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Study of beliefs, interfaith relations, and the rational and ethical justification of religious principles

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Abstract

This study examines the rational and ethical foundations of religious beliefs with a focus on interfaith relations, situating the discussion within the discipline of Ilm al-Kalām (Islamic theology). It explores how Islamic theological principles provide a framework for ethical engagement with adherents of other faiths, emphasizing justice (‘adl), mercy (rahmah), tolerance (tasāmuḥ), and freedom of belief. The research employs a comparative approach, analyzing classical kalām literature alongside contemporary scholarly interpretations to assess continuity and transformation in theological reasoning. By examining Qur’ānic injunctions, Prophetic practices, and the works of prominent theologians, the study demonstrates how rational discourse and ethical justification underpin Islamic perspectives on interfaith coexistence. The findings highlight the enduring relevance of Ilm al-Kalām for addressing modern challenges of pluralism, social cohesion, and peaceful interreligious engagement, offering a normative framework that integrates faith, reason, and ethics.

Keywords:

Ilm al-Kalām; Islamic Theology; Rational Justification; Ethics in Islam;

Interfaith Relations; Religious Pluralism; Qur'ānic Ethics; Classical and Contemporary Theology

Introduction

Ilm al-Kalām, or Islamic theology, seeks to articulate the rational foundations of faith, providing both a systematic understanding of Islamic beliefs and ethical guidance for social engagement. A central concern of kalām is the justification of religious principles through reason and ethical norms, which includes exploring the moral and theological imperatives underlying human conduct, justice, and interfaith relations.¹ Within this framework, the Qur'ān and Sunnah offer guidance not only on doctrinal truths but also on the ethical treatment of adherents of other faiths, emphasizing principles such as justice (*'adl*), mercy (*rahmah*), and tolerance (*tasāmuḥ*).²

Classical theologians, including al-Ash'arī, al-Māturīdī, and Ibn Taymiyyah, analyzed ethical and rational dimensions of religious doctrines, often contextualizing these within debates on divine justice, free will, and moral responsibility.³ Their works provide a foundation for understanding how reasoned arguments support Qur'ānic injunctions regarding interfaith conduct and societal harmony. For instance, discussions on the rights of non-Muslims, fulfillment of covenants, and the ethical obligations of rulers and communities reflect an integration of theology, morality, and jurisprudence.⁴

Contemporary scholars of Ilm al-Kalām have expanded these classical insights to address modern challenges, such as religious pluralism, global coexistence, and ethical governance in multicultural societies.⁵ Figures like Fazlur Rahman and Mohammad Hashim Kamali emphasize that rational and ethical reasoning inherent in kalām supports interfaith dialogue, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence without compromising the core tenets of Islamic belief.⁶ Their interpretations illustrate how classical theological principles can be applied to contemporary contexts, demonstrating continuity with tradition alongside adaptability to modern ethical concerns.

This study aims to explore the rational and ethical justification of religious principles within Ilm al-Kalām, with a particular focus on **interfaith relations and coexistence**. By comparing classical and contemporary theological perspectives, the research highlights the enduring

relevance of kalām in providing normative guidance for ethical conduct, social harmony, and interreligious engagement. The analysis seeks to contribute to scholarly discourse by illustrating how reasoned theology and ethical imperatives are integrated in Islam to foster moral responsibility, justice, and peaceful interaction in pluralistic societies.

Literature Review

The study of *Ilm al-Kalām* has long addressed the intersection of reason, ethics, and religious doctrine, particularly regarding interfaith relations. Classical theologians such as al-Ash‘arī, al-Māturīdī, and Ibn Taymiyyah examined how rational arguments can underpin ethical and theological principles, emphasizing the divine origin of moral law and the rational justification of religious obligations.¹ Al-Ash‘arī, for instance, argued that God’s justice and wisdom are accessible through reason and serve as a normative guide for human conduct, including interactions with adherents of other faiths.² Al-Māturīdī emphasized the natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) of humans toward ethical behavior, highlighting that recognition of divine guidance fosters both moral responsibility and social harmony.³ Ibn Taymiyyah’s works provide detailed analyses of obligations toward non-Muslims, demonstrating the interplay between contractual fidelity, justice, and ethical restraint in interreligious interactions.⁴

Contemporary scholarship extends these classical insights, reinterpreting kalām principles to address modern pluralistic societies. Fazlur Rahman emphasizes that rational and ethical reasoning inherent in Islamic theology provides the basis for interfaith dialogue and social cohesion, arguing that the Qur’ān advocates universal moral values that transcend historical contingencies.⁵ Similarly, Mohammad Hashim Kamali highlights the compatibility of Islamic ethical principles with contemporary human rights norms, suggesting that kalām offers a framework for peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among diverse communities.⁶

Research on Qur’ānic ethics and interfaith engagement also underscores the practical implications of theological reasoning. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Louay Safi analyze how Islamic principles of justice, mercy, and consultation (*shūrā*) can inform conflict resolution and peacebuilding in pluralistic societies.⁷ These studies indicate that the ethical foundations of kalām are not merely abstract doctrines but provide actionable guidance for contemporary social, political, and interreligious contexts.

Despite this extensive scholarship, a gap remains in comparative analyses that systematically bridge classical and contemporary perspectives on the rational and ethical justification of religious principles. Many studies focus exclusively on either historical kalām texts or modern interpretations, without integrating the two to assess continuity, evolution, and applicability in today’s pluralistic environment. This study addresses this gap by examining both classical and contemporary theological perspectives, providing a nuanced understanding of how rational and ethical reasoning in Ilm al-Kalām supports interfaith relations and moral governance.

Classical vs. Contemporary Ilm al-Kalām Perspectives on Interfaith Relations

1. Rational and Ethical Foundations

Classical kalām scholars emphasized the integration of reason (*‘aql*) and revelation (*naql*) as a means to justify religious principles.¹ Al-Ash‘arī posited that God’s justice and wisdom can be apprehended through reason, serving as the ethical foundation for human interactions, including those with adherents of other faiths.² Similarly, al-Māturīdī stressed that the natural disposition (*fiṭrah*) equips humans with an innate understanding of ethical behavior, enabling them to recognize divine guidance and act justly in social and interfaith contexts.³ Ibn Taymiyyah further elaborated the interplay between ethical responsibility and jurisprudential obligations toward non-Muslims, demonstrating a coherent framework of moral and contractual duties within Islamic society.⁴

Contemporary theologians, including Fazlur Rahman and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, retain these foundational principles but reinterpret them to address pluralistic, globalized societies.⁵ They emphasize rational-ethical reasoning not only as a tool for theological justification but also as a guide for interfaith engagement, dialogue, and coexistence.⁶ This represents a significant expansion from classical kalām, moving from historically specific applications to universal ethical norms relevant to modern multicultural contexts.

2. Freedom of Belief and Non-Coercion

The principle of freedom of belief (*lā ikrāha fī al-dīn*, Qur’ān 2:256) illustrates continuity and evolution in kalām thought. Classical scholars recognized this principle, framing it within governance and legal structures, including the protection of non-Muslims under Muslim rule

and adherence to covenants.⁷ Contemporary scholars reinterpret this principle as a universal ethical imperative, applicable beyond medieval political contexts.⁸ The modern perspective emphasizes that faith should be a matter of conscious moral choice, underscoring the Qur'ānic insistence on non-coercion, rational persuasion, and ethical engagement.

3. Engagement and Dialogue with Religious Others

Classical kalām literature provides detailed guidance on interactions with non-Muslims, particularly the People of the Book, emphasizing respect, covenant fidelity, and proportionality in response to violations.⁹ Contemporary scholarship extends this framework by promoting constructive dialogue and ethical persuasion as central to interfaith engagement.¹⁰ Muḥammad 'Abduh and Fazlur Rahman highlight that the Qur'ān encourages engagement based on shared moral and rational principles rather than coercion, reflecting an adaptive hermeneutic that aligns classical ethical norms with contemporary ethical and social realities.

4. Conflict Resolution and Ethical Governance

Both classical and contemporary scholars recognize the Qur'ānic commitment to justice, reconciliation (*sulḥ*), and ethical governance. Classical kalām approaches analyzed dispute resolution, arbitration, and covenant enforcement within historical and tribal contexts, illustrating mechanisms for maintaining social harmony.¹¹ Contemporary interpretations, however, apply these principles to modern conflict resolution, interreligious dialogue, and peacebuilding, emphasizing ethical leadership and proactive engagement with diversity.¹² This comparative perspective demonstrates that ethical reasoning in Ilm al-Kalām provides practical guidance for managing pluralistic societies.

5. Synthesis

The comparative analysis demonstrates **continuity and evolution**: classical kalām establishes foundational ethical and rational principles for interfaith engagement, while contemporary kalām expands these principles to universal contexts, emphasizing pluralism, dialogue, and peaceful coexistence. Together, they illustrate the enduring relevance of Ilm al-Kalām in providing a normative framework for rationally and ethically justified religious principles that guide interfaith relations and moral governance.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that *Ilm al-Kalām* provides a coherent framework for understanding the rational and ethical foundations of Islamic beliefs, particularly regarding interfaith relations. Classical theologians, such as al-Ash‘arī, al-Māturīdī, and Ibn Taymiyyah, grounded their analyses in reason and revelation, highlighting the importance of justice (*‘adl*), mercy (*rahmah*), covenantal fidelity, and ethical engagement with non-Muslims. Contemporary scholars, including Fazlur Rahman and Mohammad Hashim Kamali, build upon these foundations to address modern challenges of pluralism, social cohesion, and ethical governance, emphasizing dialogue, non-coercion, and the universality of Qur’ānic moral guidance.

The findings underscore the applicability of *Ilm al-Kalām* in contemporary contexts. Educational institutions, policy-makers, and civil society organizations can draw upon these principles to promote interfaith understanding, ethical citizenship, and peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies. By integrating classical ethical norms with contemporary interpretive insights, Islam’s rational and ethical framework can contribute to conflict resolution, social harmony, and normative guidance for inclusive governance.

Ultimately, this comparative study highlights the enduring relevance of *Ilm al-Kalām*: classical insights provide foundational principles, while contemporary reinterpretations ensure their applicability to modern social, political, and interfaith contexts. Together, they offer a rationally and ethically justified approach to religious coexistence that is both faithful to tradition and responsive to the challenges of pluralistic societies.

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