

## **Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam**

*Franz Rosenthal*

*Leiden: Brill, 2007. 355 pages.*

Brill's new "Classics in Islam" series, a systematic reprinting of some of the seminal works in Islamic studies that have been out of print for decades, is a welcome initiative. As Dimitri Gutas, a former student, indicates in his introduction, Rosenthal's achievement in this monograph is outstanding within an exceptionally productive and influential career. It is also somewhat unusual that a work first published over thirty years ago still remains unsurpassed, even if one may question some of the argument's details and tendencies. Rosenthal often worked with manuscripts and unedited sources and, while we have the luxury of criticizing his judgments based on our access to superior critical editions, the contribution of the book remains singular.

As befits a social and intellectual historian, Rosenthal's survey commences with the philology of the word knowledge (*'ilm*) and works through instances in early Islam and Arabic poetry before moving on to chapters on definition, theology, Sufism, philosophy, and finally concluding with a chapter on the social contexts and uses of knowledge. While there are now a number of works that deal with aspects of these chapters, no one has attempted to reconstruct a survey quite like this. Each chapter could well be the subject of monographs and, as Gutas suggests, numerous sections could act as inspiration for "untold dissertations." Rosenthal begins with the claim that civilizations tend to revolve around meaningful concepts of an abstract nature that, more than anything else, give them their distinctive nature; in the case of Islam, this is the centrality of knowledge and the pursuit of knowledge. While he shifts from the plural to the singular and back, one retains the central point that the field of knowledge is unified. The fact is that Muslim scholars in very different fields of inquiry were able to retain a concept of *'ilm* that was broadly cognate and transferable.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first, on "knowledge before knowledge," engages with Semitic philology and the uses of knowledge in pre-Islamic poetry. As a leading Semiticist himself, Rosenthal was well-qualified to undertake the task. However, as can be said for practically each section of this book, the few short pages on poetry could well be expanded to take into account recent work. Unlike other volumes in the series (e.g., Goldziher's on the Zahiris), the editor does not attempt to update any references or provide an idea of developments in the field. Perhaps that would be too daunting a task in such a widely deployed book. Chapter 2 shifts to the Qur'anic discourse of knowledge and early dogma. Of particular interest here is the juxtaposition of the roots *'-l-m*, *'-r-f*, and the Qur'anic substantive *hikmah*, later adopted by philosophers to render philosophy. It would be profitable to examine some of the semantic analysis in this chapter alongside the late Toshihiko Izutsu's two masterful monographs on Qur'anic semantics (contemporary to Rosenthal's book), which go much further and are theoretically more sophisticated.

The brief chapter 3 introduces the plural and raises the question of fields of knowledge. Chapter 4 ushers in a shift to philosophy by examining definitions of knowledge. It is quite unusual here to find definitions given from the theologian and uṣūlī al-Amīdī's *Abk̄l̄r al-Afk̄l̄r*. While al-Amīdī's legal and jurisprudential work has been studied, his theological contribution is much neglected. Chapter 5 moves on to theology, beginning with the traditionalist sections on knowledge and including discussions on God's knowledge based on *kalām* disputations. This latter focuses on classical dis-

cussions and neglects the far more significant discussions in the medieval period, in which the commentary tradition on Nasir al-Din Tusi's (d. 1274) *Tajrid al-I'tiqad* spawned extensive debates on the nature of the divine and the attribute of knowledge within the rubric of demonstrating the existence of God (*fi ithbat al-sani`*).

While the book can be criticized on the whole for broadly neglecting the Shi'i tradition, especially with its early traditionalist embrace of the question of knowledge, Rosenthal does have a final section in this chapter on Shi'i concepts of knowledge, in itself more extensive than has been the Orientalist norm but still rather inadequate. Labelling Zaydis as moderates and Twelvers as extremists is rather quaint. But one would have thought the most appropriate place to start this discussion would be the chapters on knowledge in Kulayni's *Al-Kāfi* and al-Qadi al-Nu'man's *Da'irah al-Islam*. The dismissal of the hadith "I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate" as Shi'i apocrypha is odd indeed. The more recent work of Amir-Moezzi and Bayhom-Daou has furthered our understanding of classical Shi'i conceptions of knowledge, especially of the Imams.

Chapter 6 discusses light mysticism in Sufism. The next chapter shifts again to familiar ground with philosophy, but has not aged well. Recent research on its themes would question a number of assertions about the sterility and lack of innovation in logic, the translation terminology, and *kalām* epistemology. The final chapter examines the social uses of knowledge and links it to righteous action, morality, and manners. It involves rich discussions of a range of literary texts. The concluding remark returns to musings upon civilization and the role of knowledge within it. Knowledge was both a central rallying force but also, in the medieval period, a source of hardening with the theological distinction between acceptable and unacceptable knowledge. But the course of epistemology and the value accorded to knowledge in Islamic learned culture was somewhat more complex.

There is still much to learn and criticize in this wonderful monograph. Perhaps someone ought to take up the challenge of embarking on a new survey of the civilizational role of knowledge in Islam and engage in the rigorous examination of the epistemology lying at the heart of so many of the Islamic humanities. In particular, I would like to see a re-centring on knowledge on the human and how Islamic culture fostered notions of "human science" and, indeed, of the humanities in the pursuit of moral perfection.

Sajjad H. Rizvi

Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies

Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies, University of Exeter, United Kingdom