

Putting Informations on Islām Online: Some Lessons from its Worldview

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Abstract:

An era of information explosion correlates with the problems of “too much information effect” and “the information overload.” The fundamental issue is that, humankind has too many choices of information too much of the time; human beings are even informing themselves to the death of their humanity. Its solution lies in grasping the basic idea that, firstly, there is difference between information, science, understanding, and wisdom. Secondly, in order that it could be properly understood, true knowledge requires *adab* towards it, which accords with balanced, *farḍ ‘ayn-farḍ kifāyah* epistemological dynamism.

Keywords:

Information explosion, “too much information effect,” “the information overload,” information, science, understanding, wisdom, *adab* towards knowledge, *farḍ ‘ayn* knowledge-*farḍ kifāyah* knowledge.

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On the subject of “Putting Informations on Islām Online: Some Lessons from its Worldview,” three fundamental issues must be grasped. First, the difference between information and religious wisdom. Second, structuring beneficial knowledge and sciences around religious tenets, law, and spirituality. Third, on the credibility and trust of online sources.

We are living in a period of digital revolution. Thanks to information and communication technologies (ICT): there is a new way to record, to transfer and to transmit, and to accumulate data and information. A study by the University of California, Berkeley, approximates that for each person, nearly 800 megabytes of stored information is produced per annum—which is equivalent to 400,000 pages. Moreover, 300,000 book titles are published every year; while internet websites are increasing in numbers—reaching over 235,000,000 distinct ones in May of 2009.

The 1.6 billion Muslims must not remain passive bystanders to information explosion. It is very unfortunate if the Muslim nations—who account for 20 per cent of the world population, and in whose territories are located 60 per cent of the world’s natural resources—fail to advance the global opportunities for Islāmic education through digital technologies.

It might be beneficial for us to study how, for example, in less than nine years, with less than USD\$1 million annual budget, and with only seven paid staff members, *Wikipedia* has been able to mobilise “collective intelligence” of tens of thousands of volunteers. They produce the most-visited online reference site that contains more than 14 million articles in 262 languages. It might be useful also to study the success of Massachusetts Institute of Technology-pioneered *OpenCourseWare*; Brown University-initiative *Decameron Web*; *Google Scholar*; and so on. Imparting knowledge to fellow Muslims and humanity, even if by means of digital technologies—

instructing them truthfully, and guiding them along the path of well-being in this world and the hereafter, is part and parcel of the struggle in the divine path (*jihād*).

Information overload, however, has witnessed, firstly, “information anxiety”—a persistent feeling that one should perfectly know more information than one does.¹ But in reality, there is no such thing as “absolutely perfect information”! For many people, time is wasted for meaningless emails, television programmes, DVDs, internet and paper works.

Secondly, there is a problem of overconfidence. Overconfident in the reliability of their information sources, some people commit error as a result of bad judgment. And yet thirdly, for some others, there is an opposite problem of lacking of confidence—they are not able to differentiate reality and truth from fact in the midst of massive units of information. This problem is called “paralysis by analysis.”

There is a report that Esther Dyson, the most powerful woman of the computing sciences (as some have called her), was distressed by the present-day information explosion. As there are just too many resources and documents which may be referred to on any subject, she remarked:

We have too many choices too much of the time. What should I be paying attention to? We are getting a diet of empty information calories that is over processed, over sugared, and too bite-sized. While appealing, it leads to a lack of commitment and satisfaction and ultimately makes you less happy.²

1 See further http://www.slais.ubc.ca/COURSES/libr500/03-04-wt2/www/K_Woods/ which produces an article on “The Information Overload.”

2 *The Mobile Generation: Global Transformations at the Cellular Level, A Report of the Fifteenth Annual Aspen Institute Roundtable on Information Technology*, by Rapporteur J.D. Lasica (Washington: The Aspen Institute, 2007), 21.

Those problems may be illustrated by the following humorous anecdote: Once, Mulla Nasreddin was acting as a judge. Two men came to him looking for fair decision. The plaintiff's lawyer put forth a strong reasoning, and Nasreddin said: "Yes, you are right." But later, the defendant's lawyer presented powerful argument of his case, and Nasreddin said: "Yes, you are also right." The Court's Registrar, who was witnessing the situation, said with amazement: "I just cannot understand you. Both the plaintiff and respondent could never be right at the same time." In a state of desperation, Nasreddin replied: "You are right too."

Affluent individuals in affluent societies may have too many choices of almost everything to decide upon. Ironically, they were found to have too little time to do what is really important to them as human beings.³ In Islām, there is a reminder that man's sojourn on earth is indeed momentary. There is no time for him to waste by living in doubt of religious truths—there is also a limit to his intellectual strength and capacity. Because of these reasons, he must strive for wisdom, and not only information and sciences.

First, there are differences between *ma'lūmāt*, *ilm*, *fahm*, and *hikmah*. "Information"; "science"; "understanding"; and, "wisdom"—all these point to a hierarchy in the pyramid of knowledge.⁴ Each has different values. Compared to "data" or "information," "science" has more values. But compared to the "systematised knowledge" or "science," "understanding" is of more importance. And finally, "wisdom" is the most estimable of all human intellect—"wisdom" is indeed THE ultimate aim

3 Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less* (New York: Ecco, 2004), as cited in *Next Generation Media: the Global Shift*, A Report of the Forum on Communications and Society by Rapporteur Richard Adler (Washington: The Aspen Institute, 2007), pp. 30, and 51 note 21.

4 Cf. *The Great Conversation: A Reader's Guide to Great Books of the Western World*, 2d ed. (Chicago: Britannica, 1990), 24ff.; Mortimer Adler, *A Guidebook to Learning for a Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom* (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 110-112.

of lifelong learning.

“Information” may be acquired or memorised little by little, separately, between a unit of information from another unit of information. It is a raw material of data—isolated and scattered data, which offer no profound meaning to its possessor. “Information” may hence be utilised towards either what is good or evil, right or wrong purposes. For example, criminals are generally well-informed of the crime which they commit. Moreover, there is now “white collar crimes” committed by those who are educated (only in its formal sense) while breaching the trust of their strategic social position and status.

At the level of “science,” information and data are organised to operate as a whole in one’s mind, intellect and reason. As such, one may have information, but not necessarily have knowledge in its systematic and methodical sense. Information, which has been organised as “science,” is interrelated in one’s mind. For example, the discipline of History involves different information, facts and data—yet all those information are ordered in sequence, and interlinked. The same applies to the disciplines of Natural Sciences, Philosophy, and so on.

As science and knowledge are arranged according to one’s worldview, it is important to remember that the human mind views science and knowledge within the framework of their philosophy of life or worldview. Thus, what is considered true knowledge by one culture may be repudiated as false knowledge in another, different civilisation. Consider this simple example. “Knowledge that studies human self”—or psychology—is certainly different in a culture which views humanity merely as matter, compared with in another civilisation which understands him as one possessed of a sublime *rūḥ* or spiritual subtlety created by Allāh.⁵

5 See the Qurʾān, *al-Hijr* (15): 29.

Hence, in this context, there is a perpetual epistemological clash between the dominant Western philosophy of life and the worldview of Islām.⁶ But although there is a clash of worldview, there are still many similarities which overlap—a common ground of all mankind who comes to existence “from one living entity,” from the *nafs wāḥidah* stated by Allāh in five Qurʾānic verses.⁷

“Science” and knowledge may also be utilised for good or evil. Indeed, natural sciences and its applications in nuclear and biochemical technological armaments could be misused towards global human destruction. We find, therefore, that some countries and communities have forbidden scientific researches which they fear may be abused towards an aim which is harmful to human life and descent.

Another example for the misuse of knowledge is presented in Henry Commager’s analysis on how history has been abused by the Germans.⁸ For a period of over a hundred years, from Leopold von Ranke (d. 1886) to Friedrich Meinecke (d. 1954), the Germans assiduously cultivated their national history—they produced many distinguished historians, and generated vast libraries of historical records. Yet, history was misused by the Germans rather as a “propaganda”—a product of fanaticism, national pride, racial prejudice, the glorification of militarism, and ultimately of world war which slew and maimed millions of people.

The most vicious abuse of knowledge happened when what is really true is changed, and false information devised. This happens in a plot to substitute what is right with what is wrong. True information is neglected—or even concealed

6 See, for example, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ABIM, 1978, second impression with a new Preface ISTAC, 1993), 97ff.

7 See *al-Nisāʾ* (4): 1; *al-Anʿām* (6): 98; *al-Aʿrāf* (7): 189; *al-Zumar* (39): 6.

8 Henry Steele Commager, “The Discipline of History,” *The Great Ideas Today* (Chicago: Britannica, 1972), 248.

and then distorted. Hence, what is true is confused with the falsehood; the clarity of the truth is clouded by the confusion of falsehood. In such a state, oppression and malicious acts towards fellow human beings are validated in the name of knowledge and truth—whereas in reality it is falsity and falsehood in disguise. The religious leaders of the People of the Book concealed from their followers the truth of the Prophet Muḥammad while they know with certainty that his message (Islām) is the truth.

More valuable than sciences is “understanding.” By “understanding” we mean knowledge that is more meaningful and profound in nature—more influential and impactful on life. One’s knowledge with all its branches must extend its fruits in the form of one’s useful and helpful actions—in the best interests of his soul and society. Hence, “understanding” refers to grasping the meaning, values, significance and impact of certain sciences and knowledge to one’s life, humanity, and even the environment. Understanding is “a special knowledge of affairs and things as perceived by the heart” (*al-fahm maʿrifatuka al-shayʿ bi al-qalb*), as recorded in the authoritative *Lisān al-ʿArab* by Ibn Manẓūr (d. 711 A.H).⁹

The more perfect one’s understanding is, the more profound the meaning of one’s life becomes. It is so, as one is now confronting the trials and tribulations of living responsibly among one’s family and society without one’s heart being distracted—without worldly necessities obstructing religious truths from one’s view. To have such an “understanding,” one needs to know certain information and sciences—however, those who are well-informed of facts and sciences do not automatically understand the true meaning, the real end, and the goal of life in this world (*al-ākhirah*).

9 Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿArab* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1997), 10: 343, s.v. “fahm.”

“Wisdom” is knowledge at its highest sense. Just as “understanding” is inspired by Allāh, “wisdom” is His overflowing gift.¹⁰ Indeed, the All-Knowing and the All-Wise (*al-‘Alīm* and *al-Ḥakīm*) are among His Attributes, Who puts everything in its proper place in existence. Wisdom requires that whatever one has of information and sciences be put in their proper places—wisdom requires that whatever one has of information and sciences, be valued with, in a just manner. Understanding and wisdom bring clarity and resolve with regard to knowledge and the sciences in relation to religion.

A wise man is able to perceive fundamental issues in human life and its relation to God, religion, and ethics. The foundation of the worldly life of he who is wise is *īmān*—the certainty of faith, and belief without any doubt or vacillation in God and the inner reality of this world’s life as well as the reality of the hereafter. He will always strive to acquire true and proper knowledge (*‘ilm* and *ma‘rifah*)—this striving will generate virtuous activity of body and soul, extended to his family members, friends, community, and humanity at large. Contrasting information explosion with wisdom, the late Fazlur Rahman had this to say:

Physical avenues of information may improve vastly but the heart, the instrument of perception and discernment is dulled. The inputs and outputs of computers become ever more efficient; only the capacity to ask the right questions, the humanly relevant questions, fails.¹¹

Indeed, the present-day issues of information overload must be evaluated in light of the Divine reminder against those who

10 See *al-Anbiyā’* (21): 79; *al-Baqarah* (2): 269.

11 Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur’ān*, 2nd. ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1999), 57. In this context, Henry David Thoreau’s remarks are very meaningful: “All our inventions are but improved means to an unimproved end.”

know only the outer surface of this world's life, whereas they are heedless of the ultimate things—heedless of the inner reality of this world's life as well as the final reality of the hereafter.¹² If we no longer think about those ultimate things, we are without a compass and, hence, in danger of going astray.

Almost two decades ago, the social critic Neil Postman, in his speech to the German Informatics Society titled "Informing Ourselves to Death," lamented that present-day emphasis is out and out on harnessing human talent and energy towards the development of computer technology. So much so that it is at the expense of other truly fundamental educational areas as far as human spiritual progress is concerned.

Despite information explosion, and despite information overload, the more profound problems to be solved, as far as humanity is concerned, are all still the same. Our problems are all still the same: how to produce good men and women of *adab*, how to produce a happy family, and how to produce a just society—how to avoid the likes of a criminal war, hunger and starvation, homelessness and mental illness.¹³ To use the Qur'ānic term, those matters relate to the ultimate things (*ākhirah*), to the final reality of the life of this world, and the reality of the hereafter. That is exactly why Revelation is very important to educate humanity concerning their determination of mind and heart, which directs the purpose, aims and objectives in their journey through life.

But there is a trap in the dead pages of a book and reading materials—reading materials of website portal alone are not education. Reading materials are good only as far as the reader is ready or has the aptitude for them. Reading of good books will not benefit the reader who read with a sterile

12 *Al-Rūm* (30): 7.

13 Neil Postman, "Informing Ourselves to Death." Downloaded 16 April 2008 from <http://www.frostbytes.com/~jimf/informing.htm> <Speech at Conference of German Informatics Society (*Gesellschaft fuer Informatik*), Stuttgart, 11 October 1990>

mind. Islamic digital library must promote not a superficial reading—but rather, reading in the sense of a thorough study leading to an in-depth investigation, and exploration, as promoted by the Qur’ānic term *qirā’ah*. That is why *qirā’ah* (*iqra’* and *taqarru’*) is part of devotion to Divine worship and religious learning (*tanassuk wa tafaqquh*)—to the extent that the name of Muslim Sacred Book, the Qur’ān, comes from the same root-word. The first Divine Order to the Prophet to “Read! (*Iqra’*)” was indeed a regnant command to humanity to be acutely intelligent on the most significant human issues preserved in Revelation: how to produce men and women of *adab*, a happy family, and a just society—how to avoid criminal war, starvation, homelessness and spiritual illness.

The ultimate object to read was the sublime Book of God (*al-Kitāb al-‘Azīz*): the Divine Message on great issues surrounding human thought and action—who God is; the reality of creation; the relation between God and creation; the right way of life to salvation, and other sciences beneficial to humanity. To quote al-Attas, “no word that is true that can be found excels the Qur’ān in truth.”¹⁴

Other great books or reading materials—which correctly elaborate Qur’ānic message—deserve to be called the permanent literature, a civilisational legacy to be appreciated by humanity. As great and good reading materials encapsulate the best of their author’s understanding and wisdom, they will be useful to educate and instruct later generations. Emerson once remarked that “the profit of books is according to the sensibility of the reader, as the profoundest thought or passion is discovered by the profoundest mind and heart.”

In Islām, such a sensibility of a profound heart was couched in the framework of (first) *adab* towards knowledge;

14 Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture Malaysia, 1986), 447.

and, (second) *adab* towards knowledgeable scholars. There are many branches of knowledge. Wisdom understands that some knowledge have important bearing upon our life and destiny—while other branches have less important impact on the inner reality of our world's life as well as on our life in hereafter. Therefore, knowledge must be graded according to various levels and priorities. If one classifies the various sciences in relation to their priorities and puts each one of them in its proper priority, then that is *adab* towards knowledge.¹⁵

It is exactly this framework of *adab* towards knowledge which enables us to organise information. This framework functions as a structure for our data, information and knowledge. It is a structured thinking—a schematic thinking within the worldview of Islām concerning present-day knowledge and sciences.¹⁶ This ensures integrated knowledge, where there is always equilibrium between two types of knowledge, knowledge of the world and knowledge of the worldview of Islām. This is very relevant to the present call for the reorientation of knowledge and science in developing advanced technology which is friendlier in preserving a healthy ecological balance in the natural environment against water and air pollution that have degraded the quality of biosphere and have caused global warming.

There is a lesson on how to manage information explosion in Muslim history. When Islamic polity conquered the Byzantine Empire, Mesopotamia and Persia during the 630's, there was also a kind of information explosion—of new data collected from non-Arabs' civilisations, cultures, and

15 Idem, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995).

16 "A schema is a knowledge structure or framework that organises an individual's memory of information about people and events." See Richard Jackson Harris, *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication*, 2nd ed. (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 77, as cited by *The Mobile Generation* (see note 3 above).

sciences. At that time, there were spectacular epistemological challenges: to align those data in accordance with Islām's philosophy of life. How did Muslims of that era explain the framework or structure of knowledge which organised all those new information?

Their solution of it was, by elaborating the real problem of education among the Muslims—the acquisition of *farḍ kifāyah* knowledge in proportionate balance with *farḍ 'ayn* knowledge at all levels of education, with a special emphasis on the Tenets of Religion, External Law, and Spirituality (*'ilm al-tawḥīd, fiqh, taṣawwuf*).¹⁷ Affirmation of the authentic Divine Message (*Kalām Allāh*) to His Prophet must be translated into bodily actions and behaviour—reflecting the tranquility of the heart which knows itself as well as its perpetual relation to the Creator, Who is with him wheresoever he is, and from Whom nothing whatsoever is hidden. This is the root of religion—the recognition and acknowledgement of the Lordship of Allāh, the One and Only God, Who possesses the Perfect Attributes, referring to *'ilm al-tawḥīd*.¹⁸

This very knowledge concerning God later branches out into other fundamentals of faith in unseen matters (*al-ghayb*), such as belief in His angels, His scriptures, His messengers, and the Day of His Judgment. To illustrate how knowledge concerning God branches out, consider, for example, the meaning to believe in the Qur'ān. To believe in the Qur'ān not only means one must make its reading beautiful, but one must also glorify it, study it, and affirm the truth of its content with humility. It means one must follow it as it ought to be followed

17 Ibn al-Subkī once pronounced: *'ulūm al-shar' fi al-ḥaqīqah thalāthah: al-fiqh wa ilayhi al-ishārah fi ḥadīth ibn Mas'ūd wa ibn 'Umar bi al-islām wa usūl al-dīn wa ilayhi al-ishārah bi al-imān wa al-taṣawwuf wa ilayhi al-ishārah bi al-iḥsān.*

18 See, for example, Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf al-Sādah al-Muttaqīn bi-Sharḥ Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1989), 1: 200.

(*ḥaqq tilāwatihī*),¹⁹ apply oneself to it with true application, stand by its principles and stick to it; understand knowledge and the parables therein; contemplate its exhortation and counsel; meditate on its remarkable, wondrous and marvelous content; disseminate knowledge of the Qurʾān; and call upon mankind to behave in a proper manner towards the Qurʾān.

Still concerning the belief in the Qurʾān: the Muslims consist of various nations—but all of them have “one language” as far as their worldview is concerned. There are identical key terms in basic vocabulary deployed in all Muslim languages throughout the world based on Qurʾānic terms. For a few examples, the terms *Allāh*, *tawḥīd*, *insān*, *ʿibādah*, *fiṭrah*, *ʿilm*, *maʿrifah*, *ḥikmah*, *īmān*, *islām*, *iḥsān*, *taqwā*, *sunnah*, *yaqīn*, *dhikr*, *fikr*, *qalb*, *ʿaql*, *rūḥ*, *niyyah*, *amānah*, *ʿadl* and *zālim*, *adab*, *ḥaḥiqah*, *sharīʿah*, *ḥukm*, *ʿālam*, *dunyā*, *ākhirah*, *ukhuwwah*, *ummah*, *jihād*, and so on—all such terms are deployed in all languages of Muslims of Arab, Persian, Berber, Turk, the European, African, Indo-Pakistani-Bangladeshi, Caucasian, Chinese, and Malay-Indonesian nations. We are in need of websites which safeguard the correct application of these key terms and basic vocabulary.

Therefore, according to Fazlur Rahman’s *Major Themes of the Qurʾān*, this knowledge concerning God is “knowledge of the Master-Truth.”²⁰ If a master key secures access anywhere, knowledge of the Master-Truth secures entrance to every other science, in particular concerning good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, wisdom and folly, justice and injustice, both in terms of their outward and inward dimensions.²¹ That framework of knowledge will help us to acknowledge Allāh’s grace and to be grateful of His bounty; to be sincere in all matters; to help and befriend those who turn to Him

19 *Al-Baqarah* (2): 121.

20 Rahman, *Major Themes*, 2.

21 See, for example, *al-Baqarah* (2): 3-4, 177, and 285; and *al-Nisāʾ* (4):136.

and follow His guidance, to avoid those who turn away from Him and close their eyes to His guidance, and to strive against “those who mock at religion and make jest of it.”²² Sincere conduct towards Allāh also consists of calling upon mankind in general and one’s subordinates in particular to the aforementioned characteristics, to encourage and motivate them with graciousness and tactfulness.

‘Ilmu i’tiqād should be understood as not static. Nor is it limited to basic preliminaries of *i’tiqād* taught to Muslims in childhood. On the contrary, its scope and contents is very dynamic in nature—proportionate to the increase in one’s maturity as well as one’s responsibility in society. The pursuit of *farḍ ‘ayn* knowledge concerning faith is in tandem with the advancement in the capacity of one’s intelligence and reasoning.

Only a dynamic understanding of religious doctrines can vanquish one’s doubt (if any) concerning the inner reality of one’s life in this world as well as the hereafter. The doubt arises whether due to one’s personal inner agitation—or due to external influence of surreptitious deviant interpretations whose argumentations are raging in one’s society. There is always the danger of subtle, masquerading deviations which seek to undermine the teachings of the Qur’ān, of the traditions of the Prophet (*ḥadīth*), and those of his Companions (*āthār*).²³

Therefore, knowledge of *i’tiqād* which is obligatory to pursue throughout one’s life refers to knowledge that is sufficient to eliminate doubt and confusion concerning religious beliefs. That is to say, to the extent that one is able to know what true religious doctrines are, as opposed to what are false—until one is able to avoid from believing in falsehood and errant beliefs, or avoid from rejecting true religious tenets. Indeed, knowledge of *i’tiqād* is always connected

22 *Al-Mā'idah* (5): 57.

23 *Al-Zabidī, Ithāf*, 1: 200 and 218.

with a profound grasp of the total intellectual situation and requirements of the time.

On this religious doctrinal knowledge, some Muslims are content with their sufficient knowledge gleaned from the manifest verses of the Qur'ān as well as the authentic *ḥadīths* and *athārs*—as those traditions (*naql*) contain the final evidence of all truths or *al-ḥujjah al-bālighah*.²⁴ Faithful conduct towards the Qur'ān as well as the authentic *ḥadīths* requires one to preserve their true interpretation against misrepresentation of its corrupters and mischievous detractors. As such, knowledge of *ī'tiqād* may involve reasoning, just as the prophet Abraham has argued against Nimrod—a tyrant who claimed to be God—in a debate which has been praised by Allāh. The prophet Moses also argued against the Pharaoh who claimed to be God; and the prophet Solomon reasoned the sun-worshipping Queen of Sheba into a true Faith.

Concerning *ī'tiqād*, the Qur'ānic way of argumentation marshalled logical reasoning—its discourse is subtle, yet succinct and cogent, forceful and persuasive. It is effective upon the hearts, and convincing enough for contemporary minds. Wisdom found in the Qur'ān is ever ready to be expressed into contemporaneous intellectual idioms. The intellectually deviants must be met on the latter's own philosophical ground, and only in language and method they could appreciate. Closely following the Qur'ānic methodology of disputation, al-Ash'arī, al-Juwaynī, al-Ghazzālī, Fakhr al-Rāzī, for example, offered detailed intensive argumentation on Divine Oneness, prophecy and hereafter. They benefitted from extensive Qur'ānic proofs to effectively meet the pressing circumstances of their contemporary theology.

Referring to Allāh, there are Qur'ānic verses whose meanings are obscure—or not immediately self evident (*āyāt mutashābihāt vis-à-vis āyāt muḥkamāt*). These verses have been

24 As mentioned in *al-An'ām* (6): 149.

misinterpreted by the excessively “rationalistic” Mu‘tazilah and philosophers who misuse logic, as well as misunderstood by the anthropomorphist rigid traditionalists. Against those misinterpretations and misunderstanding, in defense of Islāmic theology, sound reasoning employed the analytical science of formal logic (*kalām*).²⁵

At that time—while there was a political expansion of Islām in the Mediterranean basin—intellectually the theologians (*mutakallimūn*) applied their knowledge in a most devastating manner against the various emergent heresies; whether dualism, pantheism, monism, atheism, trinitarianism, pseudo-Sufism, reincarnationism, and so on. As far as these heresies still exist, this knowledge is very much relevant today.

The second dimension of knowledge-structure is concerning living one’s life along the path of Islām (*sharī‘ah*) which is only possible if knowledge of the true path has been acquired, including acts of worship directed solely towards God, fair socio-political practices directed toward fellow human beings, and moral virtues. This dimension of knowledge-structure functions to shape and sharpen Muslim’s perception concerning values of action whether it is good or evil, right or wrong, justice or oppression, ethical or corrupt.

There will be no hope for moral harmony without correct understanding of values of action. God warned against a group of people who, when it was said to them “do not commit corruption,” they responded, “we are only putting things right.” Whereas, in God’s view, they are the ones who are truly spreading corruption even though they admit that they are not mindful of it.²⁶ Moral chaos in society is due to this kind of people. There is even a hopeless case of one who—because evil is so alluring to him—regards evil as good.²⁷

25 See further, al-Attas, *A Commentary*, 208ff.

26 *Al-Baqarah* (2): 11-12.

27 *Fāṭir* (35): 8; *al-Naml* (27): 24; *al-ʿAnkabūt* (29): 38.

Mankind cannot consider acts to be good or bad merely as they please. Right and wrong are not merely relative to what man decides. The basic standard of right behaviour, of proper speech, of decent dress, and so on, cannot be based on mere whim and fancy. Permissiveness is antithetical to *Shari'ah*, which literally means “a way to a watering place that is permanent”; terminologically, *Shari'ah* is “a way to the means of eternal life”—as *Shari'ah* is the Divine Rules governing action. All moral actions have certain divine values (*ahkām*). To prize those actions according to their values, and to act accordingly, is a duty of mankind in general and Muslims in particular.

The Divine Law, contrary to the modern sense of the term “law,” comprises the whole religious, political, social, domestic and private life of mankind. That was why al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820/204) said that parents are responsible to teach their children about purification (*al-tahārah*), prayer, fasting, and so forth commensurate with the child's age. Furthermore, as the children's social relationship develops, parents must teach them that there are regulations as far as the relationship between male and female; and that they should hold their tongues from lies, slander, and the like; and that theft, drinking intoxicants and the like are unlawful acts. In short, one has a duty to know what is permissible and what is unlawful concerning food, drink, clothing, and so on.²⁸

It is quite evident that specifications of knowledge concerning *farḍ 'ayn* is somewhat different from individual to individual. This difference in detail is connected with the difference in one's situation, condition and requirement.²⁹ Indeed, *farḍ 'ayn*-knowledge is dynamic and not limited to the aforementioned basic preliminaries taught to children by parents or religious school teachers.

28 Al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf*, 1: 217-8; and Nuh Ha Mim Keller, *Reliance of the Traveller: A Classic Manual of Islāmic Sacred Law*, rev. ed. (Maryland: Amana, 1994), 11.

29 Al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf*, 1: 203-17.

There is a very important principle concerning education in Islām, that for anyone who wishes to be a trader he is personally obligated to learn and understand the means and condition of business transaction, for anyone who wishes to get married, he is personally obligated to learn and understand the means and condition of marriage and family life, and for anyone who wishes to be a leader, he is personally obligated to learn and understand the means and condition of leadership, management and administration according to the *Shari‘ah*.

In other words, it is unlawful to delve in such enterprise until one knows the conditions for their legal validity. In his *Mubīd al-Humūm wa Mufīd al-‘Ulūm*,³⁰ Abū Sa‘īd al-Khawarizmī relates the following examples: For how can one be a good husband and father if one is not educated on how to treat one’s wife and children? To give respect to the elders, to love those who are younger—all these springs from education concerning marriage and family life. Or how can one be a just trader if one does not know what constitutes a valid transaction, the condition of any article transacted, usurious gain (*ribā*), and so on?

The historian, al-Zabīdī (d. 1790/1205), mentioned that the educational system during the time of Caliph ‘Umar (d. 644/24) was so good to the extent that there was no Muslim trader who was not clear on matters concerning transactions.³¹ And that was realised when Muslim commercial markets embraced the entire Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Egypt!

Or how can one be a benevolent leader if one is ignorant of the rights of one’s subjects or subordinates? Ignorant of socio-political justice, and mindless of legal fairness, rulers and administrators among the Muslims had contributed significantly to the chaos among the *ummah*. Mismanagement,

30 Cited in *ibid.*, 222.

31 *Ibid.*, 201 and 222.

misadministration, inefficiency, illegal extortions, high-handedness, and boastful arrogance must be uprooted through the means of education.

Leaders—defined as “those who have commanding authority or influence” over Muslims—must be sufficiently educated concerning good and truthful governance, just and equitable leadership, in the best interest of all. In the Islamic civilisation, there is particular literature composed as counsel to political leaders, such as the *Qābus Nāma* by Kay Ka‘us, the *Naṣīhat al-Mulūk* by al-Ghazzālī, the *Siyāsat Nāma* by Niẓām al-Mulk and *Kitāb al-Fakhr* by Ibn Ṭiṭṭaqa. It is very important for leaders to liberate human capabilities. Every citizen must get equal opportunity to participate positively in the system of governance—to contribute through their intelligent and meaningful participation as citizens, in peaceful cooperation between leaders and subjects. This is why governing the community is indeed a collective responsibility (*shūrā*). Leaders need reminders that the governed possess the right to be governed as free human beings governed by consent. Even for the minority or dissenting groups, there must be the protection of their rights as long as they act in a peaceful, civil, and legitimate way according to the due process of law within the framework of the basic laws of the community.

Leaders must be mindful that for a nation to be prosperous there must be a fair distribution of income as well as a just distribution of power. Just as there is the human right to security and the right to peace, there is also the right to earn a decent subsistence and the right to a decent livelihood. If and when gross socio-economic disparities are found at the heart of social discord, a leader must be persuaded that it is imperative to execute specific social reforms for the benefit of the weaker segments within a Community, whoever they are.

Similarly, it would be impossible to achieve genuine development within the framework of corrupt governance.

Hence, the great al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111/505) remarked in his *Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk*, that the ancient Persian kings:

knew beyond all doubt that where [governmental] injustice and oppression are present, the people have no foothold [for further development]; the cities and localities go to ruin, the inhabitants flee and emigrate to other territories [or countries], the cultivated lands are abandoned, the kingdom [or state] falls into decay, the revenue diminishes, the treasury becomes empty, and happiness fades among people. The subjects do not love the unjust king [or leaders], but always pray that evil may befall him.³²

(We are in need of this kind of knowledge concerning leadership, management, and administration as, at present, there is the “islands of plenty in a sea of poverty.” For example, it has been estimated that 24 per cent of the global Muslim population earn less than US\$1 per day; and a further 39 per cent of the global Muslim population live below the poverty line.)

Fard ‘*ayn* actions also refer to spiritual acts—or acts accomplished by the heart—whether in terms of commission or omission. Hence, *fard* ‘*ayn*-knowledge also refers to knowledge concerning the illnesses of the heart, such as rancour, niggardliness, envy, pride, and so on. To know their definition, causes, remedy, and treatment is one’s personal obligation in order to eliminate one’s unlawful inner traits.³³ Likewise, fortitude, gratitude, trust, truthfulness, and so on are among the spiritual acts one must be committed to, and must know.

Internal religious duty must be continuously practised,

32 Abū Hāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *Ghazali’s Book of Counsel for Kings (Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk)*, trans. F. R. C. Bagley (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 56.

33 See further, al-Zabidī, *Ithāf*, 1: 219-20; also Keller, *Reliance*, 12, quoting al-Nawawī, *al-Majmū’*.

which is different from external religious duty—external religious duty is only scheduled for a fixed time. For examples, prayer is obligatory only at the five prescribed times a day, *zakat* at the transpiration of one full lunar year, fasting for one month, i.e. Ramadan out of the whole year, *hajj* can be performed only during *hajj*-prescribed months, and so on. The *Risālah* of al-Qushayrī reported a wise man once said: “If someone does not perform those religious duties which must be continuously practiced (*al-farḍ al-dā’im*), his performance of the religious duty scheduled for a fixed time (*al-farḍ al-mu’aqqat*) will not be accepted of him.” When asked to explain what he meant by “religious duty which must be continuously performed,” he replied: “truthfulness (*ṣidq*).”³⁴

In the year 630/9, there were strong rumours that the Romans, led by the Byzantine Emperor himself, were preparing to invade Arabia, and that his armies had arrived near the frontier. In order to confront the Emperor, the Prophet then led a 30,000-strong army expedition to a place called Tabuk. At that time, God commanded that it was not desirable for all the believers to take to the field. Rather, a party of every group of Muslims, whether in townships or in the surrounding environs, should refrain from going forth to war. They had to remain behind instead, to devote themselves to the study of religion. The aims and objective is to bring about God-consciousness (*taqwā*). Therefore, their mission is of *tafaqquh fi al-Dīn*—the obligation of acquiring a deeper knowledge concerning religion, and teaching one’s fellow Muslim brethren, when they return from warfare.³⁵

From that Qur’ānic verse, scholars such as al-Ghazzālī

34 Al-Qushayrī, *Principles of Sufism*, translated by B.R. von Schlegell (New York: Mizan Press, 1990; reprint, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Islamic Book Trust, 2004), 194; see also Shaikh ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Jilānī, *Sufficient Provision for Seekers of the Path of Truth*, trans. Muhtar Holland, vol. 5 (Florida: Al-Baz, 1997), 160.

35 See *al-Tawbah* (9): 122.

inferred a very significant category of communally obligatory knowledge, or *farḍ kifāyah* knowledge, which refers to two kinds of specialisation. The first is specialisation in Sacred Law. The pursuit of it is obligatory as it is a means to practice religion. For example, the pursuit of the knowledge of the language of the Qurʾān (Arabic), the legal methodological principles (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), rules concerning business transactions (*al-muʿāmalah*), funeral rites (*al-janāʿiz*), inheritance (*al-mawārith*), marriage (*al-munākahāt*), crimes (*al-jināyāt*), and so on.³⁶

Second, as the worldview of Islām does not draw any dividing-line between the sacred and the profane, the doctrine of *farḍ kifāyah* knowledge has a positive bearing on every kind of science, even if it is not a so-called “*Sharīʿah*” science. Written in the 12th century, al-Ghazzālī’s *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, for example, includes the like of medicine, arithmetic, agriculture, and politics as part of *farḍ kifāyah* knowledge.³⁷ But that was 900 years ago. Since then, however, intellectual perspectives, various knowledge and the sciences have developed tremendously. Thus, in the 21st century, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas includes among *farḍ kifāyah* knowledge: the human sciences; natural, applied and technological sciences; comparative religions; Western culture and civilisation; linguistics; and Islām in World History, including its thought and civilisation.³⁸

In short, *farḍ kifāyah* knowledge refers to those sciences upon which the activities of this life depend—those sciences which fulfil Muslims’ needs, which divert harm from them, which bring benefit to them. Indeed, the absence of such sciences would render Muslim community lost or destroyed.³⁹ With regard to the indispensability of such sciences for the

36 Al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf*, 1: 222-3.

38 Ibid., 223-4.

38 Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 159; idem, *Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of the Future* (London: Mansell, 1985), 201-3.

39 Al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf*, 1: 223-4.

welfare of this world, al-Ghazzālī was of the opinion that if one ignored the pursuit of *farḍ kifāyah* knowledge, it was tantamount to committing sin for destroying one's community, something prohibited by God in the Qur'ān.⁴⁰

Following the conception of *farḍ kifāyah* knowledge, Muslim rulers and sovereign of the past provided clinics and hospitals—all well-arranged under the *waqf* system (endowment). Abū Bakr al-Ḥalwānī's *Latā'if al-Ma'ārif* recorded that a health system par excellence was pioneered by the Umayyad Caliph, al-Walīd ibn 'Abd al-Malik,⁴¹ who ruled the vast land from Spain to India between 705-715/86-96. Indeed, apart from building hospitals, al-Walīd developed a welfare system, built educational institutions and built steps for the appreciation of art. How far this is from present statistics and indicators on Human Development—some Muslim countries have very low commitment to provide even basic infrastructure for their subjects! For instance, in terms of insufficient health facilities, inadequate clean water supplies, improper sanitation services, and poor nutrition.

Al-Ḥalwānī's *Latā'if* further recorded that the Muslim rulers of the past also established a special section of judicial system to administer matters concerning bequests and inheritance (*al-tirkāt wa al-mawārith*).⁴² Other few examples are also pertinent: the science of geography and topography were developed to support the need for communication amongst pilgrims and traders, in addition to their benefits to agriculture. While astronomy was indispensable for travels, it was also very beneficial to agriculture in terms of a weather almanac, the ebbs and tides, and the movements of the sun and the moon. The science of botany, meanwhile, was important to understand the nutritional and medicinal properties of plants.

40 *Al-Baqarah* (2): 195.

41 Al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf*, 1: 223, relying on the authority of Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Ḥalwānī's *Latā'if al-Ma'ārif*.

42 Ibid.

Islām was controlling the world for a thousand years or more—there must be a great system that was able to sustain that—educational system, socio-economic system, political-administrative system, legal-court system. Any study and research concerning those must be welcome, like those in the *MuslimHeritage.com*.

In this new world of *wikis* and *blogs*, new metrics may be needed to establish credibility and trust. To develop new mechanisms for establishing trust, what can we learn from the worldview of Islām? Credibility and trust are due to those who are knowledgeable. *Adab* towards “knowledgeable scholars” (including of past centuries) requires the Muslims to accept their authoritative views, and to follow their position with regard to matters of knowledge and religion. We are also required to avoid from being suspicious towards sincere scholars, scholars of keen intelligence and profound insight, scholars who have intellectual integrity, and scholars who keep the trust of right spiritual leadership.

Sincere scholars must be differentiated from the false ones—the false ones restrict knowledge (*al-‘ilm*) only to the domain of jurisprudence (*ahkām fiqhīyah*). It is a characteristic of false scholars to like endless controversy and disputation—polemics of insignificant issues, polemics of unnecessary juristic details, and scholastic hair-splitting trivialities. False scholars’ emphasis is upon differences between the various madhāhib (Islamic legal schools), for example between the Shāfi‘ī school and the Ḥanafī school. They also emphasise on obstinate adherence to trivialities within those legal schools. False scholars have even hurled accusations of irreligiousness and unbelief against the other. False scholars like to dabble with vexed questions, for example the question of fate and predestination (*qadā’* and *qadr*).⁴³

43 Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 112ff.

The Qur'ān repeatedly condemns such attitudes— inability to define real issues, and inability to isolate real problems from false problems of the community. If real problems are not identified in the first place, there will be no hope to provide for right solutions.

A group of Muslim jurists once got together and, having nothing better to do (as usual), began to talk on trivial matters. One of them asked: “During a funeral procession, should one walk on the right side of the coffin or on the left side of the coffin?” Immediately the group was confused and extremely divided by a difference of opinion. Some argued that they would walk on the right side, while some others maintained that they would walk on the left side. Each group fanatically believed its argument to be better than the other. Unable to solve their problem, finally they went to Mulla Nasreddin and ask for his *fatwā*. Nasreddin listened to each group carefully and then said: “It does not matter on which side of the coffin you are, just as long as you are not on the inside!”

May Allāh help Muslims towards defining real issues, isolating real problems from false problems, providing for proper solutions, and learning to get its priorities right.