

Defining knowledge

Jslam

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THERE is an impression in some quarters that the knowledge contemplated and highlighted by the Quran means religious or spiritual knowledge only and that the holy book does not advocate the acquisition of any other kind of knowledge or learning. But let us see what the Quran and Sunnah say in this regard.

The Quran says "Read: and thy Lord is the Most Gracious who taught knowledge by pen: taught man that which he did not know" (96:4,5). These two of the first five verses of the Quran revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him) besides highlighting the importance of knowledge, also tell us what knowledge actually means.

Knowledge, as explained by the above two verses, means knowing that which one does not know. For example, Adam did not know the names of the things before they were taught to him, and for him getting to know the names of those things was knowledge. Even now, the process of acquiring knowledge starts from knowing the names of things first. Thus, knowing all that one does not know could be knowledge in the Quranic sense. This definition has, in fact, far-reaching dimensions. It, inter alia, implies that knowledge has no bounds. In other words, starting from knowing the names of things, knowledge can have no limits or boundaries.

There can be no better and more appropriate definition of knowledge than the one revealed by the Quran. This fact is evident from another verse which says "My Lord advance me in knowledge" (20:114). The verse, among other things, tells us that no one can attain the limits of knowledge. One has to continuously strive for it. That's why the Prophet emphasized the acquisition of knowledge from cradle to grave.

The Quran further says: "Do not follow that of which you have no knowledge, for you will be questioned about the use of your ears, eyes and hearts" (17:36). In Arabic idioms, heart is considered as the centre of affection and intelligence. Hence, the word "heart" occurring in relation to knowledge in this verse is to be understood as having reference to intelligence or mind and affection. Ears, eyes and mind are the three possible means or channels of the acquisition of knowledge. The mind gives us the ability to think, understand, comprehend, conceive, assimilate, preserve, plan, guide and analyze.

The object of the above verse is not merely to prevent us from doing or following something evil. If we have a look at this verse from another angle, it would follow that it also emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge about anything one does or fol-

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lows. Telling a person "don't drive the car without a licence" has the same effect as telling him "learn driving but get the licence first." Likewise telling a person "don't follow that of which you have no knowledge" means the same thing as telling him to "do or follow a thing only when you have enough knowledge about it" or "acquire the knowledge about something before following or doing it."

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it follows that the knowledge contemplated by the Quran does not mean mere religious knowledge. This is further evident from the fact the Muslim scholars played a pivotal role in the development of nearly all branches of knowledge. According to the German scholar Professor Joseph Hell "it goes to the credit of Islam that it neither slighted nor ignored other branches of knowledge, nay it offered the same safe home to them as it offered to theology."

Knowledge could be of several kinds and may be acquired for several purposes. But the Prophet specifically laid emphasis on the kind of knowledge that should be acquired by the believers when he said that "knowledge which does not yield any benefit to the people is like wealth that is not spent in the way of Allah." It means, knowledge to be acquired must have the potential of being used for the benefit of the people and must be used for that purpose. For example, even nuclear science has the potential of being beneficial to the people.

Thus, knowledge contemplated by the Quran could include many forms of knowledge including religious knowledge that can promote, directly or indirectly, human welfare or the process of human development.

The Quran not only indicates what knowledge should actually mean but also tells us how it is to be acquired and disseminated. The best way of acquiring and disseminating knowledge, according to the above vers-

es (96:4,5), could be the use of the pen or through reading and writing. This fact is also spelled out by another Quranic verse (68:1). In this verse the role of pen in the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge is highlighted but in a different way i.e. through the Divine Oath.

Besides, the Quran indicates another source through which one can acquire knowledge. When one of the two sons of Adam killed the other, he did not know how to dispose of the dead body. In the meantime a raven came and started scratching the earth from which he drew the conclusion that the dead body had to be buried (5:27,31). He came to this conclusion through observation. Likewise, when Moses and Khizr walking together reached a river, they boarded a boat passing in front of them. Meanwhile a bird came, and, sitting on one side of the boat,

dipped her beak twice in the river. Seeing this Khizr told Moses that all he could gather from what the bird demonstrated in front of them was that whatever knowledge both of them had acquired, as their share from the knowledge of Allah, was like what the bird could have picked up in her beak from the river.

The above event, partly narrated in the Quran (18:65-82) and partly in Hadith (Bokhari), among other things, tells us about another way of acquiring knowledge.

The bird dipped her beak twice in the river. Each time she might have drawn in a drop of water which means that she took in only two drops of water in all. The drops of water were from the flowing river (something small from something very big). Moses and Khizr were the two knowledgeable persons in the boat before whom the demonstration took place. Hence, the logical conclusion could have been that what the bird demonstrated was that the knowledge each one of them had acquired was like a drop of water from the flowing river. They should, therefore, not be proud of their knowledge but should rather strive to acquire more of it.

Observation, as may be seen, was the starting point in the above process. But observation by itself is not enough. It has to be complemented and followed by reasoning and analogy to draw the correct conclusion and make the right use of it. And that is exactly what happened in the above cases. That is why the Quran repeatedly emphasizes pondering and reflecting over various objects and signs in the universe (45:13).

Thus, observation and use of reasoning and analogy could be another way of acquiring knowledge. One may learn a lot from observing a phenomenon, analyzing and pondering over the chain of events involved therein, drawing his own conclusion therefrom and applying the same to another appropriate situation.