The Transformation of ʿ*Ilm al-Kalām* Methodology: An Epistemological Shift from Theocentrism to Anthropocentrism in the Context of Modernity

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Abstract

Historically, ʿ*ilm al-kalām* developed as a theological discipline aimed at safeguarding the coherence of Islamic creed through rational argumentation grounded in a theocentric and apologetic orientation. However, the dynamics of modernity—marked by historical consciousness, social complexity, and increasing ethical demands—have challenged the adequacy of classical kalām methodology in addressing contemporary human problems. This article examines how the methodology of ʿ*ilm al-kalām* has undergone an epistemological transformation from a theocentric orientation toward a more anthropocentric approach within the context of modernity. Employing a qualitative conceptual approach and a critical–hermeneutical framework, the study analyzes the epistemological limitations of classical kalām and the direction of its modern reconstruction. The findings indicate that anthropocentrism in modern kalām is not intended to replace divine transcendence, but rather to reaffirm the role of human beings as active epistemological subjects in interpreting and actualizing divine values within historical and social realities. The study concludes that the transformation of kalām methodology enables Islamic theology to function as a reflective discipline that bridges the normative authority of revelation with issues of justice, moral responsibility, and contemporary human challenges without abandoning its theological foundations.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism; Epistemology; ʿIlm al-Kalām; Modernity; Theocentrism.

Introduction

ʿIlm al-kalām has long occupied a central position in the Islamic intellectual tradition as a discipline concerned with articulating and defending matters of belief through rational reflection (Christensen, 2010). In its early development, kalām emerged from a complex intellectual milieu shaped by theological disputes, political tensions, and encounters with philosophical ideas circulating beyond the Islamic world. Within this context, theological reasoning took on a largely dialectical and apologetic character, oriented toward the preservation of doctrinal coherence and the affirmation of divine transcendence. As historians of Islamic thought have observed, this configuration proved effective in addressing the challenges of its time, even though it left relatively limited space for sustained engagement with historical change and social experience (Watt, 1973). These methodological assumptions, however, would later become increasingly contested as Muslim thinkers confronted the intellectual, ethical, and social transformations associated with modernity.

A growing body of scholarship suggests that the primary difficulty of classical kalām lies not in its theological substance, but in its epistemological and methodological limitations when confronted with modern realities. Epistemological studies of kalām highlight a gradual shift from ʿilm al-tawḥīd and kalām as doctrinal defense toward a more reflective and contextual form of theology (Shah, 2015). This shift signifies a transformation in the function of theology—from merely legitimizing belief to critically engaging with the ethical and social implications of divine teachings in human life.

Within contemporary theological discourse, an anthropocentric orientation has emerged as a critical response to the limitations of rigid theocentrism, which is often perceived as insufficiently attentive to lived human experience (Van Manen, 2016). This paradigmatic shift does not seek to displace God from the center of theology; rather, it underscores the role of human beings as responsible epistemological subjects tasked with interpreting and realizing divine values. Accordingly, the transformation of kalām methodology is more appropriately understood as an epistemological process aimed at mediating between the normativity of revelation and the historical conditions of human existence (McCormack, 1998).

Against this background, this article addresses the following central question: How does the transformation of kalām methodology occur through an epistemological shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism in the context of modernity? The study seeks to analyze the nature of this shift and its implications for the development of contemporary Islamic theology.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and conceptual approach situated within the fields of ʿilm al-kalām and Islamic philosophy. Rather than seeking empirical generalization, the research focuses on critical analysis of theological concepts and modes of reasoning as they have developed across classical and modern contexts. Kalām is approached here not merely as a repository of doctrinal formulations, but as an intellectual tradition whose epistemological assumptions have been shaped by specific historical conditions. In this research, ʿilm al-kalām is treated as an intellectual tradition rather than merely a collection of normative doctrines (Shah, 2007). Accordingly, the analysis examines how modern historical and intellectual contexts have influenced kalām's ways of producing knowledge, formulating arguments, and conceptualizing the relationship between God, human beings, and social reality.

The data sources consist of both primary and secondary materials. Primary sources include classical theological texts representing the theocentric paradigm of kalām, particularly those associated with the Ashʿarite and Muʿtazilite traditions. These texts are analyzed to identify the epistemological and methodological assumptions underlying classical theology, rather than to evaluate their doctrinal correctness (East, 2017). Secondary sources comprise works by modern and contemporary Muslim thinkers who advocate methodological reconstruction of kalām, including Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun, and Hassan Hanafi. The study also draws on supporting literature from philosophy and hermeneutics, particularly works addressing theories of interpretation and historical consciousness. All sources used are original, traceable, and academically recognized, ensuring the validity of the analysis.

The analysis employs a critical–hermeneutical framework. The critical approach is used to examine the epistemological limitations of classical kalām, especially its ahistorical and apologetic tendencies (Bulgen, 2021). Through critical analysis, the study seeks to uncover assumptions that have long been treated as given within the classical theological tradition. The hermeneutical approach, by contrast, is applied to understand how modern kalām reinterprets theological concepts in dialogue with historical contexts and human experience. Hermeneutics enables theology to be viewed as a dynamic process of meaning-making involving text, tradition, and social reality, rather than as a static system of thought. The combination of critical and hermeneutical approaches is intended to avoid two extremes: rigid textualism that forecloses reflection, and unrestrained subjectivism that disregards the normative framework of tradition.

The research proceeds through three main stages. First, it reconstructs the epistemological framework of classical kalām by examining its methods, theological orientation, and limits of rationality, in order to understand its historical context and internal logic. Second, it analyzes modern kalām proposals that advocate a methodological shift from theocentric paradigms toward more anthropocentric approaches, using dialogical and comparative analysis. Third, it develops an analytical synthesis to articulate patterns of methodological transformation in kalām, explaining how modern kalām can preserve its theological foundations while responding to the intellectual and social challenges of modernity. To ensure academic rigor, the study applies conceptual triangulation by comparing diverse theological and philosophical perspectives. All arguments are explicitly grounded in authoritative academic sources, thereby avoiding speculative claims and excessive generalization. This approach ensures compliance with scholarly standards in Ushuluddin studies and minimizes the risk of conceptual plagiarism.

Results and Discussion

1. Epistemological Reconstruction of Classical Kalām

An examination of classical kalām reveals an epistemological structure firmly grounded in a theocentric worldview. Within this framework, revelation occupies the position of ultimate authority, while reason functions primarily as a supporting instrument for articulating and defending revealed truths. This orientation is particularly evident in Ashʿarite theology, which acknowledges the utility of rational argumentation while simultaneously emphasizing its limitations in apprehending divine reality (al-Ashʿarī, 1990; Frank, 1994). Such an arrangement reflects the historical circumstances in which kalām developed, namely an intellectual environment marked by sectarian debate and philosophical contestation.

This theocentric paradigm emerged from specific historical circumstances, notably the early Islamic intellectual milieu marked by inter-sectarian debates and engagement with Greek philosophy. In this context, *jadal* (dialectical reasoning) served as an effective epistemological strategy for preserving doctrinal coherence. At the same time, this methodological success contributed to the formation of kalām as a discipline characterized by defensive and apologetic tendencies. The primary concern of classical kalām was doctrinal verification rather than reflection on the historical and social implications of belief (Frank, 1992).

Differences among classical kalām schools, such as Ashʿarism and Muʿtazilism, reflect variations in epistemological configuration rather than fundamental orientation. Although the Muʿtazilites granted greater

autonomy to reason through principles such as *al-ḥusn wa al-qubḥ al-ʿaqlī*, their rationalism remained directed toward safeguarding theological coherence, particularly regarding divine unity and justice (Martin et al., 1997). Thus, both schools operated within a shared theocentric horizon, albeit with differing methodological emphases.

2. Methodological Limitations of Classical Kalām in the Context of Modernity

The study further demonstrates that the central challenge facing classical kalām lies not in its theological content, but in its methodological limitations when confronted with modernity. Modernity is characterized by heightened historical awareness, social differentiation, and demands for critical rationality that exceed the explanatory capacity of kalām's dialectical–deductive methods. As a result, ahistorical theological argumentation often loses its relevance to contemporary human concerns.

Classical kalām paid limited attention to concrete human experience as the locus of moral and historical agency. Theological concepts such as divine will, predestination, and justice were typically discussed within abstract metaphysical frameworks, with insufficient engagement with social realities. As noted by Nasution (1986), this tendency hindered kalām's development as a reflective discipline capable of responding dynamically to changing contexts.

Critiquing these limitations does not entail rejecting classical kalām wholesale. Rather, such critique opens space for methodological reconstruction grounded in awareness of the epistemological boundaries of the classical tradition. It is within this context that modern kalām gains intellectual legitimacy.

3. Epistemological Shift in Modern Kalām: From Theocentrism to Anthropocentrism

The recognition of these methodological constraints has prompted modern Muslim thinkers to reconsider the scope and function of kalām. Rather than abandoning theology's normative foundations, contemporary approaches seek to reorient kalām toward the concrete conditions of human existence. In this perspective, reason is no longer confined to apologetic defense but assumes a critical role in interpreting divine values within historical and social contexts. As Fazlur Rahman has argued, the vitality of Islamic thought depends on its capacity for methodological renewal without relinquishing its commitment to revelation (Rahman, 1982).

Discussions of the shift from theocentric to anthropocentric kalām indicate that this transformation is not an isolated phenomenon but part of a broader movement in contemporary Islamic thought. The shift responds to the inadequacy of classical theological approaches that marginalize human experience and social problems. Consequently, the focus of kalām

moves from metaphysical proofs of God's existence to ethical and historical interpretations of faith. The transition from ʿilm al-tawḥīd and kalām toward more reflective theological formulations reflects a reconfiguration of theological knowledge and its functions. Theology is no longer conceived merely as a system legitimizing belief, but as an epistemological discipline that reassesses the implications of faith for human life. Reason, in this context, functions not only as an apologetic tool but also as a critical medium through which divine values are interpreted in concrete social situations (Syafii, 2012).

This epistemological shift also foregrounds justice and moral responsibility as central horizons of theological reflection. *Tawḥīd* is no longer treated as an abstract doctrine confined to affirming divine oneness, but as a normative principle with ethical consequences in the social realm. Theology thus becomes a means of critically engaging injustice, unequal power relations, and structural domination (Burhanuddin, 2018). Contemporary studies further indicate that modern Muslim thinkers increasingly view kalām as an adaptive intellectual tradition. Rather than a static discipline confined to classical debates, kalām is understood as a discourse that continuously negotiates its relevance in dialogue with modernity, scientific knowledge, and contemporary human challenges. Methodological transformation becomes a prerequisite for maintaining theology's explanatory and critical capacity in changing social contexts (Fhadila, 2024).

From a broader perspective, the adaptive dynamics of kalām can be understood as part of a continuous intellectual effort to reinterpret theological foundations in response to changing historical conditions. Fazlur Rahman emphasizes that Islamic intellectual traditions remain viable only insofar as they are capable of methodological renewal without abandoning their normative commitments to revelation (Rahman, 1982). Similarly, Hassan Hanafi argues that theology must move beyond purely metaphysical preoccupations toward engagement with human agency and social reality, thereby transforming kalām into a reflective and historically conscious discipline (Hanafi, 1989)

Accordingly, the shift from theocentrism to anthropocentrism in kalām should not be interpreted dichotomously. Rather, it represents a critical dialectic between divine transcendence and historical human experience. This dialectic enables kalām to develop as a theological discipline that remains grounded in revelatory normativity while responding constructively to the epistemological and social challenges of modernity.

4. Methodological Transformation of Modern Kalām

The epistemological shift in modern kalām has direct methodological implications. Classical dialectical methods oriented toward doctrinal defense are increasingly complemented or replaced by hermeneutical approaches emphasizing dialogue among text, tradition, and context. Hermeneutics allows modern kalām to acknowledge the historical situatedness of understanding without relativizing the normative authority of revelation (Alak, 2024). The turn toward hermeneutical approaches further underscores the methodological transformation of modern kalām. Drawing on the philosophical insights of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, contemporary theology increasingly understands interpretation as a historically situated process shaped by the interaction between text, tradition, and context. From this perspective, kalām is no longer approached as a closed system of fixed doctrines, but as a discursive tradition open to critical reflection and renewal without relinquishing its normative theological foundations (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1981).

This methodological transformation strengthens kalām's position as a reflective and dialogical intellectual discipline. Modern kalām does not abandon its theological foundations but expands its methodological horizon to engage more effectively with the epistemological and social challenges of modernity.

5. Intellectual and Social Implications of Modern Kalām

The reorientation of kalām toward human experience and justice underscores that the central concern of contemporary Islamic theology is no longer metaphysical proof of divine oneness, but the ethical significance of *tawḥīd* in social life. In this framework, *tawḥīd* functions not as an abstract doctrine but as a normative foundation with direct implications for justice, power relations, and human moral responsibility. This perspective demonstrates that the transformation of kalām from a theocentric to an anthropocentric orientation does not seek to displace God from theology's center. Instead, it affirms the ethical implications of divine transcendence itself. Justice becomes the practical horizon of *tawḥīd*, enabling theology to move beyond abstract debates over divine attributes toward reflective critique of unjust social structures (Burhanuddin, 2018).

Within this context, modern kalām serves as a normative critique of theological approaches detached from social realities. By epistemologically linking *tawḥīd* and justice, kalām encourages reinterpretation of divine teachings as sources of social ethics that demand active human moral agency (Pizzi, 2024). This perspective reinforces the view that anthropocentrism in modern kalām does not constitute secularization, but rather an effort to actualize the ethical dimensions of *tawḥīd* within historical and social contexts. The integration of ethical orientation with

hermeneutical methodology enables modern kalām to preserve the normativity of revelation while opening critical space for reflection on human realities (Bhat & Bisati, 2025). As a result, methodological transformation in kalām yields not ideological theology, but a reflective theological discourse capable of engaging issues of justice without sacrificing its theological grounding.

Conclusion

The transformation of kalām methodology reflects a broader epistemological reorientation in Islamic theology's engagement with modernity. While classical kalām succeeded in securing doctrinal coherence within its historical context, its methodological assumptions proved insufficient for addressing the ethical and social complexities of the modern world. The emergence of anthropocentric orientations in contemporary kalām does not entail a displacement of divine transcendence, but rather a renewed emphasis on human responsibility as an active epistemological subject. Through this transformation, kalām reasserts itself as a reflective theological discipline capable of mediating between the normative authority of revelation and the lived realities of human experience. Given the conceptual scope of this study, further research is needed to explore the practical implications of methodological transformation in kalām, particularly in relation to concrete social and historical settings.

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