

Islamic Epistemology: Basic Concept and Classification

Prof. Sayyid Muhammad Yunus Gilani*

Introduction

There are several Arab-Islamic terms and concepts that contain shades of meaning for which there are no single and exact corresponding equivalents in English. The term '*ilm*', for example, although translated generally as 'knowledge', contains the idea of standard norms of Islamic life, thought and civilization based on Revealed Guidance and God-given gifts and faculties of reason etc. '*Ilm*' in general refers to the attitude in life that comes from recognizing one's proper place in relation to one's self, community, mankind, universe and the Creator of all. Loss of '*ilm*' implies loss of proper behaviour and discipline and a failure to act with justice and is aptly referred to as *jahl* or *jahiliyyah* (ignorance) and stands as an antagonistic correlative to Islam. This in nut-shell sums up the Islamic epistemology. Islam's vision of knowledge, as the key to vertical relationship with the Creator and horizontal relationship with the creation, is the means and method of contributing materially, morally and spiritually, to virtuous (universal) civilization (Fig.1). Social and civilizational goals flow from *iman* (faith) as light flows from the sun. And *iman* comes from (and also leads to) '*ilm*' which in its turn is related and gives rise to (and necessitates) '*amal salih*' (right action). (Fig. 2 & 3).

1. '*Ilm*: Knowledge, Science and Scholarship

Ilm, the knowledge, is the basis of Islam. "Islam" connotes submission, recognition, surrender and obedience to the will of Allah. This will of Allah can be known through knowledge, '*ilm*'. *Ilm* is Islam, even if the theologians have been hesitant to accept the technical correctness of this equation.¹ The concept of '*ilm*' has dominated every field of Muslim civilization and it has operated as a determinant, side by side with the

* Professor & former Director, Shah-i-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Social Science, University of Kashmir.

concepts of *tawhîd* (recognition and the affirmation of the Oneness of God), *al-Dîn* (the true religion) etc.² Not only an intellectual but even a layman in Islam has to be affected by it. There can be no Islam without *'ilm*. *'Ilm*, knowledge, has always been respected in the global Islamic community, the *ummah*, It was moreover the most important condition for legitimate political leadership in its history.³

'Ilm, the opposite of *jahl* (i.e., ignorance), is connected with a number of terms e.g., *ma'rifah*, *fiqh*, *hikmah*, *shu'ur* etc. "The *'alima* is used in the Qur'ân both in the perfect and imperfect and also in the imperative with the meaning 'to know', but in the imperative and in the perfect it seems often to mean basically 'to learn' without effort, the fifth form *ta'allama* being used when a nuance of laborious study is implied, *'ilm* is the result of this action".⁴ The derivations of the root *'-I-m* [ع ل م] make about one per cent of the total vocabulary of the Qur'ân occurring 750 times. "The Qur'ân contains roughly something short of 78,000 words."⁵ However *'ulûm*, the accepted plural of *'ilm*, occurs nowhere in the Qur'ân.⁶

'Ilm initially implied the knowledge of Allah, His miracles, and His works among His servants and creatures. On the death of Caliph 'Umar (r.a.) Ibn Mas'ud (r.a.) exclaimed that the nineteenths of *al-'ilm* had passed away, pointing towards the knowledge of Allah and Islam that 'Umar (r.a.) possessed. The term was altered by restriction in its meaning with the passage of time and applied to those only who debate the case of jurisprudence and the like.⁷

'Ilm and *ma'rifah*, both mean knowledge but because of the various derivatives of *ma'rifah* such as *'ârif* or *'arraḥ* it tended to be used for the knowledge acquired through, reflection and experience presupposing a previous ignorance. *'Ilm* was applied to the spontaneous knowledge of Allah and the religion and *ma'rifah* meant "secular knowledge."⁸ However, different writers used the terms in different and often interchangeable senses. *Ma'rifat 'ilmî* was used as synonymous with *'ilm*, the knowledge and *Ma'rifat hâlî* meant the knowledge as practised in day to day life.⁹ In the early times *'Ilm* in the expression *talab al-'ilm* was used by the majority as meaning the "traditions" (*hadîth*) the

search for which involved long jöurneys.¹⁰ *Talib al-'ilm*, he who seeks 'ilm, is a general term used to denote the students, particularly, of the religious knowledge.

2. The *Qur'ân* on 'Ilm

And pursue not that of which you have no 'ilm (knowledge) for (every act of) the hearing or of seeing, and (of feeling in) the heart will be enquired into (on the Day of Reckoning).
(17:36)

...Of 'Ilm (Knowledge) it is only a little that is communicated to you (O men)!
(17:85)

...And say: My Lord! Increase (Advance) me in 'Ilm (Knowledge)
(20:114)

And (yet) there is among mankind such a one who disputes concerning Allah without 'ilm (knowledge), without guidance, and without A Book (Scripture) of Enlightenment.
(22:8)

Say: Verily the 'ilm (knowledge) is with Allah alone I am only to warn plainly (in public)
(67:26)

3. The *Hadîth* on 'Ilm

Hadrat Abu Hurairah (R.A.) relates that the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: A person who follows a path for acquiring 'Ilm (Knowledge), Allah, will make easy the passage for Paradise for him. (Muslim)

Hadrat Abu Hurairah (R.A.) reports that the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: A person who invited (somebody) towards righteousness has a recompense equal to the recompense of those who receive guidance from him, without reducing the recompense of (any one of) them. (Muslim)

Hadrat Abu Hurairah (R.A.) narrates that the Holy Prophet ﷺ said when a person dies, his actions stop except three things (that he leaves behind): (first), Sadaqa Jariya (continuous charity), second, *ilm* (knowledge) from which benefit may be obtained, and (three), a virtuous son who prays for him.

Hadrat Anas (R.A.) relates that the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: A person who goes (out of his house) in search of knowledge, he is on Allah's way and he remains so till he returns. (Tirmidhi)

Hadrat Abu Sa'id Khudri (R.A.) relates that the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: A Muslim is never satiated in his quest for good (knowledge) till it ends in paradise. (Tirmidhi)

Hadrat Ibn Mas'ud (R.A.) relates that he heard the Holy Prophet ﷺ say: May Allah, keep the person happy who hears something from us and conveys it to others, as he has heard, for sometimes the people who hear from others remember it better than the (first) hearer himself. (Tirmidhi)

4. 'Ulûm: Sciences and disciplines

As already stated above, '*ulûm*', the plural of '*ilm*', does not occur in the Qur'ân. "'*Ilm*' the concrete, specialised discipline with its plural '*ulûm*', as Rosenthal speculates, must have taken its place in the Islamic terminology next to '*ilm*', the abstract concept, quite early. It seems likely

that at the beginning “there was the idea of an *‘ilm* constituting a distinctive part of the vast realm of religion conceived as knowledge and concerning individual points of religious law or theology and that this meant the starting point for the use of *‘ilm* as the designation for science of scholarly discipline.”¹¹ With the passage of time as awareness must have been there that there was not only *‘ilm* but a number of *‘ulûm*. *‘Ilm* can be both a totality of a number of *‘ulûm* and an individual item of information as well.¹²

5. *Aqsâm al-‘Ulûm: (Classification of ‘Ulûm):*

5.1 Farabi’s Classification of ‘Ulûm

With the advance in times the *‘ulûm* were divided and classified according to the contents and form. One of the earliest attempts to classify the *‘ulûm* was made by al-Kindî,¹³ Abû-Yûsuf Ya‘qûb ibn-Ishâq (c. 801-873 A.D.) in the third A.H./ ninth A.D. century. However, the most accepted early classification of *‘ulûm* was made by Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Tarkhân Abû Nasr al-Fârâbi (Alpharabius), the Turkish savant (died at Damascus in 339 A.H./950 A.D.), who was native of Fârâb in Transoxiana. His classification of the *‘ulûm* (sciences) is as follows:- I. The science of language; II. The science of logic; III. The science of mathematics: arithmetic, geometry, optics, astrology, music, “weights” and mechanics; (IV) A. Theological and natural science; IV(B). The science of “Theology”, comprising politics, *fiqh* (law) and *kalâm* (scholastic theology).¹⁴ [Table 1]

In *De Ortu Scientiarum*, which is ascribed to al-Farabi and exists only in a Latin translation, *‘ulûm* (sciences) are classified in a different way as: I. Natural science which deals with the occasions and causes of changes in substances. This “science of action and passivity” is further divided into the following *‘ulûm*: 1. juridical astrology (*de judiciis*); 2. medicine; 3. divination (*de-nigromantia*); 4. (interpretation of) visions (*de-imaginibus*); 5. agriculture; 6. navigation; 7. alchemy (“which is the science of transforming things into other species”), and 8. optics (*de speculis*); II (a) the knowledge of the four elements: fire, air, water, earth and the four qualities which arise out of them viz. heat, cold, fluidity (moisture) and dryness; (b) (i) *‘ulûm al -riyadiyah* (mathematical science

of numbers), (ii) mensuration (iii) astronomy, and (v) music.¹⁵ [Table 2]

In his classification and the theory of knowledge al-Farabi emphasizes that the religious truth (the revelation) and the philosophical truth (the reason) are one in their subject and different only in their form. This idea renders possible accord between these two '*ulûm* and al-Farabi is the first scholar who raised a new edifice of philosophy on this accord followed by the later '*ulama*' and '*hukama*'.¹⁶

5.2. Ibn-Sina's Classification of '*Ulûm*

Abu-'Ali al-Husayn ibn-Sina (Latin Avicenna, through Hebrew Aven Sina. b. 980 A.D. d. 428 A.H./ 1037 A.D) called by the Arabs *al-Shaykh al-ra'is*, "the Shaykh" (of the learned) and "prince" (of the courtiers) and *al-mu'allim al-thani*, the second teacher (after Aristotle), born near Bukhara, lived in the eastern part of the Muslim world and was buried in Hamadan, the great successor of al-Farabi, following him in reconciling '*ilm* and '*hikmah* (philosophy) and exposing and delineating its Platonic aspects,¹⁷ makes a primary division of wisdom or philosophy (*hikmah*) into two parts in his short treatise on this subject, *Risalah Taqsim al-'Ulûm*: (1) The theoretical or speculative knowledge aiming at the acquisition of established beliefs concerning existing things whose existence in no way depends upon man's activity: "its purpose indeed being merely the forming of reasoned views (*ra'y*) as for example in the 'science' or belief in the Oneness of God or in the 'science' of predestination (*qismah*)"; (2) The practical (science) aiming at the acquisition of reasoned views to attain "good" with a view to action.¹⁸ [Table 3]

Another division of '*ulûm*, according to ibn-Sina, is into three parts: (1) lower science called *al-'ilm al-tabi'iyyat* or natural science. It is subdivided into two parts: (a) root or principle concerned with the qualities, possessed by the natural substances- matter, form, motion, character and causes or conditions of production; (b) branch or derivative science concerned with the conditions, movements and stations of the essential constituents of the world viz. the heavenly bodies. This derivative part is sub-divided into the various "departmental sciences"; medicine, astronomy, interpretation of ideas (*ta'bir*), magic (*'ilm al-*

tilismat) and alchemy; (2) the middle science, called the propaedeutic (mathematical) sciences, *ilm al-riyadhiyat* and (3) the upper science called “theological” science, *ilm al-ilahiyyat*.¹⁹[Table 4]

5.3. Al-Ghazzali’s Classification of ‘*Ulûm*

Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazzali (Latin Algazel) “unquestionably the greatest theologian of Islam and one of its noblest and most original thinkers”,²⁰ who “has been acclaimed by both Muslim and European scholars as the greatest Muslim after Muhammad”,²¹ the Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ was born in 450 A.H. /1058 A.D. at Tus, Khurasan, near modern Mashhad, Iran and died there in 505 A.H./1111 A.D. His classification of ‘*ulûm* is analysible on the basis of three criteria: I. classification of ‘*ulûm* by level of obligatoriness, II. classification of ‘*ulûm* by source and III. classificatin of ‘*ulûm* by social function.²²

5.3.1. Al-Ghazzali’s Classification of ‘*Ulûm* by Level of Obligatoriness.

(a) Individually Requisite (fard ‘ayn) ‘*ulûm*: Their acquisition is *Shari’ah* duty (*fard*) of every Muslim. It starts with knowledge of the “five pillars” of Islam as and when these duties become incumbent upon the individual: confession of faith; the daily prayers; fasting in the month of *Ramadan*: payment of *zakat*; and *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Makkah.

It is also compulsory for every individual to learn about (i) other ideas and actions permitted or prohibited in Islamic law, and (ii) the beliefs and actions of the *ahwal al-qalb*, (states of heart)²³, ‘*Ilm al-Mu’amalat* (knowledge of transactions) traditionally deals with Islamic civil law, but al-Ghazzali returned to the ethical problems over and over again since he complained that they had been neglected by all. To rehabilitate the science of the states of the heart he waged “holy war”. This being the way to find paradise and avoid hell, he also named it as the “science of the hereafter”. He made its inculcation in beliefs and actions to the limit of thoroughness, every individual’s lifelong duty.²⁴ (iii) ‘*Ilm al-Mukashafah* (Science of revelation) is the esoteric science of the transcendental mysteries mentioned in the Qur’ân like angels, attributes of Allah, prophecy etc. All people are required to have belief in the mysteries

whereas the prophets (A.S.)“and those close to Allah” have the real knowledge about these mysteries. However, the people should be diverted to pursue the subjects allowed by the Islamic law, for the knowledge of these transcendental realities is beyond the ‘grasp’ of even theologians and philosophers.²⁵

(b) Socially Requisite (*Fard Kifayah*) ‘ulûm. The knowledge of these ‘ulûm is obligatory (*fard*) for the Muslim community as a whole. However, only the requisite (*kifayah*) number of competent people are required to specialise in each of these disciplines. These “comprise every science which is indispensable for the welfare of this world”, without them “a community would be reduced to narrow straits.”²⁶ [Table 5]

5.3.2. Al-Ghazzali’s Classification of ‘Ulûm by Source

(a) Shar‘iyyah Sciences (*‘Ulûm Shar‘iyyah*). These ‘ulûm are “acquired from the prophets (A.S.) and are not arrived at either by reason, like arithmetic, or by experimentation, like medicine, or by hearing, like language.”²⁷

The first of these sciences deals with primary and secondary sources of *Shari‘ah* viz. *Qur’ân* and *Sunnah*. The *furu‘* (branches) sciences are derived from the *Shari‘ah* sources through rational process. These are:

- i) The *fiqh* and
- ii) “the sciences of *ahwal al-qalb* (the states of the heart)

Muqaddimat (auxiliary) ‘ulûm like Arabic linguistics “act as the instrument for the Shar‘iyyah sciences.”

Mutamminat (supplementary) ‘ulûm are also related to the study of the primary sources of the *Shari‘ah*. Al-Ghazzali’s *Shar‘iyyah* sciences include the rational or non-*Shar‘iyyah* sciences which are needed for a deductive understanding of the *Shari‘ah*.

(b) Non-*Shar‘iyyah* Sciences (*‘Ulûm ghayr Shar‘iyyah*). The primary sources of the non-*Shar‘iyyah* sciences are reason, experimentation etc. The permissible (*mubah*) ‘ulûm are “those which are not explicitly forbidden by the *Shari‘ah* and, therefore, are *prima facie* lawful. Such are all the rational or “philosophical” sciences (*‘ulûm*).²⁸ [Table 6]

5.3.3. Al-Ghazzali's Classification of 'Ulûm by Social Function

a) Praiseworthy (*Mahmud*) 'Ulûm. These are the useful and indispensable 'ulûm "on whose knowledge the activities of this life depend such as medicine and arithmetic."²⁹

b) Blameworthy (*Madhmum*) 'Ulûm. These include magic, talismans, dialectical theology, astrology and the like.

Blameworthy and praiseworthy sciences. Criteria:

'Ilm "is seeing things as they really are, which is one of the attributes of Allah. "Now", then, asks al-Ghazzali, "could a thing be 'ilm and at the same time be blameworthy". He describes the value and excellence of 'ilm in the very first chapter of his *Book of Knowledge (kitab al-'Ilm)*.

Knowledge, 'ilm must be a means to some higher ultimate goal. It is the social role of the 'ulûm that makes them praiseworthy or blameworthy. 'Ilm in itself can never be held to be blameworthy. The 'ulûm, of whatever kind, which fail in serving the ultimate purpose are in danger of becoming blameworthy.

Some "philosophers" propound particular sciences or doctrines, which if they conflict with the *Shari'ah* doctrines and purposes, are blameworthy for ideological reasons.³⁰ [Table 7]

5.4. Ibn-Khaldun's Classification of 'Ulûm

'Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldun (732-808 A.H./ 1332-1406 A.D.) "the first philosophical historian and the greatest until the nineteenth century"³¹ was born in Tunis of a Spanish-Arab family. During his first forty-odd years he lived in Muslim Spain and North Africa amidst political throes, and served many a ruler in high government positions. After 784/1382 until his death, he served in Egypt as a College-Professor and a Chief Judge. He is known as a historian and a sociologist of politics, economics, urban life, and knowledge. His fame rests on his *Prolegomena (Muqaddimah)* to his *Universal History, Kitab al-'Ibar wa diwan al-Mubtada wa'l-Khabar fi ayyam al-'Arab wa'l-'Ajam wa'l-Barbar* (The Book of instructive examples and register of subject and predicate dealing with the history of the Arabs, Persians and Berbers), written during a temporary retirement in an Algerian fort in a period of less than four years.

(776-779/1374-77).

Ibn-Khaldun shares the views of al-Ghazzali. His main classification of 'ulûm is into the *Shar'iyah* and the philosophical sciences.³²

5.4.a) Shari'ah Based (Shar'iyah), or Transmitted (Naqliyyah), or Positive (Wad'iyyah) 'Ulûm.

These are the institutional sciences based upon information derived from the Qur'ân and the *Sunnah*. In these 'ulûm there is no room for reason except in the deduction of practical application.³³ The unlawful innovation (*bid'ah*), speculative theology, *tasawwuf* etc. were added to these 'ulûm. "All these transmitted 'ulûm belong exclusively to the Islamic community and its people, although there have existed in every community similar sciences which are homonymous with these in the distant genus (*jins ba'id*) in so far as they are [all] legal sciences...."³⁴ Thus every community or nation in the world has its own law (*Shari'ah*) etc. to supply it with the dogmas and doctrines and prescribe the obligatory, forbidden, permissible, praiseworthy and blameworthy acts.³⁵ The other religions are concerned with a narrowly conceived "religion" excluding politics and leadership for social organisation. Hence only "remotely comparable" to the *Shari'ah* of Islam.³⁶

The Prophets (A.S.) have the 'ilm beyond the theoretical reason but the common believers do not possess it, therefore, it is better for them not to waste their time in the rational truth behind the unseen (*al-ghayb*) dogmas of religion. If the metaphysics is made the object of theoretical sciences, the result is that "the mind becomes lost and gets nowhere, nor gains any real insight."³⁷

5.4.b) The Philosophical (Falsafiyyah) or Rational/Intellectual ('Aqliyyah), or Natural (Tabi'iyyah) 'Ulûm

These 'ulûm are "natural" in man who is guided thereto by his reason. The philosophical sciences are those which may be acquired by inborn power of reflection.³⁸ The main 'ulûm in this category are: logic, natural sciences or "physics" (e.g., medicine, agriculture); metaphysics; and mathematical sciences (e.g., geometry, arithmetic, music, astronomy).

The philosophical sciences can be known by man by his very nature as a rational being, so they are natural sciences.

The intellectual sciences are natural to man in as much as he is a thinking being. They are not restricted to any particular religious group. They are studied by the people of all religious groups who are all equally qualified to learn them and to do research in them. They have existed (and been known) to the human species since civilization had its beginning in the world. They are [also] called the sciences of philosophy and wisdom.³⁹

The philosophical sciences are those that man can know by the nature of his thought, and through his human perception can arrive at their subject matter, problems, ways of demonstration, and the manner of teaching them — until his reflection and investigation leads him to [distinguish] truth from falsehood in them.⁴⁰

The *Shar'iyah* in sciences, including the instrumental sciences viz., languages, their dialects and scripts, may vary with communities, but the intellectual sciences are international. They may show no differences while as the religious (*Shar'iyah*) sciences differ from community to community according to the religions among them.⁴¹ [Table 8]

5.5. Some other Classifications of 'Ulûm

5.5.1) 'Ilm al-Abdan and 'ilm al-Adyan

The Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ is reported to have said that *al-'ilm* is two fold: the '*ilm* of religions and the '*ilm* of bodies; "*al-'ilm 'ilman, 'ilm al-adyan wa 'ilm al-abdan*". Its face value is that knowledge lies in theology and medicine. It has been interpreted to mean that the '*ulûm* are divided into the abstract and the concrete, metaphysical and physical. This classification makes it clear that in Islam natural or physical sciences are not contrasted with religion. "Islam covers the whole of life, his [a Muslim's] religion being the greater, included all that is known as natural phenomena..."⁴² [Table 9]

5.5.2) The Main 'Ulûm and the Auxilliary 'Ulûm

The main subjects of 'ilm are theology, ethics, law, *fiqh*, *usul al-fiqh*, the Qur'ân and the Tradition (*hadîth*). The auxilliary 'ulûm are grammar, rhetoric, prosody, logic, methodology, mathematics and the terminology of Tradition⁴³ (*mustalahat al-hadîth*). [Table 10]

5.5.3) 'Ulûm al-'Arab and 'Ulûm al-'Ajam

The religious 'ulûm concerned with the Qur'ân, *hadîth* and *fiqh*, with Arabic as their language are also known as 'Ulûm al-'Arab, "the Arab Sciences". The 'Secular' sciences being derived from foreign (such as Greek, Persian and Indian) and ancient sources are termed as 'Ulûm al-'Ajam, "the non-Arab Sciences" or 'Ulûm al-'Awa'il, "the sciences of the Ancients".⁴⁴ The Arabo-Islamic sciences acquired more importance with the passage of time. The classification of 'ulûm into *mahmudah* (praiseworthy) and *madhmumah*⁴⁵ (blameworthy) plays a great role in their relative importance.⁴⁶ [Table 11]

5.5.4) Naqliyyah (founded on revelation) 'Ulûm and 'Aqliyyah (Rational or Intellectual) 'Ulûm⁴⁷

This classification is held by Ibn Khaldun as shown above. However, others also share this view. The sciences related to the Qur'ân, its revelation, recitation (*tajwid*), readings, interpretation, the Tradition (*hadîth*) and the 'ilm al-rijaj (facts about the reporters of Traditions), law, principles of law, religious rites and observances, are *naqliyyah 'ulûm*. They are also 'ulûm al-'Arab according to preceding classification. The 'ulûm which are not connected directly with religion are called 'aqliyyah 'ulûm. They are mostly 'ulûm al-'Ajam. They include all the natural philosophical and 'foreign' sciences. [Table 12]

5.5.5) Necessary 'Ulûm and Acquired 'Ulûm⁴⁸

The necessary 'ulûm are intuitive and include facts of history and geography that are known by general report. The acquired 'ulûm are secured by applying reason. Important facts that are known by revelation form the necessary 'ulûm. [Table 13]

5.5.6) Nafi' and Ghair nafi' 'ulûm

The Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ said:

The greatest among the mankind in worth is one who abandons whatever is of no use to him

His prayers (*du'a*) also included

My Allah! make profitable to me what you taught me and teach me what is profitable to me.

O, my Allah! I seek thy refuge from the '*ilm*' which doesn't profit.

O, My Allah! I ask of thee the profitable '*ilm*'

Thus the greatest '*alim*' and the highest and infallible model of '*ilm*' and '*amal*' Muhammad () classifies the '*ulûm*' into '*nafi*' (profitable, purposeful and useful) and '*ghari nafi*' (non-profitable and useless). The '*ulûm*' that serve the highest spiritual, ethical and civilizational goals of man are to be sought, taught, re-searched and developed and all anti-human harmful branches of "knowledge" have to be abandoned.

(Table 14)

5.5.7) The Revealed Knowledge and the Empirical Knowledge

Cyril Glasse referring to the dual implication of the word '*ilm*' in Arabic thus indirectly classifying the '*ulûm*' into Revealed Knowledge and the Empirical Knowledge states:⁴⁹

Ilm (lit. "science", "knowledge"). There is a *hadîth* which says: "Seek science [*ilm*], even unto China." In the sense of '*ilm*' as "revealed knowledge", the Koran [Qur'ân] itself had provided the essentials to metaphysical knowledge and an understanding of the relationship between man and God. A repeated theme of the Koran [Qur'ân] is revealed knowledge alone avails man in relation to God, and that speculative thought (*az-zann*) is invalid.

They engage in speculation, and speculation is of no avail with the Real" (53:28). As regards '*ilm*' in the meaning of "science", the Arabs at the time of the revelation were not well endowed with it.....

...Because of the dual implication of the word '*ilm*' in Arabic, some minds have constantly confused principal, or metaphysical, knowledge with empirical knowledge. Thus it is frequently claimed nowadays that Western scientific

knowledge somehow originated in the Islamic revelation, the 'ilm of modern science being perceived as deriving from the 'ilm of the Koran [Qur'ân]. This is... to fail to see that words change their meanings." [And still worse it would also mean that Islamic 'ilm is the root of the post-Renaissance and the contemporary secular (Godless) materialistic and value-free Western science which has surrendered before the Western global colonial imperialism and is in total service of West's hegemony over the rest.]

The Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ said, "One of the signs of the Hour is that knowledge [*'ilm*] will be taken away and ignorance reign supreme." [Table 15]

5.5.8) Conventional/ Medieval Classification of 'Ulûm

Thomas P. Hughes enlists 'ulûm as classified conventionally in Islamic heritage⁵⁰:

'ILM Lit. "To know; knowledge." In Muslim theology, the word *'Ilm* is always used for *religious* knowledge. 'Abu'l-Haqq says it is the knowledge of religion as expressed in "the Book" (Qur'ân) and the "Sunnah" (Tradition), and is of two kinds, *'Ilmu'l-Mubadi*, elementary knowledge, or that relating to the words and sentences of the Qur'ân and *Hadîth*; and *'Ilmu'l-Maqasid*, perfected knowledge, or that relating to faith and works, as taught in the Qur'ân and *Hadîth*. There is also *'Ilmu'l-Mukashafah*, revealed knowledge, or that secret knowledge, or light, which shines into the heart of the pious Muslim, whereby he becomes enlightened as to the truths of religion. This spiritual knowledge is also called *'Ilmu'l Haqiqah*, or the knowledge of truth. [Table 16]

It is related (*Mishkat*, book ii, ch.i. Arabic ed.) that the Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ said *'Ilm* is of three kinds, viz. *Ayatu'l-Muhkam*, *Sunnatu'l-Qaim*, and *Faridatu'l-'Adil*, and that whatever is beyond these three is not necessary. The learned doctors explain these terms as follows *Ayatu'l-Muhkam*, the established text or verses of the Qur'ân; *Sunnatu'l-Qaim*, the correct Ahadith or Traditions; and *Faridatu'l-'Adil*, the lawful interpretation of the Qur'ân and the Traditions. [Table 17]

The acquisition and the imparting of religious knowledge is very

highly commended by Muhammad صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ (see *Mishkatu'l-Masabih*, in loco):-

The desire of knowledge is a divine commandment for every Muslim, and to instruct in knowledge those who are unworthy of it, is like putting pearls, jewels, and gold on the neck of swine.

Whoever is asked about the knowledge which he hath, and conceals it, will be reined with a bridle of fire on the Day of Resurrection.

There are two avaricious persons that are never satisfied: one of them in knowledge, the more he attains the more he desires; the other of the world, with the things of which he is never satisfied.

That persons who will pursue the road of knowledge, God will direct him to the road of Paradise; and verily the angels spread their arms to receive him that seeketh after knowledge; and everything in heaven and earth will ask grace for him. Verily the superiority of a learned man over a worshipper is like that of the full moon over all the stars.

ILMU 'L-ADAB The science of Philology. In *Hajji Khalifah*, Lexicon, vol.i., p.215. quoted by Lane, it is "the science by which one guards against error in the language of the Arabs, with respect to words and with respect to writing."

The science of polite writing is classed under twelve heads: 1. *lughah*, lexicology; 2. *Sarf*, accidence; 3. *ishtiqaq*, derivation; 4. *nahw*, syntax; 5. *ma'ani*, sense or meaning; 6. *bayan*, eloquence; 7. *'arud*, prosody; 8. *qafiyah* rhyme; 9. *rasmu'l-khatt*, calligraphy; 10. *qardu sh-shi'r*, versification; 11. *inshau'n-nathr*, prose composition; 12. *muhadarah*, dictation. These sections are regarded as distinct sciences.

'ILMU'L- AKHLAQ Ethics; morals. The best-known works on the subject are the Persian works—the *Akhlaq-i-Jalali*, by Faqir Jani Muhammad, A.H. 908, which has been translated into English, with references and notes, by W.F. Thompson, Esq. (London, 1989); the *Akhlaq-i-Nasiri*, by Nasiru'd-din al-Tusi, A.H. 672; and the *Akhlaq-i-*

Muhsini by the Maulawi Husain al-Kashifi (Husain the commentator), A.H.910.

'ILMU'L-ASMA' The knowledge of the names, titles, or attributes of God.

'ILMU'L-BATIN The mystic science; the same as Tasawwuf. [Sufism].

'ILMU'L-FALAK The science of Astronomy.

'ILMU'L-FARA'ID The law of inheritance.

'ILMU'L- FIQH Jurisprudence; and the knowledge of all subjects connected with practical religion. In the first place, *fiqh* deals with the five pillars of practical religion: 1. the recital of the creed; 2. prayer; 3. fasting; 4. *zakat* or almsgiving; 5. *hajj* or pilgrimage; and in the second place with all questions of jurisprudence such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, sale, evidence, slavery, partnership, warfare, etc.

The chief Sunni works on the subject are: Of the Hanafi, the *Hidayah*, the *Fatawa-i-'Alamgiri*, The *Durru'l -Mukhtar*, and *Raddu'l-Muhtar*; of the Shafi'i and Maliki the *Kitabu'l-Anwar*, the *Muharrar*, and the *Ikhtilafu'l-A'immah*. The best-known Shi'ah works on jurisprudence are the *Sharai'ul-Islam*, the *Mafatih*, and the *Jami'u 'sh-Shatat*.

'ILMU'L-HADITH The science of the Traditions; i.e. the various canons which have been established for ascertaining the authenticity and genuineness of the Hadith or Traditions.

'ILMU'L-HANDASAH The science of Geometry.

'ILMU'L-HIKMAH or **'ILMU'L-FALSAFAH** Philosophy.

'ILMU'L-HISAB Arithmetic.

‘ILMU’L-ILAHİYAT A Knowledge of divinity. [THEOLOGY]

‘ILMU’L-INSHA The art of literary composition. [INSHA’]

‘ILMU’L-JABR Algebra.

‘ILMU’L-KALAM Scholastic theology; It is also known as *‘Ilmu’l-Aqaid*, the science of the articles of belief. The author of the *Kashfu’z-Zunun* defines it as “the science whereby we are able to bring forward proofs of our religious belief,” and it includes the discussions of the nature of the existence and the attributes of God.

‘Ilmu’l-kalam is the discussion of all subjects connected with the six articles of the Muslim Creed; 1. the Unity of God; 2. the Angels; 3. the Books; 4. the Prophets; 5. The Day of Judgement; 6. the Decree of God, as distinguished from *al-Fiqh*, which is an exposition of the five foundations of practical religion. 1. recital of the Creed; 2. prayer; 3. fasting; 3. zakat; 5. hajj.

The most celebrated works on the subject of *‘Aqaid*, or *‘Ilmu’l-Kalam* are: *Sharhu’l-‘Aqaid*, by the Maulawi Mas‘ud Sa‘du’d-din at-Taftazani, A.H. 792; the *Sharhu’l-Muwaqif*, by Saiyid Sharif Jurjani.

‘ILMU’L-LUGHAAH Lexicography. [ARABIC LEXICONS]

‘ILMU’L-MANTIQA Logical science. [LOGIC]

‘ILMU’L-MASAHAH Mensuration.

[Table 18]

5.5.9) I.R.K.H., Social Sciences, Natural and Physical Sciences etc.

The *‘ulûm* (disciplines of knowledge) as they are studied and taught in the contemporary times leads us to the following current classification of *‘ulûm*. [Table 19]

6. The Unity of ‘Ulûm

Dividing *‘ilm* (knowledge or science) or the classification (of all

and whatever kinds) of *'ulûm* into branches, fields, disciplines (various aspects of the ultimately indivisible *'ilm*), subjects etc. is (a functional or academic) exercise demanded or necessitated by convenience. The watertight compartmentalisation in Islamic context is impossible and even irrelevant because the ultimate source of *'ilm* (knowledge) and all the *'ulûm* (disciplines) is One Infallible (Allah s.w.t). He is the Creator of the *'ilm*, *'ulûm* and the *'ulamâ'*. Furthermore, the direction and final end of the *'ulûm* also is one — life of righteousness in His service (*'ibadah*) and submission. Even (Islamic) social sciences are not “secular” but very much religious in scope, subject -matter and the objectives. (Islamic) medical sciences take care of *halal* and *haram* and thus are religious in application. “*Unani*” medicine is the best example in the Islamic heritage of sciences. It is no more Greek. Fully Islamised it does pass on in the name of Islamic medicine. The modern (allopathic) medicine in the hands of Islamically oriented researchers, experts and practitioners is sure to develop into (one more) Islamic science dealing even with the latest bio-ethical issues. Creative literature in Islamic hands becomes purposeful, life-giving and didactic and thus an Islamic poet gives direction to his community, emancipates it and is not “wandering distractedly in every valley” and lost in the ‘art for the sake of art’. He is a believer in the Ultimate Reality, works righteousness, is engaged much in the remembrance of Allah and stands in defence against injustice.

Shall I inform you, (O people), on whom it is that the evil ones descend? They descend on every lying, wicked person, (into whose ears) they pour hearsay vanities, and most of them are liars. And the Poets— it is those straying in Evil, who follow them: Seest thou not that they wander distractedly in every Valley? And that they say what they practise not? Except those who believe, work righteousness, engage much in the remembrance of Allah, and defend themselves only after they are unjustly attacked. And soon will the unjust assailants know what vicissitudes their affairs will take!

(Qur'ân 26:221-227)

An *'alim* (scholar) of the (Islamic) religious sciences is not a *rahib* (monk or hermit renouncing the worldly (social) life and working for his personal 'salvation'). The Final Messenger of Islam (salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam) has clearly and categorically denounced *rahbaniyyah* (renunciation) saying.

"la rahbaniyyata fi'l Islam"

(There is no *rahbaniyya* in Islam)

and

khayru'l-nasi man yanfa'u al-nas

(The best of mankind is one who is useful to mankind)

An *'alim* and every *'alim* in the Islamic context has to be in service of the society and his *'ilm* has to be *nafi'* (useful and purposeful) to him and the humanity for the Messenger of Allah says: The Creation is the family of Allah so the most loved to Allah among the mankind is the most useful to His family

The *'alim* even of the religious sciences in Islam is not merely "religious" in the limited sense of the word. He has social and civilizational function and he is heir to the Prophetic mission of eradicating the evil and establishing the good, for the Prophet صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ said:

The *'ulama'* are the heirs of the Prophets.....

The Islamic civilization produces poet Rumi who is a *Mawlawi* (and *mawlana*) and a physical/natural scientist Abu 'Ali Ibn Sina who is a *hafiz* (preserver and memorizer of the Holy Qur'ân).

Tawhîd, the affirmation and confirmation of the concept and process of the Oneness of God (Allah s.w.t) is the greatest unifying factor and force. It is the be-all and end-all, alpha and omega of all the Islamic beliefs and actions, dogma and pragma, faith and practice, concept and process, world-view and ideology. Its application in epistemology leads to the concept of unity, unicity and integration of all aspects, forms, levels and classes of knowledge and sciences. By virtue of very fundamentals, in Islamic approach to knowledge and sciences in spite of all classifications *'ulûm* are inter-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary and even trans-disciplinary. *Tawhîd* integrates the natural and the super natural, social, physical, and

the metaphysical, empirical and the transcendental elements in knowledge, thought, life and civilization. It ultimately leads us to realise and appreciate the unity of design in the universe and Oneness of the Creator.

Table 1 Farabi's Classification of 'Ulum I

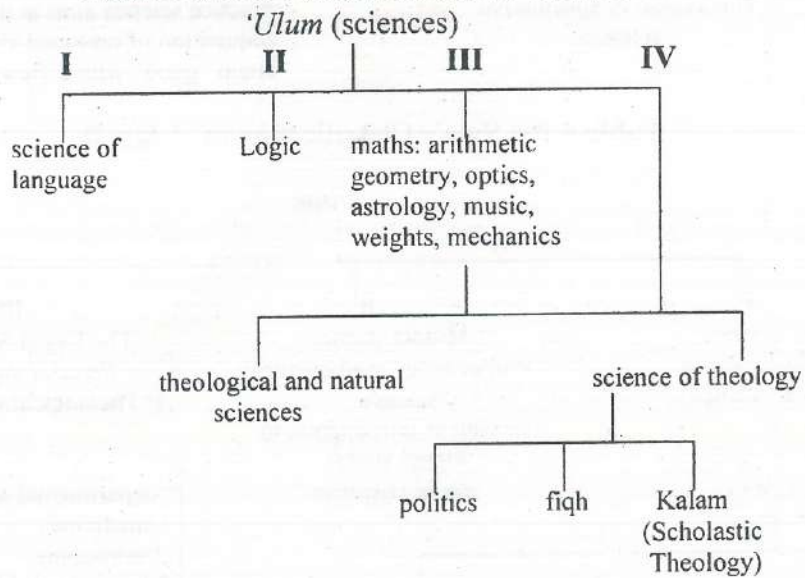


Table 2 Farabi's Classification of 'Ulûm II

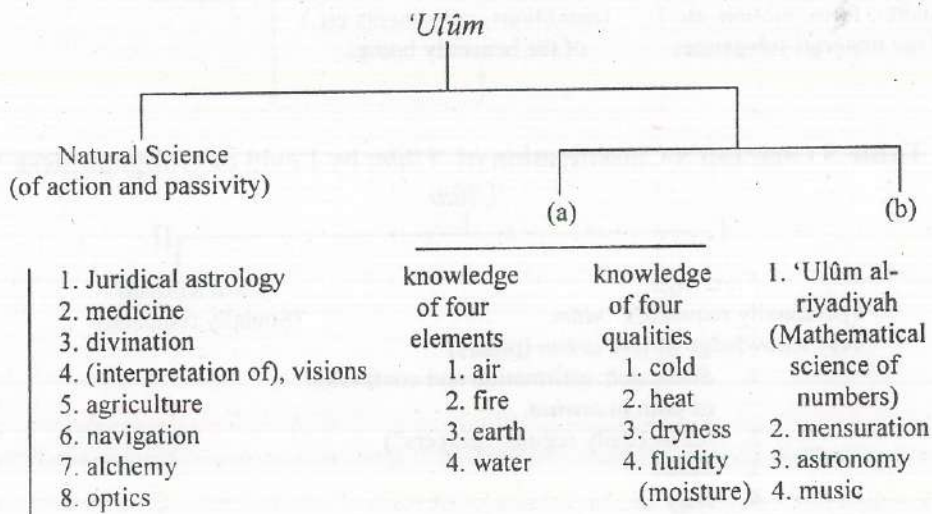


Table 3 Ibn Sina's Classification of 'Ulûm I

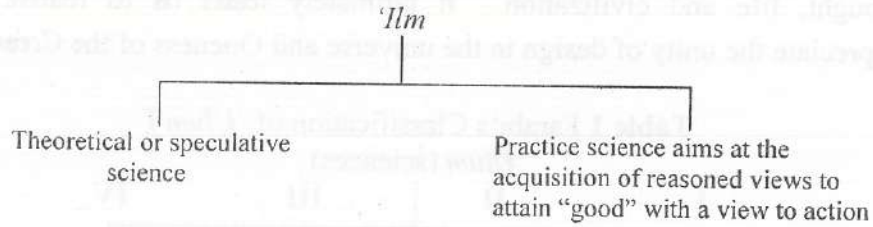


Table 4 Ibn Sina's Classification of 'Ulûm II

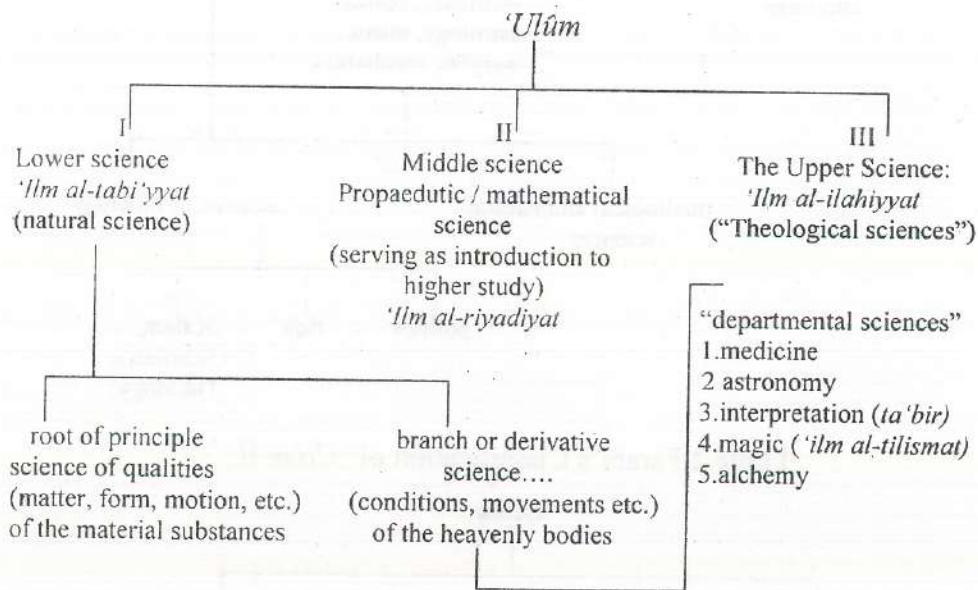


Table 5 Ghazzali's Classification of 'Ulûm by Level of Obligatoriness

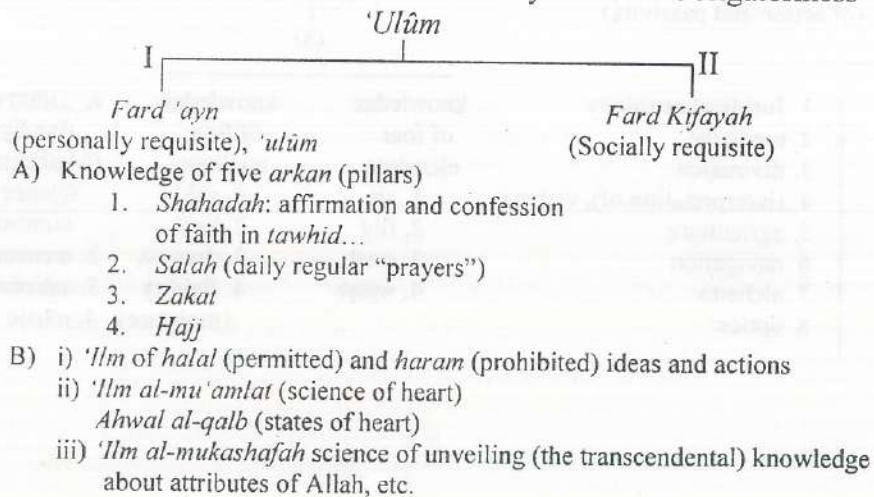


Table 6 Ghazzali's Classification of 'Ulûm II by Source

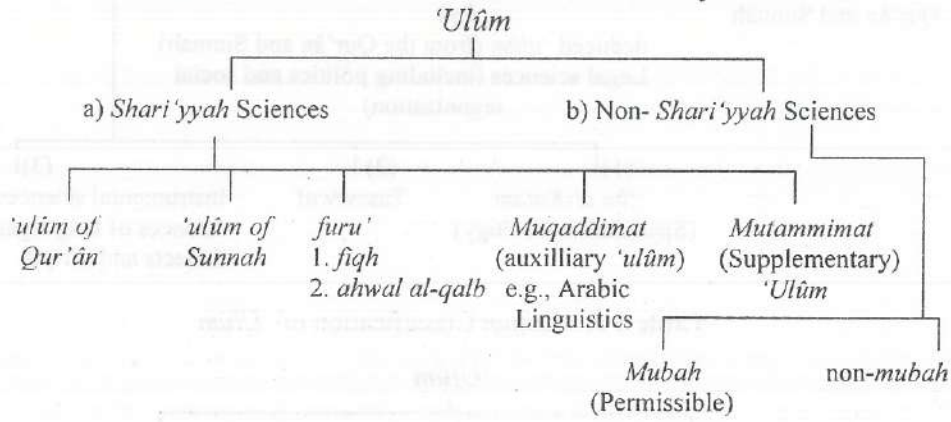


Table 7 Ghazzali's Classification of 'Ulûm III by Social Function

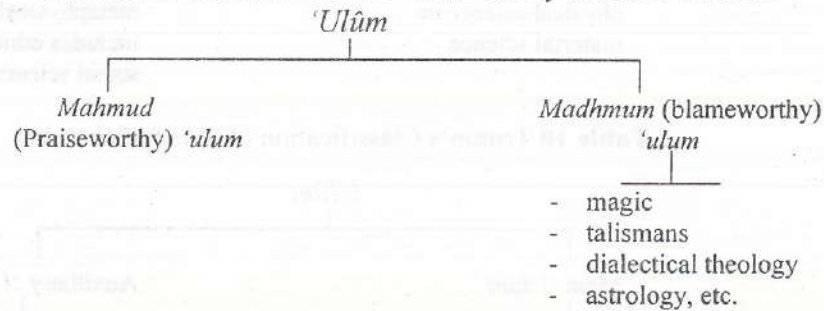
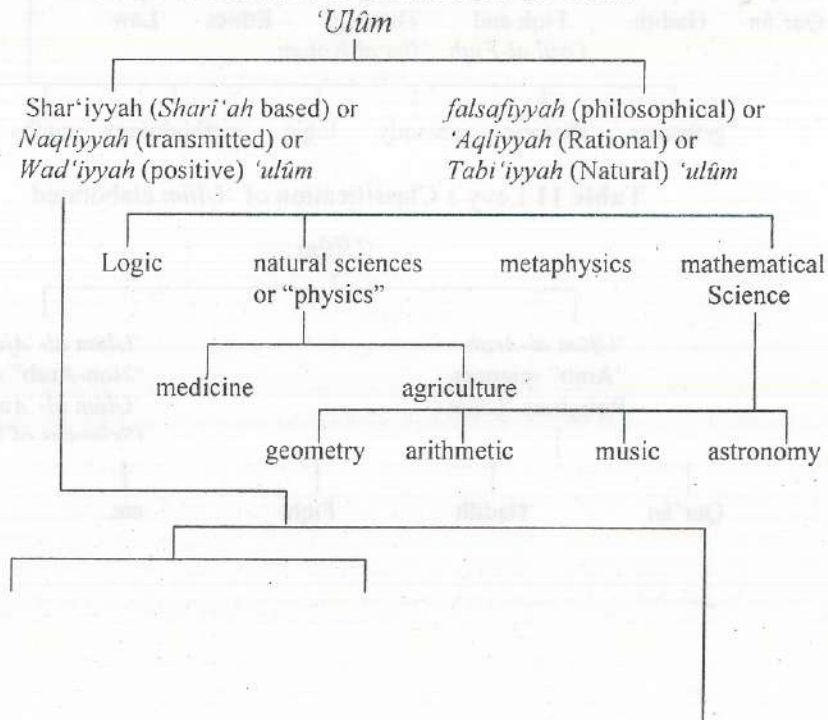


Table 8 Ibn Khaldun's Classification of 'Ulûm



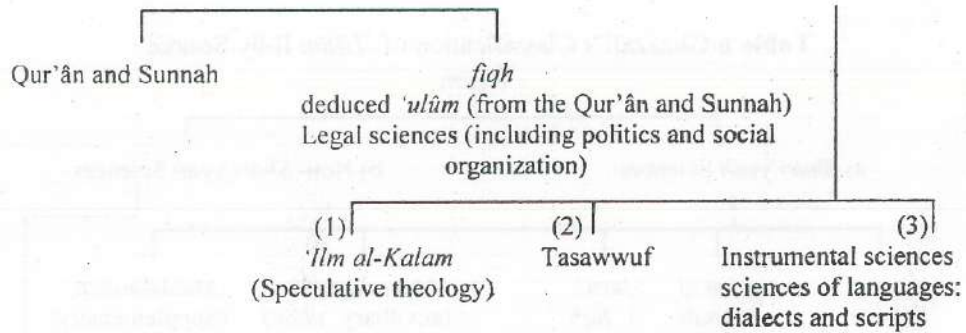


Table 9 A Masnun Classification of 'Ulum

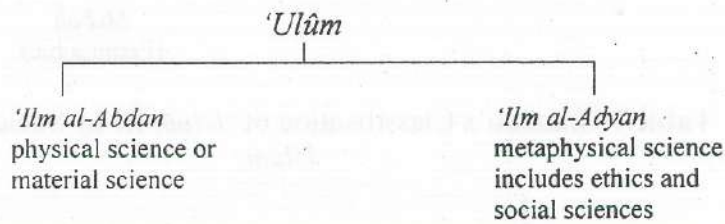


Table 10 Tritton's Classification of 'Ulum elaborated

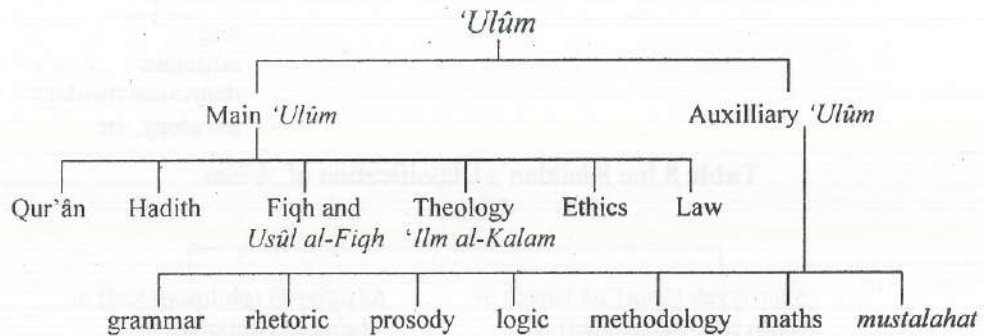


Table 11 Levy's Classification of 'Ulum elaborated

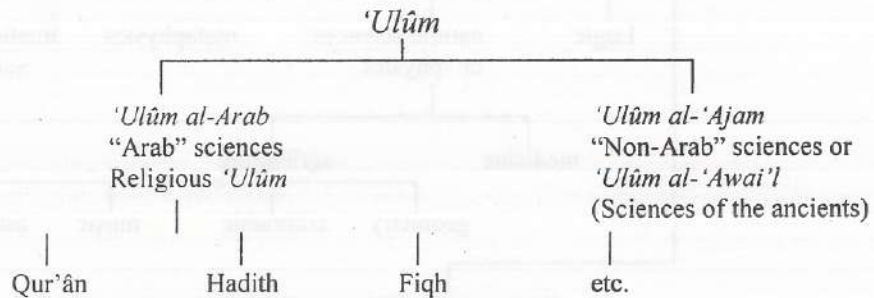


Table 12 Tritton's Classification of 'Ulûm elaborated

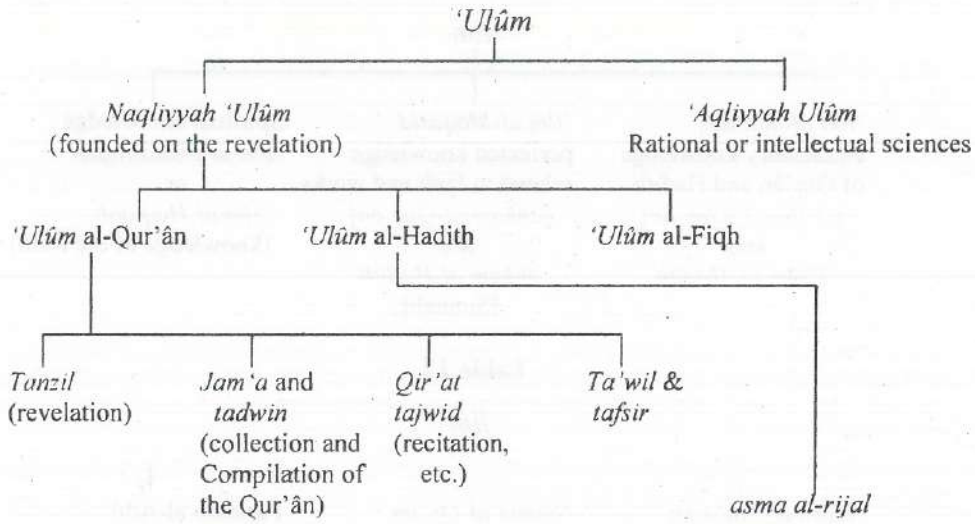


Table 13 Tritton's Classification of 'Ulûm explained

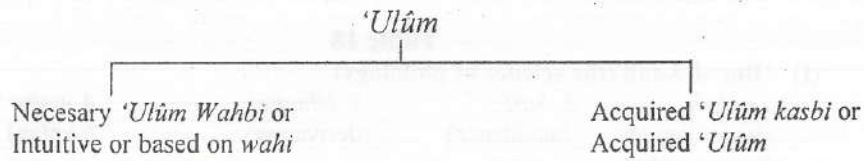


Table 14 A Masnun Classification of 'Ulûm

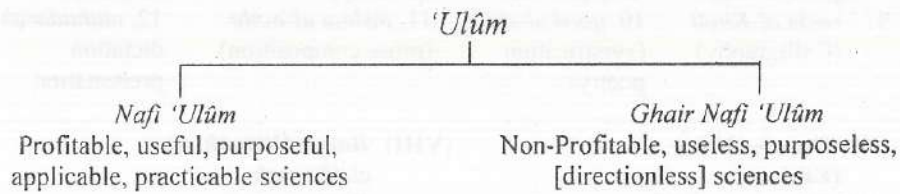


Table 15 Glasse's Classification of 'Ilm

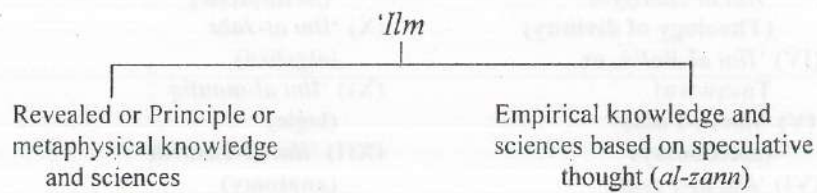


Table 16

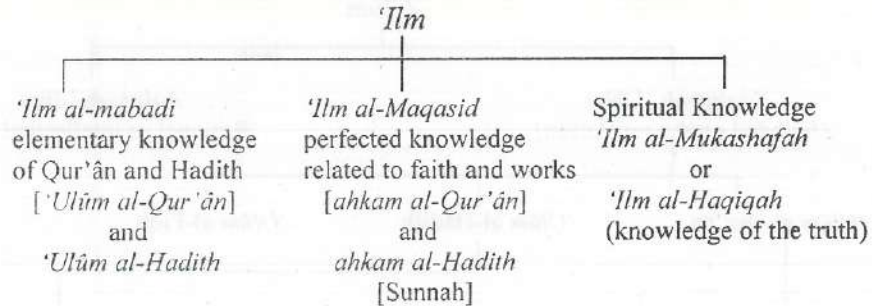


Table 17

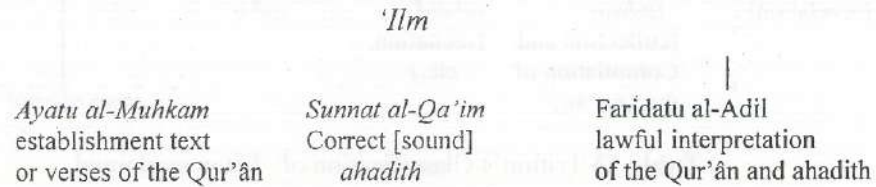
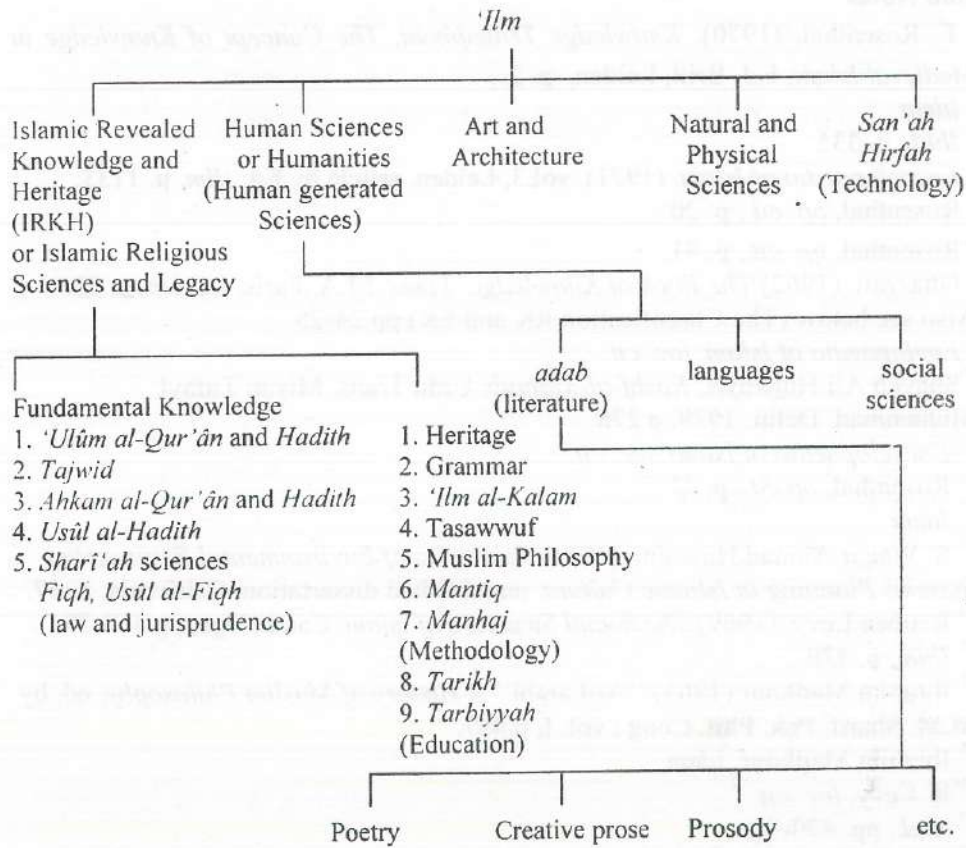


Table 18

- (I) *'Ilm al-Adab (the science of philology)*
- | | | | |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. <i>Lughah</i>
(lexicology &
lexicography) | 2. <i>Sarf</i>
(accidence) | 3. <i>Ishtiqaq</i>
(derivation) | 4. <i>nahw</i>
(syntax) |
| 5. <i>ma'ani</i>
(Semantics) | 6. <i>bayan</i>
(eloquence) | 7. <i>'arud</i>
(prosody) | 8. <i>qafiyah</i>
(rhyme) |
| 9. <i>rasm al-Khatt</i>
(Calligraphy) | 10. <i>qard al-shi'r</i>
(versification
poetry) | 11. <i>inshau al-nathr</i>
(prose composition) | 12. <i>muhadarah</i>
dictation
presentation |
-
- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>(II) <i>'Ilm al-Akhlaq</i>
(Ethics)</p> <p>(III) <i>'Ilm al-Aqa'id, or</i>
<i>'Ilm al-Kalam, or</i>
<i>'Ilm al-Ilahiyyat</i>
(Theology of divinity)</p> <p>(IV) <i>'Ilm al-Batin, or</i>
Tasawwuf</p> <p>(V) <i>'Ilm al-Falak</i>
(astronomy)</p> <p>(VI) <i>'Ilm al-Farâid</i>
(the law of inheritance)</p> <p>(VII) <i>'Ilm al-Handasah</i>
(Geometry)</p> | <p>(VIII) <i>'Ilm al-Hikmah, or</i>
<i>al-Hikmah</i>
(Philosophy)</p> <p>(IX) <i>'Ilm al-Hisab</i>
(Arithmetic)</p> <p>(X) <i>'Ilm al-Jabr</i>
(algebra)</p> <p>(XI) <i>'Ilm al-mantiq</i>
(logic)</p> <p>(XII) <i>'Ilm al-Tashrih</i>
(anatomy)</p> <p>(XIII) <i>'Ilm al-Tarikh or</i>
<i>Tawarikh</i>
(history)</p> |
|---|---|

Table 19 Contemporary Classification of 'Ulûm



End Notes

- ¹ F. Rosenthal, (1970), *Knowledge Triumphant, The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, p. 2.
- ² *Idem*
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 335
- ⁴ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, (1971), vol.3, Leiden, article by Ed. 'Ilm, p. 1133.
- ⁵ Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 20
- ⁶ Rosenthal, *op. cit.*, p. 41.
- ⁷ Ghazzali, (1962) *The Book of Knowledge*. Trans. M.A. Faris, Lahore, p. 83. Also see below (The Classification RK and EK) pp.24-25.
- ⁸ *Enclopaedia of Islam, loc. cit.*
- ⁹ Shaykh Ali Hujwayri, *Kashf-al-Mahjub*, Urdu Trans. Miyan Tufayl Muhammad, Delhi, 1979, p.276.
- ¹⁰ *Encyclopaedia of Islam, loc. cit.*
- ¹¹ Rosenthal, *op.cit.*, p. 43
- ¹² *Idem*
- ¹³ S. Waqar Ahmad Hussaini, (1941) *Principles of Environmental Engineering Systems Planning in Islamic Culture*, unpublished dissertation, California, p. 57.
- ¹⁴ Reuben Levy, (1969) *The Social Structure of Islam*, Cambridge, pp.469-70.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 470
- ¹⁶ Ibrahim Madkour (1963) "Al-Farabi" *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, ed. by M.M. Sharif, Pak. Phil. Cong., vol. I, p.457.
- ¹⁷ Ibrahim Madkour, *idem*
- ¹⁸ R. Levy, *loc. cit.*
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 470-71.
- ²⁰ P.K. Hitti, (1970) *History of the Arabs*, London, p. 431.
- ²¹ W.M. Watt, (1962) *Islamic Philosophy and Theology*, Edinburgh, p. 114.
- ²² S. Waqar A. Husaini, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-69.
- ²³ Al-Ghazzali, (1966) *The Book of Knowledge*, Trans. N.A. Faris, Lahore, pp. 31-36, 9.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.35, 99 f.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 77; 46-48, 77-79.
- ²⁶ Al-Ghazzali, *The Book of Knowledge, op. cit.*, pp. 37, 51; also p. 9.
- ²⁷ *Ibid* pp. 36 f.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 53, 36-40 and also al-Ghazzali [Al-Munqidh Min al-Dalal], *The Faith and Practice of al-Ghazzali*, Trans. W.M. Watt, London, George Allen, 1953, pp. 32036, 38f.
- ²⁹ Ghazzali, *The Book of Knowledge, op. cit.*, p. 37.
- ³⁰ S. Waqar A. Husaini, *op.cit.*, p. 61.
- ³¹ D.B. Macdonald, (1960) *Development of Muslim Theology, Jurisprudence and Constitutional Theory*, Lahore, p. 242.
- ³² For details see S.W.A Husaini, *op.cit.*, pp. 69-75.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 69

³⁴ Ibn Khaldun, (1967) *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Trans. F. Rosenthal, Princeton, vol. II. pp. 437, 424, 419-424.

³⁵ Ibn Khaldun, *op. cit.*, vol. III, p. 282ff., vol. I, pp. 477-478.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 438.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, vol. III, p.35.

³⁸ R. Levy, *op.cit.*, p. 458.

³⁹ Ibn Khaldun, *op.cit.*, vol. III, p. 111.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, vol. II, p. 436.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, vol.III, p. 282.

⁴² R. Levy, *op.cit.*, p. 458.

⁴³ A.S. Tritton, (1954) *Islam: Belief and Practice*, London, 1954, p.121.

⁴⁴ R. Levy, *op.cit.*, p. 460.

⁴⁵ See al-Ghazzali, *The Book of Knowledge, op. cit.*, Section II.

⁴⁶ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden, 1971, artele 'Ilm, by Ed., p.1133.

⁴⁷ A.S. Tritton, *op.cit.*, pp. 120-121.

⁴⁸ A.S. Tritton, *op.cit.*, p. 46.

⁴⁹ Cyril Glasse, (1989) *The Consise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, London, 'ilm, pp. 184-185.

⁵⁰ T.P. Hughes, (Delhi reprint 1988, first ed. 1885,) *Dictionary of Islam*, pp. 200-202.