

How to become a scholar.

By Asif Rajbee.

The road to knowledge of all things, whether it is the Quran, the Sunnah or the sciences, is a command of the Prophet (pbuh). Islam privileges those who are more knowledgeable than others. Clearly this leads to the situation in Islamic history where a few scholars rule the debate on Islam. However, there are many possible results that conform to a set of rules, many interpretations are possible. For example, one could have a society where everyone is a scholar and they all debate over the true course of action. Such a society would be more in line with Islam because it is enjoined on all believers to seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave and also rulings given on Islam by an entire society will be more thoroughly researched and argued. Therefore there is less chance of mistakes occurring since many people are checking the reasoning and logic of each others arguments. This is also a good way to enjoin good and forbid evil since everyone would have a good knowledge of what these things are because they are all scholars.

Islamic teachings come principally from the Quran and Sunnah. Now some scholars believe that this is the entire source, they argue that the Quran is complete as it is stated in there. However, the prophet said that those who come after the Sahabah (the early Muslims) will understand the teachings of Islam better. This implies that Muslims are able to seek knowledge and develop ever better understandings of the mysteries of the Quran. Examples of this is the scientific knowledge in the Quran, like the stages of development of the foetus or the fertilisation of plants through the air or the massive volatility interest bearing loans causes to economies. Allah's (SWT) miracle is the Quran and it is up to Muslims to learn and understand why this is so.

From this argument we see that it is necessary to understand the Quran fully if we have knowledge of things other than the Quran. How else does one know that a gun is able to kill someone without knowing the basic idea of what a gun is and does. Therefore a person who sees someone killed by a gun will understand that the person has murdered someone with a weapon is therefore a murderer as opposed to concluding that someone just fell down dead by themselves.

The Quran and Sunnah are the sources and we have seen that they are not the only ones. The historically accepted method for determining Islamic law or Shariah is Fiqh. There are several established methods for making a ruling. The first necessity is a clear understanding of the texts and language of the Quran and Sunnah, including the derivations and implications of certain meanings. Normally much of the text of the Quran is clear and self-evident, but a major part of fiqh is from interpretation or ijtihad (personal reasoning). There is the concept of ta'wil, meaning interpretation of verses of the Quran and Sunnah. This is where the meaning is not clear or perhaps metaphorical and has not been explained by the text. Many rules in Islam are clear, such as the taking of riba (interest on loans) is forbidden. What is not as clear is whether Islamic finance products such as diminishing musharukah (where a bank becomes a partner with you in buying a house and you slowly buy them out over time) are unislamic. We need to speculate on what Allah's (SWT) aims are with Islam to understand this question. Clearly it says in the Quran that Islam is meant to benefit Muslims not to impose a burden on us for no reason. So it is possible to search for the reasoning behind why rules are given. This is a useful skill to be developed that helps one in Dawah. A reason that one can find if one goes to the economist is that interest bearing loans lead to massive amounts of instability in economies. House prices go up very fast when people lend money leading to crashes and many people becoming homeless. Riba also leads to money going from the poor to the rich, leading to an unequal society. God wants money to go from the rich to the poor through charity, thus we can suggest that Allah (SWT) wants to have an equal society. But an equal society would mean that everyone, not just the rich, could afford to buy homes for themselves. It is a necessity to have shelter. Thus we might see that on balance an Islamic financial product that does not cause economic instability, but rather has provisions to stop a person from losing their homes if times are bad, is plausibly in line with Islam. We would stress that we cannot truly know the reasoning of Allah (SWT), but we may be able to glimpse it from afar and if we find this then we are truly astounded by the glory of his work. It is so intelligent, so wise and so worthwhile in improving the lives of all people.

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Another important aspect of fiqh is ijma, meaning consensus of opinion among scholars, which would be consensus of opinion among all Muslims if everybody strives to become a scholar. There is also qiyas or analogical reasoning, used especially when there is no specific ruling on a new issue, for example stem cell research. Istihsan is the use of reasoning to apply fairness to the law of Islam, avoiding hardship for the believer (“God intends facility for you, and He does not want to put you in hardship”, Quran, Al Baqarah 2:185). How far should one go with reasoning? This is a deep philosophical question that is integral to keeping to the right path. The right path may change with circumstances and historic time periods. For example it is good to feed the poor but not to feed someone who is defined as poor but has a great deal of unemployment benefit as their income, enough to support themselves. The definition of poverty is the subject of a complicated debate and even this simple term is subject to political bias in order to comply with one or other policy of powerful groups. Thus we argue that there is much need for knowledge in understanding Islam and that a thorough derivation of the rules of the Quran cannot come from a small group of people. It must come from the wider, highly educated society.

This is just the beginning knowledge you must undertake to become a scholar. Further reading would include “Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence by Mohammad Kamali” (1989) which can give you further references on the debate over the ages on the rules of Islamic law. A good understanding of the Quran and Sunnah, including the knowledge of classical Arabic are important. Reading the works of the major scholars and schools of thought are important but one should not privilege them to the point of accepting their ideas without thinking, since that would be idolatry.