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The Status of Knowledge in Islam

The Status of Knowledge in Islam[1]
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Abstract

Acquiring and possessing knowledge (‘ilm) has a great status in Islam, as knowledge is highly encouraged by the Holy Qur’an and Muslim scholars. God the Exalted introduces Himself using the adjective ‘All-knowing’ (‘aleem) 122 times in the Qur’an. Moreover, the Qur’an on multiple occasions has glorified those with knowledge, such as scholars (‘alim) and teachers (mu’allim).

This article will present a brief look at the importance of knowledge in Islam, as well as the high status educators and scholars enjoy as a result. This knowledge is only is efficient once it is seen through the seeker’s actions. Upon glancing at the verses of the Qur’an and narrations, the outcome of knowledge and learning is gnosis of God (ma’rifah), sincerity in actions (ikhlas), and a sense of responsibility before God and His creation.

The Importance of Knowledge

Islam was revealed in a land where the people were known for their ignorance. Their beliefs, sayings, and actions were clear signs of their distance from knowledge and civilization. For years, people engaged in battles against one another over petty issues, resulting in a high number of deaths. Fathers would bury their newborn daughters in cold-blooded machoism. Worshipping materials such as rocks, wood, dates, circumambulating naked around the house of God, holding a strong caste system, and devaluing the status of women are clear examples of the ignorance during the time before Islam, called the ‘Age of Ignorance’ (Jahiliyyah).

This reveals the difficulty the Holy Prophet of Islam experienced in bringing his message. One of Islam’s main goals was to motivate people to learn and acquire gnostic knowledge (ma’arif). The Qur’an

emphasizes on the status of knowledge, the importance of learning, and the value of scholars, teachers, and students. The Holy Qur'an has also encouraged people to attain knowledge through sending the Prophet as one who integrated learning and instilled a yearning for knowledge in the people's hearts:

كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولًا مِنْكُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمْ مَا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

As We sent to you an Apostle from among yourselves, who recites to you Our signs, and purifies you, and teaches you the Book and wisdom, and teaches you what you did not know. (***2:151***)

On many accounts, the Holy Qur'an repetitively glorifies scholars and condemns the ignorant as a method of encouraging the Muslims to seek knowledge and dishearten them from remaining in a state of ignorance:

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ۗ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

...Say, "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" Only those who possess intellect take admonition. (***39:9***)

In the Holy Qur'an, God the Exalted praises the ignorant man who follows a knowledgeable man and at times has advised people to find the truth by seeking out knowledgeable individuals even if they are from other religions:

فَاسْأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

If ye realize this not, ask of those who possess the Message. (***16:43; 21:7***)

This verse portrays the rational necessity for the ignorant to refer to the knowledgeable.[3] Since the people of the Abrahamic faith are educated in answering questions regarding the existence of messengers and prophets before Prophet Muhammad (s),[4] God has commanded the polytheists, who are skeptical on this matter, to refer to them for their knowledge.

The Prophet of Islam spoke of status of knowledge and understanding on multiple occasions. He once said, "Knowledge is the root of all good and ignorance is the root of all bad."[5]

Truly, attaining eternal and worldly bliss, a level which the prophets of God had reached, cannot be achieved if one does not know what path to follow. With regards to this, Prophet Muhammad said, "The closest of men to the status of prophethood are those who are accustomed to knowledge and struggle (jihad)."[6]

The Holy Prophet of Islam has discussed the superiority of knowledge over worship (‘ibadah) multiple times, where he says, “In the eyes of God, the virtue of knowledge is more favorable than worship.”7 He has also said, “A small amount of knowledge is better than much worship.”8

It was based on this given status of knowledge that the Holy Prophet encouraged Muslims to seek it: “Seek knowledge even if it be in China, because seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.”9 He has also said, “In the eyes of God, seeking knowledge is more valuable than prayer (salat), fasting (sawm), pilgrimage (hajj), and struggle (jihad).”10

The practical life story (sirah) of the Holy Prophet was such that he preferred a scholarly gathering over one devoted entirely to worship: One day the Prophet entered the mosque, and upon arrival he noticed two groups of people. He said, “Both groups are good. One group is glorifying and beseeching God and the other is seeking knowledge and conveying it to the uneducated. However, the latter group is the better of the two, for I have been sent to teach men.” Subsequently, the Holy Prophet sat amongst those who were busy obtaining knowledge.11

Imam Ali (a),12 considered knowledge as a source of life for one’s heart and the light for one’s eyes against the blindness and weakness of the body.13 He has said:

Oh people! Seeking knowledge is more necessary than seeking wealth, because wealth has been distributed amongst you. God, the Just, has divided it amongst you and He will make it available to you, but knowledge is kept amongst certain individuals and you are responsible for seeking it from them; thus, you should ask for it.14

Also, Imam Ali (a) in his conversation with one of his close companions, Kumayl bin Ziyad, said the following on comparing knowledge and wealth:

Knowledge is better than wealth, for knowledge guards you but you must guard wealth. Wealth is reduced when given away, but knowledge grows when given. An individual who is built by his wealth will be obliterated when his wealth is wiped out.15

Imam Sajjad (a)16 said the following regarding this topic: “If people know how beneficial it is to seek knowledge, they will obtain it even if it is with bloodshed or going in a whirlpool.”17

The Holy Qur’an has firmly condemned ignorance and lack of knowledge and has warned their followers from falling into it. In the Qur’an, after the narration of Prophet Noah’s story and his request from God to save his son from the storm, God says the following:

يَا نُوحُ إِنَّهُ لَيْسَ مِنْ أَهْلِكَ ۖ إِنَّهُ عَمَلٌ غَيْرُ صَالِحٍ ۖ فَلَا تَسْأَلْنِ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ ۖ إِنِّي أَعِظُكَ أَنْ تَكُونَ مِنَ الْجَاهِلِينَ

O Noah! …So ask not of Me that of which thou hast no knowledge! I give thee counsel, lest thou

act like the ignorant! (***11:46***)

God the Exalted not only warned his Prophet from ignorance and lack of knowledge, but He also advised him to distance himself from them:

خُذِ الْعَفْوَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْعُرْفِ وَأَعْرِضْ عَنِ الْجَاهِلِينَ

Hold to forgiveness; command what is right; But turn away from the ignorant. (***7:199***)

It is from such viewpoints in Islam that the Holy Prophet considered providing a platform for education and learning to be one of the responsibilities of a parent toward his child.[18]

The best knowledge

Mankind's inclination to seek the truth along with his sense of curiosity has led him to become familiar with a wide scope of intellectual understandings. Various universities across the globe have attracted numerous students, and a new field in education and learning is discovered every day.

Yet, with the growth of science and knowledge, people's problems and sufferings have also increased. It is not surprising to think mankind's advancement in science has created a number of difficulties and obstacles for him. So the question that remains is: what kind of knowledge should be learned? Moreover, what is considered to be the best knowledge?

Centuries ago, Prophet Muhammad (s) said the following in regards to seeking new sciences and knowledge: "Knowledge cannot be quantized, so seek the best of it."[19] Imam Ali (a) has also said, "Know that there is no good in knowledge that does not benefit anyone."[20]

From a Qur'anic viewpoint, knowledge without an honorable motive – or with mere material motives – is not considered knowledge; rather, it is an aberration and deviation. With enough research, we see that today's problems – wars, bloodshed, oppression, transgressions, corruption, and demoralization – all root from this hopeless and deviated knowledge.

It stems from the ideology of people whose knowledge is geared only towards materialism, and their vision does not surpass that of an animalistic view. Indeed, knowledge is ignorance when it is not used as a means for honorable goals and is corrupt unless it becomes a tool and a source of light for reaching faith.[21]

From an Islamic perspective, man has been created for a clear and obvious reason; hence, he should adjust his practical and theoretical activities to reach that goal. In Islam, man is a composition of body and soul, and God created him to reach perfection (kamal) and to achieve happiness in this world and the hereafter. Islam is not such that it advises mankind to have no regard for this world.

However, it also does not leave people free to do as they wish as they make this world the limit for their aspirations with no regard for their actions. Islam advises its followers to set this world as a preface for the next world, while adhering to moderation in the various realms of life, and to carry out their activities with the objective of reaching eternal bliss.

Considering what has been said thus far, the best knowledge is that which helps man draw near to happiness in this world and the next. Not every field of knowledge can help man achieve this objective. Indeed, Prophet Muhammad (s) had clarified various fields of knowledge that proved to be futile.

One day he entered the mosque and saw several people gathered around a man. The Prophet asked, "Who is that man?" They answered, "He is a great scholar ('allamah)." He said, "What is an 'allamah?" They said, "He is the most knowledgeable in Arab lineage, the events of the past, the history of the 'Time of Ignorance' (jahiliyyah), and poetry." The Prophet replied, "This is the type of knowledge in which he who is heedless to it will not lose anything and he who is aware of it will not gain anything."[22]

Without a doubt, reaching happiness in this world and the next will only be achieved when one acquaints himself with God, his purpose in this world, his destination, and the practical steps in attaining eternal happiness, all of which can be achieved through learning and becoming familiar with religious sciences. Familiarizing oneself with the abovementioned knowledge is required to such an extent that God the Exalted has said the following in the Holy Qur'an:

وَمَا كَانَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لِيَنْفِرُوا كَافَّةً ۚ فَلَوْلَا نَفَرَ مِنْ كُلِّ فِرْقَةٍ مِنْهُمْ طَائِفَةٌ لِيَتَفَقَّهُوا فِي الدِّينِ وَلِيُنْذِرُوا قَوْمَهُمْ إِذَا رَجَعُوا إِلَيْهِمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَحْذَرُونَ

Nor should the Believers all go forth together: if a contingent from every expedition remained behind, they could devote themselves to studies in religion, and admonish the people when they return to them, – that thus they (may learn) to guard themselves (against evil). (9: 122)

This verse is connected with the verse of struggle (jihad), and it implies a reality that plays a vital role for Muslims: though struggle has been greatly stressed and any deviation from it is a sin, at times when it is not necessary for all believers to participate in the warfare, all must not be excluded.

Rather, it is necessary for a Muslim population to divide their people into two groups: those who are responsible for warfare, and those who engage in teaching Islamic gnostic knowledge (ma'arif) and jurisprudence (ahkam).

It is based on this idea that the religious leaders consider seeking Islamic knowledge a collective obligation (wajib kifa'i)[23] so that those who have attained knowledge may travel to various areas to convey the message (tabligh), and more specifically, to return to their people and familiarize them with Islamic issues and rulings.[24]

According to Islamic leaders, the best knowledge is that which helps one become more familiarized with religion. The Holy Prophet has said the following: “The best of people is the religious scholar. If he is needed, he will help people and be beneficial for them, and if his knowledge is not desired, then he himself will make use of it.”25

It is worth mentioning that when using the term “Islamic scholars,” it is not simply and solely referring to those who have mastered Islamic jurisprudence; rather, it refers to all religious sciences which have been divided into the three branches of Islamic Theology, Islamic Ethics, and Islamic Jurisprudence.

The science of religious theology is the foundation and grounds of becoming familiar with principles of the Existence and Oneness of God (tawhid), prophethood (nubuwwah), leadership (imamah), the Day of Resurrection (qiyamah), and other matters of belief. Imam Sadiq (a) has said the following regarding this topic: “The best act of worship is having knowledge of God.”26

One day a man came to see the Holy Prophet and asked him, “What action holds the highest merit?” The Holy Prophet said twice, “Knowledge of God and knowing His religion.” The man said, “Oh Prophet of God, I asked about an act and your answer is about knowledge?” The Prophet said, “A small amount of actions are highly beneficial if there is knowledge, while lots of actions are useless if there is no knowledge.”27

Familiarizing oneself with God has been advised to such a large extent; thus, a great segment of knowledge and the sciences can be placed in this realm. For instance, when an individual becomes familiar with his surroundings and the world around him; when he learns about the skies and sees the order in the stars, moon, and sun, his certainty (yaqeen) in the Just God will develop.

At that point, when he focuses on the specific aspects of birds and animals, when he notices their great variety and their unique capabilities, when he contemplates the reproduction of fish and other aquatic beings and when he studies plants and trees and mountains, he will have no other choice but to confess the existence of the Great and All-Knowing God. Furthermore, the extraordinary wonders of the human body, such as the digestive, circulatory, and reproductive system are so astounding that it leaves every individual amazed.

Indeed, when an individual accepts this knowledge with the intention of seeking and gaining knowledge about God, it will be placed under the umbrella of theology. It is on this account that God the Exalted has advised mankind to study the wonders of creation:

إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ وَالْفُلْكِ الَّتِي تَجْرِي فِي الْبَحْرِ بِمَا يَنْفَعُ النَّاسَ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مِنْ مَاءٍ فَأَحْيَا بِهِ الْأَرْضَ بَعْدَ مَوْتِهَا وَبَثَّ فِيهَا مِنْ كُلِّ دَابَّةٍ وَتَصْرِيفِ الرِّيَاحِ وَالسَّحَابِ الْمُسَخَّرِ بَيْنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ

Behold! in the creation of the heavens and the earth; in the alternation of the night and the day;

in the sailing of the ships through the ocean for the profit of mankind; in the rain which God Sends down from the skies, and the life which He gives therewith to an earth that is dead; in the beasts of all kinds that He scatters through the earth; in the change of the winds, and the clouds which they Trail like their slaves between the sky and the earth;- (Here) indeed are Signs for a people that are wise. (2:164)

In other verses, God the Exalted offers hints for people to think and ponder:

أَفَلَا يَنْظُرُونَ إِلَى الْإِبِلِ كَيْفَ خُلِقَتْ

وَإِلَى السَّمَاءِ كَيْفَ رُفِعَتْ

وَإِلَى الْجِبَالِ كَيْفَ نُصِبَتْ

وَإِلَى الْأَرْضِ كَيْفَ سُطِحَتْ

Do they not look at the Camels, how they are made? And at the Sky, how it is raised high? And at the Mountains, how they are fixed firm? And at the Earth, how it is spread out? (88:17-20)

On occasions, the Holy Qur'an makes reference to the astounding beauty of the creatures such as the honeybee, ant, camel, fly, and cow, and marvels at the process in which milk, honey, pomegranate, and dates are formed. Through this method, traces of various kinds of human sciences can be found in the Holy Qur'an.28

Additionally, in the realm of ethics and jurisprudence, many statements have been made by religious leaders in this regard. Imam Ali (a) has said, "The root of science is to tell between different characteristics, and to express good character while refraining from bad character."29 He has also said, "The best science is that which leads to your improving yourself (islah)."30

Furthermore, it has been narrated that one day a man told Imam Sadiq (a), "I have a son who would like to ask you a few questions about that which is lawful (halal) and forbidden (haram)." In response, the Imam said, "Is there any topic better than the lawful and forbidden for people to set forth their questions?"31

Another important question that should be investigated is the sort of science that must not be learned. In a general statement, Imam Ali (a) warns people not to seek out merely any knowledge, since "certain kinds of knowledge can lead one astray."32 In a more comprehensible statement, he says, "Any

knowledge that cannot be legitimized with reasoning is misleading."[33]

This wise saying assists people in choosing a correct path when setting out to gain knowledge. For example, the science in which its destination is solely to kill innocent lives or leads the youth into the arms of addiction or to the collapse of humane ethics is not justifiable with reason and hence should not be learned as it will lead one astray.

It should be noted that the vast amount of worldly sciences is not related to religious sciences. At the same time, these sciences do not conflict the dictates of our mind and intellect. For example, pharmacy, biology, aerospace, microbiology, nuclear engineering, and tens of other fields are all sciences that upon first look, one would think they are not linked to mankind's happiness in the next world. Thus, what is Islam's stance on these sciences?

As we have discussed thus far, the purpose of creation in Islam is to attain happiness in this world and the next. Based on this idea, any sort of knowledge that is sought with the intention of reaching this fulfilling happiness is recommended in Islam.

For instance, consider an individual who is on the pathway to learning medicine. If this individual recognizes the brilliance of the human body and through that reflects upon the greatness of its Creator, and if he uses his knowledge to serve mankind, this type of knowledge will lead him to happiness in this world and the next.

However, if pursuing medicine leads him to become a self-centered person or arrogant; or if it makes him feel superior to others and draws him into a path where he thinks about the destruction of mankind, then this knowledge is the grounds for his misery in both worlds.

By looking at this matter from another perspective, bearing in mind other Islamic advice, we can see which fields and sciences are approved in the Islamic framework. For example, caring for people and solving their problems greatly pleases God the Exalted, and it results in His generous reward. With regards to this, Imam Sadiq (a) has been narrated to have quoted God the Exalted:

الخلق عيالي فأحبهم إلي ألطفحم بهم وأسعاهم في حوائجهم

My people are like my family, therefore I love the most he who has been the kindest towards them and has worked the hardest to resolve their problems.[34]

Taking this criterion into account, we can say for instance if pharmaceutics is pursued in order to provide medicine for patients, then it is a science approved and recommended in Islam.

However if this science is practiced with the intention of destroying people's lives, then this science has truly deviated one from the path to happiness. If nuclear sciences are learned for the sake of contributing

to the improvement of man, it is approved by Islam; however, if it is pursued with the intention of making nuclear weapons and serving as a means for mass destruction, then it is definitely unacceptable in Islam.

Islam and the status of those who seek knowledge

We can understand the status of one who seeks knowledge from the accounts Islam gives about such a person. The Holy Prophet has said, “All creatures – be it the fish in the sea, the insects in the ground, and the mammals on land – seek forgiveness for the seeker of knowledge.”35

He has also stated, “He who sets out to seek knowledge and succeeds in acquiring it will be given two rewards from God, and if he is unable to acquire that knowledge, one reward will be given to him.”36

The Holy Prophet has discussed the value of seeking knowledge in many other of his statements. He addresses Abu Dharr al-Ghifari with the following:

Oh Abu Dharr, whoever leaves his home with the intention of seeking knowledge, for every step he takes God will give him the reward of one of the Prophets and for every word he hears or writes, a city will be built for him in the heavens; and God, the angels, and the Prophets love the seekers of knowledge.37

He has also said, “He who seeks knowledge is like a person who fasts during the day and stands in prayer at night; and the knowledge he seeks is better than giving charity in the amount of Mt. Abu Qubays in the way of God.”38

The Holy Prophet has also said the following about the virtue of seeking knowledge: “For he who seeks knowledge, heaven seeks him.”39

The importance of seeking knowledge is such that religious leaders have divided people into three groups: educators, seekers of knowledge, and the shavings on water.40 The “shavings” are those who have no ability on their part and it is the water that will direct them from one direction to another. An ignorant person who does not reflect and think is dependent on a wave, and is taken in a new direction every day.

Imam Sadiq (a) has said the following to one of his companions about this matter: “Either be a scholar or teacher or one who loves knowledge.”41 Imam Ali (a) has also said, “Honour in this world and salvation in the next is for he who seeks knowledge.”42

Naturally, seeking knowledge is accompanied with financial difficulties. While acknowledging this fact, Islam gives the seeker of knowledge such value that it ensures his day-to-day provisions from God. The Holy Prophet says, “God will guarantee the daily sustenance of he who seeks knowledge.” 43

The state of affairs and position of the seeker of knowledge during death and in heaven is another subject that has been explored by previous religious leaders. The Holy Prophet has stated, “One who dies while acquiring knowledge dies the death of a martyr.”44

He has also said, “When death approaches a person while he is seeking knowledge, he will meet God where he and the Prophet are only one level apart.”45

Indeed, the great status of the seeker of knowledge confirms the importance of knowledge and acquiring it. The Holy Prophet spoke of the status of he who seeks knowledge where he says, “The seeker of knowledge is the seeker of mercy; the seeker of knowledge is the pillar of Islam and his reward will be given with the Prophets.”46

He has also said, “He who searches for a door of knowledge so that he can keep Islam alive, there will be only one rank difference between him and the Prophet in heaven.”47

In Islam, the seeker of knowledge should not feel superior when he has acquired knowledge. Imam Ali (a) has given the following advice to the seekers of knowledge:

Refrain from learning knowledge for the following four reasons: 1) for showing your self-importance and superiority to scholars. 2) To argue with the ignorant and uneducated. 3) To use it as a means to boast and show-off in a gathering. 4) Or to use it for drawing the masses to yourself in order to attain a position, management, or rank...48

Furthermore, the Holy Prophet has said, “The smell of heaven will not reach he who seeks knowledge in order to boast it to others or to argue and quarrel with the ignorant.”

Certainly, the seeker of knowledge has been praised and honored is such a way. It is for this reason that he carries a great responsibility. He who is the basis for the continuation of Islam and he who the spiritual existence of mankind lies in his hands. His intention and motive for seeking knowledge should be to guard the teachings of religion, to reach eternal bliss, and to show others its path.

The Status of Educators in Islam

Islam has given special attention to the matter of teaching and education. It is obvious that when knowledge has been given such a high status in this religion, the status of teachers and instructors cannot be overlooked.

In account with the luminous verses of the Holy Qur’an, God was the first instructor of mankind:

خَلَقَ الْإِنْسَانَ

عَلَّمَهُ الْبَيَانَ

He has created man; He has taught him speech (***and intelligence***). (***55:3-4***)

In the Islamic worldview, the Prophets of God were all instructors and teachers for mankind. The Holy Qur'an considers one of their responsibilities as instructing and teaching:

كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولًا مِنْكُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمْ مَا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

A similar (***favor have ye already received***) ***in that We have sent among you a Messenger of your own, rehearsing to you Our Signs, and sanctifying you, and instructing you in Scripture and Wisdom, and in new knowledge.*** (***2:151***)

In an interesting statement made by the Holy Prophet of Islam, he explains the status of teachers as the following: "Certainly God, the angels, and even the ants in their underground lair and the fish in the sea send their praise upon a teacher who teaches the good to people."[49] He has also said, "The greatest charity and contribution is for someone to gain knowledge and then teach it to his brother."[50] Additionally, the Holy Prophet said the following when talking about the status of the greatest men:

God is the most superior and I am the most superior amongst man and the most superior from amongst you is he who gains knowledge and then after provides it for the public.[51]

Imam Baqir (a), the fifth Shi'a Imam, has said the following in this regard: "He who teaches a fraction of the truth to another individual, his reward is equivalent to one who has followed that truth in action."[52]

Imam Sadiq (a), the sixth Shi'a Imam, gave the following explanation about the reward of instructors: "The creatures on land and fish in the sea and every small and big in the skies and on ground seek forgiveness for he who teaches the good."[53]

Conversely, those who have knowledge but hide it and deprive others access to it have been severely condemned. The Holy Prophet has said, "All creatures, even the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, curse he who conceals knowledge."[54]

Verily the message of Islam was for all intellectuals of the world. The Prophet says, "Any individual who possess a beneficial and valuable knowledge and conceals it, on the Day of Judgment God will tie a chain of fire around his neck."[55]

Islam has placed a great burden upon the shoulders of students, which reveals the important status of teachers. Pertaining to this subject matter, Imam Sajjad (a) has made an everlasting statement to all students with regards to the rights of teachers and instructors:

And the right of the one who instructs you and teaches you is to honor him, to respect his meetings, to listen well to his words, to be responsive to him, and to help him (for it is to your benefit) so that he is

able to teach you what you are in need of being taught; by freeing your mind for him [for listening to his words], to utilize your understanding for him, to listen to him with a purified heart, and to fix your eyes on him by means of abandoning leisure and diminishing lust.

And you should know that regarding what he teaches you, you are responsible to pass on his knowledge to the ignorant. Therefore, you must properly deliver the knowledge given to you from your teacher to the ignorant, not cheat him in his mission, and to carry out his mission by delivering it.[56]

In another narration from Imam Sajjad (a), he has said:

If you do these, the angels will be your witness that you did what was required of you and that you obtained knowledge only for God the Glorified and not to please others.[57]

The Status of Scholars in Islam

In a school of thought where knowledge and learning have a high status, it is natural for the scholars to be given the same standing. On multiple occasions, the Holy Qur'an has commended scholars upon their greatness and has placed them above the believers:

يَرْفَعِ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ

God will rise up, to (suitable) ranks (and degrees), those of you who believe and who have been granted (mystic) Knowledge. (58:11; 30:56)

According to this verse, those who have obtained and hold knowledge about God the Exalted, without a doubt outrank those who have simply settled to having faith in Him.[58]

At times, putting forth the name of scholars, along with His and the angels' name, God the Exalted shows that they alone pledge to the oneness of God:

لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ وَالْمَلَائِكَةُ وَأُولُو الْعِلْمِ قَائِمًا بِالْقِسْطِ ۚ لَا إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

There is no god but He: That is the witness of God, His angels, and those endued with knowledge, standing firm on justice. There is no god but He, the Exalted in Power, the Wise. (3:18)

In other verses, it is shown and made clear to the Holy Prophet that it is the scholars who know what is revealed to you; that it is the truth and is from God:

وَيَرَى الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ الَّذِي أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ هُوَ الْحَقَّ وَيَهْدِي إِلَىٰ صِرَاطِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَمِيدِ

And those to whom knowledge has come see that the (Revelation) sent down to thee from thy Lord – that is the Truth, and that it guides to the Path of the Exalted (in might), Worthy of all praise. (34:6)

In Islam, where scholars and students carry out the same responsibilities and mission as the Prophets to guide the people, they are considered to be the inheritors of the Prophets,[59] seeing that the Prophet has stated the following: "Scholars and students are the illumination on earth, and the successors of prophets and my inheritors."[60]

In another statement, the Holy Prophet explains the specifics of how scholars succeed the Prophets. He says, "He who welcomes and greets scholars, has greeted me; he who visits a scholar, has visited me; and he who accompanies a scholar, has accompanied and has become my companion, and he who is a companion of mine, it is as if he is accompanying God."[61]

The Holy Prophet said the following statement to Imam Ali (a) when comparing a scholar and a worshipper ('abid): "The sleep of a scholar is greater and more valuable than that of a worshipper. Oh Ali, a two rak'ah[62] of prayer made by a scholar is more valuable than seventy rak'ah of a worshipper."[63]

Imam Baqir (a) has also said, "A scholar whose knowledge is used is greater than the worship of seventy-thousand worshippers."[64]

In other words, a scholar is not only beneficial for himself. His knowledge is made available to others and they are able to make use of it. On the contrary, the prayer of one who worships has no gain or benefit for others and is only benefitting himself. It is based on this idea that religious leaders have explained the superiority of scholars over worshippers as such:

When Satan circulates and introduces false innovations amongst the people, is it the scholar who enlightens the people and warns them about it. On the other hand, one who performs much worship is occupied with his prayer and does not recognize the false and immoral innovation, and for the same reason does not warn people about it.[65]

The superiority of a scholar over a worshipper will be made known to all in the hereafter. Imam Sadiq (a) has said the following about this matter:

When the Day of Resurrection approaches, God will call forth the scholar and worshipper. When standing before God, the worshipper will be told, 'Go to heaven.' However the scholar will be told, 'Stand here and take those you have trained with you to heaven as well.'[66]

In Islam, a scholar holds such a high and grand status that just as looking at the Ka'bah[67] is considered a form of worship by the Holy Qur'an, gazing upon a scholar is similarly regarded as worship.[68]

The religious leaders have also given ample advice about comportment in the presence of a scholar and they have compared and likened the respect one has towards a scholar to that which one must have

towards God.69

Respect for scholars has been advised to such an extent that Imam Sadiq (a) has said, “Respecting a scholar makes God happy and disrespecting a scholar is what causes God’s displeasure.”

Imam Ali (a) has said, “When you see a scholar, accompany him.”70 Imam Baqir (a) has also said, “When you are sitting in the presence of a scholar, be greedy to hear more than to speak, and the same way you learn to listen well, learn to speak well, and do not ever cut his words short.”71

Knowledge with action

As discussed thus far, in Islam, knowledge and learning has purpose and meaning when there is a practical and pragmatic message followed by wisdom and intuitive knowledge. In other words, knowledge that is most valuable is that which can be seen through one’s actions and is the grounds for transcending to the ethics of humankind.

For this reason, religious leaders have come to the conclusion that the outcome of knowledge and learning is the gnosis of God (ma’rifah), sincerity in actions (ikhlas), worship, humility and modesty, patience, fortitude, and sense of responsibility before God and his creations.72

In Islam, a scholar whose knowledge leads him to arrogance and self- pride and a sense of superiority above others is nothing more than an ignorant person. A scholar whose knowledge is not made available to people, which distances between him, God, and God’s creations, and is only pursued for material gains, is not considered a scholar. Imam Ali (a) states the following:

The highest level of knowledge is humility, modesty, and its outcome is virtue and God-consciousness (taqwa), refraining from carnal desires and impulses (the whims of the soul), supporting the truth, abstaining from sin, affection towards your brother in faith, hearing the words of scholars and accepting it, and preventing yourself from revenge when you are in power…”73

The Holy Qur’an says the following about scholars whose knowledge can be seen through their actions:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ إِذَا يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِمْ يَخِرُّونَ لِلْأَذْقَانِ سُجَّدًا

…it is true that those who were given knowledge beforehand, when it is recited to them, fall down on their faces in humble prostration. (***17:107***)

According to this verse, the true scholars are those who have delved into and comprehended the greatness of God and have bowed their heads before Him.

In truth, as previously explained in more depth, the character-building religion of Islam’s goal is to assist

people to reach happiness and tranquility in this world and the next. This cannot be achieved if one does not learn the path to happiness and does not carry it out in his or her actions.

Therefore, the state of knowing only composes half of the path to happiness and the other half is to carry out that knowledge through your actions. Based on this understanding, the Holy Prophet has said, “A scholar is he who carries out what he knows in his actions.”[74]

Imam Ali (a) has also said, “Knowledge is a source of guidance when one carries it out in his actions.”[75]

In the culture of the Holy Qur’an – where the objective in its revelation is to guide mankind – not every individual is worthy of the title ‘scholar.’ People who are honored with this title are those whose actions are in sync with their knowledge and are taking steps towards happiness. The Holy Qur’an describes the true scholars as such:

إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ

Those truly fear God, among His Servants, who have knowledge. (***35:28***)

In other words, from amongst all people, it is the scholars that are raised to the great status of being in fear; meaning the fear of falling short in carrying out their responsibilities along with realizing the greatness of the Lord. This state of being “in fear” is the birth of a journey through the signs upon the horizons and souls, being aware of the knowledge and power of the Lord, and the purpose of creation.

An additional conclusion that can be drawn from this statement is that true scholars are those who have a strong sense of duty and are people of knowledge, not people of talk. If knowledge is not put into action, it results in the lack of being fearful and conscious of God and as we saw in the aforementioned verse: if an individual is not God-fearing and God-conscience, then he is not of the scholars and the knowledgeable.

This truth has also been narrated by Imam Sajjad (a), the fourth Shi‘a Imam, as follows:

Knowledge and action are two close friends. He who knows God is fearful of Him, and this fear is what leads him to act according to God’s decree. The knowledgeable and their followers are those who have gotten to know God well and take action for Him, and show love and affection towards Him.[76]

In the explanation of the aforesaid verse, Imam Sadiq (a) says, “What is meant by scholar is an individual whose actions are in sync with his words; he whose actions and words are not synchronized is not a scholar.”[77]

Conclusion

According to the beliefs held by the religious leaders in Islam, the knowledge of a scholar is needed and it is beneficial to the people when he acts according to it. It is because of this point that people are wary of being led by a scholar who is worldly-minded and materialistic.78 Imam Sadiq (a) has said. "It is when a scholar practices what he preaches that his words will affect the hearts of people."79

Upon looking at this matter from another angle, scholars are the leaders in society. For this reason, their faults and lapse in judgment and actions will lead people to do the same. Imam Ali (a) has said the following in this regard: "A scholar's mistakes are like a ship being punctured; it will eventually cause him and others to drown."80

Although the verses in the Qur'an and the words of our leaders have illustrated a high status for our scholars, a firm and severe warning has been given to scholars who lack in action.

The Holy Prophet has said, "The dwellers of the hellfire are bothered by the smell of a scholar who did not practice what he knew."81 Imam Baqir (a) has also said, "On the Day of Resurrection, the one who will be the most regretful is he who advocated and preached about certain actions, but acted contrary to that."82

Thus, based on the logic of the Qur'an, 'scholars' are not people whose heads simply play the role of a chest that holds snippets of peoples' sayings and beliefs, who hold a heap of formulas and rules, their tongues merely tools for communicating these, and their resting place is in the schools, universities, and libraries.

Rather, they are that group of intellectuals where the light of knowledge and learning has encompassed their entire existence and has radiated, allowing them to see the light of God, faith, and piety. They have a strong sense of duty before their responsibilities and are the most dedicated people.83

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