

# THE SCIENCE OF KALAM

*An Overview*

ISLAMIC FIQH SERIES

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# **THE SCIENCE OF KALAM (علم الكلام)**

## **AN OVERVIEW**

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## PREFACE

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

الحمد لله رب العالمين، والصلاة والسلام على سيدنا محمد وعلى آله وصحبه أجمعين

Islamic teachings are broadly divided into the following categories.

**(i)** Beliefs - Belief in Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ), His Apostle Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم), belief in angels, belief in holy books, belief in all prophets, belief in last day, belief in destiny and fate, and belief in virtue and evil.

**(ii)** Morals - These moralistic deeds are related to spiritual and physical characteristics of human beings, like justice, Taqwa, chastity, wisdom, endurance, truthfulness, etc.

**(iii)** The imperatives (Ahkam) - This is related to the deeds and practice of Muslims on how to perform Salah, Zakat, fasting, buying, renting, marriage, divorce, division of inheritance, etc.

The science which deals with the beliefs is 'Ilm al-kalam. The science which deals with Islamic morals is 'ilm al-Akhlaq (ethics). The study of the imperatives (Ahkam) is Ilm al-Fiqh (Islamic Jurisprudence).

The above classification is based on the relationship of Islamic teachings with human beings. The things which relate to human reason and intellect are called 'Beliefs'. The things which relate to human qualities are called 'ethics' and the things that relate to deeds and practices are covered in the study of Fiqh.

Our entire focus in our books is related to Sahih Iman. All our books have been written on different topics, but the focus has always been on Sahih Iman.

This book is an overview of Ilm al-Kalam. In Sha Allah people will benefit from it.

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## ILM AL-KALAM

**Ilm al-Kalam** (the Science of Kalam) primarily deals with justifying religious beliefs to reason and employing reason to draw conclusions from these beliefs. Its subject areas are comprised of the following.

- (i) The articulation of fundamental beliefs.
- (ii) The construction of the framework within which these beliefs must be understood.
- (iii) The attempt to give coherence to these views within the accepted framework.

Some Muslims sects, particularly Salafis and their likeminded groups, reject Kalam as deviation and innovation. They exaggerate the impact of non-Islamic influences and philosophy on the evolution of the 'schools of kalam'. As a matter of fact, many of kalam's early themes, such as 'the status of the sinner' or the question of 'political legitimacy', arose within a purely Islamic context.

The groups should understand that the religion cannot progress if we limit the understanding of fundamental beliefs, saying 'we cannot discuss issues related to faith'.

Their contention is absurd, particularly in relation to those who need counseling on Islamic issues. What about the new converts? What about Da'wa? We need to explain that Islam is the only truthful religion on Earth. Muslims have been involved in polemics right from the start, from the Prophet's (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) time. If we had not taken the assistance of Kalam (debate), Islam would not have spread in the world.

Muslims proclaim to the whole world that Quran is the word of Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ). How a non-Muslim will believe it? We will have to take the assistance of 'the science of debate (Ilm al-Kalam) and place before him the undeniable facts about Quran and logical explanations as to why this book is the word of God?

Similarly, we need to explain what is the meaning of one-ness of Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) in the light of Quran and Ahadith. There are many verses of Quran about the 'essence' (unity) of Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) and His attributes. These have to be explained in simple understandable terms.

What these sects do is, they take the textual/literal meanings of Quranic verses, and if someone questions their interpretation, they stop him from further discussion, saying 'these issues are related to faith, thus cannot be discussed using human reason'.

In the first place, they have misinterpreted the meanings of these verses using their limited common sense and the faulty reasoning. When you try to correct them, they brand you as 'innovator'.

**It is in Quran** - هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ ۚ وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا ۚ [He (الله - عزَّ وَجَلَّ) is who has sent down to you (O' Prophet - صلى الله عليه و آله) the Book (Quran). Some verses of it are definite in meaning (Ayaat-e-Muhkamaat). These form the mother of the Book (the basic there in) and the rest are figurative (metaphorical) (Ayaat - e - Mutashaabihaat). But they, in whose minds there is a tendency to deviate from truth, take the metaphorical (verses in their literal / textual sense) craving discord, and craving to give them their own interpretation, although none knows the reality about them except Allah (عزَّ وَجَلَّ). And those who make it right approach to knowledge could only say 'we believe therein all that is from our Lord'. None can catch their significance except those gifted with insight.] (Aal-e-Imran - 7).

Salafis, Deobandis and their likeminded sects portray Islam as stagnant, rigid and militant religion. This is against the essence of Islam.

The 'science of basic principles of Islam' (Ilm al-Usul) and the 'science of affirming the Unity of Allah' (Ilm At-Tawhid) under Islamic Theology are very important subjects. We need to revive these subjects so that progress towards Muslim self-understanding; stagnant for centuries can be resumed. We do not mind if someone calls both these sciences together as 'Ilm al-Kalam' in the new meanings.

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF SCIENCE OF DEBATE (علم الكلام)

The emergence of Islam was distinguished with polemics (religious debates) with polytheists, Jews and Christians in and around Makka. Since Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) was physically available to answer questions, there were no controversies during this period among Muslims over fundamental questions related to faith and practice.

Political disputes broke out after the death of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) which culminated in the tragic events leading to the martyrdom of the rightly guided Caliphs, Hadhrat Umar, Hadhrat Uthman and Hadhrat Ali (رضي الله تعالى عنهم). Particularly, Hadhrat Uthman's (رضي الله تعالى عنه) martyrdom in 656 AD (35 AH) broke down the political system that was established by Muslims after the death of Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم).

The political disputes had their direct impact on Islamic theology. There were three major sects, Kharijis, Shias, Murjiya in addition to Umayyad political tribulations that competed to dominate Muslims.

The Kharijis and Umayyeds opposed Hadhrat Ali (رضي الله تعالى عنه), the Shias considered Hadhrat Ali (رضي الله تعالى عنه) should have been the first Caliph and Murjiyas remained neutral. All these groups attempted to influence Muslim community of mainstream Ahle Sunna.

Later, the issue of Kalam or Speech came to the fore in the seventh century AD (second century AH) when an Islamic sect Mu'tazila dominated Islamic horizon and imposed their views as official doctrine of Islam; similar to what Salafis are doing for the past one hundred years in the Middle East and other parts of the world today.

During 7th century AD (2nd century AH) the term khawarij (meaning rebels) was first referred to as a group of dissidents who rebelled against the leadership of the rightful Caliph, Hadhrat Ali (رضي الله تعالى عنه). The Khawarij had neither a unified leadership nor a settled doctrine. They were primarily a militant political group with an uncompromising attitude. The core of their views revolved around the nature of legitimate leadership. Although the Khawarij's uncompromising views restricted them to a marginal existence, but their impact on Muslim community had been significant.

Let us compare the above with the historical background of Salafis. The founder of Salafism, Ibn Taymiyya rebelled against the Jurisprudential authority of legitimate Imams of Fiqh, Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali. The Salafis did not have a political leadership or a settled school of thought for over 5 centuries, during 1300-1800 AD,

except that they inherited a militant political tendency and an uncompromising attitude in Islamic faith and practice.

Political fortunes changed for this Sect when Ibn Abdul Wahhab (1703-1792) came on the scene. Anybody who knows a little about Islamic history, is aware how Ibn Abdul Wahhab rose to power in collaboration with the House of Sauds. The Salafis gained political control of the Arabian peninsula in early 20th Century after bloody conflicts with mainstream Ahle Sunnah Wal Jama'a.

The core of Salafi doctrine also revolves around the nature of leadership of Muslim countries. They want Salafis and their likeminded groups to control the Muslim world. It started first when their founder Ibn Taymiyyah declared Muslim rulers of Syria and Egypt as unbelievers and initiated a campaign of overthrowing them from power.

Ibn Abdul Wahhab did the same thing in Arabian Peninsula in 18th Century AD. Currently they are doing the same thing in many Muslim countries, like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Far East and Central Asia. In 2008, Wahhabis were banned in certain Central Asian Republics for their subversive activities against elected Governments.

During 7th Century AD, the Shais stood firmly against the Kharijis. They believed in the undisputed authority of an Imam (leader). They claimed that the position of Hadhrat Ali (رضي الله تعالى عنه) as Imam and successor of the Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله) was determined by revelation and was not a matter of opinion.

Now, look at the present Islamic world. The Shias are firmly stood against Salafis in the Middle East and the rest of the world, challenging them for Muslim leadership.

When we compare earlier Kharijis and Shias and present Salafis and present Shais, we realize that these sects have their origins in political power and leadership of Muslims, rather than religion. They indulge in theological arguments with mainstream Ahle Sunnah to support their political objectives.

During 7th Century AD, there were other sects, like Murjiya who maintained their neutrality to both Kharijis and Shias. In addition, there were sects like Qadariyya, who supported the freedom of 'human will' against the law of Predestination. They argued for absolute freedom of the Human will. They claimed that Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) would not put human beings under obligation to act righteously if they did not possess the power to choose their course of action.

Opposing the Qadariyya were the sect of Jabriyya (Determinists). Their most prominent spokesman was Jahm Ibn Safwan (died 746 AD - 128 AH) who taught that 'no attributes could be associated with Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) except for creation, power and action, as any attribute that could be associated with creatures was not fit to be associated with

the Creator. As Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) is the sole Creator, human actions are also authored by him alone; therefore, human beings have no control over their actions and have no free will'. Jahm also claimed that since Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) could not be described as a speaker, 'the Quran could not be described as His word, except in the sense of his creation'. Jabriyya sect had limited impact on mainstream Muslims.

Then emerged the sect of Mu'tazila who were characterized by their elitism and militant rationalism. They attempted to systematize religious doctrine centered on affirmation of Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) Absolute Unity and Absolute Justice.

Some Muslim Sects wrongly claim that 'Ilm al-Kalam' is associated with Mu'tazila sect. They should carefully read the history of Islam. The emergence of Islam was distinguished with 'Ilm al-Kalam' - polemics (religious debates) with polytheists, Jews and Christians during the time of Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم).

It continued during the period of rightly guided Caliphs. Hadhrat Ali (رضي الله تعالى عنه) had an expert team of 'Ilm al-Kalam (debate) who used to debate with Kharijis.

We need these experts all the time who could explain issues to people in correct Islamic perspective.

The fact of the matter is, Mu'tazila wrongly interpreted 'Kalam' which was later corrected by Imam Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (died 936 AD - 324 AH).

## **DISPUTED ISSUES UNDER ILM AL-KALAM**

Mu'tazila's conservatism and their uncompromising logic for 'a reason for everything' alienated them from mainstream Islam.

On the question of divine justice, the traditionalist mainstream rejected the Mu'tazila's attempts to impose 'human and rational concepts of justice' on Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ). They questioned the legitimacy of debate advocated by Mu'tazila in this context.

The struggle between the Mu'tazila and mainstream Islam came to a head in the 'creation of the Qur'an' controversy which erupted in the first half of the third century AH (ninth century AD).

The Mu'tazila imposed all their controversial ideas on Islamic state with the help of Caliph Al-Ma'mun (198-218 AH - 813-833 AD). Those rules were later abandoned by successive Caliphs.

Let us look at the similarities. The Wahhabis imposed their controversial beliefs in Arabian Peninsula with the help of 'Al-Saud' rulers in early 20th Century in spite of opposition from mainstream Islam.

The first issue that divided Muslims was the question of political authority and its legitimacy. Mainstream Muslims accepted the procedures adopted to elect the first four rightly guided caliphs. The Kharijis did not raise their head during the rule of first two Caliphs. They gained momentum during the rule of third rightly guided Caliph and with the help of politically ambitious head of Islamic provinces, started questioning his authority in taking decision and accused him of doing things that favor some at the expense of others.

The second major issue discussed within kalam was the status of the person who committed major sins. The Khawarij started this debate by arguing that any person who committed a major sin automatically became a non-believer, thus forfeiting all rights and protections under Islamic law. The Mu'tazila argued that such a person was in an intermediate position, neither a Muslim nor a Non Muslim. The Murjiya argued for withholding of judgment to widen the interpretation as to who could qualify as a believer.

The third major issue discussed in kalam was freedom of the human Will. The Mu'tazila and Qadariyya both came out strongly in support of freedom of the will. They held that human beings are the creators of their own acts, for otherwise Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) would be committing a grave injustice if He punishes those who had no choice in what they did.

At the other extreme, the Jabriyya held that man could not have any control over his actions as Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) was the sole creator. Most other groups tried to strike a balance between these two poles.

The Shia tended to affirm the freedom of the human will and some of their sub sects like Zaidiyya, agreed completely with the Mu'tazila on this issue. Some other Shia groups held that human beings are, in part compelled because of the chain of causation that triggers their acts.

The Khawarij accepted the idea of predestination, holding that Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) was the Creator of the acts of people, and that nothing occurs which He did not Will.

This was also the view of mainstream orthodox and traditionalist groups, who affirmed that the will of Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) was supreme and that he was the creator of all human acts, whether evil or virtuous; nothing could happen on earth that contradicted His Will. This position was later given some gradation by al-Ash'ari, who argued that Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) created human acts, but human beings acquired (kasaba); meaning human beings are the perpetrators of their acts. He created a fine distinction between

creation of human acts by Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) and performance of these acts by human beings.

The fourth major issue discussed in kalam was the question of divine attributes. The Jabriyya used the affirmation of the uniqueness of Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) attributes to deny the existence of free will. The Mu'tazila developed this idea further, arguing that Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) could not have attributes in addition to His essence (Unity - Zaat), for this would mean a multiplicity of eternal entities. Later Mu'tazilites, like Abu'l-Hudhayl al-'Allaf (d. 842 AD /227 AH), added that the divine attributes are identical with the divine essence (Zaat - Unity). Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) knowledge is not an attribute added to his essence but is identical with that essence.

Early Shi'ite theologians opposed the Mu'tazila, affirming Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) immanence (actually present throughout the material world) and denying his immutability (the quality or state of change) and transcendence (the fact, state or act surpassing beyond limits) of time and space.

They held that Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) will was also mutable (alterable), and ascribed motion to him. They also held that Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) could also be the 'locus of accidents' (contingents / mumkinaat / hawadith) and was corporeal in some sense. Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) knowledge and will could not be eternal, for this would negate human freedom and make accountability redundant. It could also imply the eternal existence of things.

Later Shi'ite theologians belonging to Zaidiyya sect, repudiated most of the anthropomorphisms (the attribution of human form and character to Allah) of their predecessors and turned towards Mu'tazilite positions.

Traditionalists, including Ash'ariyyas, affirmed the reality of Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) eternal attributes, which were neither identical with his Essence (Zaat - Unity) nor distinct from it.

The issue of 'Quran as creation' was part of the issue of divine attributes. The Mu'tazila denied that Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) words were eternal and affirmed that the Qur'an had to be created. This idea was accepted by the Khawarij.

However, the bulk of the traditionalists, including Ash'ariyya, rejected this view, arguing that one could not describe Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) speech as created because this would mean that Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) was subject to changing states. Speech (kalam) was one of Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) eternal attributes, and the Qur'an, being His word, could not be said to be created or un-created.

Some early Shi'a theologians like Hisham ibn al-Hakam (d. 816 AD/200 AH), developed a more complicated version of the latter argument, saying that the Qur'an,

the word of Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) could not be described as creator, created or un-created, because an attribute, being an adjective, could not have another adjective predicated to it. Similarly, one could not say about Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) attributes that they were absolute or contingent.

The vision of Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) was also debated under Kalam. Whether Allah (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) could be seen in Hereafter. The Mu'tazila rejected it and their opponents affirmed it. Issues like 'limits of faith', the everlasting states of Hell and Paradise, the nature and limits of Allah's (عَزَّ وَجَلَّ) knowledge, will and power; all were debated under kalam.

Later, some philosophical themes were introduced into kalam, like the nature and classification of knowledge and the science of movement, bodies and things. Kalam was further widened to discuss other sciences, like biology, psychology, chemistry and different logic.

In essence, Kalam essentially dealt either with attempting to justify religious beliefs to reason, or with employing reason to draw new conclusions and consequences from these beliefs.

## THE DECLINE OF KALAM

**The decline of Kalam** is attributed to many factors. First, there was the rift that developed between kalam as a discipline and philosophy proper.

Ash'arite and Maturidi scholars tried to contain the traditionalism tide during fifth to eighth centuries AH (eleventh to fourteenth centuries AD) but they failed to stem this tide.

Kalam was also undermined by the rise of pro-traditionalist tendencies within the discipline itself. It was difficult to reconcile vigorous rationalist discourse with the traditionalist position, which discouraged questioning in many key areas. The resurgence of literalism under Ibn Taymiyyah and his disciples was anti-kalam, rejecting altogether.

With all these powerful forces deployed against it, the decline of 'right kalam' was inevitable. The early schools of kalam all became extinct, but traces of their teachings remain embedded within the teachings of the main schools of Islamic jurisprudence.

The two main Shi'a schools (the Ithna 'Ashriyya and Zaidiyya) have inherited some

aspects of Mu'tazilite rationalism and doctrines. Shi'ism has also been more successful and more reconciled to philosophical discourse.

**The Hanafi school of thought** became closely associated with the Maturidi school of kalam.

**The Shafi'i school of thought** adopted Ash'arism as a general rule.

**The Maliki school of thought**, also adopted Ash'arism as a general rule, but with less enthusiasm.

**The Hanbali school of thought**, adopted Mathuridi school of Kalam, but with less enthusiasm.

Salafis wrongly claim that Imam Ahmad favored an anti-rationalist and anthropomorphic position. Read details here.

The resurgence of neo Kharaiji movements like Wahhabism / Salafism in Arabian Peninsula and their associated groups like Deobandism and others in the World resulted in abandonment of Kalam altogether.

The best treatise on Kalam is the book written in Urdu by Shaikh Mohammad Abdul Qadeer Siddiqui (رحمته الله عليه) titled '**Hikmat-e-Islamia**' (حکمت اسلامیہ) in late 1920s. This book has been translated by me in English, titled '**Islamic Wisdom**'. It is an important read for those who are interested in this subject.