

Published on Al-Islam.org (https://www.al-islam.org)

<u>Home</u> > <u>An Introduction to Ilm al-Kalam</u> > <u>An Introduction to 'Ilm al-Kalam</u> > Al-Kalam al-'Aqli and al-Kalam al-Naqli

# An Introduction to 'Ilm al-Kalam

This long article is a part of Martyr Murtadha Mutahhari's book *Ashna'i ba 'ulum al-Islami* (An Introduction to the Islamic Sciences). The book consists of seven parts:

- (1) logic
- (2) philosophy
- (3) al-kalam (Muslim scholastic philosophy)
- (4) 'irfan (Islamic mysticism)
- (5) *usul al-figh* (the principles of jurisprudence)
- (6) *figh* (Islamic jurisprudence)
- (7) hikmat al-'amali' (practical philosophy or practical morality).

All the seven parts together serve both as a comprehensive survey of the fundamentals of different branches of Islamic sciences and a general and comprehensive perspective for the proper understanding of the basic teachings of Islam along with the main points of difference among various sects of Muslims.

This work of Martyr Mutahhari is the best introduction to Islamic philosophy and jurisprudence. From this view, *Ashna'i ba 'ulum al-Islami* deserves to be prescribed as the basic text for all the students of Islamic studies. It is also very useful for non-specialists who wish to acquaint themselves with Islam.

All the introductory books written so far are either by the Orientalists and are naturally biased and fail to give true picture of the development of different Islamic sciences or are written by Muslim scholars who consciously or unknowingly incorporate in the body of books certain misleading notions propagated by the Western scholars of Islam about Muslim philosophy and its various branches.

It also can be said with some justification that no other available introductory text in this field covers all Muslim sects and their specific views. Martyr Murtadha Mutahhari's exposition and evaluation of various theories is objective and unbiased, which is the most essential condition for a book to be prescribed as an introductory text.

In this part, dealing with 'ilm al-kalam, the author has discussed the main doctrines of kalam and their subsequent modifications with special reference to Mu'tazilah, Asha'irah and Shi'ah schools of kalam. But he has not ignored other schools and has referred to their relevant doctrines wherever it was necessary for the full understanding of the problem under discussion.]

*'Ilm al-kalam* is one of the Islamic sciences. It discusses the fundamental Islamic beliefs and doctrines which are necessary for a Muslim to believe in. It explains them, argues about them, and defends them.

The scholars of Islam divide Islamic teachings into three parts:

- (i) Doctrines ('aqa'id): These constitute the issues which must be understood and believed in, such as, the Unity of God, the Divine Attributes, universal and restricted prophethood, etc. However, there are certain differences between Muslim sects as to what constitutes the basic articles of faith (usul al-Din) in which belief is necessary.
- (ii) Morals (*akhlaq*): These relate to the commands and teachings relating to the spiritual and moral characteristics of human beings, such as, justice, God–fearing (*taqwa*), courage, chastity, wisdom, endurance, loyalty, truthfulness, trustworthiness, etc., and prescribe 'how' a human being should be.
- (iii) The Law (ahkam): Here the issues relating to practice and the correct manner of performing acts, such as, prayers (salat), fasting (sawm), hajj, jihad, al-'amr bil ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'an al-munkar, buying, renting, marriage, divorce, division of inheritance and so on, are discussed.

The science which deals with the first of the above–mentioned is *'ilm al-kalam.* The study of the second is *'ilm al-'akhlaq* (ethics). The study of the third is called *'ilm al-fiqh* (the science of jurisprudence). That which is subjected to division in this classification is the corpus of Islamic teachings; that is, those things which constitute the content of Islam. It does not include all those Islamic studies which form the preliminaries for the study of Islamic teachings, such as, literature, logic, and occasionally philosophy.

Secondly, in this classification the criterion behind division is the relationship of Islamic teachings to the human being: those things which relate to human reason and intellect are called 'aqa'id; things which relate to human qualities are called akhlaq; and those things which relate to human action and practice are included in figh.

As I shall discuss in my lectures on 'ilm al-fiqh, although fiqh is a single discipline from the viewpoint of its subject, it consists of numerous disciplines from other viewpoints.

In any case, *'ilm al-kalam* is the study of Islamic doctrines and beliefs. in the past, it was also called *"usul al-Din"* or *"'Ilm al-tawhid wa al-sifat"*.

### The Beginnings of Kalam

Though nothing definite can be said about the beginnings of *'ilm al-kalam* among Muslims, what is certain is that discussion of some of the problems of *kalam*, such as the issue of predestination (*jabr*) and free will (*ikhtiyar*), and that of Divine Justice, became current among Muslims during the first half of the second century of Hijrah. Perhaps the first formal centre of such discussions was the circle of al–Hasan al–Basri (d. 110/728–29).

Among the Muslim personalities of the latter half of the first century, the names of Ma'bad al–Juhani (d. 80/699) and Ghaylan ibn Muslim al–Dimashqi (d. 105/723) have been mentioned, who adamantly defended the ideas of free will (*ikhtiyar*) and man's freedom. There were others who opposed them and supported predestination (*jabr*). The believers in free will were called "qadariyyah" and their opponents were known as "jabriyyah".

Gradually the points of difference between the two groups extended to a series of other issues in theology, physics, sociology and other problems relating to man and the Resurrection, of which the problem of *jabr* and *ikhtiyar* was only one. During this period, the "qadariyyah" came to be called "Mu'tazilah" and the "jabriyyah" became known as "Asha'irah". The Orientalists and their followers insist on considering the beginnings of discursive discussions in the Islamic world from this point or its like.

However, the truth is that rational argumentation about Islamic doctrines starts with the Holy Qur'an itself, and has been followed up in the utterances of the Holy Prophet (S) and especially in the sermons of Amir al–Mu'minin 'Ali (A). This despite the fact that their style and approach are different from those of the Muslim *mutakallimun* 1.

## **Inquiry or Imitation?**

The Holy Qur'an has laid the foundation of faith and belief on thought and reasoning. Throughout, the Qur'an insists that men should attain faith through the agency of thought. In the view of the Qur'an, intellectual servitude is not sufficient for believing and understanding its basic doctrines. Accordingly, one should take up a rational inquiry of the basic principles and doctrines of the faith. For example, the belief that God is One, should be arrived at rationally. The same is true of the prophethood of Muhammad (S). This requirement resulted in the establishment of *'ilm al-'usul* during the first century.

There were many reasons which led to the unprecedented realization of the necessity for the study of the fundamentals of the Islamic faith amongst Muslims and the task of defending them, a realization which led to the emergence of prominent *mutakallimun* during the second, third, and fourth centuries.

These were: embracing of Islam by various nations who brought with them a series of (alien) ideas and notions; mixing and coexistence of the Muslims with people of various religions, such as, the Jews, the Christians, the Magians, and the Sabaeans, and the ensuing religious debates and disputes between the

Muslims and those peoples; the emergence of the Zanadiqah2 in the Islamic world – who were totally against religion – as a result of the general freedom during the rule of the 'Abbasid Caliphs (as long as it did not interfere in the matters of state politics); the birth of philosophy in the Muslim world – which by itself gave birth to doubts and skeptical attitudes.

### **The First Problem**

Apparently, the first problem which was discussed and debated by the Muslims was that of predestination and free will. This was very natural, since it is a primary problem linked with human destiny and which attracts the interest of every thinking adult. Perhaps it is not possible to find a society which has reached intellectual maturity in which this problem was not raised. Secondly, the Holy Qur'an has a large number of verses on this subject, which instigate thought in regard to this problem3.

Accordingly, there is no reason to try to seek another source for the origin of this problem in the Islamic world.

The Orientalists, habitually, make an effort, in order to negate the originality of the Islamic teachings, to trace the roots, at any cost, of all sciences that originated amongst Muslims to the world outside the domains of Islam, in particular the Christian world. Therefore, they insist that the roots of 'ilm al-kalam should be acknowledged to lie outside Islam, and they make similar attempts with regard to the study of grammar, prosody (and perhaps semantics, rhetoric, and studies of literary and poetic devices), and Islamic 'irfan.

The problem of determinism and free will (*jabr wa ikhtiyar*) is the same as the problem of predestination and Divine Providence *qada' wa qadar*, the first formulation relates to man and his free will, while the second one relates to God. This problem also raises the issue of Divine Justice, because there is an explicit connection between determinism and injustice on the one hand, and free will and justice on the other.

The problem of justice raises the issue of the essential good and evil of actions, and the latter in its turn brings along with it the problem of the validity of reason and purely rational judgements. These problems together lead to the discussion of Divine wisdom (that is the notion that there is a judicious purpose and aim behind Divine Acts) 4, and thereby, gradually, to the debate about the unity of Divine Acts and the unity of the Attributes, as we shall explain later.

The formation of opposite camps in the debates of *kalam*, later acquired a great scope, and extended to many philosophical problems, such as, substance and accident, nature of indivisible particles which constitute physical bodies, the problem of space, etc. This was because, in the view of the *mutakallimun*, discussion of such issues was considered a prelude to the debate about theological matters, particularly those related with *mabda'* (primeval origin) and *ma'ad* (resurrection). In this way many of the problems of philosophy entered *'ilm al-kalam*, and now there are many problems common to both.

If one were to study the books on *kalam*, specially those written after the 7th/l3th century, one would see that most of them deal with the same problems as those discussed by philosophers – especially, Muslim philosophers – in their books.

Islamic philosophy and *kalam* have greatly influenced each other. One of the results was that *kalam* raised new problems for philosophy, and philosophy helped in widening the scope of *kalam*, in the sense that dealing with many philosophical problems came to be considered necessary in *kalam*. With God's help, we hope to give an example of each of these two results of reciprocal influence between philosophy and *kalam*.

### Al-Kalam al-'Aqli and al-Kalam al-Naqli

Although *'ilm al-kalam* is a rational and discursive discipline, it consists of two parts from the viewpoint of the preliminaries and fundamentals used by it in arguments:

- (i) 'aqli (rational);
- (ii) naqli (transmitted, traditional).

The 'aqli part of kalam consists of the material which is purely rational, and if there is any reference to naqli (tradition), it is for the sake of illumination and confirmation of a rational judgement. But in problems such as those related to Divine Unity, prophethood, and some issues of Resurrection, reference to naqle – the Book and the Prophet's Sunnah – is not sufficient; the argument must be purely rational.

The *naqli* part of *kalam*, although it consists of issues related with the doctrines of the faith – and it is necessary to believe in them – but since these issues are subordinate to the issue of prophethood, it is enough to quote evidence from the Divine Revelation or the definite *ahadith* of the Prophet (S), e.g. in issues linked with *imamah* (of course, in the Shi'ite faith, wherein belief in *imamah* is considered a part of *usul al-Din*), and most of the issues related with the Resurrection.

- 1. See Murtadha Mutahhari, Sayri dar Nahj al-balaghah, pp.69–76, where the author has discussed the difference between the approach of the Nahj al-balaghah to the problems of theology and metaphysics and the approach of Muslim mutakallimun and philosophers to such problems. (Translator)
- 2. "Zanadiqah" (sing. zindiq), a term applied heterogeneously and relatively, is used to describe any heretic group whose belief deviates radically from the Islamic doctrines. The author, probably, refers by it to one or more of such sects as the Mu'attilah, who denied the creation and the Creator, reducing the world to an unstable mixture of the four elements, the Manawiyyah (Manichaeans); and Mazdakiyyah, who were dualists, etc. (Translator)
- 3. See Murtadha Mutahhari, Insan wa sarnewisht (Man and Destiny).
- 4. See Murtadha Mutahhari, 'Adl al-ilahi (Divine Justice), "the Introduction," pp. 7-43.

#### Source URL:

https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol3-no2/introduction-ilm-al-kalam-murtadha-mutahhari/introductio

n-ilm-al-kalam#comment-0