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REVIEW ARTICLE

A Comparison of Western and Islamic Conceptions of Happiness

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Abstract Research on the confluence of culture and mental health has grown dramatically in the past three decades. However, this line of research has focused almost entirely on western populations and largely neglected people from other regions. Western conceptualizations of positive functioning cannot be generalized to the Muslim populations before indigenous investigations are undertaken. This paper looks at the Muslim understanding of a good life. A brief review of the conceptualizations of happiness in the West is presented first. Next, a selection of Islamic teachings relevant to the concept of happiness is compared and contrasted with scholarship originating from the West. It is hoped that this theoretical analysis will stimulate more informed empirical research among Muslim psychologists.

Keywords Happiness · Islam · Mental well-being · Cross-cultural comparison · Hedonism · Eudaimonism

1 Introduction

Research on the confluence of culture and mental health has grown dramatically in the past three decades, and researchers have gained important insights into the impact of cultural beliefs and practices on the mental well-being of individuals. However, this line of research has focused almost entirely on western populations and largely neglected people from other regions. Scientific psychological investigations on the Islamic conceptualization of mental health in particular have been scant. This is regrettable as Islam is an influential religion in the world today. Today, Islam is one of the most populous religions in the world with one-fifth of the earth's population professing it. Islam is not an Arab religion. Less than 20 % of all Muslims are Arabs (Newby 2002).

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> There are Muslims throughout Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It is often thought to be a religion of nomads, but well over half of all Muslims live in cities. It is a religion that continues to attract more members. In North America, Islam is the fastest-growing religion, with more members than either Judaism or the Episcopalians (Newby 2002, p. 1)

Islam is influential upon Muslims' life-style and ways of thinking. Abu-Raiya and Pargament's (2011) comprehensive review of empirical Islamic psychology underscores "the relevance of Islam to Muslims' lives and well-being, and … the need for greater attention to the Islamic religion when dealing with Muslim populations. Failure to do so could lead to an incomplete and perhaps distorted picture of Muslims" (p. 106).

The present article looks at the Muslim understanding of a good life. No doubt, it is a daunting undertaking to do a comprehensive review of a topic as broad as well-being in the Islamic world. Islam represents diverse schools of thought and sects. However, despite this diversity, agreement on basic beliefs is fairly apparent in the Islamic world. The Quran is the holy book for Muslims, and is the authoritative text that contains all the major teachings about human life and happiness. Therefore, the core aspects of Islamic thought and guidance for well-being can be found in the Quran. Sects within Islam may have different opinions about politics or interpretation of historical events, and may be associated with different organizations of social life and customs. Yet, basic tenets of Islam are the spiritual, moral, and integrative force behind all sects and religious orders and brotherhoods (Barakat 1993), with core religious aspects concerning happiness, well-being, and living a good life applicable to all sects. Therefore, the focus in this article is on relevant common notions across dominant Islamic schools pertaining to the conceptualization of happiness. I have not tried to work through a standard chronological account of the Islamic faith, and its development and changes over the past 1,400 years. Rather, the focus is on the aspects of Islam which seem to have an ongoing impact on the contemporary mind-sets of Muslims around the world. I first present a brief review of the conceptualizations of happiness in the West. Next, a selection of Islamic teachings relevant to the concept of happiness is introduced and compared with scholarship originating from the West. Potential implications for a culturally informed conceptualization of happiness in Islam will be discussed.

1.1 Western Conceptualization of Mental Well-Being: Hedonic and Eudaimonic Aspects

It is probably impossible to map out the entire field of well-being research in the West. For the most part, this paper is focused on the distinction between two widely accepted traditions of analysis in the study of well-being: hedonic and eudaimonic (Delle Fave et al. 2011). Eudaimonia (good-spiritedness) was the word used in Greek philosophy to refer to a good life or happiness. An examination of this concept in Greek antiquity can contribute greatly to our discussion. Hedonism was not seen as the rival of eudemonism, neither was it considered to be a central ingredient of eudaimonia in ancient western philosophy. Hedonistic definitions of happiness however started to gain popularity in the West starting with the enlightenment through to the present day (Marar 2003). The primary difference between eudaimonic and hedonic definitions of well-being is that the former is premised on cultivating virtues, skills, and positive functioning, and the latter is premised on obtaining pleasure and positive feelings (Keyes and Annas 2009). Making a distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic aspects of well-being has repeatedly proved informative, and has

been held by many to be theoretically and empirically warranted (for example see Delle Fave and Bassi 2009; Ng et al. 2003; Ryan and Deci 2001; Ryan et al. 2008; Waterman et al. 2008).

In Philosophy, hedonism is defined as "an ethical position which claims that pleasure or happiness is the highest or most intrinsic good in life, and that people should pursue as much pleasure and as little pain as possible" (Bunnin and Yu 2004, p. 298). This position was advocated by such philosophers as Aristippus, Epicurus, Hobbes, the British empiricists (e.g., Locke and Hume), and the utilitarians. In line with this philosophical position, psychological hedonism also holds that "human actions are determined by the desire to secure pleasure and to avoid pain" (Bunnin and Yu 2004, p. 299). In this perspective, hedonic happiness is viewed as an end in itself. Hedonism as a philosophy of life has had only a scant number of advocates (e.g., Aristippus) in Greek antiquity, although pleasure has always been yearned for by people. It was only after the enlightenment that a hedonistic view of happiness started to be widely advocated in western thought. In its post-enlightenment revival, hedonistic views focused on an overabundance of positive states of mind over negative states of mind, and a general satisfaction with life (Marar 2003; Tatarkiewicz 1976). The rational empiricism in the Anglophone world emphasized that overall well-being is based on the absence of negative experiences and the presence of many positive and enjoyable experiences (Locke 1690/2004). Similarly, McMahon (2008) shows that, in the enlightenment, westerners started to believe that they could or should expect happiness "in the form of good feeling and pleasure as a right of life" (p. 86).

These shifts in the meaning of happiness are reflected in modern western psychology. In the dominant version of happiness that western psychology offers, well-being is conceived of as identical to subjective well-being (Diener 1984), which is dependent on the pleasure and pain experiences of the individual over a certain period of time (Ryan and Deci 2001). Subjective well-being is operationalized and assessed as a predominance of positive over negative affect (i.e., affect balance) and a global satisfaction with life based on the individual's own standards (Diener 1984).

1.2 Eudaimonism in Western Thought

The eudaimonistic tradition, on the other hand, relies on virtue ethics to define happiness and ways of achieving it. This view asserts that the central question of ethics, "how should I live?" can be construed as "what kind of person should I be?" (Bunnin and Yu 2004). In the West, this approach to ethics can be traced back to ancient Greek philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle.

Virtue ethics is an approach in normative ethics, stressing virtues and moral character. It is contrasted with the deontological approach which stresses duties and rules, and the utilitarian approach which stresses consequences of actions, with both positing that human beings should be guided by universal duties and principles (Hursthouse 1999; Macaro 2006). Instead of following pre-existing duties, the issues of character and free will are emphasized in virtue ethics (Macaro 2006). Virtues are defined as dispositions or character traits that help us function well, and hence make us good as human beings (Hooft 2006). Almost all versions of virtue ethics hold that our desires aim ultimately at an overriding good: eudaimonia (= good-spiritedness, good fate, happiness). Eudaimonia is the most important good that makes our lives good as a whole. Humans can achieve eudaimonia "whenever the physical, psychological, interpersonal, social, and political aspects of their lives are functioning well and harmoniously" (Devettere 2002, p. 22).

According to Devettere (2002), virtue ethics posits that an object functions well or poorly depending on whether or not it achieves its final aim or *telos*. That is, this approach holds that human nature possesses numerous capabilities, and human beings can live a good life only when they actualize these innate natural capabilities. Defined in this way, eudaimonia pertains to what is characteristically human, or what is natural for us as humans (Slife 2012). Eudaimonism holds that human beings can live a good life only when they actualize these potential, and not by pursuing pleasure produced by good feelings or satisfaction of bodily needs. Indeed, the overriding good towards which we all aspire "is not a feeling or emotion at all. It is your life as a whole which is said to be happy or not, and so discussions of happiness are discussions of the happy life" (Annas 2000, pp. 40–41). Alternatively, eudaimonia is a life of activity in accordance with virtue, and as understood by ancient ethicists, it is not a subjective state of mind (Annas 2000).

In eudaimonism, subjective states of mind (such as emotions and satisfaction) are considered to be somewhat peripheral and secondary (Haybron 2000). That is, happiness is not identified with the feelings associated with it (Clack 2012). It is not to say that pleasure and good feelings are seen as negative in virtue ethics. They are just not central—too temporary to be central. Pleasure is a completion, a by-product of virtue (Haybron 2008). Aristotle, for instance, holds that virtuous activity and a eudaimonic life can be deeply pleasurable (Kristjánsson 2010); However not all types of pleasure can meet the eudaimonic criterion. Aristotle distinguishes between noble pleasures (e.g., learning) and base pleasures (e.g., gluttony), based on how much a certain pleasure is consistent with the human *telos*.

Taken together, in construing happiness, a conspicuous emphasis on rationality (i.e., being rationally efficient) and individualism (exercising one's free will and not submitting to fate) in the history of western thought is evident (Coan 1977; Christopher 1999). Reason and a reflective attitude (which were considered to be the best of all human capacities) were the main ingredients of a good life, and were the key to it for Aristotle (Clack 2012; Macaro 2006; Ryan et al. 2008) and Plato. Aristotle believed that the unreflected could be barely considered to be human because reason was the defining characteristic of humanity. Although Aristotle believed that fate could interfere with our personal attempts towards well-being, he glorified autonomy (Ryan et al. 2008). Well-being should result from one's voluntary act to be considered authentic. A person should actively seek excellence, and practice it. Compared to Aristotle, in Plato's view, fate was less emphasized and volition more strongly emphasized (Belliotti 2004).

In line with philosophical eudaimonism, some positive and humanistic psychologists, adhering to the eudemonistic view, consider well-being to consist of more than just hedonic pleasure, suggesting that people's reports of being happy and enjoying life, although beneficial and necessary in their turn, do not necessarily mean that they are functioning well psychologically and socially (e.g., Keyes and Annas 2009; Keyes et al. 2002). Like its counterpart in philosophy, this approach in psychology is concerned with actualizing one's potential and capacities, targeting optimal and full functioning (Deci and Ryan 2008). Some psychologists have endeavored to formulate a psychological version of eudaimonia (e.g., Delle Fave and Bassi 2009; Ryff 1989; Ryff and Keyes 1995; Waterman 2008; Waterman et al. 2010). The focus of many of these models is on autonomy, reason, and individuals' private lives. Although empirical investigations suggest that there is an overlap between the experience of hedonia and eudaimonia (for example see Kashdan et al. 2008; King and Hicks 2007; Strümpfer 2006), eudaimonistic and hedonic aspects of well-being have been found to be theoretically and empirically distinguishable. For example Keyes et al. (2002) reviewed the empirical research confirming that the two components

are separate yet related concepts. In addition, the two components of well-being are not at odds with each other (see also Delle Fave and Bassi 2009; Keyes and Annas 2009).

A final observation about western conceptualization of happiness is that whereas in philosophical eudaimonism, social virtues are believed to be as important as personal ones, in recent psychological formulations of eudaimonia the social aspect of life has received less attention (Keyes 1998). Eudaimonism transcends the dichotomy between living for oneself and living for the benefit of society (Waterman 2008). For example, Aristotle warned against an excessive focus on self-interest as he believed that people are more importantly a part of the City (Fowers 2012). For him, the self is constructed socially, and eudaimonia is a way of living well not for the sake of the individual but for the sake of the whole community (Aho 2012). In eudaimonistic psychology, interpersonal aspects of eudaimonia have received considerable attention. According to Keyes and Shapiro (2004), however, what has been missing is attention to the social aspect of eudaimonia. That is, the hedonic and eudaimonic traditions in contemporary western psychology represent well-being as a primarily private phenomenon, and emphasize its private features (Keyes 1998).

1.3 The Present Study

An inspection of the extant literature on happiness indicate that researchers have, as yet, focused on western cultures, and input from many other cultures (e.g., African and Middle Eastern) is lacking in mainstream psychology. Furthermore, most of these studies have relied on conceptualizations rooted in western worldview, and have largely ignored insights from different parts of the world (Said 1979). Moreover, previous research has focused on secular notions of well-being, which is not surprising given the intellectual traditions in Western Europe since the enlightenment that facilitated a strict separation of church and state, with a dissociation of spirituality from empirical research. Yet, spiritual and religious notions continue to be an important aspect of how people see themselves and the world (Hogan and Bond 2009; Triandis 2007). Understanding happiness in non-western societies may require a broader view that includes historical and contemporary perspectives on morality, self, and the world coming from sources that influence how people define themselves and a good life, for example, religion (for similar arguments see, Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2011; Skinner 2010).

Findings from western and East Asian cultures cannot be generalized to other cultures before indigenous conceptual and empirical investigations are undertaken. This paper focuses on the Islamic conception of mental well-being. Among many other Muslim scholars, Abu-Raiya (2012) argues for an indigenous perspective when studying Muslims and Islam. Considering the differences between the Islamic and Western worldviews as claimed by sociologists (Huntington 1997), relying merely on western theories to understand Muslim mental health is doomed to fail. Religion and spirituality are keys to understanding the notion of mental health and healing (e.g., Inayat 2005) in Muslim culture. The empirical evidence pertaining to the positive impact of Islamic faith on Muslims' mental health is thoroughly reviewed by other researchers (Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2011). Therefore, the present paper focuses on the Islamic conceptualization of mental well-being.

As mentioned earlier, the focus in this article is on core tenets of Islam as a religion rather than any differences in customs and social organization of life in the context of sects. While there are some differences in the behavioral expression of happiness in various sects of Islam, they are very much in agreement about the conceptualization of happiness. All Islamic views on happiness have their roots in the Quran and the Prophet's sayings, hence

the basic tenets of Islam underlie them. As Anwar (2006) puts it: "while Muslims' expressions of Islam vary and are ingrained into local cultures, they perceive the correct interpretation of the Quran as a thread that runs through all their lives" (p. 16). According to Islam, "revelation already and uncomplicatedly contains the whole truth" (Akhtar 2008, p. 85). Consequently, all Islamic movements have stayed in line with the content of the Quran and prophet's sayings. In fact, anything which is not Quranic cannot be called Islamic. In this study, input from various Islamic movements is also presented, particularly, drawing upon classic Islamic philosophy and Sufism (the mystical aspect of Islam, for a review see Joshanloo and Rastegar 2012) as the two main channels through which Quranic ideas have been discussed and developed. Reviewed next are the generalities of the Islamic perspective on happiness, drawing on the Quran and key Islamic texts.

1.4 The Concept of Mental Well-Being in Islam

> But he who turneth away from remembrance of Me [=God], his will be a narrow life, and I shall bring him blind to the assembly on the Day of Resurrection
>
> (the Quran, 20:124)

> One who seeks happiness through the pursuit of pleasures will find nothing except anxiety and bafflement. If we fail to keep in check the rebellious passions and infantile inclinations within us, which constantly keep on raising their heads, with the means of reason and sagacity, they will overpower our conscience and make us their own slave. The more that we succeed in subduing our lusts and desires, the closer shall we move to happiness. To sum up, all our misfortunes, afflictions and helplessness, and, in a word, everything that clouds the horizons of our life, is a product of the domination of lusts over our being.
>
> Musawi Lari (Shiite writer), *Ethics and Spiritual Growth*

In Arabic, the word *deen* is used to refer to religion and faith. This word connotes piety and fear of God, and is associated with following the commandments. The word Islam itself means submission to the will of God (Husain 1998). Another key word used in Islam to refer to religion is *Shari'ah*. The Shari'ah (i.e., the divine law) constitutes Islam's ritual, legal, ethical, and social aspects. Muslims believe that the Shari'ah contains "the concrete embodiment of the Will of God, how God wants them to act in this life to gain happiness in this world and felicity in the hereafter… The life of the Muslim from the cradle to the grave is governed by the Shari'ah" (Nasr 2003, p. 75).

This understanding of religion indicates what virtue amounts to in the Islamic faith: to submit to the supreme power and be afraid of him. This fear is believed to lead to more complete submission. Only through submission to the will of God and by obedience to his law "can one achieve true peace and enjoy lasting purity" (Husain 1998, p. 282). The Quran says: "But as for him who feared to stand before his Lord and restrained his soul from lust, Lo! the Garden will be his home"[1] (Q 79:40–41), and "They only are the (true) believers whose hearts feel fear when Allah is mentioned …" (Q 8:2). Concerning the importance of full submission, the Quran says: "Amongst us are some that submit their wills (to Allah) and some that swerve from justice. Now those who submit their wills—they have sought out (the path) of right conduct" (Q 72:14). Sufis strongly emphasize this aspect of Islam. In Sufism, the ultimate goal of humankind is to become one with God

[1] All English translations of the Quran verses were obtained from http://www.quranexplorer.com.

through destroying their personal will and ego (Joshanloo and Rastegar 2012). God is the only reality, and nothing else possesses authentic existence, "the full realization of this ultimate truth constitutes 'loss' of self in the One" (Renard 2009, p. 33). In this stage, Sufis say, the soul is so completely absorbed by the presence of God that it no longer has any individuality (Elkaisy-Friemuth 2006; Joshanloo and Rastegar 2012).

The Quranic view of humankind is dualistic holding that humankind possesses both a perishable body and an ever-lasting soul (Haque 2004; Joshanloo 2013). Islam posits that one of the basic spiritual needs of humankind is to worship a higher power (Sajedi 2008a). In Islam, worshiping God is considered to be our *telos*. In addition, according to Islam we have two lives, one in this world and one in the hereafter. Our life in the present world is far less important than our eternal life in the afterworld (Q 6:32). If there is a conflict between this-worldly and otherworldly happiness, that of the afterlife should be chosen by a Muslim. In Islamic philosophy too happiness and eschatology are related to each other. That is, the ultimate realization of happiness is believed to be possible only after liberation from the flesh (Khademi 2009; Mattila 2011).

Islamic texts indicate that to live a good life, one should have faith and put his or her faith into practice. All Muslims are obliged to have faith in the principal beliefs of Islam (e.g., belief in the oneness of God, belief in the resurrection, etc.). Furthermore, Islam is a comprehensive way of life. It covers all aspects of life (individual, spiritual, economic, social, political, and the family). Muslims believe that religion cannot be separated from every little aspects of life (Hamdan 2007; Joshanloo 2013; Pridmore and Pasha 2004). It is believed that only having true faith in these beliefs, and living a life based on the ordinances of Islam in all aspects (Quran 10:63–64) can lead to the satisfaction of the individual's physical and spiritual needs, and actualization of their potential. Following this comprehensive schedule of life is believed to be enough for reaching happiness both in this life and the hereafter. In El Azayem and Hedayat-Diba's (1994) words, "it is believed that by following Islamic principles, Muslims can achieve and enjoy the four ingredients of a healthy and balanced life, namely, physical, social, mental, and spiritual health" (p. 49). Clearly, such a concept of happiness needs to go beyond the absence of mental illness. Indeed, in Islam, mental health is not only the absence of mental disorders but also the presence of positive qualities and virtues.

According to Islam, humankind is the product of the unification of spirit and body. God has breathed his spirit into the human being's material body. This divine spirit needs to be actualized. We can freely choose to actualize the divine spirit within ourselves by following the ordinances of Islam or choose to indulge in worldly pleasures. From an Islamic perspective, the latter is an absolute failure leading to misery both in this life and the hereafter. The attainment of a virtuous life-style requires relentless patience and constant struggle against our lower nature (Akhtar 2008; Joshanloo 2013). Sufis in particular stress the ascetic aspects of the Islamic faith. They attach great importance to asceticism and piety. Mortification and asceticism have always been considered key methods for purification of the soul along the Sufi path (Joshanloo and Rastegar 2012; Zarrinkoob 1999).

According to Islam, when children are born, they have within them a natural belief in God and *the straight way*. This natural belief is called *the fitrah*. This innate disposition is considered to be a source of guidance telling humans when they are wrong (Haque 2004). That is, we are preprogrammed to worship God and follow his commands. But, due to environmental pressures, we forget our true nature. The Quran says (30:30–31): "So set thy purpose (O Muhammad) for religion as a man by nature upright—the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man". Humans are obliged to re-discover their *fitrah* and follow its guidance. Obviously, such a viewpoint fits nicely with the eudaimonistic view which emphasizes actualizing human potentials and the satisfaction of true human needs.

In sum, unlike some western streams of thought which deny the existence of any built-in religious sentiment in the psyche (e.g., orthodox psychoanalysis, Abu-Raiya 2012), Islam holds that humanity is created to worship and serve God and there is a genuine godly aspect in its soul. Worshiping and serving God is the *raison d'être* of humankind, its *telos*. And achieving this *telos* is at the heart of a happy life.

Islam holds that Muslims should not pursue hedonistic pleasures as the primary goal of their lives (Joshanloo 2013). In fact, positive emotions and pleasure are considered necessary in Islam, but they are regarded as secondary and are placed after the eudaimonistic strivings. Muslims should not choose for themselves the evil pleasures of this world as the goal of their life (Q 7:169), since "naught is the life of the world save a pastime" (Q 6:32). Thus, attempts to maximize positive emotions and pleasures and minimize negative emotions and pains as a stand-alone plan for life are firmly discouraged in Islam. Islam's de-emphasis on hedonism does not, however, mean that positive emotions and pleasures are not legitimate. Instead, Islam holds that by adhering to the Islamic life-style, Muslims will experience many different positive emotions and pleasures (e.g., vitality, peacefulness, contentment, gratitude, joy, etc.), both in this world and in the hereafter (Joshanloo 2013). Similar views are advocated in Islamic philosophy (for a review see Mattila 2011) and Sufism (for a review see Zarrinkoob 1999) holding that one should not commit one's life to pursue the low pleasures of the body.

1.5 Islamic Views on Hardship and Suffering

In Muslim cultures, it is believed that illness and recovery is in God's hand. Disaster and hardship are considered as God's trial or a test of Muslims' faith. One should tolerate the hardship and stay grateful to God, and fully rely on him. Islamic texts recognize several godly purposes of misfortune, stress, and disease. It is believed that in order to pass divine trials, an illness or any other sort of hardship should be tolerated with patience (Husain 1998). The highly praised virtues of patience and reliance on God in hardship and illness are believed to transform suffering to blessing (Watt 1979). It is also believed that as a result of their ignorance, non-believers are more susceptible to emotional suffering and physical illness (Okasha 2009). The prophet is cited as saying: "Verily God, The Glorious and majestic, by His wisdom and exaltedness created ease and comfort in contentment and certainty; and He created depression and fear in doubt and discontent" (Kabbani 2006, p. 123).

Muslims believe that faith prevents ill health and helps manage health problems when they occur (Inayat 2005). Accordingly, many mental health issues (except serious psychological problems, such as schizophrenia) attract a stigma in Muslim cultures, with most of them being seen as the result of an individual's moral failure (Smither and Khordandi 2009) or a bad relationship with God. Using spiritually-based behavioral therapies is not uncommon in the Islamic world. These traditional therapies utilize faith and trust in God, charity to the poor, prayer, repentance, recitation of Quranic verses, etc. as curative factors as they are believed to strengthen the person's soul (Husain 1998). For example, daily prayers are believed to "give spiritual nourishment and harmonize the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the devotee" (Inayat 2005, p. 163). In particular, remembrance of God is considered a soothing factor for Muslims. For example, Quran says (13:28): "Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest". The prophet is cited as saying: "Say often, 'There is no strength nor power except God.' Surely it is a treasure from heaven, and in it is a healing for every malady, the least of which is anxiety" (Kabbani 2006, p. 120).

Sufis in particular embrace hardship and suffering as necessary elements of the path towards God. A Sufi poet says: "The self will not go in gladness and with caresses, it must

be chased with sorrow, drowned in tears" (Vaughan-Lee 1994, p. 90). Sufis believe that God is with those hearts which are broken for him. They use the analogy that gold ore becomes gold after it is put through a process of fire. A Sufi also should be transformed to a true lover through suffering (Vaughan-Lee 1994).

1.6 Self and Balance in Islam

Besides virtuous activity and servitude to God, Islam recognizes some subjective aspects of mental health. The ideal subjective state of mind in Islam is not a high-arousal one. Instead, Islam favors a tranquil and content state of mind bestowed to an individual by God on the basis of their virtuous activities. Islamic psychology rests on a perception of a multi-state self. The Quran recognizes three states of self. One of them is called the ordering, inciting, or evil-commanding self (*Al-Nafs Al-Ammarah*). This component of the self is described in a negative light in the Quran as it strongly urges us to do evil (Akhtar 2008). This *unhealthy* state of the self is in conflict with society and is antisocial, destructive, and out of balance (Ashy 1999). The blaming, reproachful, or self-accusing self (*Al-Nafs Al-Lawwama*), which is the Quranic equivalent of conscience, stands against the evil-commanding self. This state of the self counteracts the evil self's destructive power in the human personality (Akhtar 2008). This state of the self indicates internal imbalance, anxiety, and guilt but is shown in a positive light in Islamic teachings as it can be conducive to balance and peace. The most desirable and balanced state of self is the peaceful, serene, or tranquil self (*Al-Nafs Al-Mutmainna*) which is the highest stage of psychospiritual development in Islam (Abu-Raiya 2012). According to Ashy (1999), this is the ideal to which a Muslim should aspire. It consists of a complete harmony within an individual in every realm of functioning. This state is to be achieved after a lifelong struggle between the evil-commanding and self-accusing selves (Akhtar 2008).

The concept of balance has a significant role to play in the Islamic conceptualization of happiness. The balance between the selves (as introduced above), between body and soul, individual and social should be maintained. A Muslim ideal is to let the godly part of the soul (i.e., the heart, the inner center where faith in God resides) rule over other aspects of our personality. "In a general way, illness is seen to arise when the dynamics of the self flow in the wrong direction—(for example, by intellect overriding intuitive wisdom), or through dissociation within the self—at any level but particularly from the inner centre" (Skinner 2010, p. 549). This inner center integrates the different structures (i.e., the three selves) and forces (e.g., reason, emotion, etc.) of the personality into a coherent whole (Abu-Raiya 2012). The ultimate determinant of one's level of mental balance and happiness is a successful integration of these forces and structures via faith accompanied by a virtuous life-style. Contentment is the result of reaching the state of peaceful self. God addresses the person who has reached this state in the following way: "But ah! thou soul at peace! Return unto thy Lord, content in His good pleasure! Enter thou among My bondmen! Enter thou My Garden!" (Q 89: 27–30). The state of peaceful self is reflected in the mind in form of contentment with whatever God wishes (i.e., whatever happens in life). The worries over worldly difficulties and sufferings are said to perish in this state.

1.7 Contemporary Views

Turning to modern Muslim scholarship, it seems that contemporary Muslim understandings of life, humankind, God, and happiness are still strongly influenced by Islam. Muslim writers generally concur with the Aristotelian notion that in order to obtain happiness, we

need to know all aspects of humankind, all its capacities and abilities, deficiencies, and needs. The Islamic strategy for the promotion of mental health is believed to be based on a perfect divine knowledge of human nature including its defects and needs (Husain 1998). Muslim writers go as far to assert that modern science and secular ideologies have failed to bring happiness to humanity, due to a lack of a complete understanding of humankind and its spiritual needs (e.g., Khomeini 1979; Musawi Lari 1997). To them, it is God that can show us the way to happiness and salvation since he has created us and knows all about us. Therefore, we should try to find the answer to all our questions in the revealed law and Islamic scriptures. Based on this perspective, God, knowing that the humanity's major need is happiness, has sent his prophets to show us the way to happiness and salvation.

In an anti-hedonistic fashion (which is especially evident in the contemporary era when Muslims scholars feel under cultural attack from the materialistic West), what Muslim writers prescribe is that one should not let carnal motives dominate one's intellect. Instead it is religious faith which should dominate our intellect. They believe that many of the virtues stipulated by Aristotle are profitable but of course his list is incomplete. They add religious faith, purification of the heart, worship, absolute submission to God, etc. to this list. Finally, they all believe that authentic happiness is to be experienced in the afterlife, which is generally interpreted as "proximity to God" in heaven.

A detailed discussion of individual symptoms of well-being (e.g., positive relations with others, purpose in life, social integration, social contribution, life satisfaction, etc.) and their relevance to Islamic faith is beyond the focus of this article. The interested reader is referred to the existing articles and books published by Islamic scholars and psychologists in many diverse languages. For example, in an article written in Persian, Sajedi (2008a, b) argues that Islam provides Muslims with the mechanisms needed to achieve many high standards posited by western notions of mental health. He cites tens of sayings of Islamic religious leaders and of the Quran to show that many common themes in western models of well-being (e.g., spirituality, positive relations with others, social interest, meaning in life, self-knowledge) are highly valued in Islam.

Muslim writers further believe that faith helps us resist the pressures of carnal desires and inclinations (Musawi Lari 1997) which are seen by Islam as conducive to misery and hell. At the same time, extreme celibacy and asceticism is not prescribed in Islam (Husain 1998). Human beings should stay connected to this world and others, and play their role in the social world (Motahhari 1992; Musawi Lari 1997). In this system of beliefs, everyone's rank and worth depend on their level of piety and fear of God, and not on their material gains or achievements. Indeed, from an Islamic perspective, a person who does not espouse spiritual values is not worthy of being called a human being. In order to become a human being in the real sense of the word, one should have a pure soul, a great will, and a high purpose which are all consistent with Islam (Musawi Lari 1997). In the Quranic perspective, humans can become the lowest of the low (Q 95:488), unless they redeem themselves through faith and good action (Husain 1998). In sum, Islam believes that religious faith distinguishes humankind from animals.

One of the theoreticians of the Islamic revolution of 1979 in Iran, and one of the internationally renowned Islamic writers Morteza Motahhari (1920–1979) illuminates in detail what cannot be considered authentic happiness in the Islamic perspective (2010; see also Motahhari 1992, 1994b). Antithetical to hedonistic formulations, happiness cannot be equated with pleasure since some pleasures bring about future pain, he thinks. In line with Aristotle's ideas, to him, pursuing a pleasure which might lead to larger pains is contradictory to expediency and wisdom. Consistent with the anti-hedonistic sentiment of contemporary Islamic culture, he concludes that a pleasurable experience can be considered as

happiness only if it does not bring about bigger pains or does not prevent bigger pleasures, and in reality such a pleasure is hard to find outside the realm of religion.

He also asserts that fulfillment of one's wishes and dreams cannot be equated with happiness because after achieving a wish, it might turn out to be harmful. In other words, not all of our wishes are consistent with our *telos*. An individual's desires are proportional to his level of knowledge, and many desires are inconsistent with the ultimate happiness envisaged by Islam. Finally, he dismisses satisfaction as the hallmark of happiness. He writes that satisfaction is associated with one's level of understanding and mental complexity; therefore it is possible that someone is satisfied with their lives, while those lives are not happy by Islamic standards. So contentment is an ideal state in Islam only if it is based on Islamic values.

Motahhari believes that without strong beliefs, noble ideals, and religious faith, a human being cannot live a healthy life or contribute to society (1992). Such a person either becomes confined by his selfishness and personal benefits, or becomes confused and indecisive when facing critical moral issues of life. Consistent with Aristotle's focus on social aspects of eudaimonia, to Motahhari, individual happiness is tied to collective happiness and a person cannot seek happiness independent of others. In other words, we should devote ourselves to the collective happiness of humanity.

He continues to make clear that religious faith has some major benefits for mental health. I dwell on his notion as similar notions are reflected in the works of many contemporary Islamic writers. Considering that religion gives meaning to the world and assures us that the creation had a great goal, a believer is essentially optimistic, Motahhari claims. Given that the goal of creation, as seen by Islam, is betterment and perfection, a believer feels accountable for their own failures. That is, she never blames the universe and God for her failures since she knows that the world has been created in the best possible way. And this feeling of responsibility provides high levels of morale, self-esteem, and hope. Motahhari believes that lack of faith leads to pessimism, confusion, indecisiveness, failure to improve oneself, and undermotivation to be righteous, and thereby prevents the person from enjoying the life.

Another benefit of religious faith, recognized by Motahhari, is the expectation that good effort produces good results. Religion assures us that there is a difference between those who choose the right way and those who choose the wrong way, but a nonbeliever fails to find any reason why they should act righteously. Motahhari says that a life empty of faith is one of distrust, uncertainty, one full of unanswered questions, and apprehension of a dark future. He believes that the golden way to happiness is religious faith.

Another advantage of religious faith that Motahhari emphasizes is that religion provides us with stronger and more permanent pleasurable experiences, compared to which sensual pleasures are of little value. Examples of these noble pleasures are those derived from worshiping and absorption in God, or doing voluntary service to society. He acknowledges that life has lots of worries, hardship, and failures and we cannot overcome all of them on our own. In such a state of affairs, the only thing which can bring peace and happiness to life, he believes, is religious faith. And this benefit comes from religion's triumph in persuading us that all these hardships and worries are divine trials and will be compensated in the afterlife. So a believer can find meaning and pleasure even in hardship (Motahhari 1992). He also believes that religion can successfully protect us from death anxiety (Motahhari 1994a).

2 Discussion

It can be concluded that an Islamic concept of happiness should be formulated in such way that it guarantees the satisfaction of the individual's need for worship (which is considered inherent) and his or her happiness both in this life and the hereafter. The key to achieving this is an Islamic-based virtuous life-style accompanied by religious faith. Beside this, Islam recognizes some subjective aspects of mental health as well. Islam prescribes virtuous activities and strong faith which lead to a spiritual and tranquil state of mind bestowed to an individual by God. The concept of balance is essential to the conceptualization of happiness in Islam. The balance between various states of the self, between body and soul, individual and social should be sustained. This balance is created through the domination of the godly part of the human personality over its other parts. The ultimate determinant of one's level of mental balance and happiness is a successful integration of internal forces and structures. Contentment is the result of reaching this state of integration. In sum, the Islamic conception of happiness is more consistent with the eudaimonistic perspective, and it is both-worldly, holistic, and pro-homeostasis in nature.

The analysis presented above indicates that there are some similarities and differences between the western and Islamic conceptualizations of happiness. In what follows, some of these will be touched upon. Both Islam and mainstream psychology start with the argument that the absence of mental illness cannot be called happiness or flourishing on its own. For living a happy life, positive states are needed in addition to the absence of negative states. Another similarity is that the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic well-being is theoretically warranted in both western conceptualizations of happiness and Islam.

Ironically, however, the application of eudaimonic notions of well-being to the contemporary West has been questioned on the grounds that to assume that the human *telos* guides our actions is in need of empirical demonstration and western secular psychology has failed to successfully offer this. In its quest to be objective, modern philosophy too has abandoned the concept of a goal for human nature because such a concept is believed to be based on excessive speculation which fails to separate questions of fact and value (MacIntyre 1984; Stewart-Sicking 2008). Decades ago, such scholars as Friedrich Nietzsche, and Karl Marx challenged the concept of a fixed human nature by demonstrating how historically grounded social needs can come to be conceived as natural (Belliotti 2004). Although some western psychologists have drawn on evolutionary biology for insights, this seems to raise other important concerns, for instance, reductionism (for a complete discussion of this issue see, Aho 2012; Belliotti 2004). Classical philosophy believed in some firmly rooted human *telos* which is unique to human beings, and is shared by all humanity. Now that religion's authority and explanatory power in the morally pluralistic West has declined, it is a daunting task for western psychologists to find a basis on which to demonstrate empirically that there is a *telos* at work in humankind. Obviously, Muslim and other religious cultures have less to do in this regard as they still believe in a human *telos* authorized by religion, which is more or less unquestionable.

In the Islamic world the emphasis seems to be on the eudaimonic aspect of happiness. Prioritizing hedonic pleasures over eudaimonistic ones is discouraged. As far as the formulation of eudaimonia is concerned, some basic psychological needs of human beings are emphasized almost uniquely in either western psychology or Islam. For instance, the need to worship God is seen by Islam to be one of the most fundamental needs of human beings, the satisfaction of which leads to eudaimonia (Sajedi 2008a). In contrast, this need is almost entirely absent from the western psychological literature on basic psychological needs (e.g., Ryan et al. 2008). Instead, autonomy is emphasized in western mainstream

psychology, a value which is not considered particularly significant in collectivistic Muslim cultures, and does not seem to be a fundamental ingredient of a good life in Islam.

Compatible with the western psychological research acknowledging the existence of both objective and subjective aspects of well-being, in Islam, happiness is believed to consist of subjective as well as objective facets. From an Islamic perspective, it is believed that an objectively virtuous life style can lead to desirable states of mind (the peaceful self, or contentment). However, the ideal affective state (Tsai 2007), in Islam, is not a high-arousal positive one (like euphoria, joy, exuberance, etc.) as generally desired in the West. Consistent with the eudaimonistic-orientation of Islam and the concept of contentment as described in the Quran, low-arousal positive affects are preferred. It is worth reiterating that subjective states of mind are alien to the Aristotelian conception of eudaimonia.

Islam is a comprehensive way of living. To live a virtuous life based on Islam may not be that easy. The comprehensive Islamic regulations and ordinances should be followed in every little aspect of life on a minute to minute basis (for instance, Islamic texts contain lots of regulations regarding going to the toilet). This is inconsistent with western relative inattention to nuances of everyday life (Kupperman 2002; Sundararajan 2005). Western contemporary Anglo-American ethical philosophy is called *big moment ethics* by Kupperman, on the basis of its preoccupation with *major choices* at ethical crossroads and its being quiet on almost all of life apart from the big moments.

Although individual happiness has its rightful place, its social and sometimes political aspects have been stressed in Islam. A person's social identity and social duties are considered central in Islam, in the Shiite sect in particular. This prominence is evident in Morteza Motahhari's arguments and is consistent with the Greek emphasis on social aspects of happiness. This is not surprising as most Islamic societies are collectivistic cultures where harmony between the individual and society is considered fundamental to the mental well-being of individuals. "Within an Islamic society … the relationship between the individual and society is regarded as being largely harmonious, and for the individual, Islamic society is a source of social identity and the collective self mentioned earlier" (Smither and Khordandi 2009, p. 89). Muslims are obliged to reconcile their personal drives with the demands of society, and acts which are harmful to the community are fiercely condemned (Anwar 2006; El Azayem and Hedayat-Diba 1994; Smither and Khordandi 2009). The economic structure of Muslim society also contributes to Islamic collectivism. That is, still in many Muslim countries, a person's survival depends more or less on collaboration with members of the family and community (Dwairy 2006) rather than the state and social institutions. Islam conceives of each individual self as a part of the community. Islamic ethics are seen as aiming at a achieving a healthy society and establishing a good social order (Anwar 2006). In contrast, the social and political components of eudaimonia are less emphasized in contemporary western conceptualizations of happiness. Apart from the body of research produced using Keyes' social well-being scales (Keyes 1998), the social aspects of eudaimonia have received scant attention in the western psychological literature on mental well-being. This is to be expected in view of the prevalence of individualism and instrumental hedonism which characterize the contemporary western culture (Aho 2012).

As mentioned earlier, Islam stipulates high standards for being a human. In order to become a human, the individual is supposed to be pious, spiritual, and possess high ideals. Humans can become the *lowest of the low* unless they strictly obey Islamic ordinances (Husain 1998). All in all, Islam believes that religious faith distinguishes humankind from animals. This Islamic view of humanity and the prevalent western focus on unconditional

acceptance are poles apart. This can have significant consequences for how people judge their lives and selves.

Finally, an emphasis on reason and intellect independent of religious tradition has never been evident in the history of Islam. Although some medieval Islamic philosophers have glorified intellect and reason, the version of intellect that they have advocated is obviously a Quranic one. First, they believed that it is only divinely supported people (e.g., the prophets) who can attain the highest forms of intellect by virtue of their access to revelation. They further believed that others should attain it only by using these authorities' instructions (Mattila 2011). Second, Islamic philosophers believed that happiness (which is achieved through intellect) cannot be fully realized in this world. Rather it may be realized in the afterlife where human beings are liberated from matter, indicating that a spiritual version of intellect is advocated by Islamic philosophy (Mattila 2011). Finally, they believed that human intellect should completely submit to revelation. For example, for Avicenna (who is one of the most eminent Islamic philosophers), consistent invocation of God, saying one's obligatory prayers, and following God's commandments were among the key ingredients of happiness (Khademi 2009).

In Islam (including Sufism and Islamic philosophy), the Quran is held to provide the answer to the most important theoretical questions regarding the nature and goal of the mankind and universe. In a sense, there is no room for the philosophical inquiry which is independent from the Quran. This can partly explain the dramatic decline of Islamic philosophy centuries ago. Akhtar (2008) states that "philosophy never took root firmly in the soil of Islam even in the intellectual heyday of Muslim civilization" (p. 88). To sum up, whereas an emphasis on personal reason independent of revelation in obtaining personal and collective happiness has become dominant in the West after the Enlightenment, it has never gained enough credit over revelation and tradition in Islam.

3 Concluding Remarks and Suggestions for Further Research

To date, research on mental well-being has largely regarded happiness as an "outside-in" process affected by wealth, social status, and need satisfaction, neglecting "inside-out" factors (Biswas-Diener et al. 2012). Through the "inside-out" factors, people make sense of their daily life, develop their understanding of happiness, and choose certain values to espouse. Acknowledging the inside-out factors requires us to take into account the extent to which spirituality or transcendence is important for a culture (Leong and Wong 2003; Webb 2012). Unlike morally pluralistic western societies, in Islamic cultures, spirituality and religion are interwoven in individuals' understanding and experiencing of life in general and happiness in particular. As the current review indicates, happiness for many Muslims is formulated based on the Islamic worldview, and goes beyond this world. Transcendence, spirituality, mystical experience, and practicing religious rituals and duties are essential in Muslims' understanding of such concepts as happiness and a good life.

These very facts have been largely ignored so far, partially because the current western theories (holding to secularist and value-neutral perspectives) and the existing measurement tools cannot accommodate to these facts. This ignorance can have adverse consequences leading to distorted conclusions about the actual situations of Muslim individuals and nations. For example, it is possible that a Muslim is unhappy by all western standards (e.g., he or she has not been successful at goal accomplishment and desire satisfaction, and has low scores on ego strength, affect balance, and autonomy), but he or she considers themselves happy by spiritual standards prevalent in their culture. As a nation-level

example, consider the case of Nigeria. This country has been listed as one of the happiest countries in the world in recent happiness rankings (Agbo et al. 2012). However, Agbo et al. (2012) find every reason to doubt the finding that this partly Islamic culture is one of the happiest countries in the world. These authors contend that the hedonistic emotion-based conception of happiness proposed by the contemporary literature is limited in capturing what happiness means in Nigeria, and these findings are in fact misleading. They propose that Nigerians have developed feelings of happiness as an adaptive mechanism to counter the effect of the harsh conditions of their country, and religion is one of the main factors helping them develop this sense of happiness.

Obviously, it is not enough to examine religion or spirituality only as predictors of happiness. Instead, future research in Islamic cultures needs to re-conceptualize happiness in religiously-informed ways. Indigenous scales should be developed drawing on the cultural background of these cultures as reviewed here. Comprehensive and appropriate scales of well-being for Muslim samples could potentially have additional domains beyond what can be found in the extant literature. For example, a scale to measure to what extent a Muslim believes that they have secured happiness in the afterlife seems to be necessary to be included in future research. Another scale would be needed to assess how a Muslim interprets their emotional experiences. The current review made it clear that a Muslim could regard some of their negative feelings (e.g., sadness) as a blessing facilitating reattachment to God. A Muslim may also consider a positive feeling as sinful. If this is the case, it would be necessary to distinguish these specific types of negative or positive emotions in Islamic cultures. The findings of a previous study reinforce this concern. In a sample of Muslim Iranian adolescents, Garcia and Moradi (2012) found that those scoring high on negative affect and low on positive affect reported higher life satisfaction than those high on both positive affect and negative affect, contradicting findings produced in western samples. Such findings indicate that much remains to be known about happiness and its affective predictors in Muslim cultures. Future research along these lines will help us more thoroughly address these issues.

In summary, this paper was an attempt to bring to focus some aspects of the Islamic understanding of happiness which are not dominant themes in the western psychological literature. The field is believed to be in dire need of such heterogeneous input from understudied cultures to upgrade persistently its fundamental and closely held beliefs. Considering the centrality of Islam to the well-being of Muslims (Abu-Raiya and Pargament 2011), this kind of culturally informed investigations should be accelerated. It is hoped that such theoretical analyses will stimulate more informed empirical research in Muslim nations. It is also hoped that the outcomes of such analyses will help explain the findings of empirical studies on happiness involving Muslim samples.

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