

The Place of knowledge
in Islam

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مقام العلم في اسلام
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" God will raise men of learning and faith
to high and honourable levels . "

The holy Quran

" seek knowledge from the cradle to the
grave. "

The holy Prophet

" Learned men are heirs to prophets. "

The holy Prophet

" Men of learning are alive even if they
are buried in the earth , and ignorant
people are dead even if they live on the
earth . "

Imam Ali

" It is incumbent upon every Muslim, both
man and woman , to seek knowledge , and
God loves seekers of knowledge . "

Imam Sadegh

" Knowledge is a strong base and support for faith . "

The prophet of Islam

" The most precious person is he whose deeds are many , and the least worthy person is he who has the least knowledge."

The holy prophet

" Teach your knowledge to others so as to strengthen the basis of your learning and also learn knowledge from others so as to raise the level of your own knowledge . "

Imam Hassan Mojtaba

" He who teaches me even a word , makes me his slave . "

Imam Ali

One of the subjects which Islam has considered to be most important and has been recommended most emphatically by it is the matter of knowledge and learning . To seek knowledge is regarded an Islamic duty and one of the obligatory religious acts .

In this pamphlet, we do not intend to

propagate Islam under the title of knowledge and learning or to quote points from the Holy Quran and Islamic history and narrations, or say that Islam has supported knowledge in this or that way, and has encouraged people to acquire knowledge

No! No one should suppose that this matter is an unknown secret to the public, since so much has been said and written about it that no repetition is needed in this regard.

Moreover, speaking and writing about it do not serve as a remedy, since we see the present grave position of us Muslims even after so many centuries of talking and writing about this topic.

The late scholar sharaf-edin-Ameli, leader of Lebanese Shi'as, spent long years of laborious work, and wrote and published valuable books introducing Shiism and Imami scholars, but despite all these painstaking efforts, he threw a glance at the chaotic condition of Lebanese Shi'as and saw it to be at a very regrett-

able level. He noticed that the Shi'as were the poorest, the most distressed and most retarded social class of Lebanon. There were no doctors, engineers, university professors and worthy personalities amidst them, or even if there were any, their number was of little consequence.

But the Shi'as were engaged in such occupations as portering, bath-keeping, massaging, and sweeping. Observation of this situation made that great man think that his books would be of no avail to or influence on the retarded and distressed life of the Shi'as. He said: " Those who read my books and see the condition of the Shi'as, will say: " If Shiism were a useful and liberating school, the Shi'as who are its followers, should have a better and a more respectable position. "

It was subsequent to these reflections that the late scholar came to a decision, and endeavoured to raise the position of the Shi'as in a practical manner and bring about a fundamental change.

He set up charity societies and numerous schools and educational institutions and with the overall aid of his followers , he was able to elevate the position of Lebanese Shi'as and save them from ignorance and retardation . (1)

It is indeed astonishing to note that we Muslims have confined ourselves to verbal utterances and remained behind in traversing the course of knowledge and learning .

Imam Ali (PBUH) (2) gave a warning in his last will to all the world Muslims not to let others (non-Muslims) excel them in the enforcement of the lofty teachings of Islam , and thus Cause their own retardation (3)

Dr . Gustav Lebon, the French scholar, says; " At a time when the Islamic civili-

- (1) Fariza-e-Elm (precept of knowledge)
- (2) The abbreviation " PBUH " stands for the phrase " peace be upon him " , a phrase which is used as a sign of reverence after the names of the Imams .
- (3) Nahjol-Balagha .

sation was at its peak in Andalusia, our centers of learning consisted of a number of fortresses in which our lords and masters lived a semibarbaric life, and prided themselves in the fact that they were illiterate. Among us christians, the most learned person was the ignorant monk who spent all his time taking out the books of Greece and Rome, kept in the church or monastery, wiping out the writings on their skin leaves, and instead writing on them incomprehensible religious incantations. " (1)

Will Durant writes in his " History of civilisation " : " The Muslims were superior and unrivalled in sciences during the Middle Ages. In mathematics, great progress had been made in Morocco and Azarbayjan, exhibiting once again the perfection of the Islamic civilisation Botany which had fallen into oblivion after Theophrastus, was revived by the Muslims. Edrissi had written a book about (1) The Arab and Islamic Civilisation .

plants and had described 360 different herbs. His attention was not confined to medical issues but he had also discussed them from botanic and scientific points of view .

In this period too, like other eras , the greatest physicians of Asia , Africa and Europe appeared from amongst the Muslims . Islam was also a pioneer of the world in establishing fine hospitals and provision of their equipment. The hospital which was founded by Nureddin in 1160 A.D. , treated the patients gratis for three whole centuries and also provided them medicine free of charge. There were also lunatic asylums in all the major Islamic cities to take care of lunatics. " (1)

While Europe and Christianity were burning in the fire of ignorance, the Muslims possessed such a civilisation that some aspects of it have been described by historians .

(1) History of Civilisation, will Durant,
Vol. 11, PP . 297-301 .

Without a doubt, the civilisation that had been achieved by the Muslims, was indebted to the teachings of Islam, since in the pre-Islamic period, they, too, were submerged in ignorance and depravity like other races and nations, and history shows clearly how bad their living conditions were.

Islam rose, and with its exact and extensive programs and its beneficial and liberating teachings, took that corrupt and contaminated community gradually towards happiness, and made a learned and progressive nation out of those ignorant and retarded individuals.

Islam prescribed no limitation or condition for seeking knowledge, and considered it necessary and obligatory for all people, men and women, in all periods of life, at any place and by any available teacher.

The above claim may be summed up and proved in the following brief sentences quoted from the prophet:

" Seeking knowledge is the duty
of every Muslim . " (1)

طَلَبُ الْعِلْمِ قَرِيضَةٌ عَلَى كُلِّ مُسْلِمٍ

In this sentence, no limitation or exception, which is often seen in many injunctions of Islam, can be seen, and no difference exists between a man and a woman in this matter, since the word " Muslim " includes both a man and a woman .

In the above utterance, the prophet of Islam reminds the people of the world that seeking knowledge is an indispensable duty and a general obligation, and is not confined to a particular class of people, or a particular sex .

اُطْلُبُوا الْعِلْمَ مِنَ الْمَهْدِ إِلَى اللَّحْدِ

Meaning: " seek knowledge from the
cradle to the grave, " that
is from birth till death .

In this injunction, the limitation of time

(1) Kafi

and duration has been removed , and seeking knowledge is not related to a particular period . It begins with the opening of the eyes to the world and ends with closing them for ever .

الْحِكْمَةُ ضَالَّةُ الْمُؤْمِنِ أَيْنَمَا وَجَدَهَا أَخَذَهَا

Meaning:

" Knowledge resembles something missed by a believer , and he who loses something , will pick it up when he finds it . "

wise saying means a firm , logical and correct word . Here it is said that we should not worry about the place where knowledge and wisdom may be found . Even if we find knowledge among infidels and hypocrites , we should acquire it .

We should point out here that the word حِكْمَةٌ (wisdom) used in this sentence refers to any proper and logical word that may be learnt from anyone on the condition of its being correct and free

from doubt. Those, who have no discernment and cannot distinguish between what is right and wrong , should not pay attention to everyone's word , but should take care not to be influenced. by the suggestions of perverts.

اُطْلُبُوا الْعِلْمَ وَلَوْ بِالْمِثْبِنِ

Meaning:

" Seek knowledge even if it is in China . " In this injunction, the limitation of place is omitted , and it is specified that one should seek knowledge and acquire it even if it is in the remotest part of the world , and even if it requires spending time and money, and toleration of much pain .

In short, the four above sentences mean that all Muslims in all phases of life should learn from everyone wherever he may be, and this is a religious duty .

What was mentioned above is an example of Islam's recommendations about the acquisition of learning and knowledge ,

and as we said at the beginning, our intention here is not to state Islamic injunctions. The Muslims of early Islam employed these lofty teachings for several centuries , and were the most eminent nation of the world .

There rose from amongst the Muslims , as we have already said, great physicians , exalted Chemists , geographers , astronomers, and other scientific personalities in many branches of science and industry. Those who are interested in details can refer to such books as Georgie Zeidan's " History of civilisation " , Will Durant's " History of Civilisation " , Gustav LeBon's " Arab and Islamic civilisation " , Ibn-e-Nadim's " Index " and similar books .

In view of what was said , is it not regrettable that the Muslims, having such liberating religious injunctions, with such brilliant historical record, and such great scientific figures and personalities, should fall into such a profound slumber

that most of their individuals are deprived of literacy , not to say anything of higher education , and should have to stretch their hands of need towards the enemies of Islam ?

In this case , the negligence of the Muslims in the Middle Ages , and the destruction caused by christian colonisers have been the two main factors for unhappiness and misfortunes .

Will Durant says: " The high towers of Christian churches and their belfries are, to a large extent , indebted to the minarets of mosques. The revival of the art of ceramics in Italy and France is due to the emigration of Muslim potters to these two countries which took place in the 12th Century, and to the visits of Italian potters to Islamic Andalusia. Blacksmiths and glass-blowers of venice, book binders of Italy , Chain mail and armour-makers of spain , all have learnt their art from Muslim artisans . In almost the whole Europe weavers turned their attention to

Islamic lands for their models and designs . Even the gardens largely showed signs of Iranian gardens .

This influence (of Islam and Muslims on European countries took place through commerce and crusades , and translation of thousands of books from Arabic into Latin and the travels of such scholars as Gerbert, Micheal scott and Adelard Bath to Islamic Andalusia , and through the Christian youths who were sent by their Spanish fathers to the court of Muslim emirs to be educated and to learn the way of knights , since some Muslim aristocrats were considered knights and gentlemen .

There was a constant contact between the Muslims and christians in Syria , Egypt, sicily and Spain. Every progress made by the christians in the Muslim realm was followed by a wave of science, literature , art and philosophy of the Muslims towards the Christian lands. For example, the domination of Talitala by the Christians in 1080 A.D, added to the ast-

rological knowledge of the Christians , and confirmed the belief in the fact that the earth was spherical in form .

But these borrowings did not extinguish the fire of rancour , since next to bread , nothing is dearer to human beings than their religious beliefs . Man does not live on bread alone . He needs faith , too , to live since it creates a hope in his heart . Therefore , anything which endangers his strength or belief , sets fire to his heart .

The Christians were , for three centuries , a witness to the invasions of the Muslims resulting in the conquests of their lands one after another taking Christian races constantly to the spheres of Muslims' influence . The powerful hands of the Muslims controlled Christian commerce , and the christians were called heretics everywhere .

At last , the wars which had long been expected , started and the two civilisations came into collision with one another in the crusades , causing the bloodshed of the

Choicest men of the East and West . This exchange of hostility was an effective factor in the whole history of the Middle Ages. The third religion, namely Judaism, too, received many blows as a result of the fighting between these two faiths. The west lost the crusades but emerged victorious in the conflict of religions . All the Christian fighters were driven out of the holy land , but the Muslims whose delayed victory had sucked their blood, and whose lands had been devastated by the Mongols, fell into a dark period and were overcome by stupidity and indigence , where as the defeated west , which had learnt much through its constant efforts, forgot all the failures and acquired the thirst for knowledge and love of progress from its enemies . It began to build sky-high and lofty churches, and to traverse the spheres of intellect .

In fact an ordinary reader is amazed at this lengthy account of Islamic civilisation , but a research scholar regrets its

unnecessary brevity . Only the golden age of the history of a society is able to produce in such a short period, so many famous men in the fields of politics , education , literature , geography , history , mathematics , Chemistry , astronomy , philosophy , medicine and their likes during the four Centuries of Islam from Haroun-e-Rashid down to Ibn-e-Roshd . (1)

That is the past history of the Muslims , and that is their civilisation . This is their decline and retardation , and these are the reasons and causes for it .

Now we can see that uttering and writing the following verse:

يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ

and reciting the following verse:

هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

as well as the annals related to this matter solve no question , and these holy slogans

(1) History of Civilisation , will Durant ,
Vol . 11 , PP . 320-322 .

should pass from a potential stage to a practical one to produce a movement among Muslim masses for the acquisition of knowledge and perfection , in the same way that civilised countries with the indefatigable endeavour of scholars have achieved honour and progress.

Edison, with his amazing perseverance, continued his scientific activities and experiments, and sometimes spent as many as twenty hours on his round-the-clock work, and often used to say: " I have much work to do but a short life; so I must make haste. " During his experiments, he suffered all kinds of hardships and calamities. Battery acid was spilt on him thus burning his body and clothes. Several times he received electric shocks which hurt and injured him , Edison worked between 19 and 20 hours a day, and his nightly rest consisted of a brief slumber on the bench of his workshop. In fact, his whole life was spent in that way, and he never stopped working and carr-

ying out research right to the end of his life . (1)

A Mistake

Some people suppose that Islam uses the word "knowledge" to mean theology , and knowledge of the origin and destination , as well as personal and social duties, religious devotions and their likes; whereas in most cases the word " knowledge " is used in a general sense without any reservations .

Moreover , attention to the goal envisaged by Islam about Muslim society, shows us that knowledge is not limited to particular branch .

Islam wishes the Muslim society to be cherishod , independent and free from any wants .

It wishes the Muslims to have economic and social independence .

It wishes the Muslims not to stretch

(1) " The men who Transformed the world " , by Igon Larson .

their hands of need to foreigners.

It wants the Muslims to be superior, in all the material and spiritual aspects, to all races and nations .

To attain these objectives requires that the Muslim society should possess distinguished scholars in various branches of arts and sciences , and in each branch outstanding experts should be active .

If we lack specialists and scholars in the fields of economics , agriculture , medicine, industry and other technologies and sciences, we will definitely be in need of foreigners , but this is quite contrary to the goal of Islam .

Therefore, our religious duty necessitates that everyone, in any position or rank , should , according to his share, endeavour in the propagation of knowledge and learning. He should teach others what he knows . He should place his knowledge at the disposal of others through writing articles and books, and through

delivering lectures and holding conferences, He should translate into his own language such useful books written in foreign languages. He should encourage young people in the acquisition of knowledge and virtue, and persuade them to continue their studies and go through various stages of progress. He should found libraries and centers of learning so as to prevent young people's waste of time. He should buy useful books, and place them at the disposal of students and scholars.

This sacred duty of propagation of knowledge should be combined with a more sacred duty, namely the strengthening of the power of faith, morality, and noble qualities in the society .

Parallel with the advancement of knowledge, moral and spiritual principles, too, should be strengthened so that useful and brilliant results could be obtained, and knowledge employed for social welfare, otherwise knowledge minus spiritualities would mean placing a weapon in the hands

of a drunkard .

Honouring scholars

In the two corners of a mosque , two groups had gathered in circles . The noble prophet of Islam entered, looked at each group and asked as to what they were doing. He was told that one group was engaged in the invocation of God and recitation of incantation and prayer , while the other was discussing scientific matters .

The prophet said: " Both groups are proceeding towards goodness and happiness, but I will join the group that is engaged in scientific discussion , for , I am ordained to lead people towards knowledge and perfection. " So he joined them and took part in the discussion. (1)

The sixth Imam showed much respect to Hosham-bin-Hakam who was the youngest person present in a gathering of the great elderly companions and offered

(1) Manbat-el-Morid

him the seat of honour, (1) since he was a learned man, a fine orator, and a true servant of Islam .

Glorifying learned men and scholars is the best way to turn people's attention to knowledge and learning , and this method has always been adopted by the exalted leaders of Islam .

Combat with knowledge

Christian colonisers have started propagating this idea through their agents among the class of young and enlightened Muslims that the reason for the retardation of Islamic countries is their religion, and if they wish to get rid of this situation , they should free themselves from the fetters of religion so as to attain the progress made by civilised countries, in the same way that the Christians freed themselves from the bonds of Christianity to attain a wonderful progress .

This false reasoning has been reso-
(1) Bohar-el-Anwar, Vol. 4 .

rted to deliberately so that by misleading young Muslims they can more easily exploit Islamic countries and keep the Muslims in a state of retardation .

It may be true that the Christians proceeded in the way of progress by breaking their ties with the church , and by rejecting the so - called religious decrees of priests, but a comparison of the superstitions of the church with the everlasting injunctions of Islam is a great sophistry and an inhuman pitilessness . The church , with its childish regulations which were drawn up by Christian priests, had blocked the way of scientific and technical progress , and placed scholars and researchers under great pressure .

The church had imposed on the European community a series of ideas and so-called scientific theories under the name of sacred divine laws , and when knowledge and science proved the wrongness of the ideas of the church ,

there remained no alternative for the people but to be wearied of and averse to the church and its regulations , and to free themselves from the yoke of priests , and put their faith in science and knowledge .

What mainly helped the dismemberment of the church and its religion was the insistence of church authorities on preserving their lost prestige. This insistence went so far that in order to enforce their views , they got inclined towards unreasonable conduct and dictatorship , and dominated , like a fearful monster , all aspects of public life thus depriving people of security and tranquility .

On the order of church authorities , the dreadful and dangerous institution of inquisition was created in order to violently suppress the ideas of those opposed to the church , and torture scholars and men of learning . Some scholars were burnt alive in incinerators

simply because they believed that the earth was spherical and it constantly revolved, and only because they had discovered a fact . (1)

This strictness went so far that every enlightened person thought it his duty to destroy this tyrannical monster through joint efforts and employ their forces for its suppression , so that the church could , for ever , be removed from the scene of combat and lose its power permanently .

This was the way adopted by the church towards the enlightened , individuals , scholars , and researchers , and all the progressive and liberal classes .

Obviously, the secret of the success and progress , gained by Europe , lay in its liberation from such a system which , in the name of religion and heavenly laws , checked the way of

(1) Islam and confusion of the enlightened masses .

scientific advancement .

But among the Muslims , there did not take place such tragic events even as an example, and as we have already pointed out, Islam does not only approve of knowledge and science, but is also the greatest patron of learning and learned people .

Therefore , this idea that religion is a barrier to the progress of nations may be true of the church , but is a great injustice to Islam , and such an idea is infused among the Muslims by the enemies so that by means of creating carelessness and indifference among the Muslims , they may attain their colonising designs .

Meanwhile , it is the sure and definite duty of all Muslims to combat such a propaganda, and propagate the enlightening facts of Islam which nourish the spirit of humanity , nobility , progress and exaltation in the society, and thus repay their debt to Islam and Muslims .
