



## Liberation Psychology from an Islamic Perspective

### Some Theoretical and Practical Implications of Psychology with a *Telos* of Justice

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#### Abstract

Liberation psychology is an emerging field of psychological theory with an orientation towards justice as the *telos* of psychology. Rejecting the traditional European psychological practices which have based psychological work on the isolated individual, liberation psychology theorizes that individual wellness is inextricably connected to societal forces of oppression. This paper discusses Islamic connections to liberation psychology, including psychological approaches that are consistent with Islamic assumptions and conceptualizations of the self, human rights in relationship to the principle of tawhid, environmental justice, and an analysis of pathologies of violence in relationship to the Muslim community and the human community.

Keywords: liberation psychology, praxis, Exodus, tawhidic principle, human rights

#### Introduction

Traditionally European psychology has supported the status quo (Martín-Baró; Watkins and Shulman). Alternatively, liberation psychology refers to psychological approaches that aim to critique and transform the structures in society that contribute to the pathologies of addiction, mental illness, and the deterioration of individual and community integrity, and that support wellness, empowerment, and a future for humanity (Martín-Baró). Liberation psychology critiques the historical approaches of psychotherapy and psychology that dealt with individual wellness but neglected to include an analysis of the societal factors involved in

individual problems and other problems at the micro level (Martín-Baró; Moane 2006, 2010; Watkins and Shulman). It is a person-in-environment approach at the individual level, and includes the prioritizing of mezzo and macro level changes through social action and organizing. It is also explicitly in contradiction to the colonial, Eurocentric, and imperialistic approaches that have traditionally dominated the field of social sciences (Al-Faruqi; Duran, Firehammer, and Gonzales; Martín-Baró; Seedat; Watkins and Shulman). It is a paradigm shift for psychology which refocuses priorities (Malherbe). For Muslims in mental health this has many implications, but it can be summarized as advocating for justice in our work.

The author approaches liberation psychology from a Muslim perspective being Muslim herself. The importance of liberation psychology for Muslims is thus beyond theoretical and involves personal and practical applications for the author as a mental health practitioner. The heuristic approach of working from the author's religious orientation in part stems from the desire to theorize on liberation psychology generally as well as the dearth of academic or other writing on liberation psychology in English and its relationship to Islam in spite of the harmonizing of the two.

This paper suggests that an Islamically grounded liberation psychology could start from Islamic principles, particularly *tawhid* as the overarching metaphysical principle, and justice as the practical implementation, including the importance of using approaches that draw from our own tradition. The author suggests that an Islamic liberation psychology approach would involve practicing *tawhid* in affirming all persons' full humanity, and cultivating a personal and community approach to wellness that prioritizes right relationship to the environment. Finally, a liberation psychology approach could entail consciously advocating for violence to be framed and addressed in relationship to our community in ways that take seriously colonialism, imperialism, and racism.

### **Background: Liberation Psychology's Roots in Liberation Theology**

Liberation psychology springs from the tradition of liberation theology (Martín-Baró), the tradition of doing theology in reflection on solidarity with the oppressed and working to establish a just social order (Gutierrez). This tradition of theology transcends the separate traditions and circumstances of various times (Rieger), religions, races, genders, and nationalities. Liberation theologies have emerged from South and Central America (Gutierrez), the African diaspora (Cone), second-wave feminists (Ruether 1972), the hearing-impaired community (Lewis), the Muslim community (Dabashi; Demichelis; Esack 1997), and some claim that liberation theology existed at least back as far as the 1400s in the work of persons such as Bartholome de las Casas (Gutierrez). Liberation theology is based on the praxis of engaging with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized, and rejects the dichotomy of natural and supernatural, worldly and spiritual, in favor of doing theology in a holistic way. This holistic approach affirms that theology should spring from the lived experience of finding God in one's brother or sister, and serving others as a means to serve God. This service to others, the genuine heart-felt engagement with the world in the pursuit of justice as an engagement with God, constitutes the basis of liberation theology. This is in opposition to the historical work of theology which conceptualized theology as an individualistic, isolated, and personal relationship with God and supported the status quo (Gutierrez).

Some have claimed that the wave of liberation theology from the 1960s–1980 is outdated and obsolete due to the changes in political organization. Others have argued that movements like the Occupy movement continue to provide grounds for the discussion of oppression, due to the huge disparity in the wealth being held in the hands of the few, the 1%, versus the hands of the many, the 99%. This economic injustice so prominent in today's world make the discussion of a God who condemns sin as part of social and institutional oppression highly relevant (Pui-Lan; Rieger and Pui-Lan). Rieger and Pui-Lan discuss this in depth as the theology of the multitude. Based on the leaderless movements of the twenty-first century, like Occupy, they discuss a contemporary vision of liberation and revolution, and they state that the concept of justice is still central, vital, and critical for today's world, in spite of the changing terms of oppression, from colonialism and imperialism, to a decentralized "empire" (Hardt and Negri). Rieger and Pui-Lan argue for a deep solidarity that transcends all race, gender, and nationality around the division of wealth and that this is the current work of liberation theologians. Because there is still a need for a more just world to be created, and because this involves confronting sin and encountering God in the poor, liberation theology remains relevant and vital for theological work in the twenty-first century.

### **Justice as the Goal of Psychology**

Like a liberation theology approach that prioritizes justice, a liberation psychology approach has its *telos* as justice. Liberation psychology is a psychological orientation based on a vision of social transformation. Ignacio Martín-Baró was a Jesuit and a Salvadorian psychologist who was assassinated by a U.S. trained death squad for his work in psychology in 1989 (Chávez, Fernandez, Hipolito-Delgado, and Rivera; Watkins and Shulman). He is cited unanimously as the original and main theorist of liberation psychology. Unfortunately, there is very little work that has been done in the field of liberation psychology in English. Other than a few isolated thinkers, the language is not widely prevalent. There are schools that use his thinking and thinkers that have built on his theories such as Geraldine Moane in Ireland and Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman in California, as well as a few texts, notably Montero and Sons' book, *Psychology of Liberation*, among others, but the field is still emerging.

Martín-Baró was living and working in El Salvador in the midst of a war that had cost over 80,000 Salvadorans their lives. For his context, the psychological theories of the 1970s and 80s, where the personal happiness of the autonomous individual constituted the frame and end of psychology, were inadequate (Watkins and Shulman). Watkins and Shulman describe his thinking saying,

Martin-Baro envisioned a psychology that would acknowledge the psychological wounding caused by war, racism, poverty and violence; a psychology that would support historical memory and critical reflection; a psychology that would aid the emergence of the sort of subjectivity through which people could creatively make sense and respond to the world (25).

Martín-Baró criticized several of the main assumptions of traditional European psychology including its emphasis on scientism, individualism, and ahistoricism. In his critique of ahistoricism, he was particularly concerned with the universalizing of European psychology to all people around the world in all circumstances. He critiqued this universalizing tendency of

traditional European psychology with the famous words, “The prevailing scientism leads us to consider human nature as universal, and to believe therefore, that there are no fundamental differences between, say a student at MIT and a Nicaraguan campesino, between John Smith from Peoria, and Leonor Gonzales from Cuisnhat, El Salvador” (23). This ahistoricism distorted psychologists’ view of people and prevented psychologists from actually seeing the truth of the impact of society on individuals. In his own words,

What is needed is the revision, from the bottom-up, of our most basic assumptions in psychological thought . . . This done, truth will not have to be a simple reflection of data, but can become a task at hand: not an account of what *has been done*, but of what *needs to be done* (23).

He called for psychology which would change the world for the better. When Martín-Baró was assassinated, Adrienne Aron and Shawn Corne of CHRICA published his writings in English, and since then the field has continued to grow. He was theorizing a psychology that would be relevant to the world he lived in and the people he worked with, much like the approach of liberation theology.

Liberation theologians have critiqued traditional theology as talking about the individual relationship to the Divine in a vacuum, and many European psychological approaches had a similarly individualistic orientation. Theorists like Freud did engage in societal critiques in their overall body of work, but Freud’s orientation to psychological treatment and the goal of psychology as a science was to make individuals who were not functioning effectively in society fit in and succeed, without any overall critique of the society itself. Similarly, people like B. F. Skinner and behaviorists, or Piaget and his theories of cognitive development, focused on the individual and how the individual functioned and not how the individual fit with society and was affected by societal forces. Their analysis effectively excluded a critique of how society’s problems and dysfunctions negatively impacted individual development.

Liberation psychology make axiomatic the concept that the problems in the individual are intricately connected to the problems of the society, and that psychology should have greater goals than helping individuals to conform and fit in enough to function successfully in society as it stands now. This conceptualization of interconnectedness also is not an impartial theory or valueless, but is founded on a critique of injustice and oppression that has created suffering for individuals and communities. As Watkins and Shulman state, “We do not want to assume that the role of psychology is to help individuals and families adapt to the status quo when this present order contributes so massively to human misery, psychological and otherwise” (13).

Liberation psychology is highly relevant for Muslim mental health, although there is little to nothing on the relationship between the two that has been published. It explicitly critiques colonialism and its impact on the mental health of individuals and communities, a necessary piece of psychology for Muslims. Liberation psychology provides a further theoretical basis for the work being done currently by Muslims to create psychological frameworks that are consistent with Islamic assumptions in that it rejects the use of psychology to perpetuate oppression, and it also addresses the impact of violence on individuals and communities. These are topics that are particularly relevant for Muslims. Martín-Baró’s critiques of traditional psychology’s individualism, ahistoricism, and scientism are just as valid for Muslims as they were for Salvadorians. Traditional European psychological approaches are problematic

for the reason that they tend to neglect an analysis of society, as well as the fact that they are often in conflict with fundamental Islamic assumptions such as the existence of the soul.

*Dialogical Action and Critical Consciousness, and the Mental Health Jihad*

According to Paolo Freire, action is necessarily predicated on reflection, and this constitutes true speech. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he states: “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action, in such radical interaction that if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers. There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (87). This combined work of action and reflection is praxis, a concept employed by Marxist thinkers such as Gramsci. Freire, in his pivotal work as an educator in Brazil, called for praxis to be founded on dialogical engagement and the development of critical consciousness.

Martín-Baró built off of liberation theology and Freire’s work and called for a dialogical engagement with the world that would question the status quo and break with the dominant culture in the interest of creating a more just society (Watkins and Shulman). Watkins and Shulman describe his thinking, saying,

When individuals have been taught silence and accommodation by the institutions around them, the outcome is a sense of fatalism about life’s conditions. The way things are seems inevitable. One’s failure seems one’s own fault. Desires for different ways of being in relation to oneself and others are crushed by a sense of oneself as powerless. The crucial question of liberation psychology, then, involves the transformation of fatalism into critical consciousness, an awakening of agency and the power to perform our roles differently, and a quickening of imaginations of desire (25).

The work of liberation psychology as framed by Martín-Baró and others following in his footsteps involves participatory dialogue and dialogical action expressed in a wide array of psychological modalities which call into question the status quo and envision a just future full of hope and possibility (Watkins and Shulman).

Part of the work of liberation psychology is a profound utopian vision of a world transformed by love and consciousness, where the current devastation of the environment and human communities has been overcome and replaced by sustainable practices and life-affirming ideologies. The concept of utopian vision is central to liberation theology and liberation theologians have cited the story of Exodus, saying that the liberation of the Israelites from slavery and their entrance into the Promised Land would never have been possible if they had not first had a vision of where they wanted to go. The concept of a Promised Land to which they were headed was a central piece of their decision to embark upon the journey away from the familiar land of Egypt into the desert. Similarly, liberation theology has always involved a hope for a future without oppression. Liberation psychology likewise is predicated on a utopian vision of what human society could be. As Watkins and Shulman state, “One finds orientation in one’s wandering in the desert through utopic imagining, nourishing a capacity to believe in a better future” (36). In Martín-Baró’s own words, the choice between traditional psychology and liberation psychology is “between accompanying and not

accompanying the poor and oppressed majorities in their effort to emerge into history, in their struggle to constitute themselves as a new people in a new land” (46).

Dialogical engagement with society is central to how mental health practitioners frame this Exodus towards a just society. Dialogical engagement focuses on the development of critical consciousness in the tradition of Freire. In an Islamic context this involves speaking truth to power, reflection on how our religion supports a just society, and how the current climate of Islamophobia and, historically, colonialism and imperialism, and its accompanying ideology of Orientalism, oppose this future. Concretely, this commitment can be seen in organizations like Call to Islam which prioritized the praxis of liberation in dialogical engagement with apartheid in South Africa (Esack 1988).

In one way, this is the jihad of Muslims in mental health in a liberation psychology framework. The hadith of the Prophet Muhammad states that when asked, “What is the best jihad?” he responded, “A word of truth in front of a tyrannical ruler” (Elias). Muslims generally interpret the meaning of jihad, mentioned often in the Quran and Hadith, as “struggle” and as a spiritual effort (Saritoprak, Exline, and Stauner). A dialogical engagement with the world in support of Islam being beneficial to mental health then is jihad, or a spiritual struggle, and a duty of Muslims. It is speaking truth to power in the sense that these types of words and actions speak about how Islam is good for people who practice the religion and believe in its precepts and values in the face of those who argue that Islam is a toxic influence.

The mainstream media, and certain voices in academia, persistently portray Islam as a religion of terrorism and violence, oppressive to women, and pathologically incompatible with modernity (Falk; Harris; Khalaf; Mohr 2010; Said). Simultaneously, ample evidence exists that Islam is good for the mental health of individuals in a variety of ways (Abu-Ras, Ahmed, and Arfken; Dunkel, Davidson, and Qurashi; Hodge, Zidan, and Husain; Mohr 2017) and that Islam supports a wide array of positive health outcomes both mental and physical (Koenig and Shohaib). A utopian vision for Muslim mental health can prioritize faith in the vibrancy and viability of Islam as a contributing factor to individual and community wellness.

#### *Concrete Implications of Justice-Oriented Islamic Psychology: Indigenous Psychology*

Part of this work for justice, according to Freire and Martín-Baró involves praxis that does not perpetuate structures of injustice. Liberation psychology from an Islamic perspective, then, involves working from psychological approaches and paradigms that are informed by indigenous cultural values and concepts. Seedat states, “psychology is another site of cultural imperialism and intellectual occupation.” The assumption that the premises of European and North American psychological approaches are universally valid denies the validity and even presence of contradictory worldviews (Al-Faruqi; Seedat). Many Muslim mental health practitioners have been engaged in the work of theorizing an Islamic approach to psychology that reflects Islamic assumptions (Abu-Raiya; Badri; Haque, Khan, Keshavarzi, and Rothman; Rothman and Coyle; Skinner). For example, Robert Frager and his work on Transpersonal Psychology brings Sufi approaches to psychology to the forefront (Bektasoglu and Ulusoy). Other thinkers such as Awaad and Ali (2015, 2016) have written about early work in Islamic psychology, which predates European psychology by 1000 years, in their commentary on Al Balkhi. There is a significant amount of work emerging about the possibilities for and benefits of Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy (al-Karam). Understanding how Islamic approaches

can form the basis of psychological work with individuals is a part of the jihad of Muslim mental health. Questioning the assumptions of traditional European psychology, rethinking them, and developing psychological approaches that honor Muslims' worldviews is a necessary part of the work (Haque and Keshavarzi 2013, 2014; Haque, Khan, Keshavarzi, and Rothman).

Much of the work that is being done in Islamic psychology critiques Eurocentric conceptualizations of the self, drawing on Islamic conceptions of the human being in order to better treat individuals through psychotherapy (Abu-Raiya; Rothman and Coyle). Although this is incredibly important work that needs to be done, this paper draws very minimally on it and focuses instead on the macro issues of psychology – specifically, what the larger picture and vision is for mental health practices for Muslims, with Muslims, and by Muslims. One of the basic premises of liberation psychology is that psychological approaches that limit themselves to addressing wellness at the individual level fall short of the possibilities for psychology. Liberation psychology is based on the premise that psychology is not value-neutral, just as Western visions of the self were not created in a vacuum but are instead a product of a specific worldview that is actually hostile in many cases to Islam and Muslims. In light of the veiled agendas and ends that Western psychology presupposes of scientism ((Martín-Baró; Quadir), colonialism (Seedat), sexism (Moane 2006, 2010), and global capitalist expansion (Hardt and Negri; Quadir; Reuther), another approach for psychology could focus on the *telos* of justice and societal transformation.

#### *Tawhid and Islamic Psychology*

In an Islamic liberation psychology, conceptions of consciousness and the person that are based on Islamic principles also need to have their ultimate roots in the principle of *tawhid* (Al-Faruqi; Quadir), and the validity of all psychological approaches and concepts should be measured against the principle of *tawhid* (Younos). *Tawhid* is the principle that God is Absolutely One, independent of all others, and that all others are contingent upon God. God's unity is the basis for the overall unity of the entire creation and realm of human existence and human endeavor. According to the principle of *tawhid*, all things depend upon and find their existence in God. This is the basis for Islam for Muslims and the basis for reality, life, and truth.

As far as psychological approaches, psychological concepts that contradict *tawhid* fundamentally contradict Islamic principles and values and Muslims' way of being in the world. Islamic psychological approaches need to take seriously the concept of *tawhid* and work to be aligned with this basic principle. This makes the process of creating a coherent Islamic psychology essential so that materialistic approaches based on scientism do not define how Muslims approach the field of mental health (Younos). There are multiple implications of the principle of *tawhid* on psychology but two major ones are human rights and ecological justice.

#### **Tawhidic Principle: Human Rights and Justice**

For an authentically Islamic approach to liberation psychology, just as specifically framing work in mental health as Muslims needs to come from approaches that affirm the strengths in our tradition, the overall conception of the human person needs to be consistent with Islamic values and with the goal of justice. Explicitly affirming and embracing the full humanity of

women, the poor, people of color, and the LGBTQ community is a core piece of an Islamically informed liberation psychology.

#### *Tawhidic Principle*

The unity of God and the subsequent contingent nature of all creation and humanity makes all human beings equal before the Absolute Transcendent Creator. In this sense, every person should have the right to live their life and self-actualize in the way that their individual conscience directs them, as no other person can rightly serve as a mediator between them and the Divine Unity. Al-Faruqi states about inclusivity:

All humans are one in the eye of Allah (SWT) except as their deeds distinguish them in moral virtue, in cultural or civilizational achievement. If these deeds are hampered because of preemptive, culturally limiting circumstances, it is a moral duty to alter and remove those culturally limiting circumstances in order to develop a new, healthy set of circumstances, which is always possible. The door to such alteration is never closed. On the other hand, where a person is judged because of these immutable characteristics, a mortal crime, namely, chauvinism, is committed. The implications of such a crime are ominous: both the unity of humanity and Divine unity are violated. Nothing is more odious to Allah (SWT) than shirk . . . and chauvinism implies nothing less than shirk (48).

For this reason, we are mandated as Muslims to embrace the diversity of the Muslim community, and the many voices and faces of Islam (Mohamed and Esack 2017; Younos). The fundamental goodness of people and of creation is part of the Islamic vision of humanity. While many Christian traditions view humanity as fallen and inherently sinful, the Islamic vision of human nature is that the original nature of human beings is good. Positive psychology and strength-based approaches then are highly relevant and consistent with Islamic conceptions of the self.

#### *Concrete Implications of Tawhid for Inclusivity*

As mental health professionals, it is our moral duty to protect vulnerable groups in society. Advocating for people who are oppressed and marginalized is a central mandate of the codes of ethics for psychologists, social workers, and other mental health workers (APA; NASW). This professional duty is also consistent with Islamic values in that making the circumstances optimal for human beings to self-actualize is the ultimate goal of a healthy society.

The importance of *tawhid* for women's rights is the central point for many Muslim women writing on the topic of gender justice (Wadud 1999, 2006.) Amina Wadud's hermeneutic of *tawhid*, with which she approaches the Quran as a complete text and identifies overarching themes which determine the interpretation of all other utterances in the Quran, is guided by the identification of justice as a central principle of God's relationship to creation. What she terms the *tawhidic* principle as a hermeneutical approach is employed by other thinkers as well, notably Farid Esack and Scott Kugle in their work on human rights. The idea that there are hermeneutical principles which can guide the reading of the Quran and open up possibilities for feminisms which differ from traditional and more patriarchal readings of the tradition is almost universal among Muslim women writing on gender justice.

There is a question at this point whether arguing that woman affirming interpretations of the Quran and advocating for LGBTQI rights is incompatible with Islam and proposing that *tawhid* be applied to support radical inclusivity is a willful misreading of the Islamic tradition based on wishful thinking, personal agendas that bear no relationship to Islam, and intellectual dishonesty (Habib). However, Islam as it is practiced is a product of people. Yes, the Quran is non-negotiable, but there is currently a huge movement globally for a progressive interpretation of Islam, for a world where the views of progressive Muslims are valued and set the standard for the way that Muslims and Muslim-majority states view major social issues. Muslims for Progressive Values is a particular example of this movement. Their website states, “Muslims for Progressive Values envisions a world that reflects Islam as a source of dignity, justice, compassion, and love for all.” Concretely, supporting organizations like Muslims for Progressive Values is a way to put the professional mandate to protect oppressed populations into practice, because ultimately liberation psychology has to be personal, professional, and practical to be authentic.

Part of the critique of a radical inclusive reading of the Islamic texts and tradition that privileges the rights of both women and LGBTQI is that it is based on an imperial and colonial project to impose Western values and Western hegemony on Muslims and Muslim-majority countries (Mohr 2010; Mahomed and Esack). The construction of the Muslim Other, demonized for being backwards and opposed to gender justice, is well-documented. This construction is posed against an idealized liberal Western Subject who supports women’s rights, LGBTQI rights, and gender justice. It is clear to anyone who really looks at this dualism that this is founded on myths of Western superiority and Oriental inferiority that promote the extension of empire (Mahomed and Esack) and that it denies both the history of the Islamic world and the Western world.

It is important to clarify, then, that furthering the agenda of Islamophobes who decry Muslim homophobia as anti-modernity and anti-democracy and conveniently forget the history of European and North American homophobia is not the goal of this critique. The ways in which Islamophobia and homonationalism have worked together to further marginalize Muslims of all sexual orientations and genders is documented (Mahomed and Esack). However, highly credible Muslim intellectuals who are at the forefront of the critique of colonial agendas and engaged in active resistance to empire support the call for a stance on homosexuality and women’s rights that prioritizes justice (Mahomed and Esack) The call for tolerance has gone out in statements such as the Orlando Statement, and the exhortation for active support of LGBTQI people from Reza Aslan and Hasan Minhaj in their “Open Letter to Muslims on Same-Sex Marriage.”

As Muslims working in psychology, then, applying *tawhid*, working from a liberation psychology orientation, means honoring the experiences of women, LGBTQI people, and all people. This imperative mirrors our professional codes of ethics and is an essential piece of doing psychology with the *telos* of justice. Human rights are a critical part of social justice, if not arguably the core piece of social justice. Thus, for an Islamic psychology to be a liberation psychology, it must include an emphasis on human rights.

### Environmental Justice and Eco-liberation Psychology

Another component of an Islamically informed liberation psychology would involve bringing our tradition to bear on the personal and community relationship to the environment, and working for environmental justice as a mental health issue. Islam is a holistic religion. The concept of *tawhid*, of God's unity, mandates that all things exist in dependence on God and find their fulfillment and end in God. The purposefulness of the universe is a basic fact of the Islamic worldview. For this reason, separating mental health from the human relationship to the environment contradicts basic tenets about human existence and the meaning of human life.

The Quran teaches that human beings are vice-regents, or *khalifah* of the earth and that the creation is given to humanity as a trust, or *amanah*. This relationship of human beings to the earth as custodians of the trust of creation is intimately connected to the Islamic view of the nature of human existence and fundamentally oriented around the vision of a just world that is so central to Islam. Al-Faruqi states,

First, humans should transform creation into the Divine patterns, i.e., to rearrange its materials so as to make them fully and beneficially serve human needs, which are material (food, shelter, comfort, procreation) as well as moral, intellectual, and esthetic. Second, in the very act of transforming creation, humans need to give substance to ethical values by choosing to enter into those acts of transformation in an ethical way, i.e., in a way that fulfills the requirements of devotion to Allah (SWT) and justice to mankind. . . . Allah (SWT) commands all this to be done and declares it to be the very reason for His creation of the world. The Divine ulterior motive in all this is that humans may realize their highest will and prove themselves ethically worthy by doing it. They can do so by entering into their ordinary routines of action for His sake and by maintaining the balance of justice throughout their actions (44-45).

This just relationship between humanity and creation involves the air, land, and water. It involves all the creatures of the earth. It connects all people and human communities to each other. It is the central fact of life: right relationship to God through right relationship to creation. The violation of this right relationship, then, is a central piece of human malaise in our current world. Related to the holistic perception of the meaning of the purpose of human existence, one can connect the fatalism, depression, and rampant self-destruction in the human community to environmental problems.

This is a central principle of liberation psychology: individual wellness is intricately connected to the environmental crisis. For example, the destruction of the environment has been argued by some as the explanation for the epidemic proportions of the drug addiction problem. According to data, over 300,000 people have died in the United States since the year 2000 as a result of opioid drug overdoses. President Trump has declared it a Public Health Emergency (The White House). Part of the explanation for this epidemic is the overwhelming despair that individuals are experiencing as a result of the devastation of our natural world and the threat of the end of life as we know it on Earth. Take for example the famous rat park experiment, where rats in cages that have abundant room, vegetation, and space for

entertainment and socialization, did not use drugs that were readily available, contrasted with rats in cramped cages where they used drugs to the point of overdosing. This experiment supports the theory that the walls closing in on us from environmental devastation are contributing to the rampant problem of addiction (Brookings; Mate).

There is no question that the environmental crisis is a mental health issue in multiple ways. One way in which it is a mental health issue is the overwhelming greed which has created the crisis in the first place and the psychological orientation to nature which has given rise to this unchecked and unquestioned greed. Most environmentalists cite unchecked human greed as the cause for the environmental crisis, including prominent Muslim intellectuals such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Quadir). Out of control human consumption of the natural world and natural resources has created an unjust relationship between humanity and nature, and it has damaged everyone and everything in the process. Fundamentally, the perpetuation of oppressive relationships, men against women, rich against poor, light against dark, in complete contradiction to the principle of *tawhid*, forms the foundation of the destruction of nature (Ruether 1995).

#### *Concrete Possibilities for an Islamic Eco-liberation Psychology*

In terms of Islamically oriented liberation psychology, the role of the *aql*, or intellect, is critical for Muslims to question and remove themselves from this societal trend. Consequently, Islamically informed psychotherapeutic approaches could play a role in propelling the Muslim community to an even greater and more involved stance on environmental issues. Kesharvarzi and Khan have proposed a psychotherapeutic orientation which involves taming the *nafs*, or self-indulgent and self-destructive impulses, following on Al-Ghazzali's conception of psychological health. This necessarily involves a component of creating the awareness of right and wrong on an intellectual level, the *aql*, in order to guide the work of correcting the *nafs*.

There is a strong tradition of psychological approaches which outright reject neutrality as a stance or even a possibility in psychology (Martín-Baró). Critical Race Theory and feminist theory have both formed the basis for psychological approaches that base their analysis of human experience and the subsequent engagement of a therapist with individuals, families, and society, on a conscious orientation to racial justice or gender justice (Moane 2010). Islamically, Muslim mental health professionals in this tradition can consider the possibility of orienting work in psychology to include environmental justice organizationally, and in therapeutic and clinical work.

Martín-Baró critiqued explicitly the psychological perspective of hedonism and its assumptions that all human behavior can be explained as “a quest for pleasure or satisfaction” and questioned, “does this not blind us to a different way of being human, or at least to a different, but equally real facet of being human?” (22). He stated that he believed this explanation of human motivation, which integrated hedonism as a structural assumption in the theoretical framework of psychology, was “in fact a concession to the profit motive that underlies the capitalist system and as such, an attribution to human nature of something that has to do with the functioning of a particular socioeconomic system” (22).

For Islam, a simple lifestyle in harmony with the environment is required. Correcting greed generally, beyond merely steps such as reducing the consumption of animal products, is

consistent with the Sunnah. The Prophet lived in a very simple and humble way, and there are multiple sources, including the lives of the Muslim scholars so important in the Islamic tradition, which refute extravagant lifestyle choices as sinful.

Liberation psychology proposes engaging with individuals and the world in a process of raising critical consciousness through dialogical engagement with the world. Due to the negative impact of the environment on individuals, from fatalism and despair to drug-addiction, and the fact that greed and waste are forbidden in Islam, it is a logical next step to include environmental justice as a piece of an Islamically informed liberation psychology. Watkins and Shulman state, “Given the sway of individualism, the breaking of human-nature connections have only recently been thematized as injurious to individuals, communities, and to the environment” (220). They go on to describe the multiple impacts of economic injustice that have damaged the poor and the human community generally. They state, “liberation psychologies must also be eco-liberation psychologies that attend to the mutual interdependence of the natural and built environments, animals, and humans” (221). This perspective can be wholeheartedly affirmed as consistent with Islam and with Islamic approaches to psychology.

### **Psychologies of Violence**

The work to construct a coherent set of values derived from liberation psychology and from an Islamic perspective can include an analysis of the role of violence in the Muslim community world-wide today. In the sense of *tawhid* and unity, it is clear that violence must be addressed in any holistic approach to Muslim mental health as it is so widely prevalent in the issues of the Muslim community.

At first glance there is an easy and trite response, often suggested by Western non-Muslims, that Muslims should begin to preach non-violence and particularly focus on the problem of individuals who are Muslim and engaged in violent acts that go against the Islamic tradition. However, this response accepts multiple assumptions about the relationship of the United States to Muslim-majority countries, and to Muslims generally, that include Islamophobic demonizations of Muslims as the enemies of democracy. The colonial dialectic that has posed the civilized European or Westerner in the face of the barbarous Oriental, African, and Asian Other needs to be countered before any coherent attempts can be made at theorizing a new alternative to violence (Hardt and Negri). People like Malcolm X and Frantz Fanon both saw this truth and articulated it clearly to the benefit of the revolutionary movements of their times. Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. media and government policy have framed Muslim-majority countries, and Muslims generally, as the pre-eminent threat to world peace (Bazian). This depiction of Muslims has provided justification for multiple wars. Assuming that we as Muslims should respond to violence in the world by preaching non-violence accepts the assumptions that violence perpetrated by Muslims is a significant political or social problem without reference to state terrorism in the interests of the U.S. Empire. There is a need for a counter-narrative.

The intensely Islamophobic narrative created by equating Islam with violence and terrorism has had immense negative effects on Muslims around the world. As Majzoub and Fatmi state, “Muslims have watched Western media and political influences essentially claim ownership over their narrative, such as completely redefining the word ‘Islamist’ to refer

almost exclusively to militants overseas claiming to be Muslims” (193). The direct impact of the narrative of Islam as a violent religion that supports terrorism affects children, adolescents, and adults, negatively impacting mental health outcomes. Additionally, Islamophobia affects mental health clinicians and medical professionals by making patients fear them because they are Muslim. The increase in hate crimes, and the general discrimination Muslims face as a result of Islamophobia have vast negative mental health consequences. (Moffic, Peteet, Hankir, and Awaad).

Simply preaching non-violence to and for Muslims supports the dominant Islamophobic narrative about the Muslim community. Potentially, a better response is to contextualize violence and the current framework of the War on Terror in terms of Just War Theory and to actively work to turn the focus of the current conversation towards addressing both state sponsored terrorism and white nationalism. These sources of terrorism remain largely unaddressed. While this in a sense this supports the so-called Just Wars of the Global Police State (Hardt and Negri), refocusing the military and police efforts globally would be a first step towards changing the policy of using force as a way to further political agendas of Islamophobes. Again, it could be argued that we should just preach simple nonviolence, disarmament, and an end to war. Redirecting the war machine of the empire that has focused its efforts on Islam as an enemy does not solve the problem of the over-militarization of nations or international political affairs. However, it would at least potentially create more balance while people of good conscience work for a more peaceful world.

An integral piece of this reframing of the current conversation about and engagement with violence involves recovering from historical amnesia about colonialism and imperialism and its subsequent destruction of Muslims and Muslim-majority countries. Recovering historical memory has been an integral part of liberation psychology from its beginnings with Martín-Baró (Chávez, Fernandez, Hipolito-Delgado, and Rivera) and continues to be a central piece of its work (Watkins & Shulman).

#### *Concrete Applications*

With all this in mind, the work of Muslims in mental health involves continuing to challenge narratives that link Islam to terrorism and violence and ignore the political origins of violence and the role of the U.S. and Europe in destabilizing Africa and the Middle East. This includes rejecting pathologies of bystanding such as preoccupations with personal success at the expense of others, obsessive-compulsive rehearsals of violence in our media, and the psychic numbing that comes from turning a blind eye to vast amounts of tragedy and human suffering (Watkins and Shulman).

Much attention has been given in this debate nationally to the government program known as the Countering Violent Extremism Task Force through Homeland Security. Of the 67 organizations listed as terrorist organizations, 58 are Muslim groups (U.S. Department of State). Neither the International Klu Klux Klan, nor any other of hundreds of white nationalist groups are listed. The few organizations listed beyond Muslim groups are predominantly Irish and communist, and number less than 10. This is in spite of the fact that the majority of terrorist acts in the United States in recent years have been committed by white, right-wing men (Hasan; Williams). The tension between complicity in what is effectively a War on Islam

by accepting funding or ideological frames from the CVE program and the ability to object to the imbalanced and biased focus on Muslims as a violent threat remains a contradiction. There is a choice between critiquing the violence perpetrated by Muslims in a way that contributes to the War on Islam or critiquing the approach that the U.S. Government is taking to the War on Terror. Advocating for a true War on Terror where far-right terrorists are a primary focus of the Department of Homeland Security could do more justice to the true nature of the terrorist threats to individuals and the world.

Why is this a question for liberation psychology? Because the mutilation of Muslims' self-image through the portrayal of the media and Islamophobic attacks on Muslims are a primary mental health problem for Muslims (Alemi et al.; Samari; Samari, Alcalá, and Sharif; Sirgy, Joshanloo, and Bosnjak). Additionally, state sponsored terrorism contributes to the devastation of Muslims globally, for example, through the wholesale destruction of the entire country of Iraq, the subsequent destabilization of the region, and the decimation of the country of Syria. Addressing violence against Muslims, both psychic and physical, due to Islamophobia continues to be a high priority for our community and addressing violence in ways that do not further harm individuals is critical.

Martín-Baró described three urgent tasks for liberation psychology: the recovery of historical memory, de-ideologizing everyday experience, and utilizing the people's virtues. These three tasks are just as urgent for mental health practitioners today as they were in Martín-Baró's time. The recovering of historical memory, says Martín-Baró, "supposes the reconstruction of models of identification that, instead of chaining and caging the people, open up the horizon for them, toward their liberation and fulfillment" (30). Rejecting the narrative that Muslims are a violent problem for human society, and instead pointing out all the times when Muslims are speaking out for justice, and the deep affinity Islam as a religion has for social justice, is a key piece of this. De-ideologizing everyday experience also involves rejecting this narrative. As Martín-Baró said, "We know that knowledge is a social construction. Our countries live burdened by the lie of a prevailing discourse that denies, ignores, or disguises essential aspects of reality" (31). The portrayal of all Muslims as bearded, homophobic, misogynistic, terrorists is a huge distortion of reality and contributes to the oppression of Muslims globally in society, as well as tending to contribute to distortions of Muslims' self-image. Again, this is the issue of developing a counter-narrative. Finally, in utilizing the people's virtues, just as Martín-Baró talked about the Salvadorians with whom he worked, we need to continue the ongoing work to re-claim the narrative about Muslims as advocates for the environment, social justice, and peace.

#### *The Role of Non-Violence*

In spite of a reluctance to use the words "non-violence" out of concern that it will support Islamophobic conceptualizations of Muslims and Muslim-majority countries as a violent threat, the resistances named in this article are non-violent practices. Liberation psychology, as conceptualized by thinkers like Alsup, has at its core a non-violent ideology of love. This is connected to activists like Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi and other prominent social activists who have worked for social change through love and spiritual methods. The call to transform society ultimately has to be based on an ethic of love and care according to thinkers like King and Gandhi. In terms of Islamic approaches to liberation psychology, its

methods are non-violent, though the dialogue about violence cannot be simplified to merely this fact – the history and perception of violence (its narrative) also needs to be addressed.

### **Solutions, Directions, and Ideas for Action**

Resisting empire and the psychological impact of the hegemony of corporate capitalism, its accompanying environmental devastation, and the despair and destruction of the majority of society is the work of liberation psychology. Potentially, a significant revolution and transition of power to the multitude could occur through a mass exodus by the multitude from societal manifestations of empire that individuals experience on a day to day basis (Bowring). This exodus is possible as the route to and result of individual and community wellness.

The concept of utopian vision and exodus from systemic problems through changing personal and community behavior in place is not new. It has been put forth many times by people working with concepts of liberation across the world and over the course of time. Currently, there are many people working on this concept such as the AdBusters campaigns, or One Billion Rising, just to name two. Particularly a vision of exodus from oppression to a better future has been proposed by liberation theology as far back as the 1960s. The current situation within the United States with a government that has withdrawn us from the historic Paris climate agreement and the U.N. Human Rights Council make this an attractive and hopeful concept. Additionally, the U.S. is one of a very few countries that has not ratified the International Women's Bill of Rights; it has been ratified by 185 nations including Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. We as U.S. citizens of good conscience cannot necessarily leave our homes to effect change, and arguably this is not even the most effective route. If we as the citizens of the U.S. and of the world decide to leave behind the rules, standards, and practices that contribute to the oppression of individuals, communities, nations, and the planet itself, it is possible we can create movement in the problems we face as a human community. This approach, it must be stated, will not be equally possible for all people in all contexts. It specifically is a suggestion for people in countries where there are a sufficient amount of resources and opportunities to make decisions and choices about how one participates in society.

The idea of building a movement to “leave in place” by a collective grassroots refusal to participate in oppression is consistent with and builds on the Occupy movement. It is essentially an anarchist approach, somewhat like Occupy, as discussed by Chomsky. It “permits being political outside of the red-and-blue confines of what is normally considered ‘political’ in the United States” (ix). It has the beauty of not needing any leaders, or governing bodies, or committees. It would be based on participatory collective action with a bottom-up reorganizing of society on a more just basis. We can free ourselves with our own action. We do not need to beg corporations or the government for help or permission. In a sense this is the goal of liberation psychology: to create free and conscious people and societies able to act to transform the world. Liberation psychology, and the concept of “leaving in place,” of mass exodus, is an opening to a better future, as Freire says, to “a world in which it will be easier to love” (quoted in Watkins and Shulman: 27).

An exodus has already been proposed on a grass-roots level. The choice to shop locally, reduce one's carbon foot-print, eat lower on the food chain, offer support for inclusivity and diversity, counter narratives to Islamophobia, are all choices to exit the domain of the empire

in favor of a society that envisions sustainability and a future for all persons. Each of the above pieces of liberation psychology that have been discussed involve proposals for implementation in a Muslim mental health setting, but they are relevant for all mental health practitioners. Framing mental health work in relationship to Islamic concepts has concrete applications that have been mentioned above in reference to each of the major domains discussed. However, this article barely scratches the surface of the possibilities of an Islamic liberation psychology and there are many possibilities for a liberation psychology approach generally. It is the hope of this article that as the conversation on liberation psychology and Muslim mental health grows, many more concrete possibilities will unfold that far outpace the few interventions mentioned above.

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