The Islamic Concept of Knowledge

While it is an open question whether an explicit and systematically worked out Islamic epistemology exists, it is undeniable that various epistemological issues have been discussed in Muslim philosophy with an orientation different from that of Western epistemology. Today attempts are being made to understand the basic epistemological issues in terms of that 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 attention to the precise definitions of the various concepts involved.

With this view, an attempt is made in this paper to delineate the different shades and connotations of the term 'ilm, i.e., knowledge, in the Islamic context. It is hoped that this brief attempt will serve as a step for future groundwork for the construction of a framework for an Islamic theory of knowledge.

In the Islamic theory of knowledge, the term used for knowledge in Arabic is 'ilm, which, as Rosenthal has justifiably pointed out, has a much wider connotation than its synonyms in English and other Western languages. 'Knowledge' falls short of expressing all the aspects of 'ilm. Knowledge in the Western world means information about something, divine or corporeal, while 'ilm is an all-embracing term covering theory, action and education. Rosenthal, highlighting the importance of this term in Muslim civilization and Islam, says that it gives them a distinctive shape.

In fact there is no concept that has been operative as a determinant of the Muslim civilization in all its aspects to the same extent as 'ilm. This holds good even for the most powerful among the terms of Muslim religious life such as, for instance,tawhid "recognition of the oneness of God," ad-din, "the true religion," and many others that are used constantly and emphatically. None of them equals ilm in depth of meaning and wide incidence of use. There is no branch of Muslim intellectual life, of Muslim religious and political life, and of the daily life of the average Muslim that remains untouched by the all pervasive attitude toward "knowledge" as something of supreme value for Muslim being. 'ilm is Islam, even if the theologians have been hesitant to accept the technical correctness of this equation. The very fact of their passionate discussion of the concept attests to its fundamental importance for Islam.

It may be said that Islam is the path of "knowledge." No other religion or ideology has so much emphasized the importance of'ilm. In the Qur'an the word 'alim has occurred in 140 places,

while al-'ilm in 27. In all, the total number of verses in which'ilm or its derivatives and associated words are used is 704. The aids of knowledge such as book, pen, ink etc. amount to almost the same number. Qalam occurs in two places, al-kitabin 230 verses, among which al-kitab for al-Qur'an occurs in 81 verses. Other words associated with writing occur in 319 verses. It is important to note that pen and book are essential to the acquisition of knowledge.

The Islamic revelation started with the word iqra' ('read!' or 'recite!'). According to the Qur'an, the first teaching class for Adam started soon after his creation and Adam was taught 'all the Names'.

Allah is the first teacher and the absolute guide of humanity. This knowledge was not imparted to even the Angels. In Usul al-Kafı there is a tradition narrated by Imam Musa al-Kazim ('a) that 'ilm is of three types: ayatun muhkamah (irrefutable signs of God), faridatun 'adilah (just obligations) and sunnat al-qa'imah (established traditions of the Prophet [s]). This implies that 'ilm, attainment of which is obligatory upon all Muslims covers the sciences of theology, philosophy, law, ethics, politics and the wisdom imparted to the Ummah by the Prophet (S). Al-Ghazali has unjustifiably differentiated between useful and useless types of knowledge. Islam actually does not consider any type of knowledge as harmful to human beings. However, what has been called in the Qur'an as useless or rather harmful knowledge, consists of pseudo sciences or the lores prevalent in the Jahiliyyah.

'Ilm is of three types: information (as opposed to ignorance), natural laws, and knowledge by conjecture. The first and second types of knowledge are considered useful and their acquisition is made obligatory. As for the third type, which refers to what is known through guesswork and conjecture, or is accompanied with doubt, we shall take that into consideration later, since conjecture or doubt are sometimes essential for knowledge as a means, but not as an end.

Beside various Qur'anic verses emphasizing the importance of knowledge, there are hundreds of Prophetic traditions that encourage Muslims to acquire all types of knowledge from any corner of the world. Muslims, during their periods of stagnation and decline, confined themselves to theology as the only obligatory knowledge, an attitude which is generally but wrongly attributed to al-Ghazali's destruction of philosophy and sciences in the Muslim world. Al-Ghazali, of course, passed through a turbulent period of skepticism, but he was really in search of certainty, which he found not in discursive knowledge but in mystic experience. In his favour 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.

In the Islamic world, gnosis (ma'rifah) is differentiated from knowledge in the sense of

acquisition of information through a logical processes. In the non-Islamic world dominated by the Greek tradition, hikmah (wisdom) is considered higher than knowledge. But in Islam 'ilm is not mere knowledge. It is synonymous with gnosis (ma'rifah). Knowledge is considered to be derived from two sources: 'aql and 'ilm huduri (in the sense of unmediated and direct knowledge acquired through mystic experience).

It is important to note that there is much emphasis on the exercise of the intellect in the Qur'an and the traditions, particularly in the matter of ijtihad. In the Sunni world qiyas(the method of analogical deduction as propounded by Imam Abu Hanifah) is accepted as an instrument of ijtihad, but his teacher and spiritual guide, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq ('a), gave pre-eminence to 'aql in this matter. In the entire Shi'i literature offiqh and usul al-fiqh, 'aql is much more emphasized, because qiyas is only a form of quasi-logical argument, while 'aqlembraces all rational faculties of human beings. Even intuition or mystic experience are regarded as a higher stage of 'aql. In Shi'i literature in particular, and Sunni literature in general, 'aql is considered to be a prerequisite for knowledge. Starting fromUsul al-Kafı, all Shi'i compendia of hadith devote their first chapter to the merits of 'aql and the virtues of 'ilm. In Sunni compendia of hadith, including al-Sihah al-sittah and up to al-Ghazali's Ihya, a chapter is devoted to this issue, though it is not given a first priority. This shows that there is a consensus among the Muslims on the importance of 'aql which is denoted by such words as ta'aqqul, tafaqquh and tadabbur in the Qur'an.

Exercise of the intellect ('aql) is of significance in the entire Islamic literature which played an important role in the development of all kinds of knowledge, scientific or otherwise, in the Muslim world. In the twentieth century, the Indian Muslim thinker, Iqbal in his Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam, pointed out that ijtihad was a dynamic principle in the body of Islam. He claims that much before Francis Bacon the principles of scientific induction were emphasized by the Qur'an, which highlights the importance of observation and experimentation in arriving at certain conclusions. It may also be pointed out that Muslim fuqaha and mufassirun made use of the method of linguistic analysis in interpreting the Quranic injunctions and the sunnah of the Prophet (S). Al-GhazalisTahatut al-falasifah is probably the first philosophical treatise that made use of the linguistic analytical method to clarify certain philosophical issues. I personally feel that he is rather maligned than properly understood by both the orthodox and liberal Muslim interpreters of his philosophy. His method of doubt paved the way for a healthy intellectual activity in the Muslim world, but because of historical and social circumstances, it culminated in the stagnation of philosophical and scientific thinking, which later made him a target of criticism by philosophers.

There was made a distinction between wisdom (hikmah) and knowledge in the pre-Islamic philosophy developed under the influence of Greek thought. In Islam there is no such distinction. Those who made such a distinction led Muslim thought towards un-Islamic thinking. The philosophers such as al-Kindi, al-Farabi and Ibn Sina are considered to be hakims (philosophers) and in this capacity superior to 'ulama', and fuqaha This misconception resulted in al-Ghazali's attack on the philosophers. Islam is a religion that invites its followers to exercise their intellect and make use of their knowledge to attain the ultimate truth (haqq). Muslim thinkers adopted different paths to attain this goal. Those who are called philosophers devoted themselves to logic and scientific method and they were derogated by the Sufis, though some of them, such as Ibn Sina, al-Farabi and al-Ghazali took recourse to the mystic path in their quest of the truth at some stage. As I said earlier, 'ilm may not be translated as mere knowledge; it should be emphasized that it is also gnosis or ma'rifah. One may find elements of mystic experience in the writings of Muslim philosophers. InKashf al-mahjub of .(al-Hujwiri a distinction is made betweenkhabar (information) and nazar (analytic thought

This applies not only to Muslim Sufis but also to most of the Muslim philosophers who sought to attain the ultimate knowledge which could embrace all things, corporeal or divine. In the Western philosophical tradition there is a distinction between the knowledge of the Divine Being and knowledge pertaining to the physical world. But in Islam there is no such distinction.Ma'rifah is ultimate knowledge and it springs from the knowledge of the self (Man 'arafa nafsahu fa qad 'arafa Rabbbahu, 'One who realizes one's own self realizes his Lord'). This process also includes the knowledge of the phenomenal world. Therefore, wisdom and knowledge which are regarded as two different things in the non-Muslim world are one and the same in the Islamic perspective.

In the discussion of knowledge, an important question arises as to how one can overcome his doubts regarding certain doctrines about God, the universe, and man. It is generally believed that in Islam, as far as belief is concerned, there is no place for doubting and questioning the existence of God, the prophethood of Hadrat Muhammad (S) and the Divine injunctions, that Islam requires unequivocal submission to its dictates. This general belief is a misconception in the light of Islam's emphasis on 'aql. In the matter of the fundamentals of faith (usu-l al-Din), the believer is obliged to accept tawhid, nubuwwah and ma'd (in the Shi'i faith, 'adl, i.e. Divine Justice, and imamah are also fundamentals of faith) on rational grounds or on the basis of one's existential experience. This ensures that there is room for doubt and skepticism in Islam before reaching certainty in Iman. The sufis have described iman as consisting of three stages: 'ilmal-yaqin (certain knowledge),'ayn al-yaqin (knowledge by sight) and haqq al-yaqin

(knowledge by the unity of subject and object). The last stage is attainable by an elect few. 'Ilm is referred to in many Quranic verses as 'light' (nur), and Allah is also described as the ultimate nur. it means that 'ilm in the general sense is synonymous with the 'light' of Allah. This light does not shine for ever for all the believers. If is hidden sometimes by the clouds of doubt arising from the human mind. Doubt is sometimes interpreted in the Quran as darkness, and ignorance also is depicted as darkness in a number of its verses. Allah is depicted as nur, and knowledge is also symbolized asnur. Ignorance is darkness and ma'rifah is light. In the ayat al-kursi Allah says: (Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth ... Allah is the Master of the believers and He guides them out of the darkness into light). Usually darkness is interpreted as unbelief and light as faith in God. There are so many verses in the Quran as well as the traditions of the Prophet (S) that emphasize that light may be attained by those who struggle against darkness.

Among Muslim philosophers, particularly some Mu'tazilites, like Nazzam, al-Jahiz, Aba Hashim al-Jubbai and others, adopted the path of skepticism. Al-Ghazali was the most eminent among Muslim philosophers who, in his spiritual auto-biography, al-Munqidh min al-dalal, elaborated the path of skepticism which he travelled to attain the ultimate truth. There have been some Muslim thinkers, like Abu Hashim al-Jubba'i, al-Baqillanis al-Nazzam and others, who advocated skepticism in order to arrive at certain religious faith. Skepticism is a philosophy that has three different meanings: denial of all knowledge, agnosticism, and a method to approach certainty. Most of the Muslims philosophers sought the goal of certainty. Skepticism in the general sense of the impossibility of knowledge is not compatible with Islamic teachings. It is acceptable only when it leads from uncertainty to certainty. The skeptical method has two aspects, rejection of all absolute knowledge, and acceptance of the path to overcome uncertainty. Muslim philosophers have followed the second path, because there has been an emphasis on rejecting blind faith. Shaykh al-Mufid (an eminent Shi'i faqih) said that there was a very narrow margin between faith and disbelief in so far as the believer imitated certain theologians. In his view, an imitator is on the verse of unbelief (kufr).

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. I would like to cite here a tradition of the Prophet (S) narrated by Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ibn Abi Talib: Once Gabriel came to Adam. He brought with him faith, morality (haya') and 'aql (reason) and asked

him to choose one of the three. When he chose 'aql, the others were told by Gabriel to return to heaven, They said that they were ordered by Allah to accompany 'aql wherever it remained. This indicates how comprehensive are the notions of intellect and knowledge in Islam, and how deeply related they are to faith and the moral faculty.

The all-round development of various branches of knowledge pertaining to physical and social phenomena, as well as the process of logical argumentation for justification of Islamic doctrine and deduction of Islamic laws (ahkam) with reference to Qur'anic injunctions and the Prophetic tradition, is indebted to Islam's notion of 'ilm. 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'mun. Undoubtedly the major contributions in philosophy and sciences were made by Iranians, but the myth created by the orientalists that the fundamental sources of Islam, viz. the Qur'an andSunnah, did not contain scientific and philosophical ideas is totally false. As said earlier, not only the Qur'an and hadithencouraged Muslims or rather made it obligatory for them to pursue truth freely from all possible sources, but also contained 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 supererogatory rites of worship. There are several traditions that indicate that a scholar's sleep is more valuable than an ignorant believer's journey for pilgrimage (hajj) and participation in holy war, and that the drops of a scholar's ink are more sacred than the blood of a martyr. Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ('a) said that the reward for piety in the other world would be bestowed upon a believer in proportion to the degree of his intellectual development and his knowledge.

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. This attitude resulted in the condemnation of not only empirical science but also 'ilm al-kalam and metaphysics, which resulted in the decline of Muslims in politics and economy. Even today large segments of Muslim society, both the common man and many clerics suffer from this malady. This unhealthy and anti-knowledge attitude gave birth to some movements which considered elementary books of theology as sufficient for a Muslim, and discouraged the assimilation or dissemination of empirical knowledge as leading to the weakening of faith.

Apart from Shaykh al-Mufid and other Shi'i scholars, a number of classical Sunni fuqaha and 'ulama,' even those considered to be conservative, like Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, regarded emulation or imitation (taqlid) as religiously unauthorized and harmful. Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti held that taqlid was forbidden by both the salaf and the khalaf(early and later generations of scholars). He cited al-Shafi'i's opposition to taqlid. Ibn Hazm followed the same line. These and many other fuqaha' and theologians emphasized the exercise of 'aql and ijtihad as obligatory for the believers. Imam 'Ali ('a) gave a place of pride to reason even in the matters of religion. Abu 'Ala' al-Ma'arri believed that there was no imam except reason. Thus it is obvious that the Shi'ah and Sunnis, not withstanding their differences on several issues, agreed on the role of reason and the necessity of ijtihad. It is unfortunate that some recent movements of Islamic resurgence in the Sunni world, e.g. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Sudan etc., are opposed to reason and preach emulation, distorting the role of ijtihad and disregarding even major Salafi theologians. This attitude, they do not realize, is self-contradictory and self defeating for their own cause. It is a good sign that apart from the rejection of 'aql in recent times by some Sunni quarters, attempts have been made and are still being made to revive the practice of ijtihad and combining social, scientific and secular knowledge with the teaching of theology,fiqh, usul al-fiqh, hadith, 'ilm al-rijal, kalam and tafsir,whose acquisition is essential for ijtihad in the matters pertaining to the faith and its practice.

Another myth propagated by the orientalists, that the Arab mind was not akin to philosophizing and that it was the Aryan mind, i.e. of the Iranians, which introduced philosophy in the Muslim world, is equally unfounded and a conspiracy against the history of Muslim philosophy and its significant contribution to the development of sciences which not only benefited Muslim world but also contributed to the enrichment of human learning, culture and civilization. Ironically, despite the claim that the Aryan mind introduced philosophical and scientific thinking and research, Muslim philosophy is called 'Arab philosophy' by the orientalists, implying a contradiction inherent in their prejudice against the Semites. In Islam-of course, after the Qur'an and the Prophet's hadith-'Ali's sermons and letters, later collected under the title of Nahj al-halaghah, contained the seeds of philosophical and scientific inquiry, and he was an Arab. Similarly, the Mu'tazilah, known as the first rationalists among Muslims, consisted of Arabs. Even the officially recognized first Muslim philosopher, al-Kindi, was an Arab. After the decline of philosophical and scientific inquiry in the Muslim east, philosophy and sciences flourished in the Muslim west due to endeavours of the thinkers of Arab origin like Ibn Rushd, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Bajah, and Ibn Khaldun, the father of sociology and philosophy of history.

Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history and society is the flowering of early work by Muslim thinkers in the spheres of ethics and political science such as those of Miskawayh, al-Dawwani, and Nasir al-Din al-Tusi. The credit for giving serious attention to socio-political philosophy goes to al-Farabi, who wrote books on these issues under the titles of Madinat al-fadilah, Ara' ahl al-madinat al-fadilah, al-Millah al-fadilah, Fusul al-madang, Sirah Fadilah, K. al-Siyasah al-madaniyyah, etc.

Muslims never ignored socio-political economic and other problems pertaining to the physical as well as social reality. They contributed richly to human civilization and thought by their bold and free inquiry in various areas of knowledge even at the risk of being condemned as heretics or rather unbelievers. True and firm believers in Islamic creed, like al-Ghazali, Ibn Rushd, Ibn Bajah, al-Haytham, Ibn 'Arabi and Mulla Sadra, and in recent times Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Iqbal and al-Mawdudi were not spared fatwas of kufr by the partisans of blind imitation who were hostile to the principle of ijtihad, research and critical thought.

Along with the Muslim astronomers, mathematicians, natural scientists and physicians like Ibn Sina, Zakariyya al-Razi, and others who were instrumental in the development of human knowledge and civilization, it would be unjust not to mention the significant contribution of Ikhwan al-Safa (The Brethren Purity) a group of Shi'i-Ismaili scholars and thinkers who wrote original treatises on various philosophical and scientific subjects, an effort which signifies the first attempt to compile an encyclopedia in the civilized world.

In brief, it may be justifiably claimed that the Islamic theory of knowledge was responsible for blossoming of a culture of free inquiry and rational scientific thinking that also encompassed the spheres of both theory and practice.