

Introduction to Islamic Sciences, Part 1

Rasoul Imani Khoshkhu¹

Translated by: Mohammad Reza Farajian

Abstract

Acquiring and possessing knowledge is highly recommended in Islam as God encourages people to seek knowledge as seen in the Qur'an and hadith. Educators and scholars hold a revered position because of their efforts of pursuing knowledge and using it to influence their actions.

This article introduces the most important Islamic sciences that have long been studied in Islamic seminaries. A brief definition as well as the nature and history of each of the widely studied disciplines by Islamic scholars will be offered, namely theology (kalam), philosophy, mysticism (irfan), and jurisprudence (fiqh).

Islamic sciences apply to three different types of disciplines:

Knowledge originating from religion: This includes statements that are either mentioned in religious sources or excerpts from sources that religion considers valid. In Islam, such disciplines mostly rely on the Qur'an and Sunnah, or are intellectually understood. Therefore, all of them are deemed Islamic. Some of such disciplines are theology (kalam)², jurisprudence (fiqh),³ Ethics (akhlaq)⁴ and Mysticism (irfan).⁵

Introductory and prerequisite disciplines: teachings that are a preliminary to the above-mentioned disciplines; they are the essential means to understand religious texts and benefitting from sources such as the Qur'an, Sunnah, and reason. For this reason, they are termed 'Islamic.' Examples of such disciplines are logic, Arabic literature, Qur'anic sciences, hadith sciences, and principles of jurisprudence.

Sciences that do not originate from religion: sciences that are not exclusive to Islam or any other religion, although they have developed in Islamic atmospheres and therefore have a particular spirit. For example, philosophy consists of rules and principles far beyond a specific school of thought. However, according to some scholars,⁶ development of its rules and principles by Islamic scholars in an Islamic atmosphere makes it possible to speak of 'Islamic philosophy' and label it as a religious discipline.

According to the above-mentioned categorization, some of the most important and widely studied disciplines in the Islamic seminaries will be introduced.

Theology (kalam)

Islam has always demanded its followers to have unwavering faith in its revealed teachings while simultaneously insisting on the rational aspect of its instructions. The Qur'an inspires believers to ponder about the divine creation and signs of the Holy Essence of God to strengthen their faith. In some cases, the Qur'an itself justifies the existence of God.

These religious inspirations and giving the opportunity to contemplate the divine signs is a valuable opportunity for Muslim thinkers to discuss religious doctrines and to verify its truth through reasoning. Kalam follows the track of reasoning and benefits from the traditions received from the Imams (a).

The nature of Kalam

Kalam is one of the traditional sciences in Islam that scholars have referred to throughout history with terms such as 'principles of religion',⁷ 'greater fiqh',⁸ 'science of religious opinion and reasoning',⁹ 'science of monotheism and attributes,' and the 'science of Kalam' (Islamic Theology).¹⁰ The most common term is kalam itself which is named thus so in Shi'a narrations.¹¹

Religious sciences today are divided into three major categories: beliefs (kalam), rulings (fiqh), and ethics (akhlaq). Beliefs refer to the fundamental and basic issues of a religion that corresponds with Islamic ideology.

The issues discussed in beliefs include the existence of God, His attributes and actions, Prophethood, Imamate, the Hereafter and general issues about humankind's destination. Additionally, new questions have been raised in this field that led to a new branch, 'The Modern kalam' or 'Modern Problems of Kalam'.

Since discussing practical rulings can be meaningless before one's religious beliefs are confirmed, this discipline is also called 'The Greater Fiqh' or 'The Principles of Religion'.

According to the problems, goals, and approaches they have followed, various definitions of this discipline have been offered. By exploring all definitions of kalam, two factors have been common in most of them:

- 1) Proving religious beliefs and
- 2) Defending them against objections raised.

Thus, Kalam is a discipline that involves understanding, regulating, explaining, and justifying or proving beliefs through various approaches based on either reason or tradition and is responsible for defending it against any doubt.”

The ultimate goal of kalam is to prove the principles of religion and shield it against any doubt. This objective can be achieved in various ways that are not limited to providing demonstrations (burhan) and deductive reasoning. Thus, the aim of this discipline is sometimes achieved through providing demonstrations.

In some cases, if the addressee is a layman and is not capable of understanding complicated philosophical arguments, to convince him, a theologian may use some of the ideas of the addressee himself or those which are commonly accepted to prove or disprove his position the addressee's position.

The Qur'an also emphasizes on the three approaches of justification i.e. wisdom (illustration or burhan), good preaching (khitabah of speech) and debate (jadal or dialectic) when inviting others towards God and proving the revealed teachings of religion. [12](#)

History

Theological issues are as old as humanity. For example, all prophets, including Prophet Adam (a), have taught the doctrine of monotheism, which is the most important issue in kalam. Similarly, prophethood too existed since the beginning of time. The first instruction of the Prophet was 'Oneness of God'.

The Qur'an entails a plethora of theological issues about general principles and detailed descriptions of the Oneness of God, Prophethood, and the afterlife. There also have been numerous debates between the Prophet and Jewish and Christian scholars. [13](#) Such evidences prove that theological discussions and debates existed from the very beginning of Islam.

Therefore, the teachings presented by the Prophet (s) triggered the discussion of theological issues. The verses of the Qur'an not only supported raising such issues, but they were essential in forming theological trends.

However, the collection of such discussions and debates is not the discipline of kalam, although some believe that it is kalam, and those who sought these discussions were called Mutakallim. [14](#)

There truly is no proof for this claim. Thus, the grounds for emerging theological discussions or the discipline of kalam are the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet rather than the influx of Greek philosophy, even though Greek philosophy was influential in generating such issues. [15](#)

Imamate was among the first theological discussions considered as the most important about which Muhammad ibn ‘Abdulkarim Shahrastani (479 – 548 AH) says, “Muslims have not fought over any other issues as much as over this.”¹⁶

This issue arose soon after the Prophet (s) passed away, and it led to the emergence of Sunnism and Shi‘ism, the two major Islamic schools of thought. Sunnis believe in the election of a caliph as that which relies on the counsel of people, just as Abu Bakr was appointed as the caliph.

On the other hand, the Shi‘a believe that appointment of the successor of the Prophet (s) must be through Allah, and the sole person qualified for this task was Ali ibn Abi Talib. The concept of Imamate led to debates among scholars that developed over the course of history and led each group to write voluminous treatises and books.

Various methods have been used by kalam scholars of different theological schools of thought. Shi‘a scholars such as Hisham ibn ‘Abd al-Malik, Hisham ibn Salim, and Mu‘min al-Taq emphasized on reason as well as tradition; Mu‘tazilite Kalam scholars such as Wasil ibn ‘Ata’, Abu al-Hudhayl ‘Allaf, Abu ‘Ali and Abu Hisham Juba‘i – who followed the Sunni school of thought – insisted on using reason.

The People of Hadith – another Sunni sect – used strict interpretation and ruling to the mere appearance of verses and traditions and would not accept any question about its content and message. This strong opposition encouraged Asharite and Matridite Kalam scholars such as Abu al-Hasan Ash‘ari and Abu Mansur Matridi from other Sunni sects to mediate and reconcile the Mu‘tazilites and the People of Hadith.

The history of kalam in the following centuries shows that some philosophical issues entered kalam first seen in the works of Sheikh Mufid (d. 413 A.H.) such as in his *Awa’il al-Maqalat* and the works of Sayyid Murtada (d. 436 A.H.) such as *Al-Dhakhirah fi ‘Ilm al-Kalam* among Shi‘ite sources.

Later, philosophical issues were seen in the works of Fakhr Radi (d. 606 A.H.) such as *Al-Muhassal* and in *Al-Barahin fi ‘Ilm al-Kalam* among Sunni sources. It was seen afterwards in the works of Khajeh Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 672 A.H.) such as *Tajrid al-I’tiqad* and the works of Ibn Maytham Bahrani (d. 699 A.H.) such as *Qawa’id al-Maram*. This mixture lasted for centuries to the present time when such issues were seen in kalam texts.

Although kalam is among the most essential Islamic science, this discipline has had serious opposition among both Sunni and Shi‘a Muslims. Those who fervently objected to kalam were the People of Hadith as they resisted against any interpretation of verses and traditions based on reason.

Accordingly, Ahmad ibn Hanbal said, “There are three things that are not found in Islam: Maghazi, Malalim, and Kalam.”¹⁷ He also declared, “One who knows kalam can never achieve salvation. Kalam scholars are heretical.”¹⁸ Abu Hanifa’s student, Abu Yasuf, said, “Anyone who seeks [to understand] religion through kalam is a deviator.”¹⁹

Shafi'i said accordingly, "If God afflicts His servant with all great sins except polytheism, it would be far better than He afflicts His servant to learn anything from kalam."²⁰ He also declared as a ruling, "If a man leaves all his books to another in his will, and a book on kalam is to be found among them, that book could not be left included with other books."²¹

The peak of the Shafi'is' opposition with Kalam and its scholars is understood in the following statement: "They [Kalam scholars] must be lashed and taken around among tribes and announce that 'This is the punishment of those who abandon the Qur'an and tradition to learn Kalam.'"²²

Branches of Kalam

Emergence of various branches of Kalam in religion was triggered historical and social factors; however, one of the most important features is the difference of opinions towards the nature of religion, religious texts, their interpretation, and the details of religious issues.²³

In different periods and after each occasion, an ideological and intellectual issue arose which led to formation of different schools. Each group distributed their own ideas and beliefs to attract more followers, and Islamic society ultimately faced the formation of new sects.

Thus, the debate regarding the concept of imamate divided the Islamic society into Shi'as and Sunnis. The important issues that led to the emergence of the Khawarij and Murji'ah were faith, deeds, and the rulings regarding major sins. The method of interpreting verses and narrations that led to thinking of God as a corporeal being led to the emergence of sects such as Hashwiyyah and Kiramiyyah.

On the whole, the most distinguished sects and schools of kalam in the Islamic world include:

1. The Shi'a: Those who believe in the uninterrupted succession of Imam Ali (a) after the Prophet (s). They eventually divided into different groups such as the Zaydis²⁴, Isma'ilis,²⁵ and Waqifids.²⁶ The most distinguished Shi'a kalam scholars living contemporary with the Imams (a) were great personalities such as Qays ibn al-Masir, Mu'min Taq (d. c. 160 A.H.), Hisham ibn Hakam (d. c. 199 A.H.), Hisham ibn Salim, and Fadl ibn Shadhan (d. 260 A.H.).

Since the beginning of the Age of Occultation of the Twelfth Imam (a), there have been eminent kalam scholars such as Sheikh Sadaq (d. 381 A.H.), Sheikh Mufid (d. 413 A.H.) Sayyid Murtada 'Alam al-Huda (d. 436 A.H.), Khajjah Nasir al-Din Tusi (d. 672 A.H.), 'Allamah Hilli (d. 726 A.H.), and Fadil Miqdad (d. 826 A.H.).

2. The Mu'tazilites: The Mu'tazilites, whose founder was Wasil ibn 'Ata (d. 131 A.H.) believe in five principles: the Oneness of God, justice, position between positions, reward and punishment, enjoining the good and forbidding the evil.²⁷ The peak of the Mu'tazilites' power was during the era of Ma'man 'Abbasi until the ruling of Wathiq 'Abbasi (198 – 232 A.H.). Afterwards, this sect began its decline.²⁸

The most renowned kalam scholars of this group were Abu Hudhayi ‘Allaf (d. 227 A.H.), Ibrahim ibn Sayyar Nazzam (d. 231 A.H.), Abu ‘Uthman Jahiz (d. 255 A.H.), Abu al-Hasan Khayyat (d. c. 300 A.H.), Abu ‘Ali Juba’i (d. 303 A.H.), Abu Hashim Juba’i (d. 321 A.H.) and Judge ‘Abd al-Jabbar Mu‘tazili (d. 415 A.H.).

3. The Asharites: The founder of this sect was Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Isma‘ii Ash‘ari who began as a Mu‘tazilite and later searched to find a way between the Mu‘tazilites’ rationality and textualism of the People of Hadith. Thus, he broke away from them and founded this new school of thought. He presented new theories, among which is the famous ‘theory of acquisition (kasb)’ as opposed to determinism (jabr) and “delegation of affairs to humanity” (tafwid).

Nowadays, the most well-known Sunni kalam school of thought is Ashari. Its prominent kalam scholars include Judge Abu Bakr Baqilani (d. 403 A.H.), Abu al-Ma‘ali ‘Abd al-Malik Juwayni (d. 478 A.H.) known as Imam al-Haramayn, Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazzali (d. 505 A.H.), Muhammad ibn ‘Umar Fakhr Razi (d. 606), Abu al-Hasan Ali ibn Abi Ali Sayf al-Din Amadi (d. 631 A.H.), Judge ‘Adud al-Din Iji (d. 756 A.H.), and Sa‘d al-Din Mas‘ad ibn ‘Umar Taftazani (722 – 792 A.H.).

4. Maturidiyyah: This sect was founded by Abu Mansur Matiridi (d. 333 A.H.). He rose in central Asia (Samarqand) – similar to Abu al-Hasan Ash‘ari – with the intention of reforming religious beliefs. His viewpoints were close to the Asharites’ although they differed in some issues such as intellectual goodness and badness, where the Shi‘a and Mu‘tazilites perspectives are similar in this regard. Prominent Matiridi Kalam scholars include Abu Mu‘in Nasafi (d. 508 A.H.), Najm al-Din ‘Imran Nasafi (d. 537 A.H.), and Abu al-Barakat Nisfi (d. 701 A.H.).[29](#)

Islamic Philosophy

Philosophy is among the common intellectual sciences among Muslim scholars. Although the time of emergence of philosophical thoughts and issues existed long before Islam and assumed to have emerged in Old Greece, the role of Islamic philosophers in its development is not hidden to anyone so far as Muslim philosophers such as Farabi and Ibn Sina are concerned as they are infamous names in the field of philosophy.

The Nature of Philosophy

The term ‘philosophy’ termed by Socrates, is a Greek word derived from ‘philosophia’ meaning “the lover of knowledge.” Philosophy would be the title for three types of sciences: a) all real sciences b) all real and conventional sciences and c) Non-empirical sciences and knowledge.[30](#)

In a general sense, philosophy includes all rational sciences as opposed to scripture-based sciences. This includes lexicology, hermeneutics, rhetoric, prosody, exegesis, hadith studies, Islamic law, and principles of Islamic law.

In this sense, philosophy has been applied to all intellectual sciences including intellectual theology, mathematics, politics, and ethics. But today, the term 'philosophy' is commonly applied to a specific branch of intellectual sciences which studies the 'descriptions of being qua being.'

In this application, philosophy can be considered a discipline that independently discusses the concept of being, and general descriptions of it using rational and analogical methods as well as self-evident propositions; it ultimately provides a comprehensive and rational interpretation of the entire world.

History of Islamic Philosophy

When the Islamic territory expanded and included different tribes and nations, many scientific centers were established in these lands. This created the grounds for the exchange of knowledge by scholars of diverse regions.

And because the official language of these countries was Arabic, many books from Indian, Hebrew, Latin, Persian and other languages were translated to Arabic to prepare the grounds for Muslim thinkers to become acquainted with philosophical opinions of notable scholars of other regions, especially ancient Greece.^{[31](#)}

In doing so, brilliant people such as Farabi and Avicenna made great endeavors as people who were prolific in all philosophical thoughts of their period and analyzed them selectively using their God-given talent under the light of revelation and sayings the Ahlul Bayt. They founded a philosophical system which although influenced by the views of Plato, Neoplatonists and Aristotle^{[32](#)}, it included novel beliefs which were considered a new system.

Another deep evolution in Islamic philosophy was owing to the endeavors of Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (549–587 A.H.). Using the ideas of ancient Iranian philosophers and comparing them with the ideas of Plato, Plotinus, and Stoics, Suhrawardi founded a new school called "The School of Illuminationism" which is mostly influenced by Platonic ideas.

However, some Islamic scholars^{[33](#)} believe that Suhrawardi adopted his illuminationist approach under the influence of Islamic Sufis and mystics. Merging mystical findings with reasoning was his innovation. The main difference between the two illuminationist and peripatetic philosophical schools is that illuminationism does not consider reason and intellectual justifications enough for studying philosophical issues, especially theosophy.

It considers the efforts made for the spiritual journey that leads to purification necessary to discover realities, though the peripatetic philosophical school relied on mere reasoning.

In later periods, notable philosophers such as Khajih Nasir al-Din Tusi and Muhaqqiq Dawani critiqued previous scholars' views and generated new theories that enriched Islamic philosophy; this eventually carried Islamic philosophy to a new age of development.

Khajih Nasir al-Din Tusi (597 – 672 A.H.) a peripatetic philosopher, revived the philosophy of Ibn Sina, titled “The Chief of Paripatetics,” in the 7th century A.H. by compiling notes on Avicenna’s *Isharat wa Tanbihat* and organizing it to eventually preserve Ibn Sina’s philosophy.^{[34](#)}

In that book, he answered all major objections issued by Imam Fakhr Razi (d. 606 A.H.) who himself had an explanatory book on Avicenna’s *Isharat wa Tanbihat*. The connections between these two explanatory notes on *Isharat wa Tanbihat* led to discussions between Muslim philosophers of different generations.^{[35](#)}

Peripatetic philosophy was later led by Jalal al-Din Dawani (830 – 908 A.H.) who was a famous philosopher of the 9th century A.H. He had a liking for peripatetic philosophy and so he wrote his comments on one of the explanatory books on Khajjah Nasir al-Din Tusi’s *Al-Tajrid*. His comments, reviewed by Sadr al-Din Muhammad Dashtaki (d. 903 A.H.), were later called *Ifashiyeh-ye Qadim* or The Old Comments. In his second series of comments, Dawani answered to Dashtaki’s objections in his review.

Again later, Dashtaki reviewed and critiqued Dawani’s answers and again Dawani responded to Dashtaki’s objections in his third series of comments, later called *Ifashiyeh-ye Ajadd* or The Newer Comments. All three series of Dawani’s comments and the two reviews by Sadr al-Din Muhammad Dashtaki are known as a collection called *Tabaqat al-Jalaliyyah wa al-Sadriyyah*.^{[36](#)}

Ghiyath al-Din Mansur Dashtaki Shirazi (d. 948 A.H.), son of Sadr al-Din Muhammad Dashtaki, can be considered as the connecting link with the new era of Islamic philosophy which was called The School of Isfahan. He was among the great Shi’a scholars of the Safavid period in rational sciences as well as fiqh and its principles.^{[37](#)} He trained students who filled the gap between his period and the time of Mirdamad, the founder of the School of Isfahan.

Mir Burhan al-Din Muhammad Baqir Damad is seen as the representatives of the first generation of philosophers during the Safavid period in Iran. He was son of Mir Shams al-Din Damad, the son-in-law of Muhaqqiq Karaki (or the second Muhaqqiq [meaning “researcher”]) who came to Iran at the beginning of the Safavid period. Mir Damad^{[38](#)} was born in Astar-Abad.

He later moved to Mashhad with his family and afterwards moved to Isfahan. There, he became proficient in both fields of rational and traditional sciences. His works include literature in philosophy, kalam, Prophetic traditions, narrations of the Imams, Shi’a jurisprudence, Qur’anic exegesis, ethics, mysticism, and logic.

Nonetheless, he knew himself as a philosopher by calling himself “The Third Teacher” after Aristotle and Farabi.^{[39](#)} His philosophy works include *Al-Siraf al-Mustaqim wa al-’Ufuq al-Mubin*, his most important work being *Qabasat Ifaqq al-Yaqin fi Ifudath al-’Alam* or simply, *Qabasat*, a book about the creation of the world and the possibility of its origination in God.

Selected philosophers in Isfahan contemporary with Mir Damad were Sheikh Baha'i, Mir Fendereski, and Judge Sa'id Qummi (d. 1103 A.H.) who were considered among the most distinguished personalities of the Isfahan School of Philosophy.

Isfahan's main goal was to unite various and sometimes contradictory rational approaches, each of which would have been accepted by a group of Muslims over the course of history and to incorporate all of them under the title of Shi'a teachings.[40](#)

Its founder, Mulla Sadra Shirazi, a distinguished student of Mir Damad, mixed the harmonious elements of peripatetic and intuitive philosophy and mystic disclosures and added his own views to present 'transcendental philosophy,' a term well-rooted in Islamic philosophy.

Among the most important measures of Sadr al-Muta'allihin[41](#) in transcendental philosophy was organizing philosophical topics in the order mystics have taught regarding the spiritual journey of the soul. According to Sadra's system, philosophical topics and issues are categorized in four groups of issues: a) Principles and base of issues about monotheism, b) Monotheism, theology, and divine attributes, c) Divine actions and universals in being, and 4) The Hereafter and soul.

The Four Journeys by Asfar Arba'ah is written according to the mentioned system.[42](#)

Philosophical issues

As was mentioned before, philosophy is "being qua being" and it is clear that issues discussed in philosophy are about the mentioned subject and its surroundings. Thus, most important issues in philosophy are categorized into four groups[43](#) of issues that deal with:

Existence itself versus non-existence. More specifically, the fundamentality of existence and quiddity.

Different types of existence such as necessary being versus contingent being, created being versus eternal being, external being versus mental being.

General laws of existence such as causality, ontological homogeneity of cause and effect, priority and posteriority, and togetherness in the levels of existence.

The affirmation of the levels or realms of existence. Islamic philosophers categorize realms of existence into four groups: The world of nature (nasat), the world of analogies (malakat), the world of intellect (jabarat) and the realm of Divinity (lahat).

Islamic Mysticism

One of the disciplines that originated and developed in Islamic culture is mysticism (irfan). Although some people believe that mysticism and delicate mystical thoughts have been imported from outside of Islam such as the ideas that mysticism is rooted in Christian thought[44](#), neo-Plutonian[45](#) belief, or inspired by Upanishadic (Hindu) teachings.[46](#)

However, mysticism in Islam, whether in practical or theoretical aspects, originated from Islamic genuine sources and has later adapted principles accordingly. During the course of its development, it has been influenced by kalam, philosophy, and particularly illuminist philosophy.⁴⁷ Islamic culture includes vast theoretical and practical issues as well as spiritual models that motivated Muslims towards mystical issues.⁴⁸

Description of Islamic Mysticism

Lexically, mysticism means ‘knowing’ and terminologically it is “knowing the monotheistic and spiritual truth of existence in which its origin includes a simple, general, obscure, and subconscious quality and in an internal-knowing process, that origin turns to an intuitive, distinctive, clear, and definite knowledge.”⁴⁹ This unique knowledge cannot be grasped through sensation, experience, reason, or tradition, and is attained through internal intuition and spiritual perception.⁵⁰

As a cultural and scientific system, mysticism has theoretical and practical aspects:

Theoretical mysticism is the knowledge of that which the mystic achieves through his intuition at the end of his spiritual journey. This includes knowing God and the manifestations of His Names and Attributes, as well as His relation with plurality. A mystic’s monotheism is the ultimate point of the perfection where the he or she comprehends that everything other than God is a mere image; there is actually nothing but God.

The rest are manifestations and aspects of the Truth. Scholars of theoretical mysticism claim that they grasp these truths through intuition and they are taught in the form of analytical knowledge and words. They would make efforts to benefit from similes, metaphors, and allegories to create even an ambiguous and incomplete image from those truths in the minds and hearts of their listeners.⁵¹

Accordingly, subjects of theoretical mysticism are categorized into three groups:

- Mystical theology (or specific unity of existence)
- Mystical cosmology (or the order of creation)
- Mystical anthropology (or the notion of perfect man)

In fact, mystical issues revolve around the origination and circulation of plurality from the essential unity of God, the relation between this plurality with that essential unity, and the explanation of manifestations of Divine Names and Attributes.⁵²

Practical mysticism is the relation of a person with himself, the world, and with God. This is about the traveler’s journey, that is, his starting point, the steps he must take, the states of heart experienced within each step, and the position attained after each step for a traveler on the spiritual path to reach the highest level of perfection i.e. Unity.⁵³

In practical mysticism, mystics take heed to the heart and its actions. The meaning of actions is broader than the mere actions of limbs; it includes the actions of the heart as well and practical steps are taken to improve it. [54](#) Overall, practical mysticism paves the way of spiritual journey for the mystic to ultimately reach his or her final goal.

The mystical journey, like any common developmental stage, is a spiritual movement that begins from the lower and superficial levels of the soul and ends with profound levels. These phases correspond with the spiritual stations that the traveler experiences:

The initial stages of the spiritual journey that correspond to the traveler's soul.

The middle of the way towards God that correspond to the traveler's soul; the traveler enters after he passes the stations of the self.

The final stations of the mystical journey that correspond to the most interior aspect of human being, i.e. his 'inner self' (sirr).

Each of above stages includes particular stations and each of those stations includes positions that comprise of one hundred stations and positions the traveler must pass. Khajih 'Abdullah Ansari's *Manazil al- Sa'irin* (or the Hundred Stations) a prominent work in the field of Mysticism, elucidates the hundred mentioned stations in detail.

History

Islamic mysticism traces back to the first century after hijrah. Although the development of Sufism and Irfan and the groups attributed to them did not exist in the first century A.H., the existence of theoretical and practical concepts of Irfan in the first century confirms that all that the mystics achieved in the following centuries can be found in the teachings of the Prophet (s), Imams (a) and in their companions' acts. [55](#)

From the beginning of Hijrah, people such as Abu Dhar al-Ghiffari and Salman Farsi, who were trained in comprehending Islamic rulings, spread the message and taught people how to purify their souls. People such as Kumayl ibn Ziyad Nakha'i and Uways Qarani (d. 37 A.H.) as well as many Sufis followed Abu Dhar and Salman. [56](#)

Centuries after them, Sufi historians listed mystics such as Hasan Basri (d. 110 A.H.), Malik ibn Dinar (d. 131 A.H.), Ibrahim ibn Ad-ham (d. 166 A.H.), Rabi'ah 'Adwiyyah (d. 135 or 185 A.H.), Fudayi ibn 'Ayad (d. 187 A.H.) and Shaiq Balkhi (d. 194 A.H.). However, Islamic Irfan bloomed in the beginning of the third century A.H.

Islamic Irfan entered a new stage during the beginning of the third century A.H. until the beginning of the seventh century A.H. In this period, mystics became prolific authors in their field as great mystical works

were published. The specific Irfan terminology was adopted mostly from Islamic concepts and sometimes from philosophy and kalam (Islamic theology).

Practical Irfan, the base of Islamic Irfan until the seventh century A.H., reached its peak. In that period, organization, group hierarchy, traditions, and Sufi rituals were fully developed.⁵⁷ Renowned mystics of that period included Harith Muhasibi (d. 243 A.H.), Dhu al-Nan Misri (d. 245 A.H.), Ba Yazid Bastami (d. 261 A.H.), Junayd Baghdadi (d. 297 A.H.), Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 306 or 309 A.H.), Abu Sa'id Abu al-Khayr (d. 440 A.H.), Abu al-Qasim Qushayri (d. 465 A.H.), Khajeh Abullah Ansari (396 – 481 A.H.), and Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazzali (450 – 505 A.H.).

The evolutionary process of Islamic Irfan continued until the seventh century, making it the turning point of Islamic irfan. Practical Irfan reached its peak although theoretical Irfan was also frequently discussed in their works. Through Sheikh Akbar and Muhammad ibn Ali Muhy al-Din Arabi (560 – 638 A.H.), theoretical Irfan became independent and about which an independent book was written. Muhy al-Din organized topics in Irfan. He also explained the details of topics in theoretical Irfan which were often seen in the works of previous mystics.⁵⁸

Muhy al-Din Arabi's two important works are Fusas al-Hikam and Futahat Makkiyyah. The latter is like an encyclopedia of theoretical and practical Irfan. Regarding Fusas al-Hikam, Muhy al-Din claimed it to have been bestowed on him by the holy Prophet (s) in a dream.⁵⁹

Muhy al-Din's efforts in Irfan resulted in three achievements: 1. Irfan was drawn near to philosophy and philosophers and mystics became better friends; 2. Discussions on the concept of the perfect man drew Muhy al-Din's school close to the school of Shi'ism and Imamate. 3. Religious law (i.e. all religious beliefs) was drawn near to Irfan.

Muhy al-Din's Irfan was adopted from religious law as he benefited from the verses of the Qur'an and narrations in Futahat Makkiyyah.⁶⁰

After Muhy al-Din, his school of Irfan was developed and promoted through his students, at the top of whom was Muhammad ibn Isl'aaq Sadr al-Din Qanawi (603 – 773 A.H.). In the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries, his school reached its height through great personalities such as Abd al-Razzaq Qasani (d. 716 or 730 A.H.), Dawad ibn Mahmud Qayari (d. 751 A.H.), Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Turkah, Sayyid Haydar Amuli (d. 783 A.H.), Ali ibn Muhammad Turkah (d. 835 A.H.), Abd al-Rahman ibn Ahmad Jami (d. 898 A.H.). But from the 10th century A.H. on, theoretical Irfan declined as less researchers in Irfan were available. With Mulla Sadra in the 11th century, Irfan and Islamic thought entered a new era.

Mulla Sadra helped promote its progress which Muhy al-Din had begun in the 7th century A.H. in drawing reason, heart, philosophy, and Irfan to its perfection and full agreement with philosophy.

He enriched the language of philosophy and the usage of precise terminology to simplify matters in Irfan. Mulla Sadra also made understanding theoretical Irfan easy for those after him without having to have

embarked on a spiritual journey, even though being on one would prove beneficial in understanding truths in Irfan.[61](#)

From among Mulla Sadra's other efforts was separating genuine Islamic Irfan from the Sufi movement of his time which was going astray. Mulla Sadra's *Asnam al-Jahiliyyah* critiqued the Sufi order that did not coincide with Islamic mysticism and instead promoted heterodox beliefs, limiting performance only to the rituals, and paying less attention to religious practices and law.

One of the results of such efforts is differentiation in the meaning of the terms Sufi and 'Arif [mystic], in a way that Sufi and Sufism had negative connotations and they were used to distinguish false movements of Irfan from the genuine Islamic Irfan. Since then, true great mystics did not accept Sufi orders and instead gradually made a certain chain of order like a purified sapling which benefitted Shi'a with great fruits and blessings.

Some luminaries after Mulla Sadra, have been the fruits of the mentioned sapling such as: Mulla Muhsin Feyd Kashani (d. 1091 A.H.), Qac.i Sa'id Qummi (d. between 1107 and 1100 A.H.), Mulla Ali Nari Mazandarani (d. 1246 A.H.), Mulla Hadi Sabzwari (d. 1289 A.H.), Akhand Mulla Husayn Quli Hamadani (d. 1311 A.H.), Sayyid Ali Aqa Qadi Tabataba'i (d. 1366 A.H.) and Muhammad Taqi Bahjat Famani (d. 1430 A.H.).

Stations and positions in Islamic Irfan

Mystics believe that without passing the stations of true mysticism, one would not reach true irfan. As said before, according to some mystics like Khwajah Abdullah Ansari, there are one hundred stations. In what follows, we refer to some of the major stations along with the outcomes of passing through them as explained by Ayatollah Murtada Mutahhari.[62](#)

The first station: This is 'desire,' a kind of inclination and liking that befalls a person as a result of thinking, worshipping, or having faith; this occurs when a person's soul moves towards the truth. This desire is in fact a kind of awakesness and incentives will be created in it to enable it to answer the truth.

The second station: Action, self-discipline, and asceticism. The goals of ascetics are three: a) driving out all but God that is actualized through an ascetic life, b) controlling the soul which tempts people towards vices and its control can be achieved through worship and presence of the heart, c) to soften and purify the soul to foster awareness through true love together with reserve and constraint.

The third station: The mystical trances[63](#) that the traveler experiences. At the beginning, this state is transient, unless the traveler continues his or her asceticism. It is quite possible that a mystic looks at something and then quickly recalls the realm of the Holy. In mystical terminology, it is called 'the time' (waqt).

The fourth station: A continuation of the mystical raptures. Transient attractions turn into continued and

ever-following raptures so that the mystic would be familiar with the Truth. In other words, it is as if he has always been together with the Truth and has experienced it with it, while becoming distressed when he distances himself from Him.

The fifth station: The mystic is drawn to seeing the truth while it is no more under his control. He would see God behind anything he sees and he would detach himself from anything other than God. At such a state, his conscience is a clear and unclouded mirror that reflects the Truth. In a way which cannot be described by words, spiritual pleasures cast upon the mystic, which shuttles between two views: a view towards the Truth and a view towards his self [as the mirror]. He would sometimes look into the One reflected in the mirror and sometimes look into the mirror itself which reflects that One.

In the next stage, the mystic becomes [ignored from and] invisible to himself and sees only God. This is when the mystic is connected with the Truth and the mystic's journey from the self to the Truth ends.

After finishing this journey, the mystic makes a journey in the Creator Himself. This means that he becomes familiar with the Divine Names and Attributes and tries to manifest them in himself as much as possible.

In his next journey, the mystic returns to the people without disconnecting himself from the Truth. While he is with the Truth, he turns to people to help and guide them.

Finally, the mystic's last journey is among people of the Truth in which he is with people and among them and tries to direct their affairs in the way that they can be directed towards God.

[1.](#) Lecturer at the Jami'at al-Zahra (a), Qum.

[2.](#) Islamic theology

[3.](#) Islamic jurisprudence

[4.](#) Islamic ethics, spirituality and moral teachings

[5.](#) Islamic mysticism

[6.](#) 'Abd al-Razzaq, Mustafa, *Zamineh-ye Tarikhi-ye Falssafeh-ye Eslami* (translated title), trans. by Fathali Akbari, p. 18.

[7.](#) Ibn Meytham Bahrani who was a scholar of Kalam in the 8th century AH reports from other Kalam scholars call this discipline as 'principles of religion'. *Qawa'id al-Maram fi 'Ilm al-Kalam*, p. 20.

[8.](#) Taftazani, a Sunni scholar of Kalam, has used this term in *Sharh al-Maqasid*, p. 164.

[9.](#) Ibid.

[10.](#) Halabi, Ali Asghar, *Ilm Kalam dar Iran wa Jahan-e Islam*, p. 28.

[11.](#) The hadith narrated by Ibn Abi al-'Awja' is among such hadiths. He came to Imam Sadiq (a) and asked: "Do you allow me to enter the science of Kalam?" Imam (a) allowed him. *Sadaq, Al-Tawhid*, Ch. 36, hadith no. 4.

[12.](#) "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice and dispute with them in a manner that is best." Qur'an, (16: 125)

[13.](#) Cf. Tabarsi, Ahmad ibn Ali, *Al-Ihtijaj*, vol. 1, pp. 14 – 89.

[14.](#) 'Abd al-Halim, Muhammad, *Kalami Qadim*, trans. by Mohsen Jahangiri, cited in *Tarikh-e Falsafeh-ye Islami*, supervised by Sayyid Husayn Nasr and Oliver Leaman, p. 132.

[15.](#) Fakhri, Majid, *Sayr falsafeh fil Islam*, trans. by a group of translators under supervision of Nasrullah Par Javadi, Tehran, Markaz Nashr Daneshgahi, 1994, p.59

However, elsewhere in his book, the author clearly says that emergence of the discipline of Kalam in the second century

[A.H] was due to a new questioning spirit in people raised by entering the Greek philosophy in Islamic world. Ibid. p. 221.

16. Shahrastani, Muhammad ibn 'Abdulkarim, *Al-Milal wa al-Nihal*, vol. 1, p. 24.

17. Cf. *Tafsir al-Minar*, quoted from Ali Asghar Halabi in *Ilm Kalam dar Iran wa Jahan-e Islam*, pp. 32 and 33.

18. Ibn Jawzi, *Abu al-Faraj*, Tilbis Iblis, p. 87.

19. Halabi, Ali Asghar, Ibid., p. 33.

20. Ibid.

21. Fakhr Razi, *Tafsir Kabir*, vol. 2, p. 96 quoted by Ali Asghar Halabi, *ibid.*, p. 33.

22. Ibn Jawzi, Ibid.

23. Sabiri, Husayn, *Tarikh Feraq-e Islami* (1), p. 31.

24. The supporters of the imamate of Zayd ibn Ali.

25. The supporters of the imamate of Isma'il ibn Ja'far.

26. Believers in accomplishment of imamate in Imam al-Kazim.

27. Cf. Ash'ari, Abu al-Hasan, *Firaq wa Madhahib Kalami*, pp. 276 – 277.

28. Cf. Rabbani Gulpayigani, Ali, *Firaq wa Madhahib-e Kalami*, pp. 276 & 277.

29. Sabiri, Husayn, *Tarikh Feraq-e Islami* (1), pp. 303 – 305.

30. Misbal; Yazdi, Muhammad Taqi, *Amazesh-e Falsafeh*, p. 65.

31. Ibid. p. 30.

32. Aristotle and his followers were called "peripatetics" with reference to Aristotle's practice of walking to and fro while teaching

33. Mutahhari, Murtada, *Ashna'i ba 'Ulam-e Eslami*, vol. 1, p. 145. [trans. as "Understanding Islamic Sciences", ICAS, 2000: London]

34. Sayyid Husayn Nasr and Oliver Leaman, *History of Islamic Philosophy* trans. by a group of philosophers, vol. 3, p. 39.

35. Ibid., p. 43.

36. Ibid., pp. 110 – 111.

37. He had a discussion with Muhaqqiq Karaki on the issue of the accurate calculation of the direction of Qiblah which resulted in correction of direction of Qiblahs in all mosques in Iran. During that discussion, they entered into a dispute and Shah Tahmasb Safavi backed

Muhaqqiq Karaki and took the title and position of Dashtaki as the "Sadr al-Din" and gave it to Karaki.

38. Mir Burhan al-Din Muhammad Baqir Damad

39. Ibid., pp. 130 – 132.

40. Ibid., p. 165.

41. Byname of Mulla Sadra Shirazi

42. Mutahhari, Murtada, *Ashna'i ba 'Ulam-e Eslami*, vol. 1, p. 157. [trans. as "Understanding Islamic Sciences", ICAS, 2000: London]

43. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 163.

44. Badawi, 'Abd al-Ral;man, *Tarikh al-Tasawwuf al-Islami*, p. 32.

45. Ibid., p. 40.

46. Ibid., p. 35.

47. Mutahhari, Murtada, *Ashna'i ba 'Ulam-e Eslami*, vol. 2, p. 84. [trans. as "Understanding Islamic Sciences", ICAS, 2000: London]

48. Amini Nejad, Ali, *Ashna'i ba Majma'eh-ye 'Irfan-e Eslami*, p. 62.

49. Muvahhidiyan 'Attar, Ali, *Mafham-e Irfan*, p. 433.

50. Misbal; Yazdi, Muhammad Taqi, *Dar Justujay-e Irfan-e Eslami*, p.33.

51. Ibid., p. 38.

52. Yathribi, Sayyid Yahya, *Irfan-e Nazari*, p. 218.

53. Misbal; Yazdi, *ibid.*

54. Amini Nejad, Ibid., p. 403.

55. Ibid., p. 87.

[56.](#) Ibid., p. 88.

[57.](#) Ibid., pp. 99–100

[58.](#) Yazdan–Panah, Seyyed Yadullah, Mabani wa Usal Irfan Na’?ari, p. 26.

[59.](#) Muhy al–Din, Fusus al–Ifikam, p. 47.

[60.](#) Yazdan–Panah, Ibid., pp. 54 – 56.

[61.](#) Ibid. pp. 58–59.

[62.](#) Mutahhari, Murtada, Ashna’i ba ‘Ulam–e Eslami, vol. 2, p. 124. [trans. as “Understanding Islamic Sciences”, ICAS, 2000: London]

[63.](#) “About the state of trance, some mystics have said that: Upon the encounter with the heavenly souls, the soul of the mystic receives impacts enabling him to learn about incidences in the future. He would receive such impacts in his dreams while sleeping as well as while he is awake. Whatever he sees while he is asleep are truthful dreams and whatever he sees while he is awake are visionary disclosures and whatever he experiences between sleep and wakefulness is trance.” Cf. Sajjadi, Ja’far, Farhang–e Ma’arif Islami, vol. 2, p. 929.

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