

# ISLAMIC THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

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The Qur'an is definite and clear on the question of knowledge. It claims with an absoluteness that knowledge of the manifest as well as of the hidden belongs to God, that nothing occurs in the world which is not known to Him. To quote, "...by Him who knows the unseen— from whom is not hidden the least little atom in the heavens or on the earth:..."<sup>76</sup> Of man it says that most of them know not: and those few who know, 'They know an outward part of the present life,...'<sup>77</sup> It adds, '...they follow only surmise, merely conjecturing.'<sup>78</sup> In other words, the commoners have 'opinion' only (to use a platonic term), and not 'knowledge' in the proper sense; and whatever knowledge they possess is of the external aspect of the world ('appearances') only and not of the 'reality' itself. So far Plato and Kant share the approach that characterizes the Qur'an in the regard. However, unlike Kant, the Quran does not preclude the possibility of knowledge to man. It over and again talks of 'man of wisdom and understanding, however few they may be.

The Qur'an emphasizes the innate nature of all human knowledge, which is bestowed by God Himself. The Qur'an says, 'He knows what lies before them and what is after them, and they comprehend not anything of His knowledge save such as He wills'.<sup>79</sup> Again, when the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) was asked concerning the spirit, the Qur'an enjoined him to answer, 'You have been given of knowledge nothing except a little'.<sup>80</sup> Thus, man has a little of knowledge, and that by the grace of God which means that knowledge cannot be acquired by man through his personal effort and industry— surely a wahbi (endowed) view of knowledge according to which it is 'innate' and 'inspired'. Some early Muslim thinkers like Ibn Bajjah and even such a great scholar as Ibn Sina were led to the 'innate' view of knowledge not so much by their study of the Greeks, as is generally thought, as under the inspiration of these verses of the Qur'an.

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<sup>76</sup> A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (tr.) Oxford University Press, 1964, XXXIV:4.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*, XXX:5.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, VI:116

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, II:256.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid*, XVII:87.

The Muslim thinkers right from al-Kindi were led to formulate the doctrine of the Intellect under the inspiration of the above-mentioned verses. It is generally believed, and not without justification, that the Muslims took this doctrine from Aristotle's *De Anima*<sup>81</sup> ('and Alexander of Aphrodisias's *De Intellectu*,<sup>82</sup> though acknowledging at the same time that they made some very important modifications and elaborations. Thus, al-Kindi made a very pertinent addition when he divided Alexander's 'Intellectu habitus' into two intellects, of which 'one is the possession of knowledge without practising it' and 'the other is the practising of knowledge'.<sup>83</sup> Next to him, al-Farabi makes a distinction between the 'intelligibles in sensibles' and 'intelligibles in action'<sup>84</sup> which is almost parallel to that of al-Kindi. However, he adds 'acquired intellect' which is capable of comprehending pure abstractions, and here the intellect rises to the 'level of communion, ecstasy, and inspiration'.<sup>85</sup> It may be added that though al-Farabi himself declared that his theory depended on the third part of *De Anima* of Aristotle, his conception of the 'acquired intellect' is alien to Aristotle; it differs also from the 'acquired intellect' as found in the theory held by Alexander of Aphrodisias and al-Kindi'. When we come to Ibn Sina the concept of a supra-human transcendent intellect which, when the human intellect is ready, bestows knowledge upon it<sup>86</sup> finds its most developed form. It is the external, objective agency which causes all knowledge through inspiration in the human mind and, but for which no knowledge could be possible.

Unlike Alexander, al-Farabi, and even Aristotle, Ibn Sina holds that the universal is not abstracted from the particulars of sense-experience; 'it issues directly from the active intellect'. He says, 'The perception of the universal form,..., is a unique movement of the intellective soul, not reducible to our perceiving the particular either singly or totally and finding the common essence among them, for if so, it would be only a spurious kind of

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<sup>81</sup> Aristotle's famous book on psychology which was studied by the Muslim thinkers right from al-Kindi who benefitted from it.

<sup>82</sup> This book mainly deals with the doctrine of Intellect and the origin and sources of human knowledge. It also impressed the Muslim thinkers from the beginning.

<sup>83</sup> M.M. Sharif (ed.), *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1963, Vol. I, p. 433.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, p. 642

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid*.

universal'.<sup>87</sup> He concludes, 'the origin of knowledge is mysterious and involves intuition at every stage'<sup>88</sup> He goes on, 'All seeking of knowledge,...., has this prayer-like quality'; however, he adds that 'the effort is necessary on the part of man; the response is the act of God or the active intellect'<sup>89</sup> In other words, the 'innate' nature of knowledge does not preclude the possibility and necessity of effort on the part of man, and no knowledge can be 'had' without effort by man. Thus, Ibn Sina has developed his theory of knowledge in the intuitive direction in line with the teachings of the Qur'an-. In fact, the Muslim thinkers have developed their theory of knowledge in two positive directions:-viz., (i) in the direction of the practical import of knowledge, and (ii) in the direction of 'innate' or 'intuitive' nature of knowledge—the two characters which the Qur'an has emphasized. This account clearly indicates that the Muslim thinkers, although impressed by the Greeks and built their own theory on theirs, were really inspired by the Qur'anic teachings which prompted them not only to accept but also to modify and add to the Greek view.

In the chapter "Al-Baqarah", the Qur'an fixes man's capacity for knowledge as the hallmark placing him above all the creatures, including even angels, because Adam, when commanded, could name things which the angels could not'.<sup>90</sup> Even among men the Qur'an places the men of learning far above the ignorant. It says, 'Shall those who know be deemed equal with those who do not'.<sup>91</sup> It compares the knowing to the 'men of sight' and the ignorant to the 'blind'. The Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him) is reported to have said, 'The learned men are the heirs of the prophets'.<sup>92</sup> According to the Prophet (peace be upon him); the learned men have a superior rank. . He says, 'The superior rank the learned man holds in relation to the worshipper is like the superior rank I hold in relation to the least of men'<sup>93</sup> and again the Prophet (peace be upon him) describing the difference between the learned

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid, p. 495.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 496.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> The Koran op. cit., II:28-31.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, XXXIX: 2.

<sup>92</sup> From supra, p.2 by al-Ghazali in Kitab al-'Ilm, Eng. tr. as The Book of Knowledge by Dr. N.A. Faris, Lahore: Ashraf, 1974, p. 11.

<sup>93</sup> Al Baghawi, Masabih al-Sunnah, Cairo, 1312 H., vol. I, p. 14.

and the worshipper says, ‘Between the learned and the worshipper are a hundred degrees, each two of which are separated by the extent of a racing horse’s run in seventy years’<sup>94</sup> The learned, thus, occupy a very high place—a place next to the Prophet (peace be upon him) in point of rank and dignity.

Islam, however, does not approve of the concept of knowledge for knowledge sake; it rather believes in the knowledge for practice. The Qur’an generally pairs the two words hakim (one who is wise) and ‘alim (one who knows)<sup>95</sup> while talking of God—a construction which alludes to the necessity of knowledge and practice going together. According to the Prophet (peace be upon him), (as reported by Abu Darda), ‘The worst of men in the eye of Allah on the Day of Resurrection would be the scholar who does not derive benefit from his knowledge’<sup>96</sup> Again, (as reported by abu Huraira), ‘The knowledge from which no benefit is derived is like a treasure out of which nothing, has been spent in the cause of Allah’.<sup>97</sup>

However, all knowledge is not good according to the Qur’an. The Prophet (peace be upon him) has said, ‘Behold the worst beings are the wicked among the learned ones and the best are the virtuous among the learned’<sup>98</sup> According to the Islamic view only that knowledge is good which is being practised for some virtuous end. Elaborating on this point Allama Iqbal says in his Javid-Nama

‘if it attaches its heart to God, it is prophecy, but if it is a stranger to God, it is unbelief.

Science (sic-knowledge) without the heart’s glow is pure evil,

for then its light is darkness over sea and land<sup>99</sup> he says,

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<sup>94</sup> Al-Darimi, Sunan, Damascus, 1349 H., intr. p. 32.

<sup>95</sup> See e.g. The Qur’an, 12:83, 12:100, 15:25 etc.

<sup>96</sup> Al-Tabrizi, Mishkat-ul-Masabih, Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1980, Eng. tr. by Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, vol I, p. 152.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 156, reported by Ahmad and Darimi.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, p. 151, reported by Darimi.

<sup>99</sup> Arberry A. J., (tr.) Javid-Nama, London: George Allen: 1966, vs. 1321-24, p. 64. We have added the word Knowledge after ‘science’ with which Arberry had translated the word ‘Ilm used by Iqbal in his verses.

‘Science (knowledge) without love is a demonic thing, science (knowledge) together with love is a thing divine; science (knowledge) and wisdom without love are a corpse, reason is an arrow that never pierced the target’.<sup>100</sup>

Thus, knowledge which is devoid of ‘faith’ and ‘belief’, says Iqbal, is demonic and not good, and the man who possesses it is the companion of the Evil One (awliya al-Shaytan). According to the Qur’an, it is knowledge which increases submission to God that is good.

Thus, true knowledge, according to the Islamic view, is that which instils humility and submission in the person who possesses it. The Qur’an says, ‘Surely those of His servants who are possessed of knowledge fear Allah’<sup>101</sup> Haman, the minister of Pharaoh, who represents those who take great pride in their personal skill and wisdom, led to the destruction of his master as well as himself.<sup>102</sup> It may be interpolated here that the knowledge which the Holy Book refers to is not the worldly knowledge, but the knowledge of God. It is a view based on a bifurcation between the knowledge of God. (or religion) and the worldly knowledge (or science). However, this bifurcation is alleviated if we start with the belief, as we did in the beginning of this paper, that all knowledge is ‘innate’ and by the Divine Grace: this is the very purport of the Islamic teachings. They presume that all knowledge is one and in the end conduces, or will conduce, to the knowledge of God. In this connection Iqbal has denied that there is any fundamental or essential bifurcation between thought (the instrument of science) and intuition (the instrument of religion). He says, ‘Nor is there any reason to suppose that thought and intuition are essentially opposed to each other. They spring up from the same root and complement each other.’<sup>103</sup> He adds, ‘Both are in need of each other for mutual rejuvenation. Both seek visions of the same Reality...’<sup>104</sup> He is still more direct when he says, ‘The truth is that religious and scientific processes, though involving different methods, are identical in their final aim. Both aim

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<sup>100</sup> Arberry, op. cit., vs. 1341-44, p. 64.

<sup>101</sup> The Qur’an, op. cit., XXXV:28.

<sup>102</sup> Haman was the minister of Pharaoh who ordered him to kindle a fire for him, ‘and make me a tower, that I may mount up to Mose’s god,...’ see The Koran, XXVIII:38.

<sup>103</sup> Iqbal Dr. M., *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Lahore: Ashraf, 1978, p. 2.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p.3

at reaching at the most real'.<sup>105</sup> It is not only that they complement each other and are identical in their final aim; the purport of the Islamic teachings, which recommend strongly the Conguest of the Universe as the final goal of human endeavour, is that all knowledge will in the end be reduced to one ultimate knowledge— i.e., knowledge of God to Whom all things, including knowledge, must return, says the Qur'an.<sup>106</sup>

By the “Islamic theory of knowledge” I mean a theory which is mainly ‘ based on the Qur'an and the Ahadith, though I have made some references to Allama Iqbal also who is considered a great interpreter of the Qur'an.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, pp. 195-96

<sup>106</sup> The Qur'an is replete with verses on this subject: however, to quote one, 'Surely we shall inherit the earth and all that are upon it, and unto Us they shall be returned', XIX: 40.