

History of Islam

An encyclopedia of Islamic history

A Spiritual Perspective on Knowledge

A Spiritual Perspective on Knowledge

Prof. Dr. Nazeer Ahmed, PhD

“It is not the body that contains the spirit; it is the spirit that contains the body”, Shaykh Nazim al Haqqani al Qubrisi

In the previous chapters, we have shown that in the world of secular “science” there is no love, no passion, no color and no emotion. This is because the seat of all knowledge and all emotions, namely the soul, is absent from the “scientific method”.

By contrast, the spiritual approach to knowledge integrates the body, mind, soul and the spirit. This approach is summarized here as a set of five principles.

Principle 1: Man has been taught the nature of all things.

*“And he taught Adam the Names (attributes, nature)”
The Qur’an (2: 31)*

The soul is the mirror of the cosmos. It is the seat of all cognition and emotions. When it is polished it reflects the true nature of things so that they become “known” to human consciousness. God created the human genre, bestowed upon it a soul and taught mankind the “Names”. The Names here refer to the Divine Names which reflect their attributes on all of creation. By inference they connote the names and nature of all things.

Consider the lush green color of a pasture on a beautiful spring morning. The color is neither in the pasture nor in the eyeball. It is in the soul. The pasture does not “reveal” its color to a bull because the bull is colorblind. It does not “reveal” itself to a mountain because the mountain is without cognizance. Man recognizes the color because his soul reflects that color.

Similar is the case with our senses of hearing, taste and touch. These senses are a part of our nature. We “hear” the *muezzin’s* call to prayer because hearing is inherent to the nature of man. They are faculties of our soul. The dirt and the stones hear the same sound but recognize it not. We feel the pangs of love because the innermost recesses of the soul know what love is. We cry because the soul feels pain.

Man becomes conscious of the nature of things through relationships. The cosmos, of which man is a part, offers physical, human and spiritual relationships. Man interacts with the cosmos in space and time and gains knowledge of the nature of things through the relationships that permeate it. He looks at the heavens, observes their motions, extends his observations through reasoning and strives to comprehend the laws of celestial mechanics. Then, in a moment of illumination, his soul remembers the laws governing the movement of the stars. It is neither observation nor reason which gave him this knowledge. Divine Love had already bestowed that knowledge upon the soul at its pristine creation. All that man did was to regain consciousness of this knowledge through his hard work and struggle.

When a mother picks up her infant and showers it with love and affection, the love is neither in the child nor in the mother. It is in the soul and the soul is indestructible. The baby will grow up one day and go away to a far off land but the mother's love will endure. This is expressed in the symbolic language of the Qur'an:

"And the mystic ties between Parent and Child..."
The Qur'an (90:3)

Observe that the spiritual framework maintains the absolute sovereignty of God. It also makes the world "knowable" in all its human dimensions of emotions and feelings. Man is not autonomous. By himself he cannot learn anything. What man knows he learned from the Creator.

This framework also affirms the existential potential of man. Existentialism means existence precedes essence. Knowledge separates man from the beast. Man is created from clay but has the potential to know the nature of things. It is a uniquely human attribute. Nothing else in creation has this potential. Men and women are born with it. It is up to them to realize their potential through struggle and hard work.

The Qur'anic vision of knowledge breaks the endless logjam of before and after and subject and object. It affirms that consciousness is a gift bestowed by the Creator upon mankind. We cannot gain consciousness through observation and reason alone. No amount of data gathering or reasoning can *prove* that a horse is a horse. We can measure the size of a horse, assert that it has four legs, a tail, two eyes and runs at twenty miles an hour. We can look inside its body and analyze all of its organs and catalogue them very carefully. But all of this information still does not add up to a horse. Yet, even a child can recognize a horse for what it is. Every human being has "horse sense". He does not need a philosopher or a scientist to tell him that a horse is a horse.

We cannot bestow on an organism an attribute that is contrary to its nature. A tree does not grow in sunshine unless the property of growth is already present in the tree. To assert that a tree learns to grow in the sun is to close one's eyes to those inherent attributes, which enable it to grow. The sun and the tree are locked in a warm embrace; sunshine precedes growth but sunshine cannot and does not cause that growth. It is the same with consciousness. Man acquires knowledge through his senses and his reasoning power but he does so only because his soul is already predisposed towards that knowledge. Humans learn mathematics, compose sublime poetry, make discoveries, build instruments, and construct monuments because the human soul is predisposed towards self-discovery. We cannot teach mathematics to the apes nor make a camel sing an opera.

The moment of consciousness is a sublime moment. It is an immediate experience of the soul. The human body, its senses and its reason are tools for that experience. The sense of time, and before and after, is only a framework of convenience to simplify and catalogue our experience. Otherwise,

empirical, extensional and intuitive knowledge, are modes of rediscovering that which the soul already knows.

Principle 2: Man forgets and has to relearn through hard work and struggle what he has forgotten.

Let us consider an example. You commute to work every day along a certain route. You start out from your home, make a right turn on a certain street and then a left turn somewhere else and so on until you arrive at your place of work. After a while, this pattern becomes a routine. You learn to negotiate this route without the slightest awareness of the road. If we do this for a few years the commute becomes routine so that you forget you are actually taking this route. Your mind delegates the task of going to work to a subconscious level while you think about other things, about the chores that your spouse requested of you, about the work that your boss wants you to do and so on. An activity that is repeated without change becomes ingrained in the subconscious and passes out of active memory.

You continue taking this route until one day you encounter an accident or a blockage on the road. Then suddenly you become conscious of where you are and your conscious self goes to work to find for you an alternate route. You are now learning a new route because of the change that you encounter. *Thus change becomes the precursor to consciousness and learning.*

It is the same with all human knowledge. When you learn mathematics as a child but never get to use it, the consciousness of what you had learned gradually slips from your memory. Then, much later in life, you have to exert yourself and relearn what you have forgotten.

Man knows the names and nature of all things but this knowledge has slipped from his consciousness. He regains that consciousness through his struggle and interaction with the world.

Observe that no knowledge is possible in the absence of change. If the world were totally frozen, if nothing moved and nothing changed, then it would be impossible for man to know anything at all. Consciousness is a consequence of change.

This observation gives us some insight into the nature of time. Time is measured through change. We track our months and years through the change of seasons, through changes in the moon, through changes in the position of the earth relative to the sun. *Change is the intrinsic nature of all creation and time is the perception of that change. Thus time is the act of "unfreezing" of the universe. It is indeed the act of creation.*

The Qur'anic framework of knowledge unifies the observational, extensional and intuitive modes of learning. Through our observations we measure the changes in our surroundings and the relationship of one observation to the next. A physicist studies the relationships between physical entities. A sociologist studies the relationships between people. A historian studies the rise and fall of civilizations. We build models of the data we have acquired through our senses. Using our reasoning ability we extend our observations beyond the realm of immediate experience. And through our intuition we discover knowledge that was hitherto hidden from our consciousness. In each case we unearth the knowledge that is stored in the depths of our soul and bring it to the surface. Observation, reason and intuition are not different types of knowledge; they are merely different modes of gaining access to the same knowledge. *Each mode of acquiring knowledge dips into the same reservoir. Knowledge is one and the spiritual approach preserves that Unity.*

Contrast the spiritual approach with the modern secular approach. The Greeks denigrated the body as merely the slave of the mind. Modern man has accepted this framework as his own and has developed a hierarchy of knowledge in which reason occupies the highest ladder and feeling is relegated to the

lowest level. Hegel, in his essay on *Reason as the Basis of History*, wrote: "Feeling is the lowest form in which any mental content can exist...." (*Reason in History*, Hegel, translated by R.S. Harman, The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1953, p.17).

In the spiritual approach the body and the soul are both important and both occupy an exalted position as the tools through which man gains consciousness. The senses, the reasoning faculty, and intuition experience moments of illumination which lead to a rediscovery of knowledge known to man but which he has forgotten.

"Thus does God make clear to you His Signs so that you may reflect (reason and think)."
The Qur'an (2: 219)

The spiritual approach to knowledge is consistent with observation and reason. It overcomes the limitations of logic in breaking the cycle of before and after. It explains the immediacy of intuitive knowledge. It accommodates feelings and emotions. It elevates the senses to their exalted position. It reaffirms the Unity of Knowledge.

Principle 3: The *Nafs* (soul) is the seat of knowledge. It acquires knowledge through perception of change.

"Indeed, God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in their own Nafs."
The Qur'an (13:11)

*"By the Nafs
and the sense of beauty, order and proportion bestowed upon it,
and its enlightenment as to right and wrong,
verily he prospers who purifies it...."*
The Qur'an (91:7-9)

In secular thought, the soul is conspicuous by its absence. Charles Sherrington in his book *Man and His Nature* wrote:

"Mind, for anything perception can compass, goes therefore in our spatial world more ghostly than a ghost. Invisible, intangible, it is a thing not even of outline; it is not a "thing". It remains without sensual confirmation and remains without it forever". (*Man and His Nature*, Sir Charles Sherrington, Cambridge University Press, 1940, page 357).

The helplessness of secular thought springs from the very assumptions that are made in building the edifice of knowledge. These assumptions exclude the soul from the world at the outset. Having excluded the soul at the very beginning we cannot locate it later when we go searching for it. As a consequence, knowledge that is acquired through "scientific" thinking is cold and logical, without color, without feeling and without love.

The Qur'an emphasizes the preeminence of the soul in cognition and acquiring knowledge. This is equally true of social knowledge and physical knowledge. The Qur'an teaches us that no change is possible in a people until there is a change in the souls of those people. Thus the soul is the cognitive body for change and the agent for action. In the physical world, our attention is drawn to the changes that pervade creation, from the behavior of ants to the movement of stars so that we may learn from them.

That change is fundamental to perception can be seen in our day to day experiences. We breathe every minute without the least consciousness of the act of breathing. However, this same act of breathing becomes a conscious exercise should we develop a chest cold or asthma. We go out and play tennis without the least consciousness of the movement of our elbows and shoulders. But this same task becomes a painful chore should we develop a “tennis elbow” or pull a shoulder muscle. Consciousness thus takes place only when there is change.

Physical change leads to an understanding of physical laws; social change leads to a consciousness of social laws. Change is the common element that binds our consciousness of the physical world and the social world. In either case, interaction with the process of change is necessary to gain some knowledge about it.

In the absence of relationships, the relative concepts of size, shape, color and events in their infinite shades would be unknown to us because there will be no comparison, guidepost or standard with which we can understand them. Let us illustrate this by building a model of the world in which no relationships exist. In this fictitious world all objects are of identical shape, size, color and mass. Even the “people” who inhabit this world look alike and are identical in appearance to the objects around them. Let us go one step further and assume that in this hypothetical world time is frozen. Nothing changes. Assume also that there is no light and no darkness. If an outsider were to visit this world he would find it “frozen”. This world is like a black box about which nothing can be learned. It is folded unto itself and exists in perpetual darkness.

Now, open up this frozen world in slow measures. First allow some light to enter this black box. A visitor would now be able to see this world. But everything in it is still frozen so that the visitor cannot learn anything about this world except that it exists. Now, introduce the element of time and allow change to take place. Our visitor will be able to see the transformations in this world with time.

Relax the constraints further. Allow the various objects in this world to take on different shapes, sizes, colors and masses. Our visitor can now distinguish between various objects. Finally, unfreeze the “people” of this world so that they take on different colors, shapes, heights and weights and let them walk and talk so that they can interact with each other and with the world around them. A visitor to this unfrozen world would find it very much like our own and learn a great deal about it.

Notice that no knowledge in this hypothetical world was possible until it was “unfrozen”. The elements of time and change appeared. Light made its appearance as a means of “seeing”. Relationships of size, shape, mass and color appeared and learning became possible. Relationships are thus fundamental to consciousness and knowledge. Time brings about change. In the absence of time, knowledge remains frozen. The passage of time and resolution of relationships are links in the chain that connect the mind to the tree of knowledge. These relationships may be physical such as those studied by physicists or human relationships such as those studied by sociologists and historians. Consciousness springs forth when relationships develop.

The seat of consciousness and knowledge is the *Nafs* (*Soul*). The senses and reason are attributes of the *Nafs*. By themselves they do not bestow knowledge; they merely assist the *Nafs* in gaining knowledge.

Principle 4: To know is to act. Struggle is necessary to acquire knowledge.

Whoever seeks understanding must seek involvement in relationships. Learning involves awareness of relationships and no awareness is possible without interaction. This is the empirical basis for involvement, commitment and action. The fulfillment of man’s existential potential requires action. It

involves commitment, interaction and struggle. In order to learn man must experience life in its fullness. A man who is involved learns more than a man who is not. A man who travels learns more than a man who does not. Thus action is the core of consciousness.

The spiritual path to heaven lies through the struggle in this life. Man's free will dances on the stage of life and through it man ascends to heaven or allows himself to "fall to the lowest of the low."

Relationships are a simile to the Absolute. Often those who denied the Truth asked the Prophet Muhammed: "Why does God not reveal Himself to us?" This question may thus be answered. *God is beyond relationships; there is none like unto Him. Were He to manifest Himself time would cease, space would collapse, the cosmos would shrink to nothingness and those who deny the Truth would cease to exist.*

Relationships are like arrows to the Truth. Reality does not reside in the arrows but in what those arrows point to. Life is thus a simile to the Absolute. Structures change, relationships go through transformations but Reality remains unchanged.

A man of wisdom does not confuse the simile with Reality. Conversely, he does not avoid relationships because it is only through them that man can aspire to the Truth. Life is the most precious gift. It is given so that through it man may experience for a moment or two the ultimate Truth.

The Prophets and the great sages experienced the ascension to Truth through a sifting of relationships. The story of Abraham and his struggle with the laws of celestial mechanics has been related earlier. Similar was his struggle with the world of man. Of all the relationships that a man is part of, that between him and his children is the most precious. Abraham was ordered in a vision to sacrifice his only son Ishmael. Father and son bowed their will to the Will of the Creator and proceeded to implement the Command. At the moment of sacrifice, Divine Will intervened, infused into the soul of Abraham the knowledge that he had already fulfilled the Command and ordered him instead to sacrifice a lamb.

Great are the insights built into this story. When all relationships are exhausted the consciousness of the Divine begins. This is another way of stating that faith ascends when the world is left behind. Abraham reached the limit of all relationships when he agreed to sacrifice the most important relationship (between him and his son) to Divine Will. When he broke all worldly relationships, the consciousness of the Absolute dawned on Abraham. This allegory is the social counterpart to the allegory about his sighting the stars, the moon and the sun and the realization that God is beyond the relationships that these heavenly bodies are subject to.

Thus life is a window to the Eternal and the Absolute. Everything that life has to show is a simile to a higher Reality. Life is a resolution of truth. It is a sublime simile. It is bestowed on humankind so that it may bear witness to Truth.

Consider the social relationships that man is part of. These relationships exist in a limitless gradation of shadows and subtle contrasts. Each relationship brings out a certain aspect of truth. It is in sifting through these relationships that we encounter the eternal struggle between love and hate, attachment and detachment, friendship and enmity, war and peace, justice and injustice. How could we know the meaning of love without the presence of hatred? It is in the web of human relationships that love and hate make sense. The purpose of suffering is to teach joy; the purpose of hatred is to teach love; the purpose of injustice is to teach justice. Joy, love and justice make sense only in the presence of their opposites.

Life is thus the greatest of teachers. Life must be experienced so that through it man may gain consciousness of the knowledge that God has bestowed upon his soul.

Principle 5: God is the Source, the First Cause and the Focus of all Knowledge.

*“And We taught Adam the Names ...”
The Qur’an (2:31)*

Several important concepts are introduced in the quoted passage. First, the First Cause of knowledge is God. Second, the world is knowable. Third, man can learn and can be taught. Each of these concepts is an important aspect of the spiritual approach to knowledge.

The assertion that God is the First Cause of knowledge establishes the Unity of Knowledge. The second assertion that the world is knowable liberates man from the cynicism of rational thought which claims that the world is inherently not knowable. The third opens up vast vistas for mankind to communicate, transmit knowledge and learn from one another.

That knowledge springs from a Single Source can be demonstrated through observation. Different people living in different ages come up with the same concepts and inventions. Marconi, an Italian, and Popov, a Russian, invented the radio at the same time. The method of making Damascus steel, well known in Syria in the Middle Ages, was lost and was rediscovered in the 1960s with the study of super-plasticity of metals. The ancient people of India and the Mayans of Central America independently invented the concept of zero. The Seljuk Turks of Central Asia and the Aztecs of Mexico invented the triangular arch independent of each other. And so on. Like the dance of lightning on a parched earth, knowledge dances on the Soul of mankind from continent to continent but always leaves the same trace. Knowledge is one. It is man who introduces aberrations in his knowledge through his speculations.

But perhaps the most convincing proof of the Unity of Knowledge is in the message of the Prophets. Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad each living in different times, speaking different languages, belonging to different cultures, proclaimed the same universal message. The highest moral Law that each proclaimed was identical, namely, that there is no reality but Divine Reality. It was as if the mighty Pen wrote on the consciousness of these men an identical message even though they lived centuries apart. The logical conclusion is that sublime Knowledge was infused into their consciousness by the One Source.

Secular thought doubts the necessity of revelation in the scheme of acquiring knowledge. This position needs reexamination. Revelation is the most positive statement that can be made about the nature of man. It asserts that knowledge can be taught to man. The heavens and the mountains and the earth cannot learn because they are deaf, dumb and blind. They have no reasoning or cognitive faculty. Only man is endowed with these attributes so that he can learn.

The spiritual view that man has the capability to understand the true nature of things stands in marked contrast to the secular position that the true nature of things is forever hidden from man. Secular thought also claims that the mind can learn the nature of things without Divine assistance. But the secular approach gets bogged down in questions of axiom and proof, before and after, chicken and egg. Furthermore, secular thinking also finds that the world has no color, no taste, no feeling and no love. Modern man, with his blind belief in “science”, finds himself all alone, full of anxiety, lost in a cold, empty world.

Thus secular thought leads to the conclusion that the world is not knowable. The spiritual approach not only affirms that the world is knowable but insists that man struggles in this world so that through it he may appreciate the attributes of God.

Secular thought is pessimistic and cynical. It projects a worldview in which man has no company in the cosmos and has no purpose. The spiritual approach by contrast is optimistic and liberating. It places man and nature in a friendly embrace. It holds open the promise that man can learn the nature of things. Indeed, it beckons man to aspire to that knowledge.

Secular thought compartmentalizes knowledge. It builds a hierarchy in which reason occupies a higher place than the senses and feelings are denigrated to a very low level. The spiritual approach by contrast integrates the various modes of knowing into one. By asserting boldly that man has been taught the nature of all things, it brings together observation, extension and intuition into a proper perspective, namely, that these are means to rediscover the knowledge that is already known to man.

Secular thought cannot explain why things have color and taste and aroma. It cannot explain why we feel and fight for justice. The spiritual approach not only explains why we feel the way we do, it invites us to participate fully in experiencing these feelings through our senses. Secular thought is hung up on questions of before and after. Spiritual thought liberates man from the tyranny of sequentiality and makes possible an immediate access to knowledge.

Secular thought, believing as it does in causality, leads to the conclusion that man has no free will. Since it cannot figure out where the soul interacts with matter, secular thinking cannot determine exactly how the soul exerts leverage on matter. In other words, it cannot decipher how human free will controls our actions. Since there is no connection between the soul and the body, man is freed from responsibility for his actions. He becomes just another ape, perhaps a thinking ape, but an ape nonetheless. Spiritual thought, by contrast, makes man a trustee of his own free will. Nothing changes until that which in the souls of men changes. The Soul is thus the prime actor in the drama of life and all action is subject to the control of the Soul. Man is a responsible creature and is to be judged for what he does before man and before God.

In secular thought ethics is a matter of speculation. What is right and what is wrong is often a matter of convenience. Justice is what suits the status quo. Politics is a matter of self-interest. Marriage is a social necessity. By contrast, spiritual thought is based on ethics. The Source of spiritual thinking is knowledge bestowed by the Creator. The seat of knowledge is the soul. Thus knowledge has value; it actualizes itself through the actions of man. Justice is the fulcrum of life. Politics is the fulfillment of man's regency on earth. Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God.

Secular thought destroys the basis for ultimate Judgment. Since man has no responsibility for his actions he is free to pursue his inclinations with no restraint. By contrast, in the spiritual perspective, Judgment is a logical consequence of the responsible nature of man. Man is the owner of his own free will, the creator of his own destiny. His actions determine his future and he will be judged by the consequences of his actions. Thus, in the spiritual perspective, belief takes on a sound and solid foundation. In secular thought, belief is relegated to ignorance and superstition.

Secular thought destroys the basis for teaching man. How can you learn when the very seat of learning and knowledge is absent? Since the soul is taken out, the secular worldview is made up of atoms, voids and cells but it has no feelings, no emotions, no love and no hatred attached to it. Such a world picture does not make sense.

By contrast, in the spiritual approach man can learn. He can be taught and he can share his knowledge. He was taught by God the names and nature of all things. From time to time, revelation was infused into his consciousness. Man is thus a knower. It is his nature to ask, inquire, observe, reason, learn and share that knowledge with fellow human beings.

Modern man has accepted a fragmentation of knowledge into sacred and secular. He packages all of his beliefs in a "sacred" mothball which is not to be touched by philosophical inquiry. The rest of the world is left open to "secular" scrutiny to be dissected, analyzed and chopped up into further compartments.

Secular thought has no single focus. In the secular paradigm, man learns through a myriad of observations and speculative theories but these observations and theories float without anchor. Spiritual thought, by contrast, has God as its focus. It is an integrated whole. *Knowledge is a gift of God and it is He who is the focus of all knowledge. In the spiritual perspective, the philosophical question is not, "What are the laws of nature?" It is: "What is the Will of God?"*

Comments are closed.

[Blog at WordPress.com.](#)