

Epistemological Paradigms of Islamic knowledge: An Overview

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Abstract

The paper aims to summarize the basic concepts of Islamic knowledge and paradigms of Islamic epistemology. It is the study of the origin, nature, methods and paradigms in Islamic knowledge with the aim of clarifying certain ideas and of Islamic Knowledge and reaching certainty. An Islamic epistemological thought must be developed from the *Qur'ān*, the Sunnah, and the Ummatic intellectual experience over the past 14 centuries. The sources of Islamic knowledge are the *Qur'ān*, Prophetic knowledge and human intellect, with the aim to come close to Almighty Allah. The history of Islamic knowledge began when man's career on the earth began-more precisely at the time of man's creation and his descent on earth. According to *Qur'ān*, Allah has made man as a vicegerent due to knowledge (*'Ilm-ul-Asma*). Islamic Knowledge is obligatory alike for both Muslim male and female. Islamic education aims to discovering and formulating Allah's will. *Qur'ān* indicated basic principles that lead Muslims to observation of the universe and Nature, where he can find the answers to many question by his own efforts by using his intellect which Allah has provided him.

The paper concludes the various epistemological definitions of knowledge developed by the Muslims in course of history particularly emphasizing the modern trends in Islamic knowledge. An attempt has been made to explain the different Arabic connotations of the word knowledge like *'ilm*, *m'arifah*, *'aql* etc. The paper will perhaps serve as good step for future groundwork for the construction of a framework for an Islamic epistemology.

Keywords: Knowledge; Islamic Epistemology; *'ilm*; *Qur'ān*; Revelation.

Introduction

Knowledge (*'ilm*) has occupied a central place in the Islamic intellectual tradition throughout the history. Islamic belief is grounded in knowledge about God's existence and His revelation. During the course of history, Muslims developed their own epistemology and various epistemological issues have been discussed in Muslim philosophy with an orientation different from that of Western epistemology. *Qur'ān*, *ḥadīth*¹ and Muslim scholars have given great importance to Islamic concept of epistemology. In the early days of Islam, scholars developed epistemology in the light of Islamic principles. The concept of knowledge in a society gives birth to different disciplines and branches of knowledge, educational philosophy and institutional infrastructure. Education plays a key role in the character building of individuals who in turn make up the society and develop a civilization. Today attempts are being made to understand the basic epistemological issues in terms of the orientation which Muslims have developed in early days of Islam, which is different from that of western orientation. This is a valuable effort that deserves our interest and encouragement. However, it can be fruitful only if the practice of rigorous analysis is kept up, with close

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attention to the precise definitions of the various concepts involved with this view, an attempt is made to delineate the different shades and connotations of the term *'ilm*, i.e., knowledge, in the Islamic context. *Syed Naqīb Al-'Atṭās*, a renowned Muslim scholar, says that "The function of knowledge in Islam is to know God so that humankind may serve and worship Him".² We should keep in mind that Islamic concept of knowledge is not confined only to religious or spiritual knowledge, but It encompasses the entire scientific, modern and secular knowledge. The Islamic history bears testimony about the laying of the foundation of scientific knowledge. The Muslim scientists were inspired by the following Prophetic traditions: *أَطْلُبُوا الْعِلْمَ وَلَوْ بِالصَّيْنِ* i.e. "Seek for knowledge even (you have to go) to China. (Baihaqī)

طَلِبُ الْعِلْمِ فَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ.

Getting knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim (man and woman). (Ibn Mājah)

Many challenges have arisen in the human mind throughout the history but the greatest challenge in our times is the challenge of knowledge indeed not as ignorance of knowledge but the knowledge as conceived and disseminated throughout the world by western civilization because the nature of western knowledge has become problematic as it has lost its true purpose due to being unjustly conceived and has brought about chaos in man's life rather than peace and justice which is the real meaning of knowledge.³

Islamic knowledge

Different scholars have differently explained the meaning and nature of knowledge in different times. According to Aristotle education is the attainment of happiness virtuously⁴ and according to Plato, a famous Greek philosopher, the knowledge is of the world of forms or ideas which exist in the mind of a person⁵. So according to the idealists, knowledge is acquired through rational thinking. It is certain that these philosophers have no idea of revealed knowledge. Knowledge is the basis of Islam which connotes that man should be obedient and should submit his will to Almighty Allah, which is possible only if man is knowledgeable⁶. The Islamic epistemology or Islamic theory of knowledge brought about all embracing spiritual, moral and conceptual development of the Muslims during the period of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) and the golden period of Muslims. Moreover, they made remarkable advancement in every field of knowledge, including religious, as well as secular knowledge i.e., social sciences, technology and natural sciences, when the European world was in dark period. So, Islam made no distinction between the worldly knowledge and Islamic knowledge, and Muslims make excellence in every field of knowledge throughout the history.

The term used for knowledge in Arabic is *'ilm* which has the dual implication and thus the Arabic word *'ulūm* can be classified into revealed knowledge and the experimental knowledge. Rosenthal has pointed out, that the Arabic word *'ilm* has a much wider implication than its synonyms in English and other languages and cannot be expressed with a single word in any other language. The English word 'Knowledge' means information about something, while *'ilm* is an all-embracing term covering theory, action, education, natural science etc. Rosenthal, highlighting the importance of this term in Muslim civilization in which Muslims gain mastery over all fields of knowledge, religious as well as secular and gives the Muslims a distinctive shape⁷.

Knowledge has two Arabic terms that have overlapping meanings but different

connotations, i.e., *‘ilm* and *ma‘rifah*. *‘ilm* designates knowledge, or the science or study of a field of knowledge, such as the *Qur‘ān*, prophetic traditions (*Ḥadīth*), grammar, dialectical theology (*kalām*), astronomy, technology etc. The word *Ma‘rifah* or Gnosticism (secret knowledge) is particularly characteristic of the language of *Taṣawwuf* (Sufism). The mystical Islamic vision of knowledge expresses the celebrated Arabic proverb that “He who knows [has the gnosis of] his soul also knows [has the gnosis of] his God.”⁸

‘ilm (knowledge) is, of course, fundamentally important for man. When Allah created ‘Ādam (PBUH), He gave him *‘ilm*. So, in the case of man, *‘ilm* is as important as *wujūd* (existence). If man had only *wujūd* and no *‘ilm*, he would be of little consequence or will be like the other animals in the world.

It is generally regarded that whatever information, theory, idea, cultural and religious beliefs, facts and doctrines which one acquires from one’s forefathers and school teachers as knowledge. Only teaching and learning whether it may be scientific does not necessary constitute education, it may constitute knowledge but not education. The knowledge with a certain meaning will definitely be called education. According to *Al-‘Aṭṭāas*, *‘ilm* (knowledge) implies justice, which means that justice is a harmonious condition where everything or every being is in its proper place and the knowledge of the right place for a thing or being is wisdom and wisdom is the God given knowledge, which enables one for applying the knowledge for the cause of occurrence of justice⁹. The Islamic knowledge provides solutions to all human problems in a better way as compared to the western knowledge. The Islamic knowledge is more practical and provides better and effective results against the solutions given by the Western knowledge.¹⁰

Islamic knowledge began when the Prophet Adam (PBUH) was created by Almighty Allah. According to Holy *Qur‘ān*, Almighty Allah has provided man with certain amount of knowledge due to which man was made as *Ashraf al-Makhluqāt* (best creation) and has been given the trusteeship or vicegerency of the earth. When angels argue about the vicegerency of man, then Allah taught ‘Ādam the names of certain things, then ‘Ādam recited the names which the Angels did not know hence this proved his ability for vicegerent on the earth. The Holy *Qur‘ān* says: *And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: "Tell, They said: "Glory to Thee, of knowledge We have none, save what Thou Hast taught us: In truth it is Thou Who art perfect in knowledge and wisdom." He said: "O Adam! Tell them their natures." When he had told them, Allah said: "Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and earth, and I know what ye reveal and what ye conceal?" me the nature of these if ye are right."*¹¹

This shows the importance of acquiring knowledge in Islam from the *Qur‘ānic* point of view. In context of the above *Qur‘ānic* verse, from the word ‘names’ we infer that it means the knowledge and nature of everything. The knowledge not only refers to the spirit or religious but it refers to the knowledge of the accidents and attributes pertaining to things sensible and intelligible so as to make man known about the relations and distinctions existing. The revelation started to Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) with the word *iqra’*, which means ‘read!’ or ‘recite!’ Furthermore, it is inspiring that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself was *‘ummī* (unlettered person); all this gives us clue about the importance of knowledge in Islam. The holy *Qur‘ān* reports the first revelation as: *Proclaim! (or Read!) in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher, Who created-Created man, out of a (mere) clot of congealed blood: Proclaim! And thy Lord is Most*

*Bountiful, - He Who taught (the use of) the Pen, - Taught man that which he knew not.*¹²

The commencement of the first revelation with the word 'iqra' signifies that Allah has started the revelation of His Guidance with the command to seek knowledge. Allah has used the words like pen, book, writing, reading etc. at various places in the *Qur'an*¹³ which further adds the importance of the acquisition of knowledge in Islam. However, in the Holy *Qur'an* these words have not been used in their literal sense but they have much deeper meanings¹⁴. Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) has much emphasized on acquiring knowledge. Knowledge and education are inseparable from the Islam. It may be said that Islam is the path of "knowledge." No other religion or ideology has so much emphasized the importance for acquiring knowledge as Islam does.

The *Qur'an* and the Islamic tradition (*sunnah*) invite Muslims to seek and acquire knowledge and wisdom and to hold men of knowledge in high esteem. As Allah says in the holy *Qur'an*: *Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?*¹⁵

The above *Qur'anic* verse is further corroborated by a prophetic tradition that, "Whoso goes out in search of knowledge, he is in the path of Allah till he returns. (Tirmidhī)

Man according to Islam is the vicegerent of Allah, and he should conduct his life according to the tenets of Allah. The Holy *Qur'an* has frequently urged human beings to conquer universe with the use of divine revelation and intellect¹⁶; however, in this age of technology, it is not possible without gaining mastery over modern sciences. But in Islam only that part of knowledge of modern sciences merits excellence that seeks the pleasure of Allah. With the *Qur'anic* revelation, Muslims brought a revolution in human history and developed their own civilization, with the help of knowledge. According to *Syed Abu al-'Alā al-Moudūdī*: "Education is the sum total of knowledge gained. A man who does not make use of these faculties falls behind others, whereas he who makes use of them excels. Similarly a nation assumes leadership when it devotes itself unsparingly to the pursuit of knowledge handed down to it from the past as well as present".¹⁷ He further argues that it was the knowledge only which make Egypt, china, Greece, the Muslims or Europeans the leaders of the world that is to say leadership depends on education."¹⁸ This progress is the manifestation of what Allah has mentioned in the *Qur'an*: *Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves.*¹⁹

Man is urged to seek knowledge through his intellect which Almighty Allah has provided him. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said that "wisdom is the lost property of the Muslims; he recovers it who so ever finds it."²⁰ These are the inspiring words of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) for Muslims to gain knowledge. Almighty Allah has commanded human beings to search for knowledge and has promised that He will give them highest ranks if they will do that, the holy *Qur'an* states:

*...And when ye are told to rise up, rise up Allah will rise up, to (suitable) ranks (and degrees), those of you who believe and who have been granted (mystic) Knowledge.*²¹ ...

Thus inspired by the *Qur'anic* injections, Muslims throughout the globe founded many academic institutes²² for acquiring knowledge, from these institutes many scientists emerged and invented many scientific facts besides mastery over Quran, *Hadith* and *fiqh*.²³ According to *Ghazālī*, revelation is essential to recognize the reality. Without recognizing reality one can't attain true knowledge, so it is the revelation which guides human beings for attaining reality²⁴. The prime duty of Muslims is to search reality

through knowledge in accordance with Holy *Qur'an* and the traditions of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH). He also proffered that philosophy should begin with an inquiry into how creatures should follow the Divine will in the act of creation. In this way *Ghazālī* outlined a list of mystical virtues and ways which are both epistemic and ethical. They include archetypal, exuberance, intimacy,²⁵ and a taste for life. Such a doctrine moves ontology from an investigation of substances to the pursuit of the good will. *Ghazālī* posits that facts and values are interrelated. His thought also upholds an instrumental theory of knowledge, rejecting the so-called spectator theory, which places the mind of the agent outside of the object of knowledge. In contrast, *Ghazālī*'s instrumental theory of knowledge mixes ethics with a practical sense of knowledge²⁶. *Ghazālī* was really in search of certainty, which he found not in discursive knowledge but in mystic experience. In his support it must be said that he paved the way for liberating the believer from blind imitation and helping him approach the goal of certain knowledge. He divided the knowledge into two parts; they are dogmatic i.e., the divine knowledge or the knowledge which comes through prophets and the non dogmatic which include mathematics, medicine, etc and he further divided the non dogmatic knowledge into desirable, undesirable and permissible knowledge²⁷. In the Sufi tradition, knowledge is associated with goodness and Gnostics, as in becoming a better person, and in learning to live in harmony with nature²⁸.

Islamic epistemology

There have been many epistemological definitions of knowledge which are quite contradicting to one another. This debate started as early as from the Greek philosophers and other intellectuals. For instance the Greek famous philosopher Plato, asserts that knowledge is of the world of forms or ideas which exists in the mind of a person, while as the another great Greek philosopher, Aristotle, is quite contradict to Plato. According to Aristotle knowledge is not that which is created by mind but which corresponds to the world as it is. The real world refers to only what is observable. Non observable things like ethics and religion are not in the realm of knowledge but in that of belief. These scholars are the idealists and realists which did not provide any place for revelation, although revelation has provided an important role in knowledge and had changed the direction of civilizations and formed its own civilization.

Epistemology is defined as the study of knowledge and justified belief. Epistemology is called as 'theory of knowledge' as it deals with the nature, origin and validity of knowledge. So epistemology is concerned with certain questions like; the necessary and sufficient conditions of knowledge, its sources, its structure, and its limits. Epistemology aims to answer some questions related to knowledge like the concept of justification. What makes justified beliefs justified? Is justification internal or external to one's own mind? Understood more broadly, epistemology is about issues having to do with the creation and dissemination of knowledge in particular areas of inquiry. Traditional epistemology divides the senses into the five external senses (sight, touch, taste, smell, and hearing), and a set of "internal senses," such as memory. Muslims extend the Greek theories of internal sense, which included common sense and the notion of memory as "sense imagery," into refined accounts of "intentional" memory and three special senses of imagination²⁹.

Epistemology has been central to modern philosophy since the sixteenth century,

although it originally developed in Greek philosophy in close relation to ontology (theory of being) and metaphysics. Islamic epistemology can be defined as: ‘Muslim epistemology means Islamic theory of knowledge or the Islamic concept of knowledge. It discusses nature of knowledge, its sources, objectives and scope, its types and branches, which branch of knowledge is useful and should be acquired, which one is harmful and should better be avoided, what is possible to know, and what is simply not possible to know, how can knowledge be acquired etc.’³⁰

In mysticism, Islamic epistemology deals like where the knowledge is directed towards helping to understand what knowledge is and how it comes about.

The Noble *Qur’ān* provides humans with detailed guidance regarding the importance of epistemology and the subject also gets high priority in the *aḥādith*. The Islamic Epistemology is not merely theoretical but has a close bearing on human thought and behavior in individuals and the society at large. *Qur’ān*, *Ḥadith* and Muslim scholars have attached great importance to Islamic concept of epistemology.³¹ The Muslim epistemology in the initial stage (early period of Muslims) was so high that western scientist’s benefited from it and laid the foundation of the modern western science. The western people accepted the scientific portion from Islamic knowledge without the Islamic portion due to which we see that the two ideologies are quite conflicting and contradicting³². If again the Islamic ideologies are mixed to the western knowledge it will give the same fruits as it provided during the renaissance period of Muslims. The paradigms of Islamic epistemology having firm footing and being functional would create new disciplines of knowledge in accordance with the Islamic worldview, to meet the needs of the Muslim society.

Islamic epistemology is based on the *Tawḥīdī* paradigm i.e., the source of all knowledge is Allah as revealed in the *Qur’ān* that the knowledge of heavens and earth belongs to Almighty Allah. The *Tawḥīdī* paradigm has the concepts of unity of truth, unity of knowledge, unity of life, and unity of humanity. It integrates humans with God, which is the ultimate being of philosophers. Under the *Tawḥīdī* paradigm revelation and reason are complementary. Since knowledge and truth are a unity, both revelation and reason are searching for the same goal of truth. The *Tawḥīdī* paradigm also implies an all-embracing aspect. Since everything has the same creator and one source, there must be order and harmony since that creator knows all His creation. The concept of *Tawḥīd* liberates the human intellect from stagnation, dependency, blind following. It frees the human from being a slave of his own whims and fancies.

Among all of the branches of knowledge, the science or the sub-discipline of practical science known as the science of the soul is most relevant to epistemology. Islamic mysticism seeks an identity beyond any duality. It follows the theme that the soul seeks no “otherness” from the One.³³ Two kinds of intelligence, the passive and the active, mark the rational soul. The passive intellect abstracts conceptual features from the sensible whereas the active reason receives by intuition. Muslim philosophers and theologians, like other medieval monotheistic theologians, added a religious, spiritual dimension to the active intelligence³⁴.

The Islamic knowledge is something more than mere understanding. The Islamic knowledge is complete comprehension and interaction within which is the depths of soul and conscience, which is then followed by action in harmony with them.³⁵ The

fixed parameters of Islamic knowledge are the revelation (wahy). Its variable parameters are conditioned by varying spatio-temporal circumstances.

Muslim 'ulama' and scholars, theologians, thinkers and the Sufis (mystics) have attached great importance to knowledge and discussed it at length. Accordingly, 'Imām Ibn Abdul Barr, Syed Ali Hujwūrī, Ibn Sīnā, Imām Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Khuldoon, Ibn 'Arabī, Ibn Taimiyah, Mullah Sadrah, Shāh Walī Allah, Shāh Isma'īl Shaheed, and in the recent past Allama Muhammad Iqbāl, Maulana Syed Abū al-'Alā al-Maudūdī, Syed Qutub, Syed Naqīb Al-'Atṭās, Isma'īl Rajī Al-Fārūqī and Dr. Rafīuddīn have made valuable contribution in this field. The Qur'ānic terms for knowledge are: 'ilm, ma'rifah, hikmah, baṣīrah, ra'y, ḡann al-yaqeen, tadhkīrah, shu'ūr, lubb, naba', burhān, dirāyāt, haqq, and taṣawwūr. The terms for lack of knowledge are: jahl, raib, shakk, ḡann, and ḡalabah al-ḡann. There are three Grades of knowledge, depending on accuracy and validity. The truth behind reality is called ḡaqq al-yaqīn. *Verily, this is the Very Truth and Certainly.*³⁶ Knowledge that is empirical but is of lesser degree because it is based on observation by human senses that are not perfect is called 'ilm al-yaqīn. *Nay, were ye to know with certainty of mind, (ye would beware!)*³⁷ Knowledge that is empirical but is of lesser degree because it is based on observation by human senses that are not perfect is called 'ayn al-yaqīn. *Again, ye shall see it with certainty of sight.*³⁸ Islamic Knowledge is correlated with imān, 'aql, qalb, and taqwah. The seat of knowledge is the 'aql, and qalb. Intellect (al-'aql) distinguishes humans from other living things. It enables the human beings to understand and correctly interpret the sensory perceptions of the signs of Allah in the universe and thus leads to stronger faith. Intellect is so important that the Qur'ān severely condemns its misuse or under use:

*Many are the Jinns and men we have made for Hell: They have hearts wherewith they understand not, eyes wherewith they see not, and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle, - nay more misguided: for they are heedless (of warning).*³⁹

Therefore, Muslims are urged to use the intellect for searching the signs of Allah, otherwise it is like the other animals. Intellect can be a primary source of knowledge in a few instances such as mathematical and scientific knowledge. 'Aql is a tool that enables humans to generate deeper knowledge and understanding from the primary sources: revelation and empirical observation. Al-'aql can be looked at as a series of intellectual processes with which Allah has endowed the human. The Qur'ān has used several terms to describe intellectual processes. Thinking (tafakkur) is the most popular. It is noteworthy that the Qur'ān links thinking to a form of empirical observation using the human senses. Thinking can be by visual observation of the cosmos.

*Do they see nothing in the government of the heavens and the earth and all that Allah hath created? (Do they not see) that it may well be that their terms is nigh drawing to an end? In what message after this will they then believe?*⁴⁰

Allah's knowledge is limitless but human knowledge is limited. Wahy protects 'aql from mistakes and provides it with information about the unseen. 'Aql cannot, unaided, fully understand the empirical world. Inspired by the Qur'ān, Muslims developed the empirical scientific methodology that triggered the European reformation, renaissance, and scientific and technological revolution starting in the early 16th century CE.

Syed Naqīb Al-'Atṭās insisted more on adab as he finds this basic quality of Muslims which is the main component of Islamic knowledge as he describes the Islamic knowledge as, "The loss of adab is not only the loss of knowledge but also the loss of the capacity and

ability to recognize and acknowledge true leaders".⁴¹ According to him the main dilemma of Muslim *Ummah* is the confusion and error in knowledge and in order to remedy from this error we must first come to the grips with the problem of loss of *adab*. He insisted that no true knowledge can be instilled without the precondition of *adab* and knowledge cannot be possessed simply as if it were there available to everyone irrespective of intention and purpose and capacity.⁴² The Islamic knowledge is based on legitimate authority and authority recognize and acknowledges a hierarchy of authorities culminating in the holy prophet⁴³ In Islam *'ilm* is not confined to the acquisition of knowledge only, but also embraces socio-political and moral aspects. Knowledge is not mere information; it requires the believers to act upon their beliefs and commit themselves to the goals which Islam aims at attaining. In brief, I would like to say that the theory of knowledge in the Islamic perspective is not just a theory of epistemology. It combines knowledge, insight, and social action as its ingredients. Islam never maintained that only theology was useful and the empirical sciences useless or harmful. This concept was made common by semi-literate clerics or by the time servers among them who wanted to keep common Muslims in the darkness of ignorance and blind faith so that they would not be able to oppose unjust rulers and resist clerics attached to the courts of tyrants. In fact, a major reason why Muslim scholars assimilated the scientific heritage of other nations was that they did not see any conflict between the goals of science and religion, and were convinced that both religion and science aimed to demonstrate the unity of nature which in turn is an indication of the Unity of its Creator. It was for this very reason that theology and rational and physical sciences made up a conjoint discipline to be taught in theological schools and mosques.

Sources of Islamic knowledge

As for Muslims, Almighty Allah is the source of all knowledge and knowledge has been given to man through revelation and through prophets. In *Surah Al-Rahmān* Allah says: *(Allah) Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the Qur'an. He has created man: He has taught him speech (and intelligence).*⁴⁴

So it is the Almighty Allah who taught man how to learn *Qur'ān* and how to speak. For Muslims the source of all knowledge is Almighty Allah. The first source of human knowledge is the revelation which the prophets get directly from Almighty Allah, second is the prophetic knowledge which they got indirectly from Allah⁴⁵ and third is the empirical knowledge developed by humans in the course of history by trial, observation and experimentation⁴⁶. All human knowledge specially comes from Allah. Thus it is evident that human beings cannot know more than God.⁴⁷ Revelation is the most certain knowledge. There are other sources of knowledge which Almighty Allah has indicated in the *Qur'ān* but only the proper study and orientation of which will complement the truth of revealed knowledge as they are derived from the same source but the non revealed knowledge does not contain the same status as the revealed knowledge due to vulnerable in methodology and axiological limitations⁴⁸. Man was insisted in *Qur'ān* to acquire knowledge with using his own efforts as human beings has been provided with intellect and Almighty Allah has insisted man to use his intellect in worldly matters so that man can come close to Allah. The *Qur'ān* contains every principles of Islamic thought which serves as a comprehensive blueprint for both the individual and society and as the primary source of knowledge. Allah says:

*And He has subjected to you, as from Him, all that is in the heavens and on earth: Behold, in that are Signs indeed for those who reflect.*⁴⁹

In another verse, *Qur'ān* enjoins empirical observation; liberates the mind from superstition, blind following, and intellectual dependency.

*Seest thou not that Allah sends down rain from the sky? With it We then bring out produce of various colours. And in the mountains are tracts white and red, of various shades of colour, and black intense in hue And so amongst men and crawling creatures and cattle, are they of various colours. Those truly fear Allah, among His Servants, who have knowledge.*⁵⁰

The Tawhīdī paradigm of Islamic knowledge is the basis for causality, rationality, order, predictability, innovation, objectivity, and natural laws. Laws can be known through wahy, empirical observation and experimentation. *Qur'ān* being a complete code of life says: "*(We sent them) with Clear Signs and Scriptures; and We have sent down unto thee (also) the Message; that thou mayest explain clearly to men what is sent for them, and that they may give thought*".⁵¹

The Rationalists believe that mind has some fixed knowledge which is independent of sense perceptions. Islam rejects the notions of the idealists and the empiricists. Islam believes in the existence of matter as well as of soul. About senses and sense perceptions Allah says in the *Qur'ān*: "*It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when ye knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affections: that ye may give thanks (to Allah)*".⁵²

The material universe is a reality. The *Qur'ān* in Surah Al-Sajdah says: "*It is Allah Who has created the heavens and the earth, and all between them, in six Days,*".⁵³

Furthermore, the *Qur'ān* testifies the creation and existence of soul in Surah Al-Isra' as such: "*They ask thee concerning the Spirit (of inspiration). Say: "The Spirit (cometh) by command of my Lord"*".⁵⁴

As man is the blend of matter and soul, hence he/she attains knowledge through two sources; material and spiritual. There is close interaction and interdependence between revelation, inference, and empirical observation. *'Aql* is needed to understand wahy and reach conclusions from empirical observations. Revelation is true, relevant, and essential knowledge. In addition to giving facts, it also provides a methodology that can be used by other sources of knowledge. Most empirical knowledge is from observation and experimentation. Revelation provides general principles that guide and regulate empirical observations. Knowledge by revelation reaches humans only through prophets and messengers. This is conformed in the *Qur'ān* in verse: "*Allah did confer a great favour on the believers when He sent among them a messenger from among themselves, rehearsing unto them the Signs of Allah, sanctifying them, and instructing them in Scripture and Wisdom, while, before that, they had been in manifest error*".⁵⁵

Knowledge can be classified as knowledge of the seen (*'ilm al-shahādah*), and knowledge of the unseen (*'ilm al-ghaib*). Humans know only what they can see; they do not know the unseen. The unseen can be absolute (*ghaib muṭlaq*), or relative (*ghaib nisbī*). Humans cannot in any way know *ghaib muṭlaq* except through revelation. For Muslims whatever knowledge they get, is ultimately from Allah as Allah has provided human beings with intellect and insisted them to use this intellect for worldly matters so that he may come close to Almighty Allah. Knowledge may be innate or acquired. Humans have knowledge of the creator even before birth. Some human knowledge is

instinct. Most human knowledge is learned as observation, *'ilm tajrībī*; transmission, *'ilm naqlī*; or analysis and understanding, *'ilm 'aqlī*. Seeking to know is an inner human need that satisfies curiosity. Revelation, inference, *'aql*, and empirical observation are major sources of acquired knowledge accepted by believers. Islam believes in the possibility of obtaining knowledge of Truth and Reality. *Qur'ān* insisted that human true knowledge should be equated with religious insight.⁵⁶ We know that man is equipped with a soul and physical senses and prepared by Allah to acquire knowledge. According to Al-Attas, *'ilm* (knowledge) is the arrival of the ma'nā (meaning) of an object in the soul or the arrival of the soul at the meaning of an object of knowledge. Thus the soul is not merely passive but active too.⁵⁷ *Wahy* (revelation) and intuition are received by the soul. The five physical senses are the windows of the mind, particularly for obtaining empirical and the rational knowledge. There is close interaction and interdependence between revelation, inference, and empirical observation. *'Aql* is needed to understand *wahy* and reach conclusions from empirical observations. *Wahy* protects *'aql* from mistakes and provides it with information about the unseen. *'Aql* cannot, unaided, fully understand the empirical world. The *sharī'ah* is the law of Allah whose source is the *Qur'ān* and *sunnah* which includes spiritual knowledge and wisdom and consensus of the people of high authority. That this is the order of priority, in their importance, is clear from the well-known *Hadīth*, relating *Muadh ibn Jabal* who was sent by the Prophet as governor and *Qāzī* of Yemen, The Prophet asked him, how he would adjudicate cases. He replied, by the Book of God, "but if you find nothing in the Book of God, how?", then by the precedent of the Prophet, "but if there be no precedent?", then I will diligently try to form my own judgment. On this, the Prophet is reported to have said, "Praise be to God who hath fulfilled in the messenger set forth by this apostle that which is well pleasing to the apostle of Allah".

The spiritual knowledge and wisdom can be only received by man through the acts of worship and devotion, which depends upon God's grace and the latent spiritual power and capacity in man created by Allah with the help of mans act of worship and devotion. The man receives the spiritual knowledge by direct insight and unveiling to his spiritual vision (*kashf*). Such knowledge is the highest source of knowledge when experienced in true emulation of the *sharī'ah*.⁵⁸ There is lack of unanimity on the following as additional sources of knowledge: intuition (*'ilhām*), instinct (*ḥadas*), geomancy (*jabillat*), dreams (*firāsāt*), inspiration (*ru'yat and kashf*), Magic & sorcery (*sihr*), astrology (*tanjīm*), foretelling (*kahānat & tatayyur*); and other forms of superstition are not sources of true knowledge. They may sometimes lead to correct and verifiable facts but only by chance and coincidence. They most often lead to wrong and misleading facts. Using methodological tools from the *Qur'ān* and classical Islamic sciences, Muslims developed a new empirical and inductive and pioneered the empirical methods by experimentation and observation in a systematic way. They criticize ancient Greek methodology as conjectural, hypothetical, despising perceptual knowledge, and based on deductive logic. They accept the Greek scientific method of formulating and testing hypothesis but reject its philosophical presumptions: materialism, pragmatism, atheism, rejection of *wahy* as a source of knowledge, lack of balance, rejection of the duality between matter and spirit, lack of human purpose, lacks of an integrating paradigm like *Tawḥīd*.

Scientific knowledge, comprising natural and physical sciences, was sought and developed by Muslim scientists and mathematicians vigorously from the beginning of the last decades of the first century of *Hijrah*. The scientific endeavour found its flowering period with the establishment of the *Bayt al-Hikmah* in the reign of al-*Ma'mūn*. The myth created by the orientalist that the fundamental sources of Islam, viz. the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*, did not contain scientific and philosophical ideas is totally false. As said earlier, not only the *Qur'an* and *ḥadīth* encouraged Muslims but rather made it obligatory for them to pursue truth freely from all possible sources. Islam provided humans with certain guiding principles that could provide a secure foundation for the development of religious and secular sciences. Some Prophetic traditions even give priority to learning over performing certain rites of worship.

Limitations of human knowledge according to Islam

An individual or community can only know a small amount of the knowledge and must have the humility to know acknowledge that there is a lot that is not known. Man knew nothing but now he was blessed with knowledge by Almighty Allah. He started knowing the reality of the things with the help of revealed knowledge and by using the intellect. He was brought to light from the dark and deep ditch of ignorance. It was light of awareness that was conferred upon him. Knowledge is, in truth, a journey towards light and awareness. Human knowledge is potentially wide and is continuously expanding. The limit of human knowledge is ordained by Allah. Allah's knowledge is unlimited. The *Qur'an* says: " *And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (were ink), with seven oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the Words of Allah be exhausted (in the writing): for Allah is Exalted in Power, full of Wisdom* ".⁵⁹

The *Qur'an* in many verses has reminded humans that their knowledge in all spheres and disciplines of knowledge is limited. Human senses can be easily deceived. Human intellect has limitations in interpreting correct sensory perceptions. There is no denying the fact that human intellect can reach only where senses can take it. It works only within the jurisdiction of senses. It does not exist outside the sensory territory. It is a paralyzed limb without sensory support. All senses at the same time are useless and insignificant without intellect. Empirical knowledge is relativistic and probabilistic. Science can be too arrogant in stating its conclusions as established facts when the observations on which they are based may be wrong. Humans cannot know the unseen, *ghaib*. Humans can operate in limited time frames. The past and the future are unknowable with certainty. Humans operate in a limited speed frame at both the conceptual and sensory levels. There are ultimate questions about the universe that can't be answered empirically or rationally. These questions about the universe include its start, its future, its end, the purpose of human life, the nature of life, the nature of death and the nature of after death. Human behavior cannot be explained empirically or rationally. No empirical experiment can be set up to investigate motivations of human behavior and human spiritual experiences. Ideas can't be digested and processed if they are generated too slowly or too quickly. Humans cannot visually perceive very slow or very rapid events. Very slow events like the revolution of the earth or its rotation are perceived as if they are not happening. Human memory is limited. Knowledge acquired decays or may be lost altogether. Humans would have been more knowledgeable if they had perfect memory. Ordinary humans cannot receive revealed knowledge on their

own. Knowledge of the past and the future is best obtained from revelation because empirical observation is limited in the time dimension. Humans can extrapolate from existing knowledge to predict the future but can never be sure. Archeology, for example, is an empirical observation of the past but is limited because with time, artifacts become changed and distorted. Even if not distorted, they may not be interpreted correctly. The new discipline of futuristic studies relies on extrapolation from present-day trends. Its results cannot be conclusive.

The universe or cosmos around humans is a source of knowledge. Allah gave humans senses to enable them to get empirical knowledge from their environment. The *Qur'ān* in many verses has reminded humans that their knowledge in all spheres and disciplines of knowledge is limited. Allah says in the *Qur'ān*: "*Ah! Ye are those who fell to disputing (Even) in matters of which ye had some knowledge! But why dispute ye in matters of which ye have no knowledge? It is Allah Who knows, and ye who know not!*"⁶⁰

Allah allows humans to know some things and not others. Humans do not normally reach the full capacity of knowledge because of other limitations. One of these limitations is failure to exert themselves to the maximum in the search for knowledge. Human senses can be easily deceived. Human vision is limited. Hearing, smelling, tasting are relatively insensitive in humans while some animals have more acute senses. Human intellect has limitations in interpreting correct sensory perceptions. There are basic limitations in the neuro-chemical functions in the brain. Humans also have a limited database of prior knowledge to be able to interpret all new knowledge correctly. But the knowledge of the human beings is limited as mentioned in the *Qur'ān*: *... of knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you, (O men)*.⁶¹

Conclusions

In Islam *'ilm* is not confined to the acquisition of knowledge only, but also embraces socio-political and moral aspects as well. Rosenthal has pointed out that knowledge is belief as infers from the history of Islam⁶². Knowledge is not mere information; it requires the believers to act upon their beliefs and commit themselves to the goals which Islam aims at attaining. In brief, I would like to say that the theory of knowledge in the Islamic perspective is not just a theory of epistemology rather it combines knowledge, insight, and social action as its ingredients. Al-Attas observed *'ilm* (knowledge), as the arrival of the ma'na (meaning) of an object in the soul or the arrival of the soul at the meaning of an object of knowledge. The Islamic knowledge provides solutions to all human problems in a better way as compared to the western knowledge. The Islamic knowledge is more practical and provides better and effective results against the solutions given by the western knowledge. Islamic epistemology flourished in the light of Islamic principles in early days of Islam. Later on under the influence of Greek thought and modern times the influence of colonial powers and wave of modernity, Muslim epistemology lost its identity. Different Muslim scholars presented different views to develop and evolve Islamic epistemology in the light of Islamic Principles. The step to Islamization of knowledge by some contemporary scholars like *Syed Naqib Al-Attas* and *Isma'il Rajii Al-Farūqi* is an encouraged step towards the development of Islamic epistemology in modern times which tries to combine the modern knowledge with Islamic one and to find the relationship between them. Hence we may conclude that the word *'ilm* as it occurs in the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah* appears in its generic sense

rather than referring exclusively to religious studies. On this ground it can be said that Islam has only discouraged Muslims from preoccupying themselves with any pursuit of such branches of knowledge whose harm is greater than their benefit (like magic and sorcery and games of chance used for gambling). According to the prophetic tradition that, 'The best fields of knowledge are those which bring benefit'.

Therefore, the main objective of acquisition of knowledge for Muslims is seeking proximity to God and attaining His consent; and his activities focused in this direction. Anything that brings about this proximity or guides in that direction is praiseworthy. Thus knowledge is useful only if it is an instrument for obtaining knowledge of God, and His pleasure and proximity; otherwise knowledge itself is an inscrutable veil, whether it is linked with the sciences of nature or the sciences of the *Shari'ah*.

It is obvious that worshipping God is not only through prayers, fasting and so on. In fact, any move in the direction of proximity to God is considered as worship. One of the means to help man in his way towards God is knowledge, and of course it is only in this case that knowledge can be considered valuable. With the help of knowledge a Muslim can gain proximity to God in various ways and manners.

Notes and References

¹ The term *Hadith* literally means story, communication, or report but technically Muslims tend to use the term for the traditions of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh). Many Western scholars use *Hadith* more broadly to include the traditions of the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh), His Companions and even later generations.

² Al Attas, Syed Naqib, "preliminary thoughts on the nature of knowledge and the definition and aims of education", in *Aim and objectives of Islamic education*, ed., Al Attas, Syed Naqib, King Abdullah University, Jeddah, 1979, p. 24.

³ *Ibid.* p.19

⁴ Muslehuddin, Mohammad. *Islamic education: its form and features*, Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, 1989, p. 21.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶ Gilani, Sayyid Muhammad Yunus, *Knowledge: An Islamic Weapon*, Institute of Islamic Thought, Srinagar, 2002, p.4.

⁷ Rosenthal, Franz, *Knowledge triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*. Leiden: Brill, 1970. PP. 47-48.

⁸ Morewedge, Parviz, *knowledge*, in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, Editor in Chief Richard C. Martin Volume i, Macmillan Reference, U.S.A., p. 497. (Hereafter cited as *Encyclopaedia*, op.cit.)

⁹ Al Attas, op.cit. p.35.

¹⁰ Amin, Dr. Muhammad. *Muslim Epistemology: An Analytical Appraisal of Islamization of Knowledge*, (This is an expanded and revised English version of Urdu article published in *Quarterly Taleemi Zawiyay*, Lahore, June-Sep 2006, P-180-200, primarily based on Ziauddin Sardar's "Rediscovering the Epistemology of Islam, in this "Islamic Futures". Educational Reforms Trust, Pakistan, 2009, p. 22

¹¹ Holy *Qur'an*, 2: 31-33 (The paper follows the translation of Holy *Qur'an* by Abdullah Yousf Ali

¹² Holy *Qur'an*, 96:1-5

¹³ See Holy Quran 68:1-2, 2:282, 2:31-33, 4:54, 12:22, 21:74, 27:15, 62:2, 9:122.

¹⁴ Moudoudi, Syed Abu Ala. *Taleemat* (translated and edited by prof. S.M.A. Rauf in English as 'The Education'), MMI Publishers, Delhi, 1993, p.54

¹⁵ Holy *Qur'an*, 39:9

¹⁶ Moudoudi, op.cit. pp 61-63

¹⁷ *Ibid* p.55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 54

¹⁹ Holy *Qur'ān*, 13:11

²⁰ Ibn Majah, Tirmidhi

²¹ Holy *Qur'ān*, 58: 11

²² The main muslim institutes which were founded in early period by Islam were Bayt al-Hikmah in Baghdad, Nizām al-Mulk in Baghdad., University of Al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco, Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Al-Mustansiriya University in Baghdad, Al-Nizamiyya in Baghdad etc.

²³ Muslehuddin, *op.cit.* p.41

²⁴ *Ibid.*, P. 34.

²⁵ Khan , Mohd Sharief, *Islamic Education*, Ashish Publication House, New Delhi, 1986, p. 79

²⁶ Encyclopaedia, *opt. cit.* p.400.

²⁷ Many Muslim scholars are of the opinion that the knowledge can't be divided because there is not any proof from *Qur'ān* regarding the division of knowledge. Since all knowledge is from Allah and there is only one truth i.e., Almighty Allah so how can the knowledge will be divided.

²⁸ Encyclopaedia, *opt. cit.* p.401

²⁹ *Ibid.*, P. 398

³⁰ Amin, *op.cit.*, p. 3

³¹ *Ibid.* p.3

³² Al-Attas, Muhammad Naqib, *Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of Future*, Mansell, London, 1985. P. 30. (Hereafter written as Al-Attas, Secularism).

³³ Encyclopedia, *op.cit.* pp.400-01

³⁴ *Ibid* P.397

³⁵ Wan Daud, Van Mohd Nor. *The Concept of Knowledge in Islam and its Implications for Education in a Developing Country*, Mansell Publishing Limited, London, 1989, p.68

³⁶ Holy *Qur'ān*, 56: 95.

³⁷ Holy *Qur'ān*, 102: 5.

³⁸ Holy *Qur'ān*, 102:7.

³⁹ Holy *Qur'ān*, 7: 179.

⁴⁰ Holy *Qur'ān*, 7:185.

⁴¹ Al Attas, *op.cit.*, p. 12

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁴³ *Ibid.*,p.3

⁴⁴ Holy *Qur'ān*, 55: 1-4

⁴⁵ For Muslims the Revelation and Prophetic knowledge have divine origin and is the highest source of knowledge without any limitations or error. It is the true knowledge which provides us true information about the metaphysical and cosmos

⁴⁶ Muslehuddin, *op.cit.* p.44

⁴⁷ Rosenthal *op.cit.* p.29.

⁴⁸ Wan Daud, *op. cit.* p. 36.

⁴⁹ Holy *Qur'ān*, 45:13

⁵⁰ Holy *Qur'ān*, 35:27-28

⁵¹ Holy *Qur'ān*, 16:44

⁵² Holy *Qur'ān*, 16:78

⁵³ Holy *Qur'ān*, 32:4

⁵⁴ Holy *Qur'ān*, 17:85

⁵⁵ Holy *Qur'ān*, 3: 164

⁵⁶ Rosenthal *op.cit.* p.29

⁵⁷ Al Attas, *op. cit.*, p. 36

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 30

⁵⁹ Holy *Qur'ān*, 31: 27

⁶⁰ Holy *Qur'ān*, 3:66

⁶¹ Holy *Qur'ān*, 17;85

⁶² Rosenthal *op.cit.* p. 63