

Living Islamic Psychology: Portrait of a Muslim American Psychologist

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This article examines the experiences of a Muslim *American Psychologist* and her involvement in advancing the nascent field of Islamic psychology within a primarily secular American context, including her efforts toward the establishment of the first Muslim graduate school of psychology in the United States. In this article, she reflects on challenges faced in a relatively small subfield and how she has brought together various personal and professional identities within her workspace. She also examines how Islamic psychology and mainstream psychology are in conversation with each other and she also makes some recommendations for ways forward in the interdisciplinary landscape where psychology and Islam converge.

Keywords: Islamic psychology, Muslim psychologist, Muslim identity, Islam in public life, psychology higher education

Religious and Spiritual History, Identity, and Engagement

I identify as Muslim, having joined the faith tradition in 1999 when I was in my early 20s. I have been Muslim for almost all of my adult life. I consider myself very religious and very spiritual. I practice all of the outward forms of Islam (five daily prayers, fasting, charity, etc.) and I also engage in Islam's inward practices of purification of the self/soul, which includes supererogatory spiritual practices such as dhikr (remembrance/mantra practices), extra fasting, being of service to those in need, among other activities. In short, I am committed to and practice my faith "religiously" and it is the framework within which I live my life that gives it direction and meaning.

My religious history, identity, and engagement as a Muslim have been impacted across my lifespan by a variety of experiences, events, and circumstances, some of which I discuss here. They include, but are certainly not limited to, being born into a Christian family, having lived outside of my native United States in various countries for almost 17 years, doing

my PhD in transpersonal psychology, marrying into an Iraqi Muslim family, and now, some 15 years later, being in the process of an unwanted and extremely traumatic and painful divorce and moving into a mosque of sorts. I will elaborate on each of these in the ensuing section.

I was born in Glens Falls, New York, on August 26, 1976, into a Christian family. My mother and almost all of her side of the family are Baptist. I attended a Baptist church as a child and even went to a parochial school at the same church for the third, fourth, and half of the fifth grade. My father does not belong to any particular denomination. He grew up going to an Assembly of God church but then followed the Baptist tradition while he was married to my mother. His current wife of nearly 40 years—my stepmother—is Catholic. I attended the Catholic Church as a visitor on a number of occasions growing up and also observed how my five step-siblings were being raised as Catholics. In addition to this, my paternal grandmother, paternal aunt, and her two daughters joined the Mormon Church in the 1970s. I did not have any exposure to this growing up but as an adult, I have due to my close relationship with my aunt and cousins. My grandmother is no longer a Mormon. Given all of this, there is a good amount of religious diversity in my family. I contributed to it when I joined the Islamic tradition nearly 25 years ago.

In terms of my nearly 17 years abroad, I lived in many places including France, Russia, Latvia,

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Turkey, Singapore, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates. I also learned seven languages. The bulk of my years abroad were in Muslim-majority countries but this was preceded by over 3 years in various places in Europe in the 1990s. For example, I lived in Paris for over a year and studied at Sorbonne University. I also lived in Latvia on and off for almost 2 years and did a semester abroad in Russia at Moscow State University. After graduating with my BA in International Studies (1998), I then lived off and on in Turkey throughout 1998 and 1999. From 2001 until 2003, I then lived in Beirut, Lebanon, where I did a master's degree in Middle East Studies at the American University of Beirut. In 2004, I moved to the United Arab Emirates and stayed there for almost 10 years (3.5 years in Dubai and the rest of the time in Abu Dhabi). Throughout my years living in these places, I also visited many other Islamic countries (Syria, Egypt, Morocco, Yemen, Malaysia, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, etc.) including two trips to Mecca in Saudi Arabia for the spiritual pilgrimage called Umrah. As one can imagine, living for such a long time abroad and being exposed to so many languages, cultures, and faith traditions impacts one's outlook on life—religious or otherwise—especially given the fact that I come from a very small, conservative town and grew up during a time (the 1980s) where exposure to diversity was almost nonexistent—although my soul always longed for it.

Doing a PhD in transpersonal psychology is also tied to my religious history, identity, and engagement. My life in psychology began with the personal healing work I did in my late 20s in Dubai with three transpersonal therapists. This changed the course of my life and also got me extremely interested in complementary and alternative medicine and healing and, in 2006, it also led me to enroll in my doctoral program at Sofia University (formerly the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology). During the first half of my studies, I was not exposed to anything particularly Islamic in my academic work. Rather, I engaged with practices such as reiki, holotropic breathwork, a Buddhist meditative practice called "Metta" (lovingkindness), among other modalities. However, as a result of an intense healing experience I had with ruqya—an Islamic method that uses verses of the Quran for healing—this shifted my focus to Islamic healing methods exclusively and I then went on to do my

doctoral research on the use of ruqya on non-Muslims. What I learned during that time was that complementary and alternative medicine was a relatively developed field (there is even a National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine) but there were absolutely no Islamic modalities on the menu even though the Islamic tradition is full of practices that had the potential to be of great benefit to anyone. I argued that one did not have to be Chinese to use or benefit from acupuncture nor did one need to be a Buddhist in order to meditate or do yoga. One also did not need to be a Muslim in order to use and potentially benefit from ruqya or any other Islamic healing intervention, the only problem was that unless one was a Muslim, chances are they had not heard of them because they were not on the menu. Furthermore, Islamic psychology as a discipline was virtually nonexistent, even though Christian, Buddhist, and other religious or spiritual psychologies were and, in some cases, had accredited graduate degree programs in them for decades (e.g., see Fuller Seminary, Naropa University, Baylor University, Liberty University). This is when I began to think about Islamic therapies not only within the context of transpersonal psychology or complementary and alternative medicine, but the development of Islamic psychology as a discipline. I will discuss what I have been doing to develop this field in the section on my professional engagement.

Another experience that impacted my religious history and engagement was marrying into an Iraqi Muslim family. My husband, who I met in Dubai in 2007, is a urologist who fled the war in Iraq in 2005. We got married in Abu Dhabi in 2008 and within 2 months, his mother and three children from his previous marriage (at that time Ages 9–11) came to live with us. We also have one daughter together (born 2011). My husband's mother is a Quran teacher so Quran lessons were a constant in our home and so was the Arabic language. As a family, we prayed together, observed the fast during Ramadan, all of us went to Umrah (spiritual pilgrimage) and in short, we were a committed Muslim family until it came to a shocking, traumatic, and extremely painful halt last summer (2022) when my husband and I separated. Marrying into, living within this seven-member family unit for almost 15 years, and now being in the process of divorce has had a huge impact on my religious and spiritual development that I am still processing and trying to make sense

of. Elaborating further at this point in time would be premature and somewhat outside the scope of this article, but the impending divorce brings me to where I am now—the Great Falls Zawiya.

At the time of this writing, I am living alone with my 12-year-old daughter in the suburbs of Washington, DC, in a private zawiya. A zawiya is kind of like a mosque but a bit different. An analogy that might help is that a mosque is a public place of worship akin to a church, synagogue, or temple, whereas a zawiya is often private and might be akin to a monastery or convent, although the concept is not entirely synonymous. A zawiya is a place dedicated to help individuals attain beautiful character (virtues) or spiritual excellence through various purification practices such as dhikr (remembrance of God chants), fasting, prayer, Mawlid, and the like. As part of being the caretaker, I regularly host various spiritual communities who use the place for their dhikr/remembrance gatherings (majalis). I am always invited to sit in with the various groups that come and have therefore had great exposure to the vast expression of Islamic spirituality by having the honor of being the host. In the past year since my life exploded, my whole existence has been nothing other than spiritual practices and seeking proximity to God as a way to cope with the shock and pain of spousal betrayal and the loss of five members of my immediate family (husband, step-kids, and mother-in-law), four of whom were in my immediate household. I have done this through personal acts of formal and ritualized worship and also through service to the zawiya—maintaining the place and serving guests who come to remember God. One of God's greatest blessings to me during this most difficult time is to have my daughter with me full time and to have us both living in "bayt dhikr Allah," which translates as "house for the remembrance of God." This is a new level of Islam in my life that I am still in the process of trying to make sense of and integrate.

How My Islamic Identity/Engagement Manifests Itself in My Professional Life and Work

The bulk of my professional life revolves around being president of the Alkaram Institute (<https://www.alkaraminstitute.org>), a 501c3 nonprofit

research and educational institution established in 2018 whose mission is to advance Islamic psychology to benefit society and improve lives and whose longer term vision is to become the first Muslim graduate school of psychology in the United States. The word Alkaram in Arabic means "generosity" and is one of the core values of the institute.

The institute currently offers the first and only program in Islamic psychology in the United States and we plan to apply for graduate school status as soon as possible. We hope to offer an MA in Islamic psychology, which would be the first of its kind as there are currently no MA degrees in Islamic psychology anywhere. In due course, we hope to add accredited master's and doctoral programs in clinical psychology, marriage and family therapy, and more. In the meantime, we have a number of noteworthy projects including research and publications on Islamically integrated psychotherapy, virtue and character development, and beyond. I am personally involved in all aspects of running the institute including research, teaching, mentoring students and fellows, curriculum development, fundraising, and running our publication wing—Alkaram Press. We have our first two edited volumes coming out this year: *The Way of Love: Towards an Islamic Psychology of Virtues and Character Development* (Fall 2023) and *Heartfulness: Islamic Mindfulness, Meditation, and Other Psycho-Spiritual Practices* (2024).

In addition to my responsibilities at the institute, I was also an associate editor of the American Psychological Association's (APA) journal *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* for 4 years (2019–2023) and have been somewhat active in APA, particularly Division 36—The Society for the Psychology of Religion and Spirituality (R/S)—for over 15 years. Before establishing the Alkaram Institute, I also developed and taught at the University of Iowa the first and at the time only class on Islamic psychology to be offered in a university in the United States. In short, there has never been a time in my professional life as a psychologist when being Muslim was in any way separate or when R/S was not part of my work. My whole entrance into the field was as a client of spiritually integrated therapy and my doctoral program was an integration of psychology and spirituality. My work now as a midcareer psychologist is wholly

about the development and advancement of Islamic psychology within the broader mainstream and putting Islam on the proverbial menu.

Related to this, my experience within the context of APA and working with colleagues has been fruitful. I personally have presented on Islamic psychology at a number of APA conventions. I just completed coediting a special issue of *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* on Islamic spirituality in clinical contexts (York & Awan, 2023) and I have been invited on so many occasions to collaborate on various projects with colleagues because of the Islamic work I am doing—this chapter being a perfect case and point. I have had mostly a positive experience professionally although there have certainly been challenges. I discuss some of them next.

Challenges I Have Faced Along the Way

Given the current climate of diversity and inclusion, I have found a welcoming environment and people want to hear Islamic and Muslim voices and perspectives (York Al-Karam, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2020, 2021). That said, I have also had a number of challenges.

First, there is still a lot of ignorance about the field of R/S in psychology in general, even though it is quite a robust area. I have argued that R/S has always been part of psychology (York Al-Karam, 2018a, 2018b, 2020, 2021) even though at certain points in modern history, particularly during the years of psychoanalysis and then behaviorism, it was looked down upon—but this was also simultaneously the time of the emergence of humanistic and transpersonal psychologies as well as faith-based psychologies (e.g., see Reuder, 1999—history of Division 36 and the role that catholic psychologists played). Related to this, there also remains a lot of ignorance about the existence of the field of Islamic psychology and moreover, what it is and is not. This is an issue within Muslim and non-Muslim contexts alike. Due to this, much of my earlier work was dedicated to trying to deal with the issue of defining what is meant by Islamic psychology (York Al-Karam, 2018a, 2018b, 2020, 2021), how it overlaps with but is also distinct from Muslim mental health, that psychology today does deal with R/S, and educating both Muslim and non-Muslim communities about these thorny issues.

The second challenge has been related to jobs. There was a period of time during my years as

an early career psychologist where I explored full-time faculty positions. My first challenge was that I was always pinned geographically to my husband's job. So within that primary limitation of physical location and also being a wife and raising four children, the other issue was that the university jobs in the areas in which I lived never seemed to be looking for faculty with expertise and/or a research agenda in religion/spirituality or Islamic psychology. So not only are faculty positions difficult to obtain in the best of circumstances, it is even more of a challenge if one has expertise in a lesser known topic, although I believe this is starting to change.

Another challenge has been trying to develop a “new” field (of Islamic psychology). Psychology is not new to the Islamic intellectual tradition. Some of the earliest psychologists were Muslims (e.g., see Awaad & Ali, 2014, 2015; Awaad et al., 2019, 2020; Badri, 2013; Haque, 2004). However, one could definitely say that the field of Islamic psychology today is in a stage of revival. With that comes challenges of going into uncharted territory, and this is certainly the case with the establishment of the Alkaram Institute and trying to develop an institution of higher education in psychology that is both within the context of mainstream psychology but also holding fast to its own religious and philosophical worldview and identity. Being okay with the unknown and as to if or how things will unfold is a necessary quality one must possess to work in this domain. It also requires one (in this case me) to “live Islamic psychology.” Here is what I mean by that.

There are a number of Islamic teachings that provide a psychological and spiritual framework within which Muslims should live. I would argue that these teachings because they provide psychological comfort, direction, purpose, and help a person to make meaning out of life—especially hardships and difficulties—have the potential to be helpful to anyone and in fact, they are very similar to teachings in other faith traditions. These teachings are also psychospiritual cornerstones of Islamic psychology.

In terms of what they are, the first is the idea of placing one's faith and trust in God. In Arabic this is called *tawakkul*. This act of faith is connected to other concepts like knowing that God is all-knowing and all-powerful and in control. Nothing will happen unless God wills it and nothing will happen if He does not. There is a teaching that states if the whole world conspired to harm you, unless God allowed it they could not harm you in

the slightest. And if the whole world conspired to do something good to you, it would not happen unless God willed it. Moreover, whatever happens to a person is always to their benefit even if they cannot see it at the time. God states in the Quran that a person may not like a thing that is good for them and they may like something that is bad for them. For me, and all the challenges and uncertainty I face professionally, it is essential and incredibly comforting to root myself in such teachings. It frees me from worry and anxiety and allows me to work creatively and with a sense of trust that everything will unfold how it is supposed (and not necessarily how I want it to) and that results are not within the domain of human beings—we can only do our part and then we have to surrender to what we cannot control. For me, I am asked to live these “Islamic psychology” principles on a daily basis both professionally and personally. Professionally, I am trying to live true to the vision for my work, doing my best, but also surrendering to the fact that success and whatever I actually achieve is out of my control. I have no idea if the Alkaram Institute will be a success—I can only do my part and trust that how things unfold will be according to God’s will.

I am also being called to embody these spiritual truths within the context of the painful divorce I am going through right now. It gives me comfort to know that God saw everything that happened and that is He going to work everything out for me in a way that will be in my best favor. Moreover, nothing I could have done would have prevented such a major life event—nothing that is written for us ever misses us and nothing that was not destined for us will never reach us. Although divorce is a process that a person must emotionally work through, there can be great comfort in knowing that God sees our hardships, is with us all the way, and He will work it out for our good. But often, getting to the point of fully embodying these truths and feeling a sense of inner peace in the face of very painful life circumstances, this is where spiritual practices come into play. The practices are the “doing” from our part that facilitate this—the doing on God’s part is to then grace us with the peace. In that sense, it really is living Islamic psychology in the truest sense of the concept. There is no Islamic psychology without these fundamental beliefs and teachings and nobody gets out of life without being tested on living them out—including me!

Other challenges I have had are related to starting a graduate school such as funding, applying for accreditation, and matters like these related to developing an institution of higher education, especially a Muslim one in the United States. In the past decade or so there have been a growing number of Islamic seminaries in the United States. However, starting a religious institution does not at all have the same regulations that an (accredited) institution of higher education that is training clinicians has so in that sense, there are a lot of challenges related to infrastructure and regulations we face that seminaries do not have to deal with. Moreover, at present, there are only three Muslim institutions of higher education in the United States: American Islamic College established in 1983 and operating on and off since then, Zaytuna College established in 2008, and Bayan Claremont established in 2011—that is it! Related to this, none of these were founded by a woman. So, in addition to challenges associated with founding an actual college (as opposed to a seminary), I am also a nonhijab-wearing woman and convert and often have to deal with a lot of prejudice and judgments people make about me based on my appearance. I have written more about this in a book chapter (see [York Al-Karam, 2017](#)).

Reflections on Ways to Better Integrate Who I Am With What I Do in a Generally Secular Evidence-Based Discipline and Profession

One of the biggest misconceptions about Islamic psychology is that it is either not evidence based or that it is antievidence based. Nothing could be further from the truth. However, the term “evidence” needs to be qualified.

From an Islamic perspective, evidence is not something relegated solely to knowledge gained from the scientific method. It includes this, but evidence could also be gained through reason, rational or logical deduction, observation, and also revelation—as in divine revelation. Actually, even scientific evidence could be considered a type of revelation in that all knowledge is from God and it is only through His wisdom and generosity that He reveals knowledge to humans through these various methods. This is a different philosophical worldview than that of secularism, which does not acknowledge the existence of God or of things unseen. Unfortunately, philosophy is

an area of psychology that is a remaining glaring blind spot. Psychologists tout ad nauseam that psychology is a science, yet many of them are completely ignorant of the philosophy that underpins the science to which they subscribe and that it has its own philosophical bias just like religious psychologies do. Science is not neutral or objective, but unless one studies philosophy (which many psychologists do not), one would be oblivious to this fact—and many psychologists are! To me, this is one of the final frontiers of diversity and inclusion in psychology—philosophical diversity.

As this relates to integrating who I am within the context of my field; in my opinion, this is largely a matter of how well I—or anyone for that matter—am able to embody the spiritual beliefs and philosophies that I previously discussed about having faith and trust in God's plan and having the confidence to live this way and without apology. For some, living their religious beliefs and values in public is daunting. For me personally, authenticity is the only way I can operate so I take the perspective that I am going to live and do according to my beliefs and values, be respectful of everyone else to do the same, and simply not care if and when someone else has a problem with that. The famous rapper Mary J. Blige describes perfectly in her song my feelings on what others might think of how I live my life—they can "Hate It or Love It"!

Training and Practice in the Future and How Our Field Can Grow and Improve

In my opinion, the most significant issue facing psychology today as it relates to religion/spirituality is the lack of a mandate on it in education and training, at least yet. Symposia do happen at annual conventions, APA Press does publish books on this topic, Division 36 exists, we have two APA journals dedicated to it—so it is there. But, it seems that unless one is actually engaged in this subarea, one may otherwise be ignorant of it because psychology programs are simply not required to cover it in education and training. This is extremely unfortunate because R/S are core aspects of being human. Not understanding or being familiar with how they play out in people's lives is not only a travesty but a level of professional incompetence—there is simply no other way to state this. Various efforts

have been underway to develop educational and training programs in R/S but until now, it is not a requirement in APA-accredited programs. It is my hope and recommendation that this be done and that perhaps a task force be created dedicated to this. If and when it happens, I believe R/S in psychology will start to be normalized. Perhaps this publication project that describes how many of us psychologists of faith are navigating this issue will be another link in the chain toward this important and necessary endeavor.

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