

Even Unto China” – An Islamic perspective on knowledge and learning

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Seek knowledge, even unto China’ said the Prophet Muhammad (s)’

As access to information, data and knowledge becomes easier, our ability to learn has also increased. Alexander Khaleeli reflects on the impact that true knowledge should have on those who have acquired it.

Living at a time when education is so ubiquitous, it is all too easy to forget the significance of these words, uttered so many centuries ago. In the developed world, we take for granted the fact that children go to school, that books are printed by the thousands and, with enough time and effort, someone can learn almost anything they desire. And now, thanks to websites such as Wikipedia and YouTube, it has never been so easy to learn about everything from astrophysics to refrigerator repair without even needing to leave the comfort of our own homes, let alone go to China. With the power of modern technology to bring the world to us, we might be forgiven for thinking that a new age has dawned. In the past, aspiring scholars would have to travel great distances to study under an accomplished teacher or obtain a rare text. Today, some of the world’s leading universities offer courses online for free and tens of thousands of books can be instantly downloaded and shared in digital format. This even extends to the Islamic sciences; almost all of the major collections of Hadith have been digitised and made search-able. Yes, it has never been so easy to find and share information. So is knowledge just a Google search away? An unfortunate feature of our modern societies is that we often mistake information for erudition and facts for knowledge, as if education is nothing more than the hoarding of data. Compare this to what the Qur’an says about knowledge: ‘Only those of God’s servants who have knowledge fear Him.’ (35:28). This verse provides a completely different view of learning, in that it draws an explicit connection between having knowledge (‘ilm) and fearing God, suggesting that true knowledge is something that inspires us to hold our Creator in awe. In other words, it has less to do with what you know and more to do with the effect knowing has on you, the knower. By virtue of this, anything that increases a person’s awareness of his Creator is knowledge – not just traditionally “Islamic” subjects. And by the same token, someone could

conceivably have studied every verse in the Qur'an and every word uttered by the Prophet (s), without ever attaining the slightest degree of knowledge. If this seems highly subjective, that's because it is! As it is only through the agency of the subject, the individual, that knowledge can be actualised. So long as knowledge is treated as an object, as something external and "other" to the knower, it remains potential knowledge. Only when that knowledge is internalised so that it becomes part of the knower's own being does it become actual knowledge. It is possible to see whether or not we have internalised knowledge in this way by looking at our own behaviour and attitudes. If we notice that by learning something we have become more aware of God and – as a result of this awareness – been motivated to better ourselves both as Muslims and human beings, then we have attained some knowledge. This is why the classical scholars have said that the true purpose of knowledge ('ilm) is action ('amal) and that acquiring knowledge without acting upon it is worthless. The Qur'an describes 'The example of those who were charged with the Torah, then failed to carry it...' – i.e. failed to act upon it – '...is that of an ass carrying books.' (62: 5). And the Prophet says: 'Whoever increases in knowledge, but not in guidance, has not increased with regards to God except in distance [from him].' Therefore true knowledge – which is knowledge of the Divine – should be demonstrated in one's actions. So far from abounding in knowledge, the modern world seems paradoxically devoid of it. A secular, materialist world view means that scholars see no under-lying unity beneath the manifold disciplines and areas which they study, leading different fields of learning to become increasingly atomised and detached from one another, as well as detached from their ultimate source. Moreover, the commodification of knowledge under capitalism means that education is subordinated to economic imperatives and – as a result – knowledge is stripped of its moral and qualitative aspects; it is reduced to something which can be bought or sold as readily as a pair of trainers; an inert object, alien and external to the knower. In other words, the modern world has the appearance of knowledge but lacks its substance.

But how to overcome this illusion? Perhaps we can draw inspiration from the story of Socrates, the famous Greek philosopher, and the Oracle of Delphi. Socrates' friend Chaerephon once asked the Oracle if there was anyone wiser than Socrates, to which the Oracle replied that there was no-one wiser than him. Socrates thought that the Oracle could not possibly be correct, since he knew that he had no wisdom whatsoever. So he began to question the wisest people in Athens – statesmen, poets and artisans – in order to refute the Oracle's claim. In doing so, he realised that while these people claimed

to be wise, none of them in fact were. Paradoxically, this made him the wisest man in Athens because only he was aware of his own ignorance. In an era dominated by information and technology, knowledge has never been more precious or more elusive. But if we are to go in search of wisdom, we must first acknowledge our own ignorance, as we cannot pursue the substance of knowledge if we still cling to the illusion of modernity. But if we are able to recognise the fundamental unity – or tawhid – behind the multiplicity of various fields of learning, to see all knowledge as being ultimately connected to knowledge of the Divine, and in doing so leave behind our own pretensions to wisdom for the real thing, then we truly have under-taken a great journey – one that is certainly no less impressive than travelling to China