CHAPTER SEVEN

KNOWLEDGE IS THOUGHT

(Philosophy)

For the unsophisticated reader of the Qur’ân, it was sufficient to assume that numerous explicit statements in the Holy Book provided a satisfactory solution for the problems of the origin and character of knowledge. Muhammad often says that knowledge “comes” to human beings, that it is “given” or “taught” to them by God, that, in fact, the only knowledge there is the knowledge God has taught mankind beginning with Adam, the first human being. For early Muslims, knowledge was the result of a process of learning, as expressed in the tradition that “knowledge is attained only through study” (înnamâ l-‘ilm bi-t-ta‘allum). This tradition is, for instance, worked into a verse ascribed to the early gnomic poet, Sâbiq al-Barbarî, or used in a discussion with the caliph, Mu‘âwiyyah, or cited by the Sûfî, Abû Sa‘îd al-Kharrâz, or paraphrased by the wise young prince, in the story cycle of Shamâs and Jalîdâd preserved in the Arabian Nights. It was prized as an indication of the down-to-earth simplicity with which early Muslims had approached problems that had become extremely complicated, or, it was often thought, had been made so unnecessarily. However, already in the Qur’ân there are enough hints to show that in the environment of the Prophet, the problems of what knowledge was and how it could be acquired were familiar ones, even if they might not always have been consciously realized.

Such realization came rapidly enough when Islam spread and learned not only about Christian theology based upon Hellenistic

1 Among the “canonical” collection, this hadîth is to be found only in al-Bukhârî, cf. above, p. 79. It would not be correct to assume that ‘ilm here is meant to be restricted to traditional knowledge. Cf. also Abû Khayyâmah, nos. 114 and 115.
3 Cf. az-Zubayr b. Bakkâr, Jamharat nasab Quraysh, ed. Mahmûd M. Shâkir, I, 513 (Cairo 1381–1962–), where the text has min for bi.
4 Cf. as-Sulâmî, Tabayyîdî, 230.
6 Cf. above, p. 31.
philosophy but also about Greek logic and epistemology which had conquered the East long before Muhammad, principally in the name of Aristotle. Aristotelian logic was probably among the earliest Greek materials made available in Arabic translation, and it might very well have exercised its influence at the very beginnings of the Muslim concern with knowledge. However this might have been, Greek logic became the foundation of all Muslim epistemology as the result of the translation activity of the ninth century. It stayed on to form the only systematic scientific framework available to Muslim scholars for intellectual expression from that time on. Religious opposition developed to it almost instantly and never stopped growing and gaining vocal supporters. But embattled as it was, logic always found its steadfast champions who defended its usefulness and, indeed, indispensability as a necessary instrument for all scholarly activity. Logic was considered and referred to as a “craft” or “technique” (ṣīnā’ah) but also, and perhaps with greater frequency, as an ʿilm, a scholarly discipline. It was the science that produced certain knowledge (al-ʿilm al-yaqîn). Logic provided the justification and the system of classification for scholarly and scientific disciplines. It influenced the discussions of hadith scholars and historians as to the possible ways of attaining to the “truth.”

The discussion of epistemology thus did not remain restricted to concerned philosophers and professional logicians. It spread to form the foundations of systematic theology and jurisprudence, and in this way penetrated right to the core of Muslim thinking. The philosophical view of the concept of knowledge was expressed primarily in the works of scholars directly concerned with the study of logic, but then again, it found expression in the works dealing with the usûl al-ʿilm, the “principles,” or, more literally, the “roots” of knowledge, that is, systematic speculative theology (kalâm), and it also gained a strong foothold in the works on the

7 Cf. the discussion about the translation ascribed to Ibn al-Muqaffa’, possibly a son of the famous litterateur, which was started by P. Kraus, in RSO, XIV (1934), 1–14.
8 Al-Fârâbî, for instance, made indiscriminating use of both ʿilm al-mantiq and ṣīnāʿ at al-mantiq, and this was the usual state of affairs.
9 Cf. Ibn Sabīn, Correspondence philosophique, 31.
10 Cf., for instance, the specimens of translations of relevant texts in Rosenthal, Fortleben, 77 ff.