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‘Our therapeutic direction is towards Light’: transcendence and a non-secular politics of difference in Islamic Counselling training

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The Islamic Counselling training model discussed in this article first emerged in 1990s multicultural Britain within the newly expanding field of cross-cultural counselling and psychotherapy. It is informed by classical Sufi notions of the self, the development of an Islamic psychology, and decolonial scholarship. Based on ethnographic research on the current training in Islamic Counselling, this article explores the ways in which this model trains students to engage with relational differences through non-secular notions of reality, the self, and its relation to multiple others. Differences are made sense of through notions of ‘worldview’ and ‘journey’ that go beyond categories of culture, religion, and race, and while these differences are similarly ‘acknowledged’, there is also the possibility of surpassing them through an experiential process of ‘witnessing’. Islamic Counselling’s therapeutic goal, therefore, is not the forging of a pious self, but transcendence: the establishing of a deeply felt understanding of Oneness or Truth. Through this process, Islamic Counselling holds difference and connection in view simultaneously, while challenging a relativist notion of cultural difference inherent in ethno-psychiatry and cross-cultural counselling. It offers a radically new mode of relating with differences within and beyond the counselling setting.

A vast spirit

It was a fresh, orange-tinted September morning in 2016 when Giulia and Sabnum met on the first day of the Islamic Counselling training course in London. Giulia had arrived as a student and anthropologist and Sabnum was there as the co-founder and teacher of the first UK-based accredited course in Islamic Counselling. As Giulia waited in the large bright front room with the other students, Sabnum entered, walked up to each student, introduced herself, repeated each name aloud, and then embraced them with that intense warmth, sincerity, and compassion that she carries with her wherever she goes. Aside from Giulia, there were fifteen students present – mostly young female professionals – of different ages, clothed in anything from skinny jeans to an abaya and niqab. But with that embrace she made each student feel welcome and at ease despite our differences. To use her own words – with which she described her own teacher and
ment, Shaykh Haeri – Sabnum shared the ‘vastness of [her] spirit’ and the potential for all to feel that within our own selves. Later that morning, as we sat in a circle of chairs, she commented on our visible differences, turning what might have been an awkward conversation into an asset for the group. As she explained to the group, ‘to see differences is also an invitation to see beyond difference to what it means’.

This article explores this tension between ‘seeing differences’ while also moving ‘beyond difference’ from within the Islamic Counselling training model. It is based on participation and ethnographic analysis of the training process, to allow Islamic Counselling theory and practice to speak to anthropological debates in ethno-psychiatry and, by extension, to debates within cross-cultural psychotherapy, counselling, and the politics of difference in Britain. Anthropological work has critically unpacked the ways in which cultural differences are introduced but also negotiated and unravelled within ethno-psychiatric practice in Europe (Fassin 2000; Giordano 2014). Giordano (2014), whose work explores the practices of translation and mediation of ethno-psychiatrists – trained in both psychiatry and anthropology – shows how ‘culture’ is at once essentialized and contested in an attempt at reaching a ‘space of mediation’. Within ethno-psychiatry, ‘cultural’ differences are not ‘recognized’ but ‘acknowledged’, with the awareness that translation is not a transparent process, but one that results in incommensurability and which challenges a broader politics of recognition in Europe.

Building on this work, we argue that Islamic Counselling similarly challenges the politics of difference in Europe by engaging with differences in new ways. As we trace in the next section, Islamic Counselling emerged in 1990s multicultural Britain within the newly expanding field of cross-cultural and spiritual counselling and psychotherapy. Yet it positions itself within this field in markedly different ways, not by working with particularist notions of cultural or religious difference, nor by seeking to merge Islamic notions with Western models of counselling and psychotherapy. Rather, it locates Islamic sources and Sufi notions of the self at its core. Within Islamic Counselling, the journey towards God – or Oneness – is placed at the centre of the counsellor-patient and all self-other relations. This form of counselling, therefore, departs from cross-cultural or transcultural counselling and ethno-psychiatry in distinct ways.

First, Islamic Counselling works with notions of ‘worldview’ and ‘journey’, which are not solution based, in contrast also to behavioural methods of therapy, but instead emphasize a developmental approach to well-being. Second, these notions enable the therapist to engage with differences in more expansive and relational ways than those employed within ethno-psychiatry. Rather than solely learning to manage social difference through categories of culture, religion, and race, Islamic Counselling trainees are taught to push beyond identity categories. As they experiment with difference through an Islamic cultural and theological framework, they learn to address not only their clients’ identities – as Muslims in the larger social and political context of the United Kingdom – but also internal differences relating to their selves/souls, and how these relate to those of others such as their teacher (Sabnum), and potential clients. They also learn to reflect on their role as Islamic counsellors vis-à-vis other forms of counselling.

Finally, while these relational differences are similarly ‘acknowledged’ (Giordano 2014), the ‘direction’ or therapeutic aim of Islamic Counselling is for both therapist and client to transcend difference through an embodied, experiential process of ‘witnessing’. Islamic Counselling, we argue, enables both to journey to a place where they can hold difference and connection simultaneously by ‘witnessing’ Oneness or Truth.
thereby learning to see separation and the boundaries between selves – difference – as a temporary forgetfulness of that Oneness. In doing so, Islamic Counselling offers a non-secular and non-liberal mode of relating with difference within and beyond the counselling setting while reversing the binary between the assumed universality of Western forms of psychotherapy and particularist cross-cultural ones.

This article is based on the encounter between Sabnum and Giulia: between teacher-practitioner-theorist, co-founder of the Islamic Counselling model, and trainee counsellor and anthropologist. Sabnum has been involved in training Islamic Counselling practitioners for over twenty-five years by researching and developing most of the course content, devising delivery methods, delivering the sessions, and assessing and mentoring students and trainee tutors. The experiential and immersive way of knowing that comes through the guidance of her mentor, Sufi Shaykh Haeri, has been instrumental both to her own development and to the development of the work. The more distancing process of writing about this experience has, at times, felt at odds with this experiential mode, while at other times it has been a familiar process of negotiating and translating between different worlds.

Giulia enrolled on the Islamic Counselling course in 2016/17 with a dual role as an anthropologist and a trainee student. That year, she was the only non-Muslim in the group – a difference that was frequently discussed with other students. Giulia’s role as trainee counsellor and anthropologist was shared with the group in the introductory session and several times informally throughout the course. A commitment was made within the group to ensure that all students were given pseudonyms and their comments were anonymized. Giulia’s observations are based on a year of attending the course, during which she submitted weekly learning journals (for which she received extensive written responses from Sabnum), completed assignments, and sat the final examinations. She also engaged in countless conversations with students, alumni, trained counsellors, and Sabnum during lunch and coffee breaks and following classes.

The first level (Level 2) of the counselling curriculum is mostly experiential and predominantly involves dhikr (spiritual remembering), practising counselling skills, and group exercises such as using life maps to reflect on one’s own and others’ tarbiyah (journey). This experiential work continues in Level 3, but here concepts are made explicit as well as contextualised with understandings of mental health and well-being and the foundations of professional practice. In the final Level 4 diploma level, students learn to engage with the Islamic Counselling model within different social and political contexts such as relations within the trainee group, their clinical placements, clinical supervision, and personal therapy with an Islamic Counsellor. In 2016/17, the course was held on Saturdays and Sundays at a central London venue. The sessions always began with a recitation of surah al fatihah (the first chapter of the Qur’an), followed by Sabnum’s reflections. The rest of the day was organized around group discussions, presentations led by Sabnum, practice sessions, or activities in pairs.

Several years after completing the course, Giulia reached out to Sabnum about co-authoring an article. We met regularly online to discuss the theoretical contributions, divide up the writing, and reflect critically on the power dynamics embedded within our collaborative effort. Inspired both by feminist and decolonial scholarship and by our engagement with the Islamic Counselling model, our relationship turned into a fascinating ‘site’ from which to experiment with the interplay between difference and Oneness. It involved what Mohanty (2003) has described as a process of acknowledging the fault lines and boundaries between us, while also learning to transcend them. We
learnt to oscillate between seeing our differences, without erasing them, while listening with care (al-halim), responsiveness (al-sami), and ‘witnessing’ our shared desire for this article to do justice (al-adl) to our individual and collective work. These conversations proved incredibly enriching but also challenging, deeply personal, and emotional as we opened ourselves up to a place of vulnerability (Behar 1996) by reflecting on our relationship within broader racialized structures of knowledge production.

In particular, we reflected on our gendered and racialized identities and were concerned with unsettling the divide between ‘anthropologist’ and ‘ethnographic subject’, which in this case would have played out in racialized ways: between a white female non-Muslim anthropologist and a brown female Muslim counsellor-practitioner and subject of research. We also reflected on hierarchies of knowledge between Islamic and anthropological forms of knowing. We chose to present the language of Islamic Counselling as both ethnographic and analytic, elevating emic categories derived from the training to etic ones, allowing them to speak back to theoretical debates both within counselling and psychotherapy and within anthropology. This was particularly significant given the ways Islamic knowledge is often marginalized within Europe (including in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy), the ‘Islamophobic normative unconscious’ of psychoanalytic practice (Sheehi 2019), as well as Islamic Counselling’s positioning as a grassroots initiative within (largely male-dominated) Islamic psychology circles. The process of ensuring our voices were equally balanced throughout the text proved challenging and remains partly unresolved, given the choice to write for an anthropology journal which to some degree privileges Giulia’s knowledge and writing style.

The ethnographic material presented here is based on the content and delivery of the training in Islamic Counselling, rather than on the trainees or on the application beyond the training context, with the aim of unravelling the ideas and concepts that inform the Islamic Counselling model. In the following section, we situate the development of Islamic Counselling within the broader field of counselling and psychotherapy in the United Kingdom. The remainder of the article is structured thematically to explore how trainees are taught to engage with differences, how they transcend difference through Oneness, and how they learn to hold both difference and unity simultaneously by engaging ‘lightly’ with their theories and models.

Genealogies

Transcultural psychiatry, cross-cultural, and spiritual counselling in Britain

While waves of migration from the former colonies after the Second World War spurred the initial development of a transcultural psychiatry in Britain, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that a more robust debate emerged within cross-cultural psychiatry about its engagement with difference (Leff 1990; Littlewood 1990). This work emerged in the context of the postcolonial and postwar development of the field of transcultural psychiatry, marked by long-standing tensions between cultural differences and a search for a ‘psychiatric universalism’ among ‘psy’ professionals globally (Antić 2022).

In Britain, it was following the deaths of black men in mental health institutes that critical voices emerged questioning the ways in which mental health services were not meeting the needs of people of African and Asian descent (Bhui 2002; S. Fernando 2003; Keating, Robertson, Francis & McCulloch 2002). This was accompanied by a critical appraisal of racism within psychiatry past and present, in epidemiological analyses, diagnoses, and treatments highlighting institutional racism within psychiatric
institutes. The work of Fanon (1968 [1961]; 2008 [1952]) was crucial in articulating these critiques but also in the process of developing a non-racist and transcultural psychiatry. Inspired by this work, British and American theorists and psychologists further challenged the colonial racialized implications of psychiatric interventions, including the continued structural racism within British psychiatry and psychoanalysis (S. Fernando 1989; Lipsedge & Littlewood 1997; Pederson 1985; Sue & Sue 2003). These processes were paralleled in Europe, particularly in France and Italy with the growth of ethno-psychiatry – inspired, among others, by Fanon, psychiatrist and neurologist Franco Basaglia and psychoanalyst Tobie Nathan – which similarly sought to address the need for cultural particularity within psychiatric care (Fassin & Rechtman 2005).

In Britain, at an institutional level the government began to develop a multicultural approach to service provision by increasingly recognizing the claims made by minorities to be accepted as different. This shift translated into initiatives such as IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies), the current central arm of the government strategy for mental health which favours an approach of cultural adaptations to mainstream therapeutic practice (Mir et al. 2015). While IAPT tends to view culture and religion as identifiable constructs that can be operationalized into normative psychotherapeutic practice, it has the effect of essentializing cultural difference, rendering it a superficial quality rather than an intrinsic one (Whitley, Rousseau, Carpenter-Song & Kirmayer 2011), depoliticizing difference, and lessening the focus on race and racism (Mayblin & Soteri-Proctor 2011).

It was also during this same period that counselling and psychotherapy services began to proliferate in Britain. Challenging the Western biomedical model, some approaches engaged with a postmodernist (i.e. narrative, feminist therapy) rather than a modernist (i.e. cognitive behavioural therapy or psychoanalytic) sensibility (McLeod 2013: 70). Cross-cultural counselling emerged within this field, influenced both by the transcultural psychiatry movement in the Britain as well as by counselling therapy, offering a less medicalized and more egalitarian intervention than psychotherapy. This cross-cultural work was predominantly championed by third-sector organizations with closer ties to local communities.

It was within this sector that Sabnum’s work initially emerged. The Angel Drugs Project was an innovative charity which brought together people from different disciplines and diverse backgrounds to work with illegal drug users, and it was here that Sabnum also met her partner, Abdullah Maynard. Trained in person-centred counselling and humanistic counselling respectively, and inspired by anti-racism movements and emerging cross-cultural initiatives, Sabnum and Abdullah were positioned to work alongside a small group of people of colour across the United Kingdom in a field that catered predominantly for white male heroin users. With the advent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and prejudices regarding the African origin of the virus, it soon became clear that a more activist approach was needed, so in 1993 they established a year-long counselling course entitled ‘Counselling in the Context of Racism.’

Throughout the 1990s, while still working at the Angel Drugs Project, Sabnum and Abdullah also began to reflect on the importance of faith and spirituality within counselling theory and practice. In part, this awareness was influenced by the growing interest in Eastern philosophies and alternative therapies of the 1960s and 1970s counter-culture movement, alongside the growth of transpersonal counselling and
a demand for more inclusive forms of therapy that spoke to spiritual and religious experiences (Pargament & Saunders 2007; Wilber 2000). Sabnum and Abdullah’s interests also developed in parallel with the global Islamic revival that emerged at the end of the 1980s in Britain. Within the counselling and psychotherapy field, Muslims argued that there was a growing need for mental health support amongst their populations, given high levels of social exclusion (Allen, Balfour, Bell & Marmot 2014; Maynard 2008). With the introduction of the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 (and the new Prevent agenda), mental health practitioners have been required to implement measures to deal with the risk of extremism, deepening distrust among Muslim clients. This securitization agenda – which Sabnum openly challenges in her trainings – has also further entrenched the category of the good/bad Muslim (Mamadani 2004) and weaponized Sufism as the ‘moderate’ response to forms of Islam deemed more conservative or ‘extreme’.

Sabnum and Abdullah had personally witnessed how psychotherapists were failing to address, and sometimes compounding, the psychological damage and discrimination experienced by Muslims in the United Kingdom. They also bore testimony to the importance of their clients’ relationship with God and the fact that this wasn’t being acknowledged within secular practice, which either resisted the recognition of religion or tended to particularize it or cast it in cultural terms. For example, Sabnum and Abdullah were often advised to rename their course ‘counselling for Asians’ to fit with similar secular cross-cultural initiatives, rather than label it ‘Islamic’, which was seen as exclusive or particularistic.

Sabnum and Abdullah were, in turn, influenced by their own personal journeys as mureeds (followers) of Sufi Shaykh Haeri and the response Sabnum felt Sufism provided to a society increasingly devoid of meaning and swallowed up by consumerism. Shaykh Haeri is often described by followers as a teacher ‘who does not fit the mould’ owing to his universalist ideas, recognition by different Sufi orders (tariqas), and diverse followers, including both Shi’as and Sunnis (Eneborg 2020). In the 1980s, his focus became that of classical texts, especially those of the work of mystics Ibn ‘Arabi (1165-1240), Ruzbehah Baqli (1128-1209), Ibn ‘Ajiba (1747-1809), and Mulla Sadra (1571-1636) (Bilgrami 2021). In his work The journey of the self: a Sufi guide to personality (1989), he charts a sacred psychology by tracing the development and fulfilment of human character and behaviour drawn from the Qur’an, hadith, and other classical treatises.

Islamic approaches to counselling

In 1994, inspired by a course delivered by Shaykh Haeri and his wife, Aliya, a transpersonal psychotherapist, Sabnum and Abdullah decided to build on their work by developing their own model of Islamic Counselling. Based on her own experience of being ‘on the path’ and aided by new translations of classical scholars and mystics, Sabnum developed a model for the therapeutic process and the therapeutic relationship modelled around the Shaykh-mureed relationship. In 1996, a collaboration with a Muslim women’s organization resulted in the development of fully accredited courses. Eventually with Abdullah she developed a full progression route through to a professional qualification and codified the discipline and standards of Islamic Counselling in relation to the Counselling and Psychotherapy Central Awarding Body to set up the first accredited Islamic Counselling course in Europe. In developing their model, Sabnum and Abdullah were also drawing on Ilm-al-Nafs – knowledge of the...
Our therapeutic direction is towards Light self – a long engagement of Islamic scholarship with knowledge on mental and spiritual health (Haque 2004). The contemporary Islamic revival has witnessed a ‘rebirth in the modern era’ (Haque, Khan, Keshavarzi & Rothman 2016) of this body of knowledge and has been accompanied by an emerging professionalization of the field of Islam and psychology (Iqbal & Skinner 2021; Kaplick & Skinner 2017).

Within the contemporary field of Islamic Counselling and psychotherapy, there are several different theoretical models and approaches. The United Kingdom has become an important hub for these initiatives (Haque & Rothman 2021; Iqbal & Skinner 2021; Maynard 2008), with organizations tending to specialize in different areas such as theoretical development and training, service delivery, or infrastructure such as the Muslim Counsellor and Psychotherapist Network. While there is some collaboration among the various initiatives, there is also debate and, in some cases, competition over their religious legitimacy and authenticity. Key to these areas of confrontation are the extent and mode of engagement of Islamic models and services with Western models.

A growing number of Islamic psychotherapists, including Rothman (2021), Keshavarzi (Keshavarzi, Khan, Ali & Awaad 2021), as well as Sabnum and Abdullah (Dharamsi & Maynard 2012), purposely position their models within pre-existing Islamic models of the self, drawing, for example, on studies of tasawwuf (Sufism or mysticism) and nafsiyat (study of the self). Their model is, in Sabnum’s words, a ‘stand-alone theory’, and the act of comparing and contrasting everything to Western models, she insists, is a colonial and racist tendency to classify according to Western norms, without taking the model on its own terms. Yet standardization and professionalization within the field of counselling in the United Kingdom have inevitably entailed carefully negotiating their Islamic model with a generally supportive, but more fixed, secular accreditation body. For example, the Freudian psychoanalytic origin of psychotherapy and its notions of autonomy and the bounded self have contrasted with the more fluid and interdependent, non-bounded client-counsellor relationships of Islamic Counselling.

While its teachings are derived from Sufi scholars and texts, Sabnum’s course aims to be as inclusive as possible by maintaining an open, non-dogmatic, experiential view of what constitutes Islam. Unlike many other forms of Islamic Counselling that define the Islamic through fiqh (jurisprudence), a set of fixed beliefs and values, or an Islamic notion of advice (naseehah), the question of what is Islamic is purposely undefined and left to the Divine. Sabnum and Abdullah do not seek to further a particular European Muslim identity (Ramadan 2005), nor does their course subscribe to a particular madhhab (school of thought within Islamic jurisprudence) nor promote a particular Islamic tradition or interpretation of the texts.

Unlike other British contexts where different Islamic traditions rarely coexist in the same space (Bowen 2016), the experiential ‘open’ approach to Islam means that both Sunni and Shi’a attend this course, as well as Muslims who hail from a diversity of backgrounds and Islamic traditions from the United Kingdom, Europe, and occasionally farther afield. For example, several imams as well as female teachers and scholars who have trained in both rival Sunni Deobandi and Barelvi dar-ul-ulooms (seminaries) have enrolled in the training, alongside Sufi followers of tariqa, young professionals, some with very limited Islamic knowledge, and those who have already qualified in other models. Often Muslims or ex-Muslims who have been disenchanted with Islam have found the course a safe place to explore this experience. Like Giulia,
several non-Muslims have also attended the course, although it tends to be less attractive to non-religious people, or those who might not share a spiritual notion of Oneness or Truth.

This diversity within an Islamic space is unique to the model but does occasionally result in tensions, reflecting some of the contestations among Muslims about what constitutes Islam. One year, Yasin, a Black convert, imam, and prison chaplain, initially struggled to engage with Sabnum as his female tutor. This included challenging the seating arrangements (whereby men and women had naturally segregated themselves but women were not at the back of the room), giving prescriptive advice to both male and female students in practice sessions, and sometimes accusing Sabnum of bid’a (innovation) for not prescribing prayer to her students and clients, but rather listening to doubts and fears about their lives.

Trainee students bring their own understandings and experiences of Islam to the course and at times struggle to relate these to the Sufi-inspired approaches proposed by Sabnum, tending to view the course either as inauthentically Islamic, or as too Sufi or liberal. As Imran, a trainee counsellor told Giulia, Islam could not be compatible with counselling because of its prescriptive nature, and therefore the notion of Islamic Counselling was ‘biased’ and ‘exclusive’. According to him, Islam was fixed and directive because it constitutes ‘The Truth’, whereas counselling is open to listening, empathizing, and understanding the world from another point of view.

While working with such differences brings its own challenges, particularly when they hail from an imam or a religious authority, Sabnum intentionally welcomes, gives space to, and engages with these divergent perspectives. The developmental nature of the training encourages students to make sense of challenges through the notion of journey (tarbiyah), allowing many of these tensions to be addressed within the space of the training. While working with Yasin, Sabnum was able to respond to his concerns through discussions and through Islamic adab (etiquette, manners), neither judging him nor deferring to him. At times, this can also result in personal changes among her trainees. After a year of training, Yasin confessed to Abdullah that Sabnum had been the best teacher and leader (amirah) he’d ever had, and that his engagement with his patients and female teachers had become more respectful, and, indeed, more in tune with Islamic teachings.

Some tensions, however, are inevitably left unresolved, and there are some for whom this modality does not necessarily work. Despite Sabnum’s attempts to defy categorization, the training does reinforce a more Sufi-inspired and mystical version of Islam, and therefore tends to attract more spiritually inclined Muslims. Furthermore, men tend to drop out at earlier stages of the course and fewer enrol on the diploma. In common with mainstream courses, men can be reluctant to share their vulnerabilities and often opt for more ‘directive’ mainstream options with greater scope for financial security and social status. Others perceive the modality of the training delivered by Sabnum as ‘too spiritual’ or ‘too female’, and assume it to be exclusive or struggle to reconcile it with their own gendered and religious identities.

Beyond cultural differences

During one of our training sessions, Sabnum shared an experience with a client – Sarra – and the ways in which she worked with her differences. Sarra had come to therapy having experienced financial and emotional loss. Initially during the therapy, she managed to hold it together, despite the difficulties of protecting her...
children from her crumbling family life and accompanying judgements from close family and friends. Then one day, a year into therapy, she broke down in tears. As sessions continued, Sarra began to question how God might have allowed such injustice in her life; until that point, being Muslim and Shi'a had been important to her sense of self, but she began to question some of her beliefs and to face her inner uncertainties. This painful experience, coupled with a hopeful search for truth, also manifested in anger, and in later sessions she began to refer to the Battle of Karbala and to share her anger as well as her love and tears for Zaynab, the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad. Sarra began identifying with Zaynab, who became ‘a model and a proxy’ for her closeness with God (Dharamsi 2020: 27). Similarly to Zaynab, Sarra was a strong woman who protected her family and stood against the cruelty experienced at the hands of other Muslims. By identifying with her, she was also making sense of her struggle as part of ‘an eternal human and sacred struggle for justice’ (Dharamsi 2020: 27).

‘So how should we make sense of Sarra’s struggle within an Islamic Counselling framework?’; Sabnum asked her trainee students that day. Sarra’s tears could be seen as a moment of catharsis, trusting Sabnum to hold and witness her grief: the tears were deeply personal and human. But, as Sabnum explained, they were also religious, ‘culturally specific, communal and individual, spiritual and real’ (Dharamsi 2020: 27). Understanding Sarra entailed some cultural or religious knowledge: of the battle of Karbala, of Shi’a rituals in the United Kingdom, and of the importance of Zaynab in Shi’i belief and practice. Similarly to ethno-psychiatry or cross-cultural counselling, it involved an acknowledgement of these religious and cultural reference points. The fact that Sarra assumed that Sabnum, as an Islamic counsellor, was familiar with these references enabled her to bring them into the therapy sessions. But these references ought to be made sense of within Sarra’s own experience. In Islamic Counselling, there is also an acute awareness that difference should not be fixed or essentialized (Fassin 2000), and that experiences should not be reduced to cultural or religious categories. Sarra’s experience cannot be limited to her identity as a Shi’a Muslim: her nafs (self) cannot solely be defined by her social identity, as her ‘worldview’ – as understood within an Islamic framework – is more complex and constantly evolving. It involves shifting modes of social identification, alongside other, embodied, not necessarily conscious processes of relating to her nafs, her ruh (soul), Oneness, and the nafas/arwah of others around her.

Islamic counselling also recognizes that every self/soul – including that of the trainee-counsellor – is at a different stage of a journey towards transcendence. As Sabnum often explains to students, ‘we listen to people’s experiences and ask what this event means in the context of their journey’. This developmental dimension is captured by the concept of tarbiyah, which describes the process of personal and spiritual growth, which is not necessarily linear or progressive (Dharamsi & Maynard 2012: 149). In contrast to medicalized models of mental health or behavioural modes of therapy, psychological difficulties are not conceived of as problems that require a solution or fix. Rather, they are conceptualized as part of this tarbiyah – a return to that primordial Oneness with awareness of separation and difference. However, the client might not recognize these as such and Sabnum cautioned us against presenting them in these ways. ‘Distress is real and you cannot tell the client that it was meant to be or that life is a test. You need to sit there and be a genuine companion,’ she elaborated. The counsellor seeks to meet the client on this journey and to guide them – without explicitly advising or
instructing them – towards recognising their ‘higher potential’, a concept we return to below.

Islamic Counselling, therefore, treats the religious or spiritual similarly to the cultural, albeit in a dynamic, developmental, expansive, and non-essentialized way, through the concepts of ‘worldview’ and ‘journey’. Simultaneously, however, and in contrast to cross-cultural and some forms of spiritual and Islamic Counselling or Islamic self-help (Jamil 2019), it refuses the culturalization and depoliticization of Islam and the definition of what Islam is. As we elaborate in more detail below, the Islamic is experiential and unfixed, but also open to be questioned. Informed by critical race and decolonial studies, Islamic Counselling politicizes and contextualizes difference. ‘Islamic Counselling is not about being in a pretty room helping someone, but about being aware of deeper, social, racial, historical, local, and global processes’ Sabnum reminded us in one of our classes. ‘We must maintain an awareness of the socioeconomic inequities or the forms of racism and Islamophobia, discrimination and stigmatization that manifest in mental ill health and vulnerability’. Just as Sabnum had welcomed our differences on the first day, throughout the training she organized regular sessions for the group to discuss our differences. These discussions were important for rendering explicit those differences that had been noticed but ignored, left unspoken, or viewed as individual particularities. The only Shi'a student on the course that year, for example, shared her experience of feeling different and her awareness of her difference as a minority among a Sunni majority both in the group and in the United Kingdom. As she spoke about the forms of discrimination experienced by her family, Sabnum helped the group to contextualize her experience within a global geopolitics of Shi'a-Sunni relations, by inviting students to reflect empathically on their own beliefs and where they came from, to explore differences and commonalities between the sects, and to discuss ways in which Shi'a and Sunni political interests and histories diverge and interact with individual narratives of distress.

In a public talk delivered in Bath in 2019, Sabnum explored the importance of politicizing difference within the counselling process through the ‘righteous anger’ of one of her trainee students. Razia is a well-read, articulate, second-generation Asian woman who grew up in an environment where anger was not allowed. Yet she felt angry. At first, this was directed at some of the double standards she experienced in her own family and community, but later it also developed into anger against national and global injustices and the powerlessness she experienced in addressing these. As a young woman in college, during the Bosnian genocide, she wanted to express her anger but she felt silenced by her college authorities. She soon came to realize that only certain forms of anger were ‘legitimate’ in British society. Following a terrorist attack, for example, she stated:

My outrage is only acceptable if it serves a particular political agenda. An agenda that has created a huge backlash against Muslims. I’m not allowed to be angry about that. The reality is we are angry at the terrorists. We are angry at the backlash. One we are expected to verbalize. The other we are expected to suppress.

When her husband travelled to Syria to volunteer with a British charity, she was questioned by the counter-terrorism police. She felt she was being targeted for being Muslim, placed under investigation for a crime, and this further fuelled her anger. Once again, the expression of this anger was considered illegitimate, a potential ‘threat’ to national security under the current securitization agenda.
It was through her Islamic Counselling training that Razia began to listen to her anger and to learn to transform it from a ‘vice’ that needed to be suppressed and into a virtue (Haeri 1989; Miskawayh 1966) that could be voiced and heard. As she expressed in her learning journal during her course, the Islamic counselling journey ‘gave me voice from which emerged a stronger, more authentic self. A self that says I have the right to be angry’. As Sabnum notes in her talk, Razia experiences a liberation—a form of decolonization—away from a hegemonic context of Islamophobia and structural racism that silences forms of anger that challenge the British securitization agenda and towards an Islamic framework that recognizes her anger as righteous and courageous.

For Sabnum, critique is part of the spiritual journey, enabling students to explore themselves with the aim of aspiring ‘to greater compassion and wisdom’. Sabnum is keen for trainees to emerge from the Islamic Counselling training with a sense of pride in the teachings and an awareness of the value of the body of knowledge they have acquired: one that is different from the mainstream and may not be recognized in British society, but that offers a radical alternative to secular and liberal concepts and modes of being.

Witnessing Oneness

‘Our therapeutic direction is towards Light’, Sabnum stated at the start of a class in early 2017, ‘it’s about witnessing Allah’s perfection in the play of life’. She was summarizing for Giulia and the other students what Level 2 of the Islamic Counselling training had entailed. A couple of months later, we revisited Sabnum’s counselling of Sarra and her tears and spoke in more detail about the Islamic dimension to therapy. Within the Islamic Counselling framework, the practice of engaging and connecting is central, but this connection goes beyond conventional understandings of empathy: it engages the heart (qalb) as the space where the human and the Divine meet. In Sufi teachings, ‘witnessing’ (shuhûd) is the heart’s potential to reflect Oneness or Truth through an embodied awareness (Ibn ‘Arabi 1985).

With Sarra, Sabnum explained, she was able to witness her tears, to support her in making sense of the meaning of suffering and uncertainty, ‘the fragility of earthly attachments’ (Dharamsi 2020: 28). At the same time, she was also able to invite her to see a unity, purity, and timelessness beyond human consciousness—‘to see Allah amidst the tears’ (Dharamsi 2020: 28). Sabnum was guiding Sarra towards transcendence so that social categories of religion and culture could be blurred—as she put it—‘in the Truth of her story’; by aspiring to Oneness, Sarra could come to see differences as her pathway to recognizing the Truth. According to the Islamic Counselling model, Sarra’s journey was unfolding and known only to God, hence social identities stood as temporary indicators on a trajectory towards greater understanding of Truth.

This invitation to ‘see Allah amidst the tears’ or to ‘witness’ the Oneness of God within the counselling relationship lies at the core of Islamic Counselling. This is an experiential process that involves a mode of relating, becoming aware of the timeless, ever-present connection of one’s own soul (ruh) with the ruh of the client and thereby accessing and reflecting back the Oneness (tawhid) that connects all humans to God. In Sufi teachings, the ruh is the place of the fitra, an inner core that is in every newborn and that is connected to the perfection of God, exemplified through God’s ninety-nine names or qualities. As Shaykh Haeri (1989) puts it, we all strive innately for a higher self; yet life on earth is imperfect, relative, and limited. For example, in a counselling setting, we might ‘witness’ qualities of a client’s ruh that connect her with God and His ninety-nine names or attributes. With Sarra, for example, we might reflect back
her quality as the protector of her family (al-waliyy, one of Allah's ninety-nine names), or with Razia we might witness her courage or steadfastness (al-matin). Counselling, therefore, supports others in progressing through their life journeys, which involves a process of rediscovering our original unified nature (Haeri 1989: 154-72).

Oneness is the source of what connects the counsellor to the client, but is also at the heart of relations with all other human beings. Within this Sufi-inspired model, the self is always already intertwined with others and with an unconscious or conscious yearning for the Divine. As Sabnum explained in one of our first classes:

We have that potential to connect with others and the world around us, it’s in our fitra. It’s a reflection of that unity (tawhid). We are all made up of the same template. To practise empathy in Islamic Counselling is not only to see the world from another person’s point of view, but to remember that unity, to go to that core, tap into that deeper Truth (haqq), that deeper reality.

To do so, the counsellor must first work on purifying her own nafs to connect with her own ruh and thus enable her words and actions, during the counselling session, to emanate from this ruh – or ‘highest potential’ – which in turn can connect with that of the client. During the training course, we were often encouraged to experiment with these acts of purification. For example, we collectively performed Islamic ablutions as a means of cleansing our bodies, minds, and spirits before engaging in a practice session. Our training sessions always provided time for prayer, although no one was pushed to engage in it, and, as mentioned, each session always began with the recitation of the fatiha, the first sura of the Qur’an. As one student on the training expressed in relation to this recitation:

[1] It’s like we are located out of ourselves which is a shift away from embodied identities and towards our being … it’s so incredible because it’s a place [to acknowledge] the truths we’ve had handed to us but not always had safe spaces to explore as Muslims in the west (Dharamsi 2022: 12).

As the student notes, this practice of Qur’anic recitation at the start of each training session supports her in connecting her heart to Oneness, to what lies beyond herself and her earthly attachments. It ensures that her relations with others emanate from her highest potential by engaging in a practice that is rare in a secularized society such as the United Kingdom.

Training as Islamic counsellors, therefore, entailed not only learning to counsel others, but also – in contrast to most cross-cultural or ethno-psychiatry approaches – working on one’s own journey. Sabnum described this as a process of ‘mutuality’: our practice or future clients could help us on that journey, reminding us of that connection with Oneness. This mutuality inherent within Islamic Counselling points to a self whose ethical practices are inseparable from their multiple entanglements with other humans and nonhumans. In discussions with the counselling alumni, many stressed the way in which training and practice had been personally transformative of their own journeys towards ‘Light’ and, significantly, their relations to multiple others. Sofia explained to Giulia how her relationship with her son was transformed during her training: she had learnt to listen more carefully to him, his needs and worldviews, and to engage with those rather than telling him ‘what to do’ and ‘what was right and wrong.’ This attitude to others had helped her to work on relations with others, from difficult family members to non-Muslim neighbours.

Within Islamic Counselling, the Divine is an invisible, non-material, and viscerally perceptible presence in the counselling relationship. God’s presence resides within each ruh, transforming its relation to the nafs and to other arwah/nafasqqa. Connections
with multiple others are constituted through the divinely commanded *ruh*, and hence God is both separate (*tanzih*) through the *nafs* and not separate (*tasbih*) from human beings through the *ruh* (Dharamsi 2016). This is unlike recent anthropological analyses on self-God relationships (Elliot & Menin 2018; Mittermaier 2019), whereby God remains to some extent both an agent apart or separate from human beings, and interreletanuality is made sense of predominantly through exchanges and interactions between bounded, self-contained nonhuman and human entities. Within Islamic Counselling, the Divine reconfigures and challenges the secular ‘buffered self’ (Taylor 2007), pointing to the porous nature or essence of selves and the impossibility of delineating separations between an inside or outside self and other. As Abenante and Vicini note, in Sufi practice the Divine is embodied in human life, as the human being (*insan*) ‘emerges from its encounter with the transcendent and vice versa’ (2017: 62). Within Islamic Counselling, the Divine is also at the heart of relations with multiple others, and therefore reconfigures modes of intersubjectivity and sociality – the nature and quality of relations with others. Crucially, it is this Godly presence that transforms relations with others and has ‘political effects’ which are not necessarily material or visible (M.L. Fernando 2018), but which allow for a different, non-secular way of listening to and being with others.

‘Walking lightly’

In our classes, we were often reminded of the Qur’anic verse (49:13), ‘O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another’. As Sabnum explained during one February session, we are oscillating between the differences and multiple realities that God has created in the world and our efforts to transcend difference through unity. This tension involves developing a particular attitude to Truth (*al-haqq*), understood as the experience of Oneness. Rather than assuming a secular understanding of faith as a set of beliefs or tenets, Truth (i.e. the existence of God or Oneness) is embodied, visceral, and experiential. It resides in the heart, and although it manifests itself in discursive knowledge, it can never be contained or fully described (Dharamsi 2017). This attitude to *al-haqq* means that both unity and difference can be held onto simultaneously and not in tension with one another, through an understanding of the self as always entangled with others through the Divine.

A counsellor learns to oscillate between the two, to listen deeply and to critically respond with care for the other. For example, one student, Amira, explored in her learning journal how she was judging her fellow student’s coldness; as she progressed in her reflection, she began to both notice these patterns of behaviour and at the same time ‘witness’ her higher potential. She wanted to avoid the student, but she also understood this as a desire for Peace (*Ya Salaam*); she was distressed by not finding ways to bond with her, but recognized this also as her *nafs* looking for unity. Over time, she was able to recognize her subtle patterns of wanting to be ‘accommodating’ and to be ‘liked by others’. She identified this as a desire for control, not just with this student, reflecting a subtle pattern in her relationships with others. She was also learning to see beyond these patterns, to transcend them through the process of ‘witnessing’, and to engage with her fellow student more compassionately and empathically.

As Sabnum explained in the training, ‘witnessing’ sometimes emerged in words, as a reflection of a client – or, in Amira’s case, of one’s own ‘highest potential’ – but it did not necessarily have to be spoken. It could also entail a potentiality that would emerge
spontaneously through that recognition of Oneness and that the counsellor would then transmit to clients. Throughout our course, and despite the differences and tensions between us, Giulia felt that the group was encouraged to feel a sense of unity through a Divine bond that did not need to surface through language for it to be felt. It was transmitted viscerally through bodily movement, eye contact, or – as Sabnum had made us feel on our first day of the course – through the ‘vastness of her spirit’. This could enable trainees to fully connect with another who might hold onto a different truth or might not yet see the Truth, while making the other feel safe, understood, and cared for. It created a possibility of connection with multiple others and a transcendence of difference through an Islamic framework. Our training group became a model and an inspiration for our relations not only with future clients, but also with others beyond the counselling setting.

During the training we were instructed, on the one hand, that al-haqq is to be held onto as a form of embodied trust, hope, or potentiality that is offered to the client. ‘Islamic Counselling is that knowledge that Allah knows even if they [the clients] don’t yet know they will come to know’, Sabnum told us in one of her morning reminders. ‘So when you step forward into places of uncertainty, you have this certainty’. In supporting Sarra, it was not only fragility, but also this potentiality that Sabnum sought to transmit when she witnessed ‘Allah amidst the tears’. Similarly, as trainee counsellors, she saw our journeys and our training as a process of learning to internalize this hope. ‘If you’re going to be a counsellor, you need to have this awareness burnt into your being’, Sabnum explained, ‘otherwise counselling could easily become simply a means of survival, a transaction that your client realizes and feels doesn’t really matter to you’.

On the other hand, as trainee counsellors, we were advised to ‘walk lightly’ (Qur’an 25:63) in relation to all earthly realities, including the Islamic Counselling model. ‘Walking lightly’ here connotes an attitude that is encouraged in relation to all forms of knowledge. It draws on the Islamic concept of hawna, meaning to be small, insignificant, or gentle, and spurs one’s actions to reflect an inner state of humility and letting go of certainty. Rather than gripping onto ideas and concepts which can only ever partially reveal the Truth, it directs one to become more conscious of the need for the Oneness that is Truth. As Sabnum put it in one of our winter classes, counsellors needed to ‘give up all our theories … even Islamic Counselling cannot be perfect science because perfect science is Allah.’ In contrast to more prescriptive or fixed understandings of faith, for Sabnum there is a recognition that ‘absolute Truth’ is impossible to grasp in language as the latter is always limited, and any attempt to do so is always already ‘biased’. Transcendence can only ever remain an embodied feeling of potentiality, one partially lost as soon as it is translated into words or earthly knowledge.

Towards a universal Islamic Counselling

At the Centro Fanon in Turin, analysed by Giordano (2014), ethno-psychiatrists navigate between Western psychological theories and cultural practices from patients’ backgrounds, resting in a ‘space of mediation’. In doing so, however, ethno-psychiatrists develop their own particular model of dealing with difference which assumes a culturally relativist view of the world – a world of incommensurable differences that can only ever be ‘acknowledged’ but never fully translated. While Islamic counsellors might similarly learn to engage in a process of ‘acknowledgement’, in contrast they prioritize the process of ‘witnessing Oneness’ and therefore seek to move beyond a position of incommensurability. Within the Islamic Counselling model, there is an awareness
that Truth exists and can be ‘witnessed’, albeit in an experiential and partial way as reality always escapes conceptualization. While Islamic Counselling presents a model of difference, unity, and intersubjectivity, it also recognizes the partiality of its model. The other can be ‘acknowledged’ without needing to be ‘recognized’ or translated into the familiar, but at the same time they can be ‘witnessed’ and difference can be transcended without being rendered incommensurable, silenced, or flattened in the process. Islamic Counselling, as Sabnum had captured for us on that first autumn day of the training course, involves ‘seeing differences’ but also recognizing the meaning – the Oneness – that lies ‘beyond differences’. It offers a non-secular mode of engaging with difference and a view of reality that holds onto an experiential sense of Oneness or Truth, while recognizing the impossibility of ever fully grasping it. It thereby poses a challenge to a culturally relativist concept of reality within ethno-psychiatry and cross-cultural counselling. This challenge is radical as it offers not only a mode of ‘acknowledging’ difference, but also a different way of connecting with and caring deeply for others, while being open to the possibility of being transformed by these others – including immaterial beings such as God – in the process.

In doing so, Islamic Counselling training presents not only a dynamic Islamic space in Europe, but also a way of making sense of Islam that is focused less on this-worldly practices of ethical self-discipline (Mahmood 2005) and more on modes of relating to others. Islamic Counselling engages with the self/soul and its relations with other selves/souls, re-conceptualizing one’s life journey, and opening a space for witnessing ‘Light’. Similarly to Pandolfò’s account of the work of a religious scholar and healer in Morocco, Islamic Counselling facilitates a journey towards an ultimate point of submission, ‘an endorsement of one’s destiny in its fullest vital sense’ (2018: 30). While practices of pious self-making support the self/soul on this journey, the aim is not the making of a pious self but transcendence, or a deeply felt understanding of Oneness and Truth.

Finally, Islamic Counselling offers a universalism which challenges the ways in which cross-cultural forms of counselling are often presented as particularistic, catering for ‘cultural others’, in contrast to Western forms of counselling, which are treated as universal. Islamic Counselling turns this paradigm on its head. It engages with differences, but it also presents a visceral notion of Oneness as a means of connecting ‘beyond difference’, as a mode by which Islamic Counselling can be applied to all. Unity is aspired to not through sharing a set of values, beliefs, or identities, nor through processes of public reasoning (Habermas, Brieskorn, Reder & Ricken 2010), but through embodied modes of being and relating. By ‘walking lightly’ in relation to its own theories, Islamic Counselling decolonizes counselling practice by insisting on a universalism, but one that derives from a religious tradition. As with other universalisms, however, within Islamic Counselling both ‘aspiration and disappointment coexist’ (Li 2021: 235). The model ‘includes some people while treating others as theoretically capable of incorporation’ (Li 2021: 234), yet these others – as we have seen among less spiritually inclined Muslims, or non-Muslims – do not necessarily feel at ease in these spaces. Nonetheless, Islamic Counselling forces us to take seriously these aspirations for universalism that are ‘less familiar’ to Western anthropologists, and whose rejections result in ‘the dismissal of efforts by marginalized actors to organize and connect’ (Li 2021: 234). By extension, Islamic Counselling challenges the way religion is seen in particularist terms within the broader public sphere in Britain. While claims for Islam’s universality are often treated with suspicion...
within liberal debates about difference, the particularities of liberalism or (Christian) secularism or their claims to universal transcendence are rarely called into question (Mahmood 2013). Islamic Counselling forces us to reflect on this asymmetry: on how the particularities of some traditions are rarely questioned, and how some aspirations for universality are treated as valid or real, while others are denied.

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NOTES
1 Giulia completed Level 2 and 3 certificate courses, which run over one academic year.
2 Since 2007, when they began recording student numbers, they have trained a total of 334 students, as of this writing in November 2023. Trained Islamic counsellors have gone on to work in a range of services, whether statutory (e.g. General Medical Practitioner services), third-sector Muslim (e.g. Muslim Women’s Helpline, Nour Domestic Violence), or mainstream organizations (e.g. the charitable organization MIND).
3 Terms such as Islamic Psychology, Islamic Counselling, Islamic Psychotherapy, and Muslim Mental Health are often used interchangeably, with practitioners moving between different theoretical emphases and reflecting the diversity of their situatedness in relation to the field. Sabnum uses the term Islamic Counselling to emphasize applied Islamic Psychology.
4 For students who continue with the training to diploma level, where both Sabnum and Abdullah teach classes, students, both male and female, can witness the teachings embodied through the different gendered identities of the tutors.
5 Zaynab is remembered by Shi’a Muslims ‘for speaking truth to power and facing off the tyrannical and powerful Muslim ruler of the time’ (Dharamsi 2020: 27). Significantly, the narratives relating to the battle of Karbala are rehearsed yearly by Shi’a Muslims.
6 Within the training model, ‘worldview’ is understood through the Islamic concepts of khayal (the imaginal, including the capacity to produce mental representations) and wahm (the capacity to attribute meaning).
7 In Islamic Counselling, the training process can be seen as a mode of learning to be a more truthful and humble witness (shahed), and of guiding the client to also witness Oneness for themselves.
8 Ablutions (wudu) are a ritual purification that involves the cleansing of specific body parts before performing acts of worship. Like other rituals, ablation has an outer (zahir) and inner (batin) aspect; they invite an embodied state of inner cleanliness, so, for example, when you wash your face with water, it also washes your ego.

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« Notre orientation est vers la Lumière » : transcendance et politique non séculière de la différence dans la formation au conseil thérapeutique islamique

Résumé
Le modèle de formation dont il est question ici est apparu dans les années 1990 dans la Grande-Bretagne multiculturelle, au sein du champ en pleine expansion du conseil et de la psychothérapie interculturelles. Il s’inspire des notions soufies classiques du Soi, du développement d’une psychologie islamique et de travaux sur le décolonialisme. Sur la base de recherches ethnographiques sur la formation actuelle au

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conseil thérapeutique islamique, cet article explore la manière dont celui-ci forme à aborder les différences relationnelles à travers des notions non séculières de réalité, de Soi et de relations avec de multiples autres. La compréhension des différences passe par les notions de « vision du monde » et de « voyage » qui vont au-delà des catégories de culture, de religion et de race ; bien que celles-ci soient également « reconnues », elles peuvent être transcendées par un processus expérimental au cours duquel on « devient témoin ». Le but thérapeutique du conseil thérapeutique islamique n’est donc pas de donner forme à un Soi pieux mais de parvenir à la transcendance et à une compréhension profonde de l’Unicité ou de la Vérité. Par ce processus, il envisage simultanément la différence et le lien, tout en remettant en question une notion relativiste de la différence culturelle inhérente à l’ethnopsychiatrie et au conseil thérapeutique interculturel. Il offre une manière radicalement nouvelle d’aborder les différences, dans le cadre du conseil et au-delà.

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