

ISLAM, GLOBALISATION AND THE CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY EPISTEMOLOGY

By:

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Abstrak

Artikel ini membincangkan cabaran kontemporari terhadap pemikiran Islam, hasil dari proses Globalisasi. Ia membincangkan cabaran dari proses modenisasi yang mendasari Globalisasi, serta bentuk dan corak ilmu yang didukunginya. Pendekatan yang diambil merupakan gabungan antara pendekatan sejarah dan falsafah. Fokus artikel ini tertumpu kepada persoalan epistemologi atau teori ilmu, iaitu dengan membandingkan teori-teori epistemologi Barat masa kini dengan epistemologi Islam. Beberapa perbezaan ketara di antara epistemologi Barat dan Islam kemudian nya diuraikan. Selain daripada itu, beberapa hujah dikemukakan untuk memahami bentuk cabaran epistemologi ini, dan untuk mempertahankan perspektif Islam terhadap ilmu. Kesimpulan yang dibuat ialah epistemologi Islam yang bersifat keagamaan adalah berbeza dari aliran pemikiran Modenisme dan Pasca-Modenisme yang mempengaruhi epistemologi kontemporari, dan kerana itu epistemologi Islam harus dipertahankan mengikut lunas-lunasnya yang tersendiri.

1.0 Introduction

In today's globalised world, almost everything are brought into contact with one another through the medium of technology, trade and the global media. Not only different political, economic or social systems are brought into contact, but also knowledge and belief systems, including the religious and the secular. Thus for example, modern knowledge and belief-systems co-exist side by side with traditional religious knowledge and belief-systems. How does Islamic religious knowledge fare in this respect? Has contemporary scholarship - especially in the form which has evolved from the West, based on the epistemology of Rationalism and Empiricism - erode the credibility of Islamic epistemology and forms of knowledge? Al-Ghazzali,

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living in the 11th century, contemplated a similar question when facing Greek philosophy, as a result of which emerged his great work, the *Tahafut al-Falasifah*¹, translated into English as *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. My aim is more modest, and vastly less ambitious than his. My objective in this paper is to reflect on the state and nature of Islamic epistemology *vis-à-vis* contemporary western epistemologies, and help us arrive at some understanding of the nature of their differences, and perhaps demystify, if not deconstruct, some of the claims of contemporary western epistemology.

Juxtaposing Islam with Globalization, as is done in the title above, might raise eyebrows for some, though for different reasons. To the Muslim, the eternity of the Islamic message should not be cast beside a temporal event such as Globalization. To the secular humanist or modernist, religion does not earn or deserve the same cognitive space as science or modern knowledge as found in the so-called Age of Globalization, and hence consider the pairing anachronistic. Whatever attitude one might adopt towards the juxtaposition of “Islam” and “Globalization”, the more important task is to ask for the motivation behind the enquiry, the nature of such an enquiry, and what such a line of enquiry hopes to achieve. This amounts to presenting a statement of the problem, as well as a statement of purpose.

Intuitively, one can say that the topic under discussion is motivated by a critical self-reflection towards the place and role of religion, in this case Islam, in contemporary society. For some it might even be a reflection which would hopefully result in the reaffirmation of the faith. Islamic cultures can no longer insulate themselves from external influences in the globalised world, and since knowledge is foundational to any culture, influence at the level of knowledge would thus constitute the most basic challenge facing Islamic societies. Though the relevance of the Quran to the lives of contemporary Muslims have not been doubted, there is the perceived need to fend off any possibility - real or imaginary - or suggestion that the Age of Globalization has somewhat made the Quranic perspective or knowledge, which forms the basis of Islamic epistemology, outmoded or redundant. The younger generation of Muslims especially, might come to think that subscribing to an Islamic epistemology is no longer intellectually respectable in view of contemporary developments in knowledge and society². Globalisation has not only brought about standardization in

¹ Fakhry, Majid (1983). *A History of Islamic Philosophy*. London: Longman, p. 222.

² See S. H. Nasr (1975), *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*, London: Longman, especially chapters 7 and 11, on the influence and challenges of modernization and westernization on contemporary Muslims. Also see Majid Fakhry (1983), *op.cit.*, pp. 378-380, for an account of the influence on Logical Positivism in the Middle East.

work culture, technological artifacts and economic systems, but the forms of knowledge that comes with it. One reason why Globalisation poses a challenge to the Muslim world is because of the hegemony of western culture and knowledge in contemporary Globalisation. Associated with this is the phenomenon of western modernization. In fact, according to Anthony Giddens, Globalisation is the consequence and extension of modernization from the West to the rest of the world. To quote Giddens:

Modernity is inherently globalising - this is evident in some of the most basic characteristics of modern institutions, including particularly their disembeddedness and reflexivity... Globalisation refers essentially to that stretching process, in so far as the modes of connection between different social contexts or regions become networked across the earth's surface as a whole... Globalisation can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.

Thus the challenge of Globalisation to the Islamic world, especially to its belief-system, is related to the challenges of westernisation and modernisation. Whereas previously the distinction between the functional and the symbolic or existential might be clear, the globalization of knowledge and the technological and economic systems which it supports, and which in turn supports it, has somewhat blurred that distinction, making them inextricably linked within a common nexus. Such a condition therefore bring into focus the question of the relevance and status of religious knowledge in the contemporary world.

My line of defense of Islamic epistemology is two-pronged; the one normative and the other historical. The normative route would require us to provide an appraisal of the various competing epistemologies, and the strategy for the Muslim would be to provide an epistemological justification or 'defense' of the Quranic perspective vis-à-vis other epistemologies. This normative approach is also an *a historical* one, and assumes a view of knowledge largely modeled on the natural sciences. It entails a view of epistemology as a type of science, indeed akin to the natural sciences, and has provoked a famous response in terms of naturalistic epistemology. The other path involves a historical enquiry, and perhaps an anthropology of sorts. It does not start out by seeking to judge which epistemology is superior based on some rational or logical principles, but instead seeks to uncover the historical origins of the motivation

underlying the enquiry. This approach is historical without being 'historicist'.³ It is not historicist because it does not regard truth as essentially subject to historical change unlike the historicist who privileged history by adopting an 'evolutionary epistemology'. My own approach in this paper involves a synthesis of the two; with history providing us an understanding of the context of enquiry, and philosophy or normative epistemology helping us deal with the epistemological questions as they are currently posed. I will invoke history in order to 'understand the question': that is, on why the question is posed in the first place. Once it is understood how the question arose, the historical context within which it is framed, and what *sort of answers* one should expect from it, then it becomes appropriate to bring in philosophical analysis to put the 'troubled' intellectual mind at ease. So even though eventually questions of truth, objectivity, and rationality - the staple or standard fare of western epistemological enquiry - will feature in our assessment of knowledge including religious knowledge, ample distinctions would have been made in order to put them in their proper places. And some of those distinctions, conditions, and qualifications would be occasioned by our historical enquiry and not independent of it. Thus what we mean by 'legitimation of knowledge' for instance, might not be strictly equivalent to the classical idea of 'validation of knowledge', which even from the outset has prejudged history as constitutive of the 'genetic fallacy'. 'Legitimation' involves the social and the historical in the process of the construction of knowledge, whereas 'validation' suggests a logical procedure of verification, independent of history and society. The following section will therefore inquire into the historical process of the legitimation of some of the epistemological questions and perspectives adopted in contemporary scholarship.

2.0 Understanding Our Present Predicament Through a Historical Stage Setting: The Historical Evolution of Knowledge

The fact that we need to reassure ourselves that Quranic knowledge and the Quranic perspective is still relevant in this so-called 'Age of Globalization' is a sad reflection of the times. It not only symbolizes Muslim powerlessness but also his desperate desire to retain his faith and identity in a world that is increasingly slipping away from beneath his feet. Hypothetically, I cannot imagine let's say, a seminar on "Qur'an and Knowledge Systems in the Contemporary World" being conducted in tenth century Spain or Baghdad, as how seminars such as the one held at the International Islamic

³ See Karl Popper (1961), *The Poverty of Historicism*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. I use the term 'historicism' to refer to both the belief that a study of history can reveal social laws, and the belief that truth is fundamentally historical in nature.

University, Kuala Lumpur on 23 July 2002 entitled "The Qur'an in the Globalization Age", was conducted. Being world leaders in the field of knowledge then, such power and confidence would not necessitate a critical self-reflection or a group therapeutic response to reassure the Muslims of their faith or their social and cultural condition.⁴ The fact of the matter was that Muslims had acquired Greek knowledge since about the eighth century, and continued to cultivate and develop them till about the 14th century. The Islamic civilization had produced great scientists, physicians, mathematicians, philosophers, and astronomers, such as Ibn al-Haytham (optics), Al-Khwarizmi (mathematics), Ibn Sina (medicine), Ibn Shatir (astronomy), Al-Razi (chemistry), and Ibn Rushd (philosophy), men whose works were later to influence the course of development of knowledge in the western world. Islam could not have been incidental to their success for they lived and thought as Muslims. Even though sociological historians of science such as Toby Huff⁵ has tried to argue for the thesis of the institutional impediment of Islam to the growth of science, such a thesis would have difficulties in accounting for the growth of science in the Muslim world which lasted for a period of about four centuries, taking a conservative estimate.

The revival of learning in the West which began in the 12th century through the translation efforts of scholars such as Gerard of Cremona, Michael Scot, Adelard of Bath and others, through Spain, could not have been possible without the repository of Greco-Muslim learning bequeathed to the Europeans. The rediscovery of Greek learning and its enrichment by Muslim scholars made possible the establishment of Universities in Europe in the 13th century, by providing them with a corpus of knowledge that would form the mainstay of medieval learning. To say that the revival of learning in the West began with the Italian Renaissance of the 16th century, due to the direct recovery of Greek sources made possible through Christian monks after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, is historically inaccurate. The establishment of medieval universities in Europe *preceded* the Renaissance, and owed its source to the rediscovery of Greek learning through the Muslim world⁶. Under such circumstances, I again reiterate that the relationship of the Qur'an to true knowledge and scholarship

⁴ Even though parts of Spain had been reconquered by the Christians then, and that the Muslims were involved in the Crusades against the Christians. Muslims were still a power to be reckoned with both militarily and in terms of knowledge.

⁵ Huff, Toby E. (1993), *The Rise of Early Modern Science: Islam, China and the West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 87.

⁶ Kibre, Pearl and Nancy G. Siraisi (1978), *The Institutional Setting: The Universities*. In David C. Lindberg (ed.), *Science in the Middle Ages*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 120-123

would not have been a socio-cultural problematic. True, some Muslim philosophers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd did articulate a 'doctrine of double truth'.⁷ But it only showed the defensive line taken by secular learning, not by Islam. Foucault's thesis about the relationship between knowledge and power⁸ seems to be nicely illustrated here. To some extent power influences, if not determine, the status of knowledge or what is to count as knowledge. Western epistemologists would like to think that their discourse on knowledge as justified, true belief is conducted in the spirit and atmosphere of 'the disinterested pursuit of truth'. But such 'grounds of knowledge' is needed to maintain a secular society, which in turn support such philosophical enterprises. Epistemology as a subject of enquiry, and later as an academic discipline, flourished in Europe beginning from the 17th century onwards with thinkers such as Descartes, Bacon, Hume, Locke, and Kant. They were enquiring about the foundations of knowledge not within some abstract Platonic realm, but with their feet very much steeped in the philosophico-cultural problems of the times⁹. They were responding to the challenges brought forth by scientific knowledge to Christian and medieval conceptions of knowledge. They also needed a new epistemology in order to delegitimise the old order, power structure and sources of authority - namely the Churches. To think that their enquiries were conducted solely with truth in mind, is quite naïve to say the least. Kant for instance, ventured on an epistemological project which had a clear objective in mind: i.e. to save rationality, science and the Enlightenment, and yet preserve Christian ethics. *The Critique of Pure Reason* to be sure, employed reason to its fullest extent in carrying out its enquiry, but it is not an aimless or directionless enquiry. Kant's epistemological labour were later to bear political fruits in that it helped shaped Enlightenment thinking and the social and political institutions that followed.¹⁰ So knowledge cannot really be divorced from power.

Epistemology so entrenched, then becomes the arbiter of what is to count as 'knowledge'. It then becomes a foundational discipline which supposedly has the

⁷ Majid Fakhry (1987), *op.cit.*, p. 277.

⁸ See Rabinow, Paul (ed). 1984. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books; Foucault, Michel. 2002 [1969]. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London and New York: Routledge Classics. Translated by A. M. Sheridan Smith.

⁹ Russell, Paul (1988), Skepticism and Natural Religion in Hume's *Treatise*. *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 49: 247-265.

¹⁰ Mead, G.H. 1972 [1936]. *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 2. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

power and authority to sit in judgement over disputes involving cognitive claims. As Richard Rorty puts it¹¹ (1979:3):

...Philosophy can be foundational in respect to the rest of culture because culture is the assemblage of claims to knowledge, and philosophy adjudicates such claims. It can do so because it understands the foundations of knowledge, and it finds these foundations in a study of man-as-knower...¹²

Since the Industrial Revolution in Britain in the 18th century, the development of knowledge - especially scientific knowledge - has taken a new turn. If the successes of science in the 17th and 18th centuries have given the Enlightenment the moral courage to take a new view of man and knowledge, and to empower his mind and knowledge, developments since the Industrial Revolution have placed knowledge and the mind in a new context. Scientific knowledge has become applied to technology and becomes a new source of economic growth. Big firms now typically have Research and Development (R&D) divisions or departments as part of their attempt to apply scientific knowledge for technological innovation that would provide them with a competitive edge over their rivals. In this new context, the linkage between science, technology and the economy becomes stronger. If the Enlightenment were still able to think of the human mind and scientific knowledge as mirroring the truth about nature, such a conception no longer becomes feasible in the age of high-tech science and industry. This thesis has been convincingly argued for instance by J.F. Lyotard¹³ in his book *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. The so-called 'correspondence theory of truth' becomes less applicable to 'scientific truths', especially when scientific research becomes mediated by technology and has to serve technological and economic criteria of practical success. It is not surprising therefore to see more pragmatic conceptions of truth and scientific knowledge emerging over the last few decades.

¹¹ Rorty, Richard (1979). *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton University Press, p. 3.

¹² It must be stated in fairness, however, that Rorty did not endorse such a view of Philosophy. Rorty's strategy in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, was to present the then 'received view' on Philosophy, and then to launch a critique of such a foundational conception of Philosophy.

¹³ Lyotard, J.F. (1984). *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report On Knowledge*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

3.0 Knowledge and Colonialism: The Influence of Colonialism on Local Knowledge and Traditions

Although colonialism was partly responsible for the historical movement towards globalisation, this was not achieved without a price, especially on local culture and traditions. Studies by scholars such as Edward Said, and anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai and Bernard Cohn¹⁴, have shown how western colonialists with their new-found conception of knowledge that was largely a product of the scientific revolution of the 17th century, and of 18th century Enlightenment, have imposed this knowledge on local societies and cultures through the institutions they created, and through their own administrative practices. In the case of India for instance, the services of local men of knowledge were employed in order to facilitate colonial administration and social control¹⁵. Inevitably, this has the effect of subordinating local cultures and knowledge systems to that of the colonial west.

But is it valid to compare the experience of western domination on Oriental cultures such as the Indian, Malay or Chinese, with that of western colonization over Muslim lands? Isn't the historical relationship between Islam and the West different from that between the Orient and the West? I think the comparison is valid due to certain similarities between the two cases. One significant effect of western colonization is to create a sense of 'superiority' of western knowledge over the local. This is partly achieved through the dominance of western power over the colonized, in which the new knowledge was perceived to underlie that power. Thus it is not surprising to find Muslim intellectuals, especially in the 19th century, intellectuals and reformists such as Muhammad Iqbal, Al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Sayyid Ahmad Khan, rising to the fore to meet the intellectual and social challenges posed by the west, by posing their own Islamic perspective of knowledge, life and society - based on the Quran - to counter that of the west¹⁶. What these Muslim religious reformers tried to do was to demonstrate the relevance of Islam even in the face of

¹⁴ Cohn, Bernard S. (1996), *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

¹⁵ Ludden, David (1993), *Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge*. In Breckenridge, Carol A. & Van der Veer, Peter (eds). *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 250-278; Bernard s. Cohn, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Keddie, Nikki (1968), *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press; Malek Ben Nabi (1991), *The Quranic Phenomenon: An Attempt at a Theory of Understanding the Holy Quran*. Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust. Translated by Abu Bilal Kirkary.

modernity brought about by the west. In so doing they were effectively arguing for the Quranic perspective on knowledge and life, unintimidated by images of western superiority.

But the new confrontation between the “East” and the “West” in the period of western imperialism of the 18th and 19th centuries, is strictly speaking, of a different order from let’s say the Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries. The west of the 18th and 19th centuries is a west that had shook itself off from the yoke of medievalism and on the march towards modernity. Insofar as the ‘new west’ is post-medieval in its characteristics, its antithetical stance is not only with respect to the eastern ‘Other’, but also with respect to its previous historical ‘Self’. In other words, Colonialism, i.e. the ‘overcoming’ of the east by the west, can also be viewed as the *continuation and extension* of the west’s overcoming of itself. This ‘overcoming of itself’ in western history can be seen through episodes such as the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, the conflict between Galileo and the Roman Catholic Church in the 17th century, the Thirty Years War between the Catholics and Protestants, and the Enlightenment of the 18th century. In fact some of the Muslim reformists mentioned earlier were quite aware of this ‘split in the western personality’ brought about by its historical evolution, and were selective in their criticisms of the west. It was known for example, that al-Afghani was an admirer of Martin Luther¹⁷ and sought to achieve something similar in the Muslim world (but not in the sense of creating a new sect), and that Iqbal was influenced by Nietzsche and that he accepted Darwin’s theory of evolution.

However, the difference between Islam and the west is that, although religion in the form of Christianity has lost out to science and secularism in the west, in Islam such a transformation has not taken place and modernity is conducted within the old religious framework with perhaps a few exceptions such as Turkey. Thus attempts are still being made in the Islamic world to accommodate modernity to Islam and vice versa. In the field of knowledge, the epistemological project attempted is that of the “Islamization of Knowledge”, first associated with the late Prof. Ismail Faruqi¹⁸ who wrote a monograph on *The Islamization of Knowledge*.

¹⁷ Tibi, Bassam (1988), *The Crisis of Modern Islam: A Pre-Industrial Culture in the Scientific-Technological Age*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, p. 136.

¹⁸ Faruqi, Ismail R. (1989), *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan*. Herndon, VA.: International Institute of Islamic Thought.

4.0 The History of Epistemology in the West: Can the Rise of Postmodernism Accommodate the Rehabilitation of a Religious Perspective on Knowledge?

As noted by some scholars, Globalisation is Janus-faced. On the one hand, it has a homogenizing and singularizing tendency, on the other hand it is pluralistic. This general feature of globalisation has implications for epistemology too. In order to understand this aspect further, let us consider the various epistemological positions that have currently evolved in the west, and which can be regarded as 'mainstream'. These are:

1. The classical position which basically regards knowledge as justified true belief.
2. The "scientific" position
3. Postmodernism (Phenomenology/Existentialism/Deconstruction)
4. Pragmatism
5. Social Constructivism.

To be sure, according to the way I have classified them, they are not strictly mutually exclusive and (1) might overlap with (2) while (3) might overlap with (5). In any case, I will discuss these various epistemological positions not so much with a view towards appraising and adjudicating between rival epistemological positions, as seeing its relevance to the contestation between secular and religious - especially Islamic - perspectives on, and claims to, knowledge. My discussion will focus on (1), (2) and (3) as I believe they pose more of a challenge to those espousing an Islamic perspective on knowledge, as compared to (4) and (5).

The notion of knowledge as justified, true belief is one which has formed the mainstay of western epistemological theories¹⁹. Debates have normally centered on the question of whether the three elements, i.e. belief, justification and truth, constitute a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. As it stands, this set of conditions does not in itself run against any Islamic conception of knowledge. Surely Islam too would accept belief and truth as conditions for knowledge. The only possible area of controversy lies in the justification condition. What counts as justification? In Islam, there are two accepted forms of justification, namely that based on Reason (*aqli*) and that based on the Quran itself (*naqli*). The position of Quran as revelation is something which has to be accepted as a basic premise, much in the same way as a scientific paradigm constrains scientific enquiry. However, in Islamic history *naqli* type arguments have constrained moral judgements, but not so

¹⁹ Lehrer, Keith (1972). *Knowledge*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

much judgments affecting inquiries of nature such as the controversy found in western history involving the Copernican Revolution. Although Muslim scholars such as Maurice Bucaille²⁰ have tried to use naturalistic arguments in support of the Quran - thereby opening the possibility of *naqli* type arguments constraining scientific enquiry, and making the notion of justification naturalistic and not only moralistic - his is a relatively recent approach, a modernist attempt to come to grips with science, and does not necessarily reflect the classical Islamic position. Islamic history of science is testimony to the fact that Islamic epistemology is not a hindrance to scientific enquiry. Furthermore, the notion of knowledge as justified, true belief is a contested notion even in the western epistemological enterprise itself, given that one can drive a wedge between rationality/justification and truth. It is indeed possible for something to be rationally justified, but yet false. Or the converse could also hold, that is, something could be true, but given the existing state of knowledge, could not be rationally justified. For example, in the history of astronomy in the 16th century, the Copernican thesis that the earth revolves around the sun could not be rationally justified in the absence of the concept of inertia and empirical verification of stellar parallax. Although it can be argued that for the large part there exist a high correlation between truth and justification, this empirical judgement can hardly be adduced in support of an epistemological thesis where certainty of knowledge remains a premium requirement. To my mind, Quranic statements on natural phenomena are neither sufficiently specific nor metaphysically empty such as to create potential problems with regard to justification. Given the fact that Quranic statements are either *muhkamat* (literal) or *mutashabihat* (allegorical), one has to first of all determine its status before making any pronouncement which has epistemological implications²¹.

We now come to an examination of what I termed the “scientific position” with regard to knowledge, and look at its implications for Islamic epistemology. This position, which I associate largely with the Logical Positivists and Logical Empiricists, but having roots going back to the Enlightenment, regard science as their model or ideal of knowledge, and believe that the scientific approach and method can be extended to the humanities and social sciences. They attempted to combine rationalism and empiricism, replacing Kantian rationalism with ‘logicism’, and accept only the rational and the empirical as foundations of knowledge. Although Logical

²⁰ Bucaille, Maurice (1978), *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*. Indianapolis, Indiana: American Trust Publications.

²¹ Al-Edrus, Syed Muhammad Dawilah (1992), *Islamic Epistemology: An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge in al-Qur'an*. Cambridge: The Islamic Academy, and Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, pp. 97-98.

Positivism as a philosophical school of thought is no longer in fashion, belief in the rational and the empirical as the only genuine foundations of knowledge seems to have been retained in the 'secular' academic tradition. For example, Ernest Gellner²² who was by no means a Logical Positivist, accepts what he calls *Enlightenment Rationalism*, as his epistemological position and rejects revelation as a foundation for knowledge. Similarly, Karl Popper, who saw himself as a critic if not destroyer of Logical Positivism, accepted rationalism and empiricism as the true foundations of knowledge²³. Apart from accepting rationalism and empiricism as the only genuine foundations of knowledge, the "scientific" position also advocates the extension and application of the methods of the natural sciences to the humanities and social sciences²⁵. In its extreme form as found in Logical Positivism, metaphysics is to be expunged and even the humanities is to be explained and understood within a 'metaphysics-free' framework²⁶. How such an undertaking can be actually implemented remains a problem in view of the fact that metaphysical beliefs constitute an *empirical* part of human communities and influence group behaviour. With respect to Islamic epistemology there are two things to be said here. Firstly, internal problems besetting the scientific position make it unlikely to pose a serious threat to rival epistemologies. Secondly, while the extension of the methods of the natural to the social sciences might not be an issue for Islamic epistemology, the acceptance of only rationalism and empiricism, might. How does someone hoping to defend Islamic epistemology cope with this? For a start it can be argued that Islam does not reject rationalism and empiricism as valid sources of knowledge. What it rejects is the claim that rationalism and empiricism, normally understood, are the only valid sources of knowledge. This rejection of course, does not affect the Muslim attempt to acquire knowledge of the so-called 'secular' sciences. It does not forbid him or her to study physics, economics, mathematics, etc. or to carry out research in those fields using the rational and empirical approach - something which the globalization of knowledge and research has brought about. But the Islamic perspective on knowledge does provide him or her with an orientation towards knowledge, and of how to fit that knowledge with the rest of his or her belief

²² Gellner, Ernest (1992), *Postmodernism, Reason and Religion*. London: Routledge.

²³ Popper, K.R. 1971 [1966]. *The Open Society and Its Enemies: Hegel and Marx*. Vol. 2. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, p. 224.

²⁵ Sorrell, Tom (1991), *Scientism: Philosophy and the Infatuation with Science*. London: Routledge; Olson, Richard (1990), *Science Deified and Science Defied: The Historical Significance of Science in Western Culture*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

²⁶ Ayer, A.J. 1976[1936], *Language, Truth and Logic*. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books.

system.²⁷ It is in this context that I think the effort towards the *Islamization of Knowledge* should be understood. In Islam, unlike in the west, there exists a close relationship between epistemology and ethics. The search for knowledge and truth is bound to ethics. One cannot obtain religious knowledge and enlightenment for instance without observing ethical practices and conduct. Even in the field of science as it is practiced in the west, the production of scientific knowledge is predicated upon the acceptance of a certain group ethics such as the openness of critical enquiry. According to Popper²⁸: "*Ethics is not a science. But although there is no 'rational scientific basis' of ethics, there is an ethical basis of science, and of rationalism*". In Islam, the subservience of epistemology to ethics ensures its immunity from abuse, and directs knowledge in the service of mankind, who ultimately serves and worship Allah. In practice, what this amounts to is that the pursuit of knowledge has to be guided by Islamic values and norms, not that the *content* of knowledge is determined by Islamic injunctions.

As a reaction to modernism and Enlightenment epistemology, there has emerged a new philosophical thinking loosely labeled as "Postmodernist". Under this general rubric can be included philosophies such as Phenomenology, Existentialism, and Deconstruction. Although Postmodernism does not pose the same kind of challenge as modernist epistemologies, and on the surface might appear accommodative of 'alternative epistemologies' including the Islamic, its humanistic and relativistic character make it uncongenial to Islamic epistemology. Postmodernism is anti-foundationalist and against all types of "metanarratives", including the Islamic. It would definitely not go down well with attempts towards the theologizing and divination of knowledge. Furthermore the humanist strain found in phenomenological

²⁷ In Islamic Epistemology, knowledge is divided into that of the worldly and other-worldly (see El-Idrus 1990: 107). Also see Syed Naguib Al-Attas (1978: 156-159) for an account of the distinction between *fardhu 'ain* and *fardhu kifayah*, where under the latter, he includes the so-called 'secular' sciences such as the natural and human sciences. According to this system of classification, no knowledge is regarded as secular. Al-Ghazali, however, regards 'blameworthy knowledge' such as astrology and the occult, as not worthy of pursuit. Its rejection is because of its violation of Islamic ethics and *akidah*. Thus the acceptance or rejection of knowledge in Islam is based on Islamic ethics and belief-system, rather than on the basis of whether it is secular or otherwise. In fact, on this account, the attribution of secularism to subjects such as the natural sciences, engineering, or medicine, manifests a lack of understanding of the true conception of knowledge in Islam.

²⁸ Popper, K.R. 1971 [1966], *The Open Society and Its Enemies: Hegel and Marx*. Vol. 2. Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, p. 238.

and existential epistemologies, would negate the Islamic view of the supremacy of the Godhead and man's subservience to Him. Thus although Postmodernism serves as an interesting antidote to the scientific modernism of classical western epistemology, it remains at odds with attempts to absolutise and privilege the Transcendent Divine, including the Islamic²⁹. However, it cannot be denied that there exists a certain potentiality and capacity for certain variants of Phenomenology and Existentialism, to accommodate itself to a religious world-view. This is possible through a theistic version of existentialism or a phenomenology that admits of spiritual consciousness,³⁰ as opposed to the Husserlian search for 'objective consciousness' which merely transposes the language of objectivity of the external world on to the internal.

5.0 Some Points of Comparison Between Islamic and Western Epistemologies

Although Islamic and Western Epistemologies are different in character - the differences arising largely from the 'secular' nature of western epistemology as compared to the religious nature of Islamic epistemology - some points of comparison can be validly made, insofar as they address roughly similar issues, though from different perspectives and adopting different positions. Some of these issues are:

- (i) the nature of metaphysical knowledge
- (ii) the relationship between ethics and epistemology
- (iii) the concept of truth
- (iv) the nature of belief and certainty of knowledge.

Let me begin with a discussion of the nature and status of metaphysical knowledge. By definition, metaphysics is that which is beyond the realm of the ordinary intellect and senses. Since the western epistemological tradition, especially since Kant, has been steeped in either the Rationalist or Empiricist tradition, or a combination of both, metaphysical knowledge especially in the religious sense as expressed through the concept of 'revealed knowledge', has lost its appeal and legitimacy. The claim of Islam, or any other religion for that matter, as to the legitimate status of revealed knowledge, has been rejected by contemporary western epistemologies. Western epistemology seeks to 'support itself from within itself', by using the resources of Rationalism and Empiricism to justify knowledge arrived through those means. It is a case of reason supporting itself, in order to achieve some

²⁹ Gellner, Ernest, *op.cit.*, pp. 73-75.

³⁰ I have in mind for example, Henry Corbin's version of Phenomenology or Kierkegaard's version of Existentialism.

sort of assurance of its own reliability, and the knowledge produced thereby. In Islamic epistemology, because of the central role of the Godhead, nothing can escape its purview, including knowledge. In fact, Islam does not reject rational and empirical sources of knowledge, but regard them as being subordinate to that of 'revealed knowledge', or of gnosis or mystical intuition, which is a direct gift of God, in the overall hierarchy of knowledge³¹. Thus Islam's position is that while the rational and the empirical are valid sources of knowledge, they are not the only sources. Other means of knowing are possible, though it is a form of cognition which is not arrived at through the normal process of ratiocination, or through sense-experience. In fact its means of attainment involve certain religious practices and exercises which are meant to purify and enlighten the soul, and illuminate the intellect. I will discuss this in more detail below.

Going back to the question of metaphysics, which involves ontology, understood as the study of 'what there is in the world', we will notice the difference between the claims of religious and non-religious knowledge as to what entities really exist in the world. For Islam, the Unseen world - which includes the angels, satan, *jinn*, and abodes such as Paradise and Hell - are truly existing realities which cannot be known either through rational or empirical means, and are to be accepted on faith by ordinary believers. Contemporary western epistemology either reject any claims to genuine knowledge on such entities, or remain agnostic as to their existence. Thus the differing metaphysical stances adopted by Islam and the modern West, determines the variations in their epistemological positions. Because Islamic metaphysics admits of the existence of the Unseen world, knowledge of it is possible, though not necessarily attainable by the uninitiated. Modern western epistemology on the other hand, because it has ruled out of court from the outset as to the existence of such metaphysical entities, denies any genuine knowledge of them. The basis of such western rejection of metaphysics varies from the Kantian to the scientific. Thus one of the challenges faced by Islamic or any religious epistemology, is how to confer credibility to the belief in the Unseen. This task is not as impossible as it might initially seem, given the fact that not all beliefs refer to that which can be confirmed by the senses, and neither are they analytic or logical in nature. Examples are scientific beliefs in the existence of theoretical entities such as waves or nuclear particles, or even that of 'energy' and 'vibrations'. However, one can anticipate the reply that these abstractions have their empirical correlates, unlike metaphysical religious entities.

³¹ Nasr, S.H. (1981). *Knowledge and the Sacred*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, p. 12.

Next, let us look at the relationship between ethics and epistemology. In western epistemology, epistemology is independent of ethics and that the two are separate. Although philosophers such as Karl Popper might claim that scientific knowledge has an ethical basis in the sense that fraud is not tolerated in the production of scientific knowledge for instance, such ethical relevance at best only occurs *within the context of justification and not discovery*. That is in trying to establish the truth of a scientific claim, the dishonesty of a researcher would be revealed through the process of verification and counter-checking by other researchers. It is only in this 'institutional' and 'indirect' sense that ethics becomes relevant to epistemology. However, in Islam, the relationship between ethics and epistemology goes much deeper. In Islamic religious knowledge for instance, ethics is relevant even for the attainment of knowledge or enlightenment. That is one cannot acquire a knowledge of God, unless one undergoes a process of purification which is deeply ethical in nature. This is perhaps because religious cognition differs from ordinary intellectual cognition in that it involves a synthesis of the head and the heart, or of the affective and the cognitive. Whereas modern western epistemology - deeply influenced by science as it were - is bent on keeping the 'subjective' at bay from the 'objective', so as not to let the subjective distort or taint the nature of 'objective knowledge', Islamic religious knowledge especially Sufism does not maintain a strict separation between the subject and the object. In fact, ideally, knowledge of God is to be achieved through a state of annihilation or *fana'*, in which duality dissolves into unity, and that there no longer remains the distinction between subject and object. Which is why the highest stage of certainty (*yaqin*) possible in knowledge, according to Islam is that of *Haqq-ul-yaqin*, which means certainty of reality, as opposed to certainty of truth. In Islam, both the words *Haqq* and *Sidq* refer to what in the English language is referred to as 'Truth'. However, *Sidq* refers to semantic or linguistic truth while *Haqq* refers to Reality, which is an extra-linguistic phenomenon³². In fact, in Islamic epistemology, the initial stage of certainty in knowledge, which is referred to as *'ilm-ul-yaqin*, consists in certainty arrived at through rational and empirical means, or what the contemporary western epistemologist refers to as *knowledge as justified true belief*.

6.0 Concluding Remarks

We have surveyed the historical relationship between knowledge and power in the encounter between Islam and the West. We have also briefly looked at the various epistemological positions, in its relation to Islamic epistemology, and made a

³² Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naguib (1989), *Islam and the Philosophy of Science*. Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation, p. 18.

comparison between them. These are conducted with a view to understanding how contemporary knowledge in the west - which has tended to become 'mainstream' partly because of 'globalization' - fares against the Islamic perspective on knowledge. Based on the afore-mentioned analysis, my conclusion is that the Islamic perspective, whose inspiration derives from the Quran, remains relevant even in the face of current epistemologies. This is not to say however, that the Islamic perspective is in complete agreement with those epistemologies, or that there exist no problems in the attempt to relate the two. The force of contemporary knowledge, which cannot be totally ignored, has compelled Muslim thinkers to face this epistemological challenge head on. The attempt towards the *Islamization of Knowledge* seems to be a contemporary response towards meeting this challenge. Muslim thinkers have taken several different routes in attempting to meet this challenge. The Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi (1903-1973) for instance undertook a scholarly study of the what he called the 'Quranic phenomenon', and Muhammad's prophethood. In fact he subtitled his book *The Quranic Phenomenon*, with the phrase 'an attempt at a theory of understanding the Holy Quran'. Similarly the French Muslim Maurice Bucaille³³, sought to show how certain passages in the Quran are verified by contemporary science. I regard these as attempts towards the 'rationalization' of the Quran, perhaps with a view to making it acceptable to the modern mind. On the other extreme, the Iranian scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr, adopting the 'traditionalist' approach, did not attempt to 'modernise' Islam and the Quran by seeking to accommodate Islamic thought to modernism or vice versa, but instead develop a metaphysical account of Islamic thought and philosophy, though resembling neo-Platonism in some ways, which insulates itself from modernism. The 'third way' relates to the contemporary Muslim programme of the 'Islamization of knowledge'. Admittedly, there are more than one version in this 'third way' itself. To me, this holds out some promise in the attempt by Muslims to come to grips with the phenomena of contemporary knowledge. Even within the bosom of the western intellectual tradition itself, there have been soul-searching attempts towards rethinking the Enlightenment ideals and its alternatives. Critical theory, lead by Jurgen Habermas and the Frankfurt School, and the Deconstructionism of Derrida and Foucault, are some outstanding examples. Perhaps the Islamic critique of knowledge, guided as it were by spiritual insights and the recognition of the materiality of life, could provide a better alternative to both modernism and postmodernism as it is currently projected in the west. The onus however, lies on Muslim intellectuals to prove that this is the case.

³³ Bucaille, Maurice. *op.cit.*

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