

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

<u>Home > An Introduction to Ilm al-Kalam > Definition and subject matter of 'ilm al-kalam > The Various Schools of Kalam</u>

Definition and subject matter of 'ilm al-kalam

For a definition of *'ilm al-kalam,* it is sufficient to say that, 'It is a science which studies the basic doctrines of the Islamic faith (*usul al-Din*). It identifies the basic doctrines and seeks to prove their validity and answers any doubts which may be cast upon them.'

In texts on logic and philosophy it is mentioned that every science has a special subject of its own, and that the various sciences are distinguished from one another due to their separate subject matter.

This is certainly true, and those sciences whose subject matter has a real unity are such. However, there is nothing wrong if we form a discipline whose unity of subject matter and the problems covered by it is an arbitrary and conventional one, in the sense that it covers diverse, mutually exclusive subjects, which are given an arbitrary unity because they serve a single purpose and objective.

In sciences whose subject has an essential unity, there is no possibility of overlapping of problems. But in sciences in which there is a conventional unity among the issues dealt with, there is nothing wrong if there is an overlapping of issues. The commonness of the problems between philosophy and *kalam*, psychology and *kalam*, or sociology and *kalam*, is due to this reason.

Some Islamic scholars have sought to define and outline the subject matter of 'ilm al-kalam, and have expressed various opinions. But this is a mistake; because a clear-cut delineation of the subject of study is possible for only those sciences which have an essential unity among the problems dealt with. But in those sciences in which there is a conventional unity of problems dealt with, there can be no unity of subject. Here we cannot discuss this issue further.

The Name "Ilm al-Kalam"

Another point is why this discipline has been called "*'ilm al-kalam"*, and when this name was given to it. Some have said that it was called "*kalam"* (*lit.* speech) because it gives an added power of speech and argument to one who is well-versed in it. Some say that the reason lies in the habit of the experts of this science who began their own statements in their books with the expression "*al-kalamu fi kadha*".

Others explain that it was called "kalam" because it discussed issues regarding which the Ahl al-Hadith preferred to maintain complete silence. Yet according to others this name came to be in vogue when the issue whether the Holy Qur'an (called "kalamullahi"), the Divine Utterance1, i.e. the Holy Qur'an) is created (makhluq) or not, became a matter for hot debate amongst the Muslim – a controversy which led to animosity between the two opposite camps and bloodshed of many.

This is also the reason why that period is remembered as a "time of severe hardship" – *mihnah*. That is, since most of the debates about the doctrines of the faith revolved around the *huduth* (createdness, temporality) or the *qidam* (pre al-ternity) of the "Utterance" or *kalam* of God, this discipline which discussed the principal doctrines of the faith came to be called "*'ilm al-kalam''* (*lit.* the science of the Utterance). These are the various opinions that have been expressed about the reason why *'ilm al-kalam'* was given this name.

The Various Schools of Kalam

The Muslims differed with one another in matters of the Law (*fiqh*), following differing paths and dividing into various sects, such as Ja'fari, Zaydi, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali, each of which has a *fiqh* of its own. Similarly, from the viewpoint of the doctrine, they divided into various schools, each with its own set of principal doctrines. The most important of these schools are: the Shi'ah, the Mu'tazilah, the 'Asha'irah, and the Murji'ah.

Here it is possible that the question may arise as to the reason behind such regretful division of the Muslims into sects in matters dealing with *kalam* and *fiqh*, and why they could not maintain their unity in these spheres. The difference in matters of *kalam* causes disunity in their Islamic outlook, and the disagreement in the matter of *fiqh* deprives them of the unity of action.

Both this question and the regret are justified. But it is necessary to pay attention to the two following points:

- (i) The disagreement in issues of *fiqh* among the Muslims is not so great as to shatter the foundations of the unity of doctrinal outlook and mode of practice. There is so much common in their doctrinal and practical matters that the points of difference can hardly inflict any serious blow.
- (ii) Theoretical differences and divergence of views is inevitable in societies in spite of their unity and agreement in principles, and as long as the roots of the differences lie in methods of inference, and not in vested interests, they are even beneficial; because they cause mobility, dynamism, discussion, curiosity, and progress. Only when the differences are accompanied by prejudices and emotional and illogical alignments, and lead individuals to slander, defame, and treat one another with contempt, instead of motivating them to endeavour towards reforming themselves, that they are a cause of misfortune.

In the Shi'ite faith, the people are obliged to imitate a living *mujtahid*, and the *mujtahidun* are obliged to independently ponder the issues and form their independent opinions and not to be content with what has been handed down by the ancestors. *ljtihad* and independence of thought inherently lead to difference of views; but this divergence of opinions has given life and dynamism to the Shi'ite *fiqh*.

Therefore, difference in itself cannot be condemned. What is condemnable is the difference which originates in evil intentions and selfish interests, or when it centres around issues which drive Muslims on separate paths, such as the issue of *imamah* and leadership, not the difference in secondary and non-basic matters.

To undertake an examination of the intellectual history of the Muslims so as to find which differences originated in evil intentions, vested interests, and prejudices, and which were a natural product of their intellectual life, whether all points of difference in the sphere of *kalam* should be regarded as fundamental, or whether all problems in *fiqh* should be regarded as secondary, or if it is possible that a difference in *kalam* may not be of fundamental significance whereas one in *fiqh* may have such importance – these are questions which lie outside the brief scope of this lecture.

Before we take up the schools of *kalam* for discussion, it is essential to point out that there has been a group of scholars in the Islamic world which was basically opposed to the very idea of *'ilm al-kalam* and rational debate about Islamic doctrines, considering it a taboo and an innovation in the faith (*bid'ah*). They are known as "Ahl al-Hadith." Ahmad ibn Hanbal, one of the imams of jurisprudence of the Ahl al-Sunnah, stands foremost among them.

The Hanbalis are totally against *kalam*, Mu'tazilite or Ash'arite, not to speak of the Shi'ite *kalam*. In fact they are basically opposed to logic and philosophy. Ibn Taymiyyah, who was one of the eminent scholars of the Sunni world, gave a verdict declaring *kalam* and logic as 'unlawful'. Jalal al–Din al–Suyuti, another figure among the Ahl al–Hadith, has written a book called *Sawn al–mantiq wa al–kalam* 'an al–mantiq wa al–kalam ("Protecting speech and logic from [the evil of] 'ilm al–kalam and the science of logic").

Malik ibn Anas is another Sunni imam who considers any debate or inquiry about doctrinal matters to be unlawful. We have explained the Shi'ite viewpoint in this matter, in the introduction to Vol.V of *Usul al–falsafeh wa rawish al–riyalism*2.

The important schools of *kalam*, as mentioned earlier, are: Shi'ah, Mu'tazilah, Asha'irah, and Murji'ah. Some sects of the Khawarij and the Batinis, such as the Isma'ilis, have also been considered as schools of Islamic *kalam*3.

However, in my view, none of these two sects can be considered as belonging to the schools of Islamic *kalam.* The Khawarij, although they held specific beliefs in the matters of doctrine, and perhaps were the first to raise doctrinal problems by expressing certain beliefs about *Imamah*, the *kufr* (apostasy) of the *fasig* (evil–doer, one who commits major sins), and considered the disbelievers in these beliefs as

apostates, but they did not, firstly, create a rationalist school of thought in the Muslim world, and, secondly, their thinking was so much deviated – from the viewpoint of the Shi^lites – that it is difficult to count them among Muslims.

What makes things easy is that the Khawarij ultimately became extinct and only one of their sects, called "Abadiyyah" has some followers today. The Abadiyyah were the most moderate of all the Khawarij, and that is the reason why they have survived until today.

The Batinis, too, have so much liberally interfered in Islamic ideas on the basis of esotericism that it is possible to say that they have twisted Islam out of its shape, and that is the reason why the Muslim world is not ready to consider them as one of the sects of Islam.

About thirty years ago when the Dar al–Taqrib Bayna al–Madhahib al–'Islamiyyah was established in Cairo, the Imamiyyah Shi'ah, the Zaydiyyah, the Hanafi, the Shafi'i, the Maliki and the Hanbali sects, each of them had a representative. The Isma'ilis tried hard to send a representative of their own; but it was not accepted by other Muslims. Contrary to the Khawarij, who did not create a system of thought, the Batinis, despite their serious deviations, do have a significant school of *kalam* and philosophy. There have emerged among them important thinkers who have left behind a considerable number of works. Lately, the Orientalists have been showering great attention on the Batini thought and works.

One of the prominent Isma'ili figures is Nasir Khusrow al-'Alawi (d. 841/1437–38), the well-known Persian poet and the author of such famous works as *Jami' al-hikmatayn*, *Kitab wajh al-Din*, and *Khuwan al-'ikwan*. Another is Abu Hatam al-Razi (d. 332/943–44), the author of *A'lam al-nubuwwah*. Others are: Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, the author of *Kashf al-mahjub* (its Persian translation has been recently published), who died during the second half of the 4th/l0th century; Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani, a pupil of Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, has written a large number of books about the Isma'ili faith; Abu Hanifah Nu'man ibn Thabit, well-known as Qadi Nu'man or "the Shi'ite Abu Hanifah" (i.e. Isma'ili); his knowledge of *fiqh* and *hadith* is good, and his well-known book *Da'a'im al-'Islam* has been printed by lithotype several years ago.

1. Translator's Note: There are at least seventy–five places where the various derivatives of the root kalimah occur in the Qur'an. In three places the phrase kalam Allah is used in reference to the Qur'an (2:75, 9:6, 48:15).

The word kalimah (word, statement), or the plural kalimat, with reference to God occurs at least thirty times in the Qur'an, twice with reference to Jesus (A) who is called a "kalimah" of God. The Gospel of John designates Jesus Christ (A) as the "Eternal Word of God." The Qur'an also speaks of Jesus as a Word of God, while according to John's Gospel he is the Word, eternal and uncreated: "Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God."

We are further told: "Through him God made all things, not one thing in all creation was made without him. The Word was the source of life the Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son."

Probably the Christian belief in Jesus as the uncreated kalimat Allah (Word of God), some kind of a demiurge – a belief which probably emerged as a result of Manichaean influence on early Christianity – had prompted the early Muslims,

engaged in polemics with Christians on the nature of Jesus Christ, to consider in their turn, the Qur'an, the Kalam Allah, as uncreated and eternal

- 2. 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i, Usul al-falsafah wa rawishe riyalism ("The Principles and Method of Realism"), vol. V (chapter XIV), the introduction by Murtadha Mutahhari, who has written very elaborate footnotes on the text of 'Allamah Tabataba'is book
- <u>3.</u> 'Abd al-Rahman al-Badawi, Madhahib al- 'Islamiyyin, vol. I, p. 34. Apparently, the author does not consider the Tahawiyyah, the Maturidiyyah and the Zahiriyyah as among the major schools of kalam, or not important enough to be included in this brief survey. (Translator)

Source URL:

https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol3-no2/introduction-ilm-al-kalam-murtadha-mutahhari/definition-a nd-subject-matter-ilm-al#comment-0