

## Two Kinds of Knowledge: A Seminal Quranic Distinction

DR. G R MALIK\*

In Surah *al-Fātir*, the Quran says:

إِنَّمَا يَخْشَى اللَّهَ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ الْعُلَمَاءُ<sup>١</sup>

Only those of the servants of Allah fear him who have knowledge.

Another Quranic verse from Surah *al-Mūmin* reads:

فَلَمَّا جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَرِحُوا بِمَا عِنْدَهُمْ

مِنَ الْعِلْمِ وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِءُونَ<sup>٢</sup>

And when their Messenger came to them, they exulted in the knowledge they possessed and what they used to mock, befell them.

The two verses pose an immediate paradox. If knowledge generates in us God-consciousness and inspires us with the fear of the Supreme Being, how can the same knowledge stand between us and the path shown by Allah's chosen Messengers (peace

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\*Professor of English, University of Kashmir, Srinagar

of Allah on all of them)? Are the two verses mutually contradictory or do they speak of two different kinds of knowledge? The book of Allah and its only authentic exposition, the Sunnah of the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم), are full of adulatory references to knowledge. The cognitive faculty is extolled in the most glowing terms and extreme emphasis is placed on the proper utilization of the cognitive organs. As against 250 legislative verses of the Quran, there are 750 verses which urge us to study and contemplate the universe, and the Prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) declares the ink of a scholar's pen more holy than the blood of the martyr. Why then does the verse from Surah *al-Mumin* seemingly denigrate knowledge?

A close study of the Quran reveals that the two verses quoted above are not mutually exclusive but mark a seminal distinction between two kinds of knowledge. One of these knowledges is unbridled, unbalanced, defective, goalless and directionless, while the other is controlled, balanced, all-comprehensive and inclusive, and with a definite goal and direction. The key verses in this connection occur in Surah *Aal Imrān* of the Quran:

إِنَّ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَأَخْتِلَافِ اللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ لَآيَاتٍ  
 لِأُولِي الْأَلْبَابِ - الَّذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَمًا وَقُعُودًا  
 وَعَلَى جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ  
 رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَطْلًا سُبْحَانَكَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ<sup>3</sup>

Verily in the creation of the heavens and the earth and in the alternation of night and day there are signs for men of reason— men who remember God standing, sitting and on their sides and reflect on the creation of the heavens and the earth, (exclaiming in wonder), our Lord, you have not created this (universe) for naught, glory be to you, save us from the mortification of the Fire (of Hell).

These verses define the nature and scope of knowledge and prescribe a definite methodology and goal for it.

Knowledge is the study, observation and explanation of the phenomena including the objects of sense-perception as well as the alterations in the phenomenal world. Other verses of the Quran, amplifying and elaborating the scope of knowledge, include human self—both in its physical and psychical aspects—and human history, in the phenomena to be contemplated and explained:

سُرِّيهِمْ ءَايَاتِنَا فِي الْأَفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَبَيِّنَ لَهُم أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ ۗ

We will show them signs in the universe and in their own selves until  
it becomes manifest to them that this is the truth.

أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ ۗ

Do they not travel through the earth and observe the end of those before them.

This objective definition of knowledge holds good for both kinds of knowledge. What distinguishes the controlled knowledge from the unbridled one is the methodology and the goal which the Quran prescribes for it. The unbridled knowledge is knowledge for the sake of knowledge, not a means to an end but an end in itself. It observes the phenomena, discovers the laws operating in them and derives conclusions and generalizations from this process without any ulterior purpose and without a methodology beyond the one arising from the study of the phenomena themselves. Consequently it is generally trapped in the mesh of the sensible reality and neither desires nor feels the need of going beyond it. It, therefore, inevitably misses that aspect of reality which the senses fail to comprehend and grasp. As experience has shown, it actually refuses to consider the existence of any supra-sensible reality and thus exhibits pride which is fatal to the process of knowledge and turns this blessing into a curse.

The Quranic methodology for the acquisition of knowledge consists in the subservience of the whole process of study, contemplation and ratiocination to *dhikr*; perpetual remembrance and bearing in mind the Creator in the creation:

لذِينَ يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ قِيَامًا وَقَعُودًا وَعَلَىٰ جُنُوبِهِمْ وَيَتَفَكَّرُونَ فِي خَلْقِ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ

It is highly significant that in the Quranic statement *dhikr* takes precedence over *fikr* (contemplation) and this defines the contours of the methodology of acquiring knowledge. Besides this, knowledge is not an end in itself but a means to an end and the end is underlined in,

رَبِنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا سُبْحَانَكَ فَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ

That is to say, the end is to establish a vital contact with the ultimate source of all creation, Allah subhanahu wa taala, and contemplate all phenomena under this aspect. Such contact leads to the revelation that nothing in the universe of creation is meaningless and purposeless, nothing is *bātil*, and that all objects have a symbolical, a divine aspect to them. This brings about a radical change in the whole approach and way of study and contemplation and allows access to those aspects of reality which elude the grasp of the merely physical and unbridled knowledge. The Quran, therefore, lays particular stress upon this elusive aspect of reality and leaves all other aspects to human reason and experimentation as their very proper and only sphere. In surah *al-Baqarah*, Allah subhanahu wa taala says:

يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْأَهِلَّةِ ۖ قُلْ هِيَ مَوَاقِيتُ لِلنَّاسِ وَالْحَجِّ ۗ

They ask you concerning the phases of the moon; say they are signs to compute periods of time and for pilgrimage.

Evidently the scientist's answer to the question, 'they ask you concerning the phases of the moon', would be different. The Quran, by no means, rules out that answer. On the

other hand, it is left for human reason to sort out. But the facet that the merely rational and physical knowledge would ignore is brought to light here.

The Quranic exhortation to study and contemplate human history is too well-known but the Quran scrupulously avoids —nay, refuses to deal with—the merely factual and objective description of history. That is left to human intellect, to the exploration of the historian. In Surah *al-Kahf* the Quran brushes aside as irrelevant from this point of view the number of the sleepers in the cave (*ashāb al-kahf*), or the name of the person who acted as the guide of Moses (Allah's peace be upon him). The following verse from Surah *al-Hajj* sums up the Quranic attitude in this respect most tellingly:

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونَ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ بِهَا أَوْ آذَانٌ يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا فَإِنَّهَا لَا تَعْمَى الْأَبْصَارُ وَلَكِنْ تَعْمَى الْقُلُوبُ الَّتِي فِي الصُّدُورِ<sup>7</sup>

Do they not travel through the land so that they could have hearts (and minds) wherewith to feel and think, and ears wherewith to hear. For indeed it is not the eyes which turn blind; it is the hearts within the bosoms which turn blind.

In its exhortations on the observation and study of Nature, again, the Quran sometimes hints at and sometimes clearly brings out the divine aspect of reality:

مَا تَرَى فِي خَلْقِ الرَّحْمَنِ مِنْ تَفْوُتٍ فَأَرْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ هَلْ تَرَى مِنْ فُطُورٍ

ثُمَّ ارْجِعِ الْبَصَرَ كَرَّتَيْنِ يَنْقَلِبْ إِلَيْكَ الْبَصَرُ خَاسِئًا وَهُوَ حَسِيرٌ<sup>8</sup>

You cannot detect a fault in the creation of the most merciful God.

Turn your vision once more and see whether there is any flaw anywhere.

Turn your vision yet another time, it will surely come back to you worn out and dismayed.

أَوَلَمْ يَرِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضَ كَانَتَا رَتْقًا فَفَتَقْنَاهُمَا وَجَعَلْنَا  
مِنَ الْمَاءِ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ حَيًّا أَفَلَا يُؤْمِنُونَ<sup>9</sup>

Do not the unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together,  
then we clove them asunder and created every living thing from water; shall they not then believe?

أَوَءَايَةٌ لَهُمُ الْأَرْضُ الْمَيِّتَةُ أَحْيَيْنَاهَا<sup>10</sup>

A sign for them is the dead earth which we revive.

The universe of creation, from this angle of vision, is a revelation, the *Quran-i-takvini* (created Quran), as it has been aptly termed, and it is organically related to the revealed Quran (*Quran-i-tadvini*). That is why the Quranic verse, رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا رَبَّنَا مَا خَلَقْتَ هَذَا بَاطِلًا is followed by the affirmation of the other revelation, the *wahy*:

رَبَّنَا إِنَّا أَسْمِعْنَا مُنَادِيًا يُنَادِي لِلْإِيمَانِ<sup>11</sup>

Our Lord, we heard the crier calling unto (the path of) faith.

This organic vision of reality gives birth to a knowledge which is balanced and all-inclusive and joins man with the ultimate source of all creation, knowledge and power, Whose awe fills the heart every moment:

انما يخشى الله من عباده العلمو

Most of us have listened, with a sense of elation, to the story of Sir James Jeans, related by one of his illustrious disciples, Allama Inayat-ul-lah Khan Mashriqui. As the Khan recited the above-quoted Quranic verse, the scientist exclaimed, most spontaneously and involuntarily, that if it is a Quranic verse Muhammad was certainly God's Messenger and the Quran is certainly a revealed book. How else could an unlettered

person like Muhammad (صلى الله عليه وسلم) so simply and inartificially sum up the quintessence of 50 years of my painstaking research. In our enthusiasm for an outstanding scientist's vindication of the Quranic truth (and the enthusiasm is not certainly misdirected) we tend to ignore the all-important fact that only a God-conscious scientist like Sir James Jeans, could write a book like *The Mysterious Universe*.

Once the contact between knowledge and the ultimate reality is severed and knowledge becomes goalless and directionless, it follows whatever expediency dictates. If, for instance, it demands that nuclear energy should be used to produce a lethal atomic bomb, then so be it. The unbridled knowledge is not, therefore, value-free. The ethics that it follows has for its source and sanction the physical facts that it explores which, from the Islamic point of view, is a form of idol-worship. The guided knowledge, on the other hand, has to submit itself to the control of the Divine ethical code and cannot use its power in destructive ways. Controlled knowledge is not, therefore, fettered knowledge; it is only safeguarded knowledge, safeguarded from the dangers and pitfalls that inevitably lie in the way of unbridled knowledge. Consequently it is not much knowledge that maketh us made but unbridled knowledge. In the words of the Quran it turns men into beasts:

لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ لَا يَفْقَهُونَ بِهَا وَهُمْ أَعْيُنٌ لَا يُبْصِرُونَ بِهَا وَهُمْ آذَانٌ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ

بِهَا أُولَئِكَ كَالْأَنْعَامِ بَلْ هُمْ أَضَلُّ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْغَافِلُونَ<sup>12</sup>

They have hearts wherewith they do not feel, eyes wherewith they do not see, and ears wherewith they do not hear; they are like cattle, nay worse, they are neglectful.

Thus man who has essentially been created in the best of conformations (*ahsan taqwīm*) falls to the lowest of the low (*asfala safilīn*) by his arbitrary and irresponsible conduct.

As has been mentioned above, the driving force behind unbridled knowledge pride for which there is no place in controlled and guided knowledge whose greater achievement is the discovery of its own limitations. It knows that it cannot fathom the ultimate mystery of existence—the ‘why’ and ‘wherefore’ of the universe of creation. Analysis and empirical study are successful tools for a partial understanding of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of things but they falter as they try to tackle the ‘why’ of things. The Quran, even as it encourages the analytical and empirical method of acquiring knowledge, does not exclude the way of synthesis and intuition which grasps truth all at once instead of approaching it piece-meal.

The guided knowledge also knows that it can neither fully comprehend nor legislate for spiritual and moral affairs because they involve certain metaphysical issues which are beyond the pale of human understanding. For guidance in this domain Allah subhanahu wa taala had to send his Messengers.

رُسُلًا مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ لِئَلَّا يَكُونَ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَى اللَّهِ حُجَّةٌ بَعْدَ الرُّسُلِ<sup>13</sup>

Messengers with good tidings and as warners so that mankind should have no argument against Allah after the Messengers.

That is to say man's accountability would not have been justified in the absence of the Messengers and the revelation as he is not sufficiently equipped to find the path of moral and spiritual salvation on his own.



**REFERENCES:**

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5. Surah *ar-Rūm*, V.9.
6. V. 189.
7. V. 46.
8. Surah *al-Mulk*, Vs. 3-4.
9. Surah *al-Anbia*, V. 30.
10. Surah *Yāsīn*, V. 33.
11. Surah *Aal-Imrān*, V. 193.
12. Surah *al-A'rāf*, V. 179.
13. Surah *an-Nisa*, V. 165.

