Gazing at Islam Through a Psychoanalytic Lens: Acuity or Myopia?

A review of

The Crescent and the Couch: Cross-Currents Between Islam and Psychoanalysis
by Salman Akhtar (Ed.)
$69.95

Reviewed by
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When I first began reading The Crescent and the Couch: Cross-Currents Between Islam and Psychoanalysis, I was surprised to see a book dedicated to understanding Islam from a psychoanalytic perspective. Of all of the therapeutic theories, psychoanalysis seemed the least likely candidate for such a book. I would have more likely expected such a book from a behaviorist outlook.

It reminded me of a story that an Iranian psychologist colleague told me. He had a large private practice in a clinic in Iran. This psychologist preferred to function clinically from a neoanalytic, object relations theoretical orientation. The main problem that he encountered was that his clients, not used to a pay-for-service mental health model, were complaining at the end of the session that the psychologist had done nothing to earn the fee. My friend came up with the solution of giving behavioral homework assignments at the end
of a typical neoanalytic session. The clients were appeased in that in their opinion they had received a tangible product for their money. In many Muslim cultures, there seems to be a higher level of acceptance of behavior-based interventions, particularly as the psychologist may be perceived as an analogue to a medical physician. For this and theoretical reasons to be discussed later, the perspective of this book was a surprise.

The intent of this book is to combat the vitriolic, anti-Muslim negative stereotypes that currently permeate much of Western culture. The editor states that it is his intent to provide an accurate and thorough description of the practice of Islam in a way that shows its positive face and corrects the media-based negative distortions. As an edited book, with varying chapter authors, the different authors variously fail and succeed at this stated goal.

The authors of the chapter on women and Islam are an example of such a failure. They discuss the veil as a metaphor of misogynistic oppression. The authors' misinformed perspective is illustrated through several examples. The first is in the assumption that veiling the face is a common practice, or that it is directly related to Islam. In actuality, the practice of women veiling the face can be traced to a Bedouin, pre-Mohammed cultural practice. The authors' failure to distinguish between local culture practices and what is presented in the Quran, Hadiths (which are sayings attributed to Mohammed), or Sunnah (the behavioral practice of Islam as demonstrated by Mohammed) is frustrating. These authors present a negative view of Islam in which women are feared and thus are oppressed.

I note that in a separate chapter on the life of Mohammed, other authors present some of the dramatic gender-related social justice initiatives of Mohammed in a positive, accurate light. Some of these radical actions included abolishing the infanticide of girl babies and allowing women sole ownership of their personal property. For a better understanding of the practice of hijab, which is an important aspect of Islam for women that is distinctly different from the Bedouin cultural practice of veiling the face, see Priester (2008).

A specific chapter in which the authors succeed in the goal of presenting an accurate, positive, and detailed presentation of Islam addresses parallels between Sufi spiritual development and the psychotherapy process. In Sufism, an individual seeks out a pir. The pir is similar to the guru in yoga, the Zen master in Buddhism, or the spiritual director in Christian spiritual direction. The pir is a spiritually evolved master who guides the initiate through the process of enlightenment, often using meditative reflection on poetry as a critical tool.

The description of the relationship between the seeker and the pir is startlingly similar to the relationship between a client and psychotherapist. The process as described in this chapter is remarkably analogous to a psychodynamic model of psychotherapy. Jungian analysts would see a similarity to the process of individuation. This is fascinating and rich material that is de rigueur reading for any clinician who may work with Sufi clients.

One may well ask whether it is possible to present Islam (or any religion, for that matter) in a positive light when operating from a psychoanalytic perspective. It has been suggested that if a psychologist starts with a model of psychology based on secular
presuppositions, it is impossible to subsequently view religious belief or practice in a healthy
light (Priester, Khalili, & Eluvathingal, 2008).

The chapter on the life of Mohammed presents this dilemma clearly. The author states
that Mohammed's life will be viewed from a personal, historical perspective and that the
Quran will be presented as Mohammed himself describing his perspective on the social
situation around him rather than divine revelation. In this light, Mohammed's religious
behavior may be seen as pure and simple wish fulfillment: an abandoned orphan seeking his
father in the form of a projected God. It is impossible to gain a respectful understanding of
Mohammed or Islam if you reject the metaphysical claim that there is a God, that the Quran
is the direct word of this God, and view Mohammed's life or the Quran in humanistic terms.

The book also presents several reoccurring biases. First, Sunnism is presented as the
default true expression of Islam. This denigration of Shiism is troubling. The other bias is
the overexposure of Sufism. For some reason, Western writers seem drawn to Sufism. This
is evidenced by the popularity in the United States of the Sufi poet Rumi (Tippett, 2007).
Sufism is intriguing and worthy of study, but, in the larger picture, it is a rather small
minority of the current Muslim population. If you do not know this when reading parts of
this book, you might fall under the impression that Sufism is the major school of thought in
current Islam.

In the end, I would describe this book as engaging but enigmatic. It is engaging in that
it is wonderful and exhilarating to see an exploration of Islam in such a detailed manner.
While other authors have successfully introduced Islam to psychologists (Ali, Liu, &
Humedian, 2004), the level of detail afforded to readers in a book is wonderful. The book is
enigmatic in that it, at times, fosters distortions about Islam and would seem to perpetuate
some of the negative stereotypes that it sets out to dispel. Whether this is due to the
psychoanalytic perspective or other reasons is hard to say.

References

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