

The Islamic Sciences And The Philosophy Of Science

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How do theories in the Islamic sciences grow, develop, and change? What sorts of questions are answered through the development of theoretical religious sciences?

One of the topics currently of great interest among the scholars and researchers of Qom is about whether Western philosophy of science can be used to help understand the structure of religious knowledge. From the period between the world wars, when views about the philosophy of science were presented by members of the Vienna Circle, until the present day, numerous philosophical views have been presented about the empirical sciences. These views are designed for several purposes:

- (1) To Explain How And Why Scientific Theories Change And Occasionally Undergo “Revolutions”;
- (2) To Account For How Scientific Theories Are Used To Explain Phenomena;
- (3) To Show How Theories Are Confirmed And Repudiated;
- (4) To Examine The Conditions Under Which A Scientific Theory May Be Considered Rational; And
- (5) To Investigate The Question Of Whether The Acceptance Of A Theory May Justify Beliefs About Non–Observable Theoretical Entities, Such As Electrons And Quarks.

This list does not exhaust the topics of the philosophy of science, but it gives one an idea of some of the more important topics of discussion.

On the other hand, a number of Western philosophers of religion have sought to utilize the views developed in the philosophy of science in order to support their own claims about the rationality and justification of religious beliefs. For example, some have argued that just as physicists are justified in their beliefs about electrons and quarks because of the acceptability of physical theories, likewise religious people may be justified in their beliefs about God and angels because of the acceptability of theological theories.

Islamic teachings are generally divided into those pertaining to beliefs and those regarding values. This gives rise to three religious sciences: *Kalam*, *Akhlaq*, and *Fiqh*, the first of which expounds Islamic doctrine and the second and third of which pertain to values. Within these three sciences, some matters are very firm and uncontroversial, while others are disputed among scholars.

In addition to Islamic law, ethics, and dogmatic theology, however, there are a number of other Islamic sciences that include *Tafsir*, or the interpretation of the Qur'an, *Usul*, or the principles that should guide the derivation of Islamic law from its sources, various branches of the study of Hadith and history, and Islamic philosophy and *Irfan*, in both of which rational proofs are given to support some basic Islamic beliefs, such as the oneness of God and teachings about the divine attributes.

So, there are Islamic sciences in which the fundamental teachings of Islam are presented, and there are also secondary Islamic sciences designed to help with the understanding of the fundamental practical and theoretical teachings, as well as sciences that are considered prerequisites for further understanding. In addition to the fundamental teachings, parts of Islamic ethics, *kalam*, and *fiqh* may be considered more speculative, and in the other Islamic sciences, such as philosophy, *irfan*, *usul*, and history, theories are elaborated about which there is much discussion. There are also attempts to apply the teachings of Islam to various areas and to develop theories of Islamic economics, Islamic governance, metaphysics, etc.

In discussions of epistemological issues in Islamic philosophy, the focus of attention is on those fundamental beliefs that can be demonstrated by sound rational argument. Propositions and concepts are analyzed and evaluated. Less attention has been given to theoretical knowledge. It is in the area of speculative or theoretical knowledge that the study of the philosophy of science may help us to understand how the theoretical Islamic sciences compare with the empirical sciences.

Questions that are being asked by scholars today about the theoretical Islamic sciences include the following: How do theories in the Islamic sciences grow, develop, and change? What sorts of questions are answered through the development of theoretical religious sciences? How do religious explanations given with reference to the theories of the Islamic sciences differ from the sorts of explanations to be found through the study of other sciences?

What role do the fundamental teachings of Islam play in the speculative Islamic sciences? How are theories in the Islamic sciences to be evaluated? To what extent may sciences such as Islamic history and *irfan* be considered rational? To what extent must Western philosophy of science be modified to deal adequately with the Islamic sciences?

These are just some of the questions that Muslim scholars are beginning to grapple with as they engage in reflections on the religious sciences and begin to formulate philosophies of those sciences.

Topic Tags:

[Islamic Sciences](#) [6]

[Science and Islam](#) [7]

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