

Good News

'...And give good news to those who do good (to others)' – Holy Quran 22:37

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The Importance of Knowledge in Islam

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In this day and age of advanced scientific knowledge and technology; of 'space travel' and the much talked about creation of 'artificial intelligence', one cannot but wonder with astonishment at the fact that the very first revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) - himself wanting in literacy - 1440 years ago, was:

Iqra – **Read** in the name of your **Rabb** (Lord) Who creates, -
Creates man from a clot,
Read and thy Lord is most generous,
Who taught by the **pen**,
Taught man what he knew not. -
(96:1-5)

The word ***Iqra***, depending on the context, means to read or to recite, to study, to research, in other words, in essence, it signifies 'to gain knowledge'.

Therefore the importance of gaining knowledge or education through reading and writing is emphasized here in the Holy Quran. No one can argue that this advice presented here as a command to the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him –pbuh) from the Almighty is as relevant today to all mankind and will indeed remain so in the distant future as it was when first revealed.

Words linked to the same Arabic root '***qaf ra hamza***' from which the word ***iqra*** is derived, appears 88 times in the Holy Quran. The word 'Quran' also comes from the same root as ***iqra*** and appears 70 times - the most of all the other derivatives thereof. This highlights the pivotal role the Holy Quran plays as a primary source in our quest of knowledge. The word Quran itself in fact means 'that which is read' or 'recited'. It is Divine Knowledge in its purest form - a gift from the Creator as a source of inspiration, enlightenment and guidance for humankind.

It is thus also important to understand the meaning of **Rabb**, the

Author of the Holy Quran. **Rabb**, for the sake of brevity, is translated as ‘Lord’ but in essence it means ‘the One Who Nurtures and Sustains that which He has brought into existence through various stages each stage higher than the previous one until that which He has created reaches perfection.’ Our **Rabb** or Lord is thus the One Who brings everything into existence from nothing then brings it to perfection through various evolutionary stages. This applies to the physical, intellectual, moral and spiritual aspects of our lives. And this is the purpose of the Holy Quran, to awaken, enliven and grow to perfection the latent attributes of goodness in man.

The Holy Quran is thus indeed the supreme fountain from which all knowledge draws its vitality and guiding principles. Scholars are aware of the fact that the Holy Quran contains such knowledge and guidance that deals with an enormous range of sciences both pertaining to the physical and spiritual aspects of life. In it we will come across elements that form the basis of sciences such as botany, biology, anatomy, chemistry, physiology, physics, astronomy, mathematics, economics, dietary laws, governance, and more. One just has to make the effort and time to dig out the treasures hidden in this ‘ocean’ of knowledge.

This is the real meaning of *iqra* and that is why the command is immediately linked to the ‘pen’, the symbol of ‘knowledge’; because by means of the pen the knowledge you uncover can be preserved and shared with others. If it wasn’t for the pen, all our ancient treasures of knowledge would have been lost. Remnants of the words of the great Prophets; Shakespearean literature; the works of great philosophers; that of great saints, scientists, to give but some examples, would have been lost to us. Thus the Holy Quran says our **Rabb** is the One ‘Who taught (*alamma*) by the pen. Taught man what he knew not.’

Interestingly the word *alamma* has very wide connotations in the Holy Quran. It appears in different forms over 800 times in the Holy Quran. One form is very significant and that is as the noun *ālamīn* which means, ‘all the worlds’ - some say it entails ‘the entire universe and beyond’ including all the different sciences that exist today and will emerge in the future.

The origin of all knowledge is therefore ultimately from our **Rabb**, our Creator, Who reveals what He wills to man. Thus the Holy Quran says:

42:51 And it is not vouchsafed to a mortal that Allah **should speak to him**, except by revelation or from behind a

veil, or by sending a messenger and revealing by His permission what He pleases. Surely He is High, Wise.

Here three stages of divine revelation to humankind are mentioned;

1. **Wahy- Revelation i.e.** by infusing a quick idea into the mind of man.
2. **From behind a veil**, meaning by means **of dreams or visions**
3. **By the angel** appearing to the recipient and speaking to him.

The last form (3) is exclusive to prophets and has ended with the final prophet Muhammad (pbuh) but the other forms of revelation still continue today as a blessing to humankind. This is the way Almighty God speaks to humankind and this is a medium by which He teaches and steers man in the right way and opening up the secrets of this world to him.

So from the very start of man's creation, his primary source of knowledge was through revelation from God. How often don't we hear from some inventor how an idea suddenly came into his or her head and how that idea was developed into something significant and useful. Go through the history books and see for

yourself how great inventions came about. Who can forget Archimedes' Eureka!

And to show that the acquisition of 'knowledge' is part of our very 'nature', elements of 'knowledge' such as reading and writing are mentioned together with our creation from an insignificant **blood clot**.

Therefore in the phrase 'in the name of our *Rabb*,' actually signifies 'with the assistance of your *Rabb*' because our *Rabb* is responsible for our unfoldment and evolvement albeit physically, intellectually or spiritually.

Thus the Holy Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in several places said: 'Seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim.' – (*Al-Tabrani, Tirmidhi*) and 'Seek knowledge though it be in China.' As well as 'Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.'

Prof. N. Stephen, in his book *Muhammad and Learning*, makes an interesting observation. He mentions the importance of acquiring knowledge not just from books but also from 'life' itself such as from nature and from fellowman which is how the early Arabs acquired knowledge. And this is the direction the Holy Quran takes us also by asking us to think, reflect, ponder etc. (2:269; 38:29; 16:11; 45:13...)

Stephen continues:

‘No knowledge is ever wasted. Therefore: Acquire knowledge; it enables the possessor to distinguish right from wrong; it lights the way to heaven; it is our friend in the desert; our companion when friendless; it guides us to happiness; it sustains us in misery; it is an ornament among friends, and an armour against enemies.’

This brings us back to the source from which we draw inspiration in our quest for knowledge i.e. the Holy Quran. It was the bedrock of the early Muslims’ advance in just about every sphere of knowledge that took them to the greatest heights in learning in the world from the 9th through to the 17th century – an era still celebrated as the ‘Golden Age’ by Muslims and non-Muslims.

It was only when Muslims neglected the Holy Quran as a source of knowledge and started dabbling in petty theological quibbles that their current demise and backwardness set in. T

he Holy Quran is indeed a complete and absolute compendium of Divine Knowledge contained in 114 well-preserved chapters. There is no human intervention here. If we were to assume that the Holy Quran was written and compiled by human effort alone, then the broad principles of religion and science which find expression in the Holy Quran

could only have been collected by a highly learned person and not an ‘un-schooled’ 7th Century Arab. Indeed such a person would need to have a comprehensive knowledge of all the previous scriptures as well as extensive mastery over various other branches of knowledge such as philosophy, literature, linguistics, numerology, cosmology, history, comparative religion, sociology, economics, and so forth; for traces of and clear references to these disciplines are to be found in the Holy Book of Almighty God. A human author of a book such as the Holy Quran, even in today’s terms, would have had to have much more than a master’s degree in all these branches of knowledge and more - and that we all know is impossible for even the greatest scholars on earth to achieve! That is why the Holy Quran puts forward the challenge to men and *jinn* (the skilled geniuses of the world) to produce even one verse equal or superior to that of the Holy Quran. 1400 plus years later the challenge still stands.

Today you find many highly educated people with specific expertise in one particular branch of study; for example you may come across a professor of physics or a professor of social sciences or a professor of linguistics etc., but never a professor of all the branches of knowledge including the spiritual dimensions of life, all rolled up in one. This is what the

‘unschooled’ Prophet and Messenger of God presented to us in the form of the Holy Quran; knowledge that could only have come from the Divine Mind.

It is important to note, though, that the Holy **Quran is neither a book of science nor a book of history nor literature**; but to claim that the scientific facts in the Holy Quran as confirmed by subsequent discoveries are due to coincidence, would be irrational. The best explanation is that the All Knower, the Lord of ‘all the worlds’ revealed and taught it to the ‘unlettered’ Muhammad (pbuh).

Just like the Holy Quran contains knowledge about the natural world, its main objective and theme is to bring us closer to God Almighty. This is brought about through the unfoldment and growth of the inner dimensions of our beings i.e. our souls. This is the only way to gain inner ‘peace’ in this life and ‘paradise’ in the Hereafter. On the other hand, by rejecting His guiding principles will lead us to failure in this life and a burning remorse after death.

By following the Holy Quran and using it as a basis for our search for knowledge of the ‘*alamin*’ i.e. of ‘all the worlds’ or ‘all the sciences’ and NOT just use it for recital on special occasions, Muslims reached the greatest heights

intellectually, morally, and spiritually in the world.

A well-known giant in the corporate world, CEO of Hewlett-Packard Ms Carly Fiorina addressing a highly influential audience at a leadership conference in the US, told them, and I quote:

There was once a civilization that was the greatest in the world. It was able to create a continental super-state that stretched from ocean to ocean and from northern climes to tropics and deserts. Within its dominion lived hundreds of millions of people, of different creeds and ethnic origins. One of its languages became the universal language of much of the world, the bridge between the peoples of a hundred lands. Its armies were made up of people of many nationalities, and its military protection allowed a degree of peace and prosperity that had never been known. The reach of this civilization’s commerce extended from Latin America to China, and everywhere in between. And this civilization was driven more than anything, by invention. Its architects designed buildings that defied gravity. Its mathematicians created the algebra and algorithms

that would enable the building of computers, and the creation of encryption. Its doctors examined the human body, and found new cures for disease. Its astronomers looked into the heavens, named the stars, and paved the way for space travel and exploration. Its writers created thousands of stories; stories of courage, romance and magic. Its poets wrote of love, when others before them were too steeped in fear to think of such things. When other nations were afraid of ideas, this civilization thrived on them, and kept them alive. When censors threatened to wipe out knowledge from past civilizations, this civilization kept the knowledge alive, and passed it on to others. While modern Western civilization shares many of these traits, the civilization I'm talking about was the Islamic world from the year 800 to 1600, which included the Ottoman Empire and the courts of Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, and enlightened rulers like Suleiman the Magnificent. Although we are often unaware of our indebtedness to this other civilization, its gifts are very much a part of our heritage. The technology industry would not exist without the

contributions of Arab mathematicians. Sufi poet-philosophers like Rumi challenged our notions of self and truth. Leaders like Suleiman (Most famous Sultan of the Ottoman Empire during the 'Golden Age' of Islam) contributed to our notions of tolerance and civic leadership. Perhaps we can learn a lesson from his example: It was leadership based on meritocracy, not inheritance. It was leadership that harnessed the full capabilities of a very diverse population—that included Christian, Islamic, and Jewish traditions. This kind of enlightened leadership — leadership that nurtured culture, sustainability, diversity and courage — led to 800 years of invention and prosperity. — unquote.

This was indeed the 'Golden Age of Islam' that produced **philosophers and scientists such as:**

Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (872 – 950)

Ibn Sina (980 – 1037) Also known as Avicenna in the West.

Ibn Rushd (1126 – 1198) Also known as Averroes.

We also come across **astronomers** whose works paved the way for today's space travel such as the Persians:

Nasir al-Din al-Tusi and **Al Bairuni**.

In the West the German, Copernicus, is regarded as the Father of Astronomy; but what the West do not tell us, is that Copernicus copied his predecessor, al Tusi's, map of the cosmos that showed that the 'sun was at the centre of our solar system' and not the earth as wrongly depicted by Greek scholars.

Then there is that great mathematician and physicist, **Muhammad ibn Musa Al-Khwarizmi (780 – 850)**, whose works one might argue earn him the title of the '**Father of Modern Technology.**'

He is also known as Algoritmi or Algaurizin. His works introduced Arabic numerals and the concepts of Algebra into European mathematics, which, today, is the foundation of modern computers and algorithms.

These are but a few of many widely acclaimed Muslim scientists whose works helped lay the foundation of modern science which the Western world is building on and which have made it possible for them to travel into space and build technology that is marvelling the world today.

Muslims, regrettably, have indeed neglected this aspect of their lives and thus

we pray that God Almighty hasten a transformation that will see a return to the true love and zest for knowledge inspired by the Holy Quran in the world.



We strongly condemn all acts of aggression and terror including all violations of basic human rights specifically those carried out in the name of Religion or State!

The Good News

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