

**Nazila Isgandarova. *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices*. Pandora Press, 2019.**

Reviewed by Mona Islam\*

Author of *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices* (2019), Dr. Nazila Isgandarova served for years as a multifaith spiritual care provider in a long-term care facility and currently works in a mental health institution. She received a doctorate in spiritual care and psychotherapy from Waterloo Lutheran at Wilfrid University and completed a second doctorate from Emanuel College at the University of Toronto. She has been trained as a multi-faith spiritual care provider and is now a specialist in spiritual care in CASC, a Registered Psychotherapist at the College of Registered Psychotherapists of Ontario, and a Registered Social Worker (p. 10).

*Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices* establishes Islamic spiritual care as an obligation for the Muslim community, grounded in evidence from the Qur’ān and Sunna, and then traces its historical evolution while addressing current challenges. The central questions that the book addresses are “What are the needs of Muslims in different settings?” and “What are the theoretical frameworks and thus interventions of an appropriate care for Muslims?” (p. 15).

The purpose of this book is best defined by the author’s intentions. Dr. Isgandarova states that the “purpose of this book is to help Muslim spiritual caregivers and other healthcare professionals enhance the compassionate care they provide their clients in a variety of institutionalized settings” (p. 13), including “hospitals, long term care centers, hospice/palliative care programs, health clinics, counseling centers, children and youth agencies, mental health and substance use programs, adult day care, etc.” (p. 15).

The primary audience for this book seems to be those already familiar with Islam, or those seeking a refresher, as it heavily references the Qur’ān and Sunna. However, the author suggests it can also benefit a broader group, including individuals interested in Islam, “Imams, theology students, social science scholars, Muslim spiritual caregivers, educators, healthcare providers, and anyone interacting with Muslims” (p. 16). The author also acknowledges her personal biases and assumptions and outlines key beliefs, such as the mission of Islamic spiritual care to nurture Muslims’ spirituality across various settings, addressing their spiritual, physical, psychological, mental, and social needs (p. 13).

The book is organized into four large parts, each divided into several sections thematically. Part 1 defines spiritual care in Islam in the context of health and healing. Part 2 provides a general and brief historical overview of Islamic spiritual care, foundations, and main approaches and discusses the use of traditional resources and social sciences. The next half of the book is more particular, in that part 3 addresses the spiritual and religious

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needs of special populations, specifically LGBTQ individuals and elders. Finally, part 4 deals with specific spiritual and religious care needs of Muslims in various settings and includes seventeen different topics.

I was intrigued by the author's comprehensive approach to spiritual care in Islam, starting from the very essence of the spirit. In contrast to secular texts or works centered on other faiths, Dr. Isgandarova starts by defining the concept of the spirit in Islam and gradually constructs the concept of spiritual and religious care.

In part 1 section 1 of the book, Dr. Isgandarova defines the concept of *rūḥ* (spirit) and its central role in achieving human perfection. The author explains that Islamic counseling's primary goal is to guide individuals toward personal growth, drawing on the works of fifth-century scholars. However, it is also noted that humans have limitations in comprehending the extraordinary, including supernatural events and miracles. The author stresses the importance of using precise terminology when discussing the spirit, particularly in clinical contexts such as assessments, diagnoses, and treatments. A crucial issue addressed in this book is the distinction between spirit and soul. While later generations of Muslims often use these terms interchangeably, the Qur'ān clearly differentiates between them, which has significant implications for understanding their roles in spiritual care and clinical practice. Furthermore, the author adds that the origins of the spirit remain ambiguous in the Qur'ān, adding to the complexity of comprehending its role on Earth. The author references classical Islamic definitions of the *rūḥ* as a divine mystery, citing scholars such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī and 'Abd al-Razzāq. The author even includes the Shi'a view of the spirit which allows for the possibility of divine revelation being received by certain individuals, further illustrating the diversity of thought surrounding this concept.

Section 2, "Health and Healing in Islam," emphasizes the sanctity of life, prohibiting suicide and euthanasia. Islamic teachings regard the physical body as a sacred vessel for the spirit, with the Qur'ān and ḥadīth corpus stressing the importance of seeking healing and managing illness. This concept is further highlighted by the works of Muslim scholars and physicians like Ibn Sīnā, who integrated physical, emotional, and spiritual health in his medical philosophy. This section acknowledges the diversity of healing traditions within the Muslim world, shaped by historical, sociocultural, and theological factors.

In Islamic healing, illness is viewed as an opportunity for spiritual growth and purification, where sins are forgiven, and supplications are accepted. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is reported to have said, "Take advantage of five before five: your youth before your old age, your health before your illness..." (*Shu'ab al-īmān li-l-Bayhaqī*, no. 10250), emphasizing the value of good health. He also stated, "God did not create a disease without creating for it a cure" (*Sunan Ibn Māja*, no. 3436). While some Muslims may endure illness as a form of spiritual reward, others take a more proactive approach to alleviate pain.

The next section, "Visiting the Sick," cites Qur'ānic verses and ḥadīths that highlight the emotional and spiritual benefits of supporting the sick, reducing isolation and fostering emotional connection. The author portrays the caregiver as a source of compassion and peace for the sick when they recite Qur'ānic verses, drawing on the

example of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), who offered comfort through prayers for healing and reassurances of God's mercy.

Finally, section 4 of part 1 addresses a key aspect of spiritual care in Islam: creating a supportive environment which aligns with Islamic values. The author observes that while Muslims in Canada—the country in which she is based—may not have their own hospitals, various organizations attempt to meet the spiritual and emotional needs of Muslim communities. These include institutions like the Canadian Islamic Congress, ISNA, and others that provide spiritual and religious support. In this vein, Isgandarova highlights the mosque's role in addressing the spiritual needs of Muslims, noting that while many caregivers represent the mosque, the institution struggles to adapt to modern demands. Traditionally, the mosque has also served as a center for social functions like weddings, funerals, and legal matters.

The author points out that Islamic spiritual care is not solely the responsibility of imams but requires qualified individuals with expertise in Islamic teachings, including the Qur'ān, ḥadīth, *fiqh*, and *tajwīd*, along with proficiency in both English and Arabic. Spiritual caregivers must also engage in interfaith activities, counseling, outreach, and education, including teaching Islam to non-Muslims. Finally, the book emphasizes that a Muslim spiritual caregiver must demonstrate emotional and spiritual maturity, as well as an understanding of one's own biases and cultural values. These qualities ensure that caregivers can meet the spiritual and emotional needs of their community with empathy, insight, and wisdom.

After establishing a background in part 1 of the book, Dr. Isgandarova dedicates part 2 to a more practical discussion, "Practicing Islamic Spiritual Care." This second part is divided into four sections.

Islamic spiritual care has its historical roots in the Prophetic period (610–632 CE). It has always been considered a personal and communal responsibility, although there was no institutionalized form of Islamic spiritual care. In this section, both *farḍ 'ayn* (individual duty) and *farḍ kifāya* (communal obligation) are described.

The first section of part 2 gives historical accounts, dating as early as *Kitāb al-Uqalā' al-Majānīn* by Nīshāpūrī. The Islamic Golden Age (750–1257 CE) saw the establishment of hospitals that combined physical care with spiritual care, exemplified by famous institutions like those in Baghdad and Cairo, where care was provided free of charge.

In the second section of part 2, "Foundations of Islamic Spiritual Care," the author explains how the Qur'ān and ḥadīth corpus correlate spiritual diseases to physical and mental ailments. Scholars like Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr contributed to the understanding of the mind-body-spirit connection, emphasizing prayer (*ṣalāt*), supplication (*du'ā'*), and remembrance of God (*dhikr*) as healing practices that benefit both physical and psychological health. Spiritual caregivers are encouraged to integrate prayer, ritual practices, and Qur'ānic recitations into their care, to bring psychological as well as spiritual and physical healing. Dr. Muzammil Siddiqui is quoted to explain that spiritual care is deeply tied to the process of self-care and maintaining a healthy body and spirit as a trust from God.

Three primary approaches to Islamic spiritual care are outlined, including the Theological/Spiritual Approach, Social Science Approach, and Integrative Approach. The Theological/Spiritual Approach focuses on traditional healing practices, such as Sufi methods and the concept of *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the soul) to address spiritual and emotional issues. The Social Science Approach uses modern theories from psychiatry and psychology to interpret issues like mental health but is critiqued for not addressing spiritual concerns sufficiently. It includes therapies like Solution-Focused Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Finally, the Integrative Approach combines theological understanding with social science theories, aiming to bridge the gap between spiritual healing and modern psychotherapy. It addresses existential concerns, the nature of God, and the afterlife as they relate to human well-being.

The author recommends that modern Muslim spiritual caregivers integrate psychological knowledge with theological training, involving a combination of prayer, ritual observances, and therapeutic practices in order to achieve best results. Prophetic medicine (*al-ṭibb al-nabawī*) as well as folk healing (*al-ṭibb al-rūḥānī*) are introduced as practices that are still used today. Some examples of these are using honey, black seed, cupping therapy (*hijāma*), and *ruqya* (spiritual healing through Qur'ānic recitation). The use of music—in this case, the recitation of the Qur'ān in a melodious voice—is known to have therapeutic applications in spiritual care and is sometimes used within hospitals to promote healing. The central message in this part of the book is that there is a need for a holistic approach to health that goes beyond physical treatment. Spiritual care providers who are well-versed in both religious traditions and modern psychological theories are better equipped to support individuals in their healing journeys.

I was surprised by the sympathetic perspective the author showed toward the LGBTQ community in part 3 of this book, especially considering how this aligns with Islamic values. The section begins by addressing the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ-identifying Muslims, particularly due to the scarcity of relevant literature. Many existing resources are outdated, and there is a noticeable lack of current discussions on the experiences and needs of LGBTQ Muslims within the context of Islamic spiritual care. The author shares valuable insights, such as how members of the LGBTQ community often view Islamic texts and traditions as oppressive while trying to reconcile their faith with their sexuality.

I was also unaware that historical accounts indicate that the death penalties for homosexual acts in the past were not necessarily related to one's sexual orientation, but rather to other crimes like apostasy or assault. The author further highlights that LGBTQ Muslims are at a higher risk of mental health issues due to societal intolerance and the internal struggle of reconciling their faith with their sexual identity. The author encourages spiritual caregivers to become more familiar with inclusive language and perspectives to make LGBTQ Muslims feel accepted. A framework for providing LGBTQ-friendly spiritual care is presented, demonstrating the author's up-to-date knowledge of the issue. Examples like inclusive mosques, such as Salam Mosque in Canada, and practices within Rafā'i Sufi traditions, offer a practical approach to addressing these concerns.

The second part of this section shifts focus to the spiritual care needs of Muslim elders, revealing a significant gap in both literature and healthcare professionals'

understanding of the spiritual needs of aging Muslim populations. Research on elderly Muslims typically centers on maintaining independence, managing health problems, and coping with cognitive decline. However, the book underscores a growing recognition of the important role religion plays in the aging process, with many elders finding comfort in spiritual practices. Researchers like Moberg have identified key areas of spiritual need for the elderly, such as relief from anxiety, preparation for death, and the maintenance of personal dignity. The section concludes by asserting that Islam encourages the elderly to embrace spirituality and serve as role models for younger generations.

The practice of visiting the sick is also emphasized, ensuring that elderly Muslims receive the emotional and spiritual support they need. Ritual practices in Islam are noted for their protective benefits against mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. Additionally, the practice of “life review” is presented as a helpful tool for identifying unresolved conflicts and life gaps, which may contribute to enhancing the spiritual well-being of aging Muslims.

Part 4 of *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care* addresses seventeen separate issues in spiritual care. It discusses the practical and spiritual needs of Muslim patients, such as providing access to clean spaces for daily prayers, facilitating fasting during Ramadan, and considering health risks associated with the Hajj pilgrimage. The section also highlights gender-sensitive care, with Muslims often preferring caregivers of the same gender, and the role of spiritual caregivers in supporting patients through life’s major transitions. Topics like birth, death, and end-of-life care are addressed, including the rituals and practices that ensure the dignity and spiritual well-being of patients. The book discusses the significance of rites such as the *azān* (call to prayer), burial customs, and ethical considerations surrounding organ donation and physician-assisted suicide. Through these practices, spiritual care plays a vital role in the holistic well-being of Muslim patients, combining both physical and spiritual support tailored to Islamic values.

Dr. Isgandarova primarily relies on the Qur’ān, ḥadīth, and scholarly works to support her argument, with occasional references to sources outside the Islamic tradition. However, one notable gap in the book is the limited use of scientific or empirical data to demonstrate the benefits patients experience from the recommended practices. Including case studies or examples of applied spiritual care would strengthen her argument and provide more tangible evidence of its positive impact.

The book makes a valuable contribution to the field, serving as a “pocket or reference book” (p. 16). However, its encyclopedic style may not appeal to all readers. By providing a historical overview of spiritual care in Islam, from the time of Prophet Muhammad to the present, it offers valuable insights into the evolution of this practice.

One of the book’s strengths is its clear organization and its consistent focus on the Qur’ān and Sunna, with minimal deviation from these core sources. The author introduces a wide range of terms, all of which are clearly defined both within the text and in a designated glossary at the end. The glossary contains approximately fifty terms, many of which would be particularly beneficial for non-Muslim readers to understand. As such, it serves as a valuable resource for non-Muslim providers.

The book has notable deficiencies and areas for improvement. While I found no factual inaccuracies, it does not provide “a prescribed solution to every situation” (p. 15)

as promised. My main concern is the lack of sentence clarity in several sections, where confusing phrasing disrupts the flow of ideas. Additionally, various grammatical issues need attention. A more thorough editorial review would improve readability and coherence.

Furthermore, I found the author's position on certain controversial or non-mainstream topics to be unclear. For example, the author seems particularly sympathetic toward the LGBTQ community, which led me to question how this aligns with Islamic values. The inclusion of a section on Nowruz, an unfamiliar festival to Western audiences, also struck me as an odd choice for a book directed at them. Personally, I found the book less compelling because much of the content was not new to me, though it did consolidate information in one place.

All in all, Dr. Isgandarova's *Islamic Spiritual and Religious Care: Theory and Practices* offers an invaluable resource that bridges historical, theological, and contemporary perspectives, while highlighting both the importance and challenges of providing culturally sensitive spiritual care within diverse Muslim communities. Moving forward, I hope that future offerings will further incorporate empirical research and case studies, providing a stronger evidence base for the practical benefits of Islamic spiritual care.