

Ma^ʿrifah in the Qur'an

FIRST: THE DEFINITION OF *Ma^ʿrifah*

AL-TAHNĀWĪ lists a set of definitions for *ma^ʿrifah* which can be summarized as follows: *Ma^ʿrifah* is knowledge in the sense of unqualified apprehension, be it a cognition that the individual forms himself or herself, or belief in a concept or affirmation presented from without. It includes the apprehension of a simple entity's essential nature, as well as a mental affirmation of the various states in which this entity might exist. It also includes the apprehension of a complex entity, whether as an original conceptualization or in affirmation of a conceptualization formed by someone else. Similarly, it includes apprehension of both the particular and the universal, whether in terms of basic understanding, or in terms of relevant legal rulings. The apprehension of the particular takes place on the basis of evidence, and after a previous lack of knowledge and understanding.

1) *The linguistic definition of ma^ʿrifah*

According to Ibn Fāris, the letters ^ʿ-r-f form two roots, one of which denotes succession, continuity and cohesion, and the other of which denotes stillness and tranquility. The word *ma^ʿrifah* (plural, *ma^ʿārif*) is used in opposition to the word *nakirah*, where *ma^ʿrifah* refers to a specific, known entity, while *nakirah* refers to an entity that is neither specified nor known. Moreover, the term *ma^ʿrifah* is used in the context of commending someone's sound opinion, acute perception, or sharp intelligence.

2) *The definition of ma^ʿrifah based on common usage*

The word *ma^ʿrifah* is used to refer to a particular member of a species or group. In other words, it is a term that, by virtue of custom and unspoken agreement within a linguistic community, has come to refer

Qur'anic Terminology

to a specified, known entity. Pronouns, proper nouns, demonstrative pronouns, and regular nouns preceded by the definite article all serve to indicate that the entity referred to is *maʿrifah* (definite).

God declares in *Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt*, 51:56, “I have only created invisible beings and humankind in order for them to worship Me” (*mā khalaqtu al-jinna wa al-insa illā li yaʿbudūnī*). The phrase *li yaʿbudūnī* as “to worship me” implies the knowledge of faith, that is, the knowledge by faith of the Divine Being that we worship.

Scholastic theologians and logicians use the word *maʿrifah* to refer to a realization that is preceded by a lack of understanding. It is also used to refer to the formation of an image in the mind, a firm belief that corresponds to reality, and the apprehension of a universal or complex notion.

3) The technical definition of maʿrifah

The term *maʿrifah* occurs 24 times in the Qur'an, and 67 times in various other derivatives of the root *ʿ-r-f*. Most of these instances convey the sense of knowledge derived through the physical senses and pertaining to observable qualities or features. God declares in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:146, “They unto whom We have vouchsafed revelation aforetime know him (*yaʿrifūnahū*) as they know their own children (*kamā yaʿrifūna abnāʾahum*).” This sense of the verb *ʿarafa* is opposed to the Arabic verb *ankara*, meaning to deny or refuse to recognize. This sense of the word is used in *Sūrah al-Muʿminūn*, 23:69, where God asks, “Or is it, perchance, that they have not recognized their Apostle (*lam yaʿrifū rasūlahum*), and so they disavow him (*fa hum lahu munkirūn*)?” A somewhat different sense of the verb is found in *Sūrah Muḥammad*, 47:6, which speaks of how God will admit believers “to the paradise which He has made known to them (*ʿarrafahā lahum*).” The verb *ʿarrafa* might, in this context, also mean “made beautiful and pleasant.”

Based on its use in the Qur'an, the verb *ʿarafa* refers to the act of acquiring knowledge or understanding via signals or signs that are perceptible in the earthly realm. *Sūrah al-Raḥman*, 55:41 tells that “those who were lost in sin shall be known (*yuʿrafu al-mujrimūn*) “by their marks (*bi simāhum*).” The verb *ʿarafa* is used in *Sūrah al-Muṭaffifin*,

83:24 in the sense of seeing or perceiving. Hence, God tells the Prophet that when he sees believers in Paradise, he will perceive or see the radiance of bliss on their faces (*taʿrifu fī wujūbihim naḍrat al-naʿīm*). Whether the evidence on which knowledge is based is purely rational in nature or consists of wisdom and testimonies passed down through others, it will be received in either written or oral form. Knowledge based on rational evidence is referred to in *Sūrah al-Naml*, 27:93, which tells us that God “will make you see [the truth of] His messages, and then you shall know them [for what they are] (*fa taʿrifūnahā*).” (Cf. *Sūrah al-Aḥzāb*, 33:59.) A similar sense is conveyed in *Sūrah al-Nahl*, 16:83, which tells us that those who deny the truth “are fully aware of God’s blessings (*yaʿrifūna niʿmat Allāh*), but...they refuse to acknowledge them” (*thumma yunkirūnahā*).”

SECOND: THE NATURE OF *Maʿrifah*

1) *The concept of the nature of maʿrifah*

Knowledge is a quality that may be predicated of a living being. It is a relationship that comes into being between a knowing self and a known object. When we speak of “the nature of knowledge,” we seek to define or specify the relationship between knower and known and the process by which it is formed.

The relationship embodied in knowledge is connected to the purpose for human existence on Earth and the matter of human survival. The relationship between the knowing self and the known object, which is formed within the consciousness of a discerning human being, may take the form of ideas or doctrines.

What concerns here in particular is the relationship between knowledge and existence. Which of the two is prior: essence, or existence? And if knowledge is acquired, then is what we come to know the essence of something? Or is it simply a form or an archetype? Further, is what we come to know on the level of universals, or of particulars? Where do universals exist? And what type of existence characterizes them? What are the tools or means of acquiring knowledge? And how do we acquire it?

Qur'anic Terminology

2) *The nature of ma'rifah in the Qur'an*

Based on the foregoing we may say that knowledge as presented in the Qur'an consists of facts, precepts and rulings, as well as realizations and conceptualizations which we form about this or that entity as a result of what we receive via our sensory perceptions and/or our reason. The knowledge of which we speak here is a certain, indubitable apprehension that admits of no doubt and in relation to which there is no possibility of error or illusion.

(a) *The source of ma'rifah*

Everything finds its source in God Almighty. It is God who has brought all things into existence, including the cosmos and the laws that govern it. Knowledge is a divine creation and a grace with which He blesses human beings by virtue of the propensities and potentials that He has implanted within them. God has given us a natural desire to search for truth and means of acquiring knowledge. He “has brought you forth from your mothers' wombs knowing nothing – but He has endowed you with hearing, and sight, and minds, so that you might have cause to be grateful” (*Sūrah al-Naḥl*, 16:78). The gifts of hearing, sight and reason are thus among the conditions that make it possible for knowledge to be acquired.

Differences of opinion among Muslim schools of thought concerning how knowledge comes about have emerged from differences in their ways of understanding the Qur'anic verses that speak about the source of human knowledge. One such verse has to do with God's teaching of Adam: “And He imparted unto Adam the names of all things. Then He brought them within the ken of the angels and said: ‘Declare unto Me the names of these [things]’ (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:31).” By challenging the angels in this way, God was demonstrating Adam's superiority to them in knowledge, the special dignity that had been bestowed upon Adam, and God's majesty and power. This story indicates that the origin of knowledge lies in the initial receipt of information by our primal ancestor.

(b) Intuitive and acquired *maʿrifah*

Based on the aforementioned Qurʾanic account concerning Adam, scholars have raised certain questions about what it was that Adam learned: Did God teach him all knowledge, or only its basic principles? Did God teach Adam by introducing the necessary knowledge into his mind while granting him the capacity for language, after which both language and knowledge would be acquired through a human instructional process? Further, what is the process by which language is taught and learned, and how is one's first knowledge gleaned?

(c) The first tier of *maʿrifah* obtained by the first human being

The Qurʾanic statement quoted earlier that God “imparted to Adam the names of all things” suggests that God taught Adam language that signified the natures of things or that triggered the mental images associated with them. The understanding of a name requires us first to have comprehended its referent, that is, the entity it names. Without a referent, a name has no meaning. Hence, the entity named – the referent – has to be conceptualized first. A name's referent can be either a self-existent entity or a quality that inheres in something else such that when the name is mentioned, this quality comes automatically to mind.

Human *maʿrifah* subsequent to primordial cognitions

Not all acquired *maʿrifah* is based on logical evidence. This does not mean that the mind is inactive in some types of acquired knowledge. Rather, it means simply that the human capacity for knowledge acquisition is broader and more inclusive than the rational or logical faculties. A person might, for example, be provided with clear, sound, and comprehensible logical premises, yet remain unconvinced of the truths or facts to which these premises point.

Human beings have an inborn propensity to seek goodness, a propensity that helps them in turn to grasp and embrace truth. This innate capacity, which is marked by an inherent logic that goes beyond the codified logic of the mind, is reflected in the two basic kinds of evidence that God adduces for His oneness. The first of these is evidence from the physical universe, which is perceived by looking at the outside

Qur'anic Terminology

world, while the second is perceived by looking into ourselves. As God declares in *Sūrah Fuṣṣilat*, 41:53, “We shall make them fully understand Our messages [through what they perceive] in the utmost horizons [of the universe] and within themselves, so that it will become clear unto them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth.” Similarly, we read in *Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt*, 51:20-21, “And on earth there are signs [of God’s existence, visible] to all who are endowed with inner certainty, just as [there are signs thereof] within your own selves: can you not, then, see?” However, the mere availability of such evidence, outward and inward, is insufficient to bring about knowledge. We ourselves have to engage with the evidence in such a way that it leads to understanding and faith. There are individuals who dull their innate receptive and perceptive capacities through acts of disobedience. Such people render themselves incapable of benefiting even from the evidence they have at their disposal. Hence, rather than helping them, such evidence simply serves to condemn them for their refusal to receive it.

The Qur’an’s frequent use of the Arabic term *la‘alla*, meaning “perchance”, or “in the hope that...” in relation to the topic of *ma‘rifah* is another indication that fulfillment of the external conditions for acquiring knowledge is no guarantee that the individual will necessarily learn and arrive at the truth. *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:219, for example, reads: “God makes clear unto you His messages, so that you might reflect...” (*la‘allakum tatafakkarūn*; cf. 2:266). Similarly we read in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:242, “God makes clear unto you His messages, so that you might [learn to] use your reason” (*la‘allakum ta‘qilūn*; cf. *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:151). The *ma‘rifah* individuals can acquire thus depends on their readiness to receive it. The Qur’an depicts different tiers of knowledge or understanding. The first tier takes place on the level of physical perceptions made possible through the bodily senses and the conclusions reached through reason on the basis of these perceptions. The second tier might be termed special guidance which comes about through divine revelation. Those receptive to the divine light form such knowledge in gradually ascending levels, as opposed to the gradually descending levels experienced by those who are deluding themselves.

The acquisition of knowledge is thus related to human attitudes, or the will to benefit from the evidence one has. The initial tier, which consists in the realities around us and within us, is available to every able-bodied and able-minded adult. As God has declared, “We would never chastise [any community for the wrong they may do] ere We have sent an apostle [to them]” (*Sūrah al-Isrā’*, 17:15). Similarly, we are told in *Sūrah al-Nisā’*, 4:165 that God has sent messengers as bearers of both glad tidings and warning “so that people might have no excuse before God...” Hence, no one is excluded from this first tier of knowledge but those who, due to their young age or loss of mental faculties (through sleep or insanity), are not held morally accountable.

The second tier of knowledge, which leads to guidance, depends on the individual’s attitude or readiness. As for the third tier of knowledge which entails an increase in guidance, faith and God-consciousness, it follows from the second, with the difference that this third tier is an added grace that comes from God alone and has nothing to do with human action or intervention.

The worldly sciences have two purposes. The first of these purposes pertains to this earthly realm, which is to impart knowledge that can be obtained by the believer and the nonbeliever alike by simply availing themselves of the resources God has placed at everyone’s disposal. The believer, however, earns greater merit in that his or her reward will be not simply in this world, but in the next as well, in addition to the fact that he or she will be granted greater success in his or her efforts. As for the second purpose, it is to enable the believer to earn greater merit in the afterlife. The nonbeliever is deprived of this other-worldly reward. As we read in *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:44, “When they had forgotten all that they had been told to take to heart, We threw open to them the gates of all [good] things until – even as they were rejoicing in what they had been granted – We suddenly took them to task: and lo! they were broken in spirit.”

As for the believer, the more he or she learns about how to go about day-to-day affairs in this life, the stronger his or her faith becomes, and the higher the rank he or she is promised in the life to come.

Mastery of a task requires the fulfillment of two conditions: ability and wisdom. Ability consists in possessing both the basic material

Qur'anic Terminology

means and human resources needed, and the wherewithal to protect and preserve these resources. As for wisdom, it consists in knowledge and its good use and management. As God declares in *Sūrah al-A'raf*, 7:96, “if the people of those communities had but attained to faith and been conscious of Us, We would indeed have opened up for them blessings out of heaven and earth...”

The Qur'an presents human beings' purpose on earth as that of stewardship (*istikhlāf*), which is a form of servanthood. Secular philosophy, by contrast, conceives of the human purpose in essentially materialistic terms. Consequently, the highest form of knowledge from the Qur'anic perspective is faith in God. Unbelief (*kufur*) is thus contrasted not only with faith (*īmān*), but with knowledge (*ma'rifah*, *ilm*). This is why the Qur'an treats the issue of knowledge in relation to the heart (*al-qalb*, *al-lubb*, *al-fū'ād*) more than it does in relation to any aspect of the human being. It is clear, then, that what the Qur'an intends by the term 'knowledge' is not simply a theoretical grasp of concepts and information but, rather, an awareness that is grounded in primordial human nature and the willingness to submit to God's rule.

The search for knowledge is a process that involves all human perceptions, both the physical and the nonphysical, as well as previously acquired knowledge, whether it was received from others, or divine revelation, as a result of which we might classify knowledge into three types: (1) innate, (2) intuitive and (3) theoretical. Innate knowledge is something with which a human being is born, such as an infant's instinctual knowledge of how to nurse from his or her mother. Intuitive knowledge includes perceptions and cognitions that take place as a matter of course, without the need for investigation or reasoning. One's sense of touch, for example, conveys a burning sensation if one touches fire. The individual thus gains experience with fire which, together with other interactions with his or her environment, builds up a reservoir of acquired knowledge that requires no conscious thought and reasoning. The physical senses might thus be likened to the windows of the mind onto the material, tangible world. As for theoretical knowledge, it requires study, investigation and intentional reasoning. The memory records the sensory data affirmed through concrete experiences. This data, together with information received

from others, then becomes the material on the basis of which the mind goes to work forming and developing ideas and concepts.

The Qur'an affirms the importance of receiving knowledge from those who have gone before us, and calls upon us to integrate the knowledge gleaned through the Qur'an itself and the revelations received from earlier messengers of God and passed down through their followers. This integration takes place through a dual process of confirmation (*taṣḍīq*) and sifting (*haymanah*). (See *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:48 and *Sūrah al-Shūrā*, 42:13.) The sifting process consists in approving every portion of earlier revelations that has not been corrupted or falsified.

- (d) The object of *ma'rifah* as presented in the Qur'an is not essences, but attributes

Some scholars view philosophy as a process of generalization whereby individual manifestations of behavioral values, expressions of knowledge, and fields of learning in all their variety are traced back to a unifying source. The function of philosophy is to extract the implicit dimensions of the judgments we make, the ideas we form, and the beliefs we embrace, and give them direct, open expression. This conceptualization of philosophy supports the view that philosophical thought is intimately bound to religion or, rather, that the philosophical enterprise emerged as a kind of intellectual critique of religious and moral beliefs.

The Qur'an guides us to the evident realities from which we stand to benefit on the levels of both knowledge and action. However, it does not encourage us to delve into issues that cannot serve as a basis for what we do. This may be seen in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:189, which reads, "They will ask you about the new moons. Say: 'They indicate the periods for [various doings of] mankind, including the pilgrimage.'" Eminently practical, the answer provided here sidesteps the questioners' curiosity about other matters, such as why the moon appears like a mere thread at the beginning of the month, after which it fills out to form a full moon, after which it goes back to its former state. A similar point is conveyed in different terms by *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:101, "O

Qur'anic Terminology

you who have attained to faith! Do not ask about matters which, if they were to be made manifest to you..., might cause you hardship,” and *Sūrah al-Isrā'*, 17:85, “They will ask you about [the nature of] divine inspiration. Say: ‘This inspiration [comes] at my Sustainer’s behest; and [you cannot understand its nature, since] you have been granted very little of [real] knowledge.’” The essential nature of things is known only to God.

What distinguishes the Islamic approach is that it acknowledges things’ existence in the dual realms of ‘the unseen’ (*al-ghayb*) and ‘the seen’ (*al-shahādah*), that is, in one realm that is accessible to human reason and sensory perception, and in another that lies beyond these human capacities. The Islamic thought system recognizes human beings’ ability to perceive various entities’ existence and attributes; however, it denies our ability to know things’ essential natures, holding that such knowledge is not required for us to fulfill our purpose in life.

The bond the Qur’an affirms between knowledge and the knowing human being is neglected by the so-called “scientific” research methods of this age, which destroy or deny the connection that God has drawn between us and the universe we live in. People are part and parcel of the cosmos, and their lives will be sound only when their hearts beat to its rhythm. The faith-based approach in no way diminishes the ability of the scientific method to bring us understanding of individual facts. On the contrary, it augments this understanding by connecting the facts to one another.

(e) *Maʿrifah* and existence

The Qur’an calls upon us to begin with existence as the basis for *maʿrifah*. There is no such thing as abstract research or abstract knowledge. Rather, faith is a phenomenon that emerges into consciousness from deep within the self. In any given society, doctrine is taught and life is lived in accordance with it even before the individual reaches the stage of conscious awareness. The individual believes in a doctrine before formulating a theory of knowledge, or *maʿrifah*. The role of *maʿrifah* is to enable people to examine their convictions and beliefs so

that if they are convincing they can affirm them, and if they are unconvincing, they can reject them. This process is affected, of course, by environmental factors and upbringing as well as by innate disposition.

Maʿrifah entails awareness of what one believes. The origins of beliefs in the Qurʾan are likewise the origins of human knowledge. Beliefs originate out of reflection on existent entities. As such, existence is the vessel that both contains and transcends the realm of *maʿrifah*, while *maʿrifah* is the awareness of what belief requires on the level of conduct and way of life.

The Qurʾan awakens primordial human nature by inspiring faith in God as the sole Creator of the universe. It follows that the existence of God Almighty, and existence in general, are prior to human beings and human understanding. Existence is the cause and knowledge is one of its effects. The Qurʾan thus affirms an externally existent entity which is independent of the knowing self and its perception or understanding. *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:30 tells us that: “Thy Sustainer said to the angels: ‘Behold, I am about to establish upon earth one who shall inherit it.’” In the following verse we are told that God “imparted to Adam the names of all things (2:31).” These two verses indicate that the heavens, the earth and the angels all exist independently of human beings, and that they were created before us. Hence, the existence of these entities was one source of human *maʿrifah*.

Moreover, external realities vis-à-vis human beings may be divided into two categories. The first consists of entities that belong to the realm of sensory perception, and which surround human beings in the world of nature, including plant life, animal life, inanimate beings, and other people. The second consists of entities that belong to the realm that transcends sensory perception, including the Eternal Tablet (*al-lawḥ al-maḥfūz*), which is the eternal prototype for the earthly Qurʾan, Heaven and Hell, and the divine throne. The Qurʾanic revelation was a wake-up call to human beings to “read” in the name of the Lord who created them, and who created the realm of existence of which they are a part, saying: “Read in the name of your Sustainer Who has created, created man out of a germ-cell! Read – for your Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One, Who has taught [man] the use of the pen, taught man what he did not know” (*Sūrah al-ʿAlaq*, 95:1-5).

Qur'anic Terminology

As we have noted, existence is far broader than the realm of human knowledge. The Islamic teaching concerning the dual realms of what is inaccessible to human perception (*al-ghayb*) and what is humanly perceptible and knowable (*al-shahādah*) is central to the Qur'an. This teaching serves as one of the most powerful arguments for the relativity of knowledge and the finiteness, in both quantity and quality, of human understanding. God has made clear that the understanding and perceptive capacities God has granted us are for the purpose of enabling us to fulfill our role as stewards and vicegerents on Earth, a role which, in turn, is designed to help us achieve our ultimate purpose of being God's servants and worshippers. The human being with the greatest knowledge of all was the Prophet Muhammad, whom God commanded: "Say: 'O my Sustainer, cause me to grow in knowledge!'" (*Sūrah Ṭāhā*, 20:114). Similarly, we are reminded in *Sūrah Yūsuf*, 12:76 that "above everyone who is endowed with knowledge there is One who knows all."

THIRD: THE REALM OF *Ma'rifah*

As we have seen, knowledge is divided by the Qur'an into two realms: that of *al-ghayb*, and that of *al-shahādah* (cf. *Sūrah al-Ra'd*, 13:9). In relating to the world, we believe in the realm of *al-ghayb* by an act of faith without seeing it with our own eyes or sensing it in a tangible way; nor can our reason grasp its details or the manner in which it operates. Consequently, we might say that we have two different kinds of faith, one of which applies to the concrete world around us, and the other of which applies to the realm of *al-ghayb*. When relating to the former, we use both our physical senses and our minds, but in relating to the latter, our physical senses have no direct role to play. It bears noting here that God speaks of the universe in the Qur'an as consisting of numerous worlds. *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah*, 1:2 reads, "All praise is due to God alone, the Sustainer of all the worlds." From this we may conclude that there are numerous worlds, but that all of these worlds belong either to the realm of the humanly perceptible (*al-shahādah*), or the humanly imperceptible (*al-ghayb*).

1) *The relationship between al-ghayb and al-shahādah*

The realm of *al-shahādah* is often referred to in the Qur'an as *al-āfāq* ("the horizons"), which is manifested in the world of nature, while *al-ghayb* is often spoken of with reference to the inner, spiritual world of *al-anfus*, (literally, "the selves"), with these complementary realms often being mentioned in tandem. This is as it should be, since reflection on the outward signs manifested in the realm of *al-shahādah* can give us greater faith in what the Qur'an teaches about the realm of *al-ghayb*, while belief in *al-ghayb* can help us remain stronger and more hopeful in the face of life's challenges and difficulties, including situations in which we have to cope with the reality of death.

2) *The world of al-ghayb*(a) The dictionary definition of *ghayb*

The root consisting of the letters *gh-y-b* denotes the act of concealing something. The verb *ghāba/yaghīb* (verbal nouns, *ghayb*, *ghaybah*, *ghuyūb*) thus means to be concealed from view. It is used to speak of the sun's setting, since when the sun sets it disappears from sight. Derivatives of this root are used figuratively to refer to realities that are known only to God. The related noun *ghayābah* refers to a depression in the ground, or to the bottom of something such as a well. It is used in *Sūrah Yūsuf*, 12:10, where one of Joseph's brothers tells the others to throw Joseph "into the dark depths of this well" (*fī ghayābat al-jubb*). As for the noun *ghībah*, it is used to refer to slander or backbiting, which is something one only dares engage in when the object of the person being spoken of is absent.

(b) The usage-related definition of *ghayb*

The word *ghayb* is used customarily to refer to something hidden, concealed or protected and, more specifically, to realities that are inaccessible ("absent") to the physical senses and/or are not self-evident to the mind. Al-Iṣfahānī defined *al-ghayb* as that for which is no evidence, of which there is no outward sign, and of which no created being has any knowledge. Since God is All-Knowing, nothing that

Qur'anic Terminology

exists belongs, from His perspective, to the realm of *ghayb*; rather, everything belongs, where God is concerned, to the realm of *shahādah*, or that which is perceptible and comprehensible.

Derivatives of the root *gh-y-b* occur 53 times in the Qur'an; these include four instances of the plural *al-ghuyūb*, and one instance of *ghaybah*. The masculine plural active participle *ghā'ibīm* (singular, *ghā'ib*) is used in *Sūrah al-Naml*, 27:20 in the sense of 'absent'. The feminine singular form of the same participle (*ghā'ibah*) refers in *Sūrah al-Naml*, 27:75 to something concealed or hidden: "...for there is nothing [so deeply] hidden (*ghā'ibah*) in the heavens or on earth but is recorded in (His) clear decree." The noun *ghayb* is used in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:3 to mean "that which is beyond the reach of human perception." In other words, *al-ghayb* can only be perceived via God's messengers and prophets, and denial of its existence is tantamount to atheism. *Sūrah al-Nisā'*, 4:34 speaks highly of wives who "guard in [the husband's] absence what God would have them guard" (*ḥāfiẓātun lil-ghaybi bi ma ḥafaza Allāhu*).

There are certain aspects of the realm of *al-ghayb* about which God has given us some knowledge. For example, the Qur'an includes the names of God (*asmā' Allāhi al-ḥusnā*), which tell us a great deal about God's nature; it also gives us information about the nature of life in the hereafter which we would otherwise have no way of knowing. Other aspects of the realm of *al-ghayb* are shrouded in complete mystery, and about these human beings can know nothing. *Sūrah al-An'ām*, 6:59, for example, states that God has "the keys to the things that are beyond the reach of a created being's perception (*mafātiḥ al-ghayb*)," and "none knows them but He."

There are, in addition, two other types of *al-ghayb*, one of which is locational in nature, and the other temporal. The locational type of *al-ghayb* includes things we know nothing about because they are geographically remote from us, while the temporal type includes events that are either in the remote past, or in the unknown future. When future events become present to us, however, they remain in the realm of *al-ghayb* for people who are geographically remote from it.

(c) Features of *al-ghayb*

The world of *al-ghayb* represents the world of the intangible. However, even the tangible world might include certain aspects that are unknowable due to the types of geographical or temporal remoteness mentioned above. In addition, there are certain things God chooses not to disclose to anyone but a select few. *Sūrah al-Jinn*, 72:26-27 tells us that God alone “knows that which is beyond the reach of a created being’s perception, and to none does He disclose aught of the mysteries of His Own unfathomable knowledge unless it be to an apostle whom He has been pleased to elect.”

As for God’s knowledge, it encompasses everything without exception in both the realm of the seen and the unseen. As we read in *Sūrah Saba’*, 34:3: “Not an atom’s weight [of whatever there is] in the heavens or on earth escapes His knowledge; and neither is there anything smaller than that, or larger, but is recorded in [His] clear decree.”

(d) Means for coming to know *al-ghayb*

Sensory perceptions can point beyond themselves to the world of the intangible, including the realities of lordship, divinity, divine attributes and prophecy. The mind is capable of grasping some universals, such as the existence of God and prophecy. However, neither sensory perception nor reason is capable of attaining a detailed knowledge of the world of *al-ghayb*, which can only be known fully through Divine Revelation. This fact is a consistent feature of the Islamic epistemological system. As God tells the Prophet in *Sūrah al-Shūrā*, 42:52,

And thus, too, have We revealed to you a life-giving message, [coming] at Our behest. [Before this message came to you,] you did not know what revelation is, nor what faith [implies]: but [now] We have caused this [message] to be a light whereby We guide whom We will of Our servants.

In its call to believe in the world of the unseen, the Qur’an urges people to pursue scientific research. In other words, it encourages us to use the epistemological tools at our disposal to reflect on the evidence for God’s creative power. It reminds us that this evidence is dispersed throughout the Earth and the heavenly realms, as well as inside of us.

Qur'anic Terminology

As we read in *Sūrah Qāf*, 50:6-8, “Do they not look at the sky above them – how We have built it and made it beautiful and free of all faults? And the earth – We have spread it wide, and set upon it mountains firm, and caused it to bring forth plants of all beautiful kinds, thus offering an insight and a reminder unto every human being who willingly turns unto God.”

(e) The principles of *al-ghayb*

The realm of *al-ghayb*, which constitutes a source of knowledge for human beings, has certain principles associated with it. These principles can be summed up as follows: (1) Existence has a beneficial purpose or end. (2) The laws of the cosmos are not subject to the human will. (3) The existence of God is the most important element of the world of *al-ghayb* with respect to human beings. (4) The afterlife constitutes the final outcome of the actions people have committed during their lives on Earth. (5) Life on Earth takes place in a realm of action and the pursuit of righteousness. (6) Though known to God, a person's individual fate (whether he or she is guided aright or falls into error) is a product of the choices he or she makes of his or her own free will. Consequently, there is no justification for passivity, defeatism or fatalism.

Divine Revelation is the source from which people derive the knowledge they need of the realm of *al-ghayb*. Revelation and human reason complement each other and work together to form human beings' attitudes toward the world and the extent to which they fulfill their purpose in life. For this reason, the Islamic epistemological method steers clear of dualistic oppositions between religion and the state, reason and written tradition, or traditionalism and modernity.

3) *The world of al-shahādah*

As we have seen, the terms *al-ghayb* and *al-shahādah* customarily appear in association with each other. Referring to the realm of sensory perception and those entities or concepts we can grasp with our minds, the realm of *shahādah* is perceived and understood by means of balanced cooperation between reason and the physical senses. By means of this kind of cooperation and balance, human beings can

relate constructively to the world around them and achieve great things in fulfillment of their roles as God's stewards on Earth. In this process, human beings are expected to conduct themselves decisively and rationally, and to make proper use of the laws embedded within the universe based on a sound understanding of causality and the need for harmony among the various parts of the cosmic system.

(a) The lexical definition of the root *sh-h-d*

The letters *sh-h-d* form a root that denotes presence, knowledge, and the conveyance of knowledge to others. The verb *shahida/yashhadhu* denotes the act of witnessing or bearing witness, which implies the presence of the witness to the events or truths to which he or she is testifying. The noun *shahādah* denotes both the act of witnessing or bearing witness, and the testimony itself. The active participle *shāhid* refers to a witness, and the verbal noun *mushāhadah* refers to the act of seeing with one's own eyes. One of the names of God is *al-Shahīd*, which means, "the One Whose knowledge nothing escapes," because He is present to all and everything at all times. When speaking of God's absolute knowledge (*ilm*), we refer to Him as *al-ʿAlīm*. When such knowledge is construed as encompassing matters that are hidden, concealed or mysterious, we refer to Him as *al-Khabīr*, and when it is construed as encompassing matters that are visible and evident, we refer to Him as *al-Shahīd*.

(b) The usage-based definition of *sh-h-d*

Derivates of the root *sh-h-d* occur 124 times in the Qur'an, and in the following senses. In *Sūrah al-Burūj*, 85:7 the word *shuhūd* (plural of *shāhid*) is used to refer to those who are 'witnesses' to what they themselves are doing to others. The word *shahādah* can refer to an act of witnessing that takes place via physical sight, or via insight or understanding. In either case, the word denotes a definitive report that constitutes evidence in favor of what the witness is saying. The verb *shahida* is used in *Sūrah al-Zukhruf*, 43:19 in the sense of knowing about something by virtue of having seen it with one's own eyes. Of those who claim that the angels are females, God asks rhetorically,

Qur'anic Terminology

“did they witness their creation (*ashahidū khalqahum*)?” (Cf. *Sūrah al-Kahf*, 18:51.) The same verb, *shahida*, is used in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:84 in the sense of bearing witness or testifying to the truth of something. And the word *shahādah* is used in *Sūrah al-Ra‘d*, 13:9 to refer to “all that can be witnessed by a creature’s senses or mind.”

(c) Categories of *shahādah*

The realm of existence that can be understood through human reason is referred to in the Qur’an by the terms *al-āfāq* (‘horizons’) and *al-anfus* (‘souls’ or ‘selves’). These terms are found in *Sūrah Fuṣṣilat*, 41:53 quoted earlier, where God states, “We shall make them fully understand Our messages [through what they perceive] in the utmost horizons [of the universe] (*fī al-āfāq*) and within themselves (*wa fī anfusihim*), so that it will become clear unto them that this [revelation] is indeed the truth.” In a discussion of the meaning of the term *al-āfāq*, al-Shawkānī quotes Ibn Yazīd, a leading early scholar of Islam, as stating, “*Al-āfāq* are the signs observed in the sky.” Commentators Qatādah and al-Ḍaḥḥāk defined the term as referring to “God’s deeds among the people of the world.” ‘Aṭā understood it to refer to “astronomical, meteorological and terrestrial entities and phenomena, including the sun, the moon, the stars, night and day, winds, and the like.” Ibn Kathīr for his part interpreted the phrase *al-āfāq* as referring to “the Muslim conquests and Islam’s triumph over other regions and religions.” As for al-Rāzī, he opined that the term denoted “astronomical and planetary signs, the signs of day and night, in light, shadow and darkness, the four elements [fire, water, earth and air], and the three compounds known as mineral, animal and vegetable.”

(d) The relationship between the realms of *al-āfāq* and *al-anfus*

It is clear that these two realms are closely linked based on the fact that whenever one of them is mentioned in the Qur’an, the other is mentioned as well. One example of this pairing is found in *Sūrah al-Kahf*, 18:51. Referring to the angels, God declares, “I did not make them witnesses of the creation of the heavens and the earth, nor of the creation of their own selves.” Another such pairing is found in *Sūrah al-*

Dhāriyāt, 51:20-21 quoted earlier: “And on earth there are signs [of God’s existence, visible] to all who are endowed with inner certainty, just as [there are signs thereof] within your own selves: can you not, then, see?”

The Qur’an thus emphasizes the interconnection and complementarity of these two spheres: the fact that the universe has been placed at human beings’ disposal negates the notion that there is an inherent struggle or conflict between human beings and the rest of the cosmos. On the contrary, in order for human beings to be good stewards of the Earth and to “colonize” Earth in pursuit of happiness and prosperity, they must strive for a sound understanding of both “the horizons” (*al-āfāq*) and of the human psyche and its legitimate needs (*al-anfus*). The better we understand the universe, the better able we are to make good use of it. Hence, human progress and development depend on the ability to know and relate to both the outer world (*al-āfāq*) and our inner worlds (*al-anfus*). In this way only can we strive for the common good of humanity.

FOURTH: QUR’ANIC CRITERIA FOR *Maʿrifah*

The Qur’an demonstrates a concern for disciplined thought on the levels of both ethics and knowledge. Ethical integrity as it relates to knowledge, important though it is, is insufficient. It is not enough for a scholar to have pure motives for his work without also conveying information accurately and completely. Nor is it enough to be academically disciplined in terms of accuracy and thoroughness without putting one’s knowledge to the proper ethical uses. Rather, we need to hold ourselves to strict standards both ethically and academically in our pursuit of knowledge. The Qur’an seeks to guide us toward beneficial knowledge within the proper boundaries. In order to achieve true epistemological progress, which requires integration of our various sources of knowledge, we must demonstrate proper respect for both the Divine Law and human reason. We need to formulate rules that will both facilitate and regulate scholarship by ensuring that our research methods are sound and free of debilitating errors.

Qur'anic Terminology

1) *Qur'anic ethical standards of ma'rifah*

The importance of ethical standards in relation to knowledge lies in the fact that such standards guide the choices we make as to how we will put such knowledge to use. The Qur'an speaks of ethical values either in terms of legal rulings, or in terms of human beings' innate moral consciousness. People do not, of course, always obey their consciences. Nevertheless, conscience remains deeply embedded in the human psyche. Consequently, one tends to be intuitively aware of having violated a moral principle. The purpose of knowledge is to empower human beings to be God's vicegerents by bringing prosperity both to themselves and to the Earth in keeping with God's commands, and it is the Qur'an that informs us of what these commands are. The precepts set down in the Qur'an provide us with guidelines for relating to others and to the wider Cosmos in such a way that we use our God-given knowledge constructively rather than destructively.

(a) Prohibiting strife and contention

Competition in the sense of aspiration is one thing, and conflict and strife are another. Aspiration has a noble, laudable purpose (cf. *Sūrah al-Muṭaffifīn*, 83:26), whereas strife and contention lead to nothing but division. As God has said, "do not be at variance with one another, lest you lose heart and your moral strength desert you." There are two types of disagreement. The first type is permissible. In fact, it is one of the hallmarks of the Islamic academic and intellectual heritage, having served to fuel an intellectual revolution and the accumulation of vast epistemological wealth. Differences of opinion among Muslim scholars over questions of scriptural and theological interpretation have helped to deepen our understanding of the truth and to achieve significant benefits in the theoretical and practical realms alike. However, numerous verses of the Qur'an criticize the behavior of Jews and Christians whose rulings and judgments violated principles of which they had clear knowledge. God warns in *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:105, "Be not like those who have drawn apart from one another and have taken to conflicting views after all evidence of the truth has come unto them; for them tremendous suffering is in store." One of the most devastating

things that can happen to the general populace and the intellectual elite alike is for them to succumb to the spiritual weaknesses that led to the demise of bygone civilizations. One such weakness consists in knowledge losing its moral foundations and high-minded aims, with the result that it goes from being knowledge of God and a source of virtue to being a destructive force that tears at the fabric of the society and destroys its religious unity.

We know from the study of intellectual and doctrinal history that there are numerous potential causes of difference and disagreement. Whenever societies take steps in the direction of progress and higher civilization, the rifts among their members tend to widen. The result is the emergence of competing schools of thought, religions, sects and denominations. None of this is evil in and of itself. However, such developments turn destructive when people surrender to selfish whims. God warned the Prophet in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:145 that if he followed the “(vain) desires” (*ahwā’*, plural of *hawā*) of those who opposed his way, he would be a wrongdoer. To submit to Divine Revelation is to stand opposed to mere human caprice and vain desire. God asks rhetorically in *Sūrah Muḥammad*, 47:14, “Is then one who is on a clear [path] from his Lord no better than one to whom the evil of his conduct seems pleasing, and such as follow their own lusts (*ittaba‘ū ahwā’ahum*)?”

The Qur’an and the Sunnah are the two primary sources of knowledge for the Muslim community. Hence, disputes that arise from opposition to what is taught by Divine Revelation are caused by people going the way of their own caprices, whether out of love for worldly gain, hatred for people of faith, or intellectual hubris. In *Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ*, 28:78 we read about how a certain wealthy man of Moses’ day defiantly declared, “[My wealth] has been given to me only by virtue of the knowledge that is in me!” Knowledge is, first and foremost, a gift from God, and should be recognized as such. Apart from this recognition, knowledge becomes a veil that blinds us to our need for our lives and relationships to be ordered by the Divine Law.

(b) Objectivity

By “objectivity”, I am referring to the act of stepping back from one’s

Qur'anic Terminology

emotions and prejudices in relation to an issue or question concerning which a decision or judgment needs to be made. Thus defined, objectivity requires honesty and humility. Another concomitant of objectivity is academic integrity, which includes a commitment to practices such as attributing statements to their proper sources and not reading one's own thoughts or intentions into what another person has said. Consequently, objectivity can be quite difficult to achieve and maintain.

The term 'objectivity' as such does not appear anywhere in the Qur'an. However the concept of objectivity as defined above is alluded to in numerous places in the Qur'an as a necessity for making sound judgments and relating fairly to others. An example of objectivity presents itself in the balanced way in which, when God speaks about various communities, including the Jews and the Christians, He points to both their strengths and their weaknesses, their virtues and their vices. We read in *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:75: "And among the followers of earlier revelation there is many a one who, if you entrust him with a treasure, will [faithfully] restore it to you; and there is among them many a one who, if you entrust him with a tiny gold coin, will not restore it to you unless you keep standing over him." (Cf. *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:110-113.) Hence, although it has become popular to equate 'objectivity' with non-adherence to any value system or doctrinal consideration, one could not describe someone who adheres to the standards of Islamic law as lacking in objectivity. Rather, the Qur'an calls upon believers to strive for impartiality and fairness while cautioning against the dangers of neglecting these noble virtues. The Muslim is expected to relate to whatever subject or issue he or she studies without overreacting and without prejudice for or against one group or another depending on worldly fortunes or status, venal desires and ambitions, or baseless caprices and passions.

(c) A warning against suppression of the truth

God warns, "...do not overlay the truth with falsehood, and do not knowingly suppress the truth" (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:42). Elsewhere, God warns those who do engage in such concealment of the great spiritual torment that lies in store for them: "Verily, as for those who

suppress aught of the revelation which God has bestowed from on high, and barter it away for a trifling gain – they but fill their bellies with fire. And God will not speak unto them on the Day of Resurrection, nor will He cleanse them [of their sins]; and grievous suffering awaits them” (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:174).

Those who are obliged to answer a question are forbidden to conceal or suppress what they know. However, in particular situations and when dealing with certain individuals, one may be duty-bound to suppress certain information because those to whom one is speaking would be unable to comprehend this information, and would thereby be liable to misconstrue it and, worse still, disbelieve God and His Messenger.

(d) The dangers of being selective in the search for knowledge

Addressing the children of Israel, God asks, “Do you, then, believe in some parts of the divine writ and deny the truth of other parts? What, then, could be the reward of those among you who do such things but ignominy in the life of this world and, on the Day of Resurrection, commitment to most grievous suffering?” (*Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:85). This admonition reminds us of the need to develop an inclusive view of whatever subject we are studying. Rather than falling into narrow, atomistic, compartmentalized views of reality, we need to adhere to a method that provides us with a balanced mix of experience and information. At the same time, we should be diligent about purging our thought systems of foreign, extraneous, or spurious elements and ideas.

(e) Speculation and surmise

The Qur’an places no store by beliefs based on mere conjecture no matter how many people happen to subscribe to them. Truth is not measured by the number of people who embrace it any more than falsehood is identified by the scarcity of its followers. As we read in *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:116, “if you pay heed to the majority of those [who live] on earth, they will but lead you astray from the path of God: they follow but [other people’s] conjectures, and they themselves do nothing

Qur'anic Terminology

but guess.” Similarly, *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:78 urges us not to depend on “unlettered people who have no real knowledge of the divine writ, [following] only wishful beliefs and depending on nothing but conjecture.” It is clear, then, that true knowledge requires that we demand the kind of accuracy and precision that will lead to certainty.

(f) The prohibition of falsification and lying

In *Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān*, 3:71 God says, “O followers of earlier revelation! Why do you cloak the truth with falsehood and conceal the truth of which you are [so well] aware?” A similar admonition comes in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:79: “Woe, then, unto those who write down, with their own hands, [something which they claim to be] divine writ, and then say, ‘This is from God,’ in order to acquire a trifling gain thereby; woe, then, unto them for what their hands have written, and woe unto them for all that they may have gained!” Deliberate corruption of holy writ is a moral transgression. This sort of transgression is spoken of in *Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān*, 3:78, which reads, “Behold, there are indeed some among them who distort the Bible with their tongues, so as to make you think that [what they say] is from the Bible, the while it is not from the Bible.” When sound knowledge is set aside, it is bound to be replaced by untruths. If, however, the epistemological method being followed is based on sources that yield solid facts, the results we obtain will be accurate and sound, uncontaminated by the vices of cheating, deception, hypocrisy, and pedantry. We are admonished in *Sūrah al-Nahl*, 16:116, “Do not utter falsehoods by letting your tongues determine [at your own discretion], ‘This is lawful and that is forbidden,’ thus attributing your own lying inventions to God.”

2) *Scientific standards of truth in the Qur’an*

(a) Refuse to accept claims not backed up by evidence

The Qur’an affirms the importance of verifying the accuracy of any information on which we are going to base an attitude or position. This verification takes place based on two types of evidence that we will term revelational and rational. Revelational evidence is evidence

derived from the Qur'an or the Sunnah of the Prophet, while rational evidence consists of indisputable rational premises. In numerous verses of the Qur'an we encounter demands for evidence for claims people make on controversial matters. In response to those who worship beings other than God and appeal to tradition in support of their practice, God commands the Prophet, "Say: 'Have you any [certain] knowledge which you could proffer to us? You follow but [other people's] conjectures, and you yourselves do nothing but guess'" (*Sūrah al-An'ām*, 6:148). Similarly we read in *Sūrah al-Aḥqāf*, 46:4, "Say: 'Have you [really] given thought to what it is that you invoke instead of God? Show me what these [beings or forces] have created anywhere on earth! Or had they, perchance, a share in [creating] the heavens? [If so,] bring me any divine writ preceding this one, or any [other] vestige of knowledge – if what you claim is true!'" Claims devoid of proof avail nothing. As we read in *Sūrah al-Naml*, 27:64: "Could there be any divine power besides God? Say: '[If you think so,] produce your evidence – if you truly believe in your claim!'" A similar message is conveyed by *Sūrah al-Kahf*, 18:15: "These people of ours have taken to worshipping [other] deities instead of Him, without being able to adduce any reasonable evidence in support of their beliefs; and who could be more wicked than he who invents a lie about God?" For other references to evidence that God provides for the truth of His message, see *Sūrah al-An'ām*, 6:83, *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:211, *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:110, and *Sūrah al-An'ām*, 6:104.

(b) Do not delve into matters of which you have no knowledge

This is a cardinal Qur'anic rule for those who aspire to sound thinking and sound research, which requires that we know both our strengths and our limitations. *Sūrah al-An'ām*, 6:68 admonishes the Prophet to turn his back on those who speak ignorantly about God's messages, while *Sūrah al-Isrā'*, 17:36 instructs all and sundry as follows: "And never concern yourself with anything of which you have no knowledge: verily, [your] hearing and sight and heart – all of them – will be called to account for it [on Judgment Day]."

Qur'anic Terminology

(c) Make careful use of words

Sound academic research requires the precise use of terms. This point is made in another context in *Sūrah al-Hujurāt*, 49:14, which reads, “The Bedouin say, ‘We have attained to faith.’ Say [unto them, O Muhammad]: ‘You have not [yet] attained to faith; you should [rather] say, “We have [outwardly] surrendered” – for [true] faith has not yet entered your hearts.” In *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:104, the Muslim community is addressed with the words: “O you who have attained to faith! Do not say [to the Prophet], ‘Listen to us,’ but rather say, ‘Have patience with us,’ and hearken [unto him], since grievous suffering awaits those who deny the truth.” (Or, as Yusuf Ali translates the same passage, “O ye of Faith! Say not [to the Messenger] words of ambiguous import, but words of respect; and hearken [to him]: To those without Faith is a grievous punishment.”)

Believers are expected to speak respectfully and not to use words that could lead either to misunderstanding or to wrongdoing. It should always be remembered that the circumstances, the timing, the environment, the situation, and the person to whom one is speaking all play a role in how one’s words will be perceived and, hence, the effect they will have. Conversely, when words or statements are taken out of their original context, serious misunderstandings, errors and confusion can result. It is a given, then, that the Muslim academic or researcher must take special care in the way in which he or she uses language, recognizing that words are defined by their contexts as much as they are by lexicons, and that other people’s language should be interpreted based on the way in which they themselves understand it.

Just as specialists in this or that field of knowledge develop an in-house jargon that would be incomprehensible to an outsider, the people of this or that community or society come, over time, to attribute new meanings to the words and expressions they use in day-to-day interactions. In order to be recognized as competent in a given field, one has to have mastered that field’s special terminology or jargon. Similarly, the academic or scientific methodology which we glean from the Qur’an teaches us not to form judgments about people until we have made certain that we understand the meanings of the words with which they communicate.

Terminology plays a pivotal role in virtually all forms of intellectual creativity and in the discussions and debates to which they give rise. The more a field broadens and the more issues ramify, the more critical terminology becomes for conveying facts clearly and succinctly and for streamlining the exchange of ideas. On the other hand, one danger of newly evolving terminology, particularly in this age of doctrinal, intellectual and cultural clashes, is that it has the potential to crowd out the traditional terms used in academic and cultural spheres to the point where, little by little, it replaces the Islamic beliefs, notions, and moral values to which these traditional terms originally gave expression.

(d) Strive for a proper fit between your field of study and your scientific method

The importance of such a “good fit” is alluded to in *Sūrah al-Zukhruf*, 43:19, which reads, “And [yet] they claim that the angels – who in themselves are but beings created by the Most Gracious – are females: [but] did they witness their creation? This false claim of theirs will be recorded, and they will be called to account [for it on Judgment Day]!” The idolaters of the Prophet’s day were espousing an epistemological view according to which the angels are females. Elsewhere we are told that these same people attributed “daughters” to God: “Or, [if you believe in God, how can you believe that] He has daughters, whereas you yourselves would have sons?” God challenges their claim by asking whether they had been present at the angels’ creation. What this means is that the claim that the angels are females and that they are God’s daughters can only be shown to be valid or invalid, true or untrue, by appeal to empirical evidence. The only empirical evidence that would fill the bill in such a situation would have been for the people making the claim either to have witnessed the angels’ creation, or to have seen these angels at some later time, neither of which was a requirement they could fulfill. It could only be concluded, therefore, that those making this claim were engaged in unfounded speculation. In this connection, *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:100-101 reads, “And yet, some have come to attribute to all manner of invisible beings a place side by side with God – although it is He who has created them [all]; and in their ignorance they have invented for Him sons and daughters!

Qur'anic Terminology

Limitless is He in His glory, and sublimely exalted above anything that men may devise by way of definition: the Originator of the heavens and the earth! How could it be that He should have a child without there ever having been a mate for Him – since it is He who has created everything, and He alone knows everything?” Such people’s claims lacked any basis in fact, nor were they founded on any scientific method appropriate to their epistemological field, since the realm about which they were making their claim was that of *al-ghayb*, which lies beyond the ken of human perception. Worse still, they attributed perfection to themselves and imperfection to God!

The importance of a proper fit between the field of knowledge one is dealing with and the scientific method one employs cannot be stressed too highly. No scientific progress occurs without research, and scientific research depends on method. Sound method yields sound research; faulty method yields faulty research.

(e) Strive for a proper fit between the epistemological field in question and your intellectual capacities

It goes without saying that intellectual capacities have their limitations. This is true on both the level of intelligence or reason in general, and on the level of individual abilities, which vary from one person to another. The Qur’an makes clear that there are certain matters that are beyond the reach of human understanding or knowledge. These include the Divine Essence, the nature of Spirit, when the Day of Resurrection will come, the world of the angels, the inner workings of the Universe, how successful we will be in our livelihoods, what our lifespans will be, and the ultimate fates of both individuals and nations. We have not been equipped to know these things, nor are we held responsible for doing so. As we read in *Sūrah al-A‘rāf*, 7:187:

They will ask you [O Prophet] about the Last Hour: “When will it come to pass?” Say: “Verily, knowledge thereof rests with my Sustainer alone. None but He will reveal it in its time. Heavily will it weigh on the heavens and the earth; [and] it will not fall upon you otherwise than of a sudden.” They will ask you – as if you could gain insight into this [mystery] by dint of persistent inquiry! Say: “Knowledge thereof rests with my Sustainer alone; but [of this] most people are unaware.”

A similar message is found in *Sūrah Luqmān*, 31:34:

Verily, with God alone rests the knowledge of when the Last Hour will come; and He [it is Who] sends down rain; and He [alone] knows what is in the wombs: whereas no one knows what he will reap tomorrow, and no one knows in what land he will die. Verily, God [alone] is All-Knowing, All-Aware.

Muslims must bind their reason to their religion; in other words, they must use their minds, but with awareness of the limits of the mind in the face of mysteries to which God has not granted us access. Otherwise, we may squander our mental energy on pursuits that yield no benefit. Muslims should inquire into those things God has urged them to gain knowledge of, and they should do so in keeping with the limits set down in the Divine Law as given in the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. Only then will the Muslim community be able to protect itself from error and achieve the good both in this life and the next.

(f) Achieve a thorough grasp of the issue at hand

Formulation of an appropriate ruling on an issue requires an accurate understanding of that issue. This understanding is built in turn on a thorough acquaintance with all its aspects, since otherwise, the ruling might be invalidated by factors that were not taken into consideration in the beginning. This is why inclusive thinking is so vital. Judging an idea, person, group or school of thought based on a partial examination will lead to a decision, attitude or ruling that is unfair in one way or another, which is in violation of what God has commanded us in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:8: "O you who have attained to faith! Be ever steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity; and never let hatred of anyone lead you into the sin of deviating from justice. Be just: this is closest to being God-conscious. And remain conscious of God: verily God is aware of all that you do."

The Qur'an speaks harshly of those who form judgments based on incomplete knowledge: "Nay, but they are bent on giving the lie to everything the wisdom whereof they do not comprehend, and ere its

Qur'anic Terminology

inner meaning has become clear to them. Even thus did those who lived before their time give the lie to the truth: and behold what happened in the end to those evildoers” (*Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:39). As for a fair and sound judgment, it is based on both complete understanding and a charitable motive. Hence, rulings set forth in the Qur'an may be followed by a statement such as: “God wants to make [all this] clear unto you, and to guide you onto the [righteous] ways of life of those who preceded you, and to turn unto you in His mercy: for God is All-Knowing, Wise” (*Sūrah al-Nisā'*, 4:26).

When a ruling is based on a thorough comprehension of the issue at hand and when it is applicable to all the forms such an issue might take, this helps to prevent unfair generalization of such a ruling to situations or people to which, or whom, it does not apply. If the cause that gave rise to some past ruling recurs in another situation, the same ruling will apply; otherwise, it will not. Therefore it is of great importance to distinguish between one situation and another lest our rulings be misapplied. A principle related to this is that only the person guilty of a crime should be punished for it. As we read in *Sūrah Fāṭir*, 35:18:

No bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden; and if one weighed down by his load calls upon [another] to help him carry it, nothing thereof may be carried [by that other], even if it be one's near of kin. Hence, you can [truly] warn only those who stand in awe of their Sustainer although He is beyond the reach of their perception, and are constant in prayer, and [know that] whoever grows in purity, attains to purity but for the good of his own self, and [that] with God is all journeys' end.

It follows, then, that if a scholar makes an error, we have no right to hold other scholars accountable for it. Similarly, if one member of a group, sect or religion commits an error or even a crime, this does not give us the right to issue a blanket judgment against all other members of this group or religion. Rather, the ruling or verdict applies only to the guilty party and to the relevant situation. *Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:110-115 makes clear that although some “followers of earlier revelation” are iniquitous,

they are not all alike: among the followers of earlier revelation there are

upright people, who recite God's messages throughout the night and prostrate themselves [before Him]. They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin the doing of what is right and forbid the doing of what is wrong, and vie with one another in doing good works: and these are among the righteous. And whatever good they do, they shall never be denied the reward thereof: for, God has full knowledge of those who are conscious of Him. (cf. *Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:40)

The Muslim should derive knowledge from the proper sources while at the same time being open to the knowledge and experience of others. Different types of knowledge are derived from different sources. Revelational knowledge, for example, is derived from Divine Revelation, while human knowledge is derived from a variety of other sources. When a question arises about this or that, the Qur'an directs the inquirers to the appropriate source of knowledge. In *Sūrah al-Anbiyā'*, 21:7, God says to the Prophet, "For [even] before your time, We never sent [as Our apostles] any but [mortal] men, whom We inspired – hence, [tell the deniers of the truth,] 'If you do not know this, ask the followers of earlier revelation.'" If the type of knowledge we are seeking has to do with the material world, then it makes most sense to seek this from those who possess this type of knowledge rather than from someone else. Similarly, the tools and methods we employ in gathering information should be suitable to the type of knowledge we are after. So long as the knowledge people possess is of benefit and its uses are in keeping with the Divine Law, we are called upon to pursue greater understanding of their cultures, their academic disciplines, and the learning they have accumulated over the centuries so that we, too, can spread blessing through the creative use of information and its applications.

In *Sūrah al-Kahf*, 18:65-66, we read about how Moses, encountering a servant of God who had been given special wisdom (identified in commentaries as Khidr), asked if he could follow this servant and learn from him even though he (Khidr) was less well-known, and possibly of lower rank, than was Moses. Similarly, we find Adam's son Cain expressing the need to learn from the example of a crow, even though a bird might be considered a lower form of life than a human being. After killing his brother Abel, Cain saw a raven which showed him how to

Qur'anic Terminology

bury his brother, and he learned from the raven's concrete example. We read in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:31:

Thereupon God sent forth a raven which scratched the earth, to show him how he might conceal the nakedness of his brother's body. [And Cain] cried out: "Oh, woe is me! Am I then too weak to do what this raven did, and to conceal the nakedness of my brother's body?" – and was thereupon smitten with remorse.

We also find that the Queen of Sheba, before surrendering herself to the one God worshipped by Solomon, was possessed of a profound wisdom which God Himself affirms in the Qur'an. The Qur'an quotes her as saying, "Verily, whenever kings enter a country they corrupt it, and turn the noblest of its people into the most abject. And this is the way they [always] behave" (*Sūrah al-Naml*, 27:34).

When gleaning information from others, we need to distinguish between what constitutes 'cultural invasion' and cultural exchange. The fear of subjecting themselves to cultural hegemony by others has prevented many Muslims from benefitting from sound knowledge and exploring the horizons that would have enabled them to overcome backwardness of various sorts and contribute to positive, constructive change in their societies. However, a truly progressive scientific approach is prepared to glean knowledge from whatever source necessary so long as the knowledge it contains is accurate and lends itself to the service of the good, and this regardless of the character of the person or group that serves as this source. As we have seen, the Qur'an calls upon Muslims to derive benefit from earlier revelations by affirming whatever knowledge they supply provided that it is in congruence with the Islamic message. Some of the contents of earlier revelations, according to Islamic teaching, have suffered corruption, as a result of which discernment is in order so as to make it possible to adopt what is still sound in these messages and to reject what has been corrupted or falsified. Muslims are to study, analyze and critique the contents of earlier revelations in such a way that they draw from them what is good, true and beneficial.

The Qur'an was revealed both to complete and to abrogate previous revelations. God tells the Prophet in *Sūrah al-Mā'idah*, 5:48, "And

unto you [O Prophet] have We vouchsafed this divine writ, setting forth the truth, confirming the truth of whatever there still remains of earlier revelations and determining what is true therein.” *Sūrah al-Aḥqāf*, 46:12 reads, “And yet, before this there was the revelation of Moses, a guide and a [sign of God’s] grace; and this [Qur’an] is a divine writ confirming the truth [of the Torah] in the Arabic tongue, to warn those who are bent on evildoing, and [to bring] a glad tiding to the doers of good.” In the same vein, *Sūrah al-Ṣaff*, 61:6 reads, “And [this happened, too,] when Jesus, the son of Mary, said: ‘O children of Israel! Behold, I am an apostle of God unto you, [sent] to confirm the truth of whatever there still remains of the Torah, and to give [you] the glad tiding of an apostle who shall come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad.’” This passage is a confirmation that successive revelations represent an accumulation of knowledge, with the later building upon what was left by the earlier. Similarly, it illustrates the phenomenon whereby the Qur’an confirms all of the knowledge that was brought in earlier times through divine revelation because such knowledge is intended for everyone. Islam’s revealed precepts and doctrines, being marked by the highest levels of certainty, stand in judgment over other teachings and serve as a criterion by which we are to judge the truth of other revelations and sources of knowledge.

This is the approach that should be taken to the heritage passed down to us by bygone nations and civilizations, as well as to our own Islamic scientific heritage. Our Islamic academic heritage undoubtedly contains both truth and error, since it consists of human interpretations. Such interpretations, the aim of which was to arrive at truth, left a massive body of writings that have both benefited and burdened later generations. Our job is to sift through what we have; whatever we find to be in agreement with the revealed message, we should accept, and whatever conflicts with it, we should set aside.