

**SECTION ONE:
BACKGROUND**

CHAPTER ONE

THE MEANING AND SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE IN ISLAM

1.1 The Meaning of Knowledge in Islam

People generally regard whatever information, theory, idea, cultural and religious beliefs, facts and doctrines which one acquires from one's forefathers, mentors and school teachers as knowledge. Also whatever comes to one's mind as a result of one's exposure to preaching, teaching, propaganda, indoctrination, scientific findings and trash from occultism and taboos is similarly regarded as knowledge. If one gets this kind of exposure one is regarded as having acquired knowledge especially by people who do not have the same or similar exposure. While such information and exposure could constitute knowledge, this brings into sharp focus the debate on the distinction between knowledge and claims to knowledge and the difference between knowledge and belief.

This debate has been raging on amongst philosophers and other intellectuals for centuries. A famous Greek philosopher, Plato, for instance, asserts that knowledge is of the world of forms or ideas which exist in the mind of a person. Ideas such as goodness and beauty are acquired through contemplation and they are permanent and perfect. Knowledge then, being of the world of forms, "is infallible and is of what really is, whatever it is", (Plato quoted in Annas, 1981:201).

Belief, on the other hand according to Plato, is of the physical world. It is acquired through the use of the senses, which can sometimes mislead, so it could be true or false. In the

epistemology (theory of knowledge) of Plato and other idealist or rationalist philosophers, knowledge is obtained through rational thinking or contemplation, while belief is acquired through the use of the senses. However, knowledge can also be seen as a justified true belief; a true belief being one that is devoid of contradictions.

The empiricist philosophers, with Aristotle on the lead, had a contrary epistemological view. For them knowledge is not that which is created by the mind but that which corresponds to the world as it is. The real world refers to only what is observable. Things that we can observe are the objects of knowledge. Non-observable things like ethics, aesthetics and religion are not in the realm of knowledge but in that of belief.

From the above, it could be understood that the epistemological view of a scholar or an educational administrator will certainly influence his scholarship or educational policies respectively. A realist educational administrator, for instance, will have little or no regard and commitment to revealed knowledge when making or implementing policies on education. A Muslim scholar therefore needs an Islamic epistemology which differs from the idealist and realist epistemologies.

There is therefore a need to redefine knowledge in terms of an Islamic epistemology. In Islam, knowledge comes from Allah's revelation to His Prophets, and from reasoning and perception or empiricism. The following verses of the Holy Qur'an show this:

1. Read! In the name of your Lord who creates, creates man from a clot (of congealed blood). Read: and your Lord is the Most Bounteous, Who teaches by the Pen, teaches man that which he knew not. (Qur'an 96:1-5).

2. And if you are in doubt as to what We have revealed to Our Servant (Muhammad), then produce a chapter like thereunto. (Qur'an 2:23).
3. And Allah has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs knowing nothing, but He has endowed you with hearing, sight and minds, so that you might have cause to be grateful (to Him). (Qur'an 16:78).

The first and second verses indicate that revelation is a source of knowledge while the third verse shows that knowledge could be realised through the use of the senses (empiricism). The mentioning of the mind in the third verse implies its use in rational thinking.

Islam also differentiates knowledge from claims to knowledge, conjecture and other trash. The following verses provide some examples of this differentiation.

1. Produce an evidence for what you are claiming, if what you say is true (Qur'an 2:111).
2. Never can surmise take the place of truth. (Qur'an 6:148).
3. Have you any (certain) knowledge, which you could proffer to us? You follow only conjectures and you yourselves do nothing but guess (Qur'an 6:148).

In the light of the contents of the above verses, knowledge, in Islam, is truth. Thus it can be defined as the truth relating to the nature of God (Allah), His creation and all phenomena, acquired through revelation, reasoning and experiences of the senses.

Some key concepts used in the definition need to be explained. Nature, in this context, refers to the qualities, attributes or characteristics, which belong to God, creations and all phenomena. We can not know God in the way we know ourselves but with the aid of His revelation we can know His nature in terms of His attributes. For instance, we know that He is One and He is Eternal, Omniscient, Omnipotent, and He does not need a helper, a wife and a son. We do not know Him if we ascribe the opposite of these attributes to Him.

We can also know facts about plants, chemicals and rocks in terms of their uses, properties and relationships with other matters. Intangible phenomena like justice, gentleness, rumour and democracy can also be known by acquiring facts about their features and essences. For instance, politeness can be one of the features of gentleness.

The term phenomena in the context of the definition refers to things that appear to and are perceived by the senses. These exclude God, angels, Satan, Jinns and paradise, which our senses cannot perceive. We have tangible phenomena like stone and magnet and intangible phenomena like riot, strike, communism, poverty and wedding ceremony. They all have properties and essences and can be known. The objects of knowledge are therefore God, His visible and invisible creation and the tangible and intangible phenomena.

The concept of knowledge in Islam is wider than the Western concept of knowledge in terms of the sources, purpose and objects of knowledge. Relying upon the Western concept of knowledge therefore leads to a narrow and incomplete understanding of all phenomena.

1.2 Sources of Knowledge in Islam

In the rationalists' epistemology the objects of knowledge are forms or ideas existing in the human mind and its source is rationality or reasoning through contemplation. In the realists' epistemology the object of knowledge is the observable world and its source is experience through the senses or empiricism. In the Islamic epistemology, revelation is added to the two sources of knowledge over which the rationalists and realists disagree.

Revelation as a source of knowledge takes the forms of (a) direct verbal communication by which Allah speaks to man behind a veil as had happened to Prophet Musa (Alaihis Salam), (b) inspiration, and (c) sending an angel with a message to man. These three methods have been stated in the following verse:

And it is not (possible) for a man that Allah shall speak to him except through inspiration or from behind a veil or that He sends (unto him) a messenger (an angel who) reveals (to him) by His leave that which He wills. (Qur'an 42:51).

Prophets also receive revelation through dreams as Chapter 48 verse 27 of the Qur'an states. However with the death of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.W), the seal of the Prophets, revelation ceased to come from Allah and whoever claims to have it is an impostor or someone being deceived by Satan.

Knowledge obtained through revelation, being divinely ordained, is absolute knowledge (*haqq al-yaqin*); it is infallible and hence the most reliable form of knowledge.

Rationalism is another source of acquiring truth or knowledge. Knowledge acquired through it is known as *ilm al-yaqin* (knowledge by reasoning or inference).

Rational thinking alone cannot suffice for man to acquire true knowledge because his intellect has limitations. He therefore needs revelation to ascertain the reliability of what he understands through rational thinking. Without this, people can introduce many alien ideas into Islam under the guise of rational thinking or Islamic philosophy. Philosophers like al Kindi, al Farabi and Ibn Sina, for instance, were said to have introduced Greek thought into the body of Islamic thought and belief, and for this reason, Sayyid Qutb as quoted by Moussalli (1990:326) cautions that:

The correct Islamic conception should not be sought in (the writings of) Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd, al Farabi or others who are called the philosophers of Islam. Their philosophies are only shadows of Greek philosophy, alien in its spirit to the spirit of Islam...

Scholars such as Valiuddin (1978), Ahmed (1932) and El-Zein (1979) also state that Greek philosophy as well as Indian rites were introduced into Islamic philosophy and Sufism. Knowledge gained through meditation or contemplation could not be acceptable if it clashes with revealed knowledge contained in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (S.A.W). But for scholars like S.H. Nasr, knowledge acquired

through contemplation is the highest and most comprehensive. He writes:

Finally, we have the level of pure knowledge and understanding. It is that of the contemplative, the gnostic (arif), the level that has been recognized throughout Islamic history as the highest and most comprehensive. (Quoted by Fakir 1992: 200-201).

Makhdum Sawi, a Sufi scholar, as related by EL-Zein (1979:39-40) indicated that through meditation a person could have this mystical knowledge by which he can:

discover the essences of things which are the reality of the phenomenal beings, and behold the Divine Throne (Arsh), the Foot Stool (Kursi), the Preserved Tablet (Lauhi-l- Mahfuz), the Pen (Qalam), Angels, etc.

Owing to the fact that the human intellect has limitations, knowledge acquired through rationalism, logic and contemplation needs to be verified by revealed knowledge. Secondly, mystical knowledge or claim to knowledge is not the preserve of Muslim mystics; it also exists in other religions and cultures.

The last source of knowledge is experience or empiricism. The senses of hearing, feeling, smelling, seeing and tasting are employed to discover the properties of a phenomenon. The senses too have limitations; they cannot, for instance, perceive angels and they can sometimes mislead us. For these reasons, knowledge based upon empiricism (*ayn-al-yaqin*) may sometimes be unreliable. It also needs confirmation by revealed knowledge.

Revelation, being absolutely reliable and supreme, is superior to the other two sources of knowledge. These other two sources, rationalism and empiricism, must in no way contradict revelation; they can provide further or detail explanation to revealed knowledge but the explanations need confirmation by revelation.