

Education in Islam

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1) Importance of Education

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In a society where religion and knowledge in general and science in particular do not go hand in hand, it seems necessary to briefly describe the position of Islam vis-à-vis knowledge, Islam, in theory as well as in practice, has always promoted knowledge. Distinctive mark of human beings over the angels is knowledge:

"And Allah taught Adam all the names..." (2:31)

The first verses of the Quran began with the word:

"Read. Read in the name of thy Lord who created; [He] created the human being from blood clot. Read in the name of thy Lord who taught by the pen: [He] taught the human being what he did not know." (96: 1-5).

The Qur'an says.

"Are those who have knowledge equal to those who do not have knowledge?!"(39:9).

The Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him and his progeny) has also emphasized the importance of seeking knowledge in different ways:

(a) Time: "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave."

(b) Place: "Seek knowledge even if it is far as China."

(c) Gender: "Seeking of knowledge is a duty of every Muslim"

(d) Source: "Wisdom is the lost property of the believer, he should take it even if finds it in the mouth of a *mushrik*."

The Prophet did not only preach about importance of knowledge, he also gave examples of promoting knowledge. In the very first battle between the Muslims and unbelievers or Mecca, known as the war of Badr, the Muslims gain victory and caught seventy *kuffars* as prisoners of war. One of the criteria of releasing the POWs devised by the Prophet was that those who were literate among the prisoners could go free if they teach ten Muslim children how to read and write.

2) What Type of Knowledge?

Knowledge in Islam is normally divided into two broad categories: there is a famous saying "*al-ilm 'ilman: 'ilmu- adyan wa ilmu abdan* – knowledge is of two kinds: the knowledge concerning religions and the knowledge concerning [human and physical] bodies." What has been mentioned above on the importance of knowledge refers to both, the religious as well as the secular knowledge.

The Quran has specifically talked about science also:

"In the creation of the heavens and the earth the alternation of the night and the day, in the ships that sail in the sea with their load... in the rain which Allah sends down from the sky and thus revives the earth after its death; and then He spread in all kinds of animals; in the changing of the winds: in the clouds which have been left suspending between the heaven and the earth -in all these are clear signs for the people who understand" (2: 164)

"We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves." (41:53)

The backwardness of the Muslims in last few centuries, as far as education is concerned, is because of the following:

- The Muslims lost leadership in the field of physical science and technology because of arrogance which led to stagnation.
- The invasion by the Mongols, who were barbarians and did not appreciate the value of knowledge: they burned down the most prestigious libraries in Baghdad.
- In the nineteenth century, when the Muslims attempted to revive the process of education and knowledge in their societies, they naively adapted the western secular system which had completely

separated the religious sciences from the secular sciences. (Example of the Turkish reformers of the last century and also Egyptian intellectuals of the early twentieth century, especially Dr. Taha Husayn in his *Mustaqbilu 'th-Thaqafah fi Misr*. We can also mention Sir Syed Ahmad Khan of India.) The Muslim world is still suffering from the dissection between the religious and secular sciences.

This issue goes back to the basic difference between the Islamic and Christian view of knowledge. In Christianity, the Bible relates the fall of man to the sin of stealing the fruit from the tree of knowledge; whereas, in Islam, the Quran describes knowledge as the basis on which the man was given preference over the angels. Even historically, the Christian church is full of stories about its Inquisitors who censored the works of science and also tortured the scientists if their views were contrary to what the Bible said.

In Muslim history, no such institutionalized censorship or suppression of scientists can be found. In the Muslim world, you find the harmonious combination of the two types of knowledge. For example, in the person of Ibn Sina, you had someone who had written *al-Isharat* on philosophy and metaphysics, and also *al-Qanun fi't-Tibb* on medicine, a book whose Latin translation was used as a text in western universities till two centuries ago!

This dissection between the religious and secular sciences is the root of all the problems in the area of education for the Muslims world-wide. The greatest challenge for the Muslims of the twenty-first century is the issue of the bringing together of the two sciences, religious and secular, in such a way that knowledge brings people closer to God and gives meaning to the life on this earth. This is not impossible because historically the Muslims have done that in the past. Right from the days of Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) till the down-fall of the Muslim empire. We had Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s) who taught theology to Hisham bin Hakam, *Ahadith* to Zurarah bin A'yan, and science to Jabir bin Hayyan. In our Imams, we see the example of a single source for religious as well as secular sciences.

The western science is based on experimental method. Let me just quote something about the alchemy of Muslims from Will Durant's *The Story of Civilization*,¹ Muslim "developed experimental method which is the greatest pride and tool of the modern mind. When Roger Bacon proclaimed that method to Europe, live hundred years after Jabir bin Hayyan, he owed his illumination to the Moors of Spain, whose light had come from the Muslim East."

But, for today, I would like to briefly look at this issue in the Western context and propose some ideas which hopefully would generate discussions in the workshop this afternoon.

3) Education at the Basic Level

What can we do to combine the religions and secular education for Muslim children in North America? There are two solutions to these problems: a short-term and a long-term solution.

a) The Short Term Solution

Send our children to the public or private school for secular education; and for their religious education, send them to the: Sunday schools and summer programs. This is what we are doing at this stage of our settlement in this continent.

But this short-term solution is not a complete solution, its still suffers from the problem of separating religion from science; religion from real life issues. If the parents do not implement what is taught to the students at the Sunday schools, then there is the danger that the student might suffer from the double standard syndrome: behave as a Muslim in madrasah, masjid and majlis but. behave as a “regular” with others.

b) The Long-Term Solution

Creation of full time Islamic schools. This will provide The Muslim students with a morally Islamic atmosphere turning the peer pressure in favour of Islam rather than against Islam.

Secondly, a full time Islamic school would integrate the secular sciences with religious sciences — science will became not only a servant of man but also a means of serving Allah, *subhanahu wa ta'ala*.

4) Education at Advanced Level

At the present stage of our settlement, on this continent, we cannot think of the same solution for the advanced level or education as we presented about the basic level of education. Maybe, our future generations may explore the means and ways of establishing an Islamic university which our students can study the so-called 'non-religious' sciences not as anti-religious but as part of their 'religious' outlook.

At the moment, however, our efforts should be concentrated on bridging the gap between the *'ulama* and the scientists on the intellectual and mental levels. This may be done in two ways:

a) Short Term

There should be regular inter-action, dialogue and discussion between the ulama and scholars of secular sciences.

b) Long Term

(a) The *'ulama'* should become familiar with the modern scientific issues: their information on social, economic, and ethical issues of our time must be up- to-date and correct.

In the old Islamic system, there was no separation between the centers of learning of religious and secular sciences. You could have gone to Baghdad, Hella, Najaf, Ray, Cairo, Fez, Qum or Cordova for seeking of religious as well as scientific knowledge. Even now, I personally know of examples among the *'ulama'* of Qum who had hired a learned economist from the University of Tehran to visit them on a

weekly basis to discuss the most modern and advance economic theories of the time. My own grandfather was an *'alim* and also a *tabib*.

(b) The Muslim scientists must familiar themselves with the basic texts of Islam: the Qur'an and *sunnah*. The Muslim scientists must become familiar with the Islamic literature related to the areas of their specialization. When the Prophet said, "I am leaving two precious things amongst you: the Book of Allah and my family; as long as you hold to them you will never be led astray," he was not only addressing the *'ulama'*: he was leaving these two guides for the entire *ummah*.

Out of six thousand and some verses of the Qur'an, only five hundred arc on fiqh, The verses on nature and creation are still waiting explanation by the Muslim scientists. The ahadith on nature and science arc still waiting for explanation at the hands of Muslim scientists. Allamah Majlisi has compiled a 110 volumes encyclopaedia of *Ahadith* known as *Biharul Anwar*. In this compilation, there a complete volume on the verses and ahadith related to the earth and heavens; this particular volume is sub-titled as 'kitabul 's-sama" wa 'l ardh" — the book of the heaven and earth.

Small steps have already been taken by some scientists to study the original texts of Islam on scientific issues. The fore-most example is that of Dr. Maurice BuCaille in his Bible, Qur'an Science. Also a group of Canadian science Lists from the University of Toronto were invited in early eighties by a university in Arabia to study embryology in the Quran and hadith. These non-Muslims were astonished to see that the Qur'an spoke about issues which have been discovered only recently by the modern science on embryology.

My prayers is to see that Muslim scientists come up with ground-breaking theories based on the Quran and *Ahadith* rather than wait for science to discover something and then say that it was mentioned by the Qur'an 1400 years ago!

5) Some more Suggestions

The Shi'ah community of North America is, al hamdulila-Lah, affluent to take care of its children. And I strongly believe that our organizations, specially the federal, national or umbrella organizations, must establish scholarship programs for those who want to pursue advance studies in all fields of knowledge. They should also establish 'awards' for those of our children who show excellence in their academic fields. Even Muslim scholars and scientists should be awarded for their achievements. Such projects already exist among other ethnic and religious groups. e.g., the Jewish people, who recognise the achievements of their own people. We should we not take pride in our community members and support them.

If there are organizations which have such programs, then they should be more publicized among- our communities all over North America. I hope the ideas I have thrown around will help in generating discussion and formulating a vision and a view of future, which, I believe is optimistic.

Remember, our Imams have said that if you have to select between wealth and knowledge, go for knowledge: wealth can be stolen but knowledge can never be taken away; wealth decreases with usage but the more you use your knowledge the more you increase in it.

Look at the examples of our Imams: the rulers took away the wealth but they could not take away the knowledge which had been bestowed upon them by Allah. In spite of all the bitterness between Imam Ali and first caliphs, the second caliph used to approach Imam Ali whenever he could not resolve a legal or Qur'anic problem.

We are in minority in this continent; when political stability and economic prosperity is there, we as immigrants or minorities are acceptable. But no one knows what will happen to the present tolerant environment when the economic indicator goes down or these countries lose their political stability. Look at the anti-immigrant, sentiments in Europe during the last two years. Our wealth may be taken away; but if we have knowledge, no one will be able to deprive us of it. With knowledge, we may regain our wealth; but with wealth, you cannot buy knowledge

1. vol. on Religion, p. 249

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