

Understanding Islam **Series Three: Building a Just Society**

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Part Three: Education to serve God and humanity

Although Muhammad himself was not a man of books – he was rather a man on whose life God wrote by the sending down of the Qur'an, by the direct gift of esoteric knowledge, and by the nobility of soul that enabled him to live out this wisdom in an exemplary way – there are several incidents in his life that demonstrate the high value that he placed on education. This was to be expected, given that the Qur'an on numerous occasions commands its readers to ponder on what they read [Q. 4:82; 23:68] and to read the signs around them [Q. 10:67]. Indeed, the word signs (*aya*) occurs more than four hundred times in the Qur'an.

When prisoners were taken after the Battle of Badr (634), those who could read and write were able to earn their ransom by teaching these skills to Muslims in Madina. Muhammad appointed scribes to write down the verses of the Qur'an from his lips. He drew up written treaties and sent letters to the rulers of his time. When appointing a governor to send to the Yemen, he commended him for realising that his own ability to reason, based on the guidance of the Qur'an and the *sunna* of the Prophet, was his guide in applying the message to the circumstances of the people there.

Knowledge is a gift from God sent down upon the Prophet to allow people to live a life filled with God-consciousness (*taqwa*), which will enable them to flourish in this life and attain the life of paradise [Q. 3:164]. This message is emphasised in the Hadith:

Acquire knowledge: it enables the possessor to distinguish right from wrong, it lights the path to heaven. It is your friend in the desert, your society in solitude and your companion when friendless. It guides you to happiness, it sustains you in adversity. It is an ornament among friends and an armour against enemies.

Here we see that knowledge has an ethical dimension, it not only enables one to know right from wrong but also guides people along the right path. This has led Muslim scholars to emphasise the importance of learning which uplifts the human being; and the corollary: to keep away from knowledge that debases and diverts the human being from the godly quest.

Knowledge then is part of the birthright of every human being. The Prophet is reported to have said: “The search for knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim male and every Muslim female.” There is no gender distinction here. Again, “Wisdom is the lost property of the believer. Wherever he finds it, he has a right to it.” There is no distinction between “secular” and “religious” knowledge but rather between knowledge that leads to a godly life and that which detracts from that aim. The theologian and the scientist should both be seeking to explore and unpack

knowledge that will benefit the human quest. Muslims are to seek to emulate the people of learning, as made clear in the Hadith:

Do not try to be like anyone except in two cases. The first is a person to whom God has given wealth and who spends it righteously. The second is one to whom God has given wisdom and who acts according to it and teaches it to others.

The linkage here between “having wisdom,” “acting upon it,” i.e., putting it into practice in one’s life, and “teaching it to others” should be noted. Knowledge is not an end in itself but something that shapes the life of the possessor; knowledge must be integrated so that the student can see it lived out in the life of the teacher and not just spoken about. The student is quite entitled to ask the teacher: “Why should I believe the teaching that you share if I do not see it lived out in your own life?”

As God is the possessor of all knowledge – two of the names by which God is known are Al-Alim (the All-knowing) and Al-Hakim (the Wise) – so seeking knowledge is an act of worship of God (*ibada*) and an act of exploring the attributes of God. As God is infinite, the quest for knowledge is without end. As the Hadith put it: “Search for knowledge even though it be in China” and “A believer will never be satisfied with the good that he hears until he reaches paradise.”

It is reported that Muhammad came across two groups of people sitting in the mosque and said:

Both of them are doing good but one of them is better than the other. As for these, they call upon God and pray to him for help. If he wills, he gives it to them, and if he wills, he denies it to them. As for these, they learn theology or knowledge and teach them to the illiterate. They are therefore better. Indeed, I have been sent as a teacher. Then he took his seat in their midst.

It is well established that to pray the regular five-times-each-day prayers (*salat*) is an obligation on every Muslim man and woman but Hadith report: “Studying together for an hour during the night is better than spending the whole night in devotions.” And again: “The superiority of the learned man over the devout man is like that of the moon on the night when it is full over the rest of the stars.” The reason for this becomes clear when we read: “To the devil, a learned theologian is stronger than a thousand pious worshippers” and “The ink of the scholars is higher in merit than the blood of the martyrs.”

Scholarship after the Prophet

For the Shi'a, the primary focus of scholarship after Muhammad resided with the divinely-appointed Imams, who were the bearers of the light of knowledge, which gave them privileged access to interpret the Qur'an and way of Islam. But in general, a special place of honour was always given to the learned, according to the Hadith: “The learned ones are the heirs of the prophets; they leave their knowledge as their inheritance. He who inherits it inherits a great fortune.”

In the early centuries, any Muslim man or woman with knowledge regarded it as a duty to pass it on to those who would learn from them. As time went on, a body of scholars arose (*ulama*), who took on the particular responsibility of teaching within the Muslim community. Such scholars taught their students and when they were satisfied with their mastery of a particular subject, they gave them their permission to teach (*ijaza*). This system continues until the present time within both Sunni and Shi'a schools. Outstanding scholars, like the founders of the Sunni schools of law, great theologians and masters of the sufi teaching, were given the title Imam. This is not to be confused with the specific use of this title for the divinely-appointed Imams in the Shi'a tradition. The title of Imam for an outstanding scholar is used within both schools through the centuries, e.g., Imam al-Ghazali and Imam Ibn Taymiyya, in the Sunni school, and Imam al-Khoei and Imam Khomeini in the modern period in the Shi'a school. Such Shi'a teachers of the highest rank take on the responsibility of being guides to the community (*marja*) so that people of lesser knowledge can emulate and follow their teaching. Within the Sunni schools, the system is not so formal but many Sunni Muslims will identify themselves with a particular school of learning and take their guidance from the scholars who belong to it.

Centres of learning

Over the centuries, great centres of learning have been established, such as al-Azhar in Cairo (founded in 978) and the seminary of Deoband in India (founded in 1867), in the Sunni tradition, and Najaf in Iraq and Qum in Iran in the Shi'a tradition. Some of these, like al-Azhar and Qum, in the twentieth century expanded to cover all the disciplines of a modern university, whilst others, like Deoband, have concentrated on the religious sciences. Various titles are associated with such educational centres: *jamia*, *dar ul-uloom* and *madrasa* are most common. *Madrasa* can be used for a wide range of establishments from a school for children to a centre of higher learning.

Life-long learning

Every child is born in a natural relationship with God and the rest of creation (*din al-fitra*) but a child needs example and instruction to stay on that path and follow it to fulfilment in this life and paradise in the next. Training a child in correct behaviour begins as soon as they are able to learn. As is reported in a Hadith: "No parent gave their child a gift better than beautiful manners."

Once they begin to talk, children are taught to say *bismillah*, "In the name of God," before they begin an action. Progressively, they will be taught phrases and then verses from the Qur'an. The traditional practice was for children to learn at least part of the Qur'an by heart before they began reading and writing. At this early stage, the memory is like a sponge that soaks up the rhythms of the Arabic Qur'an. In countries where Arabic is not the common language, the children learn the Qur'an phonetically either by listening to it being recited to them or sounding it out from a written text. Having some verses of the Qur'an in one's memory is essential for a Muslim to pray

their daily prayers. As Muhammad is reported to have said, “The best amongst you is the one who learns the Qur'an and teaches it.”

School education should take place within an atmosphere that promotes Islamic values. A respectful relationship is encouraged between teachers, pupils and parents. Teachers are required to have integrated their learning so that it is reflected in their life and conduct. They should be a role model of the quest for advancement in knowledge and growth in etiquette. To provide a modest, moral atmosphere conducive to learning, Muslim schools are generally single-sex, especially after the early years. Young people are encouraged to continue their education as far as appropriate, ideally in a single-sex institution. In universities where students mix freely together, Muslim men and women will often form groups so that they can socialise in a way that promotes a Muslim lifestyle.

As children grow up, their parents move through phases from playing with them, to instructing them and finally accompanying them into and throughout adulthood. Many adults will seek out the wise counsel of grandparents and other family elders until they in turn become grandparent counsellors themselves. There is a tradition of life-long learning and many adults seek the opportunity to learn in study circles or classes. A familiar saying about a praiseworthy mosque is that there should be a scholar sitting at the foot of every pillar surrounded by those who want to learn. It has also been common in history that dedicated students have travelled great distances for the opportunity to study in a noted centre of learning or with a particular scholar.