**Intellect & Islam**

BY N I K H AT S AT T A R 2021-03-05

GIVEN the lack of analytical thought, deep reflection and serious scholarship in many Muslim societies today, the fact that intellect was cited by the Holy Prophet (PBUH) as the most critical aspect of a Muslim`s life might come as a surprise.  
  
Dr Khaled Abu al-Fadl mentions that the Prophet is said to have stated: `To everything there is a foundation, and the foundation of a believer is the intellect. And to every person, there has to be an objective.  
  
And the objective of the true believer has to be the intellect. And to every home, there are people that are responsible and accountable and in the homes of true believers, it is the intellect that holds everyone to account ... and for every journey, thereis a purpose and the true purpose of the journey of a true believer is the intellect.  
  
The Prophet is also said to have stated that the best person and worshipper is one who possesses intellect, has developed it and invested in it.  
  
Intellect and ethics are also linked in Islam because only a person with intellect can assess the goodness and eternity of ethical values and can abide by ethical standards.  
  
With the Quran instructing Muslims to deliberate and think deeply, it is ironic that many Muslim societies, scholars, rulers and laypersons are unable or unwilling to apply their intellect and rationality to their beliefs and actions. Blind following of religious leaders without critically applying one`s own intellect; assuming that interpretations of the Quran by earlier scholars are fixed and newer interpretations are no longer possible; believing in all ahadith without testing them for authenticity are common practices.  
  
So many of us are led by emotions that are easily stirred by whatever we hear or are taught in madressahs or whatever is published in the increasingly large numbers of religious magazines and books. We seldom engage with this information at an intellectual level, question their validity, sort them through, look for evidence, search other sources for proof or subject them to a critical evaluation before placing our belief in them.  
  
We often quickly transform these beliefs into action, sometimes with disastrous consequences for our families, friends and communities. A young man once stated that a Hadith said that God would punish a man if even a strand of his sister`s hair was visible.  
  
There are other numerous and more serious examples that make lives miserable for others.  
  
Many Muslims resist alternative interpretations of the Quran that differ from tra-ditional tafsirs, to the extent of sticking the labels of `kufr` and `fitna` on anyone who dares to do so. This is the reason why many reputable scholars leave their countries to live in places where they can think, debate and write with greater freedom, for the practise of intellect and debate and expression must necessarily go hand in hand.  
  
Intellect causes desire in humans to seek knowledge: the Arabic word `ilm` has been used in the Quran hundreds of times in various connotations. Intellect enables humans to comprehend signs of God and establishes the link between knowledge, faith and practice. This knowledge differs from information, because it is only the intellect that can sort out false and biased information from true knowledge and separate fact from fiction.  
  
Al Ghazali, the famous Muslim thinker, stresses upon the need to understand and assess knowledge so that one can act upon it.  
  
He said that if a Muslim refuses the role of intellect in religion, this is a contradictionbecause a true believer`s piety is based on intellect.  
  
The Quran and ahadith are often memorised, both in their original form as well astheir translations. This is considered to be the height of religious knowledge. Even when the meaning of these texts is discussed, the usual format is of a religious teacher expanding upon his own interpretation of Quranic verses.  
  
Humans are gifted with varying degrees of intellect. It is up to them to hone it, develop it and enhance it. Intellect increases with use, and becomes dormant and rusty if left unutilised.  
  
Intellect demands that compassion should be paramount in dispensing justice; changes in social and economic realities should be considered in applying religious instructions that responded primarily to social conditions of the times of revelation.  
  
Intellectual and ethical thought also require that oppression of people in any part of the world cannot be defended for economic or political interests. Yet we find that man-made laws are assumed to be the eternal word of God, and Muslim countries are racing to develop friendly relations with oppressive regimes.  
  
Muslims are floundering because they have mostly disregarded this important pillar of Islam intellect.  The writer is a freelance contributor.