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# **Chapter 5: Plagues of Knowledge**

"Truth is a polished house,

Capricious is a raised dust,

When the dust is raised,

Even those endowed with eyesight cannot see."

(Saadi)

We learnt so far that in our search for truth, it is vital to utilize the tools of knowledge accordingly. If you are in search of an optical phenomenon, you are bound to use the power of your eyesight. Similarly, to solve a mathematical problem you are in need of your mental and rational tools. At the same time to discover the spiritual secrets of the world, self-purification is a very primary tool to use.

In other words, as there are different realms of knowledge from sensory to rational to spiritual, the relevant tools for each realm ought to be utilized accordingly.

There are, however, plagues, which may affect the accuracy and the precision of each tool that a searcher for knowledge, any knowledge, wishes to use. For instance, one who is colourblind is incapable of recognizing different colours and distinguishing them from one another. Colour blindness, therefore, is a plague, which affects his access to the obvious knowledge of various colours.

### **Plagues Of Knowledge**

Plague, in medicine, is an infectious disease caused by certain bacterium. Although by the Grace of God human plague is rare in most of today's world, this disease is still common in plants. It causes damages to the leaves and fruits of out trees.

I have borrowed the term here to refer to personality and cognitive disorders that damage or cloud a sound judgment, and instead dictate a false opinion. Without diagnosis and treatment of plagues affecting our mind we will surely go astray in our guest for truth. The following are some of the common

plagues that may influence our knowledge.

### **Personal Interests**

We sometimes say 'truth hurts', why? If man by nature is in search for truth, then why does it hurt?! What happens that sometimes truth tastes sweeter than honey and at other times it becomes as bitter as bitter melon? This happens when we centralize ourselves in our search for truth, so when it satisfies the self and meets our self-interests, we accept it as truth, or else we treat it as the bitterest falsehood that sometimes we'd rather die than face a truth.

An interest (in the case of 'self-interest') may be defined as a commitment, goal, or value held by an individual or an institution even if it were to be false.

If you revisit your situation rationally, you will admit that it is better to get hurt by a 'truth' than be comforted with a 'lie'. For, if the truth hurts you that means you have been living a lie. So, yes truth may initially hurt but it also heals when taken into heart and followed.

Therefore, the first and foremost plague affecting the discovery of truth is personal interests. A genuine researcher for truth must admit the truth whether it is in his favor or against him. The range of personal interests is so wide and varies from person to person including but not limited to commercial gains, position, family, tribe and nationality, religion and so on and so forth.

Sadly, in many instances, our judgement is influenced by our personal interests.

A conflict of interest in research exists when an individual or the company has interests in the outcomes of the research that may lead to a personal or company's advantage and that might therefore, in actuality, compromise the integrity of the research.

We live in the age of 'diet guidelines' which contain the list of 'good foods' and 'bad foods'. Amazingly, 'glass of wine' appears in the list of 'good foods' with the justification of 'moderate drinking'! Why?

Simply because much of academic studies are sponsored by major corporate companies including their interests in the result of those researches. Surely, they will never sponsor a research whose results will be in conflict with their interests. Surely, they will never sponsor a researcher whose findings show that it is grapes instead that are beneficial, not the alcohol! This research tastes very sour to them and hence no sponsor!

The same or even stronger argument can be raised about the tobacco industry. Indisputably, smoking kills more people annually than alcohol and illegal drugs combined. Then why don't the governments ban it?!

The answer is simple: Too many people 'like' it and therefore those sitting in the legislation house would

lose their seats and governments lose billions in taxes otherwise! This is where the hypocrisy of democracy is unveiled!

Juha is a 'wise fool' of Arabic folklore. Once upon a time he borrowed a pot from one of his neighbours. Upon return he put a smaller pot inside it. When the neighbour asked about the smaller pot, Juha explained that 'his pot had given birth'! The neighbour accepted and kept the two pots.

Another day Juha again borrowed a pot, this time a larger pot. The neighbour happily lent him his largest pot in hope of gaining another one!

After a while the neighbour asked Juha if he wishes to return the pot? "Unfortunately, she had a maternal death", replied Juha. The neighbour while looking astonished said: Since when do pots die?! Juha calmly replied: "If they can give birth, they can surely die during pregnancy too."

Once the Police Commander of our local police station joined a celebration at our Islamic Centre. I asked him: "Given all the increasing alcohol-related crimes why can't the government just ban the transaction of alcoholic beverages inasmuch as narcotic drugs are banned?" You know what he said?!

"Drinking is part of our culture. I also drink, and the alcohol industry is a very profitable industry for Australia!"

The implied meaning of the commander's comment is the more people drink, the merrier the liquor industries and the wealthier the tax collectors!

The commander's comment reminded me of what the Almighty God states:

"They follow a conjecture and that which they themselves desire." (53:23)

Saadi of Shiraz; the Iranian poet and mystic of the 13th century AD shows how personal interest clouds one's judgement in the following poem:

"Truth is a polished house, Capricious is a raised dust,

When the dust is raised, Even those endowed with eyesight cannot see." (Saadi)

The late Allamah al-Hilli, was a renown Shi'a jurist of the 14th century AD and the first scholar titled 'Ayatullah.' He wanted to conduct a research about the rules concerning the purification of water wells. To ensure his well at home does not cloud his jurisprudential judgement he first sealed the well.1

We sometimes meet people whose sole motive of denying religion is that they do not wish to give up their lifestyle. A Muslim lady who was not practicing Hijab was insisting that the law of female's headscarf is not mentioned in the Qur'an. I asked her that if I had shown her would she start wearing it?! She kept insisting that she was sure it was never mentioned in the Qur'an. I said: "hypothetically speaking, would you truly practice it if at all it was mentioned in the Qur'an." She said: "I'm sure it is not, but yes, if it were mentioned I would have practiced it." Upon hearing her confession, I read the Arabic version of Verse 31 of Chapter 24 for her and convinced her that the law of headscarf is clearly mentioned in the Qur'an! Guess what she said in the end?!

"I knew I shouldn't have accepted your challenge. You made me feel guilty now!"

Joe is one of my Australian friends. When I met him for the first time, he had a bundle of printed material against Islam. By the Grace of God, after about two years he confessed that 'Mansour, if one day I want to choose a religion, that would be Islam, however I'm not prepared yet to give up my red wine on my dinner table!

How accurately the Holy Qur'an describes these people:

"Nay! (Man denies the Day of Judgment, so) he desires to continue committing sins. (Thus, he hypocritically) asks: When will be this Day of Resurrection?! (75:5-6)

Hans Christian Anderson, a Danish author of the 19th century, whose fairy tales have been translated into more than 100 languages, has well introduced the effect of this plague in his fairy tale *The Emperor's New Clothes'*. In his tale he shows how two schemers could play with the intelligence of the Emperor and all his subjects, except for a young boy who lacks any personal interest and unveils the truth about the Emperor's so-called *new clothes*!

Two weavers promised an emperor a new set of clothes that they said was invisible to those who were unfit for their positions, stupid or incompetent—while in reality, they made no clothes at all, making everyone believe the clothes were invisible to them. When the emperor paraded before his subjects in his new 'clothes', no one dared to say that they did not see any suit of clothes on him for fear that they would be seen as stupid. Finally, a child cried out, "But he isn't wearing anything at all."

## **Pride**

"There is only one veil between you and a sound piece of advice - your pride."

(Imam Ali ('a))2

Although it is quite healthy to keep our confidence and pride in a positive manner, it can however be an obstacle to our search for truth, particularly if it establishes a feeling or haughty attitude of superiority over others. A true searcher for knowledge should always be humble to 'knowledge' irrespective if it is consistent with his social, age, cultural and/or religious backgrounds or not. The Holy Qur'an with reference to this plague states:

"And they denied them (the divine signs) wrongfully and arrogantly." (27:14)

## **Compound Ignorance**

As explained in the second chapter, there are two types of ignorance. The first is simple in which the person is aware of his ignorance, and the other is compound where a person assumes he knows while he does not.

I had just enrolled at the Islamic seminary of Qom in 1978 in the School of the late Ayatullah Golpayegani. One day he visited us and while quoting a narration that 'a little knowledge is more dangerous (than no knowledge)', he explained that 'the incomplete of everything is better than nothing except for the incompleteness of knowledge. That is, it is better to be totally ignorant than having the incomplete knowledge of something, for the latter always assumes he knows whilst he does not. For instance, it is better to be quite healthy than no health at all, quite wealthy than in total poverty, but little knowledge results in compound ignorance. Ibn Sina also says:

"Avoid incomplete cleverness."

The mule of a so called 'philosopher' said one day

If they were fair, I would be riding

For I am a simple ignorant (animal)

But my companion (i.e. the rider) is a compound ignorant3

## **Hypocrisy**

As man grows up, he learns more to be able to be hypocritical and how to hide his real face from people. As such, hypocrisy is less observed among children. When a child is hungry at a party, he/she openly expresses his feeling of hunger.

Many may read books and the study of comparative religions and different schools of thoughts, but not all of them search for the sake of learning. People who have hidden agendas such as learning to misuse or to pretend that they are learned people to gain a position, are rather hypocrites and their sheer hypocrisy will prevent them from reaching the truth. This disease is observed among some of the Orientalists or writers of particular religious zealots when condemning another religion or sect.

A hypocrite is not in fact in quest of truth, he has already formed an opinion and is just attempting at proving his enemies wrong.

Hypocrisy is considered a severe mental disease in Islam. In more than 13 chapters of the Holy Quran this disease has been analyzed. Chapter 63 of the Holy Quran is dedicated to unveiling this disease, introducing the distorted personality of hypocrites.

## **Prejudice & Stubbornness**

چون غرض آمد هنر پوشیده شد صد حجاب از دل به سوی دیده شد

"When spite arrives, art departs
One hundred veils travel from heart to eyes."

-Rumi-

Prejudice is a very destructive force against discovering a truth. The central problem of prejudice rests on egotism, in the sense of selfishness, self-family, self-tribe, self-race and even self-religious zealots to condemn whatever and whoever is against the self. The life of selfish people rotates around the triangle of 'me, myself and I'. Usually prejudice is removed when you are more accurately informed.

Frederick Copleston in the preface of his 'A History of Philosophy' criticizes the authors of history for their biased approaches, yet agrees that it is quite impossible for an author not to influence his personal opinion. He assumes that his narration is free from any prejudice, yet it represents the Orthodox scholarly interpretation of history.

Prejudice can be toward a party, a group, an ethnic and patriot, which sum it all up as "personal interests".

A man asked Imam Ali ('a) to define Islam. The Imam replied: "I will give you such a precise definition that no one has ever given. Islam means submission to truth". Islam is therefore contrary to stubbornness and prejudice.

From the Islamic point of view, 'truth' for a Muslim is like a stolen property that he is searching for. For instance, if you have lost your wedding ring you don't mind who brings it to you; whether they are from the same party, religion, creed, colour, social status, friend or not. Such shall be truth for a Muslim.

Stubbornness is also a natural result of prejudice. Once a person forms prejudicial opinion, it makes him stubborn. Always, remember ignorance is not the absence of knowledge, it is the refusal to acquire it.

In your search for truth, promise yourself not to form any opinion beforehand about anything. Avoid any pre-judgment by insufficient knowledge, irrational feelings and inaccurate stereotypical approaches.

## **Blind Following**

One of the very destructive plagues of knowledge is to blindly follow inherited opinions. Naturally, when an opinion is accepted for many years or centuries, people tend to take its truth for granted.

The general acceptance of the Ptolemaic system of the geocentric universe in which the earth was considered to be stationary and motionless at the centre of the universe, was taken for granted for more than 13 centuries until Copernicus, a Polish astronomer came up with his theory that the sun is at rest near the centre.

One of the major problems of the reformers with people of their age has always been their fear of any change to the inherited systems they have been practicing, whether it has been rational or not.

Another spectrum of blind following is to follow the majority because of their number. For a true researcher of knowledge, the number of people is not a determining factor; it is reasoning and sensibility, which determines facts. Sadly, as the mass is easily manipulated, they are not usually with a truth. We live in the age of 'majority rules' when truth is decided by the vote of majority, where following 'peer pressure' and 'keeping up with the Joneses' is a social norm!

A genuine researcher, therefore, ought to be free from the kingdom of number.

It is very important that when you are in search of the truth, you are not intimidated or discouraged by currents against you. You stay loyal to truth and nothing but the truth; the whole truth.

Imam Al-Sadiq ('a) presents this fact in the following parable:

"If you have a walnut in your hand and people say you hold a pearl, it won't benefit you, and if you have pearl in your hand but people say it is a walnut it doesn't reduce its value."4

### **Causes of Blind Following**

### **Mental Immaturity**

This is observed in people who are biologically grown but mentally are still in their childhood.

#### **Captured By Famous Personalities**

Just because a famous scholar or a scientist has expressed an opinion it does not make it necessarily valid. The validity of every claim must be scientifically examined. Karl Popper used to say: "Great men may make great mistakes." Always keep in mind that human blunder is inevitable for fallible humans.

### **Ethnical Identity**

Your ethnic identity attachment could lead to another element of blindness. The Holy Qur'an with reference to ignorant people who keep honouring their culture no matter how irrational it may be states:

"When it is said to them: "Follow what Allah has sent down." They say: "Nay! We shall follow what we found our fathers following." (Would they do that!) Even though their fathers did not understand anything nor were they guided?" (2: 170)

Imam Al-Sadiq ('a) visited one of his companions. Considering his financial status, the holy Imam asked why he didn't provide a more spacious house for his family?! The man replied: My ancestors used to live here, and I also wish to live in it and keep it as it was! The holy Imam with an opposing tone said: Even though your forefathers didn't know better or couldn't afford better?!

#### Love/Hate

Being blindly infatuated with someone can easily cloud our judgment. Imam Ali ('a) is quoted to have said:

"Whoever loves something, (his love) turns him blind and sickens his heart. Then his vision and hearing are impaired."5.

## **Superficial Observation**

Many ideas in a superficial and trivial look may seem wrong, but when you spend more time on them and have more in-depth study you may acknowledge them. The difference between a superficial look and the professional one is the difference between Newton's look at an apple tree and other people's view.

### **Political Influence**

An Arabic expression says: "People are on the religion of their kings." The motto of all politicians is what God quotes from Pharaoh:

### "I show you only that which I see (as correct)." (The Holy Qur'an, 40:29)

They justify invading countries by 'fake evidence' that they 'produce weapons of mass destruction', or 'harbour terrorists', and if any individual dares questioning their integrity, he is a 'risk to national security' or a 'hate preacher'!

The Almighty God reveals the confession of some of the hell-bound people:

"They said: Our Lord! Verily, we obeyed our chiefs and our great ones, and they misled us from the (Right) way." (33:67)

During the civil war imposed on Imam Ali ('a), a man from Kufa rode his he-camel (Arabic: Jamal) to Syria. A Syrian stopped the Kufan and claimed that the camel was his. They raised the dispute to the court in which the judge was Muawiyah. Fifty Syrian witnesses falsely testified during the judicial proceeding that the she-camel (Arabic: Naqah) belonged to the Syrian man! The Kufan who was caught in a foreign land tried to prove their perjury. He said to the judge: "All the witnesses testified that the 'she-camel' is his, but my camel is male!" Muawiyah while refusing his appeal said to the Kufan: "Go back home and tell Ali Ibn Abi Talib that I will fight him with people who do not distinguish between male and female camels." 6

## **Propaganda**

The propaganda agencies attempt to conduce psychological warfare against their enemies. Today the technological advancement of the mass media, especially those of the electronic media, expand the outlets available to propagandists.

The story of a man from Damascus who was brainwashed by the propaganda machines of Muawiyah and his insulting attitude towards Imam Al-Hasan ('a) is a famous historical example to show how propaganda can influence the masses.

Paul Joseph Goebbels was a German Nazi politician and one of Hitler's closest associates. The following statement is often attributed to him or to Hitler himself: "If you tell a lie big enough and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it."

The effect of propaganda is sometimes so strong as in the story of the fool who was disturbed by some naughty children. In order for him to get rid of the children he told them that someone was distributing free ice-cream on the other side of the city. When all of the children left towards the place he thought for a while and then immediately followed them. Someone asked him: "Why are you following them?" Just in case it was true!! "he replied.

## **Indulging In Sins**

The last but not the least plague of knowledge, any knowledge, is indulging in sin. Truth is pure and will not be achieved with impurity. Seeking pleasure contradicts and avoids discoveries in search for truth. The Almighty God with reference to this plague reveals:

"Nay! (Man denies the Judgment Day, so) he desires to continue committing sins. (Thus, he hypocritically) asks: When will be this Day of Resurrection?! (75:5-6)

The above plagues are often combined which obviously makes the cure less feasible. Imagine one who follows his whim and desire who is too proud to admit a truth, who is stubborn and under the influence of a massive propaganda machine against the truth! Sadly, with the rise of Islamophobia, finding such figures who are filled with a lot of hatred against Islam and Muslims is not difficult.

## **Two Tips For Researchers For Truth**

### **Make No Assumptions**

Assumption is the first obstacle in search for truth. Assumption means to take something for granted and to believe it to be true without proof. The treatment is to promise yourself to make no assumptions before looking at and examining the evidence.

### **Do Not Justify**

By justification here I mean to try to find excuses to justify an irrational issue, due to your preassumption influence. A prime example of such justification is a Christian belief that you are absolved from all sins if and only if you believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord, irrespective of your deeds! This false doctrine would justify committing sins as it has been.

- 1. Mutahhari, Majmoo'e Athar, vol.26 p.65
- 2. Behar, vol. 75 p. 109
- 3. Tafsir Roohul-Ma'ani, vol. 21 p.55
- 4. Tawhaful-Uqool, p.386
- 5. Nahjul-Balagha, Sermon 109
- 6. Mas'oodi, Moruju-Thahab, vol. 3 p.41

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