

Introduction to Islamic Theology

Lesson 1



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ENRICHING THE SOUL

Three Branches of Islamic Knowledge

- Muslim scholars have divided Islamic teachings into three distinctive categories:
- **1. Theology** علم العقائد
- **2. Jurisprudence** علم الفقه
- **3. Ethics** علم الأخلاق
- In this classification, the criterion behind the division is relationship of Islamic teachings to the human being.
- Teachings related to human reason and intellect are called عقائد
- Teachings related to action and practice are called فقه
- Teachings related to human character and qualities are called أخلاق

Three Branches of Islamic Knowledge

- This division is also based on a famous hadith:

إنما العلم ثلاثة آية محكمة، أو فريضة عادلة، أو سنة قائمة، وما خلاهن هو فضل.

“[Truly beneficial] knowledge is only of three kinds: [knowledge of the] unequivocal signs [that lead to sound faith], just commandments [ordained in the Quran] and [commandments ordained] through my example that are promulgated by Islam...”- The Prophet (s)

Source: al-Kafi, v. 1, p. 32

Definition and Names of this Science

- Islamic theology also known as علم الكلام is the study of Islamic doctrines and beliefs.
- In the past it was also called علم أصول الدين (The Science of the Principles of Religion), علم التوحيد والصفات (The Science of God's Oneness and Attributes)

The Origins of Islamic Theology

- The Quran laid the foundation of faith and belief based on reason and rational thinking.
- There are several Quranic verses that condemn blind acceptance of beliefs and ideas:

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ اتَّبِعُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا بَلْ نَتَّبِعُ مَا أَلْفَيْنَا عَلَيْهِ آبَاءَنَا أَوْلَوْ كَانِ آبَاؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ
شَيْئاً وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ

“And when it is said to them, “Follow what Allah has revealed,” they say, “Rather, we will follow that which we found our fathers doing.” Even though their fathers do not use reason, nor are they guided?”

Quran 2:170

The Origins of Islamic Theology

- During the lifetime of the Prophet (s), he was recognized as the undisputed authority by all Muslims. If Muslims had any questions about issues relating to doctrine, they would direct them to the Prophet (s) and he would respond.
- After the demise of the Prophet (s), Muslims did not consider any particular individual to be the undisputed authority on Islamic matters.
- Furthermore, with the expansion of the Islamic empire, Muslims were exposed to different religious traditions and philosophies. This led to widespread intrafaith and interfaith dialogue and discussion.

The Origins of Islamic Theology

- Perhaps the first formal center of such discussions was the circle of Hassan al-Basri (d. 110 AH)
- Among the most important discussions by Muslims during the first half of the second century AH was the issue of predestination and free will **إختيار** and **جبر**
- Those who believed in free will were called Qadariyyah
- Those who believed in predestination were known as Jabriyyah

The Origins of Islamic Theology

- Gradually, doctrinal differences between the two groups extended to a series of other issues in theology.
- During this period, the Qadariyyah came to be called the Mu'tazilites and the Jabriyyah became known as the Ash'arites.

The First Problem

- Apparently, the first problem that was discussed and debated by Muslims was that of predestination and free will.
- It is arguably impossible to find a society that has reached intellectual maturity in which this question was not raised and debated.
- This question also raises the issue of divine justice, because there is an explicit connection between fatalism and injustice.
- The problem of justice raises the issue of the inherent goodness and evil of actions.

Philosophy and Theology

- With the passing of time, kalam extended to many philosophical problems.
- If one were to study the books on theology, especially those written after the 7th century AH/13th century CE, 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 of such mutual influence was that kalam raised new problems for philosophy, and philosophy helped to widen the scope of kalam, in the sense that dealing with many philosophical problems came to be considered necessary in kalam.

Tradition-Based Theology & Reason-Based Theology

- Although Islamic theology is a rational discipline, it consists of two parts in terms of the types premises it used in its arguments:
 - 1. Rational عقلي
 - 2. Transmitted, tradition, hadith نقلي
- The aqli part of theology consists of premises that are purely rational, and if there is any reference to a naql, it is for the sake of confirming a rational judgement.

Tradition-Based Theology & Reason-Based Theology

- For example, in questions related to God's oneness, prophethood or resurrection, references to naql is not sufficient. In these cases, the arguments must be purely rational.
- The naqli part of theology consists of issues related to the doctrine of the faith-and it is necessary to believe in them- but since these issues are subordinate to the issue of prophethood, in dealing with them, it is enough to quote evidence from the Quran and authentic hadith. For example, most of the issues related to life after death are based on naql.

The Origin of the Term “Kalam”

- Why was this discipline called “kalam” and when was this name given to it? A number of possibilities have been cited:
 - Some have said that it was called “kalam” (literally, ‘word’, ‘speech’, ‘utterance’) because it gives an added power of argument and speech to one who is well versed in it.
 - Some say that the reason lies in the fact that experts in this science habitually began their own statements in their books with the expression of “al-kalam fi kadha) الكلام في كذا
 - Some say it was called “kalam” because it discussed issues regarding which the ahl al-hadith (literally: followers of hadith) maintained that nothing ought to be said: One must remain silent about them with regard to these issues.

The Origin of the Term “Kalam”

- Others claim that this name came to prominence when the issue of whether the Quran (called Kalamu Allah) is created or eternal. In other words, since most of the debates about the doctrines of faith revolved around the createdness or the pre-eternal nature of the kalam of God, the discipline that discussed the principal doctrines of the faith came to be called kalam.

The Aims of Studying Islamic Theology

- 1. To prove the correctness of your religious doctrine to yourself and others
- 2. To explain and clarify the meaning of doctrinal concepts
- 3. To refute and respond to attacks directed towards the Islamic doctrines.

The Major Theological Schools

- Before we delve into the various schools of kalam, it is necessary to highlight an intellectual trend in the Muslim world due to the ahl al-hadith.
- These were a group of scholars who were basically opposed to the very idea of kalam and rational debate about Islamic doctrines, considering it to be a taboo and an impermissible innovation in the faith.
- Ahmad b. Hanbal (d. 241 AH), the founding Imam of the Hanbali school of fiqh, stands foremost among them.

The Major Theological Schools

- Ibn Taymiyya (d. 711 AH) who was one of the eminent scholars of the Sunni world and a follower of the Hanbali school, issued a fatwa declaring kalam and logic forbidden.
- Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d. 911 AH), another figure among the ahl al-hadith who published a book against kalam.
- Malik b. Anas (179 AH) considered any debate or inquiry about doctrinal matters to be religiously forbidden.

The Major Theological Schools

- The major schools of kalam are:
 - Mu'tazilites
 - Ash'arites
 - Murji'ah
 - Shi'a
- Some sects of the Khawarij, and the Batini's, have also been considered as schools of Islamic kalam.

The Major Theological Schools

- The Khawarij held specific beliefs in matters of doctrine and perhaps were the first to raise doctrinal problems by expressing certain beliefs like the apostasy of a person who commits a sin without repenting.
- However, since the Khawarij did not create a rationalist school of thought in the Muslim world and because they were seen as extreme deviants, many saw them as a group outside of the fold of Islam.
- The Khawarij ultimately became extinct although with their ideas were recently revived by terrorist groups like ISIS.

The Mu'tazilites

- Mutazilites comes from the Arabic word عزل which means to “to dismiss”, “to depart”, “to leave”.
- The founder of this group was Wasil b. Ataa' واصل بن عطاء. He was attending the theological circle of Hassan al-Basri when some asked Hassan al-Basri about the condition of someone who commits a major sin. Are they considered believers or disbelievers?
- Before Hassan al-Basri answered, Wasil responded saying, “He’s neither a believer nor a disbeliever.” منزلة بين المنزلتين

The Mu'tazilites

- Wasil then left and sat somewhere else with his brother-in-law.
- When Hassan al-Basri saw that Wasil had left and sat somewhere else, he said, *إعتزل عنا* "He has left us."
- After this incident, these people and their students and those who later adhered to the theology that they taught became known as "Mu'tazilites"
- This group emerged in the 1st century of Islam.
- Mu'tazilites, as well as Shia, have a rational approach to Islam.
- Mu'tazilites, however, took this to the extreme and rejected or reinterpreted anything that could not be understood rationally. They imposed rational understanding on every religious matter.

The Mu'tazilites

- Shia's are also in favor of rationality in religion however, they assert that there are things in religion that are not against reason but are beyond reason.
- Mu'tazilites, like Shia, greatly emphasized the concept of divine justice.
- All Muslims believe God is just, however, some believe that justice is whatever God does, meaning that it is subjective
- Others contend that justice is objective and can independently be understood.
- Thus, Mu'tazilites and Shia are known as **العدلية**

The Mu'tazilites

- Mu'tazilites consider the following five principal doctrines as forming their basic creed:
- **1. Monotheism:**
 - Oneness of God's attributes- Mu'tazilites, like Shia's, believe that God's attributes differ as concepts but they all point to a singular reality. Ash'arites, on the other hand, assert that God's attributes are separate from His essence and exist as independent realities.
 - Oneness of God's actions- Mu'tazilites maintained that if all actions exist by the will of God, then a good doer deserves no reward and a sinner deserves no punishment. Thus, they argued that God has delegated full power to human beings and given them full autonomy over voluntary actions.

The Mu'tazilites

- **2. Divine Justice:** God is just and does not oppress His creation
- **3. Promise and Threat:** God has promised to reward the faithful for their obedience and has threatened to punish them for their disobedience, and there can be no uncertainty about this. Therefore, divine pardon is possible only if the sinner repents. Forgiveness without repentance is not possible.
- **4. A Position Between the Two Positions:** If someone commits a major sin, they are neither a believer nor an infidel. They are simply in an intermediary state between belief and disbelief.

The Mu'tazilites

- **5. Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil:** The opinion of the Mu'tazilites is that the shariah is not the exclusive means of identifying good and evil; human reason can independently identify at least some kinds of good and evil. Also, the implementation of this duty is a universal obligation upon all Muslims, whether an Imam is present or not. Furthermore, some duties are the exclusive responsibility of the Imam or ruler of Muslims such as the enforcement of the penal code, protecting the borders of Muslim countries, and other such matters relating to the responsibilities of the Islamic government.