

# Characteristic Themes in Psychology of Religion in Turkey

## *Muslim Thinkers' Views on Human Psychology and Psychology of Sufism*

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### Introduction

The psychology of religion, in general, is concerned with individuals' attitudes towards belief and non-belief. The studies of this field involve different religions, languages and cultures that are affected by their social contexts. Therefore the historical development of psychology of religion and its subjects vary among countries. The first studies in psychology of religion in Turkey were conducted by scholars in the fields of philosophy, theology, and Sufism. As an academic discipline, the subject of psychology of religion appears in the curriculum at the first theology faculty established at Ankara University in 1949. Since that time, psychology of religion has produced various works as a separate discipline.

Reviewing the psychology of religion literature in Turkey one can see that the general subjects such as religious experience, theories of the development of religious beliefs, and the concept of God, as well as topics arising from Islamic tradition and Turkish culture are discussed. Two characteristic themes frequently found in these studies are *Muslim thinkers' views about human psychology* and *the psychology of Sufism*.

In the past, Muslim thinkers expressed their opinion about issues such as human nature, behavior, personality, mental health, and motivation, which are discussed in the field of psychology today. They used the methods of observation, introspection, experiment, and clinical study as well (Köse & Ayten, 2012: 87). The perspective of these thinkers has played a vital role in the formation of Islamic civilization and its approach to humans. Having the same perspective, Sufism has its own literature and traditional background in Turkey. It can be said that there is an interest in a psychological examination of Sufi life both in psychology of religion and in popular culture. Sufi communities and organizations have functioned as informal educational institutions throughout history. In addition, Sufism and Sufi orders played a significant role in the period of

Islamization of the Turks (Köse & Ayten, 2010: 20–21). Because of this cultural and historical background, Sufism still affects daily life in Turkey and has a place in people's lives not only among pious circles, but also among secular people. The Sufi way of examining human psychology has great potential to make a contribution to studies in psychology. Therefore, this article aims at giving information about these two characteristic themes of psychology of religion in Turkey.

### Muslim Thinkers' Views about Human Psychology

Muslim thinkers have written on human psychology from the earliest times. They named these works "*Ilman-Nafs*" or the science of self-psychology. What makes these contributions special is that these works and theories are based on Islamic philosophy or the Unity of God (Allah in Islamic context). The term *nafs* (self or soul) in Muslim scholars' writings means individual personality while the concept of *fitrah* is used to point out to the human nature (Haque, 2004: 357–358). The subjects, which are included under the title of "*Ilman-Nafs*" mainly reflect the philosophical tradition. Also some understandings special to geography or culture are added to this category. The Qur'an and the Sunnah have been very effective in explaining these before noted observations (Hökeleki, 2006: 410).

It is observed that the subject is shaped particularly around the concept of *nafs* and its strengths and weaknesses and also *fitrah* as a significant concept stands out in the works by Muslim scholars on human psychology. In this chapter instead of examining Muslim thinkers' views about human nature in general, we will briefly deal with their opinions about mental health, diseases, happiness and *nafs*.

#### *Haris al-Muhasibi (781–857)*

As one of the first Sufis and also scholars of hadith, kalam and tafsir, Haris al-Muhasibi used the term *nafs* for the first time in its pure psychological sense. Therefore Hökeleki (2006) claims that the history of Islamic psychology starts with him. Muhasibi, according to Hökeleki (2006), has influenced many who came after him, not only with his perspective but also the terms he used to explain human's spiritual life. He is a leading figure in the Islamic tradition for the development of an original language of psychology. The most famous book of Muhasibi, *ar-Ri'aya fi Huquqillah* means "Obeying Allah's Permits". In this book, he presents deep analyses about themes such as piety, abstinence,