

The Impact of Knowledge on the Interpretation of Ethics

Some Examples from Islamic Philosophy of Religion

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The Basic Assumption of Knowledge

The question of the human being as a moral subject has been a central issue in Islam from the very beginning. Muslim discussions during the early Middle Ages were characterized by confrontation of a rational approach that favoured free will and reason, with a dogmatic approach to the absoluteness of God's will and predestination. The main question of discussion concerned the human ability to define moral good and prescribe rules for right actions.

In the pre-Qur'anic period, the notion of knowledge (*'ilm*) was conceptualized as conventional intellectual skill, whereas, following the years of revelation (610–632), it became more and more designated as religious knowledge, because God was considered the main source of knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge was considered a religious duty.

As emphasized by Franz Rosenthal (1914–2003), *'ilm* has been one of the most powerful terms of Muslim religious life and the bearer of Islamic civilization development. As a form of systematic religious knowledge, primarily related to the interpretation of God's revelation, *'ilm* has functioned as the basis of all Islamic sciences (*al-ulum al-islamiyya*).¹

1. The concept *'ilm*, including related words deriving from the same root, is the second most frequent word mentioned in the Qur'an (next to Allah). In light of the contexts in which the word appears most often, one can conclude that knowledge is not only a precondition

One of the well-known principles, derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah, is that knowledge and faith (*'ilm* and *iman*) are interconnected and essentially related to morality (*akhlaq*). The Qur'anic expression, "he, who believes and does good deeds", has been the basis for Islamic ethical reasoning.² The centrality of knowledge in terms of morals was also asserted in classical Islamic literature, describing the mission of Muhammad as a religious reform based on *'ilm*, instead of *jahiliyya* (ignorance) that characterized the pre-Islamic Arabian tribal society.

The reflections on the ethical dimensions of Islam have also been a key focus area within the Islamic philosophy of religion. The Muslim philosophers particularly highlight the so-called "practical wisdom" – an idea they found in Greek philosophy and which, according to them, corresponded with Qur'anic moral teaching. The interdependence of such a wisdom, also defined as *hikmah*, is clearly reflected in the thought of al-Farabi (c. 870–c. 950), who was the first to formulate a theory of the ideal state, pointing out the unity of knowledge and moral virtue as a condition for the establishment of a just Islamic society. Although his political theory was never realized,³ the idea of the interdependence of (correct) knowledge and (good) morality has been a guiding principle throughout the history of Islamic thought.

Universality of the Philosophical Wisdom

The initial interpretations of Islam were not motivated by philosophy of any sort. Instead, they were concerned with practical issues of social and political character. The development of Islamic science has begun out of a need to deduce rules of conduct to carry on the practice of the Prophet and ensure

for a correct conduct of life but is also a religious objective. By referring to the Qur'anic revelations that glorify knowledge as a kind of synonym for the truth, and to some of Muhammad's sayings in which he encourages Muslims to seek knowledge from other people, many Muslims argue that *'ilm* is a constituent element of Islam. Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam*, Leiden 1970, 20–24, <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004153868.i-355>.

2. According to Toshihiko Izutsu, one can distinguish between three levels of ethical reasoning in the Qur'an: the first refers to the "ethical nature of God", the second refers to man's "fundamental attitude towards God", and the third refers to the "ethical relation among individuals who belong to, and live within, the religious community of Islam". Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'an*, Montreal 2007, 17.

3. According to al-Farabi, Islamic society should also be organized on three levels: *māmurah* (world level), *ummah* (national or community level), and *madina* (city level). Government should not be attached to a specific group or a specific religious movement, but to humanity as such. The ruler of the ideal Muslim state, the caliph, who in the terminology of al-Farabi was a "prophet-king-philosopher", should have both prophetic and philosophical abilities. Furthermore, he should have a prophetic and moral authority and, at the same time, be capable of communicating his visions to the people. Al-Farabi, *Abu Nasr al-Farabi's Mabadi ara Ahl al-Madina al-Fadila*, Oxford 1985.

continuity with it. Seeing how Islam in its earliest history was an object of juridical and political interpretation, it is quite understandable why Muslims first established jurisprudence (*fiqh*) by developing different schools of interpretation of sharia (understood as guidance and holy law), and only later began to philosophize on the validity of the established norms and values.

Systematic reflections on philosophical issues occurred in the eighth and ninth centuries because of the interaction between Muslims and other cultures and religions. This was true especially for the early period of the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258), when Baghdad was a political and cultural centre where different traditions entered into productive interaction with each other. This gave Islam epoch-making intellectual input that played a decisive role in the future developments.⁴

One main object of Muslim intellectual curiosity was Greek philosophical tradition, as it was considered a universal wisdom. It is worth mentioning that the Muslims did not regard the ancient philosophical traditions as alien or anti-Islamic. Al-Kindi (c. 801–c. 873) called the Antique sciences “the human sciences” (*al-ulum al-insaniyya*) and al-Farabi understood philosophy as a common discipline, present in different cultures. According to him, philosophy had originally existed in ancient times among Chaldeans of Iraq. It was subsequently transferred to the people of Egypt and the Greeks, and then to the Syrians and the Arabs.⁵ In this sense, the emergence of Arab-Islamic philosophy may be understood as a rebirth of philosophical thinking in a new context, where it remains universally valid.

Joel Kraemer (1933–2018) particularly emphasizes the period during the Buyid dynasty (934–1062) as the most productive. He describes it as a highlight of the civilizational development during the Abbasid Caliphate, finding its place in a very fertile environment characterized by individualism, cosmopolitanism, and secularism.⁶ In a similar way, George Makdisi

4. Political sponsorship of intellectual exchanges was one decisive factor in this development. It was for example the caliph al-Ma'mun (786–833), being himself fascinated by Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who in 832 ordered the establishment of the House of Wisdom” (*Bayt al-hikma*). This institution, working as the most important learning centre in that time, launched massive activities in terms of translations and interpretations of philosophical and scientific works from foreign languages. The caliph employed the Christian Nestorian Hunayn ibn Ishaq (808–873) to lead the translation work from Greek to Arabic. The first Arab-Muslim philosopher al-Kindi had an important role in *Bayt al-hikma*, partly because he was helping to shape Islamic philosophical terminology by commenting Greek philosophical works. W. Montgomery Watt, *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, Edinburgh 1994.

5. Al-Farabi, *Abu Nasr al-Farabi's Mabadi ara Ahl al-Madina al-Fadila*, 43.

6. Unlike many Western scholars of the history of the Muslim societies (including Ira M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, 3rd ed., New York 2014, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139048828>) who highlight the religious dimension of those societies, Kraemer argues that trends like modern individualism, cosmopolitanism, and secularism influenced the

(1920–2002) highlights humanism and scholasticism as two movements that dominate the intellectual history of this period of classical Islam. According to Makdisi, there is an inter-relationship between these two movements. They both have roots in Islam, but they have been developed under external influences. Humanism first began as a philological movement related to the study of Arabic language and *adab*, while scholasticism arose in relation to the establishment of the study of sharia and theology.⁷

Regarding the interest in philosophical humanism, one can identify a parallel between the developments of Islam in this period, which Kraemer calls “the Renaissance of Islam”, and a later European Renaissance. He writes:

In some ways the Renaissance of Islam resembled the Italian Renaissance of the Quattrocento; in others it was similar to the Twelfth-Century Renaissance. As a classical revival, it resembled both. In its recovery of science and philosophy – Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Galen, Ptolemy – it resembled the Twelfth-Century Renaissance. And in its literary humanism it was more like the Italian Renaissance of the Fifteenth Century.⁸

Disregarding the few philosophers whose primary interests were secular phenomena (mathematics, medicine, and nature), Muslim philosophers were mainly concerned with religioethical questions, and they played a significant role in the discussions of the time about the just society. However, only a small minority of Muslim scholars from this time were professional philosophers. They were rather jurists, doctors, and politicians, and those we regard as philosophers were often polymaths. They played an important role in society and some of them, including al-Kindi, al-Farabi, Ibn Miskawayh (932–1030), and Ibn Rushd (1126–1198), had a close relationship

development during this period. He relates the individualism to a “stimulated self-awareness and self-creation” and a “profound recognition of one’s individuality”, the cosmopolitanism to the open cultural climate that prevailed in the city of Baghdad, and the secularism to the philosophical reflection, poetry, and literature as exponents of a worldview that helped to balance the domination of religion. Joel L. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buyid Age*, Leiden 1992, 11–15, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004451445>.

7. Makdisi sees parallels between the Arabic humanism of classical Islam and the humanism of the Italian Renaissance as well as parallels between the scholasticism of Islam and the West. George Makdisi, *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West*, Edinburgh 1990, 94–96, 348–349.

8. Kraemer, *Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam*, xxiv–xxv. According to Kraemer, one of the main expressions of Islamic renaissance is to be found in the philosophical humanism that “encompassed the scientific and philosophical heritage of antiquity, elevating it as a cultural and educational ideal” (p. xxv).

with the rulers and were therefore enjoying privileged status and protection, having a direct influence on political life.⁹

The relationship between philosophy and orthodoxy was a key issue throughout the entire Middle Ages. Al-Farabi prioritized logic over religion as he considered logic to be a precondition for both the mediation and interpretation of the revelation. Those who were sceptical towards the rationalism of philosophy, such as Ibn Hanbal (780–855) and Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328), argued that the Qur'an was clear and self-evident and thus in no need of philosophical interpretation. Al-Ghazālī (c. 1058–1111), who assumed a midway position, did not regard philosophical logic as dangerous, but only as insufficient for understanding truth, since it cannot explain the creation of the world and God's will. Ibn Rushd argued entirely differently, namely that the problem of understanding the reality of truth could only be resolved by methodologically separating philosophy and religion as two different ways leading to the same truth.¹⁰

A main dimension of Islamic philosophical thought during the entire classic period was epistemology. By insisting on both the general human ability to understand the truth and the inaccessibility of God (which was a characteristic of the first school of theology in Islam, Mu'tazilism), many Muslim philosophers mapped out a theory that meant that Islamic philosophy was linked to negative theology, which in turn affected the very role of philosophy in relation to Islamic dogma. This is also manifest in modern and contemporary intra-Muslim discussions, which again revolve around the boundaries and relationship between the divine and the human and the meaning of philosophy of religion in Islam.¹¹

In modern times, since the end of the nineteenth century, the epistemological debate within Islam became topical as a response to the new socio-political challenges, and as an attempt to formulate "Islamic" answers to these challenges. Here can be observed quite different ideologies and theological positions, from those who pleaded for the return to the so-called original epistemological framework, to those who emphasize the need for a historical reading of Scripture and argue for the necessity of a new epistemology and inclusion of modern theoretical and methodological tools.

9. Massimo Campanini, *An Introduction to Islamic Philosophy*, Edinburgh 2004.

10. Safet Bektovic, *Islamisk filosofi: Baggrund, problemstillinger og moderne udformninger*, Frederiksberg 2019, 72–92.

11. Shabbir Akhtar, "The Possibility of a Philosophy of Islam", in Seyyed Hossein Nasr & Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, vol. 2, London 1996, 2065–2077.

Qur'anic Hermeneutics and Ethics

One of the Muslim thinkers who in a decisive way marked Islam's intellectual development during the second half of the twentieth century was Fazlur Rahman (1919–1988). Rahman represents a transitional figure from Islamic modernism (from the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries) to “neo-modernism”, a term coined by himself and introduced in order to highlight a critical approach to the early reform-thought. He delivered an original contribution in the rethinking of Islam, focusing on a new hermeneutic interpretation of the Qur'an and a critical analytical study of the Sunnah.

Rahman adopted the rationalistic approach to revelation from the Mu'tazila school, but he also found inspiration in Wilhelm Dilthey's (1833–1911), Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1900–2002), and Emilio Betti's (1890–1968) methods of textual interpretation. Based on these sources of inspiration, Rahman formulated a theory of modern “Islamic intellectualism”, which was based on an exhaustive interpretation of Qur'anic ethical teaching.¹²

According to Rahman, the entire doctrine of Islam is based on an ethical foundation, with the Qur'anic teachings of justice at its core. Hence, the Islamic conception of man and of society is a matter of systematically expounding “the Qur'anic ethos” and the analysis enables us to understand the correlation between the key concepts of Islam: Islam as a religion, *iman* as a matter of conscience, and *taqwa* as an expression of the ideal religiosity.¹³

Rahman assumed a critical stance towards classical Muslim philosophers, as they primarily were concerned with Greek, Persian, and other ethical theories instead of formulating a systematic ethical theory based on the Qur'an. According to him, the development of Islam has been characterized by an absence of coherence between its ethical ideals and its laws. Sharia has rather functioned as a juridical system, which had the purpose of justifying the political aspirations and projects of the rulers. Muslim societies have functioned in accordance with an existing conception of sharia, but they have not succeeded in establishing a system that can enforce the Qur'anic teachings on justice. And not even al-Ghazali (1058–1111), who went to

12. Rahman's approach was basically historical and humanistic, but he also sought to demonstrate the relevance of religious normativity for the development of society. In many respects, his methodological approach is similar to that of Gadamer, thus stating that any understanding of the truth depends on the interpreter or history. However, unlike Gadamer, who maintained that the text as such does not have any fixed or hidden substance to be uncovered, Rahman ascribed (similar to Betti) to the text a certain objectivity, which remains unaffected by the interpreter. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, Chicago 1982.

13. Fazlur Rahman, “Some Key Ethical Concepts of the Qur'an”, *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 11 (1983), 170–185.

great lengths to substantiate the sharia ethically, succeeded in developing a systematic ethical-moral theory as he based his entire theory on spirituality and the personal experience of God and allows flexibility in relation to a practical application of regulations.¹⁴

According to Rahman, a key principle in the interpretation of Islamic ethics relates to an understanding of the relationship between the historical and ideal-normative aspects of the Qur'an. In order to substantiate the claim, he referred to, among others, those circumstances and examples in which the Qur'an identifies the difference between the ideal and the factual and allows flexibility in terms of a practical application of religious regulations.¹⁵

The Egyptian philosopher Hassan Hanafi (1935–2021) has been concerned with the same issues. His point of departure is the idea of the Qur'an as a multifocal phenomenon – a juridical code, a literary work, a philosophical text, and a historical document – which must be interpreted in all its complexity.¹⁶ Inspired by Gadamer and Paul Ricœur (1913–2005), he maintained that any interpretation is conditioned historically and determined by the interests and motivations of the interpreter.¹⁷

When dealing with the hermeneutics of the Qur'an the point is to understand the connection between the Qur'anic text, which is “born into history”, and its “meta-historical background”. This can be achieved through a double movement: first moving from text to reality and then moving from reality to text. The first movement is facilitated by employing the anthropology of language, which makes it possible to differentiate between the literary and the figurative, whereas the second movement requires one to

14. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed., Chicago 1979.

15. One of these examples deals with polygamy. For instance, if one reads the Qur'anic passage 4:3 one could conclude that polygamy with up to four wives is an entirely legitimate form of matrimony. However, if one goes on to verse 129 in the same chapter, one then comes to understand that this form of matrimony is not a norm or an ideal to which one should aspire. On the contrary, it is monogamous matrimony that should be aspired to and aimed at. In another example, the Qur'an permits slavery, but at the same time it encourages believers to free slaves and suggests that the ideal is a society where slavery does not exist. The same goes for almsgiving, which is in fact regarded as a good deed, but the ideal to which we must strive is a society in which there is no need for almsgiving. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed., Chicago 2009, 47–48.

16. Hassan Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World: 1. Religion, Ideology and Development*, Cairo 1995, 416–417.

17. The text in itself is empty and, as such, the words are given meaning by the interpreter. A text which emerged in the past, seen retrospectively, is always filled with content and meaning which relates to a contemporary vision. The procedure which helps create meaning and an understanding of the continuity between past, present, and future is hermeneutics. Hassan Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World: 2. Tradition, Revolution and Culture*, Cairo 1995, 186).

understand the spirit of the time one lives in, which then makes possible the understanding of the Qur'anic normativity.¹⁸

In order to understand the development of Muslim societies, it is necessary to conduct a phenomenological-hermeneutical analysis of the so-called Muslim consciousness. Hanafi distinguishes between several different forms of consciousness, for example “national consciousness”, “public intellectual consciousness”, and “religious consciousness”, and he ascribes a specific role to each of them in terms of the development of society.

He has especially drawn attention to himself with his interpretation of the religious consciousness. According to him, the establishment of rituals and interpretation of doctrines do not exhaust the role of religion; rather it should also serve the emancipation of man from despotism, dictatorship, and injustice. It is in relation to this that he perceives Islam as being a movement from “dogma” to “spiritual revolution”, from “God” to “country”, and from “theory” to “action”.¹⁹

The interpretation of sharia concerns religioethical values as well as actual conditions and, as such, its implementation takes into account both the intentions and actions of man. One can thus conclude that although sharia is based on the revealed principles, its goal is to provide answers to existing problems and to protect basic values, such as life, reason, freedom, human dignity, and the public good.²⁰

Regarding the knowledge of the historical development of society, the question of the relationship between religious norms, as expressed in sharia, and secular laws is particularly relevant. The challenges of Islamic political philosophy have been the focus in the thought of the Iranian philosopher Abdolkarim Soroush. He tries to rethink the question of just society and modern policy based on Islamic philosophical and theological principles, arguing against theocratic models established for example by Ruhollah Khomeini (1902–1989).

Soroush distinguishes between Islam's ethical message, which is universal, and the politics of establishing an Islamic society that can be in the service of different ideological interests. His main inspiration lies in the Qur'anic ideas concerning the organization of a just society, but he rejects the possibility of establishing an ideal system based on one particular interpretation of sharia. This is in line with his theory of the diversity of religious interpretations and the dynamics of shifting the border between religion and non-religion because of the adoption of new knowledge and experiences.

18. Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World*, vol. 2, 187.

19. Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World*, vol. 1, 145.

20. Hanafi, *Islam in the Modern World*, vol. 1, 466–467.

Soroush talks about an accumulation of knowledge and the evolution of the interpretation of the world in which secular knowledge becomes the deciding factor in man's self-awareness. This evolution does not mean the degradation of, but rather a qualitative change in, religion and religious knowledge.²¹

A key element in a just society is freedom of religion, which also includes the freedom from religious coercion. In order to secure this freedom, it is, in Soroush's view, necessary to separate religion from the state. However, there are instances where both the state and society are religious. In such cases it is important to distinguish between whether the state is making society religious by passing laws on religiosity, or if society is making the state religious by voting for religion-based legislation. The first scenario is in conflict with both democracy and the Qur'an, which state that no one is allowed to force others to believe, while the latter is an open opportunity to institutionalize religious values. Since the Qur'an itself neither speaks of any government nor prescribes a specific form of rule, it is up to Muslims to formulate and develop an adequate model of society. It is important to note that the theoretical foundation of such a model need not be decidedly religious, but it should focus on achieving the political goal of Islam, namely social justice.²²

To maintain the belief that Islam implies justice is not the same as claiming that justice is Islamic. Religious and non-religious values are not necessarily contradictory or in conflict with one another, and the struggle for justice can be motivated by both religious and non-religious reasons. One can thus argue that Muslims are faced with the challenge of rethinking the concept of justice by translating the Islamic religious language into a modern, political language, considering the balance between obligations (traditional Islamic view) and individual rights (modern view).²³

Rahman, Hanafi, and Soroush are just three characteristic examples of how a hermeneutic interpretation of the Qur'an, which critically analyzes the role of man in Islam, opens up new perspectives of Islamic ethics, and indicates how Islamic ethical principles can be applied in a modern context.

21. Soroush associates secular thinking with non-religion and does not consider it to be anti-religious. Secularization means the process of redefining religion and the relationship between the transcendent and the worldly. This process began with Greek philosophy and gained its fullness with the modern European development of sciences. The story of secularism is therefore, according to Soroush, "the story of nonreligious reason; a reason which is neither religious nor antireligious. The veil that separates this reason from religion is none other than the metaphysical reason. Tearing this veil asunder, if it could be torn at all, points toward the way out of the sphere of secularism". Abdolkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, Oxford 2000, 68.

22. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, 123–126.

23. Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam*, 37, 147–151.

Towards a New, Inclusive Epistemology

Hermeneutics as a theoretical-methodological approach is closely related to the way of thinking and thus also to epistemology as a theory of knowledge. Ideas about new interpretations and the use of new methods are part of a wider discussion on Islamic epistemology, or better said, understanding of the Islamic approach to knowledge. One of those who deals with the analysis of Islamic thought in history is Mohammed Arkoun (1928–2010). His main objection to the classical Islamic thought is that it – apart from being determined by religious dogmatics – relies on an essentialist and ideological approach to Islam. This also applies to a large extent to modern Islamic thought, which has its point of departure in an idealized past and which seeks to reconstruct a “real” authentic Islam. Such a thought very rarely examines the epistemological basis and validity of established methods.²⁴

In contrast to this, Arkoun seeks to define a new interdisciplinary approach, which he calls “applied Islamology” and that can be described as an analytical-critical science of Islamic orthodoxy. Because Islamic thought is determined by Islamic orthodoxy, this new approach demands a deconstruction of the psychological and ideological structures and mechanisms that have played a part in shaping the orthodoxy. The first step in this process is a critical analysis of Islamic texts (the Qur’an and Hadith collections) and juridical texts, with an aim of understanding their original religious and social functions. The goal is to understand how the orthodox interpretation emerged and evolved. How and who defined what was orthodox and what was not? Why were some interpretations accepted as legitimate and orthodox, while others were rejected as illegitimate and heretical?²⁵

According to Arkoun, it is a historical reality that all linguistic and cultural communities make selections and choices through which some things are declared right and true, while others are regarded as wrong and meaningless. As such, any ethnic and religious group seeks to maintain its identity by adhering to and insisting on certain ideas, declaring certain issues taboo, and ascribing a normative character to certain values. The shaping of a specific system of symbols and values and the formulation of several fixed ideas adopted by a group reflects, according to Arkoun, a self-affirming process where one neglects to assume a critical distance to self-identification.²⁶

Arkoun therefore calls not only for reconstruction of the established orthodoxy but also for the inclusion of marginal and peripheral interpreta-

24. Mohammed Arkoun, *Den arabiske tenkning*, Copenhagen 2009; Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert*, London 2006.

25. Arkoun, *Den arabiske tenkning*, 81–93; Arkoun, *Islam*, 16–17.

26. Arkoun, *Islam*, 27, 217–218.

tions, which have been dismissed as illegitimate.²⁷ According to him, only an open epistemology enables understanding of the universality and diversity of Islam. To get an understanding of Islam in its entirety – while maintaining the tension between the sacred and the human, the orthodox and the heterodox – it is necessary to be open to a re-thinking of all the interpretative traditions (the approved as well as the non-approved) and to make room for other potential interpretations. Herein lies the epistemological openness and inclusiveness.²⁸

Arkoun's approach can be supplemented by Amina Wadud's hermeneutical project, in which the main point is to include female voices in the interpretation of Islam. According to her, any attempt to re-interpret Islam presupposes a preceding struggle (*jihad*) for the inclusion of women in the interpretation.²⁹ She argues for a "women-inclusive" epistemology, as a way to rectify the historical situation in which men used to speak on behalf of women and when the issue of women was limited to a set of verses and rules from the Qur'an. A "women-inclusive" epistemology should have a part in changing the traditional Islamic framework for the interpretation of theological, ethical, and political questions.³⁰

Wadud acknowledges the relevance of Qur'anic normativity in relation to the daily lives of Muslims and to their organization of society, but she points out that the context in which the Qur'an was revealed, and the prevailing socio-political conditions, have had a decisive influence on how the Qur'an has been interpreted. In a methodological sense, she is clearly influenced by her supervisor Fazlur Rahman. Like him, she also speaks of "the spirit of the Qur'an", which denotes the essence of the Qur'anic revelations, and which is not limited to a specific place or time. Nonetheless, she stresses that no one's interpretation can claim to be the only true interpretation. By referring to the Qur'anic verse, "No one can know soldiers of God except

27. In this respect, he is in accord with Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) in his deconstruction of "the imaginary" as a sum of unarticulated conceptions, but he also acknowledges the existence of "the transcendent signifier" as a reference in the process of deconstruction. The point is not to eliminate God as a point of reference in thought, but to expose the ideological and religious background of knowledge and to analyze the relationship between the conscious and the less conscious in the culture of a nation.

28. Arkoun, *Islam*, 97.

29. Wadud has become known as the female imam leading a Friday prayer for both men and women in March 2005 in New York. In response to the negative reactions against her performing as an imam, she replied that the goal was to raise awareness about women's right to be leaders on an equal footing with men. As she has explained in several interviews, her original goal was not to change the mosque traditions or the practice of prayer, but to change the perception of concepts of caliph and imam which are inclusive and embraces men as well as women.

30. Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*, New York 2006, 53.

of God” (74:31), she rejects any authoritarian interpretation as reductionist and politically motivated, since no one can claim (with God’s authority) to own the truth or to be God’s soldier.³¹

Wadud’s epistemological considerations are of particular importance when it comes to the socio-political implications of Islamic theology. In contrast to a theocentric epistemology focused on the vertical dimension of the relationship between God and man, she argues for an inclusive epistemology that accounts for both the vertical, theological dimension of *tawhid* and its horizontal, social dimension, which relates to interpersonal relations. In this connection, she introduces the term “the tawhidic paradigm” to express a theological-sociological reading of monotheism, in which the equality of all human beings in relation to God (the vertical dimension) is interpreted in light of social equality and justice as it is reflected in an “I–God–you” relationship.³²

Conclusion

Each of the aforementioned philosophers (although some of them, like Rahman and Wadud, do not present themselves as philosophers, but rather as Islamic intellectuals), in their own way, critically re-examine the traditional theocentric Islamic view on ethics. They all have a common desire to illuminate the human role in articulating Qur’anic ethical ideas. In addition to advocating for the revival of philosophical thought and humanistic ideas, some of them argue for a new all-inclusive epistemology (Arkoun and Wadud), for a hermeneutic interpretation of Islam (Rahman and Hanafi), or for the harmonization of religious and secular knowledge (Soroush).

Inclusion of the new theories and methods is not just a matter of individual Muslim intellectuals but also, and even more, a matter of general interpretation of Islam, as well as of academic studies of Islam. However, philosophy of religion and humanities disciplines, which advocate these new approaches, have a very modest role in many Muslim countries (such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Pakistan), while they have a growing importance in some countries (such as Indonesia, Iran, Turkey, and Morocco), where they constitute an important part of the curriculum in the study of Islam.³³

31. Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 18.

32. Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, 28–32.

33. Some examples of this are: International Islamic University Malaysia (see <http://www.iiu.edu.my/>, accessed 2023-10-26), International Islamic University Islamabad (see <http://www.iiu.edu.pk/>, accessed 2023-10-26), University of Tehran (see <https://ut.ac.ir/en>, accessed 2023-10-26), and Ankara University (see <http://www.divinity.ankara.edu.tr/en/>, accessed 2023-10-26).

Studying Islam with a broader scientific basis, applying a multidisciplinary approach, and relating it to the modern social challenges, is a characteristic of Western trends, too. It can be observed in the process of the establishment of Islamic theology at western universities, where Muslim scholars together with their Christian colleagues are trying to formulate a new framework for the theological study of Islam. This is a new approach that considers three key elements: the Islamic community, the wider society and its needs, and academia and scientific standards. Professor of interreligious studies and Islam in Oslo, Oddbjørn Leirvik, calls it “Islamic university theology”.³⁴

This broadening of the space for interpretation is principally relevant in a time when the relationship between religion and ethics is discussed, not least when it comes to Islam’s ethical potential in a modern context and consequences of different ideological, philosophical, and other interpretations of the Qur’an. ▲

SUMMARY

The overall theme of this article is the relationship between knowledge, religion, and ethics in Islam. The first goal is to show how the concept of knowledge has been understood in relation to religion and intellectual life and what the relationship is between universal, philosophical, and religious knowledge. The second goal is to show, using examples from Islamic philosophy of religion, how a certain concept of knowledge affects the interpretation of morals and Islamic ethics. This implies, among other things, a discussion of epistemology, the interpretation of the Qur’an, and the definition of ethical principles. A general assumption is that the definition of a Muslim as a moral agent – which is considered one of the central issues of the Qur’an, Sunnah, and Islam in general – is not given as an unequivocal category, but is subject to constant discussion that takes place at different levels and areas. This is especially evident in modern Islamic philosophical-theological discourse, where Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, Hassan Hanafi, Abdolkarim Soroush, and Amina Wadud are only some of the important actors of the discussion.

34. Oddbjørn Leirvik, “Islamic University Theology”, *Studia Theologica: Nordic Journal of Theology* 70 (2016), 127–144, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0039338X.2016.1253258>.