

## The Implicit Personality Theory of Islam

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Almost every traditional personality theorist had something to say about religion, but the topic of how religious beliefs might affect individuals' views of human nature remains largely unstudied. All religions, however, contain certain implicit ideas regarding personality that are likely to impact individual behavior. This article draws on Islamic sources to consider what a practicing Muslim might believe about motivation, personality development, the self, the unconscious, psychological adjustment, and the individual and society. In general terms, understanding these beliefs can be useful in the broader study of how cultural issues affect personality. More specifically, understanding Islamic beliefs related to personality can assist in planning for the provision of psychological services to Muslims, as well as understanding the psychological perspectives of Muslims who are not extremists.

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When psychology speaks, for instance, of the motif of the virgin birth, it is only concerned with the fact that there is such an idea, but it is not concerned with the question whether such an idea is true or false in any other sense. The idea is psychologically true inasmuch as it exists. Psychological existence is subjective in so far as an idea occurs in only one individual. But it is objective in so far as that idea is shared by a society—by a *consensus gentium*.

—Carl Jung, *The Autonomy of the Unconscious*, 1938

In cultures all over the world, religious ideas create shared values, influence individual behavior, and help sustain cultural identity (McAdams & Pals, 2006; Pettigrew, 1997; Stewart & Healy, 1989). These ideas are transmitted directly and indirectly to children, and they often have little to do with belief in a deity. Jung, for example, asserted that he was Christian only because his life was based on Christian concepts—and not because of, in his words, a belief in “Zeus, Jahwe, Allah, the Trinitarian God, and so forth” (Bennett, 1983, p. 168).

Although many psychologists have studied the relationships between religion and different aspects of psychology, few researchers have focused on religious ideas about personality. All major religions contain ideas about human motivation, interpersonal relations, and moral behavior that reflect a specific view of human nature. These ideas are not based in scientific research, of course, but they nonetheless create an implicit theory of personality that may affect individual behavior in a particular religious culture.

This article briefly reviews psychologists' long interest in the relationship between religion and personality and then looks at the assumptions about human nature found in Islam, a religion shared by approximately 1.5 billion people, or 22.4% of the world's population (Central Intelligence Agency, 2008), with a particular emphasis on issues related to psychotherapy. Finally, the article contrasts psychological assumptions found in Islam with recent directions in personality research.

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### Personality Psychology and Religion

In psychology, studying religion's influence on individual behavior goes back to the beginning of our discipline (James, 1902), and Psychology and Religion has become a standard course offering at many schools. From the formal beginning of their field in the late 1930s,

personality psychologists have also taken an interest in religion's impact on individuals. Virtually all of the major personality theorists had something to say about the relationship between religion and personality, and four theorists—Freud, Jung, Allport, and Erikson—devoted major works to the topic.

Sigmund Freud's numerous works on religion (e.g., Freud, 1907/1959, 1913/1953, 1927/1961, 1930/1961, 1939/1964) focused almost entirely on how religious belief negatively affects both scientific advancement and personal development. In Freud's view, a belief in God is no more than a symbolic replay of the Oedipal Conflict, in which a powerful father both provides for, and demands obedience from, those under his care. Clinging to a belief in God, Freud argued, could prevent resolution of the Oedipal Conflict and, at the least, impede the self-understanding that is a person's best protection against neurosis.

Freud's negative view of religion was one reason behind the rupture of his relationship with Jung. Jung wrote in his autobiography (Jung, 1963) that he knew publishing *Symbols of Transformation* (1911–1912), with its argument that incest has a religious aspect, would create a permanent break with Freud. Although many works in analytical psychology recognize the potential negative effects of religious belief on psychological health (e.g., Jung, 1931, 1932, 1952), in many other works Jung argued for the positive impact of religion. Specifically, Jung encouraged religious practice—regardless of any belief in God—as a way of accessing the contents of the collective unconscious. Such access is desirable, Jung argued, because the collective unconscious is the key to individuation and finding a meaning for a person's life. The majority of Jung's writings on religion focused on Christianity, but he also wrote about other religions, including Taoism (Jung, 1958a), Buddhism (Jung, 1958b), and Hinduism (Jung, 1958c). Among the major personality theorists, Jung appears to be the only author who devoted an entire essay to Islam (Jung, 1959).

Gordon Allport also addressed the relationship between religion and psychology in a number of works, including his study of the religious beliefs of Harvard University and Radcliffe College students after World War II (Allport, Gillespie, & Young, 1948). Allport also researched the "mature religious sentiment"

(1950); the extrinsic and intrinsic motivations for church attendance (Allport, 1954; Allport & Ross, 1967); and, drawing on the authoritarianism studies (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), the relationship between racial prejudice and religion (Allport, 1954).

Finally, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson produced major works exploring the relationship between the psychological development of Martin Luther (Erikson, 1958) and Gandhi (Erikson, 1969), the religious values of the cultures in which they lived, and the accomplishments for which they are remembered. In contrast with the works of the other theorists, Erikson's biographies of Luther and Gandhi represent the most in-depth analysis of how a specific religious culture can affect the personality and behavior of outstanding individuals. However, none of the major personality theorists seems to have devoted much attention to how religious beliefs affect personality development in ordinary persons.

One interesting linkage between religious culture and personality, however, came from Max Weber, the German sociologist and political economist. Among personality psychologists, Weber is best known for his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1930), which argued that Protestant parents transmit values associated with their religion to their children and that those values affect their children's behavior as adults. For example, Protestantism encourages hard work, thrift, sexual and worldly asceticism, and conscientiousness—qualities that, Weber believed, could account for a Protestant's worldly success.<sup>1</sup> Although *The Protestant Ethic* is Weber's best known work, he also wrote on the sociological aspects of other religions. Weber finished works on ancient Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, but he died before completing a planned book on Islam (Giddens, 1958). In his writings on the subject, Weber described Islam as hedonistic and the polar opposite of Protestantism (Turner, 1974).

Many modern scholars, who are not necessarily personality psychologists, have continued in the tradition of Jung, Weber, and the others, making links between psychology and religious

<sup>1</sup> For discussions of the Islamic work ethic, see Yousef (2000) and Abu-Saad (1998).

traditions. Psychoanalysts, for example, link psychoanalytic therapy to both Judaism and Buddhism (e.g., Bergmann, 1995; Fromm, 1960; Gresser, 1994; Lothane, 2001; Morvay, 1999; Safran, 2003), and studies of Buddhism and the associated practice of meditation and their relationship to mental and physical health have appeared in the major psychological journals (e.g., Seeman, Dubin, & Seeman, 2003; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006; Walsh & Shapiro, 2006).

However, at least at this point, researchers' interest in religion and personality has not extended to all the major faiths. Islam, for example, largely seems to have been left out of the study of religion and personality. When authors do consider psychology in the context of Islam, they almost always write from the perspective of either mental health (e.g., Ali, Liu, & Humeidian, 2004; Ansari, 2002; Fayek, 2004; Sheridan & North, 2004) or the psychology of Islamic extremism (e.g., DeMause, 2002; Edgar, 2004; Gibbs, 2005), rather than focus on how ideas within an Islamic cultural context might affect normal personality development or behavior. Given the size of the world's Muslim population, this seems to be an area deserving more attention from personality researchers.

### Implicit Theories of Personality

The unique goal of personality psychology is to explain whole lives rather than discrete actions or cognitions (Mayer, 2005; McAdams & Pals, 2006). Historically, personality psychology has attempted to integrate knowledge of the different psychological aspects of individuals into formal theories to explain why people do what they do. However, theorizing about the actions of oneself and others is not limited to people with formal theoretical knowledge. Most people have an implicit theory of personality—a set of ideas about human nature or the traits and behaviors they expect to co-occur in an individual (Borkenau, 1992; Uleman, Saribay, & Gonzalez, 2008)—that they use to explain or predict behavior. In everyday life, people use their theories to decide, for example, whether to be open or guarded with one's co-workers, to respond in a joking or serious manner to someone else's communication, or to believe or disbelieve the words of politicians.

Because a person's implicit theory of personality is based on data that comes from his or her experience rather than scientific data, most likely, family and cultural influences—including religious ideas reflected in the culture—provide the foundation for his or her personal theory. This article looks at some of the ideas that may affect the implicit view of human nature held by someone who identifies with an Islamic culture. These ideas are considered from a general, rather than specific, perspective because members of a culture vary in the degree of their adherence to the culture's norms (Triandis & Suh, 2002). As would be the case with any religious doctrine, some of the ideas about human nature contained in Islamic texts can be supported by psychological research; others are moral philosophy or theological speculation and, of course, cannot be supported scientifically.

### Islamic Texts and Personality

Most Westerners recognize the significance of the *Qur'an* in Islamic thinking, but many do not appreciate the importance of the hadith (or Sunna), which are collections of anecdotes and sayings from the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In the Islamic tradition, the text of the *Qur'an* was passed from God through the Angel Gabriel to Muhammad, who recited its verses aloud. Initially, the *Qur'an* was recorded on parchment, stones, or palm branches. Although the Prophet's recitations began in 610 C.E., it was not until 650 C.E.—18 years after the death of Muhammad—that Caliph Uthman ibn Affan authorized a collection and binding of the text of the *Qur'an*. Uthman ordered all variants on the words of Muhammad that had arisen in the years after his death to be burned.

In contrast with the *Qur'an*, the hadith did not come through divine revelation. The hadith are short anecdotes or sayings from the Prophet's life that are relevant to the practice of Islam. Transmitted by people who knew Muhammad well—such as his wives, associates, and relatives—each hadith illustrates a moral teaching or principle. In one sense, the hadith expanded the theological teachings of Islam by commenting on many practical aspects of everyday living not addressed in the *Qur'an*. For example, the following hadith concerns the appropriateness of women leading prayers:

It is reported about Umm Waraqah who had learned the *Qur'an* by heart that The Prophet, peace and blessings of Allah be on him, commanded her that she should act as imam of the people in her house, and she had a *mu'adhdhin* [the one who calls to prayers] and she used to act as imam of the people of her house. (cited in Ali, 2001, p. 94)

In the time after the death of Muhammad, the number of hadith multiplied, and in 732 C.E. Caliph Umar II ordered all hadith to be collected and assessed as to their validity. Given the number of sayings attributed to Muhammad, this was no small task. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (810–870 C.E.) sifted through 600,000 hadith and determined that only 7,000 were authentic (Swarup, 2002). Three hundred years after the death of The Prophet, Sunni Muslim scholars compiled several collections of what they considered to be the most authentic hadith. The most highly regarded of these collections are from al-Bukhari and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (819–875 C.E.). Sunni and Shi'a Muslims have different collections of hadith, as well as some differences in practices, but they generally agree on most theological matters (Ali, 2006; Mahmood, 2006).

The *Qur'an* and the hadith—along with the Shari'a, the Islamic law derived from the *Qur'an* and the hadith—are the foundation of Islamic culture and society. Many Muslims believe that virtually every aspect of life is addressed in some way through the *Qur'an* and the hadith, although not always directly. One of the most interesting qualities of the *Qur'an* is its invitation to its readers to interpret its messages both literally and figuratively, which also comes with a warning not to distort the allegories:

He has sent down this Book which contains some verses that are categorical and basic to the Book, and others allegorical. But those who are twisted of mind look for verses metaphorical, seeking deviation and giving to them interpretations of their own; but none knows their meaning except God; and those who are steeped in knowledge affirm: "We believe in them as all of them are from the Lord." But only those who have wisdom understand. (3:7)<sup>2</sup>

Because of the symbolic nature of the *Qur'an's* teachings, vast amounts of commentary, going back almost 1,500 years, have been written by clerics, scholars, mystics, philosophers, and others. Of this commentary, less than one third has been translated into English (Lamoreaux, 2003). In this article, we have lim-

ited our references to English sources and translations only. Citations from the *Qur'an* refer to the translation by Ahmed Ali (1994), and most of the hadith cited are from the al-Bukhari collection (Khan, 1995).

Although there may be only a few Islamic writings directly related to personality, the literature on Islam in general—even in English—is huge. Islam, like most religions, consists of a large variety of sects, doctrines, and viewpoints. Furthermore, Islam is practiced in a wide variety of cultures, with the largest concentrations of Muslims in Indonesia (204 million), Pakistan (163 million), India (154 million), Bangladesh (127 million), and Egypt (73.5 million; Central Intelligence Agency, 2008). Another example of diversity in Islam concerns the role of women: Muslim women in Saudi Arabia need their husband's permission to consult a physician about a health concern, whereas Muslim women in Pakistan and Jordan can set national health care policies while serving as government ministers.

Because of this diversity, probably every point in this article is disputable from the perspective of some particular Islamic scholar or school of thought. Our goal, however, is not to provide the definitive statement on Islam and personality, nor to comment on Islamic politics, history, or society; nor are we attempting to use psychological research to confirm or disconfirm Islamic teachings. Rather, we used the Islamic literature and commentaries on that literature to identify the beliefs that might affect a Muslim's view of issues related to personality.

We believe that understanding the implicit theory of personality in Islam is important for at least three reasons. First, on a theoretical level, an implicit theory from a non-Western culture provides a potentially important model of how the values passed down through unique religious, civic, and educational institutions affect an individual's behavior and cognition. In their discussion of the future of personality psychology, McAdams and Pals (2006) have reminded us that personality researchers have not been

<sup>2</sup> References to *Qur'anic* texts are traditionally written as the number of the Sura or chapter, first followed by the number of the verse. For other references to the symbolic nature of the *Qur'an*, see 14:25, 18:54, and 39:27.

very successful in addressing this particular question.

Second, most psychological counselors today recognize that understanding an individual's personal distress very often requires understanding the cultural context of that distress. With the notable exception of psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1963), personality theories that address mental health issues rarely consider the role of cultural factors. In the burgeoning literature on therapy with Muslim clients (e.g., Ali, 2006; Ali et al., 2004; El-Islam, 2004; Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001; Hedayat-Diba, 1997; Inayat, 2001; Mahmood, 2006), authors are united in emphasizing that therapists must take time to understand the Islamic principles that may be affecting the client's cognition and behavior.

Finally, many people in the West have some understanding of the views of Islamic extremists, but they know little about how Islam affects the lives of ordinary Muslims. As mentioned earlier, Muslims constitute 22.4% of the world's population, and after Christianity with its 2.1 billion adherents, Islam's 1.5 billion believers are the world's second largest religious group.

### The Islamic View of Personality

In general, personality researchers present their findings in one of two ways: either in the context of a theoretical framework such as humanistic or evolutionary psychology, or as conclusions drawn from empirical data on a topic—such as need for achievement or sociability—that may or may not relate to a specific theory (cf. Cervone, 2005; Hogan & Smither, 2008; McAdams & Pals, 2006). In terms of theory, the perspective most commonly applied to Islam appears to be psychoanalysis (e.g., Bouhdiba, 2004; Fayek, 2004), but personality and Islam has also been studied from a more topical approach (e.g., Al-Sabwah & Abdel-Khalek, 2006; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004; Yousef, 2000). Although different theories emphasize different aspects of personality, Hogan and Smither (2008) have argued that, at the most basic level, a meaningful personality theory must address at least six topics: human motivation, personality development, the self, the unconscious, psychological adjustment, and the relationship of the individual to

society. An Islamic interpretation of each of these personality-related topics follows.

### Motivation

In personality theory, motivation describes the most basic reason or explanatory principle for a person's actions. Some hypothesized motivations for behavior include reproductive success (Buss, 1999), meaning (Frankl, 1963), or success in interpersonal relations (Hogan, 1983). Most traditional personality theories take a deterministic view of human motivation. That is, they argue that individuals act because of forces largely outside their control, such as the unconscious, environmental conditions, or evolutionary considerations. Of the traditional personality theories, only existential psychology and humanistic psychology emphasize the primacy of choice in human behavior.

Islam is often considered to take a deterministic view of human life—holding that, for example, Allah knows from an infant's birth what will happen in that person's life, as well as the exact hour of his or her death (3:145). One of the most famous of the hadith states:

The first thing God created was the Pen. He said to it: Write. It asked: Lord, what shall I write? He answered: Write the destinies of all things till the advent of the Hour. (Abu Dawud; cited in Watt, 1948)

Another hadith says:

Then God sends an Angel to put a soul into him, and the Angel issues four words [foretelling] his earnings, his death, his deeds, whether man is going to be happy or miserable. (Muslim; cited in Almunzri, 1977)

In the period after Muhammad's death, a group of Islamic scholars known as the Mu'tazilah argued that the *Qur'an* allows a belief in individual self-determination and the power to control one's life. The view that came to be more widely accepted among Muslims, however, is that God has complete control of all events and knows ahead of time the outcome of any action a person takes (Watt, 1948).

It is interesting that the Islamic idea that people are born with their destinies already determined does not absolve individuals from personal responsibility. For example, the *Qur'an* also states "Verily God does not change the state of a people until they change themselves" (13:11). In the Islamic view, people always have choices with regard to their actions, and

although Allah may know what the outcome of that choice will be, the individual is no less responsible for his or her decision (Brockopp, 2003; Hassaballa & Helminski, 2006; Rahman, 1980). In fact, what sets humans apart from animals is that humans cannot place responsibility for their behavior on instincts, conditioning, or genetics, because humans are born with the ability to rise above all of these (Shari'ati, 1979).

However, what will people choose to do? According to the *Qur'an*, the drive to experience the Oneness of God, known as *tawhid*, is the basic motivational force in human life (Ansari, 2002). Along with this motivation, humans experience two other conflicting drives: one toward stagnation and acceptance of life as it is, and a second toward achievement and perfection related to the spirit of God (Mahmood, 2006; Shari'ati, 1979). Whatever motivation prevails is the choice of the individual. This is an important choice because, in Islam, the lack of separation between secular and religious life makes a Muslim's every action a religious act (Mahmood, 2006).

In literal terms, the *Qur'an* states that people's greatest concern should be worshipping God. An allegorical interpretation, on the other hand, might suggest that following the practices associated with being a devout Muslim could lead to a state similar to individuation (Jung, 1959), self-actualization (Maslow, 1954), or experience of the True Self (Winnicott, 1960).

In addition to the motivation to experience *tawhid*, the *Qur'an* also emphasizes the basic human drive toward both sexuality (although it does not condone sex outside of marriage) and positive interpersonal relations, which are motivational themes in psychoanalysis (Freud, 1930/1961), interpersonal theory (Sullivan, 1953), and evolutionary psychology (Buss, 1999). As important as sex and positive interpersonal relations may be, however, they are less important than mankind's need to worship God. An additional benefit that comes from worshipping God and following his commands is the establishment of an ethical and just social order on Earth (Rahman, 1980).

### *Personality Development*

Most personality theories argue that people experience a number of psychological stages

before reaching maturity. The *Qur'an* is not explicit about the stages of life, but it does recognize that humans go through the three periods of weakness, strength, and infirmity (30:54). Islam is also clear on when personhood begins. In an oft-cited hadith, Al-Bukhari (Khan, 1995) stated that not until the 120th day after conception does the fetus become a person. Because of this, abortion up until the 120th day is not forbidden in some schools of Islam.

During childhood, the time of weakness, Islamic parents are charged with ensuring the physical care of their children and modeling spiritual practice to promote moral development. In the Islamic view, children under age 7, which modern developmental researchers also recognize as an important age in terms of children's reasoning abilities (Sameroff & Haith, 1996), do not understand the consequences of their actions, and much of their behavior results from simply imitating their parents (Yildirim, 2006). However, age 7 is the point at which children are encouraged to participate in the fasting that is an important part of Islamic culture (El Azayem & Hedayat-Diba, 1994).

Childhood ends with puberty, which is generally accepted as occurring around age 15 (Swarup, 2002). If, however, a boy is able to impregnate or a girl experiences menstruation before 15, puberty is considered to have begun. At puberty, the child becomes legally responsible for his or her acts (Ansari, 2002).

Traditional theories of personality have little to say on relationships between men and women. The role of women in Islam is, of course, a topic of great interest and controversy. From a strictly religious viewpoint, however, the *Qur'an* states that the marriage of a man and woman is the natural order of the universe (e.g., 4:1; 7:189; 78:8) and that their union creates a complementarity (Abugideiri, 2004; Bouhdiba, 2004). Muslim commentators (e.g., Ansari, 2002; Shari'ati, 1979) frequently point out that the *Qur'an* holds men and women in equal value, although the *Qur'an* also suggests that women are more sensitive and emotional than men (Ali, 2006). Women have the right to hold jobs and own property, but the financial obligation to the family is the responsibility of the husband. Although the role of women in society varies greatly depending on the specific Islamic culture under consideration, women have primary responsibility for the home life of the

family and play a critical role in developing a sense of morality in the children (Abugideiri, 2004; Mohammed, 2006). Regardless of cultural practices, however, Islamic thinkers agree that, in the eyes of God, men and women are equally valuable.

According to the *Qur'an*, individuals achieve their fullest physical and mental capacities around the age of 40 (46:15), referred to as the time of strength. Old age, on the other hand, is characterized as the time of infirmity, when individuals “forget what they knew, having known it once” (22:5).

### The Self

In traditional personality theories, the self takes many forms. It can be the source of transpersonal knowledge (Jung, 1933), the motivation for psychological development (Maslow, 1954), or a regulatory system that controls other parts of the personality and interactions with others in particular (Sullivan, 1953). More recent approaches (e.g., Ellemers, Spears, & Doosie, 2002) distinguish between the personal self and the collective self. The personal self (Baumeister, 1998) is a continuous awareness of who one is, whereas the collective self is derived from a person's social identity. Both concepts are important from an Islamic perspective. The collective self relates to the concept of *umma*, the brotherhood of Muslims (discussed later), and the personal self relates to aspects of individual identity described by Muslim scholars.

In the extensive Islamic writings on the subject, the personal self is represented in several forms, and sometimes the terms for different aspects of the self are used interchangeably. Of the three major aspects of the self, the spiritual heart (*qalb*) is the most important, containing the deepest spiritual wisdom of the individual (Inayat, 2005). In addition to wisdom, intuition and understanding reside in the heart, and it is through the heart that the individual links to God and fulfills *tawhid*, the motivational aspect of Islam. The heart provides a Muslim with a more profound level of understanding of the world than rational intelligence.

A second aspect of the self is the soul or spirit (*ruh*), which refers to a connection with the divine (Inayat, 2005). In the *Qur'an's* account of both Adam's creation (32:9) and Mary's con-

ception of Jesus (66:12), *ruh* is presented as God's breath used to create a linkage between God and humans (Homerin, 2006). Without this linkage, humans would be concerned only with self-preservation, inclined toward evil acts, and unable to fulfill their purpose on Earth (Leaman, 2006). In a sense, *ruh* provides the energy for a person's spiritual development, which operates through the third aspect of the self, the *nafs*.

The *nafs*, the most superficial level of the Islamic self, seems to correspond to the psychological ego (Inayat, 2005), and it takes three forms (Netton, 1993). At its lowest level (*nafs ammarah*), this aspect of the self holds all the base qualities of an individual, including his or her physical appetites and any inclination toward evil or undesirable behavior. Although these negative qualities exist in each person, most people do not have trouble keeping them under control. When negative qualities become activated, however, they can be a source of psychological stress.

A second level of *nafs* (*nafs lawwamma*) represents the individual's conscience or sense of morality and seems to function like a super-ego. When a person succumbs to the temptations of the *nafs ammarah*, this second aspect of the self reproaches the person and causes feelings of guilt. As mentioned earlier, the individual at that point has the choice of changing his or her behavior or continuing down a destructive path.

Finally, *nafs mutma'inna* refers to an aspect of the self that is the source of tranquility for the individual. Tranquility occurs as a kind of acceptance of events and the world in which the individual lives. Experience of this aspect of the self brings satisfaction and a state of inner peace (Inayat, 2005).

In summary, *ruh* refers to a quality unique to humans that connects them with God; *qalb* refers to the spiritual heart or deepest basis of knowledge for the individual; and *nafs* refers to an ego that governs behavior. These three aspects of the Islamic self are innate and do not derive from learning, experience, or genetic unfolding. From an Islamic perspective, psychological factors such as early childhood experience or sociological factors such as social class, race, or ethnicity are not essential parts of an individual's personal self. Rather, the personal self is defined in terms of his or her relationship

with God and the control of one's behavior in the interest of society.

### *The Unconscious*

Muhammad seems to have had an affinity for dreams, and Islamic tradition holds that he regularly interpreted the dreams of his followers (Bulkeley, 2002). On the day before he died, The Prophet allegedly said, "When I am gone there shall remain naught of the glad tidings of prophecy, except for true dreams" (Lamoreaux, 2003). This comment is often cited as the reason why, in the centuries after Muhammad's death, Muslims have written hundreds of manuals on dream interpretation. One of the most famous of these interpreters was Ibn Sirin, who argued that a dream's meaning cannot be understood without knowledge of the personality of the dreamer (Bulkeley, 2002).

From an Islamic perspective, dreams are not the royal road to the unconscious, however. Rather, they are communications from God, or possibly Satan, and do not arise from the unconscious of the dreamer. As in psychoanalysis and other psychological forms of dream interpretation, Islam holds that the manifest content of dreams is relatively unimportant. The true meaning of a dream requires analysis and explanation (Lamoreaux, 2003).

Given the *Qur'an's* emphasis on personal responsibility, the concept of an unconscious may be irrelevant to human behavior in the same way that learning theories discount the role of unconscious motivations in behavior (e.g., Skinner, 1974). Along the same lines, existential and humanistic theories often regard attributing behavior to the unconscious as a possible way to avoid responsibility for one's actions (e.g., Perls, Hefferline, & Goodman, 1951). Because much of Islam focuses on the choices an individual makes, the idea of an unknown force within the individual causing behavior is probably not persuasive to many Muslims.

Despite Islam's apparent lack of interest in unconscious motivations, psychoanalytic and analytical scholars—some of whom are themselves Muslim—have written a great deal about the role of the unconscious in Islamic life (e.g., Bouhdiba, 2004; Ewing, 1997; Fayek, 2004; Pandolfo, 1989). Probably most Muslims believe that the unconscious plays either a minor

or nonexistent role in behavior. Even when passionate and undesirable feelings—*nafs ammarah*—arise, the individual is expected to use conscious control to keep those feelings from being expressed in a negative way (Ansari, 2002).

### *Psychological Adjustment*

In Islam, the well-adjusted person experiences *tawhid*, obeys God's commands, and fulfills his or her responsibilities to family and society. Mental health is not the absence of psychological abnormalities but the successful blending of the issues of everyday life with the requirements of Islam (El Azayem & Hedayat-Diba, 1994). In contrast, psychological distress occurs when the individual loses contact with, or acts in ways contrary to, the beliefs of his or her faith and community. The experience of losing contact with *tawhid* resulting in psychological distress in some ways resembles the loss of contact with the collective unconscious that causes mental illness in analytical psychology (Jung, 1933), or, in terms of psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1968), the crisis that comes from feeling estranged from the culture with which a person identifies. Islam does not consider psychological adjustment problems to result solely from a particular aspect of society, society as a whole, or interpersonal relations, as do many traditional personality theories. Expressed in religious terms, people with psychological problems have failed to live in harmony with the universality of God (Ali et al., 2004). In fact, studying the *Qur'an* and performing the five daily prayers can be seen as a medium for meditation, a prophylactic against stress, and a way of promoting psychological and spiritual maturity (El Azayem & Hedayat-Diba, 1994; El-Islam, 2004).

Generally speaking, mental health issues in Islam attract a certain stigma (Ali, 2006; Al-Issa, 2000; Mahmood, 2006), with most adjustment problems being seen as the result of an individual's behavior. However, people with more serious psychological problems, such as schizophrenia, are not usually blamed for their condition (Al-Issa, 2000).

Muslim societies are more collectivistic than societies in the West, and families are often viewed as the individual units of society rather than individuals themselves (Almeida, 1996;



El-Islam, 2004). Because of this, individual psychological distress is usually seen as a family problem rather than something to be solved outside the family (Ali et al., 2004). Therapy with Muslim patients is discussed in more detail later.

### *The Individual and Society*

The relationship between the individual and society in Islamic culture contrasts sharply with the emphasis on individualism in traditional personality theories. As a general rule, traditional personality theories—with the exception of psychosocial theory (Erikson, 1963)—pay little serious attention to how individuals fit into their societies. Some theories, such as psychoanalysis, analytical psychology, and humanistic psychology, seem to regard society as a barrier to individual development that must be overcome. Those theories argue that society's demands on the individual cause neurosis, preclude or greatly limit psychological development, or prevent people from knowing themselves or acting as they feel rather than doing what others expect. This "conflict-of-interest" view of the individual and society is completely foreign to Islam, except when the society in which the individual lives promotes values that conflict with Islamic teachings. In that case, the society is undeserving of the Muslim's loyalty. The *Qur'an* says "So do not listen to unbelievers, and strive against them with greater effort" (25:52), and one of the most famous of the hadith states, "The best jihad is to speak a word of justice before tyrant" (Hassaballa & Helminski, 2006).

Within an Islamic society, however, the relationship between the individual and society is regarded as being largely harmonious, and for the individual, Islamic society is a source of social identity and the collective self mentioned earlier. In the Islamic view, both individuals and societies strive toward the goals of unity with God and living peacefully (Ansari, 2002; Rahman, 1980), and Muslims have the duty of reconciling their personal drives with the demands of the societies in which they live (El Azayem & Hedayat-Diba, 1994; Hedayat-Diba, 1997). Individuals experience not only a personal identity, but also the feelings of community and equality that all members of society share (Shari'ati, 1979). In Islam, neither society nor

the individual dominates the other. The individual has the responsibility of supporting society's goals, and society has responsibility for assisting the individual's personal and spiritual development (Peters, 1993). Despite this interdependence between the individual and society, the *Qur'an* nonetheless recognizes that interpersonal relations and life in general are complicated and that conflict is to be expected (2:216; 90:4).

Islam takes a negative view of acts that could be construed as harmful to the community. For example, the *Qur'an* explicitly forbids suicide (4:29).<sup>3</sup> Monasticism is not permitted in Islam because it is seen as less valuable than being part of the community, and being single is less desirable than being married (Ali, 2006; Jarrar, 1999). The *Qur'an* also authorizes sexual pleasure and not simply sex for the purpose of procreation. One of the rewards for a devout life, in fact, is the opportunity for sexual relations in paradise (Stewart, 2004).

In Islam, the community of believers is known as the *umma*, and, as mentioned earlier, the foundation of the *umma* is the family (Abugideiri, 2004; Mohammed, 2006). The requirements for being part of the *umma*—including communal prayer, fasting, charity, pilgrimage, and so forth—create a common identity that sets Muslims apart from other groups. Within Islam, there are many families, clans, and nationalities, but the ultimate loyalty must be to the *umma* (Forward, 1994). Membership in the *umma* is always open to anyone who becomes a believer. When a person declares himself or herself to be Muslim, that person gains all rights and privileges reserved for members of the *umma*. For example:

A Muslim is the one who avoids harming other Muslims. (Al-Bukhari, as cited in Khan, 1995)

All Muslims are like a single person. If one feels a pain in his head, his whole body feels pain; and if his eye is hurt, his whole body hurts.

All Muslims are like one foundation, some parts strengthening others; in such a way they support each other.

Assist your brother Muslim, whether he is an oppressor or one of the oppressed. "But what shall we do

<sup>3</sup> Muslim suicide bombers justify their actions by claiming that they are martyrs for Islam, and if their actions kill other Muslims, this is further justified by claiming that those killed were in some way heretics.

when he is an oppressor?" Muhammad said, "To assist an oppressor is to forbid and stop him from oppressing others" (cited in Hassaballa & Helminski, 2006).

### Islam and Modern Personality Research

Although Islam addresses many of the questions posed by the traditional personality theo-

rists, it is, of course, a religion or moral philosophy first and an implicit theory of personality only indirectly. Table 1 makes some comparisons between an Islamic view of human nature and some traditional personality theories.

As some contemporary personality theorists have pointed out (McAdams & Pals, 2006),

Table 1  
*Examples of Similarities and Differences With Regard to Traditional Personality Theories*

| Islamic view  | Similar to:   | Different from:   |
|---|---|---|
|   | <b>Human motivation</b>   |   |
| The experience of <i>tawhid</i> , or the Oneness of God, gives meaning to life and leads to an ethical social order on Earth.                             | Analytic psychology's emphasis on finding meaning through the collective unconscious; humanistic psychology's emphasis on self-actualization; object relations' hypothesis of the True Self   | Evolutionary psychology's emphasis on fulfilling the biological drive toward reproduction   |
|   | <b>Personality development</b>  |   |
| Human development proceeds through three stages related to physical and mental strength over the individual's lifespan.                                   | Analytic psychology's emphasis on the four stages of life with special attention to the stage of adulthood and the beginning of the search for meaning; psychosocial theory and its emphasis on lifespan development  | Personal constructs theory and cognitive social learning, which emphasize cognition or learning over stages   |
|   | <b>The self</b>   |   |
| The self controls individual behavior, causes guilt when negative behaviors occur, but holds the potential for leading to tranquility and <i>tawhid</i> . | Psychoanalysis, ego psychology, and interpersonal theory in terms of keeping control of behavior; analytic psychology and humanistic psychology in terms of transcending the personal self  | Personal constructs theory and cognitive social learning do not emphasize a self as the center of personality   |
|   | <b>The unconscious</b>  |   |
| Unconscious motivations for behavior are less important than conscious choices.   | Learning theory, existential psychology, and humanistic psychology put little or no emphasis on unconscious motivations   | Psychoanalysis and analytic psychology and their argument that conscious motives are less important than unconscious  |
|   | <b>Psychological adjustment</b>   |   |
| Well-adjusted individuals fit in with their community and do not experience feelings of tension between personal desires and the demands of society.      | Psychosocial theory and its emphasis on the psychological stress that occurs when individuals do not feel they fit into the culture with which they identify; Horneyan, interpersonal, and socioanalytic theory's emphasis on the importance of positive social relations | Psychoanalysis, analytic psychology, and humanistic psychology and their argument that society's requirement for individuals to subordinate aspects of their personalities to the demands of society creates psychological stress |
|   | <b>The individual and society</b>   |   |
| The need to sacrifice individualism in the interests of the community of believers.   | Although psychosocial theory recognizes the importance of fitting into one's culture, the desirability of subordinating individualism to culture is not stressed in any traditional personality theory  | All traditional personality theories  |

however, personality research seems to be moving away from the traditional “grand” models of personality—that is, the psychoanalytic, behavioral, trait, and humanistic—in favor of other approaches. Funder (2001) identified three new paradigms affecting current research in personality: the social–cognitive, biological, and evolutionary approaches.

### *Social–Cognitive Approach*

This approach emphasizes the role of cognitive factors such as perception and memory on personality and is represented by theorists such as Bandura (2001), Dweck (1997), and Mischel (2004). Some aspects of the implicit personality theory of Islam fit with a social–cognitive approach, including human development being dependent on mental as well as physical strengths, the self as the regulator of individual behavior, and the emphasis on consciousness over the unconscious. The Islamic emphasis on choice also underscores the importance of cognitive factors in behavior.

One important aspect of Islam that fits particularly well with a social–cognitive approach, however, is the life of Muhammad as an example for mankind. Although Muhammad was not divine, Islamic belief holds that his behavior—and his qualities of humility, truthfulness, modesty, kindness, and self-discipline, in particular—provides a model toward which all humans should strive (Ali, 2006). Many of the hadith describe incidents and behaviors that allow for vicarious learning (Bandura, 1977) of ethical and religious behavior, as well as ways to establish rewarding interpersonal relationships on Earth.

### *Biological Approach*

Today, most psychologists recognize the importance of genetics in influencing personality. Although the degree of heritability of different traits remains a topic for debate (Turkheimer, 1998), a large body of research now shows that many behaviors do not result solely from environmental factors. The biological approach contrasts with an Islamic interpretation of personality, however. Again, Islam’s emphasis on personal responsibility seems to reject any form of biological determinism, although, as mentioned earlier, many Muslims would recognize

that people who lack certain mental capacities are not responsible for their behavior (Ali, 2006).

### *Evolutionary Approach*

Evolutionary theories of personality (e.g., Buss, 1999; Hogan, 2006; Kenrick, 2000) emphasize the drive toward reproductive success as the basis for human behavior. Overall, an evolutionary approach probably fits least well with an Islamic theory of personality. Whereas Islam recognizes the value of sexuality in human relations, reproduction in the service of carrying one’s genes into future generations is not considered a major human motivation. Theoretically, reproduction could hasten the establishment of a just social order by adding members to the *umma*, but this differs from the reproductive goals described by evolutionary psychologists.

### *Other Considerations Regarding Personality Theory and Islam*

One could make the point that the different schools of personality psychology comprise subcultures within each school (e.g., object relations and self psychology in psychoanalysis; operant conditioning and cognitive social learning in behavioral approaches). A similar point might be made about the cultures of Islam. As mentioned earlier, this article approaches Islam as a unified belief system without taking into consideration the ethnic and cultural milieus of its adherents. Although general principles are likely to be the same, specific ideas about personality are likely to differ; for example, in the Islamic cultures of Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, and Chechnya. A scientific theory of personality should, of course, address what McAdams and Pals (2006) have referred to as “the differential role of culture” and its impact on behavior.

Another area of importance to personality psychologists that Islam fails to address is evidence for the stability of personality (Costa & McCrae, 1994; Roberts & DelVecchio, 2000). Theologically, of course, personality can always change through divine intervention or perhaps even human will, but this idea is based on faith, not on scientific evidence, data, or statistical analysis.

One of the greatest areas of difference between most approaches to personality and Islam is the Islamic belief in the overall beneficence of society and the importance of subordinating one's personal desires for what is seen as the greater good. Virtually all traditional theories of personality emphasize the psychological cost that comes with following society's rules.

A second important difference is Islam's emphasis on personal responsibility over genetic, situational, or unconscious explanations for behavior. Almost all personality theorists take a deterministic view of human nature—that human action is constrained by influences outside the control of the individual. Most psychotherapies are constructed around the idea that change can occur only after these influences are identified. In Islam, the only cause for behavior is the choice the individual makes.

Using religious study to ensure both intellectual growth and psychological stability is another idea that runs counter to ideas accepted by most personality researchers. Also, in traditional personality theory, intellectual growth and psychological stability are not necessarily related, and traditional theories are more likely to recommend strategies such as seeking insight into one's motivations, expanding one's constructs, or manipulating the environment as ways to ensure psychological health and adjustment.

With regard to psychological health, personality theories are often linked with psychotherapy, and the personological assumptions of Islam suggest approaches that might be useful to providers of therapy to Muslims. Muslims with psychological problems are likely to try to solve the problem themselves first, and if that fails, consult a friend who is known to be wise in terms of spiritual matters (Mahmood, 2006). If the individual still finds no relief, he or she may turn to a psychotherapist.

Given the stigma associated with therapy mentioned earlier, Muslims who come to therapy may prefer to believe that depressive symptoms, for example, have a physical, rather than psychological, origin (El-Islam, 2004). Also, a common belief among Muslims is that secular counselors will attempt to undermine their religious beliefs (Jafari, 1993). Therapists may need to spend time explaining to Muslim clients the purpose of psychotherapy and how the process will work (Abudabbeh & Aseel, 1999).

Islam discourages self-disclosure and a focus on the self (Ali et al., 2004), and putting one's personal needs before the interests of family can cause guilt or confusion (Gorkin, Masalha, & Yatziv, 1985). Because of this unwillingness to disclose, practical suggestions may be more helpful to the client than relying on insight to solve psychological problems (D'Ardene & Mathani, 1998; Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001). At the least, non-Muslim therapists will probably need to make special efforts to demonstrate cultural sensitivity before the Muslim client is willing to self-disclose (Ali et al., 2004).

Given the closeness of Muslim families, another important consideration for psychotherapy is the religiosity of the client and any degree of religious conflict between family members (Haddad & Lumis, 1987; Lang, 1996). For example, some families or individuals may believe that enduring emotional suffering is a way to qualify for a religious blessing (El-Islam, 2004). In the Arab world in general, religious doubts and blasphemous thoughts are particularly distressful to individuals (El-Islam, 2004). Nasser-MacMillian and Hakim-Larson (2003) raised the interesting idea that Muslims who have a psychological problem that violates Islamic teachings—for example, alcoholism or suicidal ideation—may be more comfortable discussing the problem with a non-Muslim therapist. Whatever the problem, Muslim families are likely to be the decision makers with regard to mental health problems (El-Islam, 2004), and the goal of the family will most likely be the integration of the client back into the family and not his or her isolation from the family.

## Conclusion

In the end, Weber concluded that the conditions that created the Protestant ethic did not exist in Islamic society, and he did not identify any specific traits that Islam might impart to its adherents. However, as with most religions, the teachings of Islam promote a view of personality that is likely to affect behavior in the cultures in which Muslims live. As we mentioned earlier, understanding Islamic assumptions about personality are important for at least three reasons: to help advance our knowledge of how religious teachings affect behavior; to address broader psychological topics, such as motivation, personality development, and the self that

apply to all people; and to identify specific aspects of Islamic culture that may affect the treatment of psychological distress in Muslim clients.

Although Islamic ideas about personality arose long before the development of the scientific method, some Islamic views (e.g., age and reasoning ability) fit with the views of most modern psychologists. Others (e.g., the desirability of subordinating individual interest to the interest of the group or the necessity of marriage) are not widely accepted by psychologists, at least not in the West. A lack of support does not make these ideas unimportant, however. As Jung (1938) pointed out, shared ideas create a psychological reality that affects the behavior of individuals who live in a particular society. For psychologists, understanding a religion's view of personality can be a good starting point for understanding the personalities of that religion's adherents.

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