

The Origin of the Science of *Ilmu Al-Kalam*

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ABSTRACT

Islamic theology or Ilmu al-Kalam, was established in an attempt to understand faith and religion by logical reasoning (rational proof and evidence) instead of relying on revealed texts. Logical reasoning was used to prove the origins of faith and basis of religion. Ilmu al-Kalam developed until it branched out into various sections and groups. These groups took Ilmu al-Kalam as their source to prove the fundamentals of religion and various matters of belief. As a result of this logical and reasoned development, there were supporters and opposers. The supporters developed Ilmu al-Kalam into what it is today and the opposers considered this heresy and relied on traditional revelation. When researching the starting point of Ilmu al-Kalam, many scholars and authors had varied opinions on when exactly this science was originated. Some events in Islamic history are considered crucial turning points in the development of Kalam. This paper will clarify the general meaning of theology, define Kalam, its origin, and its effect on Islamic tradition.

Keywords: Islamic theology, Ilmu al-Kalam, religion, islamic tradition.

1.0 TRADITIONAL ISLAM

Even before the development of *Ilmu al-Kalam*, Muslims were encouraged to ponder the world around them, their creator, their creation, the universe and everything else by thinking and reflecting. A true Muslim is one who thinks for himself and does not follow blindly. Even before receiving the message of Islam, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) questioned his ancestors beliefs and traditions; he did not follow blindly. He (PBUH) wanted to know more and was not convinced of his forefathers' religious beliefs. Muslims are persuaded to do so as well. Allah (SWT) says in the Quran: Do they not reflect? There is no madness in their companion (Muhammad PBUH). He is but a plain warner.

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[Quran 7: 184] This verse is directed towards the non-believers who questioned the sanity of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the revelation of Islam. Allah (SWT) asks if they reflect and think, because if they did, they would then acknowledge that the message of Prophet Muhammad is a clear and correct one and they should follow it. As long as they confine themselves in their ignorance and restrict their minds, they will never see the truth. In another verse, Allah (SWT) says: It is He Who has created you from a single person (Adam) and has given you a place of residing (on the earth or in your mother's wombs) and a place of storage [in the earth (in your graves) or in your father's loins]. Indeed, we have explained in detail our revelations (this Quran) for a people who understand. [Quran 6: 98] In this verse, Allah (SWT) says that the Quran is a book of intelligence and thought; it was revealed for people who think, understand and ponder.

The reference of the mother's womb and grave is very significant here, Allah (SWT) reminds us that a human's life begins in the womb of their mother and ends in the grave and throughout their life and they are residing on Allah's (SWT) land and relying on His bountiful creations. If the verses in the Quran were thought of deeply enough, they would ease the heart, mind and soul. In *Surah Mubammad*, Allah (SWT) asks whether or not human beings think deeply about the Quran and its meaning, whether they ponder the words and unique verses, or are their hearts locked up from comprehending and appreciating the truth in it. Do they not then think deeply in the Quran or are their hearts locked up (from understanding it?) [Quran 47: 24] If one thinks about the meaning of the Quran deeply enough, their heart and mind will accept the truth easily. If any human, Muslim or non-Muslim read the Quran with the intent of understanding its profound and eloquent words and imagery, they would simply believe in Islam and Prophet Muhammad's message. Allah (SWT) says: ((Had We sent down this Quran on a mountain, you would surely have seen it humbling itself and rent asunder by the fear of Allah. Such are the parables which We put forward to mankind that they may reflect.) [Quran 59: 21] This verse signifies the simple truth that a person discovers in the Quran.

It's powerful enough to make even the deeply rooted mountains humble themselves to the magnificence and power of the words in the Quran. If Allah's (SWT) message is this powerful then human beings, who are Allah's (SWT) creation, should also contemplate its meaning. After the development of *Kalam*, Muslim philosophers also emphasize the importance of reflecting on the meanings of the Quran. Ibn. Rush, a philosopher who wrote on the Quranic methods of proving the beliefs of the Islamic faith, states: "The whole Quran is an invitation to reflect and draw lessons and directs attention to the methods of

reflection'. (Nasr & Leaman, 1996) Philosophers recognized the depth and clarity of the Quran and its intellectual meaning.

2.0 DEFINITION OF THEOLOGY

Theology plainly means: rationality towards understanding God. After researching various sources for the exact definition of theology, the following stand out the most:

1. "(a) The study of the nature of God and religious truth: rational inquiry into religious questions; (b) a system or school of opinions concerning God and religious questions" (Houghton Mifflin Company) (Geroge, 2006)
2. "(a) The rational and systematic study of religion and its influences and the nature of religious truth (WorldNet) (Geroge, 2006)
3. "The study of religious of faith, practice and experience; especially the study of God and of God's relation to the universe." (Merriem Webster Inc.)
4. "A discipline of religious thought that is restricted in its narrower sense, because of its origination and format, to Christianity but that may be applied in a broader sense because of its themes, to other religions. The themes of theology are God, mankind, the world, salvation and eschatology." (Britannica)

These varied definitions all point out the use of rationality towards understanding God and religion in a simple and sensible way. The beginning of Islamic theology can be referred back to the period of the Rightly Guided Caliphs, following the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). More detail on the beginning of *Kalam* in the Islamic society will be mentioned later on. *Kalam* is used to refer to the logical approach Muslims took to better understand Islam, the Quran, its meaning and various controversial issues. *Kalam* was developed to answer specific questions that revealed texts could not answer. "*Al-Kalam* is a *masdar* or verbal noun of *takallam*, *yatakallamu*. Though basically meaning, "to speak intelligibly" (*nutqun muflhim*)." (Wolfson, 1976) At the time of the early Muslims, information was communicated and knowledge was passed on orally (al-Faruqi, 1986) Those who thought logically about God and the religion spoke in an eloquent and intellectual way in order to appeal to the Muslims and non-Muslims who were interested in learning more about Islam and its teachings.

The means of debating, teaching and communicating information was referred to as *Khutbah* and it was the primary method used for discussion. (Al-Faruqi, 1986) According to Wolfson, *Kalam* accurately means: ‘speech’ or ‘word,’ is used in Arabic translations of the works of Greek philosophers as a rendering of the term *logos* in its various senses of ‘word,’ ‘reason’ and ‘argument.’” (Wolfson, 1976) *Kalam* is literally spoken word but it provides logical reasoning and arguments confirming and clarifying the information in the Quran and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Those who practice *Kalam* are referred to as “*mutakallimun* (singular: *mutakallim*).” (Wolfson, 1976) *Mutakallimun* divided the *Kalam* school of thought into three disciplines: (Boer, 1970).

1. *Usul-al- din* (Fundamentals of Religion);
2. *Usul/ Ilm al-Tawhid* (Fundamentals of Monotheism); and
3. *Falsafah* (Philosophy).

In the following quotation, Frank explains that *Kalam* is more than just simple speech. He explains that it encompasses looking, considering, thinking, contemplating, analyzing, reflecting and finally inferring or coming to a conclusion. This highlights the importance of critical and thoughtful thinking before simply coming to a conclusion. If *Kalam* was based on what people thought, without deep consideration and the process mentioned above, then many people would have their own individual opinion, which will take away from the importance of the Quran and revealed texts. “Fundamental to its use to name the discipline and the literature with which we are concerned, is the occurrence of *al-Kalam* when it is equivalent to and may be substituted for *al-Nazar* (looking at, considering), which, when employed as a formal term in these contexts, is analyzed as ‘*al-fikra*’, ‘*al-tafakkur*’ and ‘*al-ta’ammul* (to “thinking,” “cogitating” and “reflecting”) and sometimes also as ‘*al-Istidlal*’ (“to inter,” “to draw a conclusion”). (Frank, 1992) Later in history, by the fifteenth century, an Islamic scholar and philosopher by the name of Ibn. Khaldun defined *Kalam* as a "science that involves arguing with rational proofs in defense of articles of faith and refuting innovators who deviate in their dogmas from the doctrines of the early generations and the people of tradition. The core of these dogmas is the oneness of God." (Souaiaia, 2007). This clarification on the discipline was necessary for Muslims to understand that they had to be careful when rationalizing the religion, since over rationalizing may diverge someone from the actual belief in Allah and Islam. Boer best summarizes *Kalam* in the quotation below: “Therefore the science of *Kalam* began, meaning ‘an assertion, expressed in logical or dialectic fashion, whether verbal or written, a *Kalaam* and those who advanced such assertions were called *Mutakallimun*. The name was transferred from the individual assertion to the entire system and it covered also the introductory, elementary observations on Method and so on. Our best

designation for the science of *kalam* is “Theological Dialectics” or simply “Dialectics”; and in what follows we may translate *Mutakallimun* by ‘Dialecticians’. (Boer, 1970).

3.0 EARLY *KALAM*

The death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was a critical event in Islamic history. It is considered to be the spark that lit up the path of *Ilmu al-Kalam*. Prior to the Prophet’s death (PBUH), Muslims learned from one another, references were not prevalent. “Not much was learned in the east at that time out of books, any more than it is to-day: more was learned from the lips of the teacher.” (Boer, 1970) The message of Islam spread by words spoken, which meant the Muslims engaged their minds and used their knowledge to convey the belief and understanding they had of Islam. Their main reference was, and still is to this day is, the Quran and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). (Boer, 1970) Referring to the Quran and Sunnah was crucial but was not sufficient enough to answer certain questions.

After the Prophet’s death (PBUH), the Muslims split into two clear groups. The first group followed an integrated system of belief based on the teachings in the Quran and consisted of early Muslims, who are also referred to as traditional Muslims (Nasr & Leaman, 1996). The second group consisted of the heresies, those who started questioning and inquiring about the details in the Quran. (Wolfson, 1976) “The early Muslims, in trying to explain the articles of faith, at first quoted verses from the Koran and reports from the Sunnah. Later, when differences of opinion occurred concerning details (*tafasil*) of these articles of faith, “argumentation framed by the intellect (*al-‘Aql*) began to be used in the addition to the evidence derived from tradition and in this way the science of *Kalam* originated.” (Wolfson, 1976) referring to the Quran was significant, but when they referred to it, they started questioning and thinking about Allah (SWT), the world around them and their creation. They started demanding logical reasons for their beliefs and practices. “In the Koran there had been given to Muslims a religion, but no system, precepts but no doctrines. (Boer, 1970) The first believers of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) accepted the message of Islam and believed in it easily because everything was direct and clear, they lived and witnessed the unfolding and development of Islam in, it was so clear to them that they accepted it and grew with it. The spread of the Islamic empires into various landscapes and areas caused Muslims to question their lifestyles and whether or not Islam had an answer for them. The expanding to new areas and various landscapes, surround Medina, Muslims were living a completely different way of life.

Their surroundings, irrigation, business dealings and general way of life were simply different. They felt that their way of life required specific answers since it was much different than the life of those Muslims living in Medina and Mecca. New issues started arising, issues that were not present during the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and during the rule of the caliphates. "Land tenure, irrigation and intensive agriculture, continuous trade between large urban centers which had hitherto dominated world empires and the physical and social mobility which Islam and the Islamic state brought-all these created problems for which no ready-made answers were available precisely because life in the Peninsula presented no parallel. The new situations called for an intellectual effort to discover the relevance of Islam to them. (Al-Faruqi, 1986) "What is contrary to logic there in was simply accepted by the first believers, without asking questions about the how and why." (Boer, 1970) They did not need to question why a certain verse was recited and why the Prophet PBUH reacted to situations in a certain way. They simply listened, observed, learned and obeyed.

The surrounded now Muslim lands were not present through all of the Prophet's developments and throughout his life, therefore they had various why and how questions which needed answers. Referring to the Quran and Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH was simply not enough to answer their questions. They needed someone to analyze what the Quran means and apply it to their own life. They needed Islam to be simplified in order for it to be applicable to their life.

The group of thinkers wanted to translate the words of the Quran into actual instructions, something that can be applied easily and can adapt to the ever-changing development and changes in their way of life. The development of this reasoned thinking went into 3 phases, clearly explained by Souaiaia below: "In Islam, it will be shown that there were attempts to adopt reason and discard revelation; that school of thought flourished and then collapsed due to its overconfidence in reason. But the school of traditionalists (revelations-based knowledge) also failed to create the responsible believer. Hence, the emergence of a third position that relied on both reason and revelation to explain the world and that which is beyond this world to adherents" (Souaiaia, 2007).

The first attempt suggested disregarding the revealed texts, referring to the Quran and relying solely on reason and logic to answer their questions. However, this attempt failed because guidelines were not set. Since they disregarded the most important text to Islam, the Quran, they were lost and deviated away from the core principles of Islam. The second attempt was to rely on revelations as the one and only source of knowledge and understanding, however this was difficult because the Muslims did not fully understand why

and how things were the way they are. They needed answers to ease their understanding of the revealed texts.

A traditional reliance on revealed texts made it hard to follow the religion properly. The third position was the successful one. It relied on both revealed and reason to come to a logical understanding. The reliance on the Quran and Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) made it easier for them to refer back and ensure they do not deviate away from the principles of Islam. The Quran was a reference and a guide. This approach was successful because it was moderate; it was not too rational and was not too traditional. Al-Ghazali refers to the revealed Islamic knowledge as *Fiqh*. He describes *Fiqh* as ‘the root of all the traditional sciences. Wolfson, 1976, says that the matters of traditional and philosophical sciences complete each other.

The situations that lead to the development of *Kalam* are expected since the human being has a mind and is bound to think. Al-Ghazali is quoted saying, the subject matter of each of these sciences, the problems which they deal with, and the methods of demonstration which they use in solving those problems’ all originate in my by reason of his being ‘a thinking human being. Wolfson, 1976, the thinking and analyzing is natural, and inevitable of the human to do. Both traditional revealed knowledge and *Kalam* aim at extracting something absent from something that is present today, they “try to derive something unknown from something known.” (Wolfson, 1976). According to al-Ghazali, *Fiqh* is “the daily bread of believing souls, while the doctrine is only valuable as a Medicine for the sick.” (Boer, 1970) He is emphasizing the importance of general Islamic knowledge among Muslims.

Every Muslim has some idea of what is morally and Islamically right and what is wrong. This knowledge does not have to be learned, however, it is an important part of a proper religious upbringing. Boer metaphorically describes that *Fiqh* is as a crucial aspect of a Muslim’s life, as crucial as bread and food is. He also claims that the reference and reliance on doctrine is as rare as taking medicine, which is only needed when one is sick, or far away from faith and belief, someone who is fading away and needs to be reminded of the importance of Islam. According to *Fiqh*, Islam classifies the various Islamic principles into the following categories: (Boer, 1970)

1. Acts, the practice which is an absolute duty and is therefore rewarded and the omission of which is punished.
2. Acts which are recommended by the law and are the subject of reward, but the neglect of which does not call for punishment.

3. Acts which are permitted, but which in the eyes of the law are matters of difference.
4. Acts which the law disapproves of, but does not hold as punishable.
5. Acts which are forbidden by the law and which demand unconditional punishment.

What *Kalam* came to answer is the details based on these four classifications. What happens to a sinner, who is really a Muslim and who is not? What can be used to determine the strength of one's faith? Is it possible that the traditional Muslims living at the time of the Prophet experienced everything in their life and what they lived through can be applied to all situations today?

4.0 DEALING WITH CAUTION

Kalam provides a logical and reasoned approach to better understand faith; however, many scholars avoid debating these topics since they cause a lot of disagreements and arguments without actually reaching an agreement or common ground (Souaiaia, 2007). These discussions and debates further divide the Muslim community. There are certain topics that should be accepted as they were revealed, since any addition may bring up even more controversial issues that the human mind would want more answers for. The more these issues are discussed, the more the controversy arises. "The introduction of Dialectics into Islam was a violent innovation and it was vehemently denounced by the party of the Tradition. Whatever went beyond the regular ethical teaching was heresy to them, for faith should be obedience and not knowledge." (Boer, 1970) To some traditional scholars, faith is simply obeying the commands of God, without questioning why or how. Since human beings are created to think, that would be impossible, although, we should use our thinking for positive use and avoid deviating from the traditional practices and principles of Islam. Allah (SWT) commanded us to read, in the first verse that was revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), therefore we must think and obey Allah (SWT), but within certain boundaries.

The first issue that was discussed and looked into was freedom will and whether or not a human has the freedom to do what they will or is their destiny already planned out for them. "In particular, the first question about which there was much dispute, among Muslim scholars was that of the freedom of will." (Boer, 1970) al-Ghazali considered *Kalam* as a collective duty for the Muslim community, but individuals were not obliged. "He wrote, "We turn now to *Ilmu al-Kalam* and say that it has advantages and disadvantages, usefulness and harm. With regard to its usefulness, whenever it is useful it is lawful, commendable or

obligatory, as the occasion demands. As for its harm, whenever it is harmful it is unlawful; and its harm lies in raising doubts and undermining the articles of faith, removing them from the realms of certitude and decisiveness. These things get lost at first and restoring them by means of proof is dubious and varies among individuals.” (Shu'ayb, 2012) Here al-Ghazali states that *Kalam* should be used when it is needed, only. If the issue is better left untouched, then that it should not be discussed.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The establishment of *Kalam* was needed to answer questions that revealed texts could not answer. The death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is considered to be a major event in the establishment of *Kalam*. The spread of Islam to neighboring lands is also an important aspect in the development of *Kalam*. *Kalam* answered many inquiries and caused debate and discussion on various issues. Some scholars consider the science of *Kalam* to be dangerous and should be dealt with cautiously. Researching the science of *Kalam* was very difficult at first since I had very little knowledge about the topic. The more articles and books we read, the more confused we got. Learning about this topic encouraged me to look deeper in the abundant history of Islam and its details. This research has taught me an ample amount of information and encouraged me to look deeper into the various groups that developed and enriched this science, the cause for their division and more on the scholars comments regarding *Kalam*.

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