

# OVERVIEW

---

## Reflections on the Dream Traditions of Islam

Kelly Bulkeley, Ph.D.

### INTRODUCTION

Few Western dream researchers have any familiarity with the rich dream traditions of Islam. The Muslim faith first emerged in seventh century B.C.E. Arabia as a profound revisioning of early Jewish and Christian beliefs and practices. One theme the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh) drew from the scriptures of those two religions was a reverence for dreaming. In the Qur'an, as in the Jewish Torah and the Christian New Testament, dreams serve as a vital medium by which God communicates with humans. Dreams offer divine guidance and comfort, warn people of impending danger, and offer prophetic glimpses of the future. Although the three religions drastically differ on many other topics, they find substantial agreement on this particular point: dreaming is a valuable source of wisdom, understanding, and inspiration. Indeed, as I will propose in this brief essay, Islam has historically shown greater interest in dreams than either of the other two traditions, and has done more to weave dreaming into the daily lives of its members. From the first revelatory visions of Muhammed (pbuh) to the myriad dream practices of present-day Muslims, Islam has developed and sustained a complex, multi-faceted tradition of active engagement with the dreaming imagination.

---

From the Graduate Theological Union, Santa Clara University, Berkeley, California, U.S.A.

Address reprint requests to: Kelly Bulkeley, Ph. D., 226 Amherst Avenue  
Kensington, CA 94708, USA  
E-mail: kellybulkeley@earthlink.net

Accepted December 1, 2001

For scholars trained in Western psychology, the dream traditions of Islam may appear alien, unapproachable, and perhaps not even relevant to the primary concerns of their research. This attitude is unfortunate, because there is great potential here for cross-cultural dialogue, with the benefit of greatly enhanced knowledge on both sides. The admittedly formidable linguistic and cultural chasm between Islamic and Western traditions should not deter people from making the effort to build bridges across that chasm. The simple fact is that all humans dream, and thus dreaming itself is a bridging phenomenon between the two traditions. Muslims have been paying close attention to their dreams for nearly 1500 years, and their insights and observations have many significant points of contact with the theories developed by Western psychologists over the past 150 years. The aim of this essay is to highlight those points of contact and show where further conversation between Muslims and Westerners can promote a deeper mutual understanding of the origins, functions, and meanings of dreaming.

I myself am writing from the Western psychological perspective; I am not a Muslim. However, my scholarly training is in the field of religion and psychology, so I bring to the discussion some familiarity with Islam as one of the world's major religious traditions. I am not a member of any organized religious community, although I have been influenced from childhood by Jewish and Christian teachings. I approach Islam as a respectful but curious outsider, eager to learn new things but modest in my expectations of how much can be

translated from one tradition to another.

Finally, I approach Islam as an American writing in the immediate aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. The horrific eruption of violence, fear, and destruction in the past several weeks has been awful to behold, and I know I am not alone in feeling an urgent desire to find some way of ending the bloodshed and creating a better relationship between Muslims and Westerners (1). In that broader historical context, this essay is intended as one small contribution to the cause of creative reconciliation between people who have been warring against each other for far too long.

### DREAMS IN THE QUR'AN

Muhammed (pbuh) recorded the Qur'an between the years 610 and 632 C.E. Tradition has it that the first revelation of the Qur'an was given to Muhammed (pbuh) by the angel Gabriel in a dream (2). The text of the Qur'an contains 114 chapters (suras) of varying length and content. Unlike Jewish and Christian scriptures, which were produced by multiple authors from different historical times and cultural backgrounds, the Qur'an is the work of a single man, in a single lifetime. The text thus bears a strong stamp of that man's personality—Muhammed (pbuh) is the Prophet of Allah, the human medium of God's ultimate revelation. To learn about Islam is inevitably to learn about the Prophet Muhammed (pbuh).

Several passages of the Qur'an contain discussions of dreams and dreaming, and because of the absolute centrality of the Qur'an to Muslim faith these passages have become fundamental to all later Islamic dream traditions. What follows are brief synopses of four suras in which dreams play a significant role.

12: Joseph. In this chapter Muhammed (pbuh) gives a condensed version of the story of Joseph (following the essential outline found in the Torah's Genesis 37-50). While much of the material from the Genesis version has been removed, the

three major dream episodes in Joseph's life all remain, and these episodes combine to make a clear point: dreams, and the ability to interpret them, are an important sign of God's favor. Muhammed (pbuh) starts sura 12 with the young Joseph telling his father he had a dream in which "eleven stars and the sun and the moon were prostrating themselves before me (3)." Joseph's father warns the boy not to tell the dream to his older brothers, who jealously harbor murderous intentions toward him (in Genesis the dream is interpreted to mean that one day Joseph's eleven brothers, mother, and father will all bow down to him—a prospect that enrages his brothers). Joseph's father prophesizes that his youngest son "shall be chosen by your Lord. He will teach you to interpret visions." The prophecy is borne out later in the sura when Joseph, unjustly imprisoned in Egypt, is asked to interpret the dreams of two fellow prisoners:

"One of them said: 'I dreamt that I was pressing grapes.' And the other said: 'I dreamt that I was carrying a loaf upon my head, and that the birds came and ate of it. Tell us the meaning of these dreams, for we can see you are a man of learning.' Joseph replied: 'I can interpret them long before they are fulfilled. This knowledge my lord has given me, for I have left the faith of those that disbelieve in Allah and deny the life to come. I follow the faith of my forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.'"

Joseph tells the first man his dream means he will be released and serve the king wine, while the second man's dream means he will be crucified, and the birds will peck at his head. When these predictions come true, Joseph's skill as a dream interpreter comes to the attention of Egypt's king, who has been troubled by two dreams of his own, one in which seven fatted cows devour seven lean ones, and the other in which seven green ears of corn devour seven dry ones. The king asks his royal advisors to tell him the meaning of these dreams, but they cannot do so, saying "It is but an idle dream; nor can we interpret dreams." Joseph, however, is able to interpret the dreams accurately as anticipations of the future welfare of the

land and its people, when seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of famine. The king is pleased with this interpretation, and as a reward makes Joseph his personal servant.

Very much like the Genesis version, the Qur'an portrays Joseph as an exemplary man of faith and piety, and one clear sign of his close relationship with God is his ability to have and interpret revelatory dreams.

37. The Ranks. Like sura 12, this one also retells a story found in the book of Genesis. Here the main subject is Abraham, whose life is recounted in Genesis 12-25. The Qur'anic version focuses specifically on God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac (cf. Genesis 22):

"[Abraham said] 'Grant me a son, Lord, and let him be a righteous man.' We [Allah] gave him news of a gentle son. And when he reached the age when he could work with him his father said to him: 'My son, I dreamt that I was sacrificing you. Tell me what you think.' He replied: 'Father, do as you are bidden. Allah willing, you shall find me faithful.' And when they had both surrendered themselves to Allah's will, and Abraham had laid down his son prostrate upon his face, We called out to him, saying: 'Abraham, you have fulfilled your vision.' Thus did We reward the righteous. That was indeed a bitter test."

Several points are worth noting here. First is the explicit reference to a dream as the means by which Abraham receives this command; the Genesis version does not emphasize the dream provenance as clearly. Second is the unquestioned assumption by both Abraham and his son that the dream is a command from Allah. The dream as Abraham describes it has no special markers of divine origin, and yet he and his son immediately agree that what Abraham has envisioned is ordained by God and must be done. This leads to the third and theologically most important point: the dream and their interpretation of it lead Abraham and his son to "surrender themselves to Allah's will." This humble obedience is the very heart of the Muslim faith—the absolute trust in God, even to the point of sacrificing one's most

cherished human attachments ("That was indeed a bitter test"). Muhammed (pbuh)'s retelling of the story of Abraham and Isaac in many ways encapsulates the whole of the Qur'an. A fourth and final point to note here is the interesting twist at the end of the story, which differs quite dramatically from the Genesis version. In sura 37, Abraham is stopped in the sacrifice of his son by God's sudden words, "Abraham, you have fulfilled your vision." Abraham is true to his dream not by literally enacting it in the physical sacrifice of his son; rather, he "fulfills his vision" by a symbolic demonstration of his absolute obedience to God. As I will discuss later, this emphasis on the symbolic rather than the literal will pave the way for later Muslim philosophical and theological thinking about what kinds of truth can be discerned via the dreaming imagination (4).

8: The Spoils. This sura describes two of Muhammed (pbuh)'s own dream experiences. He mentions them in the context of telling how in the early years of his mission he struggled to lead his followers in battle against their opponents—"some of the faithful were reluctant. They argued with you [Muhammed (pbuh)] about the truth that had been revealed, as though they were being led to certain death." Muhammed (pbuh) says he prayed to God for help, and God responded as follows:

"You [Muhammed (pbuh)] were overcome by sleep, a token of His [Allah's] protection. He sent down water from the sky to cleanse you and to purify you of Satan's filth, to strengthen your hearts and to steady your footsteps. Allah revealed His will to the angels, saying: 'I shall be with you. Give courage to the believers. I shall cast terror into the hearts of the infidels. Strike off their heads, maim them in every limb!'"

A little further on, Muhammed (pbuh) describes his experience the night before a particular battle, when he and his army were encamped across a valley from a gathering of hostile warriors:

"Allah made them appear to you in a dream as a small band. Had He showed them to you as a great army, your courage would have failed you and discord would

have triumphed in your ranks. But this Allah spared you. He knows your inmost thoughts."

The two dreams reflect the warlike environment in which Muhammed (pbuh) and his followers first established the Muslim faith. Although Muhammed (pbuh) spent much time alone in desert caves praying and meditating, he was also a charismatic warrior who led his troops through several harrowing battles. The dream experiences reported in this sura express Muhammed (pbuh)'s faith in God's rousing presence during times of violent struggle. In this way the two dreams are similar to many passages in the Torah and the New Testament, where God appears to the faithful in times of danger, violence, and despair to offer reassurance and heavenly comfort (e.g., Genesis 28; Matthew 1, 2; Acts 16, 27). An unusual feature in this sura is the frank acknowledgment that God may use dreams to deceive the faithful for their own good. Muhammed (pbuh) is grateful that Allah knew his "inmost thoughts," i.e., his secret fear that his army would be defeated, and sent a dream that reassured him. The value of the dream is clearly not in the accuracy of its representation of physical reality, but rather in its inspiring emotional effect on Muhammed (pbuh)-the dream emboldens him to ignore any "realistic" appraisal of his chances and to continue fighting in total confidence of ultimate victory.

17: The Night Journey. This sura begins with the following lines:

"Glory be to Him who made His servants go by night from the Sacred Temple [of Mecca] to the farther temple [the Throne of Allah] whose surroundings we have blessed, that we might show him some of Our signs. He alone hears all and observes all."

The remainder of the chapter consists of a lengthy revelation to Muhammed (pbuh) regarding the creation of the world, resurrection and the afterlife, ritual practice, ethical precepts, warnings against unbelief, and several other key principles of the Muslim faith. The text does not specifically say whether Muhammed (pbuh)'s journey occurred in a waking or

dreaming state. The visionary quality of the experience and the fact that it happened at night support the belief that it was a dream, but later Muslim commentators have argued that it was not a dream but an actual physical transportation to heaven. Here we run into the difficult methodological problem of trying to distinguish dreams from other types of extraordinary visionary experience. How to tell the difference between dreams, visions, hallucinations, out-of-body experiences, and so forth is a major challenge for the cross-cultural study of dreams. I will return to this issue at the end of the essay; for the moment, I simply want to highlight the fact that this sura, one of the most mystically evocative narratives in the whole Qur'an, is decidedly ambiguous about whether or not Muhammed (pbuh)'s "Night Journey" was a dream.

#### DREAMS IN THE HADITH

Both during and after Muhammed (pbuh)'s death a number of accounts were written of his words and deeds, and these accounts are gathered in the hadith. Among the various sayings of the hadith are several detailed discussions of dreams and dreaming. Although secondary in theological importance to the passages from the Qur'an, the references to dreaming in the hadith are extremely significant historically, and they have added important conceptual and technical elements to the dream traditions of Islam. In particular, the hadith contain abundant references to the practice of dream interpretation, and many of the interpretive principles enunciated in these passages continue to guide the dream practices of present-day Muslims in countries around the world.

The legitimacy of dream interpretation as a religious activity receives strong endorsement from the hadith, most directly in the verses that state: "When the companions of the Messenger of God [Muhammed (pbuh)] saw dreams while he was still alive they would tell him of their dreams and he, for his part, would interpret them as God willed (5)." Many hadith

describe Muhammed (pbuh)'s interpretations of particular images and symbols in the dreams of his followers, while other verses tell of Muhammed (pbuh)'s own dreams and his interpretations of them. For example, the hadith report several dreams Muhammed (pbuh) had of his friend 'Umar, who later became one of his successors. The dreams express Muhammed (pbuh)'s respect and admiration for the power of 'Umar's faith, and this provided 'Umar with a kind of divine sanction for the day when he assumed religious authority following the death of Muhammed (pbuh) (6).

According to these texts, Muhammed (pbuh) was sensitive to the practical difficulties encountered by many of his followers who were trying to interpret their own dreams. The first suggestion Muhammed (pbuh) makes is to tell the dream to someone else: "A dream rests on the feathers of a bird and will not take effect unless it is related to someone." However, people should be careful not to reveal too much in public; "tell your dreams only to knowledgeable persons and loved ones," and beware those who will use your dreams against you (like Joseph's brothers did against him). Muhammed (pbuh) gives a colorful warning to those who abuse the practice of dream interpretation: "Whoever claims to have had a dream in which he says he saw something he did not shall be ordered [in Hell] to tie a knot between two barley grains and will not be able to do so." To help people increase their chances of having a good dream, Muhammed (pbuh) offers suggestions about how to approach sleep in a state of ritual purity, with the specific instruction to try sleeping on the right side (7). Bad dreams come from Satan, and he says people should refrain from talking about these dreams and instead "offer a prayer" and "seek refuge with Allah from [the dream's] evil."

The hadith that reads, "Whoever sees me [the Prophet] in dreams will see me in wakefulness [the Hereafter] for Satan cannot take my shape" has long been understood to mean that a dream in which Muhammed (pbuh) appears as a character

is unquestionably a true dream. Every other kind of dream could be a malevolent deception sent by Satan, but a dream of Muhammed (pbuh) can be accepted with complete confidence as an authentic revelation because Satan does not have the power to assume the shape of God's Prophet. Perhaps the most oft-quoted hadith on the subject of dreams reads, "The good dream is 1/46th of prophecy." While commentators have long debated the significance of this exact number (8), the general sense of the passage is clear: dreams are a legitimate source of divine knowledge (9). This basic attitude in the hadith-dreams are not the only source of religious revelation, but nevertheless a real and important one available to a wide spectrum of people—builds on the positive evaluation of dreams in the Qur'anic verses discussed above and gives a more definitive shaping to the beliefs and practices of later Muslims.

The hadith include two particular dreams of Muhammed (pbuh) that are worth mentioning. In the first, the Prophet explains how he interpreted one of his own dreams:

"I saw in a dream that I waved a sword and it broke in the middle, and behold, that symbolized the casualties the believers suffered on the Day [of the battle] of Uhud. Then I waved the sword again, and it became better than it had ever been before, and behold, that symbolized the Conquest [of Mecca] which Allah brought about and the gathering of the leaders (10)."

The broken sword is a striking emblem of military defeat and social humiliation, a vivid imagistic reference that would be likely to resonate strongly with his battle-tested followers (11). In that context, the suddenly restored and improved sword symbolizes the transcendent power of Muslim faith. What looks impossible can actually be done, what appears lost can be regained, what seems fractured can be made whole again—all of this is possible, if people are willing to give complete trust in the Almighty. Here again, a brief dream memorably expresses one of the preeminent themes of Islamic belief and practice.

The second dream to note in the hadith

is recounted by A'isha, the woman Muhammed (pbuh) married after the death of his first wife Khadija:

"Allah's Apostle said to me [A'isha], 'You were shown to me twice [in my dream] before I married you. I saw an angel carrying you in a silken piece of cloth, and I said to him, "Uncover [her]," and behold, it was you. I said [to myself], "If this is from Allah, then it must happen." Then you were shown to me, the angel carrying you in a silken piece of cloth, and I said [to him], "Uncover her," and behold, it was you. I said [to myself], "If this is from Allah, then it must happen (12)."

After the death of Khadija, we may imagine Muhammed (pbuh) felt some degree of uncertainty about whether he should take a new wife, and if yes, then whom he should choose. His decision would of course have profound implications for both his personal life and the political dynamics of the religious movement he was building. These twin dreams provide Muhammed (pbuh) with divine guidance in a potentially difficult situation, sanctioning his choice of A'isha in a manner very much like his dreams legitimating the status of his successor 'Umar, mentioned above. The repetitive nature of the two dreams emphasizes the clarity of their message, which is that A'isha has been presented to Muhammed (pbuh) as a gift from God. Not just in war but in love as well, dreams reveal the will of Allah.

### CLASSICAL TOPOLOGIES

Inspired by these teachings from the Qur'an and the hadith, Muslim philosophers and theologians in subsequent years continued the process of developing new techniques and conceptual frameworks for the practice of dream interpretation. The most famous of the early dream interpreters was Ibn Sirin, whose name was reverently attached to dream interpretation manuals for many centuries after his death in 728 C.E. One of the Ibn Sirin's key teachings was to pay close attention to the personal characteristics of the dreamer. The following anecdote about his interpre-

tive method appears in several texts:

"[T]wo dreamers came to Ibn Sirin within an hour of each other and each had dreamed of being the caller to prayer (muezzin). The first person was told that his dream foretold that he would perform the Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca. The second man, who seemed to be of a baser character, was told that he would be accused of a theft. [His] pupils then questioned how Ibn Sirin could come up with such radically different interpretations for the same dream. His response was that the character of each dreamer was evident from his appearance and demeanor. Therefore, the first one's dream evoked the Qur'anic verse 'Proclaim to the people a solemn pilgrimage' (20:28) since he was clearly pious. The second man's dream evoked the verse 'Then a crier called after them, O company of travelers [Joseph's brothers], you are surely thieves' (12:70) (13)."

Ibn Sirin's reference to specific scriptural passages reflects the fact that Muslims are thoroughly steeped from an early age in the text of the Qur'an. Memorization of Qur'anic verses has long been a central feature of Muslim education, and Ibn Sirin's interpretive strategy relies heavily on people's intimate familiarity with the language, characters, and themes of the Qur'an. Perhaps of most interest to Western psychological researchers, Ibn Sirin explicitly teaches that a given dream's meaning cannot be determined without reference to the personality characteristics of the dreamer. There is, in other words, no "one size fits all" interpretation for any particular dream symbol; the meaning depends on the personality and life circumstances of the dreamer.

The same interpretive principle appears in the *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus, a second C.E. writer from the Roman empire. Artemidorus' work was translated into Arabic in 877, and it gave a major stimulus to the further development of Muslim dream theory and practice. Here is the point where Muslim traditions begin to expand beyond their Christian and Jewish counterparts. Indeed, I would argue (without having the space to defend my claim fully) that during its Medieval period

Christianity effectively repudiated dreaming as a legitimate source of divine revelation by increasingly emphasizing the potential for demonic temptation in dreams. Although religiously-oriented dream traditions continued and in some cases even flourished at the level of popular Christian practice, the attitude of theologians and church officials from Augustine through Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and on into the present day has been generally hostile to dreams and dream interpretation (14). Judaism did not suffer this kind of decline in the religious authority of dreams. On the contrary, thinkers like Moses Maimonides (1135-1204) continued to develop creative new ways of conceptualizing the revelatory power of dreams (15). But Judaism never achieved anything like the geographic spread of Islam (from the Atlantic to the border of China in just its first 100 years), nor did Judaism ever produce the kind of spectacular efflorescence of scientific and philosophical discovery that occurred in the Classical Era of Islamic history (from approximately the ninth to thirteenth centuries C.E.). *Tabir*, the Muslim science of dream interpretation, emerged in this period as dynamic body of knowledge integrating Islamic faith with the classical heritage of the Greeks and Romans (16). Nothing emerged in Judaism or Christianity to rival the breadth and sophistication of this tradition, and it is an open question whether any civilization from India, China, or anywhere else ever matched the richness of classical Islamic dream knowledge.

Looking in more detail at the Muslim teachings, the first example to consider comes from the philosopher Ibn Arabi (1164-1240), who devised a grand metaphysical system merging Islamic theology with Greek philosophy (17). His typology of dreaming establishes the basic framework used throughout later Muslim history. According to Ibn Arabi, there are three basic types of dream. The first is an "ordinary" dream, produced by the imagination when it takes experiences from daily life and magnifies them as in a mirror, reflecting in a distorted symbolic fashion our wishes and

desires. The second and much more significant type of dream draws its material not from daily life but from the "Universal Soul," a source of knowledge closely associated with the faculty of abstract reasoning. "Universal Soul" dreams reveal fundamental truths about reality, although like the first type of dream these ones are distorted by the imperfect mirror of the human imagination. Interpretation is therefore required to discover what the symbolic images mean. The third and final type of dream involves a direct revelation of reality, with no distortion or symbolic mediation—a clear vision of divine truth.

Ibn Arabi's typology portrays a wider range of dream experience than is usually acknowledged in Western psychological thinking, which focuses its attention almost exclusively on his first category, the "ordinary" dreams of daily life. This is an important point, and I will return to it in the conclusion.

A further elaboration of this three-part typology appears in the monumental *Muqaddimah* ("An Introduction to History") written by the philosopher Ibn Khaldun (1332-1402). He explains the different types of dreams in this way:

"Real dream vision is an awareness on the part of the rational soul in its spiritual essence, of glimpses of the forms of events.... This happens to the soul [by means of] glimpses through the agency of sleep, whereby it gains the knowledge of future events that it desires and regains the perceptions that belong to it. When this process is weak and indistinct, the soul applies to it allegory and imaginary pictures, in order to gain [the desired knowledge]. Such allegory, then, necessitates interpretation. When, on the other hand, this process is strong, it can dispense with allegory. Then, no interpretation is necessary, because the process is free from imaginary pictures.... One of the greatest hindrances [to this process] is the external senses. God, therefore, created man in such a way that the veil of the senses could be lifted through sleep, which is a natural function of man. When that veil is lifted, the soul is ready to learn the things it

desires to know in the world of Truth. At times, it catches a glimpse of what it seeks.... Clear dream visions are from God. Allegorical dream visions, which call for interpretation, are from the angels. And 'confused dreams' are from Satan, because they are altogether futile, as Satan is the source of futility (18)."

Ibn Khaldun refines the philosophical and theological foundations of Ibn Arabi's three-part typology. He emphasizes the idea that in sleep people are liberated from their senses, freeing their rational souls to gain glimpses of transcendent truth. This same theme runs throughout Platonic and Neoplatonic thinking about dreams, and it seems likely that Ibn Khaldun was familiar with those Graeco-Roman philosophical notions and used them to enrich his own understanding of dreams. The distinctive feature in Ibn Khaldun's theory is that God deliberately created sleep as an opportunity for humans to "lift the veil of the senses" and gain access to divine realities and higher forms of knowing. Dreaming appears in this light as one of God's gifts to humankind, a "natural" means of spiritual insight potentially available to all people.

The foregoing is only the briefest of surveys of the vast wealth of Islamic dream teachings from the classical era. A modestly sized scholarly literature exists in English that discusses this material (19), but much more work needs to be done by researchers from both Muslim and non-Muslim backgrounds. For example, it would be interesting to know more about how Islamic theologians understood the sexual dimensions of dreaming, a topic which has long troubled Christian thinking about dreams. It would also be useful to learn more about how dreams have served in Muslim caregiving practices as means of diagnosis and treatment for people suffering from physical and/or emotional distress. And, further information about the influence of dreams on political, legal, and military decision-making would offer excellent comparative material for the study of the problem-solving function of dreaming. My suspicion is that a vast amount of information on these and other

questions does exist, but it has not yet received much attention from mainstream Western dream researchers.

## DREAMS IN CONTEMPORARY ISLAM

Turning to the beliefs and practices of today's Muslims, who number over a billion people living in countries all over the globe, the main point to note is the strong historical continuity of the dream traditions discussed so far. The basic ideas about dreaming found in the Qur'an and the hadith are still a living influence in the contemporary Muslim world, and it appears that the people of several Muslim countries hold dreaming in a much higher regard than is generally true anywhere in North America or Western Europe. One detailed piece of research will have to suffice as evidence for this admittedly broad claim (20). Valerie J. Hoffman's work on the role of visions in contemporary Egypt indicates that for present-day Muslims religiously revelatory dreams are a surprisingly widespread phenomenon. Hoffman argues that the experience of such dreams does not indicate a pre-modern or naively superstitious mentality; on the contrary, the people she describes are well-educated, technologically proficient, and psychologically healthy. Although many Westerners assume modern civilization and religious faith are mutually antithetical, the Egyptians Hoffman studies are living proof that this is not universally true. She says the Egyptian Muslims "believe that the ability to receive visions through dreams and in the waking state is a faculty that is latent in human beings, whose attachment to material things clouds their receptivity to impulses from the spiritual realm (21)." This is a remarkable indication that the fourteenth-century ideas of Ibn Khaldun are alive and well in the minds of twentieth-century Egyptian as they regard their dream experiences.

Many of the people described by Hoffman have been deeply influenced by the Sufi mystical tradition of Islam (22), and this is most evident in their use of dreams as a means of seeking religious



instruction:

"In the course of my research I collected many stories in which dreams played a major role in guiding people to a particular spiritual guide. In two very similar cases, middle-class, college-educated women-whose families had no connections with Sufism and who claimed no previous knowledge of the major Sufi saints-were afflicted by physical and psychological illnesses that medical doctors seemed unable to cure, when suddenly they were visited in their dreams by great Sufi saints, both deceased and living. They found themselves propelled by these dreams to seek the solace of the shrines of the great deceased saints and to seek blessing guidance and healing from specific living spiritual guides. Both of them found the guides they had seen in their visions, and one of them claimed that her dream had shown her the route and physical layout of the house of the woman who was to be her main spiritual guide (23)."

The material gathered by Hoffman offers striking evidence that dreams continue to play an important part in the religious lives of present-day, "modernized" Muslims. Today as 1500 years ago, dreams provide Muslims with direct experiential confirmation their faith, connecting them with divine powers and realities and reassuring them of the living presence of God in their lives. Hoffman's concluding suggestion that "Egyptians may well be defining modernity in a manner that embraces experiences unrecognized by Western rationalism (24)" is a thought-provoking challenge to Western researchers who may not fully appreciate the powerful influence of religious faith, devotional practice, and cultural history on people's dream experiences.

## CONCLUSION

What, then, are the most promising areas for Westerners and Muslims to develop further their mutual interest in dreams and dreaming? What are the best prospects for future investigation and dialogue? I have four suggestions, which certainly do not exhaust all possibilities but merely reflect

some of my own research interests.

1. Dream Patterns: C. G. Jung first was the first in the Western psychological tradition to investigate in real detail the question of whether certain dreams have fundamentally different psychological structures from other types of dreams. Jung's notion of "big dreams" has long been ignored by psychological researchers who focus exclusively on dream data produced in sleep laboratories. But in recent years, extraordinary dreams of unusual cognitive form, aesthetic vitality, and emotional intensity have been the subject of greater theoretical and empirical investigation (25). One common feature of these intense, highly memorable dreams is that when people describe them they often report a strong feeling that "it wasn't like a normal dream"; in many cases people say they're not even sure it was a dream, although they can't offer a better name for it. This is reminiscent of our earlier discussion of Muhammed (pbuh)'s "Night Journey" and the traditional Islamic debate about whether or not it was a dream or a physical transportation to heaven. I suggest the ambiguity of the Qur'anic text reflects the possibility that Muhammed (pbuh) experienced a type of "big dream"-an experience that began in the physical state of sleep and ordinary dreaming but then soared away into the transcendent realm of revelation, inspiration, and divine presence. Seen in this light, the dream typologies of Ibn Arabi, Ibn Khaldun, and many other classical Muslim thinkers offer valuable observations about various types of extraordinary dream experience. Western researchers who aspire to a truly comprehensive understanding of the dreaming imagination could benefit greatly from a careful study of these texts.

2. Dreams and the Body. Although classical Muslim typologies recognize the transcendent dimensions of dreaming, they also provide detailed analyses of the bodily basis of dreaming experience, with a special focus on several different emotions (anger, fear, lust) that influence the formation of different kinds of dreams. Most Western researchers are on familiar

ground here, and their findings about rapid eye moment (REM) sleep and the neuropsychology of dreaming should find a ready conceptual space in the Islamic tradition. For example, the common Muslim belief that dreams appearing just before waking are more truthful than dreams from earlier in the night (26) could be correlated with the Western research finding that in most cases the longest REM period of the night (when the dreaming imagination seems to be especially active) comes during the last hour or two of the sleep cycle, right before waking.

3. Gender. The work of several Western scholars has focused on the significance of gender in dream beliefs, practices, and experiences. According to the content analysis work of Calvin Hall, Robert Van de Castle, and G. William Domhoff, men and women dream differently, and one of the major differences regards the rate in which the other gender appears in their dreams: women's dreams have an equal percentage of male and female characters, while men's dreams have twice as many male characters as females (27). This finding is based largely, though not exclusively, on Western populations, and it would be fascinating to know if the same pattern exists in various Muslim communities, where gender boundaries tend to be at least as sharply drawn and forcefully defended as in Western society. A key question raised by the content analysis research is whether gender differences in dream content reflect genetically-determined psychophysiological differences between men and women, or the socializ-

ing influences of education, cultural expectation, and gender stereotyping, or some combination of the two (28). The best way to address this question is to investigate the dream lives of people from many different cultures, and here again the Islamic tradition offers an abundant source of comparative material.

4. What are contemporary Muslims dreaming right now? The Qur'an and hadith are clear about the special value of dreaming in times of military conflict, and I strongly suspect that many present-day Muslims are dreaming about the events of September 11 and talking with each other about what their dreams mean in relation to the current outbreak of warfare. I would be very, very interested in learning about those conversations. I know, based on my own research, that many people in the United States are experiencing profoundly troubling dreams related to September 11, dreams filled with planes crashing, bombs exploding, buildings crumbling, and terrorists attacking children and family members. These dreams reflect the deep emotional impact of the events of September 11 on the American psyche, and in future work I hope to investigate these dreams as expressions of an extraordinary psychological effort to make meaning in a time of social trauma, anger, and confusion. As I contemplate that project, I wonder-do Muslim dream experiences contain any of these same themes, or do they express a totally different complex of perceptions, feelings, beliefs, and desires? Are Muslims dreaming of Westerners as much as Westerners are dreaming of Muslims?

## REFERENCES

1. *In a short essay like this, I hope I will be forgiven this generalized, oppositional use of the terms "Muslim" and "Westerner." I do not mean to suggest anyone forget the facts that millions of Muslims live in Western countries, that millions of Muslims and millions of Westerners feel no special enmity toward each other and would be happy to live in mutual peace, and that millions of people in both Islamic and Western countries oppose the military policies and actions of their political leaders.*
2. Marcia Hermansen, "Dreams and Dreaming in Islam," in *Dreams: A Reader in the Religious, Cultural, and Psychological Dimensions of Dreaming* (edited by Kelly Bulkeley) (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p.74
3. *All quotes from the Qur'an are from the translation of N.J. Dawood (New York: Penguin Books, 1956).*

4. For example, see Henri Corbin, "The Visionary Dream in Islamic Spirituality," in *The Dream and Human Societies* (edited by G. E. Von Grunebaum and Roger Callois) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).
5. Hermansen, "Dreams and Dreaming in Islam," p. 75.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
7. The Muslim practice of religiously-oriented dream incubation, *istikhara*, is itself a topic worthy of greater investigation. See, for example, J. Spencer Trimmingham, *Islam in West Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).
8. One common explanation is that the number 1/46th involves a doubling of the number of years (23) between the beginning of Muhammed (pbuh)'s revelation and his death.
9. All quotes in this paragraph are from Hermansen, "Dreams and Dreaming in Islam," pp. 75-76.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
11. Many Western researchers, schooled in the interpretive methods of Sigmund Freud, will suspect a symbolic expression of castration anxiety in this image.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
14. See Morton Kelsey, *God, Dreams, and Revelation* (Minneapolis: St. Augsburg Press, 1991).
15. See Alan Brill, "The Phenomenology of True Dreams in Maimonides," *Dreaming* (2000) vol. 10, no. 1: 43-54.
16. Nathaniel Bland, "On the Muhammed (pbuh)an Science of *Tabir*, or Interpretation of Dreams," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1856), vol. 16, pp. 118-171.
17. Rom Landau, "The Philosophy of Ibn Arabi," *The Muslim World* (1957), vol. 47, pp. 46-61.
18. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah* (translated by Franz Rosenthal) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 80-81, 83.
19. For example, various essays in Von Grunebaum and Callois, *The Dream and Human Society*, *op. cit.*; Hermansen, "Dreams and Dreaming in Islam," *op. cit.*; John Lamoreaux, "Dream Interpretation in the Early Medieval Near East," Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1999; Leah Kinberg, *Ibn Abi al-Dunya Morality in the Guise of Dreams* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994); Sara Sviri, "Dreaming Analyzed and Recorded: Dreams in the World of Medieval Islam," in *Dream Cultures: Explorations in the Comparative History of Dreaming* (edited by David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
20. Other good sources on the role of dreams in contemporary Muslim practice are Katherine P. Ewing, "The Dream of Spiritual Initiation and the Organization of Self Representations among Pakistani Sufis," *American Ethnologist* (1989) vol. 16, pp. 56-74; Benjamin Kilborne, "Moroccan Dream Interpretation and Culturally Constituted Defense Mechanisms," *Ethos* (1981) vol. 9, no. 4, pp. 294-312; Hermansen, "Dreams and Dreaming in Islam"; Micheline Centlivres, Pierre Centlivres, and Mark Slobin, "A Muslim Shaman of Afghan Turkestan," *Ethnology* (1971) vol. 10, pp. 160-173; M. C. Jedrej and Rosalind Shaw (editors), *Dreaming, Religion, and Society in Africa* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1993).
21. Valerie J. Hoffman, "The Role of Visions in Contemporary Egyptian Religious Life," *Religion* (1997) vol. 27, no. 1, p. 53.
22. For further information about Sufism and dreams, see Jonathan G. Katz, "An Egyptian Sufi Interprets His Dreams: 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Sha'rani 1493-1565,'" and Marcia Hermansen, "Visions as 'Good to Think': A Cognitive Approach to Visionary Experience in Islamic Sufi Thought," both in *Religion* (1997) vol. 27, no. 1, the special section devoted to "The Study of Dreams and Visions in Islam."
23. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
25. Harry Hunt, *The Multiplicity of Dreams* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Kelly Bulkeley, *Transforming Dreams* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2000); Roger Knudson, "Significant Dreams: Bizarre or Beautiful?" *Dreaming* (2001) vol. 11, no. 4, pp. 167-178.
26. Nathaniel Bland, "On the Muhammed (pbuh)an Science of *Tabir*," p. 129.
27. G. William Domhoff, *Finding Meaning in Dreams* (New York: Plenum, 1996), p. 56.
28. On this subject, see Carol Schreier Rupperecht, "Sex, Gender, and Dreams: From Polarity to Plurality" in Kelly Bulkeley (editor) *Among All These Dreamers* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).