

Knowledge *in* Islam
a learner's notes



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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
وصلى الله على سيدنا محمد جامع العلوم ومنتهى الفهوم
وعلى آله وصحبه النجوم، وسلم كثيراً

نويت التعلم والتعليم والتذكر والتذكير
والنفع والانتفاع والافادة والاستفادة
والحث على التمسك بكتاب الله وسنة رسوله ﷺ
والدعاء إلى الهدى والدلالة على الخير
ابتغاء وجه الله ومرضاته وقربه وثوابه

*

*In the name of God, Lord of mercy, Giver of mercy.
God extol the Prophet Muhammad, the gathering point of all knowledges, the
epitome of understanding, and his family and companions, the shining stars,
and greet them with salutations of perfect peace.*

*I intend to learn and teach, remember and remind,
benefit myself and others, take and give advantage,
encourage the holding fast to the book of God and the way of His Messenger ﷺ,
and calling to guidance and directing towards good,
hoping for the countenance of God and His pleasure, proximity and reward.*



Introduction

Islam is existential literacy: when its teachings are unpacked and understood, they show us how to ‘read’ existence—*Read in the name of your Lord!*¹—and make sense of it and its idiosyncrasies²—*Taught the human what they did not know.*³ This literacy amounts to beholding our Author with every breath—“to worship God as if you see Him.”⁴

But it begins with unpacking. One of the tasks of a prophet is to elucidate—through exemplification and instruction—the meanings of God’s words. Subsequently, the art of collecting and interpreting a prophet’s teachings falls on the shoulders of his rightful heirs: scholars and sages.⁵ Such is Islam’s scholarly legacy: a brilliant symphony of phenomenal efforts to unpack and understand the Qur’an and Prophetic Way (Sunna) in a coherent, consistent, and comprehensive manner.

Despite the Qur’an being vocal about the centrality of knowledge and “the people of knowledge”, the Prophet’s emphasis, and Islamic scholarship’s rich and remarkable history, many well-intentioned but hasty Muslims underestimate (and sometimes undermine) the importance of knowledge and the vital role of scholars and sages. Religious scholarship is thought to be unnecessarily pedantic, anachronistic, and certainly less prestigious or useful than the modern sciences.

In reality, what the world perceives as religious rigidity, irrelevance, and violence actually emanates from unqualified spokespersons who appear pious but have little to do with scholarship. Not everyone who memorizes and quotes

¹ 96:1.

² All that transpires: the possibility of art, intellectual polyphony, exquisite literary experiences that unravel new linguistic horizons, laughter, the eccentric characters that pepper our lives, knowing—all these sensorial notes and conceptual musings—and the fabric of existence that binds them in a single, wondrous symphony should make us long for their Author.

³ 96:5.

⁴ Bukhari, 4777; Muslim 9.

⁵ “*And We have sent down to you [O Muhammad] the message in order that you may make clear to people what was sent down to them and so that they might reflect*” (16:44). Immediately before this, the Qur’an calls to the reader’s attention “the people of knowledge” and appoints them—here and in other verses—as the custodians of revealed knowledge when direct access to the Prophet ﷺ is not possible. If that is not convincing enough, the Prophet’s words ﷺ make it clear: “Scholars are truly the inheritors of prophets” (Abu Dawud, 3641; Tirmidhi, 2682; see [‘Scholars’](#)).

from the Qur'an and hadith is Islamically literate⁶—"the clothing does not make the monk." Anyone who sat in the company of scholars and sages, or read their works, will describe their teachings in these words: tranquility (*sakina*), knowledge (*ilm*), and refinement (*ihsan*).⁷

How, then, do we distinguish scholars from dabblers? Do we even need scholars now that information is at our fingertips? Are electronic devices adequate portals of knowledge? What is knowledge? What are the characteristics of a sound Islamic teaching?⁸ What are the tools to unpack and understand the Qur'an and hadith? Is there one, *and only one*, way to be 'Islamic'? What is a *madhhab*? Are these questions important?

An acquaintance with the philosophy of knowledge in Islam helps answer these and many more questions. Knowledge breeds amplitude in thought and action; it is the best remedy to narrow-mindedness and mediocrity,⁹ and this is one reason why the Qur'an provides "a forceful stimulus for the Islamic community to strive for education and learning."¹⁰

⁶ Consider the words of the renowned scholar and jurist Abdullah Bin Bayyah: "Islamic discourse enjoys the characteristic of tolerance because it accepts the existence of disagreement and is expansive enough to accommodate diverse points of view and opinions. So there is no basis for rebuke in matters in which there is scope for plausible difference of opinion [...] As for those who are incapable of perceiving the nature of disagreement, they are not adequately qualified to engage in this field in the first place, nor can they be considered frontrunners in matters of importance. [...] Islamic discourse is humanistic in the sense that it elevates the value of humanity. Islamic discourse is firm and solid in its essence, flexible in the manner in which it finds expression" (Bin Bayyah, p.42). 'Islamic literacy' is knowledge of the history, breadth, and variety of Islamic scholarship: the main disciplines, scholarly figures, schools of thought, contributions, basic principles of reasoning, knowledge of the conclusive and the variable within Islamic discourse, and civilizational impact of the religion. The problem with uninitiated preachers is their lack of acquaintance with most of Islam's scholarly heritage. Their rigidity and dangerous conclusions are a direct result of their religious illiteracy.

⁷ Outside, the ocean may look flat and silent. Underneath, a whole other story takes place. In the company of the scholars and sages we learn to 'read' existence and explore the depths of the Qur'an and Prophetic teachings, enjoy the expansive marine life, collect pearls and discover lost treasures, and return to the surface enriched.

⁸ "The ability to discriminate between that which is Islamically unacceptable and that which may be assimilated without harm must be based on a sound grasp of principles. Unfortunately, most Muslims have now reached the stage where they no longer even know what principles are" (Badawi, p.xiii) "[K]nowledge is necessary to anyone who intends to participate in solving conceptually and practically our current problems and who is concerned not to fall into the same kind of absurdities that [reductionism] is remorselessly pursuing. No Muslim should accept modern ideas uncritically, and no Muslim should undertake a critique based on anything other than the knowledge of the Qur'an and Sunna" (*idem*, p.149).

⁹ It is not far-fetched to say that everything celebrated about Islam's civilizational achievements has been made possible by the "people of knowledge". The opposite—embarrassing news, vulgar speech, rage, and violence—typically finds its stock in the statements of self-accredited persons who have not been refined at the hands of sages.

¹⁰ Cook, p.x.

This paper is an attempt to summarize and organize key aspects of knowledge in Islam for the benefit of beginner seekers of knowledge, young educators, social advocates, and curious passengers. Specifically, it aims to:

1. Highlight key traits of Islam’s holistic philosophy of education—especially its purpose, breadth, depth, and etiquette—and rich scholarly tradition.
2. Distinguish the conclusive and the variable in religious matters—in other words, what is absolute and what is open to different interpretations.
3. Examine accepted beliefs on knowledge-related matters, such as: certainty and truth, the role of teachers in the age of information, the cognitive effects of physical and digital environments, and more.
4. Suggest points of departure to young community leaders, educators, and readers who wish to further explore the themes discussed in this paper.

This is not a comprehensive study. It is a starting point that captures a thin slice of what is experienced in the presence of luminaries and discussed in advanced circles of knowledge.

May God accept from us and forgive our shortcomings. 🌟

Centrality: Why 'knowledge'?

The Qur'an emphasizes knowledge

We exist to know our Author.¹¹ This happens through worship and the production of culture and civilization.

وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ

They were only commanded to worship God. (98:5)

هُوَ أَنْشَأَكُمْ مِّنَ الْأَرْضِ وَاسْتَعْمَرَكُمْ فِيهَا

*He brought you from the earth
and made you cultivators in it. (11:61)*

Knowledge enables us to fulfill these two responsibilities and act in harmony with God's commands, in goodwill and service towards all creation.¹²

Moreover, we cannot ignore God's sharp admonitions to those who act without knowledge.

وَلَا تَقْفُ مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُولَئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولًا

*Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge.
Truly, hearing, and sight, and thought—all of these,
[you] will be questioned about. (17:36)*

¹¹ "The starting point of any religion is wonderment. The sheer mystery of our lives demands an explanation. From the gas clouds floating in interstellar space to the tiniest subatomic particles, the realm of action into which we have been thrust must be understood if we are to know how to live. 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' said Socrates, and this question is always true, always equally urgent" (Shalabi and Winter, p.1). Two existential questions deserve a human being's attention. The first: Why do I exist? To this, the Qur'an responds: "I have created spirits and humankind only so that they worship Me" (51:56). Ibn 'Abbas said, "that is, to know [God]" (Qurtubi, vol.17, p.55; Razi, vol.28, p.194; Ibn 'Ajibah, vol.5, p.483). The second: Why is the world intelligible? Discursive knowledge is not possible in an all-erratic cosmos.

¹² Knowledge is required at every stage of spiritual development: worship (*ibada*), cultivation (*imara*), and vicegerency (*khilafa*). Vicegerency may be defined as excellence (*ihsan*) in worship and cultivation, or as their epitome. Excellence is inner refinement (virtue, *tazkiya*) and outer refinement (beauty, *jamal*) (Isfahani, p.36 and 48).

وَتَقُولُونَ بِأَفْوَاهِكُمْ مَا لَيْسَ لَكُمْ بِهِ عِلْمٌ وَتَحْسَبُونَهُ هَيِّنًا وَهُوَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ عَظِيمٌ

*And you utter with your mouths that of which you have no knowledge,
and you think it is insignificant and yet it is major to God. (24:15)*

Many verses accentuate these warnings.¹³ Before performing any act we are morally obligated to consider its immediate and long-term effects.¹⁴ The quality of such consideration depends on one's depth and breadth of knowledge.¹⁵

وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا

Say: 'My Lord, increase me in knowledge!' (20:114)

A comprehensive reading of the Qur'an will reveal the following:

1. Our basic state is ignorance.¹⁶
2. God does not love action¹⁷ that is not grounded in knowledge.
3. God loves for us to seek knowledge.¹⁸
4. God chose the people of knowledge as interpreters of His message.

This last point is elucidated in several verses, each of which stands as sufficient proof for the indispensable role of specialists.¹⁹

¹³ For examples, see: 2:169, 4:157, 6:144, 6:148, 7:28, 7:33, 10:39, 10:68, 11:47, 16:25, 17:36, 18:5, 22:3, 22:8, 30:29, 31:6, 31:20, 40:42, 43:20, 45:26, 53:28.

¹⁴ The noble companion Ibn Mas'ud is reported to have said, "sound knowledge, near the end of time, is better than some action" (Bukhari, *Al-adab al-mufrad*, n.789). According to other transmissions, in those days "knowledge is better than action" (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, p.114, n.103).

¹⁵ Intellectual cross-pollination is an act of *tawhid* and produces the conceptual equivalent of honey: "Then eat from all fruits and travel in the ways of your Lord! There comes from their bodies a drink of varying colours—in it is healing for people. In this is a sign for the thoughtful" (16:69). This is a subtle indication that breadth and exposure lead to conceptual refinement, tolerance, a genuine appreciation of different opinions, and a healthy, versatile intellectual life. "And We made you nations and tribes, so that you know one another" (49:13). The mind of the believer is a community of ideas singing the praise of its Lord in all conceivable colors.

¹⁶ "God brought you from your mothers' wombs, not knowing anything. And He gave you hearing, and sight, and thought, that perhaps you will be thankful." (16:78) According to some scholars, *af'ida* (plural of *fu'aad*) means 'thought' (Azhari, p.115, fn.5). It can also refer to different modes of cognition and types of intelligence. As we will see later, the three faculties mentioned in this verse—hearing, sight, and thought—are analogous to the three basic means for attaining discursive knowledge.

¹⁷ The term 'action' is considered broadly here and includes speech.

¹⁸ The term *ilm* (knowledge) and its variants are mentioned over 500 times in the Qur'an.

¹⁹ See [Scholars](#).

Even a cursory reading of the Qur'an shows that knowledge is a central concept in Islam. For this reason, it is a topic worth exploring.

Seeking knowledge is an obligation for every Muslim²⁰

1. **Seeking knowledge is an obligation to know God.** We exist to know our Creator.²¹
2. **Seeking knowledge is an obligation for the worshipper.** A believer must know which acts of worship are obligatory,²² how to perform them, and when.
3. **Seeking knowledge is an obligation for the lover.** The Qur'an informs its reader that God loves knowledge and the people of knowledge. A believer who longs for God seeks knowledge to earn divine love.²³
4. **Seeking knowledge is an obligation for persons in doubt.** Scholars agree that, in addition to basic obligatory knowledge,²⁴ recommended knowledge, too, becomes obligatory for a person with doubts.²⁵
5. **Seeking knowledge is an obligation for community leaders and activists.** Thought-leaders and activists must know enough in order to make informed choices that do not contradict core Islamic principles and bring long-term harm.²⁶

²⁰ Some commentators consider the hadith "Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim" weak (*da'if*). First, it is important to know that a 'weak' hadith is not a 'false' hadith (Azami). Second, the meaning of a hadith may be sound (*sahih*) despite its apparent weakness (*idem*, p.102). Third, a hadith may be weak according to one scholar but not another (Tahanawi, pp.20-21). Fourth, several scholars have established that the hadith is in fact sound ('Awamah, *Ma'alim irshadiyah*, p.37).

²¹ "Know, therefore, that there is no deity but God" (47:19). Firm belief in God is rooted in knowledge and intellectual evidence, not blind faith.

²² The five obligatory prayers, fasting the month of Ramadan, almsgiving, and the pilgrimage are acts of worship established in unequivocal verses and mass-transmitted reports (*mutawatir*).

²³ "Say, 'If you love God, follow me—God will love you and forgive your sins,' God is forgiving, clement" (3:31). One must first know the Prophetic Way (Sunna) in order to embrace it.

²⁴ Obligatory knowledge is of two kinds: individual (*fardd al-'ayn*) and communal (*fardd al-kifaya*). Obligatory and recommended knowledges are discussed later (see ['Classifications of the religious sciences'](#)).

²⁵ Only spiritual masters can help address doubts and confusions in a non-apologetic, scholarly refined, and satisfactory way. 'Half-scholars' and unlearned 'pious-looking persons' often worsen the problem. One must know who to ask (see ['Scholars'](#)).

²⁶ With respect to social responsibility, a few important remarks must be outlined. First, there is no separation between thought and action. Every action is preceded by a judgment, and a judgment is either the conclusion of careful consideration or a hasty reaction of the ego (*nafs*). In the Arabic language, the words *'ilm* (knowledge) and *'amal* (action) share the same letters, which

6. **Seeking knowledge is an obligation to preserve knowledge.** Islamic knowledge is mainly preserved through transmission, not in books.²⁷ It must be sought and transmitted in order to be preserved.

The benefits of seeking knowledge

1. **Knowledge is essential for understanding Islam’s civilizational potential.** Whenever Muslims have adopted the highest standards their tradition has to offer, their civilizational role has been remarkable.²⁸ We owe this quality of intellectual and cultural participation to our societies today.
2. **Knowledge refines our cognitive abilities.** To be specific, traditional sciences develop the mind and give us tools of critical thought and discernment that are rarely taught in modern education.²⁹

further reinforces the intimate relationship between these two concepts. Second, according to Ibn ‘Abbas, seeking knowledge is superior to participating in military *jihad* (‘Awamah, *Ma‘alim irshadiyah*, p.35). This opinion is consistent with the Qur’an (9:122). Third, passion towards a religious, political, or social cause does not diminish the priority of self-diagnosis and self-refinement. Only purified hearts furnished with knowledge and guided by the Prophetic light produce beautiful outcomes (*ihsan*). The ultimate quest is to please our Creator, not our sense of urgency. Our emotionally-charged and reactive contexts veil us from such considerations and substitute a plethora of scriptural evidence and historic precedents with unquestioned sentiments.

²⁷ See [‘Companionship’](#).

²⁸ “Histories rarely give justice to Islam’s brilliant cultural contribution and inimitable intellectual energy. To overlook the phenomenal development of the Muslim educational enterprise during Islam’s classical period between the eighth and thirteenth centuries is to ignore some of the basic foundations of the Western intellectual tradition. Islam not only bridged early Greco-Hellenistic intellectualism to medieval European scholasticism but also contributed to and improved the corpus of knowledge in medicine, astronomy, philosophy, mathematics, music, architecture, cartography, and geometry. Islamic society can also be credited for conserving and transmitting large bodies of knowledge from Arabic to Latin and promulgating them throughout Europe. Great centers of learning arose throughout the Islamic world, producing scholars whose cumulative and creative genius burned with an intensity that dwarfed the intellectual backwardness of the Latin West. For centuries Islam produced scholars who were both devout Muslims and foremost thinkers in various intellectual disciplines. Embedded within this extraordinary, centuries-long heritage of Islamic scholarship is a remarkably rich and deep contribution to the philosophy of learning and education. The ideas of Islamic philosophers concerning education are of great significance, not only because of their innate value but also because of their impact on the development of educational institutions and theories that emerged in Europe” (Cook, p.ix).

²⁹ “We must get over all our funny prejudices about the Middle Ages and go to the men who wrote exegeses of Scripture, glosses on Justinian, or commentaries on Aristotle for the most perfect models of reading. These glosses and commentaries were not condensations or digests. They were analytical and interpretative readings of a worthy text. In fact, I might as well confess here that I have learned much of what I know about reading from examining a medieval commentary. [...] Compared to the brilliance of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the present era is much more like the dark ages of the sixth and the seventh centuries” (Adler, pp.97-98). “Marlin was

3. **Knowledge is essential for cultivating holistic humanism.**³⁰ The Islamic tradition is often seen as backward and little more than an object of historic interest.³¹ Seeking knowledge—in the traditional way—puts us in touch with Islam’s timeless teachings. Only then do we truly find intellectual satisfaction and confidence in the religion’s explanatory power and relevance.

The purpose of knowledge is to make of us refined, mindful human beings who know and love their Creator, and serve and enrich their communities.³² 🌟

exceptionally well educated [...]—he holds *three different* Ivy League degrees—he soon met [traditionally trained orthodox Jews] who had only ever attended small religious schools but could still ‘dance intellectual circles’ around him” (Newport, p.156). Studying epistemology helps in “developing the mind into a fine-tuned reasoning instrument” (Kaner, Bach, and Pettichord, pp.11-13).

³⁰ This is the culmination of the first two points: understanding Islam’s civilizational potential and refining our cognitive abilities. Islamic humanism (sometimes referred to as *transcendental* humanism) is far more comprehensive—and therefore satiating—than secular humanism.

³¹ “‘Classic’ has come to mean an ancient and antiquated book. People regard the classics as the great has-beens, the great books of their times. “But our times are different,” they say. [...] The classics, thus viewed, cannot offer instruction to a modern man, except, of course, about the peculiarities of his ancestors. But the great books are *not* faded glories. They are *not* dusty remains for scholars to investigate. They are *not* a record of dead civilizations. They are rather the most potent civilizing forces in the world today. [...] The fundamental human problems remain the same in all ages. [...] We may succeed in accelerating the motions of life, but we cannot seem to change the routes that are available to its ends” (Adler, pp.332-333). “[T]here is a myth that *our culture represents the pinnacle of human achievement*: we alone are modern, technological, and developed. This, of course, represents cultural arrogance of the worst sort, and a gross misreading of history and anthropology” (Orr).

³² Francis Bacon said knowledge is power. Ibn Mass‘ud said knowledge is light (Ghazali, p.142). The former leads to the arrogance and the destruction of nature (Orr). The latter leads to humility and the celebration of nature (Muqdasī).

Etiquette: How to seek knowledge?

Worship is incomplete without proper conduct. In fact, one of the main reasons for seeking knowledge is to learn good manners and spiritual refinement. It is said that “a little etiquette (*adab*)³³ is better than a lot of knowledge [without etiquette]”.³⁴

The etiquette presented here derives from the Qur’an, hadith, and the teachings of our righteous predecessors (*al-salaf al-salih*).³⁵

Inward etiquette

1. Seek God’s countenance and pleasure.³⁶
2. Expel arrogance,³⁷ ostentation,³⁸ and ill-thoughts³⁹ from your heart.
3. Be grateful for the *possibility* of knowledge.⁴⁰
4. Be hungry and receptive.⁴¹

³³ The words ‘etiquette’ and ‘conduct’ are used interchangeably to refer to the rich Arabic term *adab*, which is defined as ‘putting a thing in its appropriate place’. Refinement and beautiful character are manifestations of *adab*. The letters of the word *adab* also give us the words ‘beginning’ (*bad*) and ‘path’ (*da’b*) (Yusuf, p.1).

³⁴ Variants of this statement are attributed to Ibn al-Mubarak (Baghdadi, vol.1, p.80; ‘Awamah, *Ma’alim irshadiyah*, p.211). Al-Junayd said, “Four things raise a person to the highest of ranks, even if he has only a little knowledge and a little action: forbearance, humility, generosity and good manners, and they are the perfection of faith” (Ahmed, p.94).

³⁵ Our scholarly tradition has paid meticulous attention to the art of seeking knowledge. In this section we merely summarize what is elaborated in the more comprehensive works of al-Ghazali, Ibn Jama’ah, al-Zarnuji, and other masters in this field.

³⁶ “Actions are only by intentions” (Bukhari, 1). Intentions are the souls of actions and their guiding compass. Any action—even sleeping, eating, and drinking—can become an act of worship if done intentionally for the sake of God. Self-scrutiny is key on the path to God. Ask God to give you the best intentions—never assume that good intentions come to you naturally. Be mindful of your heart’s orientation at all times, and constantly renew your intentions.

³⁷ The Prophet ﷺ said: “None who has the equivalent of an atom’s weight of arrogance enters the Garden” (Muslim, 91). Humility is essential—towards one’s peers, teachers, and the authors we read. “The path of self-effacement for the sake of God demands that we view everyone as better than us” (Yusuf and Shakir, p.41).

³⁸ On the Day of Judgment, a person who sought knowledge for other than God will be told, “You learned so that people say ‘what a knowledgeable person!’” and will be taken to the Fire (Muslim, 1905).

³⁹ That is, toward any human being. “The Compassionate will have mercy on those who have mercy; so have mercy on everything on the earth, and the one in the heavens will have mercy on you” (Tirmidhi).

⁴⁰ “If you show gratitude, I will increase you” (14:7). Physical health, knowledge, your awareness of these gifts, and the gratitude you feel are all from God, and each deserves renewed praise, gratitude, and humility.

⁴¹ This refers to hunger for more knowledge (depth) and openness to different knowledges (breadth). First, knowledge is a shoreless ocean. The verse “and say, ‘My Lord, increase me in

5. Be patient.⁴²

Outward etiquette

1. Be in a state of ritual purity.⁴³
2. Put on your finest attire.⁴⁴
3. Begin in the name of God (*basmala*) and invoke blessings and salutations upon the Prophet ﷺ (*salawat*).⁴⁵

knowledge!” (20:114) is always relevant in the believer’s life. We receive knowledge as long as we seek it and realize our constant need for God’s mercies—indeed, “charities are only for those in need” (9:60). The gnostic (*arif*) is said to be like the person drowning, incessantly gasping for God. Second, we must not be quick to judge and reject matters we do not immediately understand. Part of *adab* is to receive knowledge with an open mind.

⁴² “Verily, those who are patient are granted endless reward” (30:10). The path of knowledge is long and arduous (Abu Ghudda, *Sabr al-‘ulama*). Seeking knowledge is an intellectual struggle and “those who struggle in Our cause, We will certainly guide them to Our paths—indeed, God is with those who strive for excellence” (29:69). This is hard to appreciate in the age of instant gratification: not everything has to make sense right away and it is good practice to suspend judgment. As a seeker of knowledge, you will not always get immediate and satisfactory answers to your questions. Patience is “a productive or formative force in itself” (Roberts) and this is one of the key lessons from the story of Prophet Moses and al-Khidr, peace be upon them.

⁴³ Ritual ablutions are the outward counterpart of inward purity: *takhliya* (purification) precedes *tahliya* (beautification). Some calligraphers make *ghusl* every day before starting work (Schimmel). The activity of seeking knowledge deserves this level of preparation. “Knowledge will not grant you a portion of itself until you give yourself entirely to it; however, if you give yourself entirely to it, you are still in peril of its granting you a portion” (Ghazali, p.143).

⁴⁴ This is established by the generality of the verses: “Adorn yourselves at every place of worship” (7:31) and “And whoever venerates the rites of God, that is of the mindfulness (*taqwa*) of the hearts” (22:32). Consider these verses in conjunction with the Prophet’s teachings ﷺ: “God is Beautiful, He loves beauty” (Muslim, 91) and “God has prescribed the mark of beauty (*ihsan*) upon all things” (Muslim, 1955). This applies even when choosing pens, notebooks, and other devices that aid us on the path of knowledge. In fact, scholars wrote books to address these seemingly insignificant matters (Cook). Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi instructed his student not to use the reed-sharpener for any cutting activity other than sharpening pens. Nowadays, some Muslims see such formalities as unnecessary, excessive, or superficial. First, this mindset is simply alien to the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ and the veneration displayed by early scholars such as Ibn ‘Abbas, Abu Hanifa, and Malik. Second, in this age Islam is associated with ugliness and barbarity, and therefore these neglected practices—beauty, refinement, and attention to detail—become all the more important to revive and emphasize. Third, paying attention to details deepens our awareness of ourselves and our surroundings. Fourth, one of the hallmarks of civilization is the degree of development, sophistication, and refinement of its cultural practices. These seemingly small things are precisely what gives texture and flavor to a culture—and culture is an essential part of our humanity.

⁴⁵ The *basmala* is the counterpart of the intention. The *salawat* are the counterpart of gratitude and reverence. It is recommended to read the *basmala* and *salawat* upon writing them (Cook, p.197, §209-211). The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said: “Whoever writes ‘In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Loving’ and beautifies it out of reverence for God, God forgives their sins” (Suyuti, p.48). Regarding the *salawat*, consider what Ibn al-Salah said: “Prayers and salutations upon God’s Messenger ﷺ must be observed with diligence when his noble name is mentioned, and one must never tire of repeating them each time his name is uttered, for that is one of the greatest benefits gained by the students, carriers, and writers of the hadith traditions. One must beware of what lazy people and common students do, who write S.A.A.W.S. instead of *May God send prayers and peace upon him*. Sufficient as an honor is the statement of the Prophet ﷺ,

4. Seek knowledge from reliable sources.⁴⁶
5. Venerate the means of knowledge available to you.⁴⁷
6. Sit properly.⁴⁸
7. Always carry a notebook and a pen.⁴⁹
8. Review, practice, and share.⁵⁰
9. Master the art of saying “I don’t know”.⁵¹
10. Do not waste time.⁵² 🌟

‘Whosoever sends prayers upon me in a book, the angels will continue to seek his forgiveness so long as my name is in that book’ (Nabahani, p.33). A contemporary scholar who published a book was asked by his teacher to rewrite all the *salawat* he had digitized by hand.

⁴⁶ This will be discussed in more detail later, see ‘[Sources of knowledge](#)’. Reliable sources of knowledge may not always be available locally. Traveling may be financially and physically demanding, but it may also be necessary for one’s spiritual well-being. This is evident in the stories of Prophet Moses and al-Khidr, peace be upon them, the companions who travelled to meet the Prophet ﷺ, and their successors.

⁴⁷ Gratitude begets veneration. The Qur’an indicates that veneration is in and of itself a means to knowledge: “*That and whoever venerates the rites of God, that is of the mindfulness (taqwa) of the hearts*” (22:32) and “*And be mindful (taqwa) of God and God will teach you*” (2:282). In other words, reverence increases mindfulness (*taqwa*), which increases knowledge. Scholars, books, pens, and places of learning are all rites of—and means to—God that must be honoured. Ibn ‘Abbas held the stirrup of Zayd ibn Thabit’s mule saying, “this is how the scholars and the venerable ought to be treated” (Hakim, 5785).

⁴⁸ The seeker of knowledge is a beggar before God, and this should be reflected in their physical posture—in the same way that prostration is meant to embody total submission. Sitting on the ground also has physiological benefits (Murad, *Contentions*, p.23). Abu Hanifa did not extend his legs in the direction of his teacher’s house, even after the latter’s death (‘Awamah, *Ma‘alim irshadiyah*, p.225). Nor must we, in the direction of Mecca or a copy of the Qur’an. While reading, Imam al-Shafi‘i turned the pages of his book slowly as to not disturb his teacher (*idem*).

⁴⁹ First, words of wisdom may flow from a person’s heart unexpectedly. Second, a notebook is less distracting than a phone or a tablet. Third, writing is special: “[God] Who taught by the pen” (96:4). “There is [in the activity of writing] an integration of mind, body, and character interwoven in the dynamic calligraphic process. This intimate relationship underlies the interactive effects of character writing on the mind and the body of the writer, as does the spatial organization of the character in writing” (Xu, p.3). From a spiritual perspective, letters have qualities and meanings in and of themselves—many chapters in the Qur’an begin with individual letters—and so there is blessing and benefit in manually tracing their shape (Schimmel). From a cultural perspective, handwriting preserves the idiosyncrasies of a person and their culture. From a romantic perspective, handwriting is more intimate—a more direct extension of ourselves than typing (see ‘[Digital devices](#)’).

⁵⁰ Knowledge is light, it illuminates our lives and the lives of those around us. To teach is to share the light. That said, some subject-matters require mastery and special permission (*ijaza*) before they can be taught. Generally speaking, seekers of knowledge should avoid teaching or delivering sermons unless asked or given permission by qualified scholars.

⁵¹ When asked about religious matters, the safest answer is: “I don’t know”. Seekers of knowledge may be tempted to speak up when a sensitive topic is discussed. The checklist for intervention is as follows: Do I have the knowledge to conclude that a mistake has been made? Will my intervention bring harm? Will my intervention bring benefit? Keep in mind that it is neither good *adab* nor wise to correct people on every single matter. The art of speaking is best learned in the company of sages (see ‘[Companionship](#)’).

⁵² “*To God belong the east and west—so wherever you turn, there is God’s countenance*” (2:115). “*He is with you, wherever you are*” (57:4). These verses hint that it is impolite to waste time: one is always in God’s presence. The true seeker of knowledge is either engaged in worship, sitting in circles of knowledge, reading, writing, strengthening family bonds, serving the community,

engaged in remembrance (*dhikr*), or resting—with the intention to replenish their energies for a new day of learning and worship (Abu Ghudda, *Qimat al-zaman*).

Definition: What is knowledge?

First, can we know anything for certain?

A study of knowledge (epistemology) necessarily implies a judgement on whether or not certainty is possible. One way is to assume the impossibility of certainty and consider the implications and coherence of this assumption. In other words, we pretend to be sophists⁵³—three ‘intellectual’ profiles famous for categorically rejecting the possibility of certainty.

- Deniers, whose attitude towards existence can be summed up in the statement: “Nothing is real. Reality is an illusion.”
- Skeptics: “Certainty is impossible. We can never, ever know a thing for sure.”
- Relativists: “There is no objective truth. Reality is whatever you think it is.”

These views⁵⁴ are not uncommon in our times.⁵⁵ But are they consistent with their own conclusions?

- Ask a denier, “Is your statement (‘the world is not real’) true?” If they respond ‘yes’, then the denier has affirmed that something has a reality. If they respond ‘no’, then the denier negated the negation, and therefore the world is real.⁵⁶

⁵³ The term ‘sophist’ originally referred to a cultured and intellectually sophisticated individual (Taylor and Lee). Over the course of history it has come to refer to argumentative pseudo-philosophers and enemies of reason. In this paper, the term is used in that pejorative sense.

⁵⁴ To clearly differentiate between these views imagine holding an apple. The denier would say there is no apple, despite it being there. The skeptic would affirm the existence of a thing but claim we cannot conclusively say it is an apple—or anything else for that matter. The relativist would allow the possibility of it being a watermelon or a cat.

⁵⁵ Postmodernist incredulity represents the culmination of the sophisticated attitudes described in this section (Butler).

⁵⁶ Another way to show the absurdity of the denier’s position is to pour a bucket of water on them and pretend it did not happen. After all, *nothing is real*.

- Ask a skeptic, “Are you certain that certainty is impossible?” If they respond ‘yes’, they have affirmed the possibility of certainty.⁵⁷
- Ask a relativist, “Is your statement objective?” If ‘yes’, they have contradicted their initial statement.⁵⁸

In each case we see clear contradiction, which makes these attitudes untenable.

The problem with sophistical statements is their attempt to universalize a distrust in *all* forms of knowledge, not just in *some* matters,⁵⁹ and this leads to absurd conclusions. Certainty is a necessity of human thought. It is embedded in the very substrate of human cognition.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ “Interestingly, human psychology cannot divest itself of the notion or reality of certainty, because the very attempt to do so involves an affirmation of it; this leads to the absurd position of being certain that one cannot be certain” (Lahham, *The Intelligibility of the Islamic Tradition*, pp.8-9).

⁵⁸ “Relativism holds that one can never escape human subjectivity. If that were true, the statement itself would have no objective value; it would fall by its own verdict. It happens, however, that human beings are quite capable of breaking out of subjectivity; were we unable to do so we would not know what subjectivity is. [...] If Freudian psychology declares that rationality is but a hypocritical cloak for repressed, unconscious drives, this statement falls under the same reproach; were Freudianism right on this point it would itself be no more than a front for id-inspired impulses. [F]ew things are more absurd than to use the mind to accuse the mind, not just of some specific mistake but in its entirety” (H. Smith, pp.150-151).

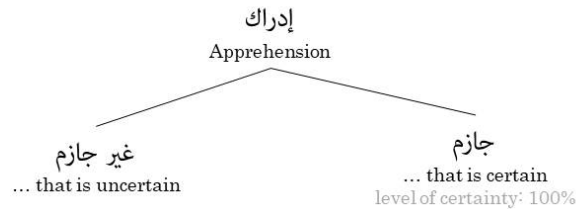
⁵⁹ It is obvious that certainty is not possible in *every* matter and that there may well be multiple valid opinions on a particular issue. In fact, this is one reason why schools of thought exist (see [‘Schools of thought’](#)).

⁶⁰ In this paper we are content with proving the possibility of certainty by demonstrating that its contradictory opposite (categorical uncertainty) is intellectually impossible. This is one methodology used in dialectical reasoning. Readers may wish to explore other methodologies. The fundamental point is: it is impossible to speak of knowledge in a meaningful way without first establishing the possibility of certainty.

Defining knowledge⁶¹

Traditional scholars define discursive knowledge⁶² as: apprehension that is certain and consistent with reality [and based on evidence].⁶³

This definition can be derived systematically by first considering the two possible types of apprehension: certain and uncertain.



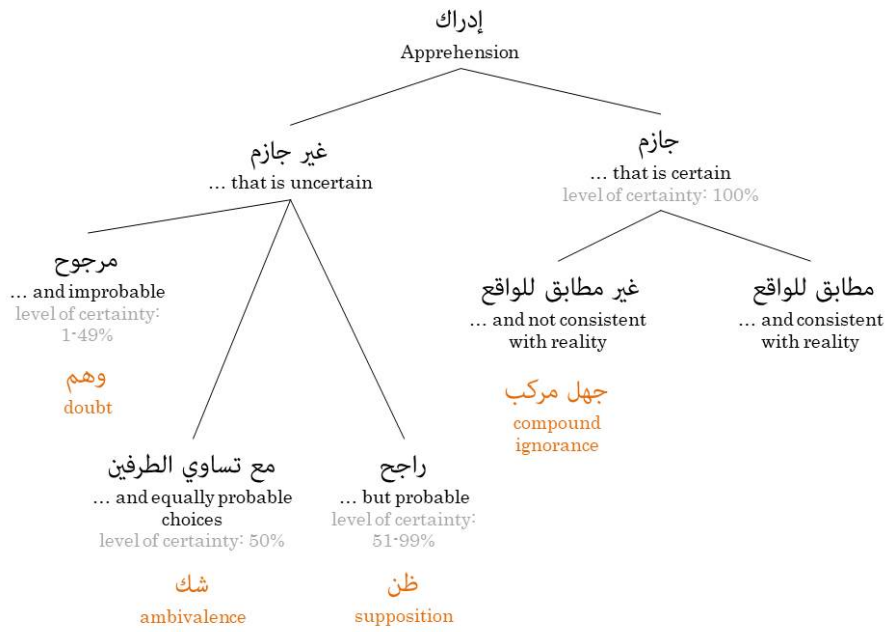
Each branch can be divided into categories. Uncertainty comes in degrees: doubt, ambivalence, and supposition. Certainty does not exist in degrees and is, by definition, always absolute.⁶⁴ But it may or may not be congruent with reality.

⁶¹ One of the distinctive marks of the Islamic scholarly tradition is its systematic approach to discursive subject matters (Abderrahman, p.20). In other words, it begins with definition and foundational principles before proceeding to particulars. The starting point and condition of a fruitful intellectual or public discourse is conceptual clarity.

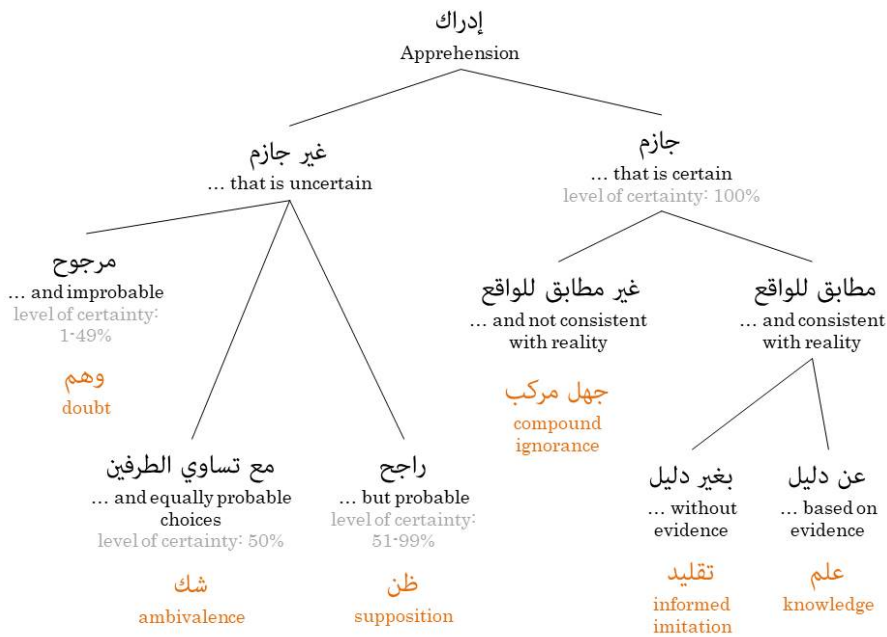
⁶² There are two kinds of knowledge: discursive knowledge and super-rational knowledge. Super-rational knowledge is alluded to in the Qur'an and Prophetic teachings and, generally speaking, cannot be supported with rational evidence (see the knowledge of al-Khidr (18:65), "*the one with knowledge from the Book*" (27:40), and the hadith about truthful vision reported in the collections of Bukhari and Muslim). Discursive knowledge, on the other hand, relies on transmitted reports, empirical evidence, or intellectual proofs—each of which is accessible and verifiable within its own cognitive framework. This paper does not discuss super-rational knowledge.

⁶³ Definitions vary slightly from one school of epistemology to another. For instance, some scholars do not consider evidence a necessary condition for knowledge. Furthermore, some scholars divide knowledge into conceptualization (*tasawur*) and judgment (*hukm*) (Isfahani, p.102). When apprehension concerns a simplex (one part), it is just an act of 'raw' conceptualization (*tasawur*). When it concerns a proposition—a complex (many parts)—it is an act of judgment (*hukm*): a conceptual relationship has been affirmed or negated. Judging a thing is an extension of how one conceptualizes it. Most misunderstandings surrounding religious matters stem from incorrect conceptualization. To give an example, those who oppose the idea of schools of thought (*madhhab*) do so because they mistake it to be an alternative to the Qur'an and Sunna (see ['Schools of thought'](#)).

⁶⁴ In other words, '99.99% certainty' is not certainty. Certainty is absolute, by definition.



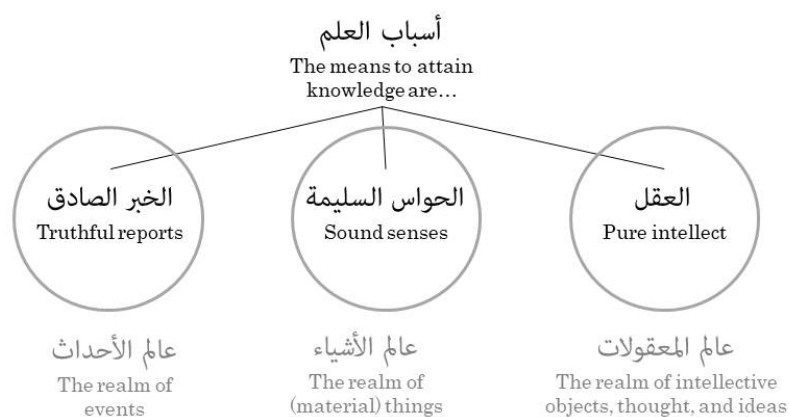
Finally, certainty that is consistent with reality is either based on evidence or not.



The means to attain knowledge

The means (*asbab*) to attain discursive knowledge are three:⁶⁵

- **Truthful reports.** Reports relate to events that are not witnessed firsthand. These may be transmitted orally or in writing.⁶⁶
- **Sound senses.** The five methods of physical perception—taste, sight, touch, smell, and hearing—relate to material events experienced firsthand.
- **Pure intellect.** The primordial cognitive faculty that relates to immaterial events—concepts, thoughts, and ideas.⁶⁷



A distinct form of judgment is possible in each realm:

- The realm of events allows **legal judgment** (*al-hukm al-shar'i*) to take place. Legal judgments deal with the actions of morally responsible agents (*mukallaf*).⁶⁸ An example of a legal judgment is, 'It is permissible to walk to the mosque [in normal circumstances]'.

⁶⁵ These are deduced logically, but they are also implied in the verse: "Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Truly, hearing, and sight, and thought—all of these, [you] will be questioned about" (17:36) (Foudah, pp.51-53).

⁶⁶ Historic events are largely determined by means of transmitted reports although empirical study—geology, archaeology, and so on—contributes significantly to the reconstruction of the past.

⁶⁷ Scholars distinguish 'intellect' and 'reason'. Simply put, intellect refers to the primordial human faculty that discerns intelligibles and wholes, while reason corresponds to the analytic faculty that focuses on parts. Intellect deals with universals (it looks 'up'), reason deals with particulars (it looks 'down').

⁶⁸ Every human action belongs to one of the legal classifications. The diagram shows five types of legal judgments, but the Hanafi school defines eight.

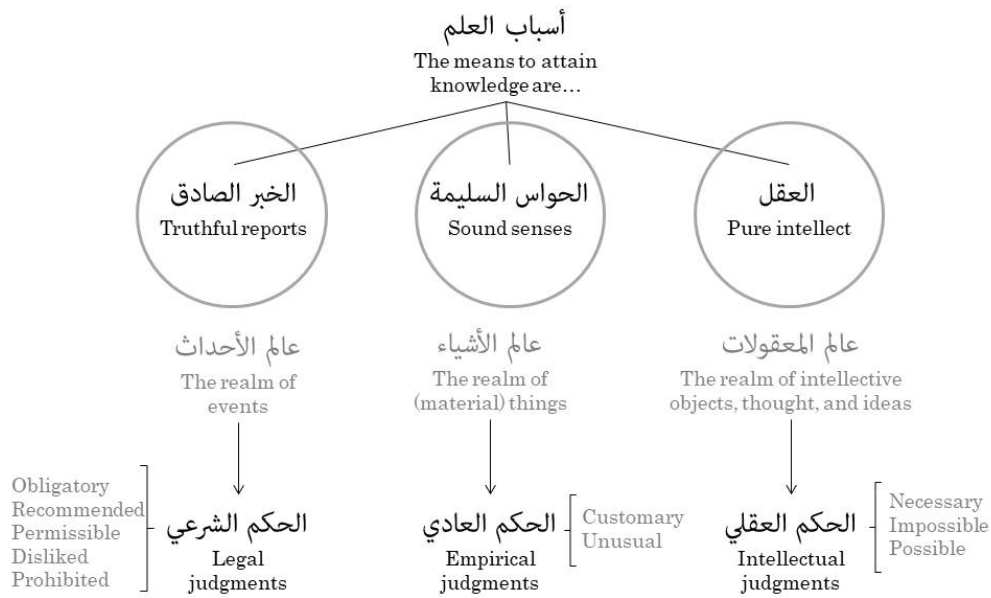
- The realm of concepts is where **intellectual judgment** (*al-hukm al-'aqli*) takes place. Intellectual judgments are of three kinds: necessary, impossible, and possible. Necessity is that which cannot be otherwise—is never negated. Impossibility is that which cannot be—never exists. Possibility accepts negation or affirmation. An example of a necessary statement is, ‘God exists’.
- The realm of matter or physical events enables **empirical judgment** (*al-hukm al-'adi*). Empirical judgments deal with the realm of possibility⁶⁹—never with intellectual necessities and impossibilities—and boil down to two types: customary and non-customary. An example of an empirical judgment is, ‘The sun rises from the East’.⁷⁰

Necessity and impossibility are unchanging, existential concepts embedded in the fabric of reality; they are objective, not subjective judgments. By contrast, legal and empirical judgments are both circumstantial and possibly subjective.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Modern scientific knowledge refers to what is contingent, particular, and possible (Goldman). Contingent: empirical knowledge is valid within a specific range of assumptions that are not themselves known to be true. Particular: it has a specific context within which it can be said to be true or false. Probable: empirical knowledge is tentative, presumptive, and subject to different interpretations and theories.

⁷⁰ It is important to note that when laypersons embrace modern scientific ideas that they themselves have not empirically tested, their act does not—strictly speaking—belong to the realm of the empirical. If the information was heard or read, then it belongs to the category of transmitted reports.

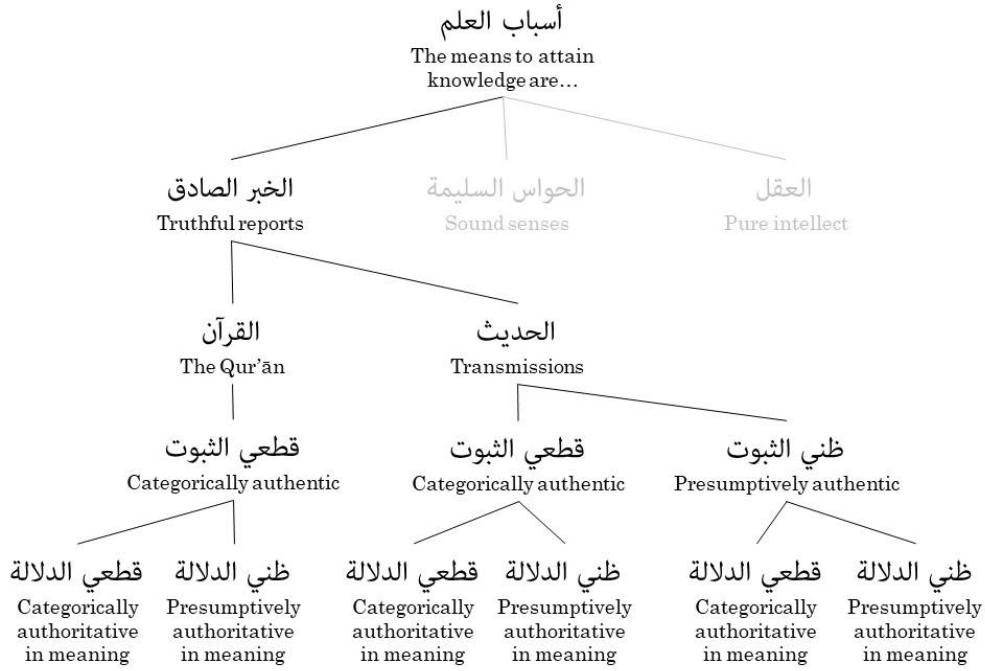
⁷¹ Additional examples might help to clarify the difference between intellectual and empirical judgments. From an empirical standpoint, stating that the sun rises from the West is contrary to customary experience, but it is not intellectually impossible. Similarly, the proposition ‘fire burns’ describes a customary reality, but it is not necessary for fire to burn. Finally, humans never experienced the beginning of the universe, but it is intellectually impossible for the universe not to have begun. Because empirical judgments are arrived at by means of sense perception, they cannot possibly relate to existential matters. In short: 1) all empirical propositions are intellectual possibilities, 2) intellectual possibilities remain as such even if proven empirically, 3) not all intellectual possibilities are empirical propositions, and 4) necessary and impossible propositions cannot be proven false by empirical propositions or truthful reports. Empirical and intellectual judgments are examined more thoroughly in epistemology, discursive theology, and philosophy of science.



Every one of these three judgments is serviced by distinct sciences. To mention a few examples, legal judgments are examined in the disciplines of jurisprudence and legal theory, empirical judgments are the focus of material sciences, and intellectual judgments are studied in logic and discursive theology.

We now focus our attention on transmitted reports. Not all primary texts—even if categorically authentic (*qat'i al-thubut*)—are definitive in meaning (*qat'i al-dalala*).⁷²

⁷² Abd-Allah, *Living Islam with Purpose*, p.7; see [‘Schools of thought’](#).



Based on the above, correct reasoning entails at least the following:

1. In any discussion or reading, define the terms being used.
2. Identify the kinds of propositions being made. Are they intellectual, empirical, or legal? Is the speaker or author confusing one type for another?
3. Determine the appropriate judgment for each proposition. If it is intellectual, is it necessary, possible, or impossible? If it is empirical, is it based on reliable experimental data? If it is legal, is it obligatory, recommended, permissible, disliked, or prohibited—and according to which school of thought?

Each of these questions calls on different disciplines and cognitive frameworks. To think clearly is to utilize the *appropriate* conceptual tools and frameworks when examining underlying assumptions, methodologies, and conclusions. 60

Pathways: What knowledge to seek?

The necessity of organized knowledge

Some Muslims believe that the religious sciences are unnecessary, or that they are mere jargon that derails us from the simple message of Islam. Anyone acquainted with the Prophet’s teachings ﷺ, the history of religious disciplines, and the nature of scholarship in general will know that this is a mistaken view.⁷³ Consider the following:

1. The Prophet ﷺ is the first to organize religious knowledge.⁷⁴
2. Religious sciences spring from the Qur’an, the teachings of the Prophet ﷺ, and the instructions of the noble companions.⁷⁵

⁷³ To be clear, Islam is simple in its foundational creed. But this simplicity must not be understood in an anemic sense or in a way that equates all religious scholarship with pedanticism. Consider the following. First, if Islam is for everyone, then it must speak to all levels of intelligence; it must not confuse the layperson and yet satiate the scholar. After all, the Qur’an celebrates the intellect (*‘aql*) and deep thought (*ulu al-albab*). Second, Islam being the final revelation must have—built into its message—the tools to respond to competing world religions and philosophies at every point in human history. Modern-day *da’wah* requires intellectual *jihad*, and the religion must provide adequate ammunition. Third, if Islam is indeed so ‘simple’ then why is its sacred text 600 pages long? Fourth, why does it impose complicated rituals on its followers? Fifth, why are there verses explicitly reserved to the scrutiny of scholars (for instance, 3:7 or 29:49)? Finally, why would the companions disagree on legal matters (see [‘Schools of thought’](#)) if things were so simple? Proponents of the view that ‘Islam is simple and nothing but simple’ cannot ignore these considerations. Islam is simple enough for the ordinary person, but a shoreless ocean for the thinking enthusiast: “Say, ‘if the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the words of my Lord are exhausted, even if We were to constantly refill it’” (18:109).

⁷⁴ That is, in the famous hadith of Gabriel (Bukhari, 4777; Muslim 9). The structure of the hadith suffices as an indication that religious knowledge may be taught systematically.

⁷⁵ It is worth mentioning a few examples. The sciences of oral reports (*‘ulum al-hadith*) are means to verify the authenticity of sayings attributed to the Prophet ﷺ and distinguish sound teachings from fabrications, in accordance with God’s command: “Oh believers, if a talebearer comes to you with news, verify it...” (49:6). The sciences of the Qur’an (*‘ulum al-Qur’an*) comprise a number of topics: the order of revelation, its context, textual interpretation (*tafsir*, exegesis), the art of recitation (*tajwid*), and more. The science of spiritual refinement (*‘ilm al-tazkiya*) responds to divine admonitions—“Forsake sin, both outward and inward” (6:120) because a day will come “when neither wealth nor children avail, save for they who come to God with a sound heart” (26:88-89), those “who fear the Compassionate unseen and come with a penitent heart” (50:33), and this is why the Prophet ﷺ is sent to refine us (2:151)—and the third component of the famous hadith of Gabriel—*ihsan*, “to worship God as if you see Him, and if you do not see Him then [know that] He sees you”. The science of logic (*‘ilm al-mantiq*) is concerned with the rules of correct reasoning and serves other sciences. The science of Arabic grammar (*‘ilm al-nahu*) was initiated under the recommendation of the noble companion ‘Ali in order to preserve the

3. Scholars and seekers of knowledge throughout history accepted religious sciences as useful—if not necessary—frameworks and repositories of otherwise scattered information.⁷⁶
4. The traditional academic disciplines gather a variety of principles to help Muslims craft thoughtful responses in new contexts and keep the religion relevant to different people and times.⁷⁷
5. It is dangerous for untrained persons to practice engineering or medicine. The schools, prerequisites, subject matters, and jargon in the fields of engineering and medicine help guarantee our safety and well-being. The same considerations apply with respect to religious knowledge.⁷⁸
6. The Prophet ﷺ endorsed beneficial innovations.⁷⁹

language. The reader may find more detailed arguments for each of these disciplines in dedicated scholarly works.

⁷⁶ A particular topic may be discussed in several, non-sequential verses in the Qur'an, a number of hadith, and scholarly opinions spread across different collections; it is easy to miss key information. Knowledge that is acquired in a fragmented way is incomplete, volatile, and potentially harmful. The traditional sciences organize knowledge in a way that facilitates a gradual, systematic, and comprehensive study of religious matters; this is why scholars deem the sciences necessary for proper knowledge acquisition. Remember that the companions had direct access to the Prophet ﷺ and therefore did not need to organize knowledge. Their successors (*tabi'in*) and their students (*tabi'i al-tabi'in*) were more explicit in separating knowledge into distinct disciplines because their context demanded it. In reality, "this was not an innovation in the negative sense, but a working-out of principles already discernible in the time of the earliest Muslims" (Murad, *Understanding the Four Madhhabs*).

⁷⁷ Contexts "change in four ways: in time (*zaman*); place (*makan*); people (*ashkhas*); and conditions (*ahwal*)" (Ghazi, p.126). It is a societal obligation (*fardd kifaya*) to understand contextual changes and revisit accordingly the language, cognitive frames, and media used in the *da'wah* and public discourse: "We did not send any messenger except with the tongue of his people to make [matters] clear for them" (14:4). The Prophet ﷺ said, "Speak to people with what they know" (Bukhari, 127). "A discourse that is in tune with the 'tongue' of a people must be conversant with their modes of intellection. It must be recognizable to its audience; and it can only do this by being conscious of the *unspoken* assumptions that operate in their minds and inform their worldview" (Bin Bayyah intro by J. H. Brown, p.6).

⁷⁸ No one opposed the establishments of engineering and medicine for initiating sciences, authoring textbooks, and being selective in appointing as teachers. The spiritual realm is more subtle and consequential than the physical, so why do we not afford religious scholarship high intellectual standards? (see 2:267).

⁷⁹ This happens in two ways. First, "whoever initiates a good *sunna* in Islam [...] will receive a reward equivalent to anyone who adopts it [...]" (Muslim, 1017). For fourteen centuries, the sciences have been adopted by the scholarly community as a good *sunna*. It is worth noting that the Qur'an does not condemn innovation (*bid'a*) as such. For example, in the commonly misread verse on monasticism (57:27), God does not censure the innovation, but condemns failure to fulfill it (Abd-Allah, *Innovation and Creativity*, p.3; 'Arfaj; 'Asri). Second, the Prophet ﷺ praised the first three generations that followed his time in one hadith (Bukhari, 3650; Muslim, 2533) and pointed to scholars as the legitimate inheritors of Prophetic knowledge in another hadith (Abu Dawud, 3641; Tirmidhi, 2682). Many of the foundational sciences were developed under the auspices of the scholars in those generations and subsequently adopted by the majority of

In short, formal academic disciplines are effective means for the study, preservation, and continuity of the religion.

Classifications of the religious sciences

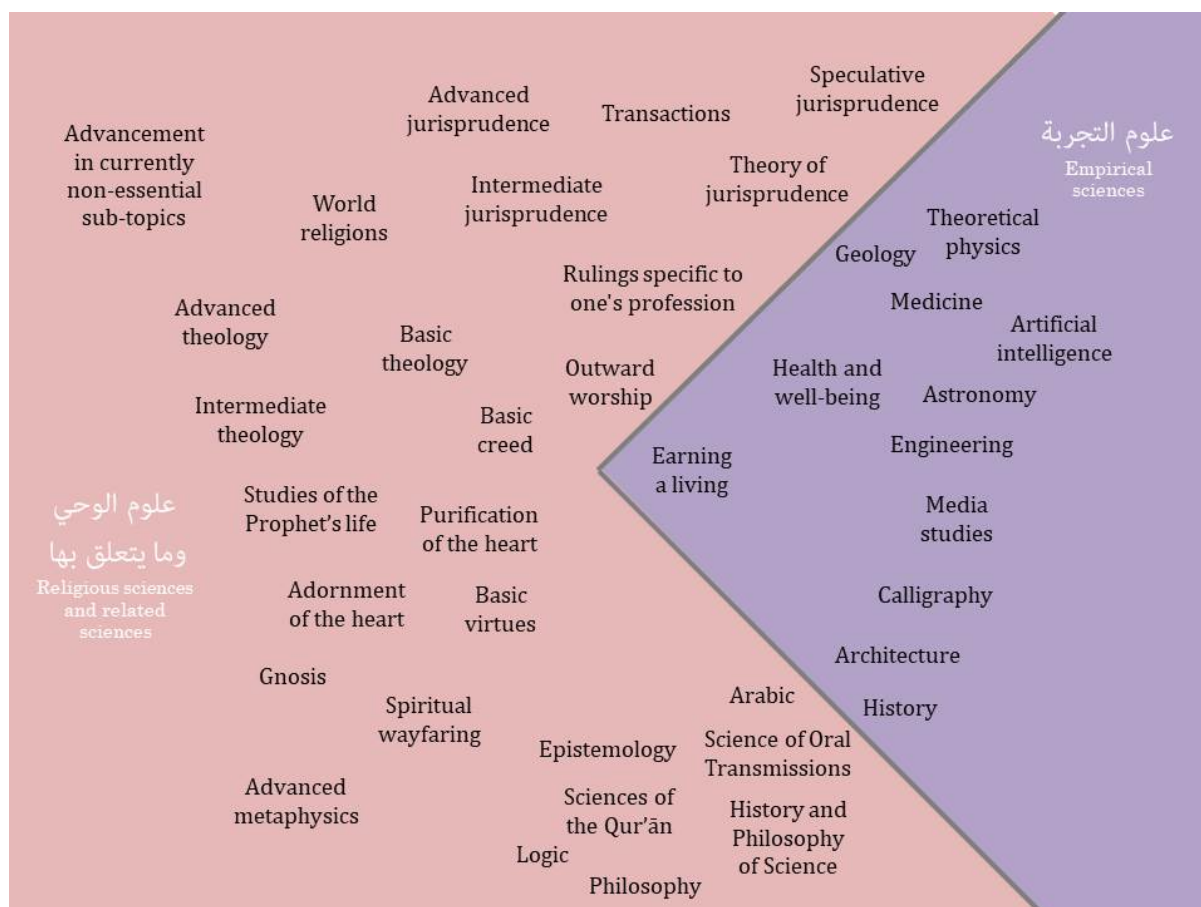
Religious disciplines can be classified in different ways:⁸⁰

1. According to their domain of study, for example: Cosmos (*al-kitab al-mandhur*) and revelation (*al-kitab al-masttur*).
2. In terms of priority, for example: individual obligations (*fardd al-'ayn*), societal obligations (*fardd al-kifaya*), recommended (*mustahhab*), and permissible (*mubah*).
3. In relation to the dimensions of the human being, for example: mind (*iman*), body (*islam*), and soul (*ihsan*).

Here is an example of the first classification—empirical sciences (right) are concerned with the material cosmos, religious sciences (left) with revelation:

scholars; therefore, in the *sunna-bid'a* paradigm, the sciences are considered a praiseworthy innovation (*bid'a hasana*), if not an obligatory innovation (*bid'a wajiba*).

⁸⁰ Needless to say, there are other ways to divide classical knowledge and the diagrams in this section do not represent a complete list of the sciences.

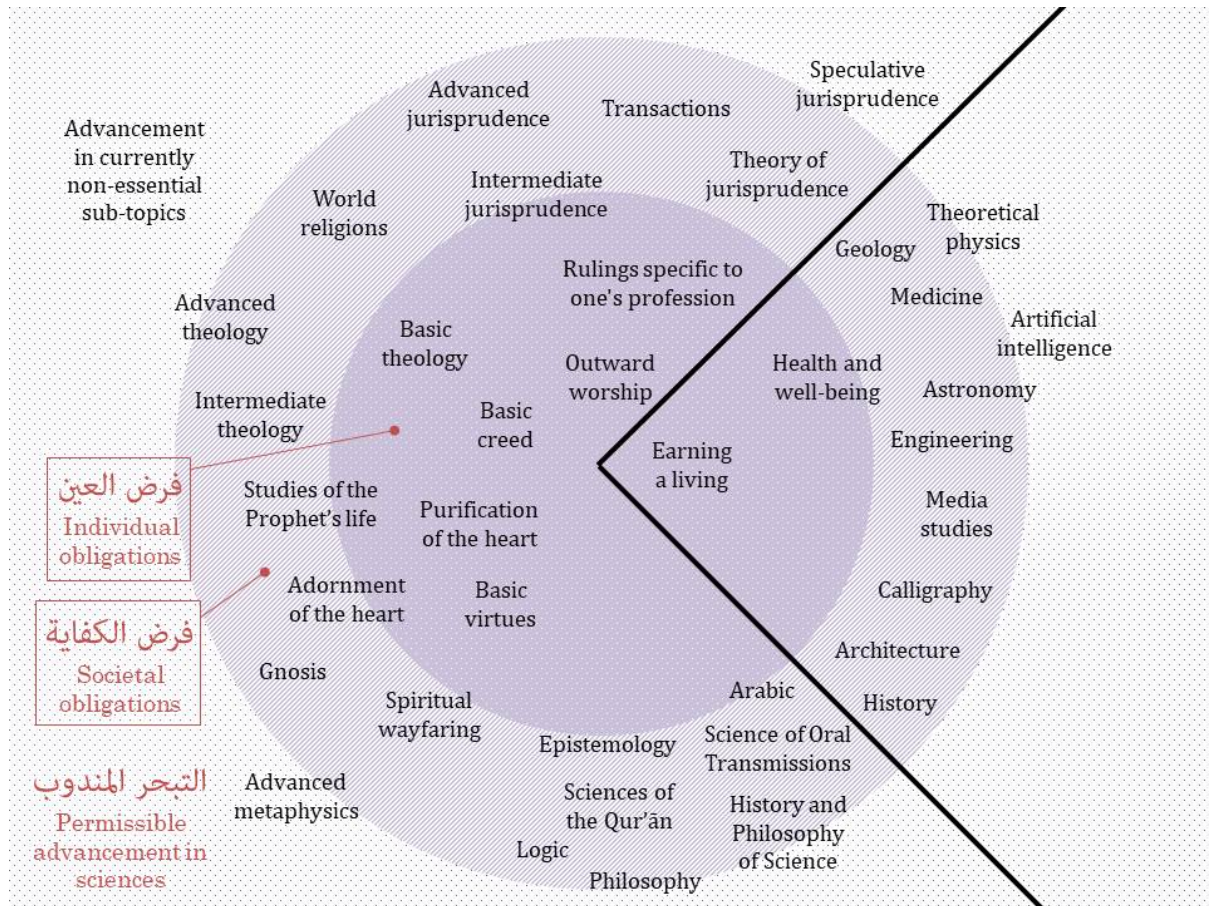


The same sciences can be organized by priority—the innermost circle covers individual obligations,⁸¹ the middle covers societal obligations,⁸² and the outermost section illustrates permissible scholarly investigations:⁸³

⁸¹ “Individual obligations are binding on every Muslim who is morally responsible (*mukallaf*). They are exclusively personal and cannot be performed by someone else on another’s behalf. The five daily prayers, fasting the month of Ramadan, and eating what is lawful and clean are individual obligations. Ethically, Muslims who fail to perform individual obligations are iniquitous and risk divine retribution” (Abd-Allah, *Living Islam with Purpose*, p.14). It is also obligatory to learn the basic legal matters related to one’s profession and personal duties such as, for example, the rights of one’s spouse and children (‘Awamah, *Ma’alim irshadiyah*, pp.37-38).

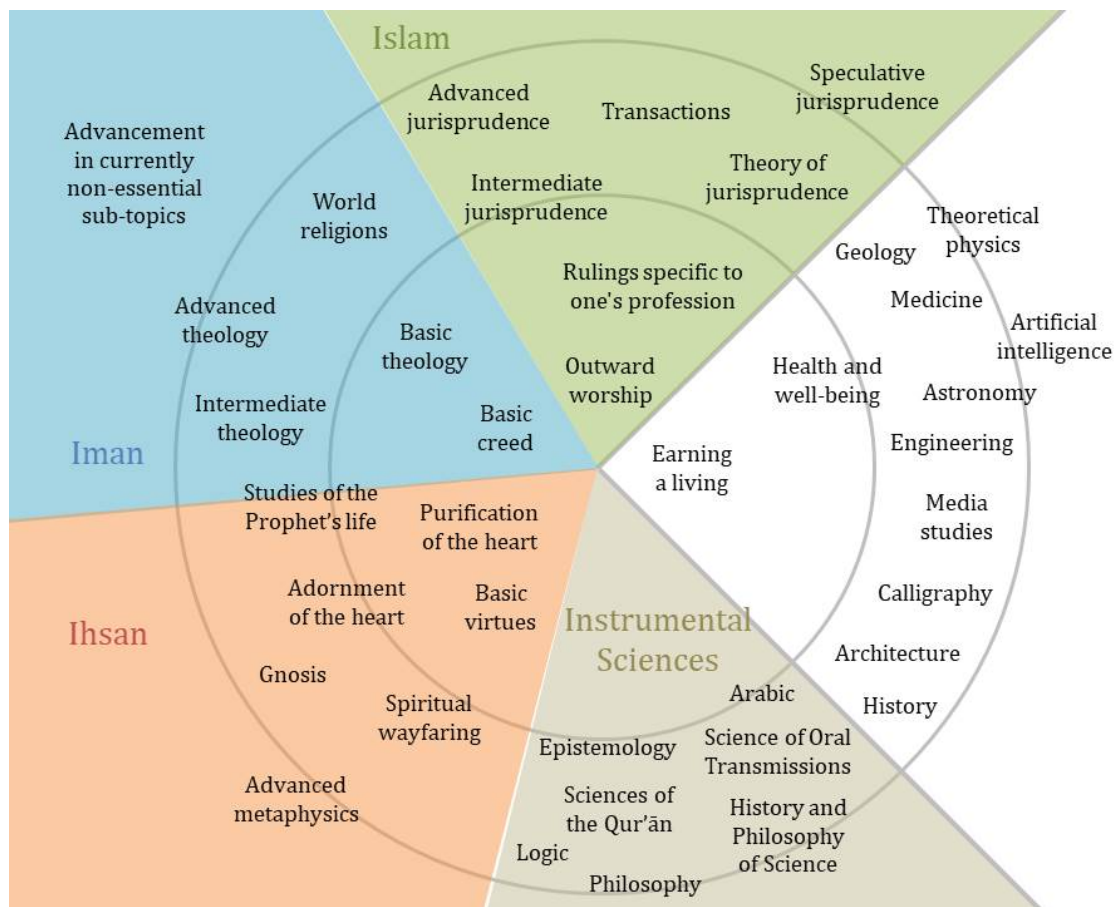
⁸² “Societal obligations are mandatory for the *entire* Muslim population taken as a whole [...]. It is a societal obligation, for example, to ensure that people have basic necessities like food and health care. The principle of societal obligation stipulates that sufficient numbers (*al-kifaya*) of qualified men and women be morally required to carry out societal obligations on the community’s behalf. [...] If the Muslim community neglects its societal obligations, *each* Muslim bears the moral responsibility for their failure as a group. *Each* member of the community is iniquitous and personally risks divine retribution” (Abd-Allah, *idem*). The same principle applies to assessing the number of qualified persons needed to teach the religion in a particular community and extends to every area that constitutes a necessity for minimal spiritual, intellectual, physical, and economic well-being (‘Awamah, *idem*).

⁸³ It is recommended for Muslims to pursue knowledge beyond what is obligatory on the individual and societal levels once these have been covered.



These sciences also correspond to different dimensions of the human being:⁸⁴

⁸⁴ The *iman-islam-ihsan* categorization follows the structure of the hadith of Gabriel (Bukhari, 4777; Muslim 9). “Islam’s sacred geography has three poles, corresponding to our own tripolar but concentric nature (body, mind, spirit; *islam, iman, ihsan*)” (Murad, *Contentions*, p.145). The first component, *islam*, corresponds to outward worship. The second, *iman*, is inward worship. The third, *ihsan*, is the perfection of the outward and inward. The fourth component of the hadith, the signs of the Final Hour, has received the attention of notable scholars due to the drastic societal changes of our age (Mashhur, *Al-nubdhah al-sughra*). A critical reading of the hadith leads us to conclude that the philosophical study of technological advancements, the proliferation of social media, modern and postmodern architecture, the economy, governance, and education—all of these investigations belong, at least partially, to this category of thought. Instrumental sciences are various principles of thought and language that support scholarship in other disciplines.



With that, the following points are key:

1. What is critical to note in this section is the obligation upon every Muslim to know: a) basic creed;⁸⁵ b) the essentials of worship;⁸⁶ c) diseases of the heart;⁸⁷ d) matters of law related to one's personal duties and profession.
2. Once individual and societal obligations are covered, it is recommended to seek further knowledge that enriches one's spiritual, intellectual, and communal life.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ That is, the six pillars of belief (*iman* or *'aqida*) presented in the hadith of Gabriel and what those pillars entail. These are covered in the famous *Creed of Imam al-Tahawi* and other introductory texts. The intellectual foundations of these pillars are studied in works on discursive theology such as *Jawharat al-Tawhid* and other intermediate texts.

⁸⁶ That is, the five pillars of outward worship (*islam*) presented in the hadith of Gabriel and their obligatory preconditions, such as ritual purity before prayer.

⁸⁷ The verses dealing with cleansing the heart from spiritual blemishes and those dealing with refinement (*tazkiya* or *ihsan*) are abundant. The Prophet ﷺ said, "None who has the equivalent of an atom's weight of arrogance enters the Garden" (Muslim, 91).

⁸⁸ Every science proceeds through beginner, intermediate, and advanced stages. The first step is to understand and master the fundamentals (*usul*) before delving into secondary and particular aspects of a science (*furu*). It is best "not to delve into all the various fields of knowledge at once" (Ghazali, p.150).

3. Every science is based on first principles that define its scope and position in the hierarchy of knowledges.⁸⁹ Any given science is therefore limited in the range of questions it can tackle.⁹⁰
4. A discipline must not be judged by its name, but by its outcomes.⁹¹
5. Intellectual variety enables one to think in richer terms and connect disciplines.⁹²

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَأَلْوَانِكُمْ
إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ

*Of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth
and the diversity of your tongues and your colors.
In that are signs for those of knowledge. (30:22)*

⁸⁹ Ghazali, pp.151-154; Lahham, *Metaphysics and Sociology*, p.3.

⁹⁰ This is especially important to note in this age where methodologies from one discipline are used to tackle issues that pertain to another discipline. For instance, the material sciences are useful tools to describe sensible phenomena and assess empirical propositions, but they are epistemically limited in the face of intellectual propositions. Modern science produces possible, particular, and probable knowledge—as opposed to necessary, universal, and certain knowledge—and it therefore cannot replace theology (see [‘The means to attain knowledge’](#)). Anyone who has studied the history and philosophy of science is well-aware of this (Goldman; Kasser; Kuhn; Root-Bernstein; W. Smith; H. Smith; Brown). As for the religious sciences, jurisprudence, for example, cannot entertain the question of cosmic patterns that Muslims are commanded to contemplate (3:190-191), the relationship between the ‘horizons’ and the ‘self’ (4:53), the wisdom behind the circular and linear motions in the pilgrimage, or the wisdom behind fasting. A curious person may well ask about these matters. Unfortunately, the usual responses given—“Because God said so” and “Don’t ask”—reflect a shallow engagement with scripture, arrogance, and an unspoken lack of confidence in the religion (some people believe that if we think too much we might come to the painful realization that this religion is not intellectually satiating). The recurrence of this attitude has slowly driven many young Muslims away from the faith. In reality, classical scholars spoke profoundly about these wisdoms that the Prophet ﷺ taught us (2:151). What we lack is knowledge of our own tradition—what has been referred to as ‘Islamic literacy’—, and this is precisely why Muslims are commanded to “ask the people of remembrance” (16:43 and 21:7) and seek knowledge (96:1 and 20:114). In short, awareness of a particular discipline’s limitations prevents the buildup of internal frustrations that stem from searching in the wrong field and ultimately lead to loss of hope in the religion.

⁹¹ “Matters will be judged by their purposes” (Abd-Allah, *Living Islam with Purpose*).

⁹² First, cross-pollination is an act of *tawhid* in that it unifies scattered elements. Second, it instills within us a deep appreciation for intellectual diversity and conditions us to approach new knowledges with humility and open minds. “The immediate benefit to the student [of pursuing a broad range of subjects] is that he rids himself of antipathy toward one area of study due to his ignorance of it; for people are enemies of that which they are ignorant of. God most high states, *If they do not find good guidance through it, they will say, ‘This is a made-up tale drawn from ancient legend’* (46:11). And a poet said, *Whoever’s mouth has the bitter taste of illness / Will find even sweet water bitter to his taste*” (Ghazali, p.148).

Schools of thought

The Qur'an and hadith are the primary sources of religious knowledge. Scholars do not differ on the authority of the Qur'an and hadith, but on how to understand them. Some Muslims believe that primary sources are self-evident, that they leave no room for multiple interpretations, and that the so-called 'schools' distort the original purity of the religion. Here, too, close contact with the Prophet's teachings ﷺ, Islam's scholarly heritage, and the nature of scholarship in general suggests otherwise.

1. The noble companions differed in their understanding of the Prophet's teachings during his life ﷺ, and he ﷺ allowed it,⁹³ thereby planting the intellectual seeds of the schools of thought we know today.⁹⁴

⁹³ One example is when the companions prepared to travel to Bani Quraydha and the Prophet ﷺ said, "None of you should pray *asr* [the afternoon prayer] except at Bani Quraydha". The time for *asr* entered, so a group of companions decided to pray. Other companions refused because, in their view, the Prophet ﷺ gave an explicit order that prayer should only be offered at Bani Quraydha. The first group responded that the Prophet ﷺ did not mean his words literally, otherwise the prayer would be missed. When this was mentioned to the Prophet ﷺ, he did not rebuke anyone (Bukhari, 946). This authentic hadith shows that there may be more than one correct way to interpret the instructions of the Prophet ﷺ; if multiple interpretations were not possible or not permissible, then he ﷺ would have made it well-known—especially in this event which concerns obligatory worship. Another example is when the companions travelled with the Prophet ﷺ during Ramadan and some companions fasted while others did not, and none reproached the other (Muslim, 1117). These and many other cases establish that there are multiple correct ways to follow the Sunna. 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz said, "It would not please me if the Companions of Muhammad ﷺ had not differed in opinion. If they had not differed in opinion, there would have been no concession" (Bin Bayyah, p.30; Abd-Allah, *Living Islam with Purpose*, p.11).

⁹⁴ The companions of the Prophet ﷺ understood his teachings differently. Not all of them thought alike—recall, for instance, Abu Bakr and 'Umar differing on what to do with prisoners of war (Ibn Hanbal, 3632). These different modes of thinking are inherited by the pupils of the companions (*tabi'in*) who begin to transcribe and codify the knowledge of the companions. It is in that same generation—and in the next—that schools of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) further condense this knowledge and derive legal methodologies to understand the Qur'an and Sunna in a comprehensive and consistent manner. In the discipline of exegesis (*tafseer*), it is when some of the companions teach in formal circles of knowledge that schools begin to take shape (Bakkar, *Safwat al-Bayan*, pp.65-68). Ibn 'Abbas is among the first to state that the Qur'an is polysemic—that it has multiple layers of meaning (*idem*, p.72). This all reinforces the idea that multiple textual outlooks are possible, and that these are rooted in the diverse interpretation methods—implicit in the words and actions—of the noble companions. A school is simply the combined effort of generations of scholars to collect, examine, understand, codify, and facilitate access to this knowledge in a reliable and consistent way.

2. The interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunna is not a simple matter.⁹⁵ Schools are “nothing more than a piece of precision equipment enabling us to see Islam with the maximum clarity possible”.⁹⁶ For instance, each school of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) proposes “how to derive rulings from the primary sources according to a logical and consistent methodology”,⁹⁷ schools of hadith sciences establish rules to discern sound narrations from fabrications;⁹⁸ schools of spiritual wayfaring (*tazkiya*) derive techniques to help seekers attain truthfulness;⁹⁹ and so on.

3. Most scholars throughout history follow a major school of thought.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁵ “[W]hat happens when there are apparent contradictions or ‘annulments’ in the Qur’an, or in the hadith, or between the two? What happens when there are different narrations of a hadith that seem to contradict each other? Are logic and ‘contradiction’ even valid concepts when applied to God’s laws? How are the differences and disagreements between the different Companions of the Prophet ﷺ on various points to be understood? What to do about things not mentioned in either the Qur’an or hadith? How do we know if the things mentioned in the Qur’an or hadith are specific and contextual or general? [...] Which verses of the Qur’an are legislative and which are merely informative? Which are literal and which are allegorical, and how do we know? [...] What happens when words have more than one meaning, and how do we know which meaning (or meanings) is correct? How do we know that we understand Arabic words in the same way they were understood at the time of the revelation of the Qur’an? Of the Prophet’s actions, which things are sunnah (and to be followed), and which are merely circumstantial, or even exclusive to him ﷺ? How ‘certain’ or ‘strong’ does a hadith have to be in order for it to be a point of reference in law? Is one hadith even enough for a law? To whom exactly do laws apply? Who is fit to interpret these laws? Who is responsible for implementing them; how, and under what conditions? [...] Is there a methodology of interpretation inherent in the Qur’an and the hadith? Why are there different interpretations and how should the different interpreters regard each other and each other’s opinions? [and so on]” (Ghazi, pp.120-121). Ordinary Muslims are not required to worry about these complex questions. They are nevertheless important questions that demand consistent and convincing answers. Today’s violent extremism, on the one hand, and disenchantment with Islam, on the other, are natural outcomes of religious illiteracy and not having addressed—or even noticed—these questions. Both of these attitudes are symptoms of societies that undermine inquiry, religious scholarship, and traditional education.

⁹⁶ Murad, *Understanding the Four Madhhabs*. In other words, a school is a methodology of interpreting the Qur’an and Sunna, not an alternative to them.

⁹⁷ Ghazi, p.126; Kandhlawi; ‘Awamah, *Athar al-Hadith*.

⁹⁸ Scholars of hadith do not all define authentic (*sahih*), acceptable (*hasan*), and weak (*da’if*) hadiths in the same way. This is why, upon hearing statements like “This hadith is *sahih*”, a student of knowledge must ask, “According to whose methodology?” Like *fiqh*, the science of hadith enjoys a plurality of schools of thought (Bakkar, *Safwat al-Hadith*; Tahanawi; Turkmani).

⁹⁹ “There are as many paths to God as there are breaths in this world”, the gnostics teach. The schools of spiritual wayfaring emphasize different techniques to truly realize the testimony of faith with the entirety of one’s being.

¹⁰⁰ “The overwhelming majority of the great scholars of the past—certainly well over ninety-nine percent of them—have adhered to a *madhhab*” (Murad, *Understanding the Four Madhhabs*). “For a thousand years, from the beginning of the third century of Islam, until the thirteenth century [...] it is impossible to find a single great and universally-recognized Sunni scholar who did not formally belong to one or other *madhhab*” (Ghazi, p.125). According to the Qur’an and the Prophet ﷺ scholars are the most qualified interpreters of primary sources. Scholars are the pillars of guidance in the absence of direct access to the Prophet ﷺ (see ‘[Scholars](#)’). Is it possible that every single one of them wrong in following a school? And if they—the “people of knowledge”—follow schools, what ought the rest of us do? “In a Western-influenced global culture in which people are urged from early childhood to think for themselves and to challenge

4. For the majority of their history, schools of thought look at each other with respect and humility.¹⁰¹ They learn from each other¹⁰² and borrow from one another's methodologies.
5. As a result of scholarly adherence and mutual respect, major schools benefit from immense scrutiny and critique—and hence constantly review and refine their methodologies.¹⁰³

established authority, it can sometimes be difficult to muster enough humility to recognise one's own limitations. We are all a little like Pharaoh: our egos are by nature resistant to the idea that anyone else might be much more intelligent or learned than ourselves. The belief that ordinary Muslims, even if they know Arabic, are qualified to derive rulings of the *shariah* for themselves, is an example of this egotism running wild. To young people proud of their own judgement, and unfamiliar with the complexity of the sources and the brilliance of authentic scholarship, this can be an effective trap, which ends by luring them away from the orthodox path of Islam and into an unintentional agenda of provoking deep divisions among the Muslims. The fact that all the great scholars of the religion, including the hadith experts, themselves belonged to *madhhabs*, and required their students to belong to *madhhabs*, seems to have been forgotten. Self-esteem has won a major victory here over common sense and Islamic responsibility" (Murad, *idem*).

¹⁰¹ "Imam Malik declined to comply with Caliph Harun al-Rashid's request for him to hang a copy of his *Muwatta'* upon the wall of the Ka'ba and issue a command for everyone to adhere to it, in order to ensure that people did not differ over religious matters. Imam Malik was requested repeatedly to do this but he emphatically refused each time and declared: 'The Companions also differed in secondary issues and all of them were considered to be correct.' Similarly, when Caliph Mansur went for *hajj*, he requested Imam Malik to give him a copy of all his works so that he could have them published and dispatched to all the parts of the Islamic world. Mansur wanted all the Muslims to adhere to a uniform code of Islamic law. Imam Malik replied: 'O leader of the faithful! Do not ever think of doing this. The people have in their possession the hadiths [of God's Messenger ﷺ] and the statements of the Companions, which they are adhering to. Allow them to continue accordingly" (Kandhlawi, p.45). Al-Shafi'i famously stated, "My opinion is correct and could be wrong, and the opinion of others is wrong and could be correct". "Al-Dhahabi counsels his readers as follows: 'Do not think that your *madhhab* is the best, and the one most beloved by Allah, for you have no proof of this. The Imams, may Allah be pleased with them, all follow great goodness; when they are right, they receive two rewards, and when they are wrong, they still receive one reward'" (Murad, *Understand the Four Madhhabs*).

¹⁰² Famous examples of this are: Abu Hanifa's pupil, al-Shaybani, studies with Malik for three years; Ibn Farukh studies with Malik and then Abu Hanifa; al-Shafi'i studies with Malik and al-Shaybani; Ahmad studies with al-Shafi'i and Abu Yusuf, the foremost student of Abu Hanifa; and so on (Tahanawi, pp.342-345; Abu Ghudda, *Sabr al-'ulama'*, pp.52-53).

¹⁰³ Take as an example the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. "The companions of Abu Hanifa who compiled and recorded the works [of this school] were forty. [The Imam] has in his company the likes of Abu Yusuf, Zufar, and Muhammad with their power of analogy [*qiyas*] and inference [*ijtihad*]; the likes of Yahya, Hafs, Hibban, and Mandal, sons of 'Ali with their memorization and understanding of hadiths; Qasim with his understanding of the Arabic language; and Dawud and Fudayl with their abstinence [*zuhd*] and piety [*wara'*]. How is anyone who has such people as his companions and sitting partners able to make a mistake? Even if he was to make one, they would surely guide him to the truth" (names have been shortened) (Mangera, p.31; Tahanawi, pp.330-331). And this is one generation of Hanafi scholars; what if we were to consider every scholar in that school over the last thirteen-hundred years and their scrutiny? The takeaway here is this: a school cannot be reduced to an individual's understanding. Furthermore, the differences of opinion among scholars of the same school strengthen and refine the school (in fact, the school's relied upon position on a particular legal matter may be contrary to the founder's opinion). It is important to recognize that *to follow a major school is to follow a large number of*

6. If every Muslim derived rulings for themselves, religious communal life would be difficult and societal obligations would be neglected.¹⁰⁴ The major

scholars of the highest caliber, not an individual. This holds true for the other major schools of jurisprudence as well as schools in other disciplines.

¹⁰⁴ A school formulates a comprehensive description of a discipline through a meticulous study of the Qur'an and vast body of hadith, and under the scrutiny of numerous scholar-adherents. Without a school, four problems arise. First, every ordinary person would bear the responsibility of deriving rulings for themselves and we would end up with "a billion *madhhabs* in bitter and self-righteous conflict" (Murad, *Understanding the Four Madhhabs*). Second, for obvious reasons, a do-it-yourself school does not benefit from the same scrutiny as the major, 1300 year-old schools. Where is error more likely, in a peer-reviewed methodology or a singular effort? And is it reasonable to suppose that these singular efforts will tolerate each other and coexist in the same way that the major schools have for more than thirteen-hundred years? And what about issues that have been settled by the great scholars over a thousand years ago, will those need to be resurfaced and lived all over; and will this not slow down communal growth as it would necessarily detract from key societal obligations? Third, "If every Muslim was obligated to consult the Holy Qur'an and Sunna on each and every problem arising before him, it would burden him with a responsibility that would be almost impossible to fulfill. This is because the derivation of the rules of *Shari'a* from the Qur'an and Sunna requires a thorough knowledge of the Arabic language and all the relevant sciences—a combination which every person is not known to have" (Mangera, pp.8-9). Fourth, "Clearly it is recommended for the [follower] to learn as much as he or she is able of the formal proofs of the [school]. But it is equally clear that not every Muslim can be a scholar. Scholarship takes a lot of time, and for the *ummah* to function properly most people must have other employment: as accountants, soldiers, butchers, and so forth. As such, they cannot reasonably be expected to become great *ulama* as well, even if we suppose that all of them have the requisite intelligence. The Holy Quran itself states that less well-informed believers should have recourse to qualified experts: *So ask the people of remembrance, if you do not know* (16:43). (According to the *tafsir* experts, the people of remembrance are the *ulama* [scholars].) And in another verse, the Muslims are enjoined to create and maintain a group of specialists who provide authoritative guidance for non-specialists: *A band from each community should stay behind to gain instruction in religion and to warn the people when they return to them, so that they may take heed* (9:122). Given the depth of scholarship needed to understand the revealed texts accurately, and the extreme warnings we have been given against distorting the Revelation, it is obvious that ordinary Muslims are duty bound to follow expert opinion, rather than rely on their own reasoning and limited knowledge" (Murad, *Understanding the Four Madhhabs*). These four dangers—conflict, error, burden on ordinary person, and neglect of essential communal responsibilities—fragment and weaken a community, and eventually lead to its destruction.

schools preserve unity among Muslims¹⁰⁵ and allow the community to fulfill other societal obligations.

7. Schools of thought exist in nearly every discipline, not just the religious sciences.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Some see the plurality of schools as a source of disunity and conflict, and this is a misperception. First, the differences between the major schools are regarding secondary matters of the religion, not fundamental certainties such as the Oneness of God, the prophethood of our noble master Muhammad ﷺ, or belief in the Last Day (Kandhlawi; Bin Bayyah). These secondary matters correspond to texts that are presumptively authoritative in meaning (*dhani al-dalala*) and-or presumptively authentic (*dhani al-thubut*). Second, ‘plurality’ here entails mercy and flexibility within carefully prescribed boundaries. This is expressed in the hadith: “The dissent of my community is a special mercy” (Kandhlawi, p.46; Abd-Allah, *Living Islam with Purpose*, p.11). In addition, “familiarity with competing interpretations and different points of view leads to flexibility and intellectual maturity” (Abd-Allah, *idem*). Rather than hasting to think ill of others for not practicing what one has learned, one remembers the breadth of knowledge and multiple plausible views that exist on said matter. “Respecting dissent means respecting the truth and recognizing that it often takes different paths and results in competing visions of reality” (Abd-Allah, *idem*). Knowledge of dissenting views *prevents* conflict. Third, ‘unity’ should not be confused with ‘uniformity’. The noble companions were united around the Prophet ﷺ, but not in a uniform way. Fourth, a (passionate) scholarly debate between adherents of different schools is not necessarily a sign of disunity or negative rivalry, but of a dynamic scholarly community. Fifth, the era of the noble companions is marked by several initiatives to preserve the religion and unity among Muslims. For example, after the passing of the Prophet ﷺ, the companions agreed to transcribe the Qur’an even though a hadith, by way of implication, negates transcribing the Qur’an (Muslim, 1080). Another example is when ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab instituted the congregational form of praying *taraweeh* even though the Prophet ﷺ had not done this (Bukhari, 2010). This sets a precedent for following generations to adopt adequate means for the preservation of the religion. The major schools—established by the disciples of the companions and their students—gained acceptance and popularity precisely because they brought clarity and unity, in addition to relieving the ordinary person from the burden of deriving rulings for themselves. How else did the schools survive for over 1300 years?

¹⁰⁶ It is natural for schools of thought to exist in any discipline that involves human judgment (Abu Zahra, pp.7-10; Bin Bayyah p.29). There exist schools of thought in physics (Kuhn), software testing (Kaner), philosophy of art (Coomaraswamy, p.113), business—compare, for example, the Harvard Business School and Stanford Graduate School of Business—, flower arranging (Koren, p.7), and tea ceremony (*idem*, p.35). Even ‘mundane’ human activities have been systematized, developed, and filled with thought and refinement. Are religious disciplines not deserving of thought and refinement? Why insist on denying the religion such a natural right? A final analogy might simplify the natural occurrence of schools of thought in Islam. To a Muslim in Calcutta, the *qibla* is West; to a Muslim in Damascus, it is South. On the face of it, the two are praying in different directions, but in reality both face Mecca. This is a useful metaphor for thinking about Islamic scholarship. Every scholar or school is seeking the same end: following the Prophet ﷺ. But they will do this according to ‘where they stand’ in the geography of primary sources and which map they use to navigate the terrain. What is important to recognize here is the possibility of other standpoints. Where human interpretation is possible, plurality is difficult to avoid. Unfortunately, the industrial model of education prevalent in many Muslim-majority countries enforces the idea that one—and *only one*—correct answer exists for every question, in every subject matter. Years of such indoctrination—and lack of training in the liberal arts—cultivates rigidity, uniformity, intolerance for dissenting views, and discomfort with ambiguity; all of this is tantamount to fanaticism. To deny schools of thought is akin to insisting the *qibla* is West no matter where one is in the world.

8. Not following a school is itself a school.¹⁰⁷

Anyone who has studied through one or more of the major schools—*madhhabs* or intellectual frameworks—in the disciplines of *islam* (praxis or law), *iman* (theology or belief), and *ihsan* (refinement) will appreciate the massive scholarly efforts poured into giving Muslims access to multiple, reliable, and refined understandings of the religion. Knowledge of this rich intellectual universe makes one grateful,¹⁰⁸ respectful of dissent, and merciful. ۞

¹⁰⁷ Ghazi, pp.127-132.

¹⁰⁸ “Some scholars state that it is due to Allah’s love for his Messenger ﷺ that He kept alive the various actions and postures he performed throughout his life [even those actions that he only performed once]—in the form of [...] *madhhabs* or schools of jurisprudence” (Mangera, p.xiv).

Custodians and repositories: Where to seek knowledge?

Scholars: the first sources of knowledge

The Qur'an and Sunna exalt the scholar

1. Prophet Moses, peace be upon him, travelled to seek knowledge from a learned person when God could very well have sufficed him with tablets or inspiration.¹⁰⁹ This remarkable event is a constant, emphatic reminder that every Muslim must seek good teachers—even if one must travel.¹¹⁰
2. Believers are instructed to ask specialists about their Creator:¹¹¹

الرَّحْمَنُ قَسَّأَلُ بِهِ خَيْرًا

*The Merciful, so ask
about Him one well-informed. (25:59)*

قَسَّأَلُوا أَهْلَ الذِّكْرِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

*Ask the people of knowledge if
you do not know. (16:43, 21:7)*

3. The words of the Prophet ﷺ are a reminder to every believer: scholars are his rightful heirs and the custodians of knowledge.¹¹² This is merely the

¹⁰⁹ 18:66. The same remark holds true for the education of Prophet Adam, peace be upon him, as described in the hadith (Bukhari, 3327; Muslim, 2841). The point is this: if prophets are required to seek knowledge even though they are infallible, what ought the ordinary person do?

¹¹⁰ The story of Prophet Moses, peace be upon him, precedes that of Dhul-Qarnayn, thus resounding 'Umar's advice, "become learned before you become a ruler" (Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, p.366, n.508; Cook, p.190). In other words, knowledge comes first. 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani spends more than twenty years learning and another ten to master himself; and this is how he changes the course of history—Salahuddin is only one of his disciples (Kilani, pp.166-168). Al-Raghib al-Isfahani and other scholars stipulate self-governance—which is only possible with self-knowledge—as a necessary condition for political leadership (Isfahani, p.36).

¹¹¹ In verse 25:59, God could very well have chosen any other divine name to describe Himself. 'The Merciful' implies a relationship between knowledge and mercy. This relationship also appears in the description of al-Khidr (18:65).

¹¹² "Scholars are truly the inheritors of prophets" (Abu Dawud, 3641; Tirmidhi, 2682). "Verily, God does not take away knowledge by snatching it from people, but He takes it away by taking away [the lives of] the scholars till none of the scholars stays alive. Then the people will take the ignorant as their leaders, who, when asked to deliver [religious] verdicts, will issue them without knowledge. They go astray and lead others astray" (Bukhari, 100; Muslim, 2673).

logical conclusion of the divine instruction that some believers should devote themselves to seeking knowledge and teaching:

وَمَا كَانَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لِيَنفِرُوا كَافَّةً فَلَوْلَا نَفَرَ مِن كُلِّ فِرْقَةٍ مِّنْهُمْ
طَائِفَةٌ لِّيَتَفَقَّهُوا فِي الدِّينِ وَلِيُنذِرُوا قَوْمَهُمْ إِذَا رَجَعُوا إِلَيْهِمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَحْذَرُونَ

*Nor should every one of the believers go [to fight].
Would a group from every expedition remain to study
the religion and admonish their people when they
return to them, that they may be aware. (9:122)*

4. The Qur'an informs us that it only unfolds its meanings to the learned:¹¹³

بَلْ هُوَ آيَاتٌ بَيِّنَاتٌ فِي صُدُورِ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ

*Nay, it is but clear signs in the breasts
of those who have been given knowledge. (29:49)*

5. It is established that several companions continued to seek knowledge after the passing of the Prophet ﷺ.¹¹⁴

6. Only a handful of companions were considered scholars¹¹⁵ and some rebuked people who quoted hadith offhand.¹¹⁶

7. The Qur'an discriminates between the learned and unlearned:

¹¹³ Qushayri, vol.3, p.100. Nothing in God's Book is arbitrary; there must be a link between this verse and the title of the chapter. The spider spins its own web. The self-taught person formulates their own opinions, much like Qarun: "But I was only given this because of knowledge I have" (28:78). The spider's house is the weakest of all (29:41) and so is the self-taught person's conceptual 'house'—neither is supported by a strong foundation. See also: 3:18, 9:11, 10:5, 35:28.

¹¹⁴ The companion Jabir travelled a month-long journey to seek one hadith from another companion (Abu Ghudda, *Sabr al-'ulama'*, p.44). Ibn 'Abbas sat at the doorsteps of senior companions—and waited—in order to learn one hadith (*idem*, p.112). The companion 'Umar famously held gatherings to seek the advice of scholar-companions (*shura*). These are the first recipients of glad tidings (3:110). They travel when they could have simply exchanged letters.

¹¹⁵ There were around 120,000 companions. Only 130 of them ever issued a legal opinion (*fatwa*) on any issue. The majority of those—about 110—issued a legal opinion only once or twice. Only 7 were considered jurists: 'Ali, Ibn Mass'ud, 'Umar, Zayd ibn Thabit, 'A'ysha, Ibn 'Abbas, and Ibn 'Umar (Ibn al-Qayyim, p.18). Even then, the companions specialized in different areas of knowledge and did not utter judgements on certain matters before consulting with one another—think of 'Umar gathering scholars for counsel (*shura*) and Ibn 'Abbas asking Ubayy. A successor narrates: "I have met with 120 of the companions of the Prophet ... [when asked,] none would speak preferring that another companion speak in his stead".

¹¹⁶ Ibn 'Abbas rebuked such a person (Muslim, introduction).

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ
إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

*Nor are they equal the learned
and the unlearned. (39:9)*

It is clear that scholars play a central role in defining correct understanding and sound religious practice.

Who is a scholar?

A scholar (*‘alim*) is “a specialist in a particular branch of study”.¹¹⁷ In addition to this, Muslim scholars have identified two characteristics that make one a reliable source of knowledge in a particular religious discipline: transmission (*sanad*) and authorization (*idhn*).¹¹⁸ Thus, we have:

1. **Knowledge** (*‘ilm*). By definition and as a bare minimum, a scholar must have detailed knowledge of their field¹¹⁹ in addition to having mastered the basics in every major discipline.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ *The Oxford Dictionary*.

¹¹⁸ The Qur’an and hadith do not offer an explicit and formal set of prerequisites to religious scholarship that one can simply point to—as one does, say, with the hadith of Gabriel and the classification of religious sciences. However, it is possible to infer some ‘timeless’ characteristics. The three chosen in this paper are inspired by Abdal Hakim Murad (*Contentions*, p.33) because they are “faithful to the continuity of the Islamic story” (*idem*). Depending on one’s context, additional qualifications may be required.

¹¹⁹ To have detailed knowledge does not necessitate knowing everything in a discipline. But it does entail intimate familiarity with the discipline’s history, schools of thought, methodologies, major contributing scholars, relied upon works, case studies, points of consensus, differences of opinion, and so on. For example, in jurisprudence, “scholars regard knowledge concerning differences of opinion to be essential for the jurist in order to open his heart and expand his horizons. Qatadah said, ‘The one who is not knowledgeable about differences of opinion has not had a whiff of Islamic legal reasoning.’ Hisham [...] said, ‘One who is not knowledgeable of the differences of opinion among the jurists is not a jurist.’ ‘Ata’ said, ‘It is not befitting for anyone to issue verdicts to people unless he is knowledgeable concerning differences of opinion among people.’ Yahya ibn Salam said, ‘It is not competent for someone who is not knowledgeable of the differences of opinion to issue verdicts, and it is not permissible for someone not knowledgeable of the variant views on a matter to even say, ‘Such and such is preferable to me’” (Bin Bayyah, p.30).

¹²⁰ The major disciplines are: sciences of Arabic language (*‘ulum al-lughah*), logic (*mantiq*), rhetoric (*balagha*), basic and discursive theology (*aqida*), refinement (*tazkiya*), Qur’anic sciences (*‘ulum al-Qur’an*), the sciences of transmission (*‘ulum al-hadith*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and theory of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*). Some add: psychology (*‘ilm al-nafs*), the science of transitions and social change, and, in this particular day and age, the history and philosophy of science and technology.

2. **Transmission** (*sanad*). Knowledge must be acquired from living scholars whose spiritual and intellectual lineage begins with the Prophet ﷺ.¹²¹
3. **Authorization** (*idhn*). Permission from recognized teachers is necessary in order to dissipate knowledge.¹²²

It is worth noting that:

- **‘Authorship’ is not the same as ‘authority’**. Mere publication does not make one a scholar, regardless of the usefulness or popularity of the published work.
- **Popularity is not proof of scholarship**. View counts and popularity on social media do not entail scholarship.¹²³
- **Scholars are not equal**. The word ‘scholar’ does not make its bearer an authority in all matters.¹²⁴ Furthermore, a scholar’s education, cultural milieu, geographic context, and gender inform their methodologies and

¹²¹ Transmission—or lineage—entails learning in the presence of a scholar who is connected to the noble companions of the Prophet ﷺ through an unbroken chain of qualified teachers. This is the way of the companions, their pupils, and the majority of scholars since (‘Awamah, *Ma’alim irshadiyah*, pp.164-196). Ibn al-Mubarak said: “The chain of transmission (*isnad*) is from the religion, and without it anyone would have said anything” (Muslim, introduction; Abu Ghudda, *Isnad*). “Beware of the man who, with no access to the pure-hearted, attempts to interpret the Sunna on his own, or with a ‘reading group’! The Muslim is called to submit to God by submitting to the Prophetic example. He has no other way. His emulation links him to the Man of Praise either through his own ego and mind, or through a line of sages. He has no other way. When the mediator is the ego, his Islam will show his Prophet to the world, and the world will see only that Muslim’s ego, rage, sloth, desire, or envy. That is the Prophet shown by the False Salafi, and he drives the world away from monotheism and God’s law. But when the emulation is transmitted through a golden chain of pure hearts, the Prophetic harmony of majesty and beauty will be disclosed” (Murad, *Contentions*, pp.153-154). Many scholars of *usul* impose the criteria of ‘prolonged companionship’ as a condition for reliable knowledge transmission (Bakkar, *Safwat al-Hadith*, p.73; Turkmani, p.237). In other words, a formal student who has spent 10 years with a teacher is likely to be a better conveyor of knowledge on behalf of that teacher than a student who spent 3 months with the same teacher—if one puts other considerations aside. Similarly, one who has studied with ten scholars in a particular discipline is likely more knowledgeable than a student with just one formal teacher—if we assume equality in intelligence and other respects.

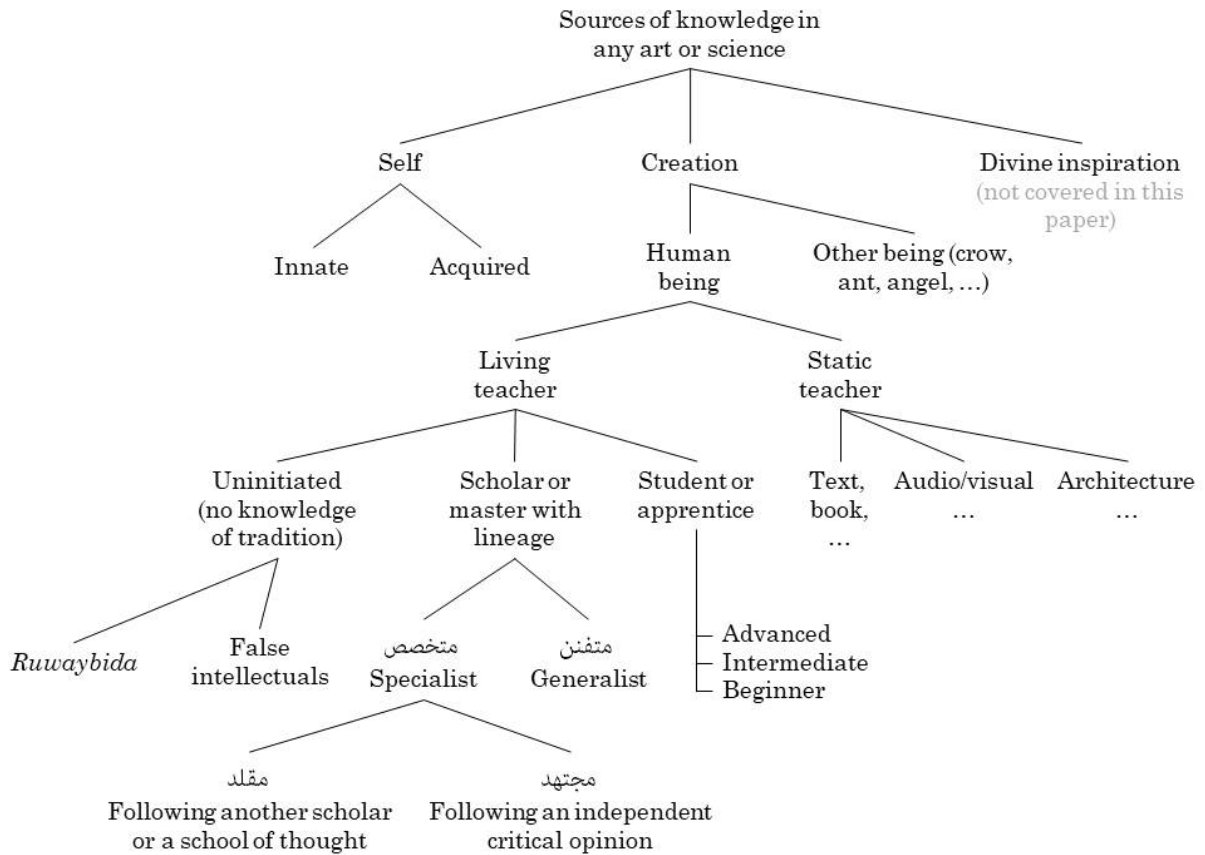
¹²² A student’s training may not be complete despite being on the path of seeking knowledge. Authorization (*idhn*) marks the completion of a learning phase and permission to disseminate knowledge. It is best granted by teachers aware of the student’s knowledge and maturity.

¹²³ A preacher or ‘televangelist’ must never be taken as the be-all and end-all of knowledge. It is possible to benefit from teachers who are not recognized scholars, but one must be careful who they are learning from. Ibn Sirin said, “This knowledge is religion, so be mindful who you take your religion from” (Muslim, introduction).

¹²⁴ “We raise in ranks whom We please. Over every person of knowledge there is one more knowing” (12:76). “God raises in ranks those of you who believe, and those who have knowledge” (58:11). It is important to recognize that a scholar may be knowledgeable in one field but not in another. Another scholar may be knowledgeable in more than one domain (E. Carr). Another may be the unrivaled master of a discipline but not a good teacher. These nuances are important.

opinions.¹²⁵ This is why learning from different teachers is highly recommended.

One way to visualize these considerations is by outlining a simplified ‘map’ of scholarship:



Companionship

1. The Qur’an emphasizes good company:¹²⁶

وَأَصْبِرْ نَفْسَكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُمْ بِالْغَدَاةِ وَالْعَشِيِّ
يُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَهُ ۗ وَلَا تَعْدُ عَيْنَاكَ عَنْهُمْ

And restrain thyself with those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, desiring His countenance, and let not thine eyes turn away from them. (18:28)

¹²⁵ This can be misinterpreted. A learned person may not be completely aware of their biases and unspoken assumptions. But this does not diminish from their knowledge and status, nor does it make their conclusions incorrect. Nevertheless, it teaches seekers of knowledge to be mindful of a scholar’s background and context when studying with them or reading their work.

¹²⁶ It is through the paradigm of this verse that we read another: “Oh you who believe! Be mindful of God and be with the truthful” (9:119).

قَالَ لَهُ مُوسَى هَلْ أَتَّبِعُكَ عَلَىٰ أَنْ تُعَلِّمَ مِنِّي مِمَّا عَلَّمْتَ رُشْدًا

*Moses said unto him, ‘Shall I follow thee,
that thou mightest teach me some of that which
thou hast been taught of sound judgement?’ (18:66)*

2. There is blessing in the company of a scholar because of their spiritual lineage.¹²⁷
3. Theoretical knowledge: To be in the company of a scholar is to be with a walking library¹²⁸ and a walking scholarly gathering.¹²⁹
4. Practical religious knowledge—such as etiquette¹³⁰ and wisdom¹³¹—is best understood in observing a master in practice.¹³²
5. “It is the traditional and still unbeatable way of best acquiring knowledge: learn from those who have pushed the boundaries of study and practice,

¹²⁷ “A time will come upon humanity when a group of people will go out in battle. It will be said to them, ‘Is there among you anyone who kept the company of the Messenger of God ﷺ?’ They will respond, ‘Yes!’ and they will be granted victory. Subsequently, a latter group of people will go out in battle. It will be said to them, ‘Is there among you anyone who kept the company of the Companions of the Messenger ﷺ?’ They will respond, ‘Yes!’ and they will be granted victory. Then, yet a latter group of people will go out in battle. It will be said to them, ‘Is there among you anyone who kept the company of the companions of the Companions of the Messenger ﷺ?’ They will respond, ‘Yes!’ and they will be granted victory” (Bukhari, 3594; Muslim, 2532). This authentic hadith constitutes strong evidence for the concept of *sanad*.

¹²⁸ Reading is an important aspect of mastering discursive knowledge (see ‘[Books](#)’). But reading takes time and it is not always obvious which books deserve one’s attention or in what order to read them. It may take a reader years to reach key information in a particular field of study. A living scholar who trod the path can condense the gist of a particular investigation in a matter of days or minutes, recommend a list of readings suitable to the student’s level and needs, suggest a course of study, point to reliable authors, examine the student’s understanding, and clarify obscure aspects of a discipline as well as apparent contradictions—or mistakes—found in books.

¹²⁹ A scholar will have benefitted from the wisdom of their teachers and an unbroken chain of knowledge transmission. To a certain extent, a scholar is the meeting point of their teachers—a congregation of knowledges. To learn from a scholar is to partake in their intellectual and spiritual inheritance.

¹³⁰ To learn etiquette (*adab*) is to learn the art of refinement in the intricacies of human conduct. A book or lecture may inspire good conduct, but neither can express it to the fullest. It takes a ‘high resolution’ medium to ‘fill in the gaps’ and convey the level of detail that *ihsan*—or moment-to-moment worship—entails. Companionship is more immediate, holistic, granular, and effective than any other medium (Ahmed, pp.78-82; ‘Awamah, *Ma’alim irshadiyah*, p.210).

¹³¹ Wisdom is the art of applying knowledge within a particular context and is only partially conveyed through a book (Isfahani, pp.104-105). The Qur’an describes wisdom as an “abundant good” (2:269) and clearly distinguishes it from ‘simple’ knowledge (2:129, 2:151, 3:48, 3:81, 3:164, and more). One could say wisdom is the Sunna (‘Awamah, *Ma’alim irshadiyah*, p.11).

¹³² What is true in the martial arts and medical practice is true in the spiritual arts and religious practice.

then stand on their shoulders and see further.”¹³³ Seeking knowledge from living masters is the norm—and best practice—in nearly every discipline:

¹³³ Lewis Blackwell wrote this in the context of photography. He continues: “[T]he most important photographic knowledge is not in technical manuals, but in better understanding the motives and the messages that rest within the creators of the most powerful images” (Blackwell, p.3).

¹³⁴ In the fine arts—where the role of the teacher may not seem so central to modern tastes—apprenticeship occupies an important place in a student’s journey. The architect Abdel-Wahed El-Wakil describes the transformative impact his teacher Hassan Fathy had on him (Wakil). Frank Lloyd Wright wrote letters to his apprentices. “This was the classical technique for learning martial arts, painting, sculpture, woodworking, masonry, and violin making—arts and crafts traditions honored and practiced throughout the world for centuries. In this context learning occurred not through the study of texts so much as it was directly transferred from the embodied knowledge of the master to the receptive, experiential ground of the student” (Robinson and Pallasmaa, p.2). The calligrapher Soraya Syed asked her teacher Hasan Çelebi: “What makes the relationship between master and student so special?” He responded: “A student may be talented, but he will be unable to reach the highest levels without a teacher. Our system of measurement in Islamic Calligraphy is so detailed; it’s microscopic. [To a trained eye] a big coarse detail may be only as big as the leg of a mosquito—but the tiny but crucial area, if it deviates from the proper form even as much as the size of a flea’s liver, it will be ugly. Someone who is talented will be able to copy a calligraphic composition just by looking at it. But when he misses that detail small as a flea’s liver, then the beauty of the writing is lost. The teacher is there to point out such minute, but necessary details” (Syed). Similar points can be concluded if one listens carefully to Elinor Aishah Holland (Zaytuna lecture). Describing traditional learning, Scott Belsky writes, “A quality education meant finding an expert to take you under his or her wing. Whether you wanted to be a blacksmith or a shoemaker, the ultimate break was ultimately a relationship” (Belsky). Paul Arden encourages young artists and creative directors to seek the best and work with them (Arden, p.86). The artist and aesthetics thinker Leonard Koren writes, “Essential knowledge, in Zen doctrine, can be transmitted only from mind to mind, not through the written or spoken word” (Koren, p.16). The Monocle includes articles about apprenticeship in the education section of its manifesto on how to live better (2013).

¹³⁵ Johannes Kepler was the assistant of Tycho Brahe. Niels Bohr was the student of Ernest Rutherford who was the student of JJ Thomson. William James was profoundly inspired by his mentor (Popova). Einstein’s genius was sparked and nurtured by a teacher who guided his readings and discussed the works of various philosophers with him from a very young age: “Einstein’s greatest intellectual stimulation came from a poor medical student who used to dine with his family once a week” (Isaacson, *Einstein*, pp.18-20).

¹³⁶ Ken Robinson includes a whole chapter about the benefits of good mentorship in his book *The Element* (pp.169-186) and considers teachers central to a person’s learning (*Teachers are like gardeners; The role of the teacher*). “There are some skills you can learn on your own, and some you can try to learn, but if you intend to take the journey of mastery, the best thing you can do is to arrange for first-rate instruction. [...] The search for good instruction starts with a look at credentials and lineage. Who was your teacher’s teacher? Who was that teacher’s teacher? And so on...” (Leonard, pp.55-56). The journalist Jane Jacobs remarked, “Writing, printing, and the Internet give a false sense of security about the permanence of culture. Most of the million details of a complex, living culture are transmitted neither in writing nor pictorially. Instead, cultures live through word of mouth and example. That is why we have cooking classes and cooking demonstrations, as well as cookbooks. That is why we have apprenticeships, internships, student tours, and on-the-job training as well as manuals and textbooks. Every culture takes pains to educate its young so that they, in their turn, can practice and transmit it completely. Educators and mentors [...] are most effective [when they] serve as examples” (Jacobs, pp.4-6). “[L]earning is a social endeavour that is best supported by more knowledgeable others. [T]here are many things that individuals are highly unlikely to discover or explore for themselves—not least because learners ‘can’t know what they don’t know’. [T]he support of mediating experts (such as teachers, mentors, coaches and other ‘educators’) remains a crucial element in stimulating people to engage with [...] education” (Selwyn, p.73). Martha C. Nussbaum considers an interactive engagement with the humanities central to a healthy democratic life: “Good humanities teaching needs small classes, participatory classroom discussion, and copious feedback on frequent writing assignments. [...] And although MOOCs may have supplementary value, particularly for students who lack direct access to a good university, they are no replacement for live, face-to-face interaction” (Nussbaum, p.xx). Finally, many popular films about education focus on the

sports,¹³⁸ medicine,¹³⁹ and so on.

Companionship (*suhba*) is possibly the most distinctive characteristic of traditional education¹⁴⁰ because it enables a holistic and practical understanding of the religion with all its subtleties. The fact that contemporary equivalents to companionship exist (apprenticeship, internship, mentorship, and ‘shadowing’) only accentuates the importance and effectiveness of this form of learning.

Finding the right teacher

Among the most important characteristics of a good teacher are:

1. **Credentials.**¹⁴¹ A teacher need not always be an accomplished scholar,¹⁴² but is certainly expected to have adequate knowledge, reliable lineage (*sanad*), and permission to speak about the matter at hand.¹⁴³

master-disciple or teacher-student relationship. Notable—and often instructive—examples of this are: *Batman Begins*, *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, *Dead Poets Society*, *Mona Lisa Smile*, *Star Wars*, *The Karate Kid*, and *The King’s Speech*.

¹³⁷ “Before it is too late you must learn the lessons and follow the path established by the greatest Masters, past and present” (Greene, p.36). Steve Jobs had a mentor, Mike Markkula, who “was as much a father-son relationship Steven ever had. [Steve said:] ‘Mike really took me under his wing’” (Isaacson, *Steve Jobs*, p.78).

¹³⁸ Coaches define and regulate an athlete’s training cycles, practices, and diets; provide mental support; and ensure athletes do not injure themselves.

¹³⁹ Medical students must go through residency programs and observe doctors at work before they are allowed to practice.

¹⁴⁰ “One of the most important of the special distinctions of the Muhammedan community is *isnad* [scholarly or oral lineage] in the transmission of the pure Sacred Law and its sciences from the earlier to the later generations” (Abu Ghudda, *Isnad*, p.10).

¹⁴¹ “*Ask the people of knowledge if you do not know*” (16:43, 21:7). It is worth restating that not every person of knowledge is knowledgeable in every discipline. For instance, one should not expect a jurist to answer an intricate theological question adequately. Nor is a theologian required to know the spectrum of opinions that exist on a particular scholarly investigation in jurisprudence. It is the learner’s responsibility to seek knowledge from the appropriate scholar.

¹⁴² A scholar may not be required for every question: just as a doctor may allow their student to handle simple medical cases with minimal or no supervision, a seeker of knowledge, too, may be allowed to teach specific disciplines to a beginner or intermediate audience. Practically speaking, it may not always be possible to ask a scholar; and, in this case, a qualified, authorized student is a viable alternative.

¹⁴³ To reiterate, lineage (*sanad*) pertains to knowledge transmission through a chain of scholars or sages. To have reliable lineage is to have a sufficient number of trustworthy, recognized teachers. It is worth noting that lineage plays an important role outside religious knowledge. An educator and martial arts instructor describes the process of looking for a teacher as follows: “The search for good instruction starts with a look at credentials and lineage. Who was your teacher’s teacher? Who was that teacher’s teacher? And so on...” (George, p.56). Some of our teachers were not allowed to give the call to prayer (*adhan*) or even play the *daf* (frame drum) without permission (*idhn*). These seemingly simple activities affect many passengers and listeners—their moods and spiritual states—and it is their right to enjoy a ‘safe’ acoustic experience. What, then, of manifestly consequential matters such as theology and practice?

2. **Etiquette and mercy.** Religious knowledge is inseparable from moral refinement and beautiful conduct.¹⁴⁴ A teacher must inspire compassion, gentleness, and genuine concern for God’s creation.¹⁴⁵
3. **Love of the Prophet ﷺ.** Etiquette and mercy only truly blossom in a heart washed by the fragrance of God’s mercy¹⁴⁶ to existence—“*We have only sent you as mercy to the worlds*” (21:107). A teacher must inspire reverence, emulation, and love of the Prophet ﷺ.¹⁴⁷
4. **Inspiring students.** To know a teacher, look at the quality of his or her longtime students.¹⁴⁸

That said, it is critical for a seeker of knowledge to remember the following:

- **Be selective.** Observe a teacher carefully—if possible, attend a few of their lessons—before deciding to study with them.¹⁴⁹
- **Be patient.** Once you have chosen a teacher, it is not appropriate to question them on every matter.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁴ Ibn Mas‘ud said, “Knowledge is not a question of the quantity of narrations [one cites], it is light cast into the heart”, and some said it is “experiencing the awe of God’s presence” (Ghazali, p.142). Avoid a teacher who does not inspire deep reverence, humility, refinement in speech and conduct, and respect for other schools of thought and the righteous predecessors. Mercy precedes knowledge in the description of al-Khidr (18:65) and in *al-Rahman* (55:1-2); where mercy is, true knowledge is found.

¹⁴⁵ Contrariwise, avoid a teacher who instigates division, hatred, arrogance, and self-righteousness, or uses vulgar terms to convey ideas, or is overly concerned with petty matters. “Do not keep company with anyone whose state does not inspire you and whose speech does not lead you to God” (Ibn ‘Ata’Allah, p.211).

¹⁴⁶ The nuances of the word *rahma* are only partially captured by its common English translations—mercy, compassion, benevolence, and so on. The scholars of innersight prefer ‘love’. Indeed, the Prophet ﷺ is the perfect expression of divine love. Without him ﷺ we would not know the art of being servants of God, beauty, refinement, the delicacies of contemplation, the subtle meanings hidden in the fabric of existence, and plenty of riches. If access to so much knowledge is not a sign of love, what is?

¹⁴⁷ This implies choosing teachers who remind you of the Prophet ﷺ—of his beauty and refinement: “*You are truly of a sublime character*” (68:4).

¹⁴⁸ “To see the teacher clearly, look at the students. They are his work of art” (George, p.57). The greatness of the noble companions tells us about the greatness of their teacher, our beloved Prophet ﷺ. Senior students are more reliable gauges than recent students. Observe them in action: Are they polite? Are they patient? Do they serve their communities? Do they respect elders and are they patient with children? Are they gentle with newcomers? Are they intelligent? Do you want to be ‘like them’? What do they say about their teacher? What do they say about other teachers?

¹⁴⁹ Salman the Persian watched the Prophet ﷺ closely before embracing Islam.

¹⁵⁰ “*If you follow me, do not ask me about anything until I make mention of it*” (18:70). “You’ve already checked out your instructor. Now’s the time for a certain suspension of disbelief” (George, p.81). Skepticism should take place *before* accepting instruction. The careful consideration of the teacher’s qualifications and qualities is the first step, not an afterthought. Once this has been established it is not reasonable to act as if one is dealing with an equal. For instance, if the

- **Do your part.** A teacher’s job is to show you the way, not walk on your behalf. A learner cannot advance unless they put in the work.
- **Diversify your teachers.**¹⁵¹ If you limit yourself to one teacher, you may become rigid and unaware of other plausible perspectives.¹⁵² A student of knowledge should celebrate intellectual pluralism.
- **Put your trust in God.** Know that God is your Ultimate Teacher and Caretaker; He will not forsake you. If you exert your utmost and are still not able to find a teacher, keep searching.

Books: the essential supplements

اقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ

Read in the Name of your Lord Who created. (96:1)

Reading is an introspective activity that enables one to assimilate another’s experience in order to think and act better.¹⁵³ It is an indispensable means to

teacher acts contrary to a student’s preference, the student must remember that the teacher has more knowledge (Awamah, *Ma’alim irshadiyah*, p.201; Yusuf and Shakir, p.70). Learning can only take place if the student trusts the teacher. At the same time, no scholar is infallible. A teacher will likely make mistakes. A good teacher is sincere enough to admit their mistakes.

¹⁵¹ Awamah, *Ma’alim irshadiyah*, p.216.

¹⁵² In the early stages of learning, many scholars recommend sticking to one teacher—or school of thought—for every discipline. Nevertheless, a student of knowledge must learn to respect dissent and postpone judgement when they see fellow Muslims practicing the religion differently. Intellectual breadth is best taught through the consideration of various modes of thinking and *as taught by their adherents*—not in the words of those who hold opposing views. Not every scholar can fairly describe a school of thought they disagree with.

¹⁵³ “The fundamental human problems remain the same in all ages. [...] We may succeed in accelerating the motions of life, but we cannot seem to change the routes that are available to its ends” (Adler, pp.332-333). “Those who can read well can think critically. To this extent, they have become free minds. If they have read the great books—and I mean *really* read them—they will have the freedom to move anywhere in the human world. Only they can fully lead the life of reason who, though living in a time and place, are yet not wholly of it” (*idem*, p.353). “The arts of reading and writing, listening and speaking, are the arts which make it possible for us to think freely, because they discipline the mind. *They are the liberating arts*. The discipline they accomplish frees us from the vagaries of unfounded opinion and the strictures of local prejudice. They free our minds from every domination except the authority of reason itself. A free man recognizes no other authority. Those who ask to be free from all authority—from reason itself—are false liberals. As Milton said, ‘license they mean, when they cry liberty.’ [...] By false liberalism, I mean the sort which confuses authority with tyranny and discipline with regimentation. It exists wherever men think everything is just a matter of opinion. That is a suicidal doctrine. It ultimately reduces itself to the position that only might makes right” (*idem*, p.366). “[C]itizens must be able to think for themselves. To do this, they must first be able to think, and have a body of ideas to think with. They must be able to communicate clearly with one another and receive communications of all sorts critically. It is for such ends that skill in reading

seeking knowledge. Unfortunately, many of us neither read a lot nor read well.¹⁵⁴ It is hard to come by a serious student of knowledge who is not a voracious reader. That said, the matter of reading comes with several key considerations:

- Reading is more likely to benefit a student who has completed the basic disciplines, learned the art of reading classical texts, and has access to a qualified supervisor.
- Reading and understanding are two different things. The act of deciphering letters may be carried out by anyone with basic literacy. But it takes a subject-matter expert to show a student how to derive and connect meanings, how to read between the lines and unpack hidden implications, where to exercise caution, when to critique the text, and how to contextualize the content.¹⁵⁵
- Student-teacher etiquette—such as looking for credentials and diversifying one’s intake—apply in the reader-author sphere.¹⁵⁶

and reading the great books are obviously only means” (*idem*). A true reader’s mind is ample, furnished with critical thinking tools, rich vocabulary, and valuable ideas.

¹⁵⁴ “When we speak of someone as ‘well read,’ [...] we use that phrase to mean the quantity rather than the quality of reading. A person who has read widely but not well deserves to be pitied rather than praised, for so much effort has been misguided and profitless. The great writers have always been great readers, but that does not mean that they read all the books which, in their day, were listed as the great and indispensable ones. In many cases, they read fewer books than are now required in some of our better colleges, but what they did read, they read well. Because they had mastered these books, they became peers with their authors. They were entitled to become authorities in their own right. In the natural course of events, a good student frequently becomes a teacher, and so, too, a good reader becomes an author” (Adler, p.264).

¹⁵⁵ Some classical Muslim scholars considered the art of reading and understanding text a discipline of its own (Azhari, p.9). A range of skills and considerations is required to ensure proper understanding of a text, among them: good command of language and the author’s style, knowledge of the author’s historic context, knowledge of the author’s assumptions about the reader, other texts published by the author, dominant schools of thought and cognitive frames at the time of writing, logic, rhetoric, history, and so on (Azhari, p.109; Sayers; Yusuf, *Commentary on How to Read a Book*). Every book comes with its own set of considerations. For instance, when reading a verse of the Qur’an, one must ask: What does this verse mean? Why is this word used and not another? Is the word used in another verse, and in what way? When was the verse revealed, and under what circumstances? Is it general or specific? Is it absolute or conditional? What do the commentators say about it? Are their commentaries based on authentic hadith, logical arguments, insight, or mere speculation? How is the verse relevant to me? Many Muslims think that the Qur’an is self-evident and content themselves with a simplistic reading. Rarely, if ever, pause to question their understanding.

¹⁵⁶ The criteria for finding a good teacher and a good author are almost identical, with minor adjustments. For example, the advice about speaking to students translates to asking specialists or well-read seekers of knowledge what they think about an author. Doing one’s part translates to paying attention to the technical terms and flow of ideas in a book, taking notes, reviewing, and then producing a summary or synthesis of the work. Diversifying one’s teachers translates to reading about the same topic from the point of view of authors who adhere to different schools of thought or different opinions within the same school.

- Readers tend to be familiar with contemporary publications, but not with classical texts. Muslims must familiarize themselves with their intellectual heritage.¹⁵⁷
- Only a small amount of Islamic knowledge has been published in books.¹⁵⁸
- A text is generally less effective than a teacher and may sometimes be misleading, if not dangerous.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ “We suffer today not only from political nationalism but cultural provincialism. We have developed the cult of the present moment. We read only current books for the most part, if we read any at all. [O]ur failure to read the great books isolates us from the world of man, just as much as unqualified allegiance to the swastika makes one a German first, and a man later—if ever” (Adler, p.353). A recurring theme—especially online—is the resurfacing of ancient controversies that have long been resolved and shelved by the great intellectuals of the past. They may not even be controversies, but only a useful play on ideas that confuses novice readers. This tends to cause one wave of panic after another. First of all, it is good to remember that Islam is an old religion that has enjoyed the scrutiny of thousands of critical thinkers. It is unreasonable to assume that every single one of them failed to notice the latest controversy and that we are the first Muslims to bear the burden of responding on behalf of the religion. Secondly, Islam stresses knowledge precisely because it equips a person with the critical thinking skills needed to examine these so-called controversies intelligently and address them in an elegant manner. This is why seeking knowledge is so important: scholars treat those ‘controversies’ as case studies and proceed to debunk them in a calm and systematic way. The digital world prevents users from enjoying a ‘stable’ period in which they can ‘finally’ learn their tradition or allow previous ‘lessons learned’ to effectively sink in and come handy at the next urgency (see [‘Digital devices’](#)). Muslims must therefore unplug—silence the noise—as long as it takes to study and develop a conceptual framework that enables them to be unperturbed by trivial matters.

¹⁵⁸ First, the nature of spiritual knowledge makes it difficult to adequately describe entirely and exclusively in words. This is why God sends prophets, not just holy books (see [‘Companionship’](#)). Second, only a small percentage of classical manuscripts have been printed (Murad, *Riding the Tiger of Modernity*).

¹⁵⁹ “We asked Ibn al-Mubarak, ‘We find counsels written in books. Can we read them?’ He answered, ‘No problem. Even if you find a counsel written on a wall, you can read it and take counsel from it.’ Someone said, ‘What about jurisprudence?’ He answered, ‘It should only be taken by direct transmission’” (Abu Ghudda, *Isnad*, p.47). A qualified teacher is able to customize knowledge in a way that a book cannot possibly do, in a manner that responds to the student’s personal questions and needs, and at a pace that suits the student’s level. A text does not always come with context or disclaimers: irrelevant content may be presented as the be-all and end-all of Islam and waste a reader’s time, while knowledge of great significance may be misunderstood or casually skimmed through. Moreover, classical texts in different sciences use a special jargon that invariably confuses beginner students. In addition, even recently revised and published texts contain mistakes and misprints—and these can cause bloodshed, such as in the case of the ‘Mardin Fatwa’ (Jifri). Furthermore, by the time a reader has been exposed to all the relevant books in a subject-matter, he or she will have mislead themselves—and others—a number of times. All this time wasted ‘bumping into walls’ could have been circumvented. This problem is further accentuated online. Consider how masses of users now discuss the religion on social networking sites. Information is shared and consumed by well-intentioned persons who have no points of reference or conceptual frameworks that allow them to discriminate the content they receive. This can be especially detrimental to soul-searchers who are filled with questions and confusions as is. Ibn Wahb said, “Had it not been for Malik and Layth, I would have perished. I thought I had to apply everything transmitted from the Prophet ﷺ.” This all explains the oft-repeated maxim, “knowledge is in the hearts, not in the text” (*al-‘ilmu fil-sudur la fil-suttur*), which is simply an emphatic commentary on the aforementioned verses (29:49, 16:43, 21:7). God has never sent a book without a prophet, yet He has sent many prophets without books.

Environments: the ‘invisible’ repositories of knowledge

The topic of learning has never been treated as an isolated intellectual activity by classical scholars. The conceptual realm was never divorced from the physical. Contemporary thinkers also recognize that our physical and digital contexts are not neutral towards us—that they affect us.

Embodiment

An education is incomplete if it does not enable its beneficiaries to acquire adequate knowledge of themselves. To do this, it must consider, discipline, and nurture the totality of the human being: body, mind, and soul.

Islam being the religion of *tawhid*—Oneness—is holistic in nature. Not only does the Qur’an highlight a correspondence between bodily discipline and spiritual growth,¹⁶⁰ but the Prophet ﷺ explicitly teaches us to be aware of our bodies: “Your body has a right over you.”¹⁶¹

¹⁶⁰ “Tell the believers to lower their gazes, that is better for them” (24:30) suggests a link between sight and inner peace. Furthermore, the journey of Prophet Moses and al-Khidr, peace be upon them, draws a link between traveling and learning—the physical and intellectual. Fasting helps one become more mindful (2:183). The revelation of the Qur’an begins with a tight embrace of the Prophet ﷺ. The same chapter ends with a prostration (96:19). Timothy Winter notes that ablutions and fasting exist “to emphasize our embodiedness”. He writes, “Without ablution, and without the fast, we are incompletely aware of our bodies, and for this reason the balance between body and soul eludes us. Ablutions remind us of our bodies’ extent in space; fasting reminds us of their extent in time” (Murad, *Contentions*, p.129). He also notes that the prayer postures “recall the human cycle between embryo and Khalifa, *qabd* and *bast*” (*idem*, p.128). The basic version of this understanding is perennial. The thinker Leonard Koren said, “the body, not language, is the repository of knowledge and technique” (Koren, p.81). Contemporary research shows that we learn with our bodies, not just with our minds by means of abstracted information. For instance, one study shows that “75% of learning occurs through visual stimulus, while 13% occurs through hearing and touching. Smell and taste counts for 12%” (*The Third Teacher*, p.165)—more reason to learn in the presence of refined teachers. The notable psychologist Daniel Kahneman writes, “cognition is embodied; you think with your body, not only with your brain” (Kahneman, p.51). Some studies even show that our eyes “emulate the actual motor expression the artist used when creating the artwork” (Robinson and Pallasmaa, p.172). In an authentic spiritual worldview, body (outward) and soul (inward) are interrelated (Ahmed, pp.30-31; Badawi p.11).

¹⁶¹ Bukhari, 1975.

The body is not merely a vehicle to transport the metabody. It is a window to it. How we sit,¹⁶² eat,¹⁶³ sleep, walk, speak,¹⁶⁴ and direct our gaze,¹⁶⁵ what we listen to¹⁶⁶—every physical habit affects more subtle dimensions of ourselves.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² “The body, whose worshipping form is *alif dal mim*—Adam—, is designed for pre-modern patterns of life. [...] Standing, or sitting on the floor in changing positions, or offering the Prayer, generate an enzyme known as LPL, which breaks down fats. Those who sit on [chairs] all day will suffer low LPL levels, and spending an hour in the gym afterwards will make little difference” (Murad, *Contentions*, p.23).

¹⁶³ The quality of food intake affects human behaviour. “In *The Medicine of the Prophet*, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah said that what we eat affects our behaviour” (Yusuf and Shakir, p.36). The quantity of food intake has spiritual repercussions as well. The Prophet ﷺ warned against overeating, advised that morsels suffice (Ibn Majah, 3349).

¹⁶⁴ Nawawi, p.338.

¹⁶⁵ 24:30.

¹⁶⁶ “Half of us are plugged into iPods, immersed in daylong concerts of our own choosing, virtually oblivious to the environment—and for those who are not plugged in, there is nonstop music, unavoidable and often of deafening intensity, in restaurants, bars, shops, and gyms. This barrage of music puts a certain strain on our exquisitely sensitive auditory systems, which cannot be overloaded without dire consequences. One such consequence is the ever-increasing prevalence of serious hearing loss, even among young people, and particularly among musicians. Another is the omnipresence of annoyingly catchy tunes, the brainworms that arrive unbidden and leave only in their own time—catchy tunes that may, in fact, be nothing more than advertisements for toothpaste but are, neurologically, completely irresistible” (Sacks, p.53). Music guides our feelings and emotions (Levitin, p.9). It is worth considering the thoughts of Allan Bloom concerning aggressive genres of music: “[R]ock music has one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire—not love, not *eros*, but sexual desire undeveloped and untutored. It acknowledges the first emanations of children’s emerging sensuality and addresses them seriously, eliciting them and legitimating them, not as little sprouts that must be carefully tended in order to grow into gorgeous flowers, but as the real thing. Rock gives children, on a silver platter, with all the public authority of the entertainment industry, everything their parents used to tell them they had to wait for until they grew up and would understand later” (Bloom, p.73). To pre-modern ears, most of the popular music in recent decades is noise. More than one thinker has felt the urge to connect silence with intellectual integration, and oppressive sounds with mental fragmentation (Scruton; Prochnik). As for the religious permissibility of music, this is a matter of debate among jurists. While many scholars conclude it is impermissible, some scholars allowed specific kinds of music (Maghamisi) especially for therapy (Abd-Allah, *Living Islam with Purpose*, p.10; Murad, *Music in the Islamic Tradition*; Sari) or *da’wah* purposes (Saggaf). One of the considerations underlying this second opinion is the legal maxim, “Matters will be judged by their purposes” (Sha’rawi; Jum’a).

¹⁶⁷ Scholars devoted much attention to physical education—broadly defined. Classical masters of wayfaring—such as al-Ghazali in *The Beginning of Guidance* and the *Ihya’* and al-Nawawi in *The Garden of the Righteous*—write explicitly about the spiritual setbacks of excessive eating and sleep. Philosophers of education tackled the topic of exercise (Cook, p.180, §122-124; Keller) and the influence of food on the body (*idem*, p.22, §4; Keller). In our age of mass production, animals may be slaughtered in a lawful manner, but they are rarely allowed to live in a dignified way. The Qur’an distinguishes the lawful (*halal*) and the pure (*tayyib*) (2:168, 5:88, 8:69, and 16:114), and this indicates that the quality of an animal’s life affects their consumer’s health (Yusuf, *Spirituality of Food*; Archuletta). All of this reinforces the idea that spiritual well-being is not restricted to performing one’s prayers and fulfilling basic obligations. Furthermore, moral conduct (*al-khuluq al-hasan*) is not limited to human affairs, but extends to how one regards the rest of God’s creation. A seeker of knowledge must therefore be mindful of the quantity and quality of their food consumption.

Space is the physical context that hosts and determines our physical habits and activities. It not only impacts our intellectual productivity in the moment of study, but more generally our ways of thinking and seeing.

- Empirically, one architect notes, “the kinds of environments we create can alter our minds and our capacity for thought, emotion, and behaviour. [...] The notion of a separate self that operates in isolation from its environment is thus tossed into the wreckage of an outworn paradigm.”¹⁶⁸
- Philosophically, architecture embodies a cosmology,¹⁶⁹ and is therefore a repository of knowledge and the expression of a worldview. As such, it is a ‘silent’ teacher that orchestrates a society’s daily activities and ultimately informs their beliefs and values.¹⁷⁰
- Spiritually, refinement is inseparable from physical education.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Robinson and Pallasmaa, p.3. Abdel-Wahed El-Wakil considers interaction with space an important part of our education (Wakil). Another architect writes, “One of the most crucial if overlooked aspects of architecture is the capacity of buildings to either support or diminish the spontaneous powers of human beings to act in space” (Plummer, p.7). Frank Lloyd Wright said, “Whether people are fully conscious of this or not, they actually derive *countenance* and *sustenance* from the ‘atmosphere’ of things they live in and with” (Robinson and Pallasmaa, p.61). An environment can either inhibit or “enhance one’s capacity for metaphysical musings” (Koren, p.67). “[T]he physical architecture of our work environments can have a transformative effect on the quality of our ideas” (Johnson, p.62). “Set Designers recognize that when it comes to companies that depend on freethinking, idea-sprouting individuals, space plays far more than a supportive role” (Kelley, p.199). “[B]uildings and cities can affect our mood and well-being, and [...] specialised cells in the hippocampal region of our brains are attuned to the geometry and arrangement of the spaces we inhabit” (Bond). Patterns and repetitive designs are calming (Robinson and Pallasmaa, p.210). High ceilings are believed to promote abstract thinking and creativity, while low ceilings promote concrete and detail-oriented thinking (Lidwell, p.38). Classical scholars had an intuitive grasp of these considerations (Cook).

¹⁶⁹ Simply defined, cosmology is the science that examines the relationship of this world to higher realms and thus allows us to decipher meaning in everyday life.

¹⁷⁰ There exists a correspondence between the city or the world (macrocosm) and the self (microcosm): “the built environment is always an expression or crystallization of the belief and worldview of its inhabitants” (Lahham, *The Vocational Society*). “It is important to recognise that philosophical systems abound in the world around us through prima facie the visual constructs of our built environments, which embody a philosophy that is imperceptibly imbibed daily. It is only secondarily that we absorb conceptual systems through our interactions with social models that we inhabit as well as educational systems that are chosen for us. What the thinker fashions in concepts, the craftsman fashions in sound or form. The outcome can educate or poison whole swathes of society through the manipulation of forms in the public or private spheres” (Lahham, *The Intelligibility of the Islamic Tradition*). Modern science has caught glimpses of these parallels: “The neuroscientist Mark Changizi has demonstrated that urban areas and the human cortex rely on extremely similar structural patterns [...] In other words, a neural highway acts just like its concrete counterpart” (Lehrer, p.183).

¹⁷¹ Architecture is not neutral towards us: the Qur’an speaks of the quality of a building’s architects (9:109); the Prophet ﷺ mentions highrise construction as a sign of the Last Day

There is a transdisciplinary consensus that space design contributes to a person's psychological well-being and education.

Digital devices

Without a doubt, digital technology and social networking tools provide opportunities to learn from peers, scholars, and institutions around the world. The benefits of modern technology are generally known and duly appreciated.

That said, specialists warn about the tradeoffs and harmful consequences of relying too much on electronic gadgets. In recent decades, electronic consumption has been associated with the following traits:

1. **Impatience.** In the field of neuroscience it is well-known that habits change the very structure of the brain. Heavy digital usage changes the nervous system in ways that accentuate impulsivity and restlessness.¹⁷²
2. **Shallow-mindedness,** or lack of depth. The terms 'surfing' and 'browsing' indicate a preference for short and easy snippets over thought-demanding content. Heavy digital usage makes intellectual content intolerable. 'Browsing' gradually weakens one's capacities for sustained attention¹⁷³ and critical

(Bukhari, 4777; Muslim 9); and 'Umar instructs Muslims in the Iraq region not to build more than three stories high. It is urgent for educators to take this topic seriously, study it carefully, and raise awareness about the powerful role that architecture plays in instilling habits and values. It is especially within the interest of Muslim educators to familiarize themselves with the basic assumptions behind modern and postmodern architecture and train their students to think critically about their environments (Blake; Brolin; Burckhardt; Nasr). Some scholars who specialize in the aims of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'a*) consider the philosophy of architecture to be a sub-discipline of the religious sciences (*fiqh al-imran*) (Qahtani).

¹⁷² Devices "change our expectations of natural gratification cycles" (Swingle, p.43). "A recent study of more than twenty-six hundred toddlers shows that early exposure to television between the ages of one and three correlates with problems paying attention and controlling impulses later in childhood. For every hour of TV the toddlers watched each day, their chances of developing serious attentional difficulties at age seven increased by 10 percent" (Doidge, p.307). "[N]ew personality traits [are] born and nurtured in the virtual world. These include an exaggerated sense of our abilities, a superior attitude toward others, a new moral code that we adopt online, a proneness to impulsive behaviour, and a tendency to regress to childlike states when faced with an open browser" (Aboujaoude, p.10). "In this media-drenched, data-rich, channel-surfing, computer-gaming age, we have lost the art of doing nothing, of shutting out the background noise and distractions, of slowing down and simply being alone with our thoughts. Boredom—the word itself hardly existed 150 years ago—is a modern invention. Remove all stimulation, and we fidget, panic and look for something, anything, to do to make use of the time" (N. Carr, p.11). Typing and tapping are more impulsive than writing with pen and paper, which has been associated with "physiological slowdown and emotional stability" (Xu, p.1). "Deceleration, then, is a productive process, a form of skilled apprehension that can orient students in critical ways to the contemporary world. But I also want to argue that it is an essential skill for the understanding and interpretation of the historical world" (Roberts). This holds true for the understanding and interpretation of the Qur'an and hadith.

¹⁷³ "[T]echnology is a false friend. Even when it does save time, it often spoils the effect by generating a whole new set of duties and desires" (Honoré, p.31). "Researchers in the new field of

analysis.¹⁷⁴ Eventually, engagement with intellectual topics—if any—becomes superficial.¹⁷⁵

3. **Narrow-mindedness**, or lack of breadth. Contrary to popular belief, digital search engines limit exposure to peripheral knowledges.¹⁷⁶

interruption science have found that it takes an average of twenty-five minutes to recover from a phone call. Yet, such interruptions come every eleven minutes—which means we’re never caught up with our lives” (Iyer, p.41). “By combining many different kinds of information on a screen, the multimedia Net further fragments content and disrupts our concentration” (N. Carr, p.91). “These services are engineered to be addictive—robbing time and attention from activities that more directly support your professional and personal goals (such as deep work)” (Newport, p.186). “Cyberspace is centrifugal; reading is centripetal [...] When I am online I am keyed to a high sense of potentiality, and psychologically I am fragmented” (Birkerts, p.168). Fragmentation and unification are opposite modes of experiencing reality. Islam has been defined as existential literacy, a way to read the cosmos. This reading is only meaningful when different aspects of reality—its words and sentences—are connected and their relationships understood as belonging to the same fabric—to a whole. On the other hand, fragmentation prevents a coherent reading because it focuses on individual letters or words without looking at the neighbouring phrases. Perceptual unification underlies *tawhid*, while fragmentation is a movement away from it, a refusal to take a step back and contemplate the ‘big picture’. From a philosophical perspective, digital tools and virtual platforms tend to favour—and perhaps glorify—the latter mode. The metaphor of writing as an act of weaving or connecting letters comes in sharp contrast with the choppy nature of typing.

¹⁷⁴ Critical inspection is not possible without sustained attention. One of the secondary costs “of hyperarousal [caused by digital media] is its effect on judgment” (Swingle, p.17).

¹⁷⁵ “In this respect, telegraphy was the exact opposite of typography. Books, for example, are an excellent container for the accumulation, quiet scrutiny and organized analysis of information and ideas. It takes time to write a book, and to read one; time to discuss its contents and to make judgments about their merit, including the form of their presentation. A book is an attempt to make thought permanent and to contribute to the great conversation conducted by authors of the past. Therefore, civilized people everywhere consider the burning of a book a vile form of anti-intellectualism. *But the telegraph demands that we burn its contents.* The value of telegraphy is undermined by applying the tests of permanence, continuity or coherence. The telegraph is suited only to the flashing of messages, each to be quickly replaced by a more up-to-date message. Facts push other facts into and then out of consciousness at speeds that neither permit nor require evaluation” (Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, pp.69-70).

¹⁷⁶ Technology fundamentally changes scholarship (Asad Q Ahmed). In a study on citations in printed versus digital journals, James Evans shows not only that papers written after the digital age lacked richness and variety in citations, but also that old-fashioned library search widens the scholar’s horizons precisely because the process involves going through more or less unrelated articles before reaching the desired study. Carr observes, “[A] search engine often draws our attention to a particular snippet of text, a few words or sentences that have strong relevance to whatever we’re searching for at the moment, while providing little incentive for taking in the work as a whole. We don’t see the forest when we search the Web. We don’t even see the trees. We see twigs and leaves” (N. Carr, p.91 and pp.217-218). Granted, there exist ‘discovery engines’ and virtual platforms designed for serendipitous exploration—and they *are* useful. But, first, these are not necessarily known to the ordinary online user (at the time of writing, only 25 million users are registered on StumbleUpon compared to a whopping 1 billion Facebook user accounts); second, they remain qualitatively limited in comparison to the multisensorial experience of, say, an impromptu walk or a trip, and are arguably less organic than a visit to a local bookstore or a discussion with a scholar.

These are only some¹⁷⁷ of the potential harms caused by the unchecked usage of electronic devices and social media. Muslims should be aware of these intellectual shifts and resist the temptation of embracing technology uncritically.¹⁷⁸ The question that

¹⁷⁷ Technology also affects culture. Think of how wondrous traditional scripts (such as *nasta'liq* and the myriad Eastern calligraphic styles) had to succumb to the crassness and monotony of digital type, just because they were difficult to program. One laments how Urdu speakers have to use *naskh*, an unaesthetic pretender Arabic typeface, to express themselves in a language that contains eleven more letters than Arabic (Eteraz). Craftsmanship for leisure is less likely—because more effortful—than spending time browsing instant gratification media. These are two of many examples that show how the current digital world standardizes the human voice much more than it diversifies it. And then there is the environment. Mass-production accelerates the depletion of the planet's resources. Some Muslim scholars are now examining legal precedents issued on the basis of obligations to future generations (Furber). Consider the historic “instances where an immediate worldly benefit is left for the sake of benefiting future generations in this world or the Afterlife. They also show far-reaching consequences are significant and that the Rightly Guided Caliphs did give special consideration to future generations of both Muslims and non-Muslims” (*idem*, p.25). Technophiles rarely lose sleep over such considerations. Our veneration of progress, fascination with gadgetry, and resolute conviction that technology necessarily takes the world and its inhabitants to better a future—despite contrary evidence—dwarves any sense of social responsibility.

¹⁷⁸ “[A]ny technology can be marketed to create an illusion of significance, but an intelligent, aware person need not believe it” (Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, p.42). Modern society's usual reaction to the birth of new technology is delight and unquestioning acceptance. Pre-modern societies questioned technological progress: “Throughout history, skilled laborers have applied sophistication and skepticism to their encounters with new tools and their decisions about whether to adopt them” (Newport, p.187). “The Greeks were suspicious of technical activity because it represented an aspect of brute force and implied a want of moderation. Man, however humble his technical equipment has from the very beginning played the role of sorcerer's apprentice in relation to the machine. This feeling on the part of the Greeks was not a reflection of a primitive man's fear in the face of something he does not understand (the explanation given today when certain persons take fright at our techniques). Rather, it was the result, perfectly mastered and perfectly measured, of a certain conception of life. It represented an apex of civilization and intelligence. Here we find the supreme Greek virtue, [self-control]. The rejection of technique was a deliberate, positive activity involving self-mastery, recognition of destiny, and the application of a given conception of life. Only the most modest techniques were permitted—those which would respond directly to material needs in such a way that these needs did not get the upper hand” (Ellul, p.29). Ellul continues, “Society was not oriented toward the creation of a new instrument in response to a new need. The emphasis was rather on the application of old means, which were constantly extended, refined, and perfected. The deficiency of the tool was to be compensated for by the skill of the worker. Professional know-how, the expert eye were what counted: man's talents could make his crude tools yield the maximum efficiency. [...] Everything varied from man to man according to his gifts, whereas technique in the modern sense seeks to eliminate such variability” (*idem*, p.67). The father of virtual reality, Jaron Lanier, critiques the demands and restrictions imposed by the Internet and social networks in particular: “If a church or a government were doing these things, it would feel authoritarian, but when technologists are the culprits, we seem hip, fresh, and inventive. People will accept ideas presented in technological form that would be abhorrent in any other form” (Lanier, p.48). Neil Postman suggests incorporating courses in “technology education” into school curricula to help students think about “the psychological, social, and political effects of new technologies”. He writes, “If we want our students to live intelligently in a technological society, I don't see how this can be done if they are ignorant of the full meaning and context of technological change. [...] My point is that, if we are going to make technology education part of the curriculum, its goal must be to teach students to use technology rather than to be used by it. And that means that they must know how a technology's use affects the society in which they live, as well as their own personal lives” (Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, p.170-171).

educators and seekers of knowledge must ask is this: “To what extent is digital technology *really* changing education—and is this *always* in our best interests?”¹⁷⁹ 80

¹⁷⁹ Selwyn, p.4 and p.24. Neil Postman proposes the following framework for assessing technology (Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*):

1. What is the problem to which this technology is the solution?
2. Whose problem is it?
3. Which people and what institutions might be most seriously harmed by a technological solution?
4. What new problems might be created because we have solved this problem?
5. What sort of people and institutions might acquire special economic and political power because of technological change?
6. What changes in language are being enforced by new technologies, and what is being gained and lost by such changes?

It is worth sharing an example of this last question. It is generally believed that the internet makes us smarter, but that is “only if we define intelligence by the Net’s own standards. If we take a broader and more traditional view of intelligence—if we think about the depth of our thought rather than just its speed—we have to come to a different and considerably darker conclusion” (N. Carr, p.141). “What the Net diminishes is [...] the ability to know, in depth, a subject for ourselves, to construct within our own minds the rich and idiosyncratic set of connections that give rise to a singular intelligence” (*idem*, p.143). As technology advances, “[y]ou can’t tell if a machine has gotten smarter or if you’ve just lowered your own standards of intelligence to such a degree that the machine seems smart” (Lanier, p.32). Any debate about the benefits or harms of technology must begin with clear definition. Modern societies tend to define ‘good’ and ‘virtue’ from the standpoint of material progress and comfort. Traditional societies define these same concepts according to what amplifies chivalry, contemplation, craftsmanship, and environmental sensitivity, just to mention a few traits. The danger here is to equate technological advancement with human development. These “changes in language” are significant because they become “mental structures that shape the way we see the world” and, “[a]s a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as good or bad outcome of our actions” (Lakoff, p.xv).



Conclusion

The study of the Islamic scholarly tradition broadens the mind's horizons. It is a monumental conceptual universe with colorful ways of thinking and a myriad contributions to world civilizations. To sit in the gatherings of its custodians is an education, to drink from the fountains of their works is bliss, and to observe them is to catch a glimpse of the Beloved ﷺ. The true believer has been compared to a tree: you throw it a stone and it gives you fruits. The saintly scholar is fragrant and fruitful, always giving.

Islam is a lifelong process of refinement (*ihsan*). The key takeaway from this short work is to be aware of one's limitations and strive to transcend them through study. No one who sought knowledge in a systematic fashion and from its rightful guardians has ever been disappointed. In the process of learning, a 'yin-yang' of receptivity and critical examination is required: never judge without consideration, consultation, and evidence. More than a thousand years of intense scholarship have preceded this moment, many questions have been judiciously answered. The fact that something does not immediately make sense is not sufficient reason to discard it.

Today, all kinds of topics are discussed on social media platforms, many books and ancient controversies are available to those who have not received the appropriate training to make sense of them. This 'democratization' tends to confuse those individuals more than it enlightens them, which is precisely why this topic—the philosophy and etiquette of knowledge, or 'Islamic literacy'—is relevant. Muslims must learn the basic thought principles that enable them to thrive, not drown, in the age of information.

Other contemporary issues have been tackled in this paper—albeit in the form of preliminary thoughts. Muslims can no longer afford to neglect topics such as the history of science and technology, architecture and cosmology, and the fine arts. It is important that intelligent persons specialize in these subjects and produce quality works: academic publications, films, and other artistic productions. Each of these sciences focuses on an aspect of reality that helps us understand ourselves better and refine the *da'wah*—call to God.

It is practically impossible to write a complete disclaimer for every statement one makes. The referenced works contain further clarification and more supportive

evidence than what has been shared in the footnotes. Curious readers may wish to explore them to satiate their musings.

And God knows best.

We ask God to benefit anyone who reads this work and to guide us to those who guide to Him. God extol our beloved Prophet, his noble family, and companions, and praise be to God, the Author of the worlds.

Oubai Elkerdi,

Montreal, 29 Ramadan 1438/ 24 June 2017. 🍀



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The list below is ordered by category and does not contain all the books that informed the content of this paper. If a book belongs to more than one category, it will only be mentioned in one. Needless to say, referencing a work does not mean we agree with all its content.

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