



HOLISTIC KNOWLEDGE: RELIGIOUS IMPERATIVE

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In Islam, knowledge receives the highest endorsement. From the perspective of Muslim cosmology, two of the greatest defining moments in human history centre on the theme of knowledge; *ilm*. The first of them is in the creation of Adam, peace be upon him - the first human being - who was invested with a station, *maqām*, loftier than that of even the angels. Pivotal to this honour was that Allah *taught Adam the names of all things*.¹ The second event was in the cave of Ḥirā' where the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, was first invested with Revelation (*wahy*) directing him to *Read! In the name of your Lord who created; created man from a clinging clot*.² On both occasions we see the role of knowledge as instrumental in shaping sacred events - which serves to demonstrate its place in a believer's life.

THE BELIEVER'S CAPITAL

The duties and responsibilities of faith are not a burden, for: *Allah does not charge a soul with more than it can bear*.³ On the contrary, they are necessary measures to regulate human existence: to guide man, prevent him from straying, harming himself or harming others. By recognising that Islam's Sacred Law, or *sbarī'ab*, exists to guide and protect us, man can attain to a reasonable equilibrium in this world and felicity in the next. Vital to this project is knowledge; for without it we would not know how to live out the Divine Will in our lives: individually or collectively. As such, a core body of sacred knowledge has been made mandatory on all Muslims to learn - which is what is intended by the Prophet's words; upon whom be peace: "The seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim."⁴

After citing the above hadith, Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbali wrote: "Thus it is obligatory upon every Muslim to know what

is required with regards to his religion, such as purification, prayer and fasting. It is obligatory upon those who have wealth to know what is due from their wealth in terms of paying the wealth-tax (*zakāb*), spending [on dependants and relatives], performing pilgrimage, and assisting jihad. Likewise, it is obligatory upon those who buy and sell to learn what transactions are lawful and unlawful. 'Umar, may Allah be pleased with him, said: 'No one sells in our markets except those who have understanding of the religion.' Al-Tirmidhī cites this.⁵ ... Imām Aḥmad, may Allah have mercy on him, was once asked by a man as to what knowledge was incumbent to seek? He replied: 'That by which he can perform his prayers and the other requirements of his religion; such as fasting and paying the wealth-tax.' He also mentioned other duties of Islam, then said: 'It is incumbent that he learn all of this.' He also said: 'What is mandatory upon a person to acquire of knowledge is that by which his prayer, and his other religious duties, can be fulfilled.' Realise also that knowledge of the lawful and prohibited is noble to learn. Some of it is a personal obligation (*farḍ 'ayn*) to learn; other aspects of it constitute a communal obligation (*farḍ kifāyah*)."⁶

HOLISTIC LEARNING

Another way of looking at what knowledge is required on each individual to personally learn was sketched by Imam al-Ghazālī in *Minbāj al-'Ābidīn*. There he wrote: "Obligatory knowledge is, broadly speaking, of three types: knowledge of Divine Unicity (*tawḥīd*); of secrets (*sirr*) - which is related to the heart and its actions - and of Sacred Law (*sbarī'ab*):

"The specific obligation from the knowledge of *tawḥīd* is that you know by it the essential fundamentals of the

faith (*uṣūl al-dīn*): knowing that Allah is omnipotent; omniscient; living; wills; speaks; hears all; sees all; that He has no partner or equal; that He possesses the attributes of perfection; is not contingent, is eternally existent; and that Muhammad is his Messenger, truthful in all he was sent with. Knowledge of spiritual secrets includes knowing the commands and prohibitions in such a way that one acquires sincerity and corrects intentions, and so that one's actions are made sound. Knowledge of *sharī'ah* is to know all the duties one is obligated with. Whatever is beyond these three types of knowledge is considered a communal obligation."⁷

In a reworking of al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāṣīmī iterates a similar triadic division of *ilm*, or knowledge:

"The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, said: "The seeking of knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim." This includes knowledge about Allah's Unicity (*tawḥīd*) and about His Essence and Attributes. It also includes knowing the acts of worship (*ibādāt*); the lawful and prohibited; and social transactions (*mu'āmalāt*): what is permitted and forbidden from them. It also includes knowing the laudable spiritual states of the heart, like patience (*ṣabr*), gratitude (*shukr*), generosity (*sakbā*), good character (*ḥusn kbuluq*), pleasant companionship (*ḥusn al-mu'āsharab*), truthfulness (*ṣidq*), and sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*); and the blameworthy traits, like rancour (*ḥiqd*), envy (*ḥasad*), treachery (*ghibsh*), pride (*kibr*), ostentation (*riyā*), anger (*ghaḍab*), enmity (*'adāwab*), malevolence (*bugḥdā*) and miserliness (*bukhl*). Knowing how to acquire the first set of traits and refrain from the second is as much a personal obligation as rectifying one's beliefs, acts of worship and social transactions."⁸

RELIGION IN A NUTSHELL

The aforementioned threefold classification of knowledge is based on a famous hadith of the Angel Gabriel, wherein he asks the Prophet, peace be upon him, about *īmān*, *islām* and *iḥsān*, which he explained as being: doctrine, law and spirituality. For what Islam offers man is a doctrine, or *aqīdab*, that explains his purpose in life, his position in the cosmos, and his relationship with his Creator. It offers a law (*sharī'ab*) that regulates his interactions with his fellow men, his environment and with the animal realm; whether such interactions be at a personal, social or political level. Beyond this, Islam offers a spirituality (*sulūk*) which gives depth and meaning to

the doctrine and law, and which offers man a detailed method of spiritual ascent. At the end of the encounter, the Prophet, upon whom be peace, revealed: "That was Gabriel, he came to teach you your religion."⁹ So this triage was explained as encompassing the religion in its entirety.

SACRED AND SECULAR DIMENSIONS

"Whoever treads a path in search of knowledge," urged the Prophet, peace be upon him, "Allah will make easy for him a path to Paradise."¹⁰

Islam certainly does not expect every Muslim to be an academic or student of knowledge totally engrossed in learning the various Islamic sciences. It is true that each Muslim community needs religious scholars; '*ulemā*', for it to fulfill its higher purpose: the scholars are, after all, "*warathatu'l-anbiyā*' - inheritors of the Prophets."¹¹ It is equally true that Muslim communities require those versed in what is commonly referred to as the worldly sciences, industries, and technologies; for without them societies would be disrupted or rendered dysfunctional. Strictures the Qur'an: "*But seek the abode of the Afterlife in that which Allah has given you, and forget not your portion of the world.*"¹² For this reason, the acquisition of such knowledge has been made a communal obligation upon Muslim societies.¹³

Important as it is, a believer must not acquire secular, or worldly knowledge while being ignorant of his *farḍ al-'ayn* or personal obligations: knowing the basic beliefs; knowing about ritual purification, the daily prayer, etc., along with learning what renders them sound or invalid; and also knowing the other basic demands made by the faith. Censuring those who adopt such an unwarranted attitude, the Qur'an states: "*They know only the outward appearances of the life of this world, and are heedless of the Hereafter.*"¹⁴ Commenting on the passage, the *tafsir* genre records the words of the famed al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, an early pietist, who protested: "By Allah, one of them knows about this world to the extent that he can pick up a coin and tell you its weight and worth; yet he does not know how to pray properly."¹⁵

SKATING ON THIN ICE

Today, the level of knowledge of the Muslim masses, or '*awwām*', possibly contours the above protestation more than it has done at any other time in our history. Indeed how many there are that are versed in the finer details

of politics; football; celebrity stardom; or just the latest local gossip, yet are content with neglecting their *farḍ al-'ayn* knowledge and leaving it at a fragile or precarious level. Still more disconcerting is that, today, it is not uncommon to encounter many who identify themselves as activists for Islam, and callers to the faith, yet whose knowledge of the *farḍ al-'ayn* tends to be sorely lacking; sometimes even infantile. And yet what is nowadays referred to as the “Revival of Islam” will never truly bear the expected fruits unless it roots itself in a sound and holistic adoption of the faith - in knowledge as well as in practice; starting, of course, with the personal obligations. An Arab poet of old offered this piece of wisdom in verse form:

“You hope for salvation, yet tread not its path;
A ship cannot sail on dry land!”¹⁶

PATH OF THE SEEKER

Knowledge that has been made a personal obligation is neither copious in quantity, nor difficult to learn. As with all things, a certain amount of effort needs to be invested in achieving the goal. The Prophet, peace be upon him, said: “*innama'l-'ilmu bi'l-ta'allum* - knowledge is gained by actively seeking it.”¹⁷ In bringing this paper to a close, then, the following holistic, yet basic *farḍ al-'ayn* schema is suggested to the dedicated seeker:

Commit to learning a basic, orthodox text on *'aḳīdab*; creedal issues. Some of these texts have been rendered into English.¹⁸ One of the most authoritative texts is the *'Aḳīdab al-Tabāwīyyah*. This covers the three areas of creed: theology (*ilāhiyyāt*), prophetology (*nubuwwāt*) and eschatology (*ma'ād*).

Commit to learning the rules related to the basic pillars of *'ibādāt*: prayer, zakāt, fasting and pilgrimage. This is best accomplished by following one of the four schools of Islamic law (*madbbabs*). This has been the tried and tested path of the Muslim nation for over a millennium. One should also learn some of the *mu'āmalāt*, particularly the rules related to marriage and divorce; and also of buying and selling - if one intends to enter into trade. Basic rights (*ḥuqūq*) and responsibilities (*mas'ūliyyāt*) are also mandatory to learn.

As for *sulūk*, the science of spiritual wayfaring, it has an inner and outer aspect. The inner concerns itself with *tazkiyah*: purifying the soul from its blemishes. Commit

to studying at least one text on this subject, practicing and internalising the remedies it offers. Shaykh Hamza Yusuf's *Purification of the Heart* is an ideal companion for this. The outer facet of the science concerns *tabdhib al-akblāq*: refinement of conduct and character. A small digest of hadiths, like *Sufism & Good Character* or *The Content of Character*, is well suited for helping to instill noble behaviour. Imam al-Nawawī's *Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn* is, however, the most comprehensive anthology for such a purpose.

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END NOTES

1. Qur'an 2:31.
2. Qur'an 96:1-2.
3. Qur'an 2:286.
4. Ibn Mājah, *Sunan*, no.224, and it is *ṣaḥīḥ*. Cf. al-Manāwī, *Fayḍ al-Qadīr Sbarḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣagbīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rīfah, n.d.), 4:267.
5. Al-Sakhāwī notes that some authors have appended to the end of the hadith the words: “*muslimab*: muslim woman,” giving the hadith an overall reading of: “The seeking of knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim man and woman.” He then says: “This has not been recorded in any of its routes of transmission, even though its meaning is sound.” *Maqāṣid al-Ḥasanab* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2003), 321; no.658.
6. 'Warathatu'l-Anbiyā', *Majmū' Rasā'il al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī*, (Cairo: al-Farūq al-Ḥadithah, 2002), 1:22-23.
7. Cited in al-Manāwī, *Fayḍ al-Qadīr*, 4:267-8.
8. *Maw'īẓat al-Mu'minin* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2001), 45.
9. Muslim, no.1.
10. Muslim, no.2699.
11. Abu Dāwūd, *Sunan*, no.3641. Ibn Ḥajr al-'Asqalānī gives it a grading of *ḥasan* in *Fath al-Bārī* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1989), 1:212.
12. Qur'an 28:77.
13. Cf. Ibn Qudāmah, *Mukhtaṣar Minbāj al-Qāṣidīn* (Cairo: Dār Ibn al-Haytham, 2003), 11-12.
14. Qur'an 30:7.
15. Cited in Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Qur'ān al-'Azīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rīfah, 1987), 3:437; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Zād al-Masīr* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī & Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002), 1090.
16. The Arabic reads: “*tarju'l-najāta wa lam tasluk masālik - ibā inna'l-safīnab lā tajrī 'ala'l-yabas.*”
17. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh*, 9:127. Al-Albānī gave the hadith a grading of *ḥasan* in his *Silsilat al-Aḥādīth al-Ṣaḥīḥab* (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Ma'ārif, 1995), no.342.
18. The ideal situation is to study with capable and qualified teachers licensed by recognised scholars. In the absence of such teachers, form a study group or self-study, whilst being humble and not making-up one's own rulings or fatwas. When in doubt, *Ask the people of knowledge if you do not know.* [21:7]