

ISLAM AND THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge is not only learning, but it also encompasses experience. The acquisition of knowledge involves a process of training and education rather than just learning. From the early day of Islam, knowledge has been considered to be the power that has been bestowed upon man in order to qualify him to be the vicegerent of Allah on earth (Khalifatullah). Without knowledge man is not strong enough to fulfill the duties and responsibilities of a vicegerent (Khalifah) to structure his life and his society, as it provides him with values, virtues, visions beliefs and power. Indeed, knowledge in Islamic worldview is a unique gift of the Creator (the most Omniscience and the only Absolute God) to man. As such, it is vital for the success of man in this world and the Hereafter. Furthermore, it is undeniable fact that, knowledge is the root of man's progress in this transitory world and a crucial factor in his well-being after his demise. Based on the above facts, this humble paper aims to explore vis-a vis the importance of knowledge acquisition in the view of Islam and to disclose the serious attention that Islam has paid toward acquisition of knowledge. However, to achieve the aims and the objectives of this paper, revelation based approach will be applied, that is by referring to the Holy Scripture of Islam (holy Quran) and its perception on knowledge. Finally, the paper will provide a brief conclusion and some recommendations.

Keywords: Knowledge, Islam, Qur'an, Sunnah, Muslim. Social sciences, natural Sciences

1. Introduction

Islam is a religion based upon knowledge; it invites its adherents to seek knowledge at all cost. It promotes pursuit of knowledge in all of its forms, and not just Islamic studies, but other fields and sciences as well. Indeed, knowledge is encouraged as a duty obliging every Muslim to seek after it as long as he lives, and as much as he can, no matter how far his pursuit would take him. And this is highlighted in abound of instances in the Qur'an and the Prophet's *Sunnah*, for Muslims to heed. As such, the text of the Qur'an is replete with verses inviting man to use his intellect, to ponder, to think and to know, in order to discover the truth of this existence. The main purpose and *raison d'être* of acquiring knowledge in Islam is to bring people closer to God and to gain the good of this world, not to destroy it through wastage, arrogance and in the reckless pursuit of higher standards of material comfort. It is not simply for the gratification of the mind or the senses. It is not knowledge for the sake of knowledge or science for the value of sake. Knowledge accordingly must be linked with values and goals. Likewise, it is undeniable fact that knowledge does contribute immensely to the glory and decline of any civilization on earth; because the greatness of past civilization is the manifestations of the power of knowledge; therefore, history is full of many

examples where the rise and fall of great civilization coincided with the rise and fall of the knowledge. Based on this fact, this paper will apply revelation based approach, verses and some prophetic *sunnah* to explore the significance of acquiring knowledge in Islamic worldview.

2. Definition

According to Oxford English Dictionary (1993) knowledge, is a facts, information and skills acquired by a person through experience or education, the theoretical or practical understandings of a subject. Encyclopedia of Britannica (1994) defines knowledge as awareness or familiarity gained by experience of a facts or situation. In short, knowledge is synonymous to awareness consciousness, realization or perception of information. In simple definition, knowledge is an information, understanding or skills that you get from experience or education or through human intellect and nature. Whereas in Islam, The term used for knowledge in Arabic is “*Ilm*”. And the most widely used word for education in a formal sense is *ta’līm*, from the root '*alima* (to know, to be aware, to perceive, to learn), which is used to denote knowledge being sought or imparted through instruction and teaching. The word *Ilm*, Rosenthal(2006) justifiably pointed out, has a much wider connotation than its synonyms in English and other Western Languages, because Knowledge in the Western world means information about something divine or corporeal, While “*Ilm*” is an all embracing term covering theory, actions and education. In this regard, Al Qadhi Abdul Jabbar(1962) defines Knowledge as the element that bring peace of mind and strong conviction and belief in a special manner. However, Imam Ghazali(1982) argued that Knowledge in Islam means the realization of things. It means realization of something in its true nature through different levels of understanding and in agreement with the facts or true nature. Therefore knowledge in this context is totally opposing ignorance or illiteracy. Whereas, Ibn Sina(1961) who speaks of knowledge as the understanding or discernment of something (*idrak al-shay’*), which is actually the reality reflecting or representing itself in the intelligent (*al-mudrik*) which has been constantly observing what it is. In principle, the reality itself is actually external from the intelligent, i.e there is a strong relation between the object of knowledge and the person who is perceiving the object, by applying various tools of understanding.

3. The Significance of Acquisition of Knowledge in Islam

First of all and foremost, it is important to remember that there is no religion on earth that concerns about knowledge than Islam. Islam is a religion based on knowledge said Safi (1996). As such, the holy book of Islam (Qur’an) which is the seal of revelation of Allah has stressed on the importance of knowledge several times in its various chapters and verses. For instance, in the Qur’an the word “*Alim*” has occurred in 140 places while “*al-Ilm*” in 27 times. In all the total number of verses in which “*Ilm*” or its derivatives and associates words are used is 704. The aids of knowledge and its tools such as book, pen, marker etc. amount to almost the same number. *Qalam* occurs in two places, *al_ kitab* in 230 verses. Other words associated to with writing occur in 319 verses. This shows that the book and pen are essential to the acquisition of knowledge. For example, the very first revelation on prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) from Allah (SWT) was about seeking knowledge and revealing scientific knowledge. Allah said “proclaim! (or Read in the name of thy Lord and Cherisher,

Who created. He created man from clot, Read and thy Lord is the most bounty. He Who thought (the use of) the pen, thought man that which he knew not”

This is the first message to Prophet Muhammad to be delivered to all mankind, here, Musa Salim(1993) argued that the word read, teach and pen have been used by Allah(SWT). They are significant elements in the search for knowledge. As a matter of fact, the root words in Arabic for teach, read, and pen have far broader meanings and harmony and can not be translated in the English to retain and convey the depth of meaning of the Arabic text. They actually related to deep thinking conducting research on physical phenomenon, pondering, contemplating, discovering and exploring the physical world. Hence the early Muslim scholars observed strictly the true meaning of the first revelation of the holy Qur’an. As such, their tireless efforts toward knowledge have immensely contributed to the rise of Islamic civilization.

The importance of acquiring knowledge is further emphasized in the holy Quran, when Allah said: “ Say: “ are those equal, those who know and those who do not know?” Quran,39:9. Indeed, this Ayah is in question form which required a very convincing answer. Logically speaking, there is no equality between a knowledgeable person or an intellectual man and illiterate or ignorant person; because knowledge is a light, which is able to guide its bearer to the right direction and correct path. Whereas, ignorance is a darkness which is incurable disease that can easily mislead a person to the wrong direction. This fact is confirmed by the holy Quran when Allah stated that “And those who are knowledgeable see that the revelation sent down to you from the Lord is the Truth, and that it guide to the path of Allah who is Exalted and worthy of All praise.” Another verse that distinguishes between astute learners and ignorant people is when Allah said “Allah will raise up, to high ranks those of you who believe and who have been granted knowledge...”. Qur’an, 58:11. It means, knowledge is able to elevate the status and position of its bearer and makes difference between him and ignorant. The above verses and other plenty verses in the Quran prove the seriousness of Islam and its scripture about the acquisition of knowledge. Thus, Qur’an is worthy to be considered as the book of knowledge.

Likewise, numerous authentic hadith are also related to the prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) on the significance of acquiring knowledge. For example, According Bukhari and Muslim whose books are considered to be the most authentic of six books of hadith, they both narrated the following hadith of *Rasulullah* “To seek knowledge is a sacred duty of every Muslim, male or female” in another hadith, it is narrated that” He who acquires knowledge acquires a vast portion.” And lastly, it narrated from *Rasullullah*(p.b.u.h) that if anyone goes on his way in search of knowledge, Allah(SWT) will thereby, make easy for him the way to paradise”

Having seen the etymology of knowledge and having explored its significance in Islam through Quran and *Sunnah*, the rational question is: what are the tools or means of acquiring knowledge in Islam? The answer of this question is the next discussion.

4. Tools and Means of Knowledge Acquisition in Islam

As far as the importance of knowledge acquisition in Islam is concerned, what are the effective methods of acquiring knowledge in Islamic worldview? Is the source of knowledge in Islam equal to the source of knowledge in western worldview? In fact, though this humble paper is not exploring knowledge acquisition in western worldview, however, it will be worthwhile and useful to shed some lights on the means of knowledge acquisition in the western worldview. Indeed, for the western modern sciences, it is undeniable fact that, the main sources of acquiring knowledge are human reason, senses and natural phenomenon. However, in Islam, the primary source of knowledge are revelation (Qur'an and prophetic Sunnah), followed by human reason senses and nature. It means Islam, believes that revelation which according to Collins English Dictionary (2003), is the act or process of disclosing something previously secret or obscure, especially something true. That means, revelation is and human can work together to produce authentic truth of our universe. Thus, revelation with particular reference to al-Qur'an is authentic primary source of knowledge acquisition in Islam. It deals with all human affairs from cradle to death; as it comprises all human needs and knowledge.

Concerning the holy Qur'an, Zakir argued that, the Qur'an is a book believed by Muslims to be of completely divine origin. As such, the Qur'an is the pure speech of Allah, exposition of all things. The speech of Allah, sent down upon the last Prophet Muhammad, through the Angel Gabriel, in its precise meaning and concise wording, transmitted to us by numerous persons (tawatur), both verbally and in writing. It means the holy Qur'an is the last revelation of God after the Torah and Bible respectively. In this regard, Daniel (2009) stated that Muslim have been justifiably proud that their scripture has remained so timeless and changeless. Indeed, the consistency of the text is sometimes offered as evidence to support Muslim claims that the Qur'an is inimitable, unequaled among scriptures. There is some merit to the claim, and the Qur'an itself support it (17:88)

It is important to mention here that the original language of the holy Qur'an is Arabic stated Daniel(2009) and the word 'Qur'an' in Arabic is derived from the root qara'a, which has various meanings, such as to Read, [Sura 17: 93.] to Recite, [Sura 75:18:17: 46.] etc. Qur'an is a verbal noun and hence means the 'reading' or 'Recitation'. As used in the Qur'an itself, the word refers to the revelation from Allah in the broad sense [Surah 17: 82.] and is not always restricted to the written form in the shape of a book, as we have it before us today. However, it means revelation to Muhammad only, while revelation to other prophets has been referred to by different names (e.g. taurat, Injil, Zabur, etc.). The revelation from Allah to the Prophet Muhammad is referred to in the Qur'an itself by the name Qur'an (recitation) as well as by other names, such as e.g. Furqaan which means, criterion, see 25: 1), (Tanzil:sent down, see 26: 192), (Dhikr: reminder, see 15: 9), .(Kitab :scripture, see 21:10) and other various references to the Qur'an are by such words as Nur (light), Huda (guidance), Rahman (mercy), Majid (glorious),Mubarak (blessed), Bashir (announcer), Nadhir (warner), etc.. All these names reflect one of the various aspects of the revealed word of Allah. Therefore, this holy book deserves to be the primary source of knowledge in Islam. Meanwhile, human reason which" represents the human intellectual faculty argued Davutoglu (1994) that processes a variety of information as premises to draw conclusions thereupon, has been given a serious attention by Islam and Qur'an alike. As such, Islam and its holy book did not ignore the importance of this human faculty in acquisition of knowledge; they jointly continue to encourage people to exercise their intellect in order to discover more truth about the physical world. In this juncture, we ought to evaluate some Quranic messages on the importance of human reason in

gaining various knowledges. According to the holy Qur'an, "Surely the worst of beasts in God's sight are those that are deaf and dumb and do not reason". (8:22)"And it is not for a soul to believe except by permission of Allah, and He will place defilement upon those who will not use reason". (10:100) "And if you obey most of those in the earth, they will lead you astray from Allah's way; they follow but conjecture and they do but guess". (6:116) . "And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge... (17:36) "And when it is said to them: 'Follow what God has sent down', they say, 'No; but we will follow such things as we found our fathers doing.' What Even if their fathers had no understanding of anything and if they were not guided?" (2:170). Obviously, the above Quranic verses and many other verses prove the importance of human reason and its ability in discovering the truth and reality of this world. It implies that Quran and human reason can work together and they are able to be integrated. Hence, there should not be any conflict between the both sources of knowledge, because the right reason depends on revelation for correct guidance, and good understanding of revelation should also depend on logical reasoning. With regard to human senses and natural phenomenon,, they are considered to be important sources of knowledge acquisition in the view of Islam. Thus, the sources of knowledge acquisition in Islam are very comprehensive and holistic. Yet, as far as knowledge acquisition is concerned, what kind of knowledge can we gain from the holy Qur'an?

5. Types of Knowledge in the Qur'an Social and Natural Sciences

First of all , the Qur'an as the seal of revelation of God declares that it is an exposition for all things (Tibyan li kulli shay) as guidance and mercy, in which nothing is neglected (Al-Nahl 16:89). The inclusion of various branches of knowledge in the Holy Qur'an is such an example of its comprehensiveness. Though, some may argue that the holy book of Qur'an is not a book of social Sciences, yet, in the matter of fact, there are some hints argued Ilyas(2002) that link to social affairs and natural sciences. Being a book of knowledge and being the final revelation of Allah, the holy Qur'an has directly or indirectly discussed various issues in the field of social sciences and natural sciences since 1400 years ago. For example, the issue of economics (Usury, loan and transaction, measure and weight is already discussed by the Qur'an. As such, economically, Qur'an provides guidance to attain and maintain justice, and sets some norms and principle argued Khan(1994) along with some restrictions to ensure the observance of those norms and principles, with particular reference to prohibition of *Riba*, uncertain contracts, illegal transaction, etc The Qur'an has dealt with these issues comprehensively (usury: Qur'an: 2:275-281. Loan: Qur'an:2:282. Measure and weight: Qur'an: 11:85.) Similarly, judiciary (Qur'an:5:42) Politics (Qur'an:3:159) and history (histories of nations and prophets). Moreover, knowledge about natural sciences are not ignored by the Qur'an, especially, knowledge of astronomy, embryology etc.. Indeed, the aim of Qur'an is to provide guidelines and principles and leaves it to mankind to explore and exercise his intellect to justify the sayings of Almighty Allah the most omnipotent and the most omniscience.

6. Conclusion

Knowledge is important and essential for all human being; because it is a sign of power, and it enables man to understand the nature, to know God as the most omnipotent and the most omniscience. In the most serious note, sciences either natural, social or religious sciences are interrelated or none of them can exclude the other, as such, they are able to unite to produce true understanding of this world and the causes behind its existence. As far as the topic of this humble paper is concerned, Islam perceives acquisition of knowledge as noblous duty and a requirement for the fulfillment of man's obligation as a vicegerent of God (*Khalifatullah*) on earth, and it introduces very comprehensive mechanisms and tools of acquiring knowledge, ranging from revelation, human reason, senses and nature. Hence, the importance of acquisition of knowledge is clearly seen in the first revelation on Prophet Muhammad (p.b.u.h) and which was not about seeking wealth nor about searching for luxurious and opulent life, but it was exclusively based on acquisition of knowledge. Knowledge that will benefit man in this life and in the hereafter.

Suggestions and Recommendation

Based on above study, this humble paper would like to suggest the following:

1. It is obvious that, Islam is a religion based upon knowledge; it has paid a serious attention to the acquisition of knowledge. This fact is obvious through its scripture (Qur'an) which repeatedly call people to seek knowledge in order to realize the truth of the existence at macrocosmic or microcosmic level.
2. Knowledge is the key of achieving high level of civilization, as such; the responsibility rests on Muslim parents, community, scholars and religious leaders to emphasize the importance of education and acquisition of knowledge to all members of the society.
3. As far as acquisition of knowledge in Islam is important, a strong mutual beneficial reciprocal relation between Muslim leaders and Muslim Scholars is urgent. Muslim governments ought to invest hugely on education, and they should encourage the scholars to involve in various researches at different branches of knowledge
4. Muslims should be reminded that the purpose in acquiring knowledge in Islam, is not only to be able to earn a lawful living, but also to use it for the benefit of mankind, to eradicate suffering and poverty, to educate others, to learn to distinguish between right and wrong, or to differentiate between good and bad, to be a good Muslim that will serve Allah and His creations, and most importantly, to gain the pleasure of Allah.

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