

The Nurture Of The Heart

When modern Western science turned its attention to the human mind and established the human science of psychology, it did so in the shadow of earlier gains made in the empirical sciences, with the result that the fathers of modern psychology focused their attention on those aspects of mind which could be best studied in a manner modeled on that of the physical sciences.

Freud, himself trained as a physician, saw psychology as an extension of medicine. Inappropriate behavior was attributed to mental illnesses analogous to the physical maladies that inhibit the proper function of the organs. In many university texts used today, psychology is defined as the science of human behavior, although there is a growing awareness, especially among therapists, that the attempt to model psychology on the physical sciences results in a woefully superficial understanding of the person.

We are finally beginning to hear voices of protest from among those professionally trained in psychology against the secularist presuppositions which dominate the field. Although this protest has its roots in the school of thought initiated by Carl Jung, it has developed into what has been called 'soul-oriented psychology' by James Hillman, and has recently found eloquent expression in Thomas Moore's *Care of the Soul*.¹

Moore proposes that the flaw of the dominant approaches to psychology is their failure to appreciate the importance of religion and the need to make spirituality a serious part of everyday life. He draws upon his own Catholic Christian tradition in order to articulate an understanding of the human soul and how it is to be cared for.

Much of what Moore says about the inadequacies of secularism will strike a resonant chord with Muslims, whose doctrine of tawhid, or Divine unity, fosters attempts to understand all aspects of life in terms of their relation to the One.

Many of the topics discussed by Moore, from jealousy and envy to the sacred arts, are also the subjects of attention in the spiritual tradition of Islam, where in addition to discussions of the progress of the soul, one also finds special attention given to the nurture of the heart.

After concurring with Moore's criticisms of modern psychology, we may find ourselves better able to appreciate the wisdom expressed in the Islamic tradition pertaining to the heart. From this perspective, care of the soul may be seen as a preliminary to purification of the heart.

In the Introduction to *Care of the Soul*, Moore writes:

In the modern world we separate religion and psychology, spiritual practice and therapy. There is considerable interest in healing the split, but if it is going to be bridged, our very idea of what we are doing in our psychology has to be radically re-imagined. Psychology and spirituality need to be seen as one. In my view, this new paradigm suggests the end of psychology as we have known it altogether because it is essentially modern, secular, and ego-centered.²

Precisely the same point could be made with regard to other modern secular fields, such as politics, art, literature and philosophy. They have come to presuppose the fundamental tenets of individualistic secular modernism.

The greatest political protest that has ever been made against modernism and in favor of traditional cultural values is the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Muslims all over the world are now beginning to gain the confidence to develop their own traditions, not only in politics, but in the arts and sciences, as well.

On the other hand, although the Islamic Revolution may be considered anti-modernist, in the sense that it represents a rejection of cultural values seen as being imposed by the West, many commentators have been shocked at how much of modernism has been accepted by revolutionary Muslims. Muslims generally pursue technology, development, economic expertise and the social sciences, including psychology, without much thought to the ways in which these may be linked to more offensive manifestations of Western culture in Muslim societies.

Those who continue to imagine that the way to progress and development is through the blind imitation and importation of Western ideas and methods would do well to ponder the fact that within the Western world itself, an increasing number of thinkers are turning to tradition as a source of inspiration. This does not mean that we are to simply replace imitation of the West by imitation of tradition. The necessity for critical thought is undeniable; what is at question is its orientation.

One of the greatest sources of traditional thought which has stimulated religious thinkers in the East and West is the works of Plato, and Moore draws upon Plato's idea of the "craft of life" in working out his own understanding of care of the soul. He writes:

Another phrase Plato used was *heautou epimeleisthai*, "care of oneself"; this word for care also described honoring the gods and the dead. Somehow we have to understand that we cannot solve our "emotional" problems until we grasp this mystery that honoring the divine and the departed is part of the basic care that as human beings we have to bring to life.³

Another insight Moore draws from the ancient Greeks is the need for community. Plato discusses his ideal city, the Republic, as an organic community whose sectors are analogous to the parts of a single human soul.

The emphasis on community is also voiced by one of the most important movements in current political philosophy critical of liberalism: communitarianism. Moore recognizes that one of the strongest needs of the soul is for community, and that in the modern world there are many signs that we lack a sufficiently deep experience of community.⁴

Sometimes the need for community and its lack in modern society are manifested in deep feelings of loneliness, even to the point of causing thoughts of suicide, which the therapist discovers in his practice.

Moore remarks that professional psychology has created a catalogue of disorders, known as the DSM-III, and that he would like to add to the list some of the disorders he has seen in his practice. He writes:

For example, I would want to include the diagnosis "psychological modernism," an uncritical acceptance of the values of the modern world. It includes blind faith in technology, inordinate attachment to material gadgets and conveniences, uncritical acceptance of the march of scientific progress, devotion to the electronic media, and a lifestyle dictated by advertising.⁵

Moore suggests that the way out of the kinds of neuroses faced by modern Western people is to learn from other cultures, from art and religion and philosophy. He continues that modern psychology can be replaced by care of the soul, and that then "we can begin building a culture that is sensitive to matters of the heart."⁶

Among Muslim traditions there is a great wealth of fascinating discussions of matters of the heart, some of which has been collected in Murata's *The Tao of Islam*. In general, the Muslim sages, like the sages of other traditional societies, would diagnose the illness of "psychological modernism" as due to a lack of inner harmony.

The particularly Islamic recipe requires the observance of the shari'ah. The shari'ah orients the soul toward the heart: "The function of the Sharia is to turn all the forces of the soul in directions that will help the soul reach felicity."⁷

Should we conclude that all that is needed to cure psychological modernism is to establish an Islamic government that enforces the shari'ah? Obviously this will not be sufficient, and if the enforcement is carried out in an odious manner, the net result will probably be a worsening of the disease rather than its cure. Islamic law can perform its curative function only when it is observed willingly, because it works by getting us to want and will what is appropriate.

'Abd al-Razzaq Kashani, commenting on the Qur'an, explains that God sends down with the Qur'an the differentiations of the discerning intellect, and that this differentiation "will then be a healing for the illnesses of the hearts".⁸

The illnesses to be healed are things like ignorance, doubt, hypocrisy, blindness of heart, rancor and envy. The analytic distinctions set out by Islamic law between the pure (tahir) and impure (najis), the correct (sahih) and incorrect (batil), and the fivefold classification of acts into those which are obligatory (wajib), recommended (mustahab), neutral (mubah), disapproved (makruh) and prohibited (haram), all are needed for the proper harmonious synthesis of the elements of the soul, which in turn is required for the health of the heart.

The point is expressed by Mawlavi Jalal al-Din Rimi as follows:

Sick, surely, and ill-savored is the heart that knows not

(Cannot distinguish) the taste of this and that.

When the heart becomes whole (is healed) of pain and

disease,

it will recognize the flavor of falsehood and truth.

When Adam's greed for the wheat [the forbidden fruit]

*waxed great, it robbed Adam's heart of health.*⁹

Perhaps some will object that this sufi purification of the heart of worldly desires may be salutary for a heart afflicted by the traditional vices, but can such a prescription cure the heart diseased by such modern illnesses as psychological modernism, alienation, drug addiction, loneliness, violence and boredom? The facile answer is that if you get rid of all the traditional vices, the modern ones will also evaporate.

This, however, is to ignore the fact that the modern situation may be such as to make the pursuit of virtue and eradication of vice seem quaint and rather beside the point.

Modern theories, most of them with roots in nineteenth century Europe, offer their own solutions to the modern maladies they describe. Marxists, for example, used to think that state ownership of industry and capital would bring about liberation from the modern maladies. No one seems to believe that any more.

Liberalism does not really address itself to the modern maladies, but would seem to imply that they are private matters, to be treated by one's psychotherapist or pastor. The psychotherapist will suggest that a cure is to be found in facing one's feelings of guilt, seeking satisfying sexual relations, and many more sessions with the psychotherapist. Perhaps psychotherapy deserves more than this sort of snide put-down, if for no other reason than that it has attracted so many believers.

But the point here is that it treats the modern diseases of heart, soul and spirit as if they were private matters pertaining to one's childhood relations with parents and adult enjoyment of sex. Moore is

certainly to be commended for seeking to move past this with his rejection of modern psychology. Most psychotherapists today seem to rely more on pharmaceuticals than the theories of Freud or Jung, anyway. Drugs are a way to cope with mental disorders, but no one pretends that they offer a cure.

People today are unhappy. Where there is wealth, there is wanton consumption, and where there is not, there is envy. Both are primarily stimulated by television. The religious solution offered in the context of liberal capitalism is the consumption of mass marketed spirituality.

It does not really matter very much if it is mainstream Christianity, New Age, or even sufism! What is offered is a private religion of religious experience. Having the right sorts of experiences is supposed to cure the troubles of the modern mind. Religion offers consolation. It soothes. God loves you. You are saved, if you just believe with all your heart. The wanton consumption continues and the envy. The TV is still on.

Charles Taylor speaks of three major sources of the moral outlook of modern Western people: theism, naturalism, and Romanticism and its successors. He finds these sources have evolved in such a way that they are not capable of solving the problems of the loss of meaning and disenchantment.

What is needed, Taylor concludes, is insight into the importance of human sympathy and commitment, of the inherent value in things and our ability to recognize such values. While Taylor expresses doubts about the ability of Christianity, or more generally of theism, to foster the needed insights, he admits to sharing the hopes "implicit in Judeo-Christian theism."[10](#)

If the complex of psychological modernism is so deep, should we really expect that Islam will do any better at solving it than the modern approaches have? The science of the West would seem to place no hope in anything remotely like Islam, after all, it contends, it was developed to deal with an entirely different set of problems.

Second, Islam does not seem to offer anything all that much different from Christianity; so, if Christianity has failed modern man, the prospects for Islam will be dim as well. Third, if the roots of the modern disorders of the mind lie in the social configuration of societies in relation to industrialization and the sorts of life style changes that accompany the development of industry, adaptation of technology and media, religious affiliation would not seem very important.

In Marxist terminology, this would be to expect a change in the mode of production because of an alteration of the superstructure. For example, it could be argued that in America and Europe marriage is weakening not because so many people believe in a socialist or feminist utopia without the constraints of marriage, but because men and women repeatedly find themselves failing at marriage. It doesn't matter whether they are Muslims, Christians or Buddhists.

They fail at marriage because of complex factors including the legal system, media exploitation of sex for marketing purposes, availability of sexual relations outside of marriage, lack of support for marriage

through extended familial relations, etc.

Fourth, the objector will ask us to look at the mess the societies of the 'Islamic' nations, for example, the widespread corruption and political repression that characterize most Muslim societies, the ostentatious consumption of the rich alongside abject poverty, and the envy of the middle classes for those who have more of the luxuries imported from the West.

So, how can Islam help? First of all, it should be admitted that acceptance of Islam by an individual or society is not sufficient for salvation from psychological modernism. Nevertheless, there is reason to have hope in Islam if for no other reason than that it is not rooted in the modern ideas that have abetted the emergence of the modern maladies.

Of course, the same could be said for Christianity, but Christian thought has itself undergone its own process of modernization in a manner that makes it difficult to work effectively against the flaws in modernism. Reliance on Islam offers us another chance. Maybe it is our last chance. Maybe Islam is the last chance for humanity to throw off its prejudices and conceits, to find social harmony and inward spiritual harmony in humility before God.

It is true that Islam appeared in and addressed a society very different from those of the world today, but there is a seductive whiff of hope that in the process of finding the universal message of Islam and applying that message to current situations at the very least we can avoid the pitfalls into which various tendencies of Christian thought have fallen.

Religious affiliation is not so important, but the practical application of religious ideas in society can engender positive changes. For example, if Muslim societies thrive, their media will not exploit sex for marketing, the legal system will not encourage the breakdown of the family, extended family relations will support the marriages of their members who will find the inner moral strength in their faith to maintain loyalty to spouses.

The tremendous problems of Muslim societies today are no cause to despair over the ability of Islam to cope with modernism, because the hope we seek from Islam requires the implementation of divine guidance, not merely formal allegiance and enforcement of external precepts. The world today needs a force that can stand in opposition to the dominion of world consumerism and the values of market capitalism. Only Islam seems capable of playing this role.

Of course, the opposition role is not sufficient. If the Islamic movement is to be effective, it must offer more than a rejection of the evils of modernized culture; it must promise something more rewarding, and it must be able to present this promise in the form of a vision of how humanity in its current conditions of distress can move toward the path of divine guidance.

Certainly, in the intellectual traditions of the Muslims, especially those pertaining to the inner life, 'irfan, there are sources enough on which to draw for such vision, if they are interpreted with an astute

cognizance of current conditions and their historical contexts.

The final stages of the perfection of the heart are annihilation (fana¹) and subsistence (baqi), destruction followed by a new life. The malaise and avarice psychological modernism would also seem to require destruction and new life.

Through participation in the renewal of Islamic community Muslims may find a way to disillusionment with the glitter of the modern, and devote themselves to the realization of the human perfection for which God has created us. In line with this view of the heart, the perfect man is frequently described as one who possesses a heart, as Mawlavi Jalal al-Din Rumi writes:

*The owner of a heart becomes a six-faced mirror;
through him God looks upon all the six directions.* [11](#)

In another place Mawlavi explains that the spirit is simply awareness, and that therefore, whoever has greater awareness has greater spirit. The human spirit is greater than the animal spirit because of its superior awareness. "Then the spirit of God's friends, the Possessors of Hearts, is even greater.. That is why the angels prostrated themselves to Adam: His spirit was greater than their existence." [12](#)

Commenting on the cosmic marriage of soul and spirit, Murata writes, "If the perfected rational soul is to be actualized, its parents—spirit and soul—must marry, give birth to it, and nurture it." [13](#) If the heart may properly be understood as the 'perfected rational soul' perhaps the cure for some of the maladies of which Thomas Moore speaks will turn out to require more than care of the soul, but a way of looking at the soul which is entirely different from what is typically found in the Western tradition.

Instead of seeing the soul as containing two warring parts, reason and passion, with art and religion being confined to the emotional, and reason left with nothing to do but logic chopping and juggling numbers, it might be salutary to submit to the more radical procedure of looking at the human being in a way suggested by the tradition of Islam. According to this tradition it is not the soul that contains the heart and intellect, but rather the soul and reason in proper harmony give rise to the heart.

In a passage from one of the earliest writers to discuss the marriage of the soul and intellect and the birth of the heart, Shihab al-Din 'Umar Suhrawardi [14](#) describes the soul as the animal spirit in man.

This soul and the spirit are attracted to one another like Adam and Eve, and love each other so much that each tastes death in absence from its mate. The product of the union of soul and intellect or spirit is the heart—not the lump of flesh, but the subtle heart.

Among the hearts of men, some are inclined toward the soul and some toward the spirit. At this point in his explanation, Suhrawardi cites a hadith attributed to the Prophet of Allah (s) according to which there are four kinds of hearts: the heart within which is a shining lamp of the person of faith, the black and inverted heart of the infidel, the hypocrite's heart which is bound by attachments, and the layered heart

within which are both faith and hypocrisy.

Suhrawardi explains these types of heart in terms of their relation to their parents. To the extent that the heart inclines toward the intellect, it will gain felicity, and to the extent that it inclines toward the animal spirit, the earthly soul, the heart is wretched.

An interpretation of a similar hadith which explicitly brings out its moral significance is given by Imam Khomeini (quddisa sirruh).¹⁵ The hadith on which Imam Khomeini comments is attributed to Imam Baqir, who is reported to have said that there are four kinds of hearts: "the heart that has faith and hypocrisy in it, the heart that is inverted and upside down, the heart that has been sealed and is darkened, and the heart that is clear and luminous."

Imam Khomeini warns that the theoretical discussion of the states of the heart and that which relates to its health and sickness, reform and corruption, must be recognized as being a mere preliminary to the practical work of genuine reform.

The believer's heart is described as luminous because faith is a human perfection, being a kind of knowledge, and perfections are completions of existence, which is spoken of as light. Imam also explains that the faithful, since they are followers of the Perfect Man and walk in his footsteps, they journey by the light of his guidance and the lamp of his knowledge.

The term "Perfect Man" is said to have been introduced by Ibn 'Arabi, and is used for one of the most important concepts of 'irfan (gnosis). Within the tradition in which Imam Khomeini writes, the term 'perfect man' is used for the prophets, and the special friends of God, the 'awliya, among whom the most prominent are the twelve imams of the Shi'ah.

Imam explains that the inversion of the heart results from neglect of God and attention to worldly things; this conforms with the view of the writers mentioned by Murata, who speak of the wretched heart as one that attends to the desires of the soul and neglects the light it receives from its father, the spirit or intellect. Here too, we see that the proper function of the intellect is to come to know God.

One might object that attention to intellectual knowledge cannot cure the sick heart, even if the knowledge is about theology. The objection betrays an incorrect understanding of the knowledge of God sought by the 'drif. What is sought is no propositional judgment, no statement of dogma nor philosophical proof, but the unveiling or tasting of divinity, called the 'encounter with God', liqd Allah.

This is not mere intellectual knowledge in the modern sense, but a knowledge with affective and practical dimensions. The heart may only be cured when it is not cut off from the intellect; so, the intellect must be able to speak to the heart.

Imam Khomeini concludes with a call to faith and to a harmony of the exotic and esoteric, urging his readers to take care that the effects of faith may be established in both our inner and outer being.

In the same way as we claim to possess faith in the heart, we should make our outward being also subject to its authority, so that the roots of faith become established in our hearts . . . so that this Divine trust of a celestial and pure heart, fashioned with its Divine nature, is returned to the Sacred Being unaffected and unsoiled by the workings of Satan and the hands of treachery. [16](#)

- [1.](#) Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994).
- [2.](#) Moore (1994), p. xv.
- [3.](#) Moore (1994), xvii
- [4.](#) Moore (1994), 92.
- [5.](#) Moore (1994), 206.
- [6.](#) Moore (1994), 284
- [7.](#) Murata (1992), 286.
- [8.](#) Murata (1992), 302.
- [9.](#) Mathnavi, II, 2737 ff. translated in W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*, p. 56, also see W. C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983).
- [10.](#) Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 521.
- [11.](#) Mathnavi, v, 874. See Chittick, *The Sufi Doctrine of Rumi*, p. 61
- [12.](#) See Murata (1992), 305, who cites Mathnavi II, 3326–30, and Chittick's *The Sufi Path of Love*, pp. 31–32, 37, 39–40, 62, etc.
- [13.](#) Murata (1992) 305.
- [14.](#)
- [15.](#) See *Forty Hadith: An Exposition*, Part 34, by Imam Ruhullah al-Musawi al-Khomeini, tr. by A. Q. Qara'i, *Al-Tawhid*, vol. XII, No. 1, 13–24.
- [16.](#) *Ibid.*, 23–24.

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