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## SOME THOUGHTS ON TRAINING 'ULAMA

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Though there is no concept of priesthood in Islam yet a class has come into existence which is known as 'ulama or called clerics in English. In Islam any person, if he/she has adequate knowledge can perform all the functions and rituals be it related to marriage, death or other obligations for Muslims. Alim (plural ulama) means one who knows. Thus whole emphasis is on knowledge of Qur'an and hadith irrespective of class, caste, race or nationality. Since knowledge is central this class came to be called 'ulama.

Now the question is what knowledge should be imparted to these persons who are supposed to guide the community. The Ulama often quote a hadith that since Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is the last prophet the ulama are like stars after him and Muslims should seek guidance from them as stars guide and become source of light in darkness of night and ignorance is like darkness.

Now in those days when the tribe of 'ulama began to come into existence the most important knowledge was that of Qur'an and hadith which embodied total knowledge for guidance of the community. And in the island of Arabia which had no literary tradition before Islam, Qur'an and hadith imparted revolutionary tradition of knowledge. Anyone having that knowledge was counted among great alim. Also Qur'an and hadith were main sources of shari'ah law so its knowledge was main source of knowledge.

However, as Islam spread to other countries with old culture and civilization and other sources of law, besides these 'ulama with their knowledge limited to Qur'an and hadith other types of ulama also came into existence i.e. those who acquired knowledge from other sources like philosophy, mathematics, physical sciences like optics, chemistry, physics, astronomy and so on. These ulama put emphasis on reason and rational sciences besides traditional sources like Qur'an and hadith.

These rational sciences, over period of time became so important that they became source of syllabus for training of 'ulama and came to be known as *ulum al-aqliyah* which mainly consisted of translations from Greek philosophy and other sciences. In those days Greek sciences were the most advanced ones and these rational sciences were supposed to broaden the vision of the ulama. They were thought to be so important that Socrates whose disciple was Plato (Flatoon or Aflatoon) was thought to be one of the prophets.

Muslims produced great philosophers who contributed richly and whose commentaries on Greek philosophy were taught in European universities and Christian seminaries throughout middle ages. Thus the Christian priests studied al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Ibn Rushd (Averros) etc. in their seminaries. Thus all kinds of rational sciences flourished during medieval ages in the Islamic world and Muslim ulama learnt these sciences.

Now these Greek sciences are mostly of historical importance and humankind has made tremendous progress in social and physical sciences and no one can claim to be an alim without knowledge of these contemporary developments. Unfortunately colonial period and development

of these sciences in Europe had to be simultaneous and since Muslim countries were victims of colonial rule, Muslims in general and the Ulama in particular, became highly prejudiced against all western or European sciences. Their source was mainly colonial.

Also, the Islamic seminaries while taking out their anger against colonial masters did not understand difference between colonial rulers and scientists many of whom were themselves persecuted by the rulers. It is not the rulers who developed science but it was scientists who did and also these ulama by now considered traditional Greek philosophy and science as integral part of their religion which was totally wrong. These ulama had resisted Greek knowledge and many philosophers were persecuted but later they adopted and made these sciences part of their syllabus, and then of their religion.

Similarly they resisted modern social and physical sciences as irreligious being imported from colonial west and rejected these 'ulum. However, later they began to accept these sciences but would not teach them in the Islamic seminaries. Still they teach traditional Greek sciences as if it is part of Islamic knowledge. Now it is high time that Islamic seminaries integrate, like Greek sciences earlier, part of syllabus in Islamic seminaries.

Today the whole emphasis in these seminaries is on traditional sciences and theological issues which is of course necessary but only as a part of training. Along with these theological issues they must train the students in these seminaries in modern social and physical sciences which will greatly help broaden their vision. They should also be trained in reinterpreting Qur'an so that it can embrace modern knowledge. The earlier commentaries and interpretations were done in the light of knowledge which was available then. One cannot continue to teach same tafsir (commentary) as if not only Qur'an but also the tafsir literature is also divine. While Qur'an is divine, tafsir is entirely human effort to understand it within the parameters of available knowledge.

The existing hadith literature comprises both authentic as well as hadith of doubtful origin. The students must be trained in modern method of critiquing the existing hadith literature and rigorously select only those which are authentic and in keeping with reason. Integrity of the narrator is not enough; it should also fulfill the criterion of reason. Reason and intellect are divine gifts and the Qur'an recognizes the role of 'aql (reason).

Also, in these madrasas sectarianism is flourishing and so there is great need for future ulama to learn the value of tolerance and moderation. The fundamental values of Qur'an (truth<sup>9</sup>haq), justice ('adl), doing good<sup>10</sup>hsan), compassion rahmah) and wisdom (hikmah) must be taught and emphasized. Also, knowledge of comparative religion must be imparted which is highly necessary in the modern pluralist world.

Only such a comprehensive syllabus will produce future ulama.