

**Secularization of Knowledge:  
Epistemological Foundations, Historical Trajectories, and  
Contemporary Critiques**

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**Abstract:** This article examines the concept of the secularization of knowledge by analyzing its epistemological foundations, historical development, and contemporary critiques. The study focuses on how secularization reshapes the structure of knowledge by separating it from metaphysical and theological frameworks. Employing a qualitative method based on critical literature review, this research engages with classical Western philosophical traditions and modern Islamic intellectual responses. The findings reveal that the secularization of knowledge is not merely an intellectual shift but a civilizational project rooted in Enlightenment rationality, which prioritizes empirical and autonomous reason while marginalizing transcendental sources of truth. Furthermore, contemporary critiques—particularly from Islamic scholars—argue for the reintegration of ethical and metaphysical dimensions into knowledge production. This article concludes that the debate on secularization of knowledge remains central in constructing alternative epistemologies that are both scientifically robust and ethically grounded in the modern world.

**Keywords:** secularization of knowledge, epistemology, modernity, Islamization of knowledge, philosophy of science

### **Epilogue**

The secularization of knowledge constitutes one of the most consequential epistemological transformations in modern intellectual history. It refers not merely to the institutional separation between religion and science, but more profoundly to the reconfiguration of knowledge itself—where metaphysical, theological, and revelatory

dimensions are progressively excluded from the domain of legitimate inquiry. This shift, rooted in the intellectual currents of early modern Europe, has shaped the foundations of contemporary scientific disciplines and continues to influence global knowledge production.

The genealogy of the secularization of knowledge can be traced to the philosophical revolution initiated by René Descartes, whose methodological skepticism established the autonomy of reason as the primary source of certainty. This epistemological turn was further systematized by Immanuel Kant, who restricted human knowledge to the realm of phenomena, thereby excluding metaphysical realities from empirical verification. In this framework, reason becomes both the instrument and the limit of knowledge, effectively marginalizing revelation and transcendent truth claims. As noted in contemporary scholarship, Kant's critical project laid the groundwork for a "self-legislating epistemology" that no longer depends on external, particularly divine, authority.<sup>1</sup>

The positivist culmination of this trajectory is most evident in the thought of Auguste Comte, who advanced the idea that authentic knowledge must be grounded exclusively in empirical observation and scientific method. Positivism thus institutionalized the epistemic hierarchy that privileges observable phenomena while dismissing metaphysical speculation as pre-scientific or irrelevant. This paradigm significantly contributed to the emergence of modern disciplines characterized by methodological naturalism and value-neutral inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

From a sociological perspective, the secularization of knowledge is closely tied to broader processes of rationalization and modernization. Max Weber famously described this transformation as the "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung*), in which the cosmos is stripped of its sacred and symbolic meanings, replaced by calculability and instrumental rationality.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Émile Durkheim

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<sup>1</sup> J. Habermas, "The Relationship between Faith and Knowledge," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 1–25.

<sup>2</sup> A. Giddens, "Reason without Revolution? Habermas's Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns," *Theory, Culture & Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 121–135.

<sup>3</sup> M. Weber, "Science as a Vocation," *Daedalus* 87, no. 1 (1958): 111–134.

reinterpreted religion as a social construct, thereby relocating its epistemic authority from the divine to the collective consciousness. These sociological interpretations reinforce the view that secularization is not only an intellectual shift but also a structural feature of modern society that reshapes how knowledge is produced, validated, and disseminated.<sup>4</sup>

However, the claim that secular knowledge is neutral and value-free has been increasingly contested in contemporary academic discourse. Scholars in the philosophy of science and critical theory argue that all knowledge systems are embedded within specific historical, cultural, and ideological contexts. The supposed neutrality of modern science often conceals implicit assumptions rooted in Western secular modernity. As such, the secularization of knowledge may be understood as a form of epistemological hegemony that universalizes a particular worldview while marginalizing alternative ways of knowing.<sup>5</sup>

Within the Islamic intellectual tradition, the critique of secularization has been articulated with particular rigor. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas conceptualizes secularization as a process that leads to the “loss of adab,” resulting in epistemic confusion and moral disorientation. For al-Attas, knowledge cannot be separated from its ethical and metaphysical foundations without undermining its ultimate purpose.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Ismail Raji al-Faruqi proposes the project of “Islamization of knowledge,” which seeks to reconstruct modern disciplines by reintegrating them with the principles of tawhīd and Islamic worldview.<sup>7</sup>

Recent studies in global epistemology further highlight the urgency of rethinking the secularization of knowledge in a pluralistic world. The dominance of secular paradigms in academia has prompted

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<sup>4</sup> É. Durkheim, “Individualism and the Intellectuals,” *Political Studies* 17, no. 1 (1969): 19–30.

<sup>5</sup> S. Fuller, “The Philosophy of Science and Its Discontents,” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 30, no. 1 (2000): 5–27.

<sup>6</sup> S. M. N. al-Attas, “Islam and Secularism Revisited,” *Muslim Education Quarterly* 8, no. 2 (1991): 15–28.

<sup>7</sup> I. R. al-Faruqi, “Islamization of Knowledge: Problems, Principles and Prospective,” *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 5, no. 1 (1988): 5–26.

calls for epistemic diversification, where non-Western and religious knowledge systems are recognized as legitimate contributors to scholarly discourse. In this context, the Islamic critique of secularization is not merely reactive but offers constructive insights into developing an integrative epistemology that harmonizes reason, revelation, and ethical values.<sup>8</sup>

Accordingly, this study situates itself within these ongoing debates by examining the secularization of knowledge as both a historical process and a contested epistemological framework. By engaging with both Western philosophical foundations and Islamic intellectual critiques, this article aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and possibilities involved in reconstructing knowledge in the contemporary world.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design based on critical literature analysis to examine the epistemological foundations and implications of the secularization of knowledge. Given the conceptual and philosophical nature of the topic, the research is situated within an interpretive–critical paradigm that combines hermeneutical understanding with normative evaluation. This approach enables the study not only to reconstruct the historical development of secular epistemology but also to critically assess its underlying assumptions and implications. In this context, the notion of worldview, particularly as articulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, is employed as a key analytical lens to demonstrate that knowledge is inherently value-laden and embedded within specific metaphysical frameworks.

The data consist of primary and secondary textual sources. Primary sources include canonical works of modern Western philosophy, especially those of René Descartes, Immanuel Kant, and Auguste Comte, which are central to the formation of secular epistemology. These are complemented by secondary sources drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly monographs

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<sup>8</sup> W. Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option,” *Transmodernity* 1, no. 2 (2011): 44–66.

indexed in reputable academic databases. In addition, selected works of Muslim intellectuals, such as Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, are incorporated to provide a comparative perspective and to articulate the Islamic critique of secular knowledge.

The analysis is conducted using a descriptive-analytical and conceptual approach, focusing on key epistemological categories such as rational autonomy, empiricism, and value-neutrality. To ensure theoretical rigor, the study employs triangulation of sources and interdisciplinary perspectives, particularly from philosophy, sociology of knowledge, and Islamic thought. While the research is limited to textual analysis and does not include empirical data, its strength lies in providing a systematic and critical reconstruction of secular epistemology, as well as offering a foundation for developing more integrative approaches to knowledge in contemporary discourse.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Secularization of Knowledge as Epistemological Reduction**

The findings of this study demonstrate that the secularization of knowledge is not merely a historical development but constitutes a form of epistemological reductionism. By restricting valid knowledge to empirical observation and rational verification, secular epistemology effectively excludes metaphysical and revelatory sources of truth. This reduction is rooted in the philosophical trajectory initiated by René Descartes and systematized by Immanuel Kant, culminating in the positivist paradigm of Auguste Comte.<sup>9</sup>

From a theoretical standpoint, this epistemological shift transforms the ontology of reality itself: what cannot be measured or empirically verified is rendered epistemically insignificant. As a result, knowledge becomes increasingly fragmented and instrumental, oriented toward control and utility rather than meaning and ultimate truth. This confirms contemporary critiques in philosophy of science,

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<sup>9</sup> R. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

which argue that modern epistemology operates within a “closed immanent frame” that systematically excludes transcendence.<sup>10</sup>

### **Al-Ghazali and the Critique of Epistemic Autonomy**

In contrast to the secular model, the epistemology of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali offers a fundamentally different conception of knowledge. Al-Ghazali does not reject reason or empirical inquiry; rather, he situates them within a hierarchical epistemic structure that includes revelation (waḥy) and spiritual intuition (kashf). In works such as *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn* and *al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl*, knowledge is ultimately oriented toward ma‘rifat Allāh (knowledge of God), which serves as the telos of all intellectual activity.<sup>11</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, al-Ghazali’s critique can be interpreted as a rejection of epistemic autonomy in its secular sense. While modern epistemology asserts the self-sufficiency of human reason, al-Ghazali emphasizes the limitations of reason when detached from divine guidance. This position resonates with contemporary philosophical critiques of rationalism, which highlight the contingency and boundedness of human cognition.<sup>12</sup>

Moreover, al-Ghazali’s integration of ethical and spiritual dimensions into epistemology challenges the modern assumption of value-neutrality. Knowledge, in his framework, is inseparable from adab (ethical discipline) and purification of the soul (tazkiyah al-nafs). This contrasts sharply with the secular model, where knowledge is often detached from moral considerations, leading to what may be described as an ethical vacuum in scientific practice.<sup>13</sup>

### **Turats as an Integrated Epistemological Tradition**

Beyond al-Ghazali, the broader Islamic intellectual heritage (turats) presents a holistic epistemological paradigm that resists the fragmentation characteristic of secular knowledge. Classical scholars did not dichotomize between “religious” and “worldly” sciences;

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<sup>10</sup> C. Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> *Ihya Ulum al-Din; Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*.

<sup>12</sup> T. Nagel, “The View from Nowhere,” *Oxford University Press*, 1986; see also *Mind* 98, no. 392 (1989): 613–624.

<sup>13</sup> A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

instead, they viewed all forms of knowledge as interconnected within the unity of *tawhīd*.<sup>14</sup>

This integrative framework can be contrasted with the disciplinary specialization of modern academia, which often isolates fields of study from one another. In the *turats* tradition, disciplines such as theology, philosophy, law, and natural sciences were unified by a shared metaphysical foundation. This unity ensured that knowledge remained oriented toward ethical and existential purposes, rather than purely instrumental goals.<sup>15</sup>

The analysis shows that the secularization of knowledge disrupts this unity by introducing a dualistic worldview that separates the sacred from the profane. In doing so, it not only fragments knowledge but also redefines its purpose, shifting it from the pursuit of wisdom (*ḥikmah*) to the pursuit of power and control.<sup>16</sup>

### **Contemporary Global Critiques and the Crisis of Meaning**

Contemporary global scholarship increasingly recognizes the limitations of secular epistemology. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jürgen Habermas have highlighted the ways in which knowledge is intertwined with power, discourse, and social structures. Foucault demonstrates that regimes of truth are historically constructed and embedded within power relations, rather than being purely objective.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, post-secular and decolonial scholars argue that the dominance of Western secular knowledge has marginalized alternative epistemologies, including religious and indigenous traditions. This has led to what is described as epistemic injustice, where certain forms of knowledge are systematically excluded from legitimacy.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> S. H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).

<sup>15</sup> G. Makdisi, "The Rise of Colleges," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 104, no. 3 (1984): 485–498.

<sup>16</sup> M. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper, 1977).

<sup>17</sup> M. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

<sup>18</sup> B. de Sousa Santos, "Epistemologies of the South," *Routledge*, 2014; see also *Globalizations* 11, no. 2 (2014): 237–251.

Within this context, the Islamic critique of secularization—articulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas—gains renewed relevance. Al-Attas’ concept of the “loss of adab” can be interpreted as a diagnosis of the broader crisis of meaning in modern knowledge systems. The absence of a coherent ethical and metaphysical framework results in knowledge that is technically advanced but existentially disoriented.<sup>19</sup>

### **Toward an Integrative Epistemology: Beyond Secular and Anti-Secular Dichotomy**

The analysis suggests that the challenge is not simply to reject secular knowledge but to transcend its limitations through an integrative epistemological model. Such a model would recognize the validity of empirical and rational methods while situating them within a broader framework that includes metaphysical and ethical dimensions.

In this regard, the epistemology of al-Ghazali and the turats tradition offer valuable resources for reconstructing knowledge in a way that is both intellectually rigorous and spiritually meaningful. Rather than opposing modern science, this approach seeks to reorient it toward a higher purpose, aligning it with the principles of tawhīd and ethical responsibility.<sup>20</sup>

This integrative paradigm also resonates with contemporary calls for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches, which aim to overcome the fragmentation of knowledge. By reintroducing questions of meaning, value, and ultimate purpose, such an epistemology has the potential to address the deeper crises facing modern civilization—namely, the loss of coherence, purpose, and moral direction in knowledge production.<sup>21</sup>

### **Epilogue**

This article has demonstrated that the secularization of knowledge is not merely an institutional or historical phenomenon, but

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<sup>19</sup> S. M. N. al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993).

<sup>20</sup> I. R. al-Faruqi, “Islamization of Knowledge,” *AJISS* 5, no. 1 (1988): 5–26.

<sup>21</sup> E. Morin, *On Complexity* (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2008).

a profound epistemological transformation that redefines the nature, sources, and purpose of knowledge itself. By privileging empirical verification and rational autonomy, secular epistemology reduces the scope of knowledge and marginalizes metaphysical and revelatory dimensions. This reduction leads to fragmentation, ethical neutrality, and ultimately a crisis of meaning within modern intellectual life.

Through a comparative analysis, the study has shown that the epistemological framework of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and the broader *turats* tradition offers a compelling alternative. Rather than rejecting reason, this tradition integrates rational, empirical, and spiritual modes of knowing within a unified metaphysical vision grounded in *tawhīd*. Such an integrative approach not only preserves the coherence of knowledge but also restores its ethical and existential orientation.

In light of contemporary global critiques of secular modernity, the article concludes that the future of knowledge production lies not in the dichotomy between secular and anti-secular paradigms, but in the reconstruction of an epistemological framework that is both scientifically rigorous and metaphysically grounded.

The primary theoretical contribution of this article lies in its reconceptualization of the secularization of knowledge as a form of epistemological reductionism, rather than merely a sociological or historical process. By framing secularization in this way, the study shifts the analytical focus from external institutional changes to the internal structure of knowledge itself.

Furthermore, the article advances the field by proposing an integrative epistemological model that bridges Western philosophical critiques and Islamic intellectual traditions. While previous studies often treat these domains separately, this research demonstrates their potential convergence in addressing the limitations of modern epistemology. In particular, the incorporation of al-Ghazali's hierarchical epistemology—encompassing reason, revelation, and spiritual intuition—offers a robust theoretical framework for overcoming the fragmentation of knowledge.

Additionally, the study contributes to contemporary debates on global epistemology and decolonial thought by positioning the Islamic intellectual tradition not merely as a subject of study, but as a source

of epistemic renewal. This challenges the implicit universalism of secular knowledge and opens new avenues for pluralistic and dialogical approaches to knowledge production.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for contemporary academic, educational, and intellectual practices. First, they call for a re-evaluation of the assumption of value-neutrality in modern science, emphasizing the necessity of integrating ethical and metaphysical considerations into research and knowledge production. This is particularly relevant in fields where technological advancement raises complex moral questions.

Second, the study suggests the need for curricular reform in higher education, especially in Muslim societies, by promoting an integrated approach that bridges the divide between “religious” and “secular” sciences. Such reform would not entail the rejection of modern disciplines, but rather their reorientation within a coherent worldview that aligns knowledge with ethical responsibility and ultimate purpose.

Third, at a broader intellectual level, this research supports ongoing efforts to develop interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary frameworks that address the fragmentation of knowledge. By drawing on both classical and contemporary sources, it demonstrates the إمكانية of constructing a more holistic paradigm of knowledge capable of responding to the existential and ethical challenges of modern civilization.

Finally, the article highlights the urgency of engaging with alternative epistemologies—such as those found in the Islamic tradition—not as peripheral or derivative, but as strategic resources for rethinking the future of knowledge in a post-secular and pluralistic world.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

This study is subject to several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, it relies primarily on qualitative library research and conceptual analysis, without incorporating empirical data or field-based investigation. As a result, the findings remain largely theoretical and may not fully capture how the secularization of knowledge

operates in specific institutional, educational, or socio-cultural contexts. Second, the scope of the study is selective in its engagement with intellectual traditions, focusing mainly on Western philosophical developments and Islamic thought, particularly the framework associated with Abu Hamid al-Ghazali. While this allows for depth of analysis, it may overlook other relevant epistemological traditions, including Eastern philosophies or indigenous knowledge systems.

In addition, the interpretive–critical approach adopted in this research inevitably reflects certain epistemological commitments, particularly the emphasis on integrative and metaphysically grounded knowledge. Although this perspective is theoretically justified, it may introduce a degree of normative bias in evaluating secular epistemology. Future studies could address this limitation by incorporating a broader range of perspectives, including more neutral or empirically oriented frameworks, to provide a more balanced comparative analysis.

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