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Book Review

Kalam and its Relevance in the Muslim Scholarship of Religion: An Integrated Approach

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In the pluralistic world, where interreligious encounters are more frequent and necessary than ever, the Muslim academic community is grappling with a pivotal question: *How can one study other religions objectively while remaining faithful to Islamic theology?* The edited volume *Kalām and Its Relevance in the Muslim Scholarship of Religion*, curated by Prof. Haslina Ibrahim, enters this arena as both a response and a challenge. It is a timely intellectual contribution that examines the enduring role of *Ilm al-Kalām* (Islamic scholastic theology) as a foundational yet evolving framework for Muslim engagement with the academic study of religion.

This book not only revitalises traditional theological discourse but also engages with the pressing methodological dilemmas faced by contemporary Muslim scholars in the comparative and phenomenological study of religion. The central tension addressed is the call, often made in Western academic circles, to “leave your religion at the door” when entering the classroom—a demand that undermines the epistemic and theological commitments of Muslim scholars grounded in *Usul al-Din* and *Kalām*.

The book is structured around an essential intellectual tension: the ideal of religious neutrality versus the Islamic imperative to seek and affirm truth. The introduction and first chapter by Prof. Haslina Ibrahim set the tone with a powerful critique of the Western phenomenological model in religious studies. She argues that the “*epoche*”—the suspension of judgment promoted by phenomenologists like Gerardus van der Leeuw, is not methodologically compatible with Islamic theological traditions. For *Mutakallimun*, neutrality is not a virtue but a suspension of reason and divine obligation. Islam commands its adherents to distinguish between truth (*haqq*) and falsehood (*batil*), which places the Muslim scholar in a unique position—both as a seeker of knowledge and a defender of divine truth (pp. 12-26). Haslina frames *Kalām* as a powerful epistemological tool that offers more than polemics; it is a dynamic discourse capable of being revived and recontextualised for interreligious dialogue. While some may label *Kalām* as biased or incompatible with objective religious studies, the book contends that objectivity without value orientation leads to methodological sterility. The Islamic tradition, by contrast, insists on a value-laden quest for truth, critical, respectful, and grounded in rational discourse.

Alwani Ghazali’s chapter makes a compelling case that the Qur’an itself promotes dialogue through concepts such as *hiwar* and *jadāl*, terms often used interchangeably but with nuanced meanings. By anchoring interreligious dialogue in the Qur’anic tradition, Alwani bridges the gap between classical Islamic theology and modern dialogical ethics (pp. 27-43). Her discussion moves beyond apologetics and shows that the Qur’an encourages Muslims to engage in intellectual exchange without relinquishing their theological convictions. This chapter is particularly significant for dismantling the misconception that Islam mandates confrontation in interfaith contexts. By retrieving dialogical principles from the Qur’an and Sunnah, Alwani repositions *Kalām* not merely as a defensive discipline but as a proactive engagement with religious diversity.

Chapters by Wan Haslan Khairuddin, Indriaty Ismail, and Haslina Ibrahim trace the intellectual genealogy of *Kalām* in the works of key scholars such as Ibn Hazm, Al-Biruni, and Al-Shahrastani. These scholars, despite methodological differences, shared a commitment to rigorous truth-seeking. Ibn Hazm’s literalist methodology, Al-Biruni’s empirical curiosity, and Al-Shahrastani’s taxonomical neutrality are presented as examples of how *Kalām* can be internally diverse and intellectually vibrant. This historical contextualization is vital. It challenges the reductive modern view that pre-modern Muslim scholars were solely preoccupied with dogma. On the contrary, the classical *Mutakallimun* often employed methods that resonate with modern academic standards—critical engagement, textual analysis, and comparative inquiry (pp. 44-77).

Among the most intriguing contributions is the chapter on Ismail Raji al-Faruqi and his concept of *Meta-Religion*. Al-Faruqi proposed a universal set of evaluative principles rooted in Islamic metaphysics, offering a third path between theological exclusivism and relativistic pluralism. He rejected the suspension of judgment as intellectually and theologically unsatisfactory, arguing instead for a principled evaluation of religious claims based on shared logical frameworks. Al-Faruqi's contribution, as presented by Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman and Haslina Ibrahim, reinvigorates the potential of Islamic intellectual tradition to speak to global religious studies discourse. Though largely neglected in mainstream academia, his *Meta-Religion* deserves attention as a serious contender in methodological debates on religious plurality and interfaith engagement (pp. 78-93).

Another valuable addition is the chapter on Abu Isa al-Warraq, a controversial figure often claimed by both rationalist and polemicist camps (pp. 94-103). Though the chapter could have explored his arguments more deeply, it serves to remind readers of the multifaceted nature of Islamic engagement with other religions, even during periods of intense doctrinal conflict. Imam al-Ghazali's inclusion, however, is a masterstroke. As both a master of *Kalām* and a pioneer of Islamic spirituality, his balanced approach to interreligious critique—combining philosophical inquiry with ethical concern—is held up as a model for contemporary scholars (pp. 104-117). Ibnu Khaldun's sociological reading of religions in the *Muqaddimah* is also given due attention (pp. 118-134). Though *Kalām* had declined by his time, his historical methodology exemplifies an alternative Islamic lens for studying religion, one that maintains faith-based commitments while engaging with empirical realities.

The inclusion of *Kalām* scholars from the Malay Archipelago—Nur al-Din al-Raniri and Abd al-Rauf al-Sinkili—by Mohd Noh Abdul Jalil adds a regional dimension often missing from discussions of Islamic theology and the unique contribution of the *Kalām* discourse (pp. 135-150). These scholars were not merely defenders of doctrine but were also cultural interlocutors. Their polemics against Christian missionaries reflect the local religious tensions of their time, yet they also illustrate the adaptability of *Kalām* in different socio-political contexts. The chapter offers a significant contribution by uncovering regional *Kalām* scholars whose intellectual legacy holds the potential to enrich the broader discourse with insights rooted in local contexts elsewhere while remaining firmly anchored in the Islamic worldview.

A particularly topical chapter deals with the use of the word “Allah” in Christian literature in Malaysia. The authors employ *Kalām's* reasoning to evaluate whether such usage constitutes theological confusion or linguistic flexibility (pp. 151-162). While some readers may find the argument conservative, the chapter exemplifies how classical *Kalām* tools can still be wielded in current debates involving theology, identity, and public policy. The final chapter by Arfah Ab. Majid introduces a bold and creative idea: *Kalām* as public theology (pp. 163-174). She argues that in an era of ideological and philosophical confusion, Muslim laypeople need exposure to *Kalām* as a method of rational and ethical engagement. Interreligious dialogue, in this light, becomes not merely a scholarly pursuit but a public responsibility. This chapter pushes the boundaries of *Kalām*, advocating for its democratisation. It

resonates with modern calls for religious literacy and civic engagement and suggests that *Kalām* can be repurposed as a tool for societal harmony, not just theological debate.

This book is not without its tensions. Some may interpret its core argument as a call to reconcile *Kalām* with modern religious studies. Yet the volume makes it clear that the objective is not reconciliation but revitalisation—reviving the Islamic intellectual tradition so that it can contribute meaningfully to contemporary scholarly discourse. At the same time, the book is self-aware that it recognises that the world we live in is different from that of classical scholars. Today's pluralistic environment requires more than apologetics—it demands sincere engagement, ethical dialogue, and a methodologically sound approach to religious diversity. Thus, the book does not propose a total return to classical *Kalām*, nor does it endorse the wholesale adoption of Western academic frameworks. Instead, it advocates for an integrated method—one that respects tradition while benefiting from modern advances in the study of religion.

While the work is a commendably structured and intellectually stimulating contribution, it is not without its limitations. Firstly, few ideas offer only a surface-level treatment of their subjects, lacking the analytical depth required for a work aiming to reestablish *Kalām* as a central framework in religious studies. Additionally, some contributions appear tangential to the book's core objective of demonstrating *Kalām's* contemporary relevance, thereby diluting the thematic coherence of the volume. More crucially, certain discussions lack rigorous engagement with *Kalām*ic epistemology, which is purportedly the foundational perspective of the work. The absence of a clearly dedicated chapter outlining how *Kalām* can be methodologically and practically employed in modern interfaith and interreligious academic discourse, particularly from the standpoint of Islamic epistemology in comparative religion, is a missed opportunity. Furthermore, the book seems largely shaped by a Muslim dominant context, potentially limiting its applicability to settings where Muslims live as minorities and Islamophobic context. In such contexts, especially where interreligious tensions are high, greater sensitivity to the socio-political dynamics and risks of engaging in theological critique is essential. Addressing these gaps would have strengthened the book's practical and global relevance in today's complex religious landscape.

Kalām and Its Relevance in the Muslim Scholarship of Religion is both an academic intervention and a theological invitation. It calls on Muslim scholars to reclaim their rich heritage of reasoned faith, to revisit the tools of *Kalām* with renewed vigour, and to engage with other religious traditions not from a place of insecurity but from a confident and principled commitment to truth. This book is a must-read for scholars of Islamic theology, students of comparative religion, and anyone concerned with interfaith dialogue. It bridges the gap between *Usul al-Din*, *Kalām* and modern religious studies, not by diluting Islamic principles but by reaffirming their relevance in a world that desperately needs more principled, informed, and compassionate conversations across faiths.