“Read! In the name of your Lord Who has created,” (Surah Al Alaq 96:1)

The first blessed verse (ayat) revealed to our beloved Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) began with ‘IQRA’ - Read. The word “Iqra’ (read or recite)” is a command to read or recite. This word refers to speaking particular words that are either written or memorized by heart (Al-‘Allaamah Taahir ibn ‘Ashoor).

The first verse of Surah Alaq (96:1) is of great significance. It did not order us to establish prayer, pay zakat or comply with the pillars of Islam. It was just the commandment to ‘Read’. Hence, the first duty in Islam that was revealed was to acquire knowledge (‘Read’). In order to excel in all aspects of Islamic studies, we should acquire knowledge from the Qur’an, Sunnah and eminent scholars.

It is a sad state of affairs that, in contemporary times, illiteracy rates in the Muslim world range between 40% among males and 65 % among females, with rural areas lagging behind urban areas by over 10% (ISESCO). This means there are hundreds of millions of illiterates, mostly females, who are unable to read or write. Another set of statistics showed that over 70% of the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world are illiterate (Yahia Abdul Rahman, 2007). Despite the advancements in technology and the use of social media, “Muslims who know how to read, do not read! We do not educate ourselves” (Yahia Abdul Rahman, 2007). Another set of statistics showed that in the 57 member-countries of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), there are an estimated 1,460 universities (UNESCO, SESRTCIC, 2015). That means there is only one university per every 821,918 Muslims. For example, Saudi Arabia has two universities, Turkey has one university, Iran has one university and Malaysia has one university. These are the only Muslim-majority states ranked in the top 500 ranking universities worldwide (CSIC, 2018). The top 5 universities that have published articles within OIC countries (2004-2006) are all in Turkey and include Hacettepe University, Istanbul University, Ankara University, Gazi University and the Middle East Technical University. In addition, the University of Iran ranked 7th, Cairo University 9th, Kuwait University 13th and the University of Malaysia ranked 16th (SESRTCIC, 2015). The contribution of Muslim countries to the scientific world and science literature is also insubstantial.

Within the field of scientific work, the OIC countries have 8.5 scientists, engineers and technicians per 1,000 people as compared to 40.7 of the world average and 139.3 for OECD [Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development] countries. The United States of America has 1.1 million scientists (4,099 per million); Japan has 700,000 (5,095 per million) (Farrukh Saleem, 2005). Forty-six Muslim countries contribute 1.17 % to world science literature as compared to 1.66 percent by India and 1.48 percent by Spain (Wikiislam.net).
In relation to the Nobel Prize, only two Muslim men Abdus Salam (Physics-Italy and UK) and Ahmed Zewail (Chemistry, Egyptian-American scientist) won it in the categories of Physics and Chemistry. Dr. Abdus Salam, when in his home country (Pakistan), is not even considered a Muslim. It is reported that “Over the past 105 years, 1.2 billion Muslims have produced eight Nobel Laureates while a mere 14 million Jews have produced 167 Nobel Laureates”(Wikiislam.net).

Publishing and reading books seems to be a lost asset for most Muslims. The average number of books published per million in the Arab world is approximately 30 (0.7%), compared to about 212 in the US and 584 in Europe. As for the Arab world: the average Arab reads 1/2 page per year as compared to the average American at 11 books per year and the average British at 7 books per year (Yahia Abdul Rahman, 2007).

Unfortunately, these days, many of us want knowledge to fall into our laps or to gain it when it easy and convenient for us. Generally, Muslims on a global scale have lost their reading skills. This is common among undergraduate Muslims students who are dependent on notes from the lecturers and PowerPoint presentations rather than attending a local library to undertake further readings. Even as consumers of knowledge, we have become passive and dependent.

We are no longer willing to sacrifice in order to gain knowledge. We can see many beautiful examples amongst the most knowledgeable of Muslims, the Companions of the Prophet (may Allah have mercy on them all) about their sacrifices and dedications of seeking the right kind of knowledge. One example is Ibn Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) who would sit outside the doors of the older Sahabas, in the heat and the wind, waiting patiently to ask them about hadith. When they would come to him, they would say ‘Why didn’t you send someone for us?’ and he would say ‘No, it is more proper that I come to you’. Another example is of Abu Huraira, (may Allah be pleased with him) who would divide the night into three portions, one for sleep, one for prayer and one for studying hadith. Later scholars would travel for one month to hear a single hadith. Those Sahabas and scholars of the past did not wait for knowledge to come to them but went out to seek knowledge which is the only path that leads directly to Allah and His Paradise. As the Prophet (ﷺ), said,

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\text{Whoever follows a path in order to seek knowledge thereby, Allah will make easy for him, due to it, a path to Paradise. (Muslim)}
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The meaning of the phrase ‘follows a path’ in this hadith, according to Ibn Rajab, is to incorporate both the actual physical following of a path, as well as the non-physical means by which one attains knowledge. This statement would therefore include “all acts such as travelling, walking or driving to attend lectures or meet scholars to learn from them, as well as reading, studying, memorizing, contemplating and so forth. All of these are ‘paths’ by which one seeks knowledge” (Yahia Abdul Rahman, 2011). The majority of commentators on this hadith, state that what is meant by ‘knowledge’ here is knowledge of the religion, although some do assert that it incorporates other types of knowledge as well. Certainly knowledge of the religion would seem to be the most likely knowledge to facilitate us on the path to Paradise. We know from other hadith that seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim, but it does not come without effort. We must sacrifice and struggle to
gain knowledge and when we do this, Allah will make it easy for us to attain that knowledge and follow it to Paradise.

According to Islamic teachings, “literacy is a legitimate duty, moral obligation, message of civilization and social responsibility, which requires all segments of society, including governments, organizations, civil associations, international and professional organizations and trade unions, to contribute to the process of eradicating illiteracy (Abdulaziz Al-Tuwaijri). In conclusion, as Muslims we need to be proactive and increase our capacity to produce, disseminate (through various mediums) and apply knowledge.

Above all, we need to revive the “awakening of knowledge”, in order to become producers rather than consumers of knowledge.

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References


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