

Duty of Acquiring Knowledge

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“Say, ‘Are those who know equal to those who do not know?’ Only those who possess intellect take admonition.” (39:9)

Our topic and its intended meaning are based on the famous hadith by the holy Prophet (S) agreed upon by both Shi‘ites and Sunnites:

Seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim man and woman.

According to this hadith, one of the Islamic duties and obligations is acquiring knowledge. In Arabic, “*Fariḍah*” means obligation or duty and its origin is “*Faraḍa*” [a verb in Arabic] meaning “to be certain” or “to oblige”. What, we call today as a “*wājib*” or a “*mustaḥab*” act, were called in early Islamic era “*mafrūḍ*” [obligatory] and “*masnūn*” [recommended]. It must be mentioned that the words “*wājib*” and “*wujūb*” have been used in that era but not as frequent as “*fariḍat*”, “*mafrūḍ*”, and “*faraḍa*”; while the word “*mustaḥab*” with its current meaning seems to be coined by Islamic jurisprudents. The word “*mustaḥab*” is neither used in the holy Qur’an nor in any hadith and even the early Islamic jurisprudents did not include in their glossaries. In the past, they used the words “*masnūn*” and “*mandūb*” instead of

“mustahab”. Acquiring knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim and does not belong to a class or a subclass of people. In civilizations prior to Islam, knowledge was a privilege for the select few. In Islam, knowledge is an obligation and duty for everyone, just as performing the daily prayer, fasting, paying alms, going on pilgrimage to hajj, jihad, and promoting the good and prohibiting the bad. From the beginning of Islam until now, all Islamic sects and scholars have agreed upon this. There is normally a chapter in hadith references called “*Bāb-u Wujūb-i Talab-i al-‘Ilm*” (the Chapter on the Obligation of Acquiring Knowledge).

Thus, the above hadith is accepted by all and if there needs to be any discussion it will just be its interpretation and scope.

Conditions of Islamic nations

There is no need to discuss here surrounding issues like how Islam has urged people towards knowledge and mention verses from the Qur’an and quote some hadiths from religious leaders and point to parts of Islamic history related to our topic. I do not want to commend Islam and repeatedly attract your attention to how Islam has supported knowledge and has driven humanity towards it, because such things have been and are being said too much and I believe they do not have much fruits. These become fruitless when one takes a look at Islamic nations and finds that they are most illiterate and uneducated nations of the world. Such person would, at least, have one question and that would be: “why the furthest nations of the world from knowledge are the Muslims if such words are true and Islam has supported knowledge that much?”

I believe we must pay more attention to the problems in our society and think about the roots of our scientific backwardness and seek for a solution rather than such above-mentioned useless

propagandas whose ultimate effects are to temporarily make us feel happy. In his lecture here, Sayyid Mūsā Sadr (God bless him) mentioned some of Allamah Sharaf al-Dīn's activities and said that although Allamah Sharaf al-Dīn had many great books for introducing Shī'a and the Household (A); when he saw the Shī'a situation in Lebanon and that they were the poorest and were devoid of proper education and there were few teachers, doctors, or engineers among them and instead, all porters, bath-keepers and scavengers were Shī'ite, he thought to himself about the influence his books could have. He was worried that people might say that if Shi'i Islam were a good faith, Shī'ites' situation must have been better. That made him think about scientific activities and establish schools, institutes, and charitable groups to create a holy movement and promote the Shī'ite community in Lebanon. Muslims, in general, compared to other people of the world are like Lebanese Shī'ites in comparison with other Lebanese at the beginning of Allamah Sharaf al-Dīn's movement. Whatever we speak of Islam, its support of knowledge and its motivation towards acquiring knowledge would not have any effects upon the current situation of Islamic nations. The most this may do is just to raise a question for the listener why Muslims are suffering in this situation if those words are true. Let me tell you a story, and before that I am going to read four hadiths from the holy Prophet (S) about knowledge and explain them because they are related to this story and then I will tell you the story next.

Four hadiths

One is the above hadith which indicates that it is obligatory for every Muslim, male or female, to seek knowledge. It is for both men and women because the word "*muslim*" means Muslim, whether man or woman. Of course, the expression "*wa muslimah*" (and Muslim women) is added in some Shī'ite hadith

references like *Bihār al-Anwār*. According to this hadith, acquiring knowledge is a common obligation and is not gender or class-specific. There may be an obligatory duty for the youth instead of the elderly the old, or a task obligatory for the governor and not for the governed, or vice versa or something which is obligatory for men and not for women like jihād [war] and Friday congregational prayer which are obligatory for men and not for women, but the obligation of acquiring knowledge is mandatory for all Muslims and not specific to a select few.

Another hadith is:

Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave.

This means that acquiring knowledge does not belong to a special period of time and it always must be pursued. Ferdowsi, the Iranian Poet, referring to this hadith says:

زگهواره تا گور دانش بجوي به گفتار پیغمبر راستگوي

As the first hadith removed the limits of gender and class and generalized the theory, this hadith generalizes the concept from the aspect of time. It is possible that an obligation is limited to a specific time and that makes it impossible to be done at any time. For example, obligatory daily fasting is limited to a specific time during the month of Ramadan. Daily prayers are also assigned to a specific time of the day and must be performed during specific hours. Hajj is also an obligation though it can only be done during the month of Dhi'l-Hajjah. But acquiring knowledge is not limited to time or age.

The third hadith:

Seek knowledge even if it is in China.¹

Apparently, China has been mentioned in the hadith because either it was the furthest place in the world that people could go that time or it was known as the cradle of science and industry. The mentioned hadith suggests that acquiring knowledge is not place and time-limited. It is possible that an obligation is limited to a place and is impossible to be done anywhere; for example, hajj rituals are both time and place-limited. Muslims are to perform hajj rituals in Mecca, in the land where Islam emerged and spread throughout the world, and it must be performed around the house built by the hands of Abraham and his noble son, Ishmael. Muslims cannot agree with each other and choose another place for performing hajj. Thus, this obligation is limited; however, to acquire knowledge, no special place is assigned and wherever there is knowledge it must be acquired, whether in Mecca, Medina, Egypt, Syria, Iraq or the furthest places in the world. We have a series of hadiths about the virtue of emigration and travel for acquiring knowledge to furthest places and even the following verse is interpreted accordingly: "...And whoever leaves his home migrating toward Allah and His Apostle, and is then overtaken by death, his reward shall certainly fall on Allah..." (4:100) and "migrating toward Allah and His Apostle" is interpreted as migrating and travelling for acquiring knowledge. It is mentioned in hadiths that "If you knew what successes you would achieve as a consequence of seeking and acquiring knowledge, you would go after knowledge even if your blood would spill in its path or [if it] required you to go into the seas and travel through the oceans."²

The fourth hadith from the Prophet Muhammad (S):

Wisdom is the missing property of the faithful, and one who has lost something would catch it wherever he finds it.

The word *wisdom* is a firm, sound and valid word that means to discover the truth. Any law that agrees with the truth and it is not made by mind is called wisdom. Imam Ali (A) states:

A wise saying is a lost article of the believer. Therefore, take advantage of wise sayings though it is from the hypocrites. You, the believers, are more deserving of acquiring it.³

The one condition in acquiring knowledge is that the knowledge to be acquired must agree with the truth and reality; and if so, you should not mind from whom you are learning knowledge and wisdom. Actually, there are certain conditions when one is doubtful about the truth of the issue. In such situations, those who cannot distinguish the truth from falsehood must not listen to those who are on the wrong path. They must be careful about whom they are under influence. If they do not care, they risk going astray. But there are times when it is certain that the word is true such as a discovery in medicine or in natural sciences. It is ordered that in such a situation, one must set out to learn. It is quoted in our hadiths from Jesus, son of Mary (A), that: "Achieve the truth and accept it, even if from the people of the falsehood, but do not take or accept falsehood, even if from the people of the truth."⁴ You must analyze what has been said.

Such hadiths have removed the limits of knowledge with respect to the people from whom a Muslim gains his knowledge. That is because an obligation might be more limited from this view, i.e. congregational prayer must have an imam, but to become such imam has conditions which are being Muslim, faithful and just; but on the contrary, none of such conditions is specified in acquiring and imparting knowledge.

Now let us tell you the story, to which these hadth relate. Our knowledgeable friend, Mr. Sayyid Muhammad Farzan narrated

that in the past, at the beginning of Constitution revolution,⁵ Mr. Sayyid Hibat al-Ddin Shahrestani (may God bless him) published an Arabic journal in Iraq called “*Al-‘Ilm*” (or “Knowledge”) and it was published for two or three years. On the back cover of this journal, the word “*Al-‘Ilm*” was written in Nasta‘liq calligraphic style and on its four corners the above four hadiths were written. Once, it was written in that journal that once a German orientalist had gone to visit Mr. Shahrestani and saw the hadiths on the back cover. He had asked what was written and was told that they were the four commands on acquiring knowledge by our prophet (S). After asking them to translate the hadiths, the orientalist thought for a short while and showed his surprise over the hadiths that encouraged acquiring knowledge regardless of gender, time, place, and the type of teacher and asked how it comes that despite these hadiths, Muslims are so much backward in knowledge and the rate of illiterate people among them is very high.

Why this general rule has been ignored and not considered as an obligation and why the above commands have not been carried out continues to be a mystery. Of course, in the course of history Islam made a great scientific and cultural movement in the world and for centuries pioneered in knowledge, culture and civilization. Islam is a religion in which the first verses descended to its prophet began with:

Read in the Name of your Lord who created;
created man from a clinging mass. Read, and your
Lord is the most generous, who taught by the pen,
taught man what he did not know. (96:1-5)

Thus, it is questionable as to how a religion whose first principle is Oneness and which does not allow any restriction in thinking and learning could fail to create a great civilization.

Why this Islamic duty was not fulfilled?

Certainly, one of its causes was the actions committed by caliphate governments which created problems in the Muslims' lives. It made a stratified society which was not in any agreement with Islamic laws. Then, the society was divided into a class of the underprivileged and a class of the prodigal, extravagant, and haughty ones who did not know what to do with their possessions. When people's condition becomes weakened, the situation will become difficult to observe such duties and even some issues will prohibit their accomplishment.

Another reason for the problem was that science was disregarded because the attention was shifted to something else; it is like a certain credit is transferred from one account to another, like for example, one opens an account in a bank with certain credits and then the authorities transfer the credits from that account to another. They claim that the reason why Islamic rules about science were disregarded was that all that Islam considered as motivation of people towards learning, literacy, and merits of knowledge were all taken as credits for Muslim scholars [‘Ulamā] like respecting them, and people instead of paying attention to their literacy and acquiring knowledge sought closeness to Islamic scholars and respected them and this all led to the current situation. The above claim is somehow correct, though Muslim scholars have not done such misleading acts. This was result of hearing from ordinary clergymen on the pulpits about the necessity of respect for the knowledgeable people than for the knowledge itself.

Another problem has been that sometimes scholars of certain field of Islamic knowledge insisted on the claim that the obligation [Fariḡah] mentioned in the hadith from the holy

Prophet (S) was only applicable to their discipline and not the rest.

What knowledge?

In the late Mullā Muhsin Fayḍ's *Al-Maḥajjat al-Bayḍā*, I came across a very good point which apparently he had taken from Ghazālī. He says that Islamic scholars have become divided into almost twenty groups based on their interpretation of the mentioned hadith and each of them – regardless of their professions – have insisted that the mentioned hadith referred only to their field of study. For example, theologians have said that by the mentioned hadith, the Prophet (S) meant Islamic theology because it is the science of religious principles. Ethicists have said that the aim has been ethics i.e. to study the deeds that lead to happiness and those that prevent from happiness. Jurists said that jurisprudence has been meant. Every person has to know his religious duties either by himself being a jurist [*mujtahid*] or by following the most qualified jurist. Exegetes said that Qur'anic exegesis has been meant because knowledge meant to be the book of God. Hadith scholars said that it meant to be the science of hadith because anything, even the Qur'an itself, must be interpreted accordingly. Sufis (Gnostics) said gnosis and the knowledge of spiritual stations has been meant. After explaining the reason of every group, Ghazālī gives a statement which is relatively comprehensive. And in brief, it is that the Prophet (S) did not mean any of the above mentioned sciences exclusively; and if he meant specifically one of them, he would have expressed it. What we need to do is to discover first what is necessary in Islam as an individual duty or a shared obligation, and then whatever knowledge is needed for carrying out those necessary responsibilities becomes obligatory.

Preparatory obligation

Muslim jurists consider the obligation of acquiring knowledge to be “preparatory” and “by itself.” This means that the obligation of acquiring knowledge is not only preparatory like those prerequisites for obligations which themselves are not obligatory; acquiring knowledge is obligatory by itself as well. Jurists say that this preparatory obligation is for learning the rulings, as if it is generally considered that carrying out Islamic duties is dependent on the fact that Muslims know their duties themselves and doing so, they will be able to automatically carry them out. Thus, the obligation of acquired knowledge is that a Muslim must be a scholar of jurisprudence or a follower of one. While it is obvious that as well as knowing duties and religious orders which are needed to be learned, many deeds which are obligatory in Islam require knowledge, lesson, and skill. For example, practicing medicine is a shared obligation which itself is impossible without acquiring medical knowledge and acquiring such knowledge is an obligation and it is the same for many other obligations.

One must see what the needs and obligations are in Islamic society and it cannot be carried out well without learning, so acquiring its knowledge is also obligatory. The obligation of acquiring knowledge is absolutely dependent on the measure of society’s needs. Once, farming, required industries, trading, and politics did not require knowledge. Once, people could become politician, craftsmen, or merchants by having a short training course or apprenticeship as an assistant the experts in these fields. But today none of the above-mentioned businesses is possible to be carried out without knowledge in a way that they are in harmony with today’s world and life. Even farming now must be based on scientific and technical principles. If a merchant does not study economics, he would not become a practical

businessman. The same rule is applied to a politician. Today, businesses have emerged which are impossible to be carried out without knowledge and profession. The kinds of jobs which could be learned with short courses of training as an assistant are now as much different that it makes them impossible to be learned without going to technical schools or colleges. Most jobs need technical experts and technicians.

First principle: independence and dignity of Islamic society

Here we need to pay attention to several principal points. First we should see what kind of society Islam is seeking? Islam is seeking a society which is esteemed, independent and self-relying and actually, Islam does not accept that a Muslim nation is subordinate to a non-Muslim nation: "...Allah will never provide the faithless any way [to prevail] over the faithful." (4:141) Also, Islam does not accept that a Muslim nation always asks another nation for gratuitous assistance. Moreover, it does not accept that the Islamic society does not have economic or social independence. Islam never accepts that Muslims have no doctor or medical care when they become terribly sick and they endure illness and go to non-Muslim people. And these all demonstrate a principle.

Second principle: Knowledge as the basis of all dignities and independence

Another principle is that there have broken out a revolution in the world so that all things are done based on knowledge and life is sustained upon knowledge. All aspects of human life depend on knowledge and none of them can be dealt with without the key of knowledge.

Third principle: Knowledge as the key to performing other obligations

Carrying out other obligations and individual and social Islamic duties are dependent on acquiring knowledge. Acquiring knowledge is known as a key to the fulfilment of other obligations and Islamic objectives which in jurisprudence is called a preparatory obligation. Thus, if Muslim affairs improve and benefit more from science acquiring knowledge becomes more important and expands more in its scope.

The issue of acquiring knowledge has been discussed in various places in jurisprudence and its principles. For example, in the principles of jurisprudence (*usul al-fiqh*) when discussing “the principle of exemption” (*al-barā’ah*) they study “necessity of examining [requirements of] reason”. Here they discuss knowledge. In jurisprudence (*al-fiqh*) when discussing the issue of “recommendation or obligation of knowing practical rulings of Shari’ah with respect to business” the jurists study the significance of knowledge. The jurists also discuss knowledge when they study permissibility of being paid for performing obligatory acts.

Religious and secular sciences

It has become a habit for us to label some sciences as religious and some others as secular. Religious sciences are those which are directly related to theological, moral, or practical deeds or those which are prerequisite of learning Islamic sciences, obligations, and rulings such as Arabic literature and logics. Some people would think that other sciences are quite unrelated to religion and whatever Islam has instructed about the merits of knowledge and the reward of acquiring it, is exclusive to what is idiomatically called religious sciences and by “the obligation of

acquiring knowledge”, the Prophet (S) exclusively meant the sciences that are called religious sciences.

The fact is that that it is nothing but a label. In one view, religious sciences are exclusive to the primary texts i.e. the holy Qur’an and the original tradition of the Prophet (S) or his noble predecessors. In early Islam, when people were not familiar with it, it was obligatory for everyone to learn the mentioned primary texts before anything. There were no sciences of theology, logics, Islamic history or at that time. The holy Prophet (S) said: “Truly, knowledge is of three kinds: the firm verse, the just obligation, and the upright tradition.”⁶ This means that knowledge is exclusive to learning the Qur’anic verses, the Prophetic hadiths, and practical rulings. Later on, Muslims became familiar with those primary texts of the Qur’an and hadiths which are like the constitution of Islam and by their order, regarded acquiring knowledge as an absolute obligation and gradually some sciences were established.

Every knowledge which is beneficial to Muslims and solves Muslims’ problems is the knowledge which must be acquired according to religion and it is a religious science. Why do we recognize Arabic grammar and vocabulary as religious sciences? Is that save the fact that they benefit Islam’s objectives? Why do we learn romantic poems of Imra’ al-Qays and poems of drunk Abu Nuwās? Surely, because they help us understand Arabic, the language of the Qur’an.

Thus, any knowledge which is beneficial and necessary to Islam must be regarded as religious science, and if someone has pure intentions and acquires that science to serve Islam, he will be rewarded by those mentioned for acquiring knowledge in hadiths:: “surely, the angels spread their wings under [the feet] of

the seekers of the knowledge.”⁷ But without pure intentions, even learning the Qur’anic verses will earn no rewards.

Overall, it is incorrect that we divide all sciences into two: religious and secular sciences which makes some people think that those so-called secular sciences are alien to Islam. The fact that Islam is the comprehensive and final message of God requires that every beneficial and necessary science to Islamic society must be considered as religious knowledge.

Women’s education

As said above, acquiring knowledge is not exclusive to men. Since the Prophet (S) stated: “To seek knowledge is the duty of all Muslims” and the actual word which has been used is *muslim* with its masculine grammatical form, some have thought that acquiring knowledge is only men’s obligation.

Firstly, in some versions of this hadith which are available in Shi‘ite references, the phrase “*wa muslimah*” [“and women Muslims” in Arabic] is also added. Secondly, such expressions do not show preference to a specific gender. In Arabic, when “*muslim*” is used alone and not in contrast to “*muslimah*” it can refer to both a male or female Muslim. For example, in the hadith: “The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand other Muslims are safe,”⁸ certainly, it has not been meant that only male Muslims must be like that. Elsewhere, the Prophet (S) stated: “Muslims are brothers to one another.”⁹ Here, one cannot say that the hadith is only about men because he (S) has not said “Muslim women are sisters to one another.”

The term “*muslim*” [in Arabic] has two concepts: being a Muslim and being a man. Everyone knows that in such cases, gender is not important and only being Muslim is important. Even if instead of the word “*muslim*”, the word “*rajul*” [in Arabic means

“man”] was used, the gender side of it could be ignored. This is what jurists call, “*ilghā’ al-khususiyah*” (disregarding the particularities). In some hadiths in jurisprudential issues, the hadith is addressing men; i.e. it has been asked from one of the Imams (A) that a man has dealt like that and such is happened, now what can he do? And Imam (A) has answered that question. Jurisprudents say that although the word “man” is mentioned in the hadith, but in such cases, the preference is ignored, because it is obvious that gender is not affecting the conclusion.

Moreover, in jurisprudence there is a rule that some generalities admit no restriction or modification. For example, a similar issue as what was mentioned about knowledge is brought in the Qur’an about *Taqwā* (God-fearing). About knowledge, it is stated: “...Are those who know equal to those who do not know?” Only those who possess intellect take admonition” (39:9). About *Taqwā*, it is stated: “Shall We treat those who have faith and do righteous deeds like those who cause corruption on the earth? Shall We treat the God-fearing like the vicious?” (38:28) and also it is stated: “...Indeed the noblest of in the sight of Allah is the most God-fearing among you...” (49:13) and in all these examples, the prepositions are masculine and it is not said: “Shall We treat the God-fearing men and the God-fearing women” and it is not said: “the noblest of in the sight of Allah is the most God-fearing among you women”. Can one claim that because of the masculine preposition, what is mentioned about *Taqwa* is specific to men and excludes women? Islam deems knowledge as light and ignorance as darkness as it is stated in the Qur’an that: “...Say, ‘Are the blind one and the seer equal? Or are the darkness and the light equal?’...” (13:16). Therefore, when the Prophet says: “To seek knowledge is duty of all Muslims”¹⁰ it must be an obligation for every Muslim. Can anyone assume that in Islam men are supposed to go out of darkness and come to light, but women still stay in darkness? And it is only men’s

obligation to come out of that blindness, but women still stay in such a blindness?

At the end of the verse, it is stated that: "...Only those who possess intellect take admonition." (39:9) meaning that those who possess intellect know such issues well. In fact, the Qur'an is going to state that such an issue is something obvious and everyone can understand it. It is stated about the Prophet (S) in another verse: "...to recite to them His signs, to purify them, and to teach them the Book and wisdom" (62:2). In this verse, purification and teaching are mentioned together and all of them in masculine form. If "to purify them" can be specific to men, "to teach them" can also be specific to men.

Whose fault is it?

Hearing these comments, some people would rush to say: "Come on! Are you saying that our daughters should go to the existing schools and learn this [antireligious] culture?" The answer is that: if there are any problems with these schools and culture it is people's fault because they have not reformed them. As well as obliging people to acquire knowledge, Islam has considered the preparations of reforming the society as obligatory and do not allow people to sit in the house and wait for when schools are a hundred percent good for their sons and daughters and then send their children to school. Islam does not allow people to criticize without doing anything to improve the existing conditions. We are obliged to build good schools with good culture. Basically, one who has not made the smallest step for culture, one who has not participated in establishing any cultural communities and has not made a single step to carry out the obligation of acquiring knowledge is not allowed to sit and criticize. Cultural problems were developed when such critics did not do their religious obligations about culture.

It should be noted that as far as specialization is concerned women should try to specialize in those disciplines that better match their abilities and talents and can better serve the society. Can one say that society does not need women doctors or surgeons, or midwives?

The strange thing is that when the issue is women's education, some people criticize and when the need arises, women are required to refer to male physicians or even unbelievers for medication or surgery

Holy struggle

The result of all above-mentioned is that today the most obligatory of all obligations is participating in public education. This obligation is not only the duty of those engaged in cultural activities, but the duty of everyone who is a Muslim and those who claim to be, whether a member of government or nation. Such a duty must be conducted as a holy struggle and in a religious manner. So religious scholars must take this honor and be the pioneers. The believers and religious people must not fear from schools and science and think that when science comes, religion will be gone. This idea shows lack of faith in Islam. Islam is a religion that grows in a scientific atmosphere better than ignorance. We would fear ignorance and illiteracy more than science and school if we knew what ignorance has done to us and to Islam.

When you acquired knowledge....

Sometimes, we see some people would use the poem of Sanā'ī to conceal their fear of knowledge; the poem that says:

When you acquired knowledge

then fear, for at night

If a thief comes with light

selects goods the better.

And then they say: “See! These schooled people’s harm for the country is a hundred times more than the illiterates’! Illiterate ones might, at maximum, steal unworthy things, but these schooled ones steal millions of Tomans!”

There is no doubt that science, by itself, is not the guarantee for having a prosperous society. A society needs religion and faith as well. However, if faith is not supported by knowledge it would not be useful; it will just be a burden. The holy Prophet stated: “Two kinds of people broke my back: learned people who have no piety and religious people who have no knowledge.”¹¹ Islam neither wants an impious scholar or a religious ignorant.

It is also a fallacy to use “If a thief comes with light * selects goods the better” as an example for the unfaithful educated ones and conclude that knowledge is more dangerous than ignorance. Because the thief who comes with light and steals selected goods, comes at night, not in the day. And he would come at night, when the house owner is asleep. But, he would not be able to steal during the day or when the households are awake. The faithless educated ones use others’ ignorance and sleepiness to steal. So, the common ignorance is influential in such an adversity. Light up your country with the light of knowledge, light up every house like the day, awaken everyone, illuminate everywhere and strengthen the pillars of faith and then that thief would not be able to steal. The causes that facilitated the theft have been the thief’s knowledge, faithlessness, and the common people’s ignorance. So, here ignorance is also responsible.

However, if we want to have a genuine religion, escape from poverty, overcome illness, establish justice among ourselves, bring democracy and freedom and our society becomes motivated towards engaging in social affairs, there would be one way and it is acquiring knowledge which must be inclusive and becomes a holy struggle through religion.

If we do not begin this holy struggle, the world will, and benefit from its fruits. Others will come to educate our nation and God knows what a damage our negligence would cause to Islam.

Men against ignorance

The book *Men Against Ignorance*¹² has reported UNESCO's activities for educating people in underdeveloped countries. Although it is good to see that there are means provided for promoting education among Muslims to gradually eliminate illiteracy from their communities, it is regretful that we Muslims neglect carrying out our duties and that others come from overseas and exert great efforts to fulfil our duty and not only promote general teachings, but establish additional cooperative and health organizations and help people in curing their illnesses, filling the swamps, eradicate malaria, and reform their cities and villages. They would go to places none of us have ever been to far places in countries like Pakistan and Afghanistan and provide extra services.

The statistics in that book show that 96 percent of some Islamic countries have been illiterate until few years ago. The situation has improved and the percentage of illiteracy has decreased. In the last two years, UNESCO's representatives in Asian countries held conferences in Karachi and outlined a twenty-year education plan in Asian countries. This plan which was designed to ensure accuracy based on reliable statistics and considering all possible

options and facilities. They have aroused delight and enthusiasm in the public.

Their intentions behind this act are irrelevant. Maybe a kind of colonial intention is behind the screen. Woe be to us! If the colonial power has entered through such activities, it will be all over with us! Though we do not know their true intentions, we must not put on a black cover over our faults by expressing pessimism. We have the bad habit of interpreting others' activities and intentions as malice in order to cover our faults. It was written in the same book published by the UNESCO that in one African country, a fanatical nationalist accused them that you Europeans have realized that your colonial power is weakened and your political power is being reduced therefore you hide your face under the cover of charity and serving society.

Whatever their intention is, it is irrelevant to us. What affects us is that we understand that if they are successful in educating Islamic countries in twenty years in making them literate and rescuing them from ignorance, poverty, and illnesses, what would the next generation feel towards Islam and being a Muslim? Would not they tell us that we were Muslim and followed the religion of Muhammad for fourteen centuries and were living in ignorance and misery until others stretched their hands from the other side of the world and rescued us? What reputation would then be remained for Islam? What answer should we give for the question of the Prophet (S) if he asks: Did you obey my order that said "To seek the knowledge is duty of all Muslims?"¹³

That is a natural and spiritual principle that "the man is indebted to the beneficence". The Prophet (S) also stated that: "If one revives and fertilizes a wasteland, it will be his." Although this is a legislative ruling about lands, it is true regarding matters in creation. Whoever came and revived a nation and rescued them

from misery, poverty, and ignorance, possessed their hearts, souls and beliefs. Thus, regarding the current situation, we can confidently predict that we are not the owners of future generations. One might say that a Muslim will not convert to other religions, especially if people are educated would never convert from monotheism to anything else. I am saying that it might be that way, but the certain point is that even if they do not convert to another faith, they would lose their interest in Islam and perhaps the communists would benefit from its fruit. If in Islamic countries religious interest of the youth is lost, only the communists will benefit from its fruits. Thus, we must avoid this danger. But how? Would it be through reacting negatively, like always and raise a tumult and shout that UNESCO does not have the right to teach Muslims, struggle, and spend money for this purpose? What does it have to do with them?

Do you think that such attitude is proper? Would we accept this today? Do the Muslim nations accept this from us? Or the solution is that we strive and begin a holy struggle and fulfill this duty ourselves? It was reported in the same book that in Indonesia, which is the most populated Islamic country, general education has become a holy struggle and people would pursue it like other religious duties. In Indonesia, whoever knows something about a job and has a job would consider it his duty to go to schools and teach, because the number of official schoolteachers is not enough for all schools.

This is Islam's command that makes it obligatory for everyone to acquire knowledge. The current form of that command is how in Indonesia, it is being obeyed.

Competing in offering service and in being good

In verse (5:48), after referring to the Qur'an and previous holy scriptures and divine religions, it is stated that:

For each [community] among you We had appointed a code [of law] and a path, and had Allah wished He would have made you one community, but [His purposes required] that He should test you in respect to what He has given you. So take the lead in all good works. (5:48).

It seems that this verse considers it wise that nations differ from each other and maybe it means that different nations compete with each other to do more good and scientific deeds and are tried in this way in order that the competent nation wins the contest. And this verse orders Muslims to make efforts to take bigger steps and win the competition for the good.

So, the way of avoiding the mentioned danger is not avoiding UNESCO. The way of avoiding that danger is that we initiate the work and be the winner and I repeat that it would not work until that is considered a holy struggle and religious scholars pioneer it and consider it prior to all other issues...

I could assign all this discussion to what Islam says about the merits of knowledge and make some propaganda about Islam, but as I said at the beginning, I do not believe in such propaganda and I believe they do not work. I would rather talk about our current situation and mission instead. One can proudly say that Islam says: "To seek the knowledge is duty of all Muslims"¹⁴ only when we make considerable efforts and participate in this holy jihad and progress.

Few minutes after finishing the speech, a respectable audience whom I did not know, gave me a piece of paper on which he had written criticisms on this speech:

It is too general to talk about knowledge from the view of Islam. The obligation of a holy struggle which must begin from primary schools was introduced, but its simplest way to carry it out was not mentioned. Such a discussion can only result in our frustration that why nothing can be done. We believe that we must think about that but it is just a notice and our habit to regret and pass it by. That it was mentioned in the speech that a jihad has begun by many people (UNESCO) is something natural. It would happen, want it or not, with or without propagation. What is certain is that even if the prophets did not come, perhaps human beings would understand what they said and maybe would become believers, but religion came to accelerate his evolutionary progress. Our duty is to promote it from its sluggish state. Thus, an organization and proper practical way on a specific path is needed similar to Sayyid Jamal al-Ddin Asad Abadi's activities.

Grateful to this critic and confessing to the necessity of what he has mentioned, I must add and mention that the most important point in religious issues is to educate ordinary people about their religious obligation; if they are aware and convinced about it they will carry it out like other obligations.

About other religious obligations which people have come to such understanding and belief, we see how sincerely they struggle to perform them. About fifty years ago, for the lack of facilities and security, to perform Hajj was really a struggle. The pilgrims to hajj were not sure whether they would be able to return or not. We saw many people even among peasants who would fast in the burning heat of the summer and would go to harvest at the same time.

Apart from early history of Islam, we would not find that common people struggle so valiantly for knowledge. If there has been any struggle afterwards it was conducted by those who have already acquired some knowledge and started enjoying it. Now imagine what a great movement would happen if people consider this pleasurable activity as a religious obligation and the sentence: “To seek the knowledge is duty of all Muslims”¹⁵ instead of just decorating the notice boards of schools is followed as a serious religious obligation. The great task is that people become aware of this common religious obligation and consider it similar to other obligations.

¹ *Bihār al-Anwār*, ‘Allamah Majlisi, vol. 1, p. 180.

² *Ibid.* vol. 2, p. 177. (With small changes in interpretation)

³ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, trans. by ‘Askari Ja‘fari, maxim no. 80

⁴ *Bihār al-Anwār*, ‘Allamah Majlisi, vol. 2, p.96

⁵ *Mashrutiiyyat*

⁶ *Usūl al-Kāfī*, Sheykh Muhammad Kulaynī, vol. 1, p. 32.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 234

⁹ *Ibid.* p.166.

¹⁰ *Usūl al-Kāfī*, Sheykh Muhammad Kulaynī

¹¹ *Bihār al-Anwār*, ‘Allamah Majlisi, vol. 2, p.111

¹² By Ritchie Calder, Paris : UNESCO (Soleure, printed by Gassmann), 1953.

¹³ *Usūl al-Kāfī*, Sheykh Muhammad Kulaynī

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*