# What are the differences between the Islamic and the modern scientific points of view on knowledge? How does the Qur'an regard *''knowledge''*?

Genuine knowledge ('ilm) is a source of infinite light covered with truth, which leads enlightened people toward the righteous path. Modern science is built and developed upon existing information gained through experimentation and correcting previous errors. In general, science represents theories and hypotheses that we devise and pursue in order to acquire knowledge. From this point of view, knowledge and science are not the same and must not be considered as synonyms. For example, sometimes 'ilm is mistranslated as science, because the translators do not take into consideration the genuine meanings of the words. This mistake can be excused when it is made by the general population, who might not be aware of the difference; however, we expect scientists and professionals to use these terms correctly, according to their core meanings, so that their different meanings become obvious and clear.

Knowledge is born and developed between our hearts and minds. On the contrary, science is totally material, belongs to this world and all physical beings, and depends fully upon Earth's natural rules. Science is born through theories, and its continued development always engenders doubt. Initially, science was built on rationalism and developed through positivism. It sprouts in the world of the five senses, and continues its life with reference to the theoretical mind. Most of the time, science rejects things that cannot be seen or heard. In fact, its eyes are blind to the concealed meaning of existence, and its ears cannot hear it. Modern science accepts only those objects and events that can be perceived by the five senses.

Scientific developments in the classical Islamic world have had a tremendous influence upon the achievements of modern science. Several Western scholars and writers, among them Maurice Bucaille, Jacques Cousteau, Alex Carrel, Thomas Carlyle, and Roger Garaudy agree with this fact, and state that *“the West totally owes all its achievements to the East. Andalusia, a Muslim state in Spain, was a perfect example of this process.”* In some cases, Western scientists considered the roots of the knowledge derived from the East to be abstract theories, and so they did not consider what they had given to humanity and upon what basics and pillars they had been built.

The West has mixed its materialistic ideas in the development of these ideas and sciences, and by restricting their analysis only to subjectivity, they alienated the roots from their origins. As a result, religion in the West was confined to the church and people could learn about their religion only when they came to the church to participate in religious ceremonies. Thus religion could not enter fully into the people's lives. In fact, after Constantine, emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, proclaimed Christianity to be the empire's official religion in 315, the government strictly controlled its all relations with life. This approach toward religion was a bad luck for Christianity. The first 3 centuries of Christianity was the best time for this religion, despite the severe pressure that it faced, for it was a time of blossoming and purity. After it became the official religion, Christians no longer faced oppression. However, the religion fell under the control of the government and was corrupted.

According to the state, religion belonged in the church, and while people occasionally would come to the church to practice their religion, they could not make it an intimate part of their life. As a result, Christianity was divorced from everyday life, society had to accept that there was life without religion, and that there was religion without life. Given this reality, scientific research and implications had nothing to do with Christianity, and that religion became a moral institution whose only responsibility and activities were the ceremonies connected to birth and death. The West's scientific roots lie in the classical Greek and Roman civilizations. This knowledge was incorporated into the Islamic civilization, whose scholars and scientists developed it, made original contributions to it, and passed it on to the West.

Unfortunately, Western scientists developed modern science as an independent enterprise completely separate from religion. Thus, its scientific development was built of unbelief and differs dramatically from the understanding of science and knowledge in the East. On the other hand, knowledge and science flourished for centuries in the Islamic world. Some of its luminaries are Jabir, Ibn al-Haytham, al-Khawarizmi, al-Zahrawi, Ibn Sina, and al-Farabi.

Ancient Greek scholars claimed that the smallest particle of being is an atom. However, theologian Ibrahim al-Nazzam (d. 835/845) said that substance could be divided into pieces an infinite number of times, and spoke as a modern scientist who would say the same thing today. If we look at this from the theory of particles, it would be clear that al-Nazzam's statements are true.

Muslim scholars never rejected or separated their inventions and discoveries from religion. Rather, knowledge and science reinforced their belief and understanding of religion. Even though they argued about various scientific matters, their attitude toward religion never differed from one another. For example, a Muslim physician-scholar like al-Razi had mystically spiritual intellect. Muslim scholars explored the universe in the name of The Creator, and every single discovery and invention brought a new passion, a new enthusiasm, and a spirit of new devotion. That is why they always traveled in the horizons of *“is there any more?”* and they lived in a state of continual passion of searching for the truth.

It is true that Muslim scholars' understanding of knowledge developed their understanding of religion and created metaphysical tension in their lives. Several Qur'anic verses, such as: Behold! In the creation of the heavens and Earth, and the alternation of night and day, are Signs for men of understanding (3:190), always attracted Muslim scholars. Using such verses to inspire them, they devised their theories with a feeling of prayer toward God and built their knowledge upon a foundation of such an understanding and approach. Muslim scientists explored the heavens and Earth in the light of such verses, and learned and researched the relationship between the universe and Earth, such as the connection between a flower and the sun, the association of the smallest animals and living things to the sunlight, and so on. As a result of this approach, and by reciting the Qur'an while studying the universe (the Book of Existence), Muslim scholars strengthened their faith in and closeness to God.

However, due to today's materialistic theories, Western scientists will never be free of the fear, anxiety, and unexpected surprises that might arise in their fields even though they reach the heavens and continue to solve the mysteries of the universe. On the contrary, Muslims believe that they can build castles even in the center of black holes, for: *“God's Existence, Divine Beauty, and Power are behind everything. Perhaps black holes are no more than dark hallways toward brightness and light. As we enter the grave and come out of it toward Paradise, these undesired and unwanted black holes just might be bridges between the heavens and this world.”*

Western society, confined within the limits of discoveries and scientific inventions, cannot see the true beauty of the material world. But Muslim scholars and scientists, while learning and exploring life by means of Divine guidance and assistance, could read the wisdom and hidden purposes behind the things and events occurring in the material world and see God's Divine Power behind everything in the universe. For example, consider the Islamic point of view toward the human face and appearance. Muslims never attributed such things to nature, which is unconscious and blind, but rather saw in that wonderfully beautiful human complexion the reflection of The Most Merciful and The Most Compassionate God. By seeking to increase their limited understanding, they made the limited unlimited and decorated simple mirrors with the most beautiful crafts and designs. From this point of view, Muslim scientists had the chance to see hidden wisdom and knowledge side by side, and could observe and witness clearly the things and events that were taking place in the material world.

The following Qur'anic verse describes such people: He grants wisdom to whomever He wills, and the one to whom wisdom is granted receives a benefit overflowing. However, none will grasp the Message but men of understanding (2:269). Such people with intellect can see the concealed wisdom. People who look to the universe without the glasses of wisdom and concealed truth see and observe things as unreasonable and useless.

Islam understands 'ilm to be that knowledge that was built and developed upon these fundamental basis. As a matter of fact, Islam considers the purpose of knowledge as bound to knowledge about God, His Divine Power, and His All-Mighty Wisdom. The result of knowing God is love for God, and the result of this love is spiritual happiness. Given this reality, Muslim scholars and scientists do not feel anxiety and hopelessness, for as they pursue their studies, they discover new existences, feel closer to God, and varying degrees of spiritual peace. For those who study the universe from such perspectives, knowledge is the way to reach material and spiritual happiness; for those who follow the path of materialism, knowledge can become the way to see the undesired consequences of existence and the final end of the universe. Such knowledge will cause them to be in a state of constant unhappiness.

For those who do not know The Most Merciful and The Most Compassionate Lord of the universe, the sun will burn out in 5 billion years. Such knowledge will spread fear into their hearts, for they will think that *“after the sun burns out, the horrible end of the worlds will begin and we will dissolve into atomic pieces and face non-existence.”* They will suffer from being a part of this universe. In short, following a materialistic approach to science results in hopelessness, fear, and disappointment. At this point, knowledge (in the Islamic context of this world and the Hereafter) gives confidence, and science (in the materialistic context of being limited to what the five senses can perceive) gives hopelessness. Thus, the two contradict each other. Those who follow the path of knowledge, by His help and guidance, always will walk in enlightenment and will never be disappointed or have doubts about the future.

In order for such things to happen, all of the aspects of knowledge ('ilm) and science must be taken into consideration. That is why many modern scholars and scientists are trying to change and direct existing materialistic theories and approaches toward the Islamic understanding of knowledge and science. A number of them are convinced that the contemporary Western approaches are based upon unbelief and that they cannot be changed. If materialistic science makes no effort to find God, and if it does not strive to become a mirror showing His Divine Beauty, humanity's future may be unexpectedly dramatic.