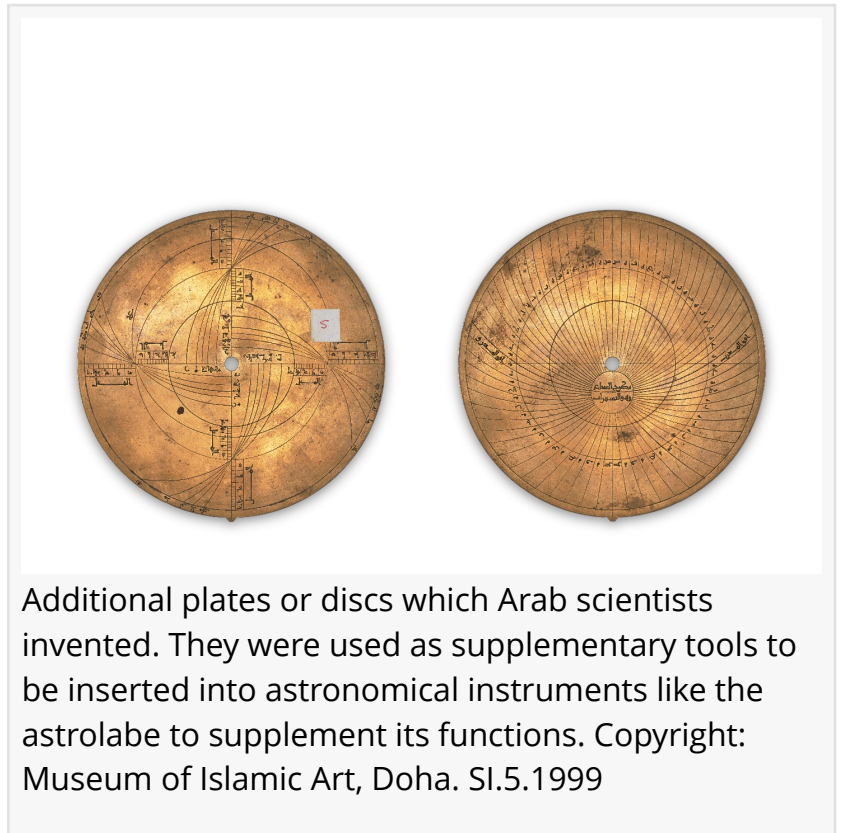


Scientist tells how and why Islam and the West hold contrasting worldviews of knowledge as concept and practice

Muslim scientists had developed their own perceptions, meanings and worldviews of knowledge that differ drastically from those prevalent in the West.

SHARJAH, EMIRATE OF SHARJAH, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, March 3, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- By Leon Barkho, University of Sharjah

A direct English translation of the Arabic word 'ilm' علم is "knowledge", but the Arabic appellation is pregnant with meanings that transcend what knowledge implied for the likes of Plato, Pythagoras, and Euclid in antiquity or for the European Renaissance scientists of the 16th century like Galileo and Kepler.



Additional plates or discs which Arab scientists invented. They were used as supplementary tools to be inserted into astronomical instruments like the astrolabe to supplement its functions. Copyright: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha. SI.5.1999

There is nearly a thousand-year gap in the history of science since the days it started in Greek antiquity and the days of the European Renaissance. This millennium is often dismissed as the Dark Ages – an age in which the torch of science was switched off in Europe, but it played over the lands under the Arab and Muslim empire.

The English word 'knowledge' as a concept derives its meanings from interpretations given to it in antiquity and the Renaissance, notes Alparslan Acikgenc, Professor Emeritus of Islamic Thought at Ibn Haldun University in Istanbul and author of Islamic scientific tradition in history in which he recounts the intellectual flourishing that occurred in the Islamic world during the Golden Age of Islam, particularly from the 8th to the 13th centuries.

"None of the meanings of the English word knowledge equals the Arabic 'ilm in depth of meaning

and the wide incidence of use. There is no branch of Muslim intellectual life, of Muslim religious and political life, and of the daily life of the average Muslim that remained untouched by the all-pervasive attitude toward “knowledge” as something of supreme value for Muslim being,” argued Prof. Acikgenc, who was recently awarded the Distinguished Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas Chair of Islamic Thought by Her Majesty Queen Raja Zarith Sofiah of Malaysia.

Prof. Acikgenc made the comments during a lecture he delivered in Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) late in February 2025 to mark the launch of the Arabic translation of his book by the Sharjah Institute of Heritage and Sharjah International Foundation for the History of Muslim and Arab Sciences (SIFHAMS), a research center affiliated with the University of Sharjah.

Prof. Acikgenc’s book, already rendered into numerous languages besides Arabic, addresses how the development of science in the Islamic context was deeply rooted in Islamic metaphysical and epistemological ideas, such as the concept of tawhid (the oneness of God) and the integration of divine knowledge with human intellectual pursuits. This perspective makes Prof. Acikgenc’s work stand out as it situates Islamic science within a broader philosophical and theological framework rather than just focusing on empirical achievements as the Western concept of knowledge stipulates.



The rete, which is a ring marked with star positions, was part of the Muslim astrolabe, with pointers to visible stars, and magnificent decorative markers. The pointers are engravings indicate the name of the start. The circle in the center has zodiac’s n



Additional components of the alidade. The the torch of science was switched off in Europe in the Dark Ages, but it played over the lands under the Arab and Muslim empire. Copyright: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha. SI.5.1999

“The concept of ‘ilm ‘knowledge’ in Medieval Islam is that ‘ilm is Islam, even if the theologians have been hesitant to accept the technical correctness of this equation. The very fact of their passionate discussion of the concept attests to its fundamental importance for Islam,” Prof. Acikgenc wrote in one of his 35-slide PowerPoint presentation.

Prof. Acikgenc said the Western concept of knowledge was not the same as the concept of ‘ilm upon which the foundations of a pervasive and flourishing science and scholarship in the Islamic world were laid down. Medieval Islam is the period in which the Ummayyad and Abbasid dynasties established centers of learning in their expansive empires, in cities like Damascus, Cario, Samarkand, and Grenada, but particularly in Baghdad, the seat of then one of the world’s greatest centers of learning – the Bayt al-Hikma, or House of Wisdom. While Europe was passing through a dark period in the Middle Ages, the Muslim world was basking in its golden age with Arabic as the lingua-franca of flourishing scholarship and discovery.

In his lecture, Prof. Acikgenc investigated the Arabic ‘ilm, illustrating its English equivalent, ‘knowledge’ is not the right representation of the religious, cultural, factual, and even emotional contents Muslim scientists endowed ‘ilm with.

The Islamic scientific tradition draws on the Muslim holy book, the Quran, and the 25 mentions of the term ‘ilm in it as well as the different usages they are put to. “The standard classification of knowledge in Islam is based on the Quran, and therefore, this should be our starting point,” said Prof. Acikgenc, underscoring that the Quran uses ‘ilm in four fundamental senses or classifications which provide a “standard understanding of knowledge in Islamic civilization”.

According to Prof. Acikgenc, in Islamic civilization, knowledge can be grouped into four major



Alidade: An instrument Muslim scientists developed to measure angles and read values on the astrolabe. The word ‘alidade’ is of Arabic origin and is derived from **أَلْإِدْهَادَة** (al-’idhada) or , perhaps from **أَدْحُد** (aadhud) “upper arm”. Copyright: Museum of Is



semantic classes or conceptual interpretations: namely revealed knowledge, illuminated knowledge, scientific knowledge or simply science, and common everyday knowledge. "If we take these classes as a tentative starting point, we can evaluate the concept of knowledge in Islamic civilization," argued Prof. Acikgenc. "If knowledge is not guided by these classes of knowledge, it may lead to dark knowledge or ignorance," which he categorizes as the fifth classification of 'ilm in Islamic civilization.

This is why the Western concept of knowledge differed from the one commonly used in Islamic civilization, added Prof. Acikgenc, noting that in the West, the interpretation of the concept leaned on Greek philosophers, namely Aristotle, who provided two classes of knowledge: common everyday knowledge and scientific knowledge. This concept is descriptive, said Prof. Acikgenc, as its main focus is on "scientific, or philosophical, knowledge (ἐπιστήμη) [that] is concerned with causes (ἀρχαί), the method, demonstration (ἀπόδειξις), and the source, reason (νοῦς)."

Why did Aristotle prescribe knowledge and did not provide what we could make of it in our daily life? Prof. Acikgenc asked in his lecture, stressing that in Islamic civilization, the concept of knowledge could be defined as an "Islamic worldview given to the Muslims that heavily draws on Quranic 'ilm. For this reason, the early Muslim community became a society of knowledge."

"Islamic emphasis on knowledge was not devoid of a purpose: Knowledge was endowed with values, spiritual as well as moral and humanitarian. The end of this kind of knowledge is not just happiness in this world; above all, divine satisfaction was the highest moral standard."

Prof. Acikgenc named his approach a "scientific process" to the history of science in Islamic civilization. "This scholarly approach aims to highlight the pivotal role that Islamic scholars played in preserving, interpreting, and advancing ancient Greek, Indian, and Persian scientific knowledge and how they subsequently contributed to fields like astronomy, mathematics, chemistry, medicine, and philosophy."

One of the key strengths of Prof. Acikgenc's approach to knowledge as a scientific concept is his emphasis on the interconnectedness between science, religion, and philosophy in the Islamic world, challenging the conventional Western narrative that separates these domains.

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