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THE CLASSIFICATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN ISLAM: A DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS

*Kabuye Uthman Sulaiman**

Abstract: The aim of this work is to describe the various types of knowledge in Islam. Islam places a greater emphasis on knowledge acquisition, dissemination, application, and preservation than any other religion. The Arabic term *‘ilm* (knowledge), is regarded as one of the most frequently mentioned terms in the *Qur’ān*, whether as a noun, verb, or adjective. This work uses a descriptive analysis method based on desk research and draws on primary Islamic sources, namely, the *Qur’ān* and *Hadīth*, as well as secondary works on knowledge. The focus of the study is on the classification of knowledge, such as *al-‘Ilm al-Mutlaq* (Absolute knowledge), *al-‘Ilm al-Muqayyad* (limited knowledge), God-given knowledge, etc., including its importance based on its sources, acquisition, and application. The findings of this work show that knowledge is acquired through various sources that determine its definition, classification, interpretation, and application.

Keywords: The *Qur’ān* and *Hadīth*, Absolute Knowledge, Limited Knowledge, Transmitted Knowledge, Acquired Knowledge.

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Introduction

According to *Qur'ān* Dictionary, the trilateral root 'ayn lām mīm (ع ل م) occurs 854 times in the *Qur'ān*, in 14 derived forms: (1) 382 times as the form I verb 'alima (عَلِمَ), (2) 41 times as the form II verb 'allama (عَلَّمَ), (3) twice as the form V verb yata 'allamu (يَتَعَلَّمُ), (4) twice as the noun a 'lām (أَعْلَمُ), (5) 49 times as the nominal a 'lam (أَعْلَمُ), (6) 73 times as the noun 'ālamīn (عَلَمِينَ), (7) four times as the nominal 'allām (عَلَّمَ), (8) once as the noun 'alāmāt (عَلَمَاتُ), (9) 105 times as the noun 'ilm (عِلْمٌ), (10) 163 times as the nominal 'alīm (عَلِيمٌ), (11) twice as the adjective ma 'lūmāt (مَعْلُومَاتُ), (12) 18 times as the active participle 'ālim (عَالِمٌ), (13) 11 times as the passive participle ma 'lūm (مَعْلُومٌ), and (14) once as the form II passive participle mu 'allam (مُعَلَّمٌ).¹ In what follows we shall highlight the value and importance of each of the following types of knowledge and the differences between them: (1) *Al- 'Ilm al-Mutlaq* (Absolute Knowledge); (2) *Al- 'Ilm al-Muqayyad* (limited knowledge); (3) *Al- 'Ilm al-Naqli* (transmitted knowledge); (4) *Al- 'Ilm al-Kasabi* or *al- 'Ulum al-Muktasabah* (acquired knowledge); (5) *'Ulum al-Akhirah* (the sciences of the Hereafter); (6) *'Ulum al-Dunya* (the worldly sciences); (7) *'Ilm al-Ghayb* (knowledge of the invisible realities); (8) *'Ilm al-Shahadah* (knowledge of the visible realities); (9) *Al- 'Ilm al- 'Aini* (personal obligatory knowledge); (10) *Al- 'Ilm-al-Kifa' i* (communal obligatory knowledge); (11) *Al- 'Ilm al-Nafi'* (beneficial knowledge); (12) *Al- 'Ilm al-Dhar* (harmful knowledge); and (13) *Al- 'Ilm ghair al-Nafi'* (unbeneficial knowledge).

Al- 'Ilm al-Mutlaq (Absolute Knowledge)

Knowledge is one of the Attributes of Allah (S.W.T.). *First*, He is *Al- 'Alīm* (the All-Knowing), *Al- 'Ālim* (the Knower), and *Al- 'Allām* (the All-Knowing). The terms *Al- 'Alīm*, *Al- 'Ālim* and *Al- 'Allām* have been mentioned in the *Qur'ān* a hundred and fifty-seven (157) times, thirteen (13) times, and four (4) times respectively.² They denote the following, among other things: (1) Allah (S.W.T.) is vast in knowledge, (2) His knowledge is eternal and everlasting, not preceded by ignorance, nor followed by forgetfulness, and (3) His knowledge encompasses all things, both their outward and inward aspects. He knows what has been, what is, what will be, and what would have been if it had been. *Second*, He is *Al- Samī'* (the All-Hearing). This means, His hearing encompasses all apparent and hidden voices, both concealed and manifest, and He is fully aware of them. *Third*, He is *Al-Basīr*

¹ Kais Dukes (2009-2017), "The Qur'an.com." Accessed on October 20, 2024, from <https://corpus.quran.com/qurandictionary.jsp?q=Elm>

² Muhammad al-Hamud al-Najdi, *Al-Nahj al-Asma 'illahi al-Husna*, (Kuwait: Maktabat al-Imam al-Dhahabi, n.d., Vol.1), pp. 213-214.

(the All-Seeing), which means He sees everything, no matter how small and subtle. He sees what is beneath the seven earths, just as he sees what is above the seven heavens. *Fourth*, He is *Al-Hakīm* (the All-Wise – The One with supreme wisdom in His creation (*Khalq*), command (*ʿAmr*), and legislation (*Sharīʿah*), and perfect in His judgment). This signifies, among other things: (1) He does not act nor does He command or prohibit, except for great wisdom, (2) He places things in their rightful positions, (3) He commands only what is good, and forbids only what is evil, (4) He punishes only those who deserve the punishment, (5) His affairs are free from flaw and error, (6) He speaks only the truth, (7) He decrees only what is wise, and last but not least (8) He is the One with a profound wisdom that minds cannot fully comprehend, and tongues cannot express. The following are some of the distinctive characteristics of Allah (S.W.T.) (S.W.T.)’s knowledge:

- 1) *Broadness and comprehensiveness*: Allah (S.W.T.) (S.W.T.)’s knowledge is unfathomable. This means, it is incapable of being fully grasped by human intelligence and thought, and it includes everything that He has and has not created, both in broad strokes and in more specific details:

﴿إِنَّمَا إِلَهُكُمُ اللَّهُ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ وَسِعَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ عِلْمًا﴾

“But the God of you all is the One Allah (S.W.T.). there is no god but He: all things He comprehends in His knowledge.” (The Qur’ān, 20:98).

﴿الَّذِينَ يَحْمِلُونَ الْعَرْشَ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهُ يُسَبِّحُونَ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّهِمْ وَيُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُونَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا

وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ رَحْمَةٌ وَعِلْمًا فَاعْفِرْ لِلَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَاتَّبِعُوا سَبِيلَكَ وَقِهِمْ عَذَابَ الْجَحِيمِ﴾

“Those who sustain the Throne (of Allah (S.W.T.)) and those around it Sing Glory and Praise to their Lord; believe in Him; and implore Forgiveness for those who believe: “Our Lord! Thy Reach is over all things, in Mercy and Knowledge. Forgive, then, those who turn in Repentance, and follow Thy Path; and preserve them from the Penalty of the Blazing Fire!” (The Qur’ān, 40:7).

﴿وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَا تَأْتِينَا السَّاعَةُ ۗ قُلْ بَلَىٰ وَرَبِّي لَتَأْتِيَنَّكُمْ عَالِمِ الْغَيْبِ ۗ لَا يَعْزُبُ عَنْهُ مِثْقَالُ

ذَرَّةٍ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَلَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا أَصْغَرُ مِنْ ذَلِكَ وَلَا أَكْبَرُ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ﴾

“The Unbelievers say, “Never to us will come the Hour”: Say, “Nay! but most surely, by my Lord, it will come upon you; by Him Who knows the unseen, from Whom is not hidden the least little atom in the heavens or on earth: Nor is there anything less than that or greater, but is in the Record Perspicuous” (The Qur’ān, 34:3).

﴿إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَخْفَىٰ عَلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فِي السَّمَاءِ﴾

“From Allah (S.W.T.), verily nothing is hidden on earth or in the heavens.” (The Qur’ān, 3:5).

﴿وَعِنْدَهُ مَفَاتِيحُ الْغَيْبِ لَا يَعْلَمُهَا إِلَّا هُوَ ۗ وَيَعْلَمُ مَا فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ ۗ وَمَا تَسْقُطُ مِنْ وَرَقَةٍ إِلَّا يَعْلَمُهَا وَلَا حَبَّةٌ فِي ظُلُمَاتِ الْأَرْضِ وَلَا رَطْبٌ وَلَا يَابِسٌ إِلَّا فِي كِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ﴾

“With Him are the keys of the unseen, the treasures that none knows but He. He knows whatever there is on the earth and in the sea. Not a leaf doth fall but with His knowledge: there is not a grain in the darkness (or depths) of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry (green or withered) but is (inscribed) in a record clear (to those who can read).” (The Qur’ān, 6:59).

From these verses, it is clear that nothing can occur without Allah (S.W.T.) (S.W.T.)’s knowledge. He is the Creator of everything. Therefore, He cannot possibly be unaware of what He has created:

﴿أَلَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ خَلَقَ وَهُوَ اللَّطِيفُ الْخَبِيرُ﴾

“Should He not know, He that created? and He is the One that understands the finest mysteries (and) is well-acquainted (with them).” (The Qur’ān, 67:14).

- 2) *Infinity and eternity*: The divine quality of knowledge and Allah (S.W.T.) (S.W.T.)’s essence are intertwined. Both He and His knowledge are regarded as possessing the qualities of eternity and infinity. Allah (S.W.T.) (S.W.T.)’s knowledge has neither a beginning nor an end. This indicates that His knowledge transcends space, time, and specific objects.
- 3) *Perfection and infallibility*: Allah (S.W.T.)’s knowledge is free from error and forgetfulness; He does not forget the good or bad done by someone and He does not fall into error. The following is the textual evidence regarding this matter:

﴿وَمَا نَنْزِلُ إِلَّا بِأَمْرِ رَبِّكَ ۗ لَهُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِينَا وَمَا خَلْفَنَا وَمَا بَيْنَ ذَلِكَ ۗ وَمَا كَانَ رَبُّكَ نَسِيًّا﴾

“We only descend by the command of your Lord. To Him belongs whatever is before us, and whatever is behind us, and everything in between. And your Lord is never forgetful.” (The Qur’ān, Maryam (19):64).

- 4) *Incomparability*: Allah (S.W.T.) is unmatched in knowledge and wisdom. He is both *Al-‘Alim*, the All-Knowing, and *Al-Hakim*, the All-Wise meaning, He “does the proper thing in the proper way in the proper place and the proper time.” He tells us that:

﴿لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ ۗ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ﴾

“There is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees (all things).” (The Qur’ān, 42:11).

- 5) *Completeness*: Allah (S.W.T.) has complete and detailed knowledge of the past, present and future, and His knowledge neither increases nor decreases. He has favoured humans with knowledge without losing anything from His knowledge. According to a story, a sparrow landed on the boat’s edge and briefly dipped its beak into the water while Musa (A.S.) and

al-Khidr (A.S.) were inside. Al-Khidr (A.S.) addressed Moses (A.S.), saying: “O Moses! The only way that my knowledge and your knowledge have diminished Allah (S.W.T.)’s knowledge is in the same way that this sparrow’s beak has diminished the sea’s water.

- 6) *Boundlessness*: Humans can only comprehend things with limits and boundaries. However, Allah (S.W.T.)’s knowledge has no bounds, restrictions, or limitations. As a result, it cannot be comprehended as mentioned earlier.
- 7) *Inexhaustibility*: Allah (S.W.T.) has only given a small portion of His knowledge to the angels and human beings. Yet, what He has given to human beings is enough for their success and well-being in this life and the one to come. Also, what He has revealed to His Prophets and Messengers (peace and blessings be upon him) in the form of Scriptures can be comprehended only as far as He permits:

﴿قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي لَنَفِدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنْفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ رَبِّي وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا﴾

“Say: ‘If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord, even if we added another ocean like it, for its aid.’” (The Qur’ān, 18:109).

﴿وَلَوْ أَنَّ فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ أَقْلَامٌ وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ سَبْعَةُ أَبْحُرٍ مَا نَفِدَتْ كَلِمَاتُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ﴾

“And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (were ink), with seven oceans behind it to add to its (supply) yet would not the words of Allah (S.W.T.) be exhausted (in the writing): for Allah (S.W.T.) is Exalted in Power, Full of Wisdom.” (The Qur’ān, 31:27).

These two verses describe the breadth of Allah (S.W.T.)’s speech and its grandeur as well as the comprehensiveness of His knowledge. It is clear from these verses that: *First*, Allah (S.W.T.) has a vast amount of knowledge. *Second*, the words of Allah (S.W.T.) expressing His majesty, greatness, and other qualities would not be exhausted if every tree on the planet were pens (writing instruments) and the oceans were ink that was replenished by seven more oceans (an enormous amount of water).

Al-‘Ilm al-Muqayyad (Limited Knowledge)

Human knowledge, in contrast to Allah (S.W.T.)’s knowledge, has a beginning, meaning it is preceded with ignorance. Allah (S.W.T.) says:

﴿وَاللَّهُ أَخْرَجَكُمْ مِنْ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ ۗ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ﴾

“It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when ye knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affections: that ye may give thanks [to Allah (S.W.T.)].” (The Qur’ān, 16:78).

This verse makes it clear that: *First*, people are born knowing nothing at all. But as they mature, Allah (S.W.T.) progressively imparts knowledge to them through a variety of channels, including their senses. *Second*, in order for us to praise Allah (S.W.T.), He has endowed us with intelligence and sense organs. We are able to experience the physical world through our senses of sight, hearing, and others. They serve as the instruments through which we learn about the physical world. Every sense is distinct and gives the brain various information. Therefore, losing a sense entails losing the information that Allah (S.W.T.) gives through that sense. *Third*, knowledge of the physical world - which, in Islam, is *ayah*, or the indication of Allah (S.W.T.)'s existence - is obtained through the senses. Allah (S.W.T.) says:

﴿وَفِي الْأَرْضِ آيَاتٌ لِّلْمُوقِنِينَ * وَفِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ ۚ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ﴾

“On the earth are signs for those of assured Faith, as also in your own selves: Will ye not then, see?” (The Qur’ān, 51:20-21).

Hearing allows us to connect with Allah (S.W.T.) (by hearing His revelation) and with our fellow humans; sight allows us to explore or uncover Allah (S.W.T.)’s signs in the universe; and intellect allows us to reflect on what we see and hear, as well as to infer, invent, and innovate. Additionally, intellect helps us make judgments by allowing us to discern between right and wrong, good and evil, and beneficial and harmful. Indeed, we construct the world or acquire power and mastery over nature with our intellect (*Ta’mir al-Ardh*). Thus, civilization and knowledge are linked. Without information, civilization and progress are impossible.

Besides the sensory organs, there are other means of acquiring knowledge, such as communication or a method of sharing information between two or more people. Language is one of the tools of communication. It is a gift from Allah (S.W.T.) to humanity and a manifestation of His existence, Might and Greatness (*ayah*). He says:

﴿الرَّحْمَنُ * عَلَّمَ الْقُرْآنَ * خَلَقَ الْإِنسَانَ * عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ﴾

“[Allah (S.W.T.)] Most Gracious! It is He Who has taught the Qur’ān. He has created man. He has taught him speech (and intelligence).” (The Qur’ān, 55:1-4).

﴿وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَأَلْوَانِكُمْ ۚ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ﴾

“And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours. Verily in that are Signs for those who know.” (The Qur’ān, 30:22).

﴿وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانٍ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ ۚ فَيُضِلُّ اللَّهُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ ۚ وَهُوَ

الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ﴾

“We sent not an apostle except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them. Now Allah (S.W.T.) leaves straying those whom He pleases and guides whom He pleases: and He is Exalted in power, full of Wisdom.” (The Qur’ān, 14:4).

There are three forms of communication: *First, verbal communication*, or the use of sound (speech or spoken word) to convey information, emotions, feelings, and thoughts. Examples of this form of communication are religious preaching or sermon, face-to-face or virtual communication between teacher and students, and communication between Allah (S.W.T.) and Prophet Musa (peace and blessing be upon them), whose special honorific title is *Kalimu’llah*, meaning “He who spoke to Allah (S.W.T.).” Allah (S.W.T.) says:

﴿وَكَلَّمَ اللَّهُ مُوسَىٰ تَكْلِيمًا﴾

“And to Musa (Moses) Allah (S.W.T.) spoke directly.” (The Qur’ān, 4:164).

Angel Jibril (peace be upon him) was the primary conduit through which Allah (S.W.T.) spoke to His Prophets (peace and blessings be upon them). We call this type of communication *Wahy* (revelation). It is the type of information that is most accurate and certain. The Qur’ān is a living illustration of *Wahy*. *Second, non-verbal communication*. It is a way to communicate (conveying and receiving information or messages) without using written or spoken language. Examples of this kind of communication include eye contact, body language, facial expressions, and gestures. *Third, written communication*. It is a means of communication (conveying and receiving information or messages) using written words or symbols.

Even with the aforementioned methods of knowledge acquisition and the use of technology in knowledge production, acquisition, and dissemination, human knowledge still makes up a very small percentage of all knowledge. Allah (S.W.T.) says:

﴿وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ ۗ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا﴾

“They ask thee concerning the Spirit (of inspiration). Say: ‘The Spirit (comes) by command of my Lord: of knowledge, it is only a little that is communicated to you, (O men!).’” (The Qur’ān, 17:85).

We can divide the things that humans can know, or the objects of knowledge, into two categories: *First*, the apparent, or things that are clearly visible. These could be either definite (lasting for a specified or known amount of time) and intelligible, or indefinite (lasting for an unspecified or unknown amount of time) and unintelligible. *Second*, invisible. These fall into two categories:

1) *Past and future events*. These two are called *Ghayb* (unseen) in the dimension of time.

2) *Things that are located elsewhere*, not where we are. These are called Ghayb (unseen) in the dimension of the place. Islam holds that only Allah (S.W.T.) has a complete understanding of the unseen. He is ‘*Alim al-Ghayb wa al-Shahadah* (the Knower of the Unseen and the Seen), as the *Qur’ān* emphasizes.

However, the Prophets and Messengers (peace and blessings be upon them) have given us some insight into the unseen which has already occurred and which will occur in the future:

﴿عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ فَلَا يُظْهِرُ عَلَىٰ غَيْبِهِ أَحَدًا * إِلَّا مَنِ ارْتَضَىٰ مِنْ رَسُولٍ فَإِنَّهُ يَسْلُكُ مِنْ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ
وَمِنْ خَلْفِهِ رَصَدًا﴾

“He (alone) knows the Unseen, nor does He make anyone acquainted with His Mysteries. Except an apostle whom He has chosen and then He makes a band of watchers march before him and behind him.” (The *Qur’ān*, 72:26-27).

﴿تِلْكَ مِنْ أَنْبَاءِ الْغَيْبِ نُوحِيهَا إِلَيْكَ ۗ مَا كُنْتَ تَعْلَمُهَا أَنْتَ وَلَا قَوْمُكَ مِنْ قَبْلِ هَذَا ۗ فَاصْبِر ۗ
إِنَّ الْعَاقِبَةَ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ﴾

Such are some of the stories of the unseen, which We have revealed unto thee: before this, neither thou nor thy people knew them. So, persevere patiently: for the End is for those who are righteous (The *Qur’ān*, 11:49).

Besides the Prophets and Messengers (peace and blessings be upon them), other human beings have been granted some knowledge of the unseen, such as Khidr (A.S.), the companion of Prophet Musa (peace and blessings be upon them). The crucial point here is that humans vary in knowledge and above all endured with knowledge is Allah (S.W.T.), the All-Knowing:

﴿نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مَن نَّشَاءُ ۗ وَفَوْقَ كُلِّ ذِي عِلْمٍ عَلِيمٌ﴾

“We raise to degrees (of wisdom) whom We please: but overall endowed with knowledge is one, the All-Knowing.” (The *Qur’ān*, 12: 76).

While knowledge is vast, Allah (S.W.T.) has restricted human knowledge to time, place, and the sensible (what can be seen, heard, tested, smelled, and touched – sensible or sensory knowledge) and the intelligible (what is known intellectually – intelligible knowledge). He says:

﴿وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ ۗ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا﴾

“They ask thee concerning the Spirit (of inspiration). Say: “The Spirit (cometh) by command of my Lord: of knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you, (O men!).” (The *Qur’ān*, 17:85).

Knowledge is an endless ocean. One can enter the ocean of knowledge, swim in it but will never be able to reach the shore. This means: *first*, the path to knowledge, which is termed as learning, is also endless. In the following narration, the pursuit of knowledge has

been described as a mandatory duty (*fardh kifayah*) and learning as a life-long endeavour, meaning the strife for self-improvement is endless: “Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.”³ *Second*, our perceptions, imaginations, and thoughts have limitations. Hence, our knowledge is limited. In addition, since no one can specialize in everything, there is no such thing as a human encyclopaedia or a walking encyclopaedia. Therefore, no one should be proud of knowledge or claim to know everything. Elucidating this reality, Voltaire (1694 – 1778 A.D.), a French philosopher and Enlightenment writer, wrote the following: “The more I read, the more I acquire, the more certain I am that I know nothing.”⁴

God-Given Knowledge

All knowledge is God-given. However, some of the knowledge is gained through senses and mental processing, while some of it does not require the senses and the intellect or mental processing. Knowledge of Allah (S.W.T.)’s existence is God-given. According to Islam, the knowledge regarding *al-Rububiyyah* [Allah (S.W.T.)’s Lordship] and *al-Uluhiyyah* [Allah (S.W.T.)’s Divinity] is inherent to all human beings. It is a yearning within every human being; they seek to connect to their Lord. Allah (S.W.T.) says:

﴿وَإِذْ أَخَذَ رَبُّكَ مِنْ بَنِي آدَمَ مِنْ ظُهُورِهِمْ ذُرِّيَّتَهُمْ وَأَشْهَدَهُمْ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ أَلَسْتُ بِرَبِّكُمْ ۖ قَالُوا بَلَىٰ ۖ شَهِدْنَا ۚ أَنْ تَقُولُوا يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِنَّا كُنَّا عَنْ هَذَا غَافِلِينَ ۗ * أَوْ تَقُولُوا إِنَّمَا أَشْرَكَ آبَاؤُنَا مِنْ قَبْلُ وَكُنَّا ذُرِّيَّةً مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ ۖ أَفَتُهْلِكُنَا بِمَا فَعَلَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ﴾

“When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam - from their loins - their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): “Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)?” - They said: “Yea! We do testify!” (This), lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: “Of this we were never mindful” or lest ye should say: “Our fathers before us may have taken false gods, but we are (their) descendants after them: wilt Thou then destroy us because of the deeds of men who were futile?” (The Qur’ān, 7: 172-173).

This verse is clear evidence that human beings come into this world with awareness that there is Creator. This awareness is known as *fiṭrah* or the spiritual instinct that inclines human beings toward the transcendent, and it is awakened by revelation. Abu Hurayrah [may Allah (S.W.T.) be pleased with him] reported Allah (S.W.T.)’s Messenger (peace and blessings be upon him) as saying: “Each child is born in a state of “Fitrah”, then his parents make him a Jew, Christian or a Zoroastrian, the way an animal gives birth to a normal

³ Mohammad al-Rishahri *Al-‘Ilm wa al-Hikmah fi al-Kitab wa al-Sunnah* (Knowledge and Wisdom in the Book and Sunnah), (Qom, Iran: Dar al-Hadith, 1997), p. 219.

⁴ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/91067-the-more-i-read-the-more-i-acquire-the-more>

offspring. Have you noticed any that were born mutilated?” Additionally, human beings, despite their cultural and individual differences, are naturally endowed with a trait to: (1) know some of what is right and wrong, (2) feel obliged to do right or be good, and (3) feel guilty about the wrong they do. This trait is known as “conscience.” It acts as a guide to one’s behaviour.

Al-‘Ilm al-Kasabi or al-‘Ulum al-Muktasabah (Acquired Knowledge)

Acquired knowledge is the knowledge acquired through senses, intellect (reflection and contemplation), and life experiences. Knowledge acquired through senses is referred to as “empirical knowledge,” “sensory knowledge,” or “sensory experience.” It begins with the senses, then proceeds to the mind (reason/intellect) and should end with the attainment of *iman* or acknowledgment of Allah (S.W.T.)’s existence and greatness. It is worth noting that there is nothing higher in the process of learning than *Imān* (conviction), that is, acknowledgment of Allah (S.W.T.)’s existence and belief in His indivisible oneness. Allah (S.W.T.) created human beings and endowed them with the faculties of hearing, sight and intellect to listen, see, reflect, ponder, think, and know. He says:

﴿ثُمَّ سَوَّاهُ وَنَفَخَ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوْحِهِ ۖ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ ۗ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ﴾

“But He fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him something of His spirit. And He gave you (the faculties of) hearing and sight and feeling (and understanding): little thanks do ye give!” (The Qur’ān, 32:9).

﴿قُلْ هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْشَأَكُمْ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ ۗ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ﴾

“Say: ‘It is He Who has created you (and made you grow), and made for you the faculties of hearing, seeing, feeling, and understanding little thanks it is ye give.’” (The Qur’ān, 67:23).

﴿إِنَّا خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنْ نُطْفَةٍ أَمْشَاجٍ نَبْتَلِيهِ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ سَمِيعًا بَصِيرًا﴾

“Verily We created Man from a drop of mingled sperm, in order to try him: So, We gave him (the gifts), of Hearing and Sight.” (The Qur’ān, 76:2).

﴿وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنْشَأَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ ۗ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ﴾

“It is He Who has created for you (the faculties of) hearing, sight, feeling, and understanding little thanks it is ye give!” (The Qur’ān, 23:78).

It is through knowledge that we gain self-understanding and an understanding of life purpose or, more accurately, the purpose of human existence. It is also by means of knowledge that we make the world a better place, i.e., improve our lives, or transform the world. Likewise, Allah (S.W.T.) endowed animals with the faculties of hearing and sight to know or be guided, but He did not grant them the intellect or the ability to imagine, ponder, and think wisely, as well as question and judge. Hence, intellect is a distinctive characteristic

of humans. It is the eye of the heart and the strength of human beings. Through intellect, they excel over other creatures on the earth. Most animals are indeed physically stronger than humans and they have superior senses of smell, sight and hearing, but they have no authority over humans.

Human senses have the following significance: *First*, they are the windows to the heart. They collect information about the environment and send it to the mind, an aspect of the brain, which processes, interprets, analyses, differentiates, identifies and integrates it. Without the mind, human beings would be unable to understand anything; their senses would be meaningless. *Second*, they make the human body useful; without the senses, our bodies would be functionally useless. *Third*, they are the tools humans use to know or explore the world around them; each of the senses has a unique function. *Fourth*, they alert human beings of dangers in their surroundings. *Fifth*, they feed the brain with information about the world which then sends messages to the body telling it how to respond.

‘Ulum al-Akhirah (the Sciences of the Hereafter)

Islam calls its adherents to seek knowledge in the broadest sense of the word. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) is reported to have said: “Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.” This Hadith alludes to both religious and worldly knowledge. Both are needed to gain the good of this world and the Hereafter. *‘Ulum al-Akhirah*, the sciences of the Hereafter, is the knowledge whose ultimate purpose is to gain the good of the Hereafter. Imam Al-Shatibi (may Allah (S.W.T.) have mercy on him) said: “The people of the divine laws have agreed that *al-‘Ulum al-Shar‘iyyah* (the sciences of Sharia) are the best of sciences and (will be) the most rewarding in the sight of Allah (S.W.T.) on the Day of Judgment.” To benefit from this knowledge, one ought to be a believer in Allah (S.W.T.), His angels, the revealed Scriptures, and the Messengers. This is because this type of knowledge came from Allah (S.W.T.) through Jibril (Gabriel) to His Messengers (peace and blessings be upon them) and is stored or contained in the revealed Scriptures.

‘Ulum al-Dunya (the Worldly Sciences)

‘Ulum al-Dunya, the worldly sciences, is the knowledge whose ultimate purpose is to gain the good of this world. In other words, it is the knowledge one acquires to make a living, attain social status, or satisfy one’s egoistic and selfish motives. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) used to ask Allah (S.W.T.) for well-being in this world and in the Hereafter. He said: “Verily, Allah (S.W.T.) the Exalted does not like one who is

knowledgeable of the worldly life, but ignorant of the Hereafter.” Al-Hasan (may Allah (S.W.T.) be pleased with him) said: “The *Faqih* (one who is immersed in the knowledge of Islam) is only he who abstains from the worldly life (*al-Zahid fi al-Dunya*), longs for the next life (*al-Raghib fi al-Akhirah*), has deep insight into his Religion (*al-Basir fi amri Dinihi*) and is persistent in worshipping his Lord (*al-Mudawim ‘ala ‘ibadati’llahi ‘azza wajalla*).”⁵ It is worth noting that abstinence from the worldly life is the general meaning of *zuhd*. Specifically, it means restraining oneself from indulging in the forbidden acts and detachment from all that distances a person from Allah (S.W.T.). Doing so is the ultimate achievement in life.

Zuhd does not mean abandonment of worldly goods or worldly life. Worldly life has a higher purpose which is to devote oneself to Allah (S.W.T.) totally; performing what He has ordained and abstaining from what He has forbidden. Hence, it is incumbent upon every Muslim to build a bridge between this world and the next. This also means to reconcile or build a bridge between the worldly sciences and the sciences of the Hereafter. Pursuing material gains while adhering to the core values, laws, and behaviors outlined in the Qur’ān and the Hadith is *‘ibadah*, an act of devotion to Allah (S.W.T.). Allah (S.W.T.) says:

﴿ يَا بَنِي آدَمَ خُذُوا زِينَتَكُمْ عِنْدَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا وَلَا تُسْرِفُوا ۚ إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُسْرِفِينَ *
قُلْ مَنْ حَرَّمَ زِينَةَ اللَّهِ الَّتِي أَخْرَجَ لِعِبَادِهِ وَالطَّيِّبَاتِ مِنَ الرِّزْقِ ۗ قُلْ هِيَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا
خَالِصَةٌ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ ۚ كَذَلِكَ نُفَصِّلُ الْآيَاتِ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ ﴾

“O Children of Adam! wear your beautiful apparel at every time and place of prayer: eat and drink: But waste not by excess, for Allah (S.W.T.) loveth not the wasters. Say: Who hath forbidden the beautiful (gifts) of Allah (S.W.T.), which He hath produced for His servants, and the things, clean and pure, (which He hath provided) for sustenance? Say: They are, in the life of this world, for those who believe, (and) purely for them on the Day of Judgment. Thus, do We explain the signs in detail for those who understand.” (The Qur’ān, 7:31-32).

﴿ وَابْتَغِ فِيمَا آتَاكَ اللَّهُ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ ۚ وَلَا تَنْسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا ۚ وَأَحْسِنَ كَمَا أَحْسَنَ اللَّهُ إِلَيْكَ ۚ
وَلَا تَبْغِ الْفُسَادَ فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُفْسِدِينَ ﴾

“But seek, with the (wealth) which Allah (S.W.T.) has bestowed on thee, the Home of the Hereafter, nor forget thy portion in this world: but do thou good, as Allah (S.W.T.) has been good to thee, and seek not (occasions for) mischief in the land: for Allah (S.W.T.) loves not those who do mischief.” (The Qur’ān, 28:77).

⁵ Abi Bakr Abdullah ibn Muhammad ibn Abi Dunya, *Kitab al-Zuhd*, Dimashq (Damascus) & Beirut: Dar ibn Kathir, 1999, p.68.

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا نُودِيَ لِلصَّلَاةِ مِنْ يَوْمِ الْجُمُعَةِ فَاسْعَوْا إِلَىٰ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ وَذَرُوا الْبَيْعَ ۗ ذَلِكُمْ خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ * فَإِذَا قُضِيَتِ الصَّلَاةُ فَانْتَشِرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَابْتَغُوا مِنْ فَضْلِ اللَّهِ وَاذْكُرُوا اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ ﴾

“O ye who believe! When the call is proclaimed to prayer on Friday (the Day of Assembly), hasten earnestly to the Remembrance of Allah (S.W.T.), and leave off business (and traffic): That is best for you if ye but knew! And when the Prayer is finished, then may ye disperse through the land, and seek of the Bounty of Allah (S.W.T.). and celebrate the Praises of Allah (S.W.T.) often (and without stint): that ye may prosper.” (The Qur’ān, 62:9-10).

It is understood from the above verses that: *first*, moderation or justice forms the foundation of a civilized society; *second*, a Muslim is permitted to enjoy fully whatever unforbidden pleasure Allah (S.W.T.) bestows on him; *third*, the resources of the universe should be utilized for beneficial purposes; and *fourth*, material development is not an end, but a means towards attaining religious or spiritual development.

‘Ilm al-Ghayb (Knowledge of the Invisible/Metaphysical World)

Knowledge is categorized regarding the visible and invisible things into the following: *‘Ilm al-Ghayb* (knowledge of the invisible reality/the metaphysical world) and *‘ilm al-Shahadah* (knowledge of the visible reality/the physical world). *Al-Ghayb* is an Arabic concept that encompasses all matters of the hereafter life, concealed matters of this world, future events, and the prophecies of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him).

‘Ilm al-Shahadah (Knowledge of the Visible/Physical World)

The concept *al-Shahadah* refers to whatever is visible to human beings regardless of whether it is comprehensible or incomprehensible by their mind. According to Islam, whatever knowledge is given to human beings is limited by Allah (S.W.T.), Who is both the All-Knowing and the All-Wise.

Al-‘Ilm al-‘Ayni (Personal Obligatory Knowledge)

Al-‘Ilm al-‘Ayni or personal obligatory knowledge is the knowledge that every human being must learn to meet their spiritual and psychological needs (guidance and discipline), and biological and physiological needs (food, water, shelter, and clothing). Man’s spiritual needs include understanding the meaning and purpose of life. The following are general questions about the meaning and purpose of life which every person must seek answers to: (1) Who is God? (2) What is the relationship of God to man and the material universe? (3) Why is life the

way it is? (4) What is the purpose of the creation of life/universe? Or what is the significance of life? (5) Who am I? (6) Where did I come from? (7) Why am I here? Or what am I living for? (8) Where am I going? (9) What is my place in the universe? (10) How should I conduct my life? (11) What is good and what is evil? And (12) What is the goal of this universe?

Humanity's search for the answers to these and related questions is for which reason the Divine Message to mankind was sent. Allah (S.W.T.) sent thousands of Prophets (peace and blessings be upon them) and He revealed Scriptures to provide answers to the above questions. The knowledge that is compulsory upon every person to acquire can be categorized as follows: (1) *'Ilm al- 'Tawhid* and *Ma 'rifatu'Allah* (knowledge of Allah (S.W.T.)). Also known as *'Ilm al- 'Aqidah* (theology); (2) Self-awareness or awareness about oneself; (3) Knowledge about how to earn a livelihood; (4) Knowledge about the purpose of the creation of man and the universe; (5) *'Ilm al-Ahkam* or *'Ilm al-Awamir wa al-Nawahi* (knowledge regarding Islamic legal rulings). Commonly known as *al-Fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence); (6) *'Ilm al-Jaza'*: Knowledge about the reward for one's deeds; and (7) *'Ilm al-Akhlaq* (Ethics): Knowledge of the deeds that lead to happiness and those that prevent happiness.

'Ilm al- 'Tawhid (monotheism) and *Ma 'rifatu'Allah* [knowledge of Allah (S.W.T.)] is knowledge of Allah (S.W.T.)'s Oneness and Uniqueness. Among the established principles among scholars is that the nobility of knowledge is in the nobility of the known, and there is no knowledge more noble than the knowledge of Allah (S.W.T.), the Almighty, His beautiful Names, and His exalted Attributes. Some scholars refer to this type of knowledge as *al-Fiqh al-Akbar* (the greater jurisprudence). The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, "Whomever Allah (S.W.T.) wishes good for, He grants him understanding of the religion." The first and foremost of this understanding is *'Ilm al-Tawhid wa al- 'Aqidah* (the Science of *Tawhid* and Creed). However, a person must also be cautious about how they acquire this knowledge and from which source they receive it.

Ibn al-Arabi said in *Ahkam al-Qur 'ān fi Fadhl al- 'Ilm bi Asma 'i 'Allah* (Ahkam al-Qur 'ān in the Virtue of Knowledge of Allah's Names): "The nobility of knowledge is in the nobility of the known, and the Creator is the noblest of the known. Therefore, knowledge of His names is the noblest of knowledge."⁶

Ibn Rajab said: The best knowledge is the knowledge of Allah (S.W.T.) (*al- 'Ilm bi-Allah*), which is the knowledge of His Names (*Asma '*), Attributes (*Sifat*), and Actions (*Af'al*). This knowledge leads its possessor to know Allah (S.W.T.) (*Ma 'rifatu-Allah*), fear Him (*al-*

⁶ Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn 'Abdullah (ibn al-Arabi), *Ahkam al-Qur'an*, edited by 'Ali Muhammad al-Bajawi, (Egypt: Matba'ah 'Isa al-Babi-al-Halabi wa shurakah Publisher, 1967, Vol. 2), p. 804.

Khashyah), love Him (*al-Mahabbah*), revere Him (*al-Haybah*), honour Him (*al-Ijlat*), glorify Him (*al-‘Azamah*), devote oneself to Him (*al-Tabattul ilayh*), rely on Him (*al-Tawakkul ‘alayh*), be patient with Him (*al-Sabr ‘alayh*), be content with Him (*al-Ridha*), and be preoccupied with Him instead of His creation (*al-Inshighal bihi duna khalqih*).⁷ He also said in *Bada’i‘ al-Fawa’id*: “Knowledge of the Names and Attributes of Allah (S.W.T.), and worshiping through them, is the axis of happiness and the pivot of success and achievement. Whoever seeks happiness and desires it should take himself to the names and attributes of Allah (S.W.T.), for in them is all comfort and all security. The peace and happiness of the heart are only found through them, because they are related to the One who holds the hearts in His hands, and their happiness lies in reaching Him.” In *Majmu‘ Fatawa wa al-Rasa’il* (The collection of fatwas and Letters of Ibn Uthaymeen): *‘Ilm al-Tawhid* is the noblest of sciences, the most esteemed in rank, and the most obligatory in pursuit because it is the knowledge of Allah (S.W.T.), His names, His attributes, and His rights over His servants.

In *Tariq al-Hijratayn* (The Path of the Two Migrations), Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (may Allah (S.W.T.) be pleased with him) wrote: “The souls have no greater need than to know their Creator and Maker, and there is no way to this except by knowing His Attributes and Names. The more the servant knows them, the more he knows Allah (S.W.T.), seeks Him and is close to Him. The more he denies or neglects them, the more he is ignorant of Allah (S.W.T.), dislikes Him, and is far from Him...” So, the journey to Allah (S.W.T.) through His Names and Attributes is a remarkable affair, and its opening is astonishing. Its possessor is led to happiness while lying on his bed, neither tired nor weary. The Names and Attributes of Allah (S.W.T.), the Exalted, are definitive and sourced from the *Qur’ān* and the authentic prophetic traditions; there is no room for reason or personal opinion in them. And the people of the *Sunnah* affirm what Allah (S.W.T.), the Exalted, has affirmed for Himself—of Names and Attributes—in His Book, or what His Messenger (peace and blessings be upon him) has affirmed for Him in his Hadiths, without distortion or denial, without alteration or resemblance, for He, the Exalted, is perfect in His Most Beautiful Names and Supreme Attributes. There is no equivalent to Him in His Lordship, no equivalent to Him in His Divinity, and no equivalent to Him in His Names and Attributes. Allah (S.W.T.) says:

﴿فَاطِرُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَمِنَ الْأَنْعَامِ أَزْوَاجًا يَذُرُّكُمْ فِيهِ جَ لَيْسَ كَمِثْلِهِ شَيْءٌ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْبَصِيرُ﴾

⁷ Zayn al-Din Abu al-Faraj ‘Abdul Rahman ibn Ahmad ibn Rajab al-Hanbali, *Majmu‘ Rasa’il al-Hafiz Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali*, edited by Abu Mus‘ab ibn Tala‘at ibn Fuad al-Halwani, (Cairo: Al-Faruq al-Hadithah li al-Tiba‘ah wa al-Nashr, 1424 AH/2003 AD, Vol.1), pp. 40-41.

“(He is) the Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you pairs from among yourselves, and pairs among cattle: by this means does He multiply you: there is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He is the One that hears and sees (all things).” (The Qur’ān, 42:11).

There are two ways to know Allah (S.W.T.): First, by observing and pondering over His creation including but not limited to diversity of humanity, the alternation of day and night, the changing of seasons, and the various animals, plants, lakes, rivers and oceans. Second, by reflecting on the *Qur’ānic* verses. Allah (S.W.T.) says,

﴿إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ وَالْفُلْكِ الَّتِي تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ بِمَا يَنْفَع النَّاسَ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ مَّاءٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَبَثَّ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ دَابَّةٍ وَتَصْرِيفِ الرِّيَّاحِ وَالسَّحَابِ الْمُسَخَّرِ بَيْنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ لآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ﴾

“Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and earth, and the alternation of the night and the day, and the [great] ships which sail through the sea with that which benefits people, and what Allah (S.W.T.) has sent down from the heavens of rain, giving life thereby to the earth after its lifelessness and dispersing therein every [kind of] moving creature, and [His] directing of the winds and the clouds controlled between the heaven and the earth are signs for a people who use reason.” (The Qur’ān, 2:164).

﴿إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لآيَاتٍ لِأُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ﴾

“Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of the day and night there are signs for people of reason.” (The Qur’ān, 3:190).

﴿وَفِي الْأَرْضِ آيَاتٌ لِلْمُوقِنِينَ* وَفِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ ءَ آفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ﴾

“And on the earth are signs for the certain [in faith]. And in yourselves. Then will you not see?” (The Qur’ān, 51:20-21).

Sheikh Ibn Uthaymeen (may Allah (S.W.T.) have mercy on him) said: “The Names of Allah (S.W.T.), the Exalted, are definitive; there is no room for reason in them. Therefore, we must adhere to what has come in the Book and the Sunnah regarding them, without adding or subtracting, because reason cannot comprehend what Allah (S.W.T.) deserves in terms of names. Thus, we must adhere to the texts in this matter...” And because naming Him with names He did not name Himself with, or denying what He named Himself with, is an offense against Him, it is necessary to adhere to the proper etiquette in this matter and limit oneself to what the texts have brought.

Ibn ‘Uyaynah (may Allah (S.W.T.) have mercy on him) said: The best knowledge is the knowledge of Allah (S.W.T.) and the knowledge of His commands. If a servant knows Allah (S.W.T.) and knows His commands, then he has achieved (the objective of knowledge). There is no blessing better than the knowledge of Allah (S.W.T.) and the

knowledge of His commands, and there is no more severe punishment than ignorance of Allah (S.W.T.) and ignorance of His commands.

The foremost among the scholars are *ahl al-‘Amal wa al-Khashyah*, i.e., those who are devoted to action and piety. They are also called ‘*Ulama’ al-Tawhid wa al-Ahkam*.

***Al-‘Ilm al-Kifa’i* (Communal Obligatory Knowledge)**

Al-‘Ilm al-Kifa’i or communal obligatory knowledge is the knowledge that is essential for the well-being of the entire society. Acquisition of this knowledge is obligatory for the Muslim community collectively. Hence, it is necessary that people should have awareness of the importance of this type of knowledge and the Muslim ruler is bound to ensure that it is acquired by some members of the community; he must compel them to learn it. Where there is only one person in a community to acquire this knowledge, it becomes a personal obligation. It includes all knowledge leading to the betterment of mankind, such as medicine, economics, technology, politics, and *Da‘wah*. Regarding *Da‘wah*, Allah (S.W.T.) says:

﴿وَلْتَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ﴾

“Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good, enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong: They are the ones to attain felicity.” (The Qur’ān, 3:104).

Commenting on this verse, Muzammil Siddiqi said:

“Thus, giving *da‘wah* with proper training and specialization is regarded as a collective obligation (*fard kifayah*). That means in every community some people must take the proper *da‘wah* training and should do this work in a systematic and methodical way on behalf of all other members of the community. If some people do this work, then there is no blame on others, but if no one does it all Muslims of the community are considered sinners. It is the duty of all Muslims to support this work by providing facilities and funds so that it can be done in a proper manner.”⁸

***Al-‘Ilm al-Nafi’* (Beneficial or Useful Knowledge)**

It is understood from the following Qur’ānic verse and Hadith that knowledge is classified into two: beneficial knowledge and non-beneficial knowledge:

﴿وَاتَّبَعُوا مَا تَتْلُو الشَّيَاطِينُ عَلَىٰ مُلْكِ سُلَيْمَانَ ۖ وَمَا كَفَرَ سُلَيْمَانُ وَلَكِنَّ الشَّيَاطِينَ كَفَرُوا يُعَلِّمُونَ النَّاسَ السِّحْرَ وَمَا أُنزِلَ عَلَى الْمَلَكَيْنِ بِبَابِلَ هَارُوتَ وَمَارُوتَ ۚ وَمَا يُعَلِّمَانِ مِنْ أَحَدٍ حَتَّى يَقُولَا إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ فِتْنَةٌ فَلَا تَكْفُرْ ۖ فَيَتَعَلَّمُونَ مِنْهُمَا مَا يُفَرِّقُونَ بِهِ بَيْنَ الْمَرْءِ وَزَوْجِهِ ۚ وَمَا هُمْ بِضَارِّينَ بِهِ مِنْ

⁸ Muzammil H. Siddiqi (24 October, 2024), “Is Giving *Da‘wah* Obligatory?” Retrieved on November 11, 2024 from <https://aboutislam.net/counseling/ask-the-scholar/dawah-principles/giving-dawah-obligatory/>

أَحَدٍ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ ۖ وَيَتَعَلَّمُونَ مَا يَضُرُّهُمْ وَلَا يَنْفَعُهُمْ ۖ وَلَقَدْ عَلِمُوا لَمَنِ اشْتَرَاهُ مَا لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ
مِنْ خَلَاقٍ ۖ وَلَيْئَسَ مَا شَرَوْا بِهِ أَنْفُسَهُمْ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٠٢﴾

‘They followed what the evil ones gave out (falsely) against the power of Solomon: the blasphemers Were, not Solomon, but the evil ones, teaching men Magic, and such things as came down at Babylon to the angels Harut and Marut. But neither of these taught anyone (Such things) without saying: “We are only for trial; so, do not blaspheme.” They learned from them the means to sow discord between man and wife. But they could not thus harm anyone except by Allah (S.W.T.) (S.W.T.)’s permission. And they learned what harmed them, not what profited them. And they knew that the buyers of (magic) would have no share in the happiness of the Hereafter. And vile was the price for which they did sell their souls if they but knew!’ (The Qur’ān, 2:102).

Ibn al-Qayyim said in *I’lam al-Muwaqqi’in*: the worthiest of competition among competitors and the most deserving of pursuit in the arena of their race is what guarantees the servant's happiness in his worldly life and his hereafter, and on the path to this happiness is a guide. That is beneficial knowledge and righteous deeds, which are the only means for the servant’s happiness and salvation, and by which he must cling to. Whoever is granted them has succeeded and gained, and whoever is deprived of them has been deprived of all good. They are the source of the division of people into those who are blessed and those who are deprived, and by them the righteous are distinguished from the wicked, the pious from the sinful, and the oppressor from the oppressed.⁹ Imam Ibn Hazm (may Allah (S.W.T.) have mercy on him) said: “The noblest of sciences is that which brings you closer to your Creator, the Exalted, and helps you attain His pleasure.”

Here we use the term beneficial knowledge to denote knowledge that:

- 1) One acts upon. With it, he guards the teachings of religion.
- 2) Leads to the refinement of character, good manners, and praiseworthy attributes.
- 3) Enables a person to understand the purpose of humankind’s creation and existence.
- 4) Brings benefits and goodness to one’s fellow human beings and nature.
- 5) Increases one’s awareness of Allah (S.W.T.), love and fear for Him, and also his humbleness, fear, lowliness, and submission to Allah (S.W.T.).
- 6) Leads to happiness or “felicity” (*Sa’ādah*) and “the avoidance of wretchedness (*Shaqā’*) in the stages of existence after death.”¹⁰
- 7) Leads a person to certainty, true understanding, and the right beliefs and practices.

⁹ Abu ‘Abdullah Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr ibn Ayyub – Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *I’lām al-Muwaqqi’in ‘an Rabbil ‘Alamin*, (Jeddah: Dar ibn al-Jawzi, 1423 AH, Vol.1), pp. 7-8.

¹⁰ William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 150.

Abu Musa reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said:

“The similitude of that guidance and knowledge with which Allah (S.W.T.), the Exalted and Glorious, has sent me is that of rain falling upon the earth. There is a good piece of land which receives the rainfall (eagerly) and as a result of it there is grown in it herbage and grass abundantly. Then there is a land hard and barren which retains water and the people derive benefit from it and they drink it and make the animals drink. Then there is another land which is barren. Neither water is retained in it, nor is the grass grown in it. And that is the similitude of the first one who develops the understanding of the religion of Allah (S.W.T.) and it becomes a source of benefit to him with which Allah (S.W.T.) sent me. (The second one is that) who acquires the knowledge of religion and imparts it to others. (Then the other type is) one who does not pay attention to (the revealed knowledge) and thus does not accept guidance of Allah (S.W.T.) with which I have been sent.”¹¹

It has been reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) used to supplicate to Allah (S.W.T.) for beneficial knowledge saying:

«اللَّهُمَّ أَنْفَعْنِي بِمَا عَلَّمْتَنِي وَعَلِّمْنِي مَا يَنْفَعُنِي وَزِدْنِي عِلْمًا الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ عَلَى كُلِّ حَالٍ وَأَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ مِنْ حَالِ أَهْلِ النَّارِ»

“O Allah (S.W.T.), benefit me with what you have taught me, teach me what will benefit me, and increase my knowledge. All praise is due to Allah (S.W.T.) in every circumstance, and I seek refuge in Allah (S.W.T.) from the condition of the people of the Hellfire.”¹²

Al-‘Ilm al-Dhar (Harmful Knowledge) or al-‘Ilm Ghairu al-Nafi‘ (Unbeneficial Knowledge)

Knowledge that does not benefit one’s mind, soul, heart, and body or bring any good to society is useless and could even be harmful. Bishr ibn Al-Harith said, “Knowledge is good – for the one who acts upon it. But as for the one who doesn’t act on it – there is nothing more harmful (to him) than it.”

Non-beneficial or harmful knowledge is one that: *First*, is acquired for the sake of knowledge itself; i.e., without the intention to act by it. *Second*, is acquired to satisfy the ego and to prove one’s worth by belittling another. In other words, it breeds pride, conceit, and arrogance in the one who possesses it. *Third*, is sought with the intention to harm others such as *‘ilm al-Sihr* (black magic). *Fourth*, keeps a person away from being devout and close to Allah (S.W.T.). *Fifth*, is acquired or disseminated with the aim of capturing people’s attention; i.e., to gain fame which is to show one’s supremacy over others. It is reported that

¹¹ Muslim, *Sahih Muslim* 2282.

¹² Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* 3599. Graded *Hasan* (fair) by Ibn Hajar.

Imam al-Shafi‘i (may Allah (S.W.T.) be pleased with him) wished that people learnt knowledge from him without attributing a single letter of it to him. Sixth, is “disconnected from its source and origin, i.e., from the Divine Reality.” That is knowledge outside the context of *Al-Tawhid*. In Islam, all knowledge is granted by Allah (S.W.T.) for His sake:

﴿وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ﴾

“And I did not create jinns and men except for My worship alone. I did not create them to make a partner for Me.” (The Qur’ān, 51:56).

One of the indicators that a person is seeking knowledge for fame is when he envies those above him and belittles those below him in knowledge. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) sought refuge with Allah (S.W.T.) from non-beneficial knowledge. He used to say:

«اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ عِلْمٍ لَا يَنْفَعُ وَقَلْبٍ لَا يَخْشَعُ وَدُعَاءٍ لَا يُسْمَعُ وَنَفْسٍ لَا تَشْبَعُ»

Allahumma inni a ‘udhu bika min ‘ilmin la yanfa ‘ wa qalbin la yakhsha ‘ wa du ‘a ‘in la yasma ‘ wa nafsina la tashba ‘. (O Allah, I seek refuge with You from the knowledge that is of no benefit, a heart that is not humble, a supplication that is not heard, and a soul that is not satisfied).¹³

Conclusion

This work has examined the different types of knowledge stressing their value and importance. It is clear from the above that: *First*, knowledge is acquired through various sources. For example, some knowledge is acquired through experiences and interactions with the physical world, some is acquired through inductive and deductive reasoning, and yet some other knowledge is acquired through education and intuition. Contrasted to acquired knowledge is God-given knowledge such as intuition and revelation. *Second*, the different types of knowledge cannot fit into one definition. Each of the different types of knowledge is defined differently. *Third*, all praiseworthy knowledge is from Allah (S.W.T.) to guide mankind towards Him. The knowledge that leads to Allah (S.W.T.) leads to *Sa‘adah*, felicity, and that which leads away from Him leads to *Shaqawah*, wretchedness. *Last* but not least, religious sciences are the sciences through which Allah (S.W.T.) is known, and through which the correct way of worship is understood. This includes all the sciences related to the study of religion and Islamic jurisprudence, such as the sciences of the Qur’an, the sciences of the Sunnah and Hadith, the sciences of Islamic creed (*‘Aqidah*), Islamic ethics, and other sciences related to Islam.

¹³ Al-Nasa’i, *Sunan al-Nasa’i* 5470. Graded *Sahih* (authentic) by Darussalam.

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