

Book Review

Modern Ilm al-Kalam (Kalam Theology) in the Indian Subcontinent: An Analytical Study of Thoughts and Methods

by Waris Mazahri, Al Balagh Publications, New Delhi

- **Hammadurrahman¹**

Ilm al-Kalam, or Islamic theology, has been a pivotal branch of Islamic thought from the classical period to the present. Historically, it developed as a response to the philosophical challenges posed to Islamic beliefs (aqā'id) by external influences, particularly the Greek philosophical tradition during the late Umayyad and Abbasid periods. Scholars engaging with these theological debates were referred to as Mutakallimūn, and their primary task was to defend the foundational tenets of Islam against philosophical criticisms, especially those concerning metaphysics, epistemology, and ontology. By grounding their arguments in both reason and revelation, these scholars sought to fortify the intellectual foundation of Islam in a world where philosophical and metaphysical inquiries were paramount.

The early period of Ilm al-Kalam was characterized by a direct engagement with Greek philosophical works, notably the ideas of Aristotle and Plato, which had gained traction in the Muslim world following the translation movements. The Mutakallimūn employed their intellectual tools to safeguard Islamic doctrines, such as the oneness of God (tawḥīd), prophethood, and the afterlife, from challenges that arose due to these external philosophical frameworks.

In the modern era, however, new challenges emerged, particularly in the wake of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment. This period introduced a new scientific and philosophical temperament that fundamentally questioned religious authority, metaphysical realities, and the very existence of transcendental entities. Modern Western positivism and empiricism replaced many of the arguments and premises of Greek philosophy, placing religious dogmas under unprecedented scrutiny. This gave rise to what we now call modern Ilm al-Kalam—an intellectual effort aimed at addressing and countering the challenges posed by the scientific revolution, secularism, and materialism while upholding the integrity of Islamic belief systems.

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Dr. Waris Mazahri's work, *Modern Ilm al-Kalam in the Indian Subcontinent: An Analytical Study of Thoughts and Methods*, explores how modern South Asian scholars have responded to these challenges. Given the Indian subcontinent's rich intellectual tradition in Islamic sciences and its historical role as a hub of Islamic scholarship, Mazahri examines the contributions of key figures who have shaped the discourse of modern Ilm al-Kalam in this region.

Mazahri's book fills a crucial gap in contemporary Islamic thought by shedding light on the intellectual contributions of prominent South Asian scholars. He examines their role in developing a theological framework capable of addressing modern intellectual challenges without compromising the fundamental tenets of Islam. These scholars faced the task of reconciling Islamic dogmas with modern scientific understandings, and Mazahri systematically analyzes their methodologies, ideas, and impact on Ilm al-Kalam.

In this analytical study, Mazahri explores key figures such as Shah Waliullah, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Shibli Nomani, Sir Muhammad Iqbal, Wahiduddin Khan, Dr. Rafiuddin and Others. These scholars represent diverse approaches to addressing the challenges posed by modernity and Western intellectual hegemony, yet they all shared a common goal: to defend Islamic theology in an age dominated by secularism, positivism, and empiricism.

Mazahri highlights how these thinkers engaged with modern science, rationalism, and empirical evidence while attempting to preserve the essence of Islamic spirituality and metaphysical belief. He places their work in a broader historical context, showing how their efforts are a continuation of earlier Kalam discourses, while also adapting to the unique challenges of the modern period.

The introduction by Ammar Khan Nasir offers a broader scope for understanding the evolution of Ilm al-Kalam. Nasir contends that the discipline must now extend beyond its classical parameters to address contemporary ideological and intellectual challenges that were unheard of in the early periods of Islam. These include the rise of atheism, the clash between rationalism and scriptural literalism, and the increasing dominance of empirical science in shaping worldviews.

Nasir's insight that Ilm al-Kalam now functions as both a defense and a rationalization of Islamic beliefs is crucial to understanding the broader scope of the book. He notes that while classical Ilm al-Kalam focused on responding to external philosophical critiques, modern Kalam must also address internal doubts and contradictions brought about by modern scientific discoveries and secular ideologies.

The main themes that Mazahri focuses on throughout his analysis include:

1. The Clash between Reason ('Aql) and Revelation (Naql): This is a recurrent theme in both classical and modern Ilm al-Kalam. The tension between human reason and scriptural authority has long been a central issue in Islamic theology. Modern scholars, much like their predecessors, are tasked with defending revelation while

accommodating reason. In the modern context, this means grappling with the findings of empirical science, which often appears to contradict scriptural accounts of reality.

2. Interpretation of Scriptural Texts (Ta'wīl al-Nuṣūṣ): The question of how to interpret the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth in light of modern scientific and philosophical discoveries is central to the modern Kalamīc project. Scholars such as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and Iqbal offered innovative methods of interpretation, attempting to harmonize scripture with reason and science, though their approaches often sparked controversy. Mazahri carefully examines how these scholars approached scriptural interpretation and the consequences of their methods.
3. Miracles and Supernatural Phenomena (Kharq al-Āda): The issue of miracles, once readily accepted in pre-modern contexts, poses a significant challenge in an era dominated by empirical science. Mazahri traces how modern scholars have dealt with the concept of miracles, discussing whether they are to be understood literally or metaphorically and how they can be reconciled with modern understandings of natural laws.

Mazahri's strength lies in his ability to trace these themes back to the works of earlier philosophers like Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al-Farabi, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes), as well as theologians such as Al-Ghazali, who had faced similar challenges in their time. He situates the modern debates within a broader intellectual tradition, showing how modern thinkers both draw upon and depart from classical Kalamīc frameworks.

Analysis of Scholarly Contributions:

Mazahri's treatment of the key figures in modern Ilm al-Kalam is both comprehensive and nuanced. He examines not only their theological contributions but also the broader intellectual, political, and cultural contexts in which they operated. For example, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's engagement with Western science and rationalism is discussed in light of British colonialism and the intellectual challenges it posed to Indian Muslims. Similarly, Iqbal's philosophical thought is analyzed within the framework of colonial modernity and the struggle for Muslim identity in a rapidly changing world.

One of the most commendable aspects of Mazahri's work is his ability to remain largely objective and balanced in his analysis. While he openly admits a personal inclination towards Iqbal's thought, he offers critical reflections on all the scholars under review, pointing out both the strengths and limitations of their approaches. This intellectual honesty enhances the credibility of his analysis.

A particularly valuable contribution of the book is Mazahri's "Khulāṣat al-Baḥṡ" (Summary of the Discussion), which provides concise summaries of the arguments presented in each chapter. This section is especially useful for readers seeking to quickly grasp the key points of each scholar's thought. The synthetic approach helps to clarify the often complex and abstract discussions on theology and philosophy.

Critical Reflections:

Despite the many strengths of Mazahri's work, there are some areas where the book could have been further enriched. For instance, while Mazahri briefly touches on the contributions of Maulana Mawdudi, Hamiduddin Farahi, and Abul Kalam Azad, these figures are given comparatively little attention. This is a notable omission, particularly in the case of Mawdudi, whose articulation of Islam as a comprehensive socio-political order has had a profound impact on modern Islamic thought. Mawdudi's engagement with secularism, democracy, human rights, and governance directly intersects with the concerns of modern *Ilm al-Kalam*, and his exclusion from a more detailed analysis seems a missed opportunity.

Mazahri's failure to fully engage with Mawdudi's contributions is particularly puzzling given the latter's extensive writings on the modern challenges facing Islam. Mawdudi's vision of Islam as a holistic system that encompasses not only spiritual guidance but also governance, economics, and social order presents an important model for how *Ilm al-Kalam* can address the challenges posed by Western political and philosophical ideologies. His ideas on secularism, in particular, would have enriched the discussion of how modern Kalamic thinkers confront the separation of religion and state—a key issue in both Western and Islamic political thought.

Additionally, while Mazahri occasionally relies on less-than-reliable sources, such as PDF copies without proper publication details, this does not significantly undermine the overall credibility of his work. Nevertheless, more rigorous sourcing would have strengthened the academic rigor of the book, especially given the importance of citation accuracy in scholarly discourse.

Modern *Ilm al-Kalam* in the Indian Subcontinent is an important contribution to the study of Islamic theology and philosophy, particularly for those interested in understanding how South Asian scholars have responded to the intellectual challenges of modernity. Mazahri's analysis is thoughtful, thorough, and objective. While there are areas for improvement, particularly in the inclusion of additional scholars and more reliable references, the book remains a brilliant piece of scholarship.