheerlessness are described as their main symptoms. The physician has ascribed the causes of all these symptoms to mental disorders consequent upon psychological factors

such as grief, anger, *ishq* (passionate love), etc. He has also suggested that such diseases can be cured by removing the causes of anger and insecurity to the patient as well as by pacifying his heart with pleasant conversations congenial to his ethos [13].

### **Ishaq Ibn Imran (d. 908 CE)**

He was one of the most eminent Muslim psychotherapists of Kairouan (Tunisia). He was the first Muslim author who wrote an independent treatise on melancholia under the title *Maqalah fi al-Malikholiya*. This treatise was found so useful that it was translated into Latin by Constantine the African in the eleventh century. Sadness, loneliness, gloom and cheerlessness were described by him as the main symptoms of the victims of such diseases.

This physician has elaborated in detail the psychological conditions that overtake men and women in the face of great and recurrent emotional setbacks. He has also listed the condition of forgetfulness in some women due to frequent pregnancies. Side by side with treating these patients with drugs and medicine, he applied and recommended psychological methods of treatment also such as their entertainment through pleasant conversations, music, gentle behaviour and sightseeing as well as by massaging their bodies with soothing oils followed by their baths. He has also pointed out that the disease of melancholia is both acquired and hereditary [14].

### **Ibn Zakaria Al-Razi (d. 932 CE)**

Al-Razi was a distinguished psychotherapist of his time. He was among the first in the world to write on mental illness and psychotherapy. His famous medical encyclopedia *Al-Hawi* contains numerous references to psychological diseases. He also wrote a separate book on psychotherapy under the title *al-Tibb al-Ruhani* (The Spiritual Medicine). In it he has thrown sufficient light on the method, application and scope of psychiatric medicine as well as interpreted general health precepts by pointing out the close relationship between psyche and soma [15]. He believed that physicians should be modest, soft-spoken and gentle while communicating with their patients to ease the anxiety of receiving bad news. They should also keep them hopeful of their recovery. He has discussed in detail the adverse effects of delusion, empty imagination and *ishq* (intense love) on the health of man. He concluded that even indigestion is preceded by psychological upheavals in the body. Psychological conditions, according to this physician, always have the upper hand in regulating health, because the ethos of the body is governed by the impact of such conditions dominating the mind. That was the main reason why he emphasized the importance of the psychological aspect in the science of medical treatment.

On the basis of this argument he held that only a competent psychotherapist could become a successful physician [16]. He was also known for successfully treating patients suffering from melancholia by stirring up their spiritual capacity and internal organs through psychotherapy [17]. Al-Razi's code of medical ethics requires the physician to keep the patient always hopeful of his recovery even if he holds a view contrary to that.

Al-Razi worked as the director of a hospital in Baghdad. He is also credited with having introduced the concept of psychiatric wards for patients with mental illnesses. He held that mental disorders of patients should be treated as medical conditions rather than considering them to be the symptoms of their having been under the possession of evil spirits or demons. He was one of the first known physicians to describe the idea of psychotherapy and psychiatry on modern lines. He described depression as a form of "melancholic obsessive-compulsive disorder", which is triggered as a result of changes of blood flow in the brain [18]. He conducted and maintained detailed clinical observations of patients suffering from mental illnesses and applied a holistic method of treatment through diet, medication, baths, massaging, aromatherapy, entertainment, etc.

Al-Razi's books became very popular in the West. His *magnum opus Al-Hawi* was early translated into Latin by the Jewish physician Faraj Ibn Salim under the title *Liber Continens*. Several editions of the book were published at Brescia in 1486, and at Venice in 1500, 1506, 1509 and 1542 [19].

### **Ibn Sina(d. 1038 CE)**

Ibn Sina was another important Muslim physician who contributed a great deal to the development of psychotherapy. His medical encyclopedia *The Canon* remained the supreme authority on medicine for about six centuries not only the Muslim world, but also in the West. He has discussed a number of nervous and psychological diseases in this book. Since he was fully aware of psychological factors of diseases, his prescriptions for physical ailments were usually accompanied by his exhortations for moral reformation and spiritual regeneration of the patients.

He has clearly pointed out that the physical health of man is closely related with his inherent and acquired psychological conditions. He further revealed that much of the natural disposition of the mother is diffused into her children through breast-feeding. He therefore advised that the breast-feeding mother should keep herself on a high level of morality, and that she should remain unaffected as far as possible by bad emotions caused by anger, fear, grief and cowardice. He made full use of his knowledge of human

psychology in curing patients. He was fully aware of the tremendous and remarkable capacities of the human body when adapted and empowered psychologically.

Ibn Sina's book *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb* (The Canon), which remained supreme in Europe for about six centuries, passed through several editions. It was first translated into Latin by Gerard of Cremona. It was in such great demand that in the last thirty years of the fifteenth century it was published sixteen times; and more than twenty times in the sixteenth century. It was later translated into Hebrew, German, Turkish, English, Uzbek, Persian and Urdu also.

### Other Prominent Psychotherapists

In addition to the above, there were numerous other physicians who excelled in this branch of medical treatment. A passing reference to a few of them is given below.

Ibn al-Jazzar (d. 1005), author of *Siyasat al-Siyan wa Tadribuhum* (Management and Training of Children), *Tibb al-Mashaikh wa Hifzu Sihhatihim* (Treatment of Old People and Preservation of their Health); Ali Ibn Ridwan (d. 1067), author of *Al-Kifayah fi al-Tibb* (Sufficient Knowledge on Medicine), in which he has illustrated the point that the beating of the heart is closely related with the psychological factors of the mind; Ibn Zuhr (d. 1162), an eminent physician of Muslim Spain, who has dealt with a number of psychological diseases in his medical works; and Dawud Ibn Umar al-Antaki (d. 1600 CE), the last eminent Muslim psychotherapist of the pre-modern era, who has discussed in his writings all kinds of melancholic diseases that were known upto his time.

### Psychotherapeutic Aspects of the Hospitals

It is a well-known fact of history that psychotherapeutic methods of treatment were applied in all the hospitals built by the Muslims during the heyday of their civilization, of which the Ibn Tulun Hospital of Egypt, the Adudi Hospital of Baghdad, the Nuri Hospital of Damascus, the Mansuri Hospital of Cairo and the Muwahhidi Hospital of Morocco were very famous. Almost all the hospitals were equipped with rich libraries which provided books to the patients. For example, the Ibn Tulun Hospital is said to have contained more than one thousand hundred books on different subjects.

Special attention was paid to the care of the patients suffering from psychological diseases in these hospitals. They were provided with professional musicians, story-tellers and excellent reciters of the Quran. While musicians and story-tellers entertained the patients with soft music, interesting stories and humorous anecdotes, the reciters of the Quran sought to stimulate their spiritual capacity in order to solidify their self-confidence. Besides, they were made to

walk in the open air, They were also given relaxing baths, and their garments were changed every morning in order to mitigate their distress by relieving symptoms of tension. So much attention was paid to the care of the sleepless among the patients at some hospitals that *adhan* (the call to prayer) in the morning was sounded two hours earlier than its usual time to make the night appear shorter to those who could not sleep [20].

More or less the same system was in vogue in all the major hospitals in the world of Islam. The caliphs and rulers also paid attention to the maintenance and organization, regularly visited them, and personally inspected the state of affairs in them as well as enquired about the conditions of patients.

### Conclusion

From what has been discussed above, it is evident that psychotherapy was an integral part of medicine developed and practiced by the Muslim physicians. Several innovative methods were introduced by them in this respect. They did not keep their knowledge confined to themselves, but diffused it in all parts of the world. They also left a deep impact on the development of medicine and psychotherapy in the West through translation of their works in Latin and other European languages. No wonder, the portraits of Al-Razi and Ibn Sina still adorn the Faculty of Medicine at Paris University.

Even the hospitals built and maintained in the Muslim world served as models for the hospitals of Italy and France. For instance, in Italy Pope Innocent III founded in Rome in the beginning of the thirteenth century the Hospital Santo Spirito (The Hospital of the Holy Spirit) on the pattern of the Muslim hospitals, from which a network of similar hospitals soon spread all over Western Europe. Similarly, the French Hospital Les Quinze-Vingts was founded in Paris by Luis IXth, King of France, in 1260 after his return from the Crusade in Muslim Asia, which is now one of the most important eye hospitals in the French capital [21].

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