

## ‘Ilm in the Qur’an

‘*ILM* IS ONE of the most frequently occurring terms in the Qur’an, as are derivatives of other roots denoting similar or related concepts. ‘*Ilm*, generally translated as ‘knowledge’, is the only thing God commanded the Prophet to pray to receive more of. Arriving at a definition of ‘*ilm* requires a discussion of numerous themes, including both the lexical meaning of the term ‘*ilm* and its customary uses. We first come to a discussion of the word’s lexical definition and the features that set it apart from other terms within the same semantic field, as well as the ways in which it is linked to such terms in various contexts.

### FIRST: THE DEFINITION AND TYPES OF ‘*Ilm*

#### 1) *The lexical definition of ‘ilm*

‘*Ilm* is the opposite of *jahl*, or ignorance. It refers to perception or knowledge in general terms. ‘*Ilm* might also be defined as the confident belief that something is as it truly is. Philologists have proposed that the word ‘*ilm* derives its meaning from the word ‘*alāmah*, meaning sign, symbol or signal. The term *ma‘lam* (plural, *ma‘ālim*) refers to a signpost, guidepost, landmark or distinguishing feature of a place or an object. Unlike most other verbal nouns, the word ‘*ilm* can be pluralized (‘*ulūm*), in which connection it denotes a field of study or academic discipline. The active participle ‘*ālim* (plural, ‘*ulamā*’) refers to a scientist (literally, a ‘knower’ or ‘one who knows’), while the related word ‘*alīm* means knowledgeable and, when referring to God, All-Knowing (cf. *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:101: “He alone knows everything” – *wa huwa bi kulli shay’in ‘alīm*). The verb ‘*alimāya‘lamu* (which can take a direct object or be followed by the preposition *bi*) means to be aware of, to sense, to know, to master, to comprehend, or to be certain of. Speaking of the person who turns his back on truth, *Sūrah al-‘Alaq*, 96:14 asks,

“Does he, then, not know (*alam ya‘lam*) that God sees [all] (*anna Allāh yarā*)?” Used in the sense of ‘distinguish’, the verb appears in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:220, which reminds us that God “knows the person who means mischief from the person who means good” (*ya‘lamu al-muḥsid min al-muḥliḥ*).

## 2) *The usage-based definition*

Most definitions of *‘ilm* identify it as a certain belief that corresponds to reality, a definitive judgment that is not subject to doubt. All such definitions distinguish between *‘ilm* and *takhayyul*, that is, fantasy or imagination. *‘Ilm* is accurate to the extent that it corresponds to actual reality. The definition of *‘ilm* as a perception of something as it actually is includes two possibilities. In one of these, it refers to a perception of the nature or essence of something, and in the other, it refers to a judgment regarding the presence or absence of an attribute in someone or something. The first usage is illustrated in the statement, “you may not know them, [but] God knows them (*lā ta‘lamūnahum, Allāhu ya‘lamuhum*)” (*Sūrah al-Anfāl*, 8:60). As for the second type of usage, it takes two direct objects, as in the phrase, “and if you have thus ascertained that they are believers... (*in ‘alimtumūhunna mu‘mināt*)” (*Sūrah al-Mumtaḥanah*, 60:10). Al-Jurjānī defined *‘ilm* as “a certain belief that corresponds to reality.” God refers to Himself in the Qur’an as *al-‘Ālim* (the One who knows) and *al-‘Alīm* (the All-Knowing). The Qur’an attributes the verb *‘alima/ya‘lamu* to God, and describes God as possessing *‘ilm*. God is also described as *‘allām al-ghuyūb* (*Sūrah al-Mā‘idah*, 5:109), which means that nothing is hidden from His knowledge or perception: He knows what was, what is, what will be, what is not, and how things that are not would be if they were. God is aware of the faith of believers, the unbelief of unbelievers, and the sins of the disobedient. However, God’s knowledge of what people will do in the future does not rob of their freedom; hence, each individual remains responsible for his or her actions, words and beliefs. God’s *‘ilm* is the cause behind the existence of the world (*al-‘ālam*), which is, in turn, the cause behind the *‘ilm* of human beings. God’s *‘ilm* encompasses all aspects of existence, both outward (*ẓāhir*) and inward (*bāṭin*). Being eternal, God’s knowledge is not dependent on events in time.

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Nor is it acquired through the senses or reasoning as is the knowledge of human beings.

### 3) *Divisions of 'ilm*

Scholars have divided 'ilm into two categories. The first is that of 'ilm *qadīm*, that is, timeless or eternal knowledge, which can be predicated of God alone. The second is 'ilm *ḥadīth*, or temporal knowledge, which is predicated of creatures. Temporal knowledge is further divided into the dual categories of intuitive, which refers to the kind of elementary knowledge that one gains through one or more of the five senses and which requires no conscious thought or reflection; and acquired knowledge, which is obtained via conscious mental effort and a deliberate learning process. This is the import behind the saying of the Prophet: *innamā al-'ilmu bi al-ta'allum*, "Knowledge comes through learning." The differences among individuals with respect to acquired knowledge are alluded to in *Sūrah al-Ra'd*, 13:17, which states that God "sends down water from the skies, and the channels flow, each according to its measure." In other words, people vary in their God-given ability to take in and 'channel' information and knowledge. The type of knowledge classed above as 'ilm *ḍarūrī*, or intuitive knowledge, is available to all able-bodied and able-minded individuals. The laws God has revealed to human beings over the ages have been revealed on the level of intuitive knowledge, that is, in language that is accessible to people of all levels of intelligence. For this reason, all people of mature mind are equally accountable for their response to the basic requirements of their religion. As for the minute details concerning the components and conditions for acts of worship, grammatical questions, analysis of linguistic structures and the like, these belong to the category of acquired knowledge, or 'ilm *muktasab*.

Lastly, 'ilm is divided into the dual categories of theoretical (*naẓarī*) and practical ('*amalī*). Theoretical knowledge is knowledge that, once it has been acquired on the level of understanding, is complete. This category includes knowledge of physical realities such as scientific facts. As for practical knowledge, it is knowledge which, in order to be complete, must be applied in practice; this category includes, for example, knowledge of rites of worship.

SECOND: LEVELS AND CRITERIA OF *ʿIlm*1) *Levels of ʿilm*

The outside world (*al-ʿālam al-khāriḡ*) is what makes *ʿilm* possible. Since the senses are the only means we have of communicating with the tangible realm, the first stage of accessing knowledge is that of sensation (*iḡsās*), which is the interaction of the senses with tangible entities through the reception of data from sensory stimuli. This sensory data is transferred to the psyche in an ascending progression from simple, primary receptive processes to something more complex. This is followed by *idrāk*, or cognition, which involves a representation of the external reality to the perceiver. This representation is stored in the mind; this is then followed by *tadhakkur*, or recollection, in which the individual attempts to recover on the conscious level what remains of the data stored in the previous stage. When the desired images are restored to the conscious mind there occurs a process of *fahm*, or understanding, which is generally associated with a word or expression you have heard someone utter.

A further level of understanding might be referred to as *fiqh*, which involves a comprehension of what the person addressing you intends through what he or she is saying to you. Beyond this we have a level referred to as *dirāyah*, or cognizance, which is the knowledge that results from repeated introductions to the subject at hand. *Yaqīn*, or complete certainty, applies to the state in which you have learned something so thoroughly that no other possibility is imaginable to you. The term *dhīhn*, usually rendered simply as mind or intellect, refers to the willingness to acquire knowledge one does not yet have, while *fikr* refers to the mental process of shifting back and forth between concepts and ideas on one hand, and the phenomena, principles or facts that demonstrate the validity of such concepts and ideas on the other. As for *ḡads*, sometimes translated as ‘intuition’, it refers to what distinguishes the act of thinking. The term *dhakāʿ*, usually rendered as ‘intelligence’, refers to the power of intuition, while *fiṡnah*, or perceptiveness, refers to the ability to attend to the content one needs to know; and *kays*, or ‘subtlety’, is the ability to deduce what is most useful or beneficial. The term *raʿy* refers to the process of conjuring and

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reflecting on the premises one has been presented with, while *tabayyun* refers to the process of arriving at clarity concerning something that was ambiguous or obscure. The term *istibṣār*, similarly, refers to knowledge gained through reflection, while the term *iḥāṭah* refers to a thorough grasp of something from all angles. The term *ẓann* refers to the process of adopting a position not as a certainty but, rather, with an awareness that there are two sides to the issue at hand, neither of which is clearly superior to the other. And lastly, the term *ʿaql* refers to an essence by means of which you perceive intangible realities through the mediation of sensory perception.

Ibn al-Qayyim proposed another division of the levels of *ʿilm* which begins with the higher levels and descends to the lower. The order in which he lists these levels is as follows: (1) The level at which God speaks directly to His servant, unmediated, when the servant is in a state of wakefulness. This highest level of knowledge is spoken of in *Sūrah al-Nisā'* 4:164, which tells us that “God spoke His word unto Moses.” (2) The level of revelation reserved for God’s prophets. God told the Prophet Muhammad, “Behold, We have inspired you just as We inspired Noah and all the prophets after him” (*Sūrah al-Nisā'*, 4:163). (3) The level that involves the sending of an angelic messenger to a human being to convey what God has commanded him to convey. These first three levels of *ʿilm* are reserved for God’s prophets alone. (4) The level of inspiration at which it is as though God were addressing someone in actual words. This level is lower than that bestowed on prophets and apostles, which involves the giving of a new law of divine origin. The Prophet attributed this level of knowledge to ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, saying, “Among the nations that came before you there were inspired individuals. If anyone in our community fits this description, it is ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.” (5) The level that involves conveying understanding to others. *Sūrah al-Anbiyā'*, 21:78-79 speaks of this level of knowledge, telling how God gave special understanding to Solomon in relation to a case that was brought before him. (6) The level of general explication. This level involves explicating the truth and distinguishing it from falsehood based on proofs, evidence and signs so that truth becomes visible to the heart just as physical entities are visible to the eye. This level constitutes the evidence on the basis of which

God will call us to account on the Day of Resurrection. Until or unless this evidence reaches people, God will not chastise them or cause them to go astray. *Sūrah al-Tawbah*, 9:115 assures us that “God would never – after having invited them to His guidance – condemn people for going astray before He has made [entirely] clear to them of what they should beware.” (7) The level of knowledge that involves special guidance of some sort. This guidance is generally marked by providential leading, God-given success, chosenness, and protection from disappointment and betrayal. This phenomenon is alluded to in *Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ*, 28:56, where God tells the Prophet, “You cannot guide aright everyone you love: but it is God who guides...” (cf. *Sūrah al-Nahl*, 16:37). (8) The level at which one is caused to hear what God wants one to hear. *Sūrah al-Anfāl*, 8:23 affirms that “if God had seen any good in them, He would certainly have made them hear...” (cf. *Sūrah Fāṭir*, 35:22). (9) The level of enlightenment (*ilhām*). *Sūrah al-Shams*, 91:7-8 tells us that God has “enlightened” the soul concerning its iniquitous tendencies as well as its capacity for God-consciousness (*alhamahā fujūrahā wa taqwāhā*). (10) The level that involves receiving a truthful vision from God. The beginning of the divine revelations which the Prophet received are said to have begun with a “truthful vision” (*ru’yā ṣādiqah*).

## 2) *The criteria of sound ‘ilm*

As was noted earlier in this discussion, ethical rectitude in relation to *‘ilm*, however necessary it is, is not sufficient; by the same token, academic discipline and rigor are not sufficient by themselves, since no amount of rigor or accuracy will render research acceptable if it conflicts with recognized standards of virtue and morality. The most important criteria by which one must abide in relation to *‘ilm* include the following:

**Objectivity.** Scientific theories and hypotheses must be based on thorough research derived from definitive, demonstrable evidence. Researchers must distance themselves from personal emotions and sensitivities, especially when studying the humanities and social sciences, which are affected significantly by individual interpretations. Objectivity is a fundamental measure of one’s ability to arrive at truth and to be fair in one’s judgments.

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**Academic integrity.** This criterion concerns itself with the protection of human rights on all levels. It is expressed in *Sūrah al-Shu'arā'*, 26:183, which commands us: "Do not deprive people of what is rightfully theirs; and do not act wickedly on earth by spreading corruption." One aspect of academic integrity is the practice of giving credit to those from whom one has received information and/or whose research has paved the way for one's own. Another aspect of academic integrity is complete truthfulness, which is a fundamental expression of one's respect for self and others. The Qur'an is replete with verses that address the matter of truthfulness. We read, for example, in *Sūrah al-Tawbah*, 9:119, "O you who have attained to faith! Remain conscious of God, and be among those who are true to their word!" Similarly, *Sūrah al-Zumar*, 39:33 identifies those who bring the truth and accept the truth wholeheartedly with the truly God-conscious. Hence, truthfulness is intimately linked with consciousness of God and faith.

**The ethics of polite disagreement.** God commands us in *Sūrah al-Nahl*, 16:125 to invite others to the path of God "with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner." The practice of arguing "in the most kindly manner" requires that one not be rude or harsh in dealing with others. The Prophet himself was reminded that if he had treated his followers harshly, they would have scattered from around him when God addressed him, saying: "it was by God's grace that you dealt gently with your followers: for if you had been harsh and hard of heart, they would indeed have broken away from you" (*Sūrah Āl 'Imrān*, 3:159). When discussion and debate are undertaken for the purpose of bringing benefit and communicating truth, there is no place for belittlement and provocation of one's opponent, or attempts to impugn his or her motives. On the contrary, we should commend our opponent on his or her learning and accomplishments, and express ourselves politely and gently. The Qur'an forbids us to goad others. *Sūrah al-Isrā'*, 17:53 reads, "Tell My servants that they should speak in the most kindly manner [unto those who do not share their beliefs]: verily, Satan is always ready to stir up discord between people..." The prophets are known to have been considerate and tactful in their dealings with others, including even their mortal

foes, as they set forth the truth. God commanded Moses and Aaron, “go forth, both of you, unto Pharaoh: for, verily, he has transgressed all bounds of equity! But speak unto him in a mild manner, so that he might bethink himself or [at least] be filled with apprehension” (*Sūrah Tāhā*, 20:43).

### Putting Evidence before Theorization and Rule Formation

Verifying one’s sources and quoting from them correctly will not be sufficient if those sources are themselves unreliable. Consequently, the Qur’anic approach to research is to demand evidence for the accuracy of whatever claim is being presented. One of the marks of those committed to the pursuit of truth is that they do not formulate a belief until after examining the evidence. As for those in the grip of falsehood, they base their belief on either their own whims and fancies, or on what they have been taught to believe by others. They then go in search of evidence that will lend their beliefs an appearance of validity and legitimacy. In this way they attempt to evade having to confront the truth and receive true guidance.

Evidence may be derived from the Qur’an and the Sunnah, from rational argumentation, or from sensory data. Each issue and question being examined calls for specific methods, approaches, and types of evidence; hence, the evidence or procedure appropriate to one question or field of study might not be appropriate for another. In *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:148 God commanded 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.’”

It should be remembered that evidence goes by many names in the Qur’an. In the verse just cited, for example, it is referred to as ‘knowledge’ (*‘ilm*). Elsewhere it is referred to as ‘proof’ (*burhān*; cf. *Sūrah al-Mu‘minūn*, 23:117), for example, ‘authority’ (*sulṭān*; cf. *Sūrah Yūnus*, 10:68), and ‘argument’ (*ḥujjah*; cf. *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:83), ‘sign’ (*āyah*; cf. *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:211), evidence of the truth (*bayyīnah*; cf. *Sūrah al-Aḥqāf*, 46:7), and ‘means of insight’ (*baṣā’ir*; cf. *Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:104).

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### Careful Use of Scientific language

A researcher must have a good grasp of the terminology relating to his or her field of specialization given the impact it has on people's attitudes and feelings. Technical terms come into being in order to meet a need; then, given their ability to influence people's understanding of things, they evolve the potential to bring either benefit or harm. Technical terms are keys to knowledge; as such, they can exert either a positive or a negative impact on people's thinking and behavior. A single term can convey several different ideas combined, some of them explicit, others implicit, some conscious, others subliminal. A given word may direct the mind toward meanings with which it has been previously associated while, at the same, giving these meanings new associations. When a term is used, it comes embedded in a whole host of related circumstances and expectations, thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears, times and places, specializations and civilizations, all of which help determine its import. Hence, anyone who attempts to understand it outside of its context is bound to fall into error and confusion.

### The Right Fit Between Intellectual Capacities and One's Field of Study

The tools of knowledge available to human beings have limited capacities and a finite scope. There is, for example, a range of frequencies that the human ear is unable to detect. Human beings also have a limited range of vision; there are colors that the human eye cannot distinguish, and images too tiny or far away to be seen with the naked eye. The mind, too, is limited in what it can absorb and comprehend. Hence, another rule of academic pursuit is not to delve into matters that are beyond one's capacity to understand thoroughly, since to do so would be waste of time and energy. On this point we read in *Sūrah al-A'raf*, 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.”

### THIRD: THE QUR’AN’S COMPREHENSIVE VIEW OF *‘Ilm*

As presented in the pages of the Qur’an, *‘ilm* encompasses both this world and the next. It concerns itself with the questions that occupy us as human beings, most particularly how the creation came into existence, how it has developed, and the end it can anticipate; the oneness of God; and the universe in all its fullness – Earth, the heavenly realm, the stars, the planets. The Qur’an calls upon its readers to reflect on these cosmic phenomena, saying, “He it is who has set up for you the stars so that you might be guided by them in the midst of the deep darkness of land and sea: clearly, indeed, have We spelled out these messages unto people of [innate] knowledge!” (*Sūrah al-An‘ām*, 6:97).

The comprehensive nature of the Qur’anic concept of *‘ilm* manifests itself with special clarity in *Sūrah al-‘Alaq*, 96:1, where God commands, “Read in the name of your Sustainer, who has created...” When read in its broadest sense, this verse may be understood to be addressed to all human beings – believer and unbeliever, righteous and unrighteous. As al-Shawkānī notes in his commentary on this verse, the verb “read” requires that there be something which “is read.” However, the object of the command to “read” is not mentioned, which signals that it might include any number of things.

The act of reading being spoken of here begins with God’s command; the means by which it takes place is provided by God, and the end, or purpose, for which it is done is centered in God. This being the case, it excludes racist, bigoted purposes, blind adherence to tradition, and unthinking prejudice in favor of a particular race, ethnic group, school or philosophy. The act of reading as presented here takes on a universal dimension, since the message we are being instructed to read and deliver to others is addressed to the entire world and deals with all of people’s needs both in this life and the next.

The One who commands us to read is Our Creator, our Sustainer, and our Lord. Being intimately familiar both with what He has created and what is best for that creation, God is supremely qualified to determine what approach we will take to this reading of ours. A thoughtful

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reading of the Qur'an reveals that the *ilm* it speaks of revolves around three principle themes. The first of these is the oneness of God in His lordship and sovereignty, His names and His attributes, and the worship-related questions that follow from these. The second theme is the Cosmos, and the divine wisdom and mysteries it manifests. And the third theme is the peoples of the world and the ways in which they relate to the Creator and the creation.

Each of these themes is associated with specialized fields of study. The first has given rise to the fields of Islamic theology and jurisprudence in their respective specializations and branches; the second, to the natural sciences; and the third, to the humanities. The interrelated dimensions of existence as presented and treated in the Qur'an yield an inclusive picture of *ilm*. This conceptualization of *ilm* leads neither to an atheistic materialism, nor to a utopian, earth-denying asceticism. Rather, it affirms a moderate stance that strikes a balance between these two extremes. As we are told in *Sūrah al-Mulk*, 67:15, God “has made the earth easy to live upon: go about, then, in all its regions, and partake of the sustenance which He provides: but [always bear in mind that] unto Him you shall be resurrected.”

### FOURTH: CATEGORIES OF *Ma'rifah*

The Qur'an calls upon Muslims to think scientifically about all aspects of life, both in this world and in the next. Given this inclusive understanding of *ilm*, some scholars have divided it into three categories: (1) theology and jurisprudence, (2) the natural sciences, and (3) the humanities.

**Theology and jurisprudence.** Theology and jurisprudence treat the principles and rites of the religion, that is, doctrine and forms of worship. The purpose of these areas of study is to enable Muslims to understand their purpose and end in life, and how to relate to their Lord and to the rest of creation. God declares in *Sūrah al-Dhāriyāt*, 51:56, “I have not created the invisible beings and men to any end other than that they may [know and] worship Me.” In order to achieve this purpose, we need to understand the tasks before us, including the commands and prohibitions we have received from God. These

commands and prohibitions then need to be applied in a studied, scientific manner; as a consequence, there are numerous branches of Islamic legal, theological and doctrinal studies. These include the field of jurisprudence, which is the study of Islamic Law and the ways in which rulings are derived from its foundations and principles in relation to forms of worship, financial transactions, personal transactions, penalties for violations of the law, and so on.

**The natural sciences.** A pursuit common to all nations and civilizations, the natural sciences are related to the way in which we manage our earthly affairs. The knowledge gleaned through the natural sciences is cumulative; hence, those who come later build on what was discovered by those who came before them. New discoveries and accomplishments in the realm of the natural sciences provide us with additional evidence of God's greatness and bounty toward us; they also provide a foundation on which to build an advancing civilization. Every Qur'anic command to investigate or reflect on plant life, animal life, the heavenly realms, the earth, or ourselves is implicitly related to the natural sciences. Indeed, human beings' ability to exercise their God-given powers on earth, be they economic, financial, industrial, cultural or scientific, is dependent on the knowledge they acquire through such disciplines and their practical applications.

Muslims' efforts to spread the message of Islam and establish God's religion on earth do not take place in some fantasy realm but, rather, in the context of our earthly existence and our relations with other communities. When Muslims are backward and decadent, this does nothing to promote the Islamic message. The importance of seeking not simply the world to come, but the good of the present world, is affirmed in *Sūrah al-Qaṣaṣ*, 28:77, where God commands us to "seek...[the good of] the life to come, without forgetting your [rightful] share in this world." We seek our "rightful share in this world" by, among other things, studying the various facets of the material world so as to put them to the most beneficial uses for all.

**The humanities.** The field known as "the humanities" encompasses a number of disciplines, including Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, History, Economics, and others. The Qur'an has provided us with definitive answers concerning the origin and nature of human

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beings, the purpose for our existence, freedom and responsibility, social relations, human interaction with the natural environment and its effects, and the extent and limitations of human power and authority over the rest of the world. Hence, fields of study such as those listed above were not classified separately in the early days of Islam. In the modern West, by contrast, these topics have become the subjects of distinct academic disciplines.

When looking at studies done in the fields of Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, History, Economics, and related areas, we should bear in mind that what is beneficial for human beings in one place or society is not necessarily beneficial for them in some other location or community. Studies done in a Western setting may not be applicable in an Eastern setting, and vice-versa. No sociological, psychological, or economic study should be taken out of context; rather, its results and conclusions should be examined with a view to the cultural, historical, political, religious, and socioeconomic milieu in which the study took place, and any extrapolations made from it should be made with care.

### FIFTH: A COMPARISON BETWEEN *Ma<sup>ʿ</sup>rifah* AND *ʿIlm*

In order to determine the precise distinctions between *ma<sup>ʿ</sup>rifah* and *ʿilm*, we must delve into scholars' discussions of these terms, which touch on matters both linguistic and doctrinal. Given the fact that scholars tend to use terms arbitrarily and in the service of their own ideas, we will need to trace these terms back to their linguistic roots so as to define them accurately and assign them to the correct semantic fields. *ʿIlm* is characterized by differing degrees of certainty and uncertainty; moreover, it involves a thought process that requires both intelligence and presence of mind. *ʿIlm* might be superficial and abstract; conversely, it might be thorough, detailed and concrete. For this reason, there are numerous words that are used more or less synonymously with both *ʿilm* and *ma<sup>ʿ</sup>rifah*. Each of these synonyms is related in one way to knowledge as a whole, and in another, to a specialized niche of some sort. In what follows we will attempt to trace the most important Qur'anic synonyms for these two terms and identify the features that distinguish each one from the rest.

## Lexical and Usage-Related Differences

In order to get a clearer picture of the relationship between the terms *maʿrifah* and *ʿilm*, we will need to examine each one's lexical definition and usages, and then compare them on this basis.

(1) *Lexical differences*

The term *ʿilm* came to be applied to certain kinds of knowledge based on the meaning of the word *ʿalāmah*, which refers to a sign or signal that points to or identifies something or someone. As for the term *maʿrifah*, it is used primarily in contrast to the word *nakirah*, which refers to something or someone unknown or unidentified. Similarly, the word *ʿirfān*, meaning recognition or acknowledgment, is used in contrast to *jahl*, meaning ignorance or lack of awareness, while the verb *taʿarrafa*, when used with a direct object, means to explore or discover. *Maʿrifah* refers to knowledge that follows upon an absence of knowledge, either because one had never known about the entity in question, or because one had once known about it but had then forgotten what one knew. In the second situation, it would be as though the information one once had had disappeared from one's mind, but was then brought up from the subconscious. As for the verb *ʿarafalyaʿrifu*, it takes a single direct object. One might say, for example, *ʿaraftu al-dār*, "I recognized the house." The verb is used in a similar sense in *Sūrah Yūsuf*, 12:58, where we are told that while Joseph recognized his brothers "he knew them" (*ʿarafahum*) after their long separation, they did not recognize him (*wa hum lahu munkirūn*). The verb *ʿalimal yaʿlamu*, by contrast, requires two direct objects when used in the sense of recognition. As we saw earlier, it is used in this manner in *Sūrah al-Mumtaḥanah*, 60:10, "if you recognize them as believers... (*in ʿalimtumūhunna muʿmināt*)."

The point of similarity between the verbs *maʿrifah* and *ʿilm* is that both refer to a kind of knowledge and awareness. *Maʿrifah*, however, has an active and personal dimension that is not present in the concept of *ʿilm*, which is more purely theoretical. So, for example, it might be said *maʿrifat Allāh* (the knowledge of God) refers to a confirmed *ʿilm* of God coupled with action that is a reflection of this *ʿilm*.

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### (2) Usage-related differences

Some view *maʿrifah* as more specialized or specific than *ʿilm*, in that *maʿrifah* refers to an awareness of the distinctive nature of something as contrasted with other entities. The term *maʿrifah* denotes the act of distinguishing someone or something known from someone or something unknown, while the term *ʿilm* does not. *Maʿrifah* also refers to a knowledge or awareness at which one arrives via a process of thinking and reflection, and is used to refer to the recognition or knowledge of something or someone whose outer effects can be perceived, but whose inner essence cannot be known. Thus one might say, *ʿaraftu Allāh*, “I know/came to know God.” One might also say, *ʿaraftu zaydan*, “I recognized Zayd,” without meaning that one knows Zayd’s inner essence.

*Maʿrifah* is further distinguished from *ʿilm* by the fact that whereas *maʿrifah* is used in contradistinction to a lack of recognition (*inkār*) or ingratitude (*juḥūd*), *ʿilm* is used in contrast to ignorance (*jahl*) and caprice or lust (*hawā*). *Sūrah al-Māʿidah*, 5:83 speaks of people’s eyes overflowing with tears when they hear God’s word “for they recognise the truth (*mimmā ʿarafū min al-ḥaqq*),” while we read in *Sūrah al-Baqarah*, 2:146 that the Jews and Christians of the Prophet’s day “know it [the truth] as they know their own children” (*yaʿrifūnahū kamā yaʿrifūna abnāʾahum*).” As for the verb *ʿalima/yaʿlamu*, it is used more frequently to refer to knowledge of facts, as in the Qur’an’s exhortation in *Sūrah Muḥammad*, 47:19: “Know, then, [O man,] that there is no deity save God (*faʿlam annahu lā ilāha illā Allāh*).”