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## Knowledge and the Self

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“My Lord! I ask You for beneficial knowledge, and I seek refuge with You from non-beneficial knowledge.”

# Knowledge and the Self

By Maulana Fazlur Rahman Ansari

Muslims in general, those with a narrow, conservative Islamic education regard Western education; especially at a tertiary level, as a vice. They do not approach learning from the point of view of *Tawhīd*, nor pursue knowledge for its own sake, even if it comes from a non-Muslim educational institution. As long as Muslims are clear about their Islamic values, there is no need to fear these levels of knowledge that comes from a foreign source. To pursue scientific or other useful knowledge as such is also an Islamic duty and should be regarded as such.

The mission of Islam is Conquest at three levels:

1. Conquest of the Self
2. Conquest of the Environment
3. Conquest of Nature.

I am referring here to a comprehensive conquest i.e. at the spiritual and physical levels.

The levels of conquest constitute the mission of Islam in all its practices; whether we pray five times per day or fast during the month of *Ramadan* etc. The first thing is the conquest of the lower self of man or the carnal self (*Nafs*) by every individual.

*Tazkiyah* (Purification), is one of the primary objectives of Islamic teachings and one of the most important aspects of the Holy Prophet's (S.) mission. *Tazkiyah* is to purify the self for the sake of character (personality) development. *Tazkiyah* originally meant pruning the plant, to remove what is harmful for its growth. When the term is applied to the human personality, it means to beautify it and to remove from it all evil traces and spiritual diseases that are obstacles experiencing of Allah. When this purification is done, then this human personality, which consists of a lower self and higher self, will function under the command of the higher self.

The lower self (*al-nafs al-ammara*) functions on the basis of instinct; that is, the instinct of hunger, sex, procreation, desire for wealth, self-assertion etc. The higher self, however, yearns for the values of truth, beauty, holiness, harmony and finally communion with Allah. Unless this carnal self is brought under the control of the higher self, man, in spite of being human, will behave more like an animal and less as the "vicegerent of God" or *Khalifat-Allah*.

This struggle over the lower self (*al-nafs-al-Ammara*) is the greater struggle (*Jih-d al-Akbar*). Thus, all religious devotions, spiritual exercises and teachings are directed towards this *jih-d* or struggle to tame the carnal self and to function under the command of the higher self. This will enable all actions to have an **ethical** and not an **instinctive** basis. The instinctive self desires wealth, power, pleasure, etc. Sometimes the instinctive self appears in the form of a raging storm; then the human being acts like a brute. Observe any human being whose anger is out of control: such a person behaves like an animal.

These instinctive urges can direct man to the abyss. These two aspects of life are clearly mentioned in the Holy Qur'~n:

**"Verily I have created man in the best form - given him the best constitution."**

(Q 95:4-5)

**"But I have endowed him (that if he so desires) he can sink to the lowest of the low."**

Therefore this struggle is there in man (91:7-9)

The human personality has two facets (dimensions): light and darkness, good and evil. We are told : **"He who purifies it and keeps it pure, he who cultivates [develops] it, and constantly prunes it, he has achieved success."**- He has achieved his destiny and: (Arabic)

**"He who permits his personality to become stunted or falls prey to evil, is a hopeless failure".**(Q 91:10) They are those who move further from their destiny.

"What is the purpose of human life but to realise the potential of *Khalifat- Allah*; to follow the "straight path" and not to deviate from it. This is possible through **Tawfiq** (divine assistance) from Allah and through His strength and mercy. When man actualizes his function as *Khalifat-Allah*, he becomes the master over himself and the environment. In order to achieve this he must conquer his lower self (*nafs*). So, the first level is the conquest of the Self; the starting point for mastery over all else.

The second level is the conquest of the environment. Because the human being lives in a social order, therefore, the maintenance of the purity of the individual's life is possible only if his environment is also pure. Thus every human being has to struggle individually and collectively to eradicate all types of moral and spiritual evils. In the Holy Qur'~n we are told:

**"You are the best community that hath been raised for mankind. You enjoin what is right and forbid (eradicate) evil and you believe in Allah." (Q 3:110)**

The third level is the conquest of Nature. This potential *Khalifat-Allah* can only be realised through the conquest of Nature as exemplified in the *Mi'raj* of our Beloved Prophet (S). Nothing, not even the cosmos, could stand in his way in attaining nearness to his Creator: This demonstrates the highest order of *Khalifat-Allah*.

What is *Khalifat-Allah*? We read in the holy Qur'~n:

**"Allah has (endowed the human beings with such powers and) made the constitution of everything in the heavens and the earth in such a fashion, so as to be controlled and conquered by man. God has made this as the mission of mankind, " (Q45:13) "sahara lakum"- "entire mankind"- not only the Muslims.**

Every human being is *Khalifat-Allah* potentially. According to the Hadith: **"All mankind is Allah's family."** Almighty Allah loves all and also punishes all - whether Muslim or non-Muslim. He is not a tribal God, He is the Righteous God. He says in the Holy Qur'~n: (Arabic).....

**"Say: My Lord is on the straight path." (Q 11:56)** He is a Righteous God. Allah has made principles and imposed upon Himself to follow those principles - although He is their Creator. Therefore He invites us to do the same and pray to Him:

**"Guide us on the straight path." (Q 1:6)** We should also walk on the straight path. The shortest line between two points is the straight line. Therefore the goal can be seen from the starting point. The 'Ay~t continues, (A

**"In these are the guidelines for those who use their intellectual powers" (Q 45:13)** or reasoning powers, for probing deeper into the mysteries of the laws of nature.

People talk about landing on the moon, the Qur'~n has mentioned about people travelling further:

**"And the moon, when you discover water on there, then you will travel from one region to another." (Q 84:18-19)**

The concept of duality, (diarchy) dividing life into two watertight compartments is un-Islamic. The concept of knowledge in other religions is dualistic: there is a form of knowledge which is sacred and a form of knowledge which is profane.

The Holy Qur'~n, speaks of a system of **values** and as we know, every culture is based on a particular arrangement of values.

The human personality has five levels of consciousness:

**1. Spiritual (consciousness of a Transcendental Being)**

2. Aesthetical

3. Intellectual

4. Moral

5. Physical; therefore, the values corresponding to these levels of consciousness are also five:

1. spiritual

2. aesthetical

3. moral

4. intellectual and

5. physical

A community is sometimes aware only of *some* of these five values, then its value system is imperfect, and the culture that emerges from it is also imperfect. An ideology might know the five values, but the order is incorrect. The problem of other cultures is the problem of gradation of values; some values are given greater priority than others. The modern culture of permissiveness is problematic as it gives priority to the physical level of consciousness over the other higher levels. The Qur'~n and Hadith are absolutely clear on values, e.g. the verse from the Holy Qur'~n :

The source of exaltation by Allah (SWT) is mentioned: **"Those are honoured by Allah who cultivate Im~n and those who cultivate (Al °Ilm) knowledge"** [various branches of knowledge - All knowledge].(Q 58:11)

The Holy Prophet (S.) came with two roles in human history:

- 1) He came to close the era of divine spoonfeeding, that is the era of prophetic revelation.
- 2) He opened the modern scientific era. Evidence of this can be found when we read the Qur'~n and Hadith and the history of science.

In his book "The Making of Humanity", R.Briffault says: "Science before Islam was unscientific. The world did not know science before the advent of Islam."

Pre - Islamic science was based on the deductive method which is a defective method of inquiry. The Holy Prophet (S.)'s was the scientific method; he encouraged the experimental or the **inductive method**.

The foundation of physical science is based on three principles:

- 1) Unity of mankind
- 2) Unity of knowledge
- 3) Unity of nature

The first one to give these principles of unity (*Tawhid*) was the Holy Prophet (S.). Why is it that three-quarters of the verses of the Holy Qur'an refer to natural phenomena? And after these verses we are told:

**"In these are the guidelines for those who use their reasoning powers."**(Q 13:4)

The Holy Prophet (S.) said: (Arabic)

**"The superiority of a person who cultivates knowledge over the one who does devotional exercises is like my superiority over the meanest of you!"** He was the one, amongst the founders of faith, who said that **"the ink of the scholar is holier than the blood of the martyr"**. He also taught: (Arabic) **"Every portion of knowledge is the lost property of the believer"**, and also: (Arabic) **"Seek knowledge even unto China."**

**But** in this age of degeneration, we are being taught that knowledge is only of three types:

- 1) *Fiqh*
- 2) *Tafsir* and
- 3) Hadith

Whoever studies beyond these becomes a devil. This is proclaimed by so-called pious Muslims. The Holy Prophet (S) laid the foundations and principles of physical science.

Let us read the Holy Qur'an:

**"These horses, mules and donkeys have been created for you, as a means of conveyance and adornment for your stables, but in the**

**future God will cause the creation of vehicles which you cannot perceive now."(Q 16:8)**

Up to the twelfth century all the scientists believed that the universe was a static universe but the Qu'ran tells us: (Arabic).....

**"Almighty Allah continuously adds mercy to this universe as He pleases." (Q 35:11)**

This is an expanding universe, not a "block" universe as Newton and the others believed. As a famous teacher said: "These fundamental portions of wisdom which took the philosophers and scientists centuries to find, were given by the Holy Prophet (S.) just by the way."

Today the world of science is divided on the issue whether there are living beings on other planets but the Qu'ran says:

**"Amongst the signs of Allah is the creation of the heavenly bodies and the earth and those living beings whom He has placed in them, and Allah is going to cause them to meet one another when He wills."(Q 42:29)**

In Islam there is no division of sacred and profane knowledge, and consequently, the pursuit of physical science is an act of *'Ibadah*. It is true that the highest level of knowledge is the knowledge of *Din* (Religion), but the process of knowledge is such that you cannot understand the highest knowledge unless you build up the lower levels of knowledge.

If we read the history of Islam on Muslim education, we will find that the courses of education were as comprehensive as it could be. Knowledge was arranged in terms of Unity (*Tawhid*). We think an *Alim* is one who studies only *fiqh*, *tafsir* and Hadith. How wrong it is! Do you know that Imam Abu Hanifa wrote a scientific treatise with mathematical equations and this is available at the International Library in France? Imam Ghazzali, Imam Fakhrudin Ar-Razi, Imam Shafi'i, were intellectual giants in various branches of knowledge and yet they were pious and saintly people.

Therefore, the early Muslims fulfilled the tasks of laying the foundation of modern science by classifying the different branches of knowledge and removing the false from the truth. They gave science the shape of pure science and laid the foundation of several exact sciences e.g. Algebra (named after Sheikh Jabir ibn-Hayyan),

co-ordinate geometry, mensuration, about blood, metals, the heavens and the earth etc.

Then two unfortunate events happened in the Islamic World:

## 1. The expulsion of the Muslims from Spain and

## 2. The fall of Baghdad.

These were the seats of scientific learning and their enemies saw to it that all traces of Islamic achievements were destroyed. Thereafter the Muslim culture started to decline. It was progressing in the direction of *Khalifat - Allah*, that is,

1. Conquest of the Self
2. Conquest of the Environment and the
3. Conquest of Nature, but Muslims withdrew themselves from the conquest of Nature and in the process lost the world.

False teachings emerged and the Muslims returned from the laboratory to the Musallah. Read 1000 Tasbih on such and such a night and get a few million Thaw~b! Finally we became so weak in the field of technology that the enemy could produce better arms and attack the World of Islam. And when they attacked, it collapsed like a house of cards. When it collapsed, Muslims became their slaves. This is because we regarded Scientific Education as un-Islamic!

If we continue to lose the opportunity and do not understand the emphasis of *Al-Ilm* -we will be destroyed. Why should we make Islam a joke and find ourselves weak and contemptible? In every community we find "Muslims" - one committed murder, another rape, fraud, (drug peddling), etc. Are they doing good to the name of Islam? I think they are the worst criminals against the name of Islam. Almost all over the world, Muslims are the most backward in education! They are the followers of him who said:

(Arabic).....

**"Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim male and female";** but they do not want to learn the Qur~n and Hadith and want to remain in the gutter.

Some Muslims now say: "We want to bring about an Islamic State again." How? With what? If we examine their motives we find that their approach is either a social, historical, ritualistic or political. With what material do we want to bring about a change?

Our Prophet (S.) established the Islamic State with material like Sayyidina Abu Bakr, Sayyidina Umar Faruq, Sayyidina 'Uthman, Sayyidina 'Ali (RA) etc. How can you build an Islamic State without creating that same band or group?

And who wants to bring about a change? - with what? Slogans, fighting against one another, one organisation against the other! We are warned in the Holy Qur~n:



**"O ye who believe! Enter into Islam completely."**(2:208) i.e., the whole of Islam comprehensively. Allah says:

**"Do you believe only a part of the message and discard the rest?"** (Q 2:85);

If you mutilate the religion the punishment will be **that "you will be debased in this world."** You will enjoy no honour! Are we not in this state? Should we not rise above petty things and overcome our defects. To carry the label of Islam is not enough; we will get a beating all the time.

O Muslims, take care before Islam becomes a memory of the past. Unless and until we can organise education according to the Islamic concept, and produce God - fearing, morally integrated, spiritually elevated, intellectually enlightened Muslims in this community, we will have no future.

All praises are due to Allah, Lord of the Worlds.

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