

## Research and Publication: A Muslim Perspective

Md. Mahmudul Hasan<sup>1</sup>  
International Islamic University Malaysia

### Abstract

Discussion on research and publication from a Muslim/Islamic perspective may sound oxymoronic to readers who view Islam as inherently incompatible with scientific advancement and antagonistic to intellectual pursuits. Considering the supreme importance that Islam lays on knowledge and intellectual activities, it is baffling to see Muslims' progressive remoteness from them. There is a tendency among many Muslims to refer back to, and take pride in, the intellectual feats of early Muslim civilisations. However, such pleasures in past achievements, if unaccompanied by scholarly exertions now, may verge on complacency. Given the predicaments of contemporary Muslims on multiple fronts, academics and scholars among them have a responsibility to represent their community. They can do so only through superior research output, not through superficial and mediocre work. Based on this premise, this essay is a call to Muslim academics as well as future contributors to *Asiatic* to strive for excellence in research and writing.

### Keywords

Knowledge in Islam, scholarly feats of early Muslims, intellectual practice among contemporary Muslims, the art of representation, excellence in research

### Introduction: Interpreting a smile

About a decade ago, I had the opportunity to speak before a group of academics and share with them my understanding of research and publication. Since the members of the audience were predominantly Muslim, I referred to verse 9:122 of the Qur'an in order to emphasise the importance of research and scholarly activity in Islam. The verse suggests that, even during the time of all-out war, there should be a distinct group of scholars in the Muslim community who will disengage themselves from combat and continue to devote themselves to learning

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<sup>1</sup> **Md. Mahmudul Hasan** is the Editor-in-Chief of *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*. He teaches and researches English and postcolonial literatures at IIUM. Previously, he taught at the English Department of the University of Dhaka and had a postdoctoral research stint at the University of Heidelberg. He has published extensively with Wiley-Blackwell, Brill, Georgia Southern University, IIIT, Routledge, SAGE, Orient BlackSwan, IIUM, and other presses. Email: mmhasan@iium.edu.my

and research.<sup>2</sup> I wanted to tell the audience that they were religiously obligated to conduct responsible research and thus to guide and benefit the wider community. Hearing me bring religion (Islam) in the sphere of research and scholarly inquiry, a member of the audience – who sat in the front row – turned his eyes on me with a look of distrust and gave me a suppressed smile which could be interpreted as one of ridicule, sarcasm, or bewilderment. It seemed to me that he could not comprehend the fact that I mentioned “Islam” and “research” in the same breath.

Perhaps, he smiled at me because most academics that he knew did not research and publish to fulfil their religious obligations. Most of them did so for reasons other than purely intellectual or altruistic ones. Through publishing their work, they seek to make their way up the career ladder. That is to say, many academics make scholarly contributions for material and professional rewards as well as for public adulation and recognition of success (Hasan, “Publishing in Academic” 3).<sup>3</sup>

Another possible reason why he offered me the suppressed smile was the split between scholarship and the global Muslim community that has been growing wider for the last centuries and is staring us in the face. Among the major religious communities in the world today, Muslims collectively lag far behind others in education and intellectual pursuits. Therefore, I understand why many people believe that Islam and research are poles apart. However, my colleague’s not-so-innocuous smile made me ponder upon Islam’s take on scholarly pursuits and the gap that prevails between research activities and Muslims as a whole in the contemporary world, on which I elaborate further below.

### **Muslims’ intellectual attainments: Then and now**

Even though the two oldest operating and degree-awarding universities – the University of al-Qarawiyyin in Morocco (est. 859) and Egypt’s Al-Azhar University (est. 972) – are in the Muslim world (Hasan, “Discussing religion” 8), educational institutions in Muslim countries are now not known as the best seats of learning. None of the top 100 publishers is in the Muslim world. I think it is fair to say that among the leading journals in any discipline, not many are run by Muslims. Nor do most of the best writers in any discipline belong to the global Islamic community. It is often the case that books – even those on Islamic sciences – authored by contemporary Muslim scholars are relatively of poor

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<sup>2</sup> It reads:

With all this, it is not desirable that all of the believers take the field [in time of war]. From within every group in their midst, some shall refrain from going forth to war, and shall devote themselves [instead] to acquiring a deeper knowledge of the Faith and [thus be able to] teach their home-coming brethren, so that these [too] might guard themselves against evil. (Qur’an, 9:122 [trans. Muhammad Asad])

<sup>3</sup> In an earlier work, I deplored: “Greed for money and status and lust for power and other materialistic ambitions seem to determine students’ educational intensity, career choice and work trajectory” (Hasan “Approaching Teaching” 7).

quality; and hence students and learners prefer materials produced by non-Muslim writers. That is not to say that there are no outstanding scholars and writers in Muslim societies. There are, but their number is disproportionately meagre and inadequate to represent the numerically strong global Muslim community.

I am aware of Muslims' foundational contributions to different branches of knowledge and scientific inquiry in the past. The arrival of Islam and, more specifically, the spread of the concept of tawhid (monotheism) facilitated scientific research and innovation (Kabir). It is now widely acknowledged that

Muslims were the medium through which ancient science and philosophy were revived and put on the stage of life for everyone, supplemented and transmitted in a manner that made the Renaissance of Western Europe possible. (Dahami 2)

Few people would deny this glorious past of the Muslims; and its occasional mention may have inspirational value, especially for the younger generation. However, it may prove meaningless and smack of complacency if Muslims choose to merely regurgitate what their predecessors had achieved but do not emulate them in developing a similarly vibrant scholarly culture with high academic standards. In the absence of strenuous intellectual practices in sight among most Muslim academics today, revelling in the "glory of past Muslim civilizations, which produced great scientists, mathematicians, doctors, pharmacists and philosophers" (Ali 23) may be interpreted as a sign of smug satisfaction with the status quo (things as they are).

Early Muslims rose to the occasion and met the intellectual challenges of their time. Muslims in today's world have a different set of existential and intellectual conundrums and cultural crises. Early Muslims did their part, and it is the responsibility of the contemporary Muslims to face contemporary problems and formulate strategies to meet current and impending issues. Early Muslim scholars will not rise from their graves to confront the educational and cultural crises their successors are experiencing now.

### **Pride in the past and present responsibilities**

I have noticed an ardent desire among many Muslims to make mention of the glories of their predecessors and to bask in the glow of past accomplishments. However, I believe, while they should remember and take pride in the past and draw inspiration from it, their focus should be on the here and now. The point I am driving home is that Muslim scholars may take pride in, and receive motivation from, the heights of their predecessors, but they must not inhabit the past by telling tales about it and at the same time be guilty of a gross dereliction of their responsibilities as academics.

It may not be advisable for contemporary Muslims to have their gaze glued to the past and to remain steeped in romantic imagination. Decades ago, I

was in London for a few days. One day, my host and a good friend of mine took me to a talk where the speaker Muhammad Abdul Bari (1953-),<sup>4</sup> in a by-the-way fashion, regretted the tendency among many Muslims to remain bogged down with the past as if, for them, time remained frozen in a metastable state. He then provided a wonderful example which I illustrate below.

While driving we are required to check the rear-view mirror every 10-20 seconds. But if we keep looking at it and do not see what is in front of us, traffic accident is inevitable and can be fatal. In other words, even though we need to glance in the rear-view mirror in order to observe the traffic behind the vehicle, we cannot afford to turn our head around and forget to pay utmost attention to what lies ahead. We should be alive to the past, but we must not plunge into it; we are required to spend more time and energy looking as far ahead as possible. This insight offers a particularly telling message for the Muslims of today about their relationship with the past in the light of their present condition, around which the following discussion centres.

### **The plight of Muslims**

Muslim communities around the world are under global scrutiny and are facing a defining moment. They are regularly targeted by both state and non-state actors for oppression and humiliation. Crippled by various crises and weaknesses, they have largely lost past glories, and their overarching condition has now become dismal. Many writers have touched on the plight of the ummah (the global Muslim community). Here I am referring to three of them – two belonging to the early twentieth century and the third, to the twenty-first century.

In a speech in London on 18 March 1936, the British writer Marmaduke Pickthall (1875-1936) – an illustrious Muslim convert and “a literary artist of the first order” (Hasan, “Marmaduke Pickthall”) – said:

The condition of the Muslims to-day is sorry as compared with what it was three hundred years ago; pitiful compared with what it was a thousand years ago; but compared with what it was fifty years ago I think it has improved considerably. Then it seemed quite hopeless. Now it is full of hope. The Muslims needed shocks—and Heaven knows they have had them. (“The Muslims” 222)

Through this assessment of the condition of the transnational Muslim community, Pickthall voiced a contemporary optimism. While it was bleak and dreary during the peak of European colonisation of Muslim countries, Pickthall noticed a reawakening among them during his time which he hoped would build a better future for them.

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<sup>4</sup> A British-Bangladeshi writer, Abdul Bari later became the Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain (2006-2010) and was, among others, the “only non-white board member of the London Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games (2006-2013)” (Hasan, “Review” 60).

Pickthall's contemporary, the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), in his poem "To the Holy Prophet" (1934), depicts the predicament of Muslims many of whom were "lying crushed and writhing under various European colonial powers" (Hasan "Iqbal's and Hassan's Complaints" 199). But towards the end of the poem, Iqbal strikes a note of optimism, stating: "In this vast world perhaps another caravan one day appear" (356). Iqbal expected a generational change among Muslims and hoped for their better versions in the time to come. However, unfortunately, things in the Muslim world have not panned out as Pickthall and Iqbal anticipated.

Fast forward to the twenty-first century, Muslim countries in the postcolonial era have been ravaged by foreign interventions, invasions, and mass migrations of their populations. As a result, many millions of Muslims are now displaced and turned into refugees; they are stranded in makeshift camps or stuck at tangled barbed-wire fences at international borders. The plight of Muslims in Muslim-majority countries is not promising either. In many of them, political oppression has exacerbated and tyranny is further consolidated. Their populations are victims of corruption and exploitation, while educational backwardness is a major impediment to addressing varied problems there. In a poem titled "SMS to Sir Muhammad Iqbal" (2002), the Malaysian writer Mohd. Kamal Hassan (1942-) provides an account of the condition of Muslims in the early twenty-first century when "Western global powers wove an all-pervasive web of domination and exploitation of them" (Hasan, "Iqbal's and Hassan's Complaints" 195). While describing the external threats, Hassan also evaluates and draws attention to the internal weaknesses of the Muslims. He says that "the world of the *Musulman* is the champion of corruption and mediocrity, / [And its] rulers are among the smartest in deceiving the masses" (17).

The sufferings of Muslims in both Muslim-majority countries and in Muslim-minority ones are unabated. Many Muslims live in fear and are repeatedly affected by war, hostilities, and other organised violence. At the same time, Muslim communities collectively are subjected to prejudices and stereotypes because of a blatant misconception of Islam as a religion and Muslims as a religious group. In books and articles as well as in electronic media contents, they are mired in a web of misinformation. They are regularly demonised and dehumanised, and find themselves unwittingly caught in propaganda war. In order to caricature Islam and Muslims, elements hostile to them have crafted and disseminated odious narratives and vile rhetorics which Edward Said called Orientalism and Gayatri Spivak, "epistemic violence" (280). What is more, because of the often distorted image of Muslims and their religion, among ordinary people, there is a sympathy deficit towards them when they suffer persecution and discrimination. The following analogy may help explain it further.

Let us suppose that there is a fatal car accident involving some people who are represented as decent, respectable, and righteous. Their tragic end will logically generate public sympathy and support. Conversely, if the same victims are portrayed as criminals and perpetrators of violence, the public reaction will likely be one of apathy and indifference. Similarly, the widespread negative attitudes towards Muslims arise from how they are represented in written and visual sources, and this leads us to the following section.

### **The issue of representation**

The most critical problem facing the Muslims in today's world is one of representation. In many cases, they are wrongly represented and their religion, wrongly interpreted. This misrepresentation has a direct bearing upon how they perceive themselves and how they are treated by others. In such a cultural context, the burden of responsibility falls on academics and writers in Muslim communities. As I have stressed in the anecdote at the beginning of this essay, they are morally and religiously obligated to research and publish in order to rectify the constant misrepresentation to which their communities have been subjected.

Unfortunately, in the art of representation, today's Muslims as a whole have not performed very well. They are largely information and knowledge consumers (not providers) and have not been able to establish a competitive advantage in the areas of knowledge production and management. This sorry state is a consequence of their forgetfulness about a key Islamic value. As Husain states: "Many of the real Islamic values, especially the emphasis on knowledge as the key to salvation, find greater adherents outside Islam today than within it" (3-4). This is despite the fact that in the Islamic view of human life, "knowledge is associated with high status and *taqwa* (righteousness/Godliness) and is declared the legacy of prophets" (Shah 54). I hope what follows will make it clear.

### **The primacy of knowledge and intellectual activity in Islam**

The earliest revelation that Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) received from God comprises the first five verses of chapter 96 of the Qur'an. They begin with a command:

Read in the name of your Sustainer Who has created. He created human out of a germ-cell. Read, for your Sustainer is the Most Bountiful One Who has taught [human] the use of the pen – taught human what they did not know. (Qur'an 96:1-5)<sup>5</sup>

The prominence of reading and the pen (that can arguably stand for the act of writing)<sup>6</sup> in the very first revelation to Prophet Muhammad indicated clearly "the

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<sup>5</sup> All translations from Arabic are mine, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>6</sup> According to one scholar, "The pen symbolizes the advent of language, and the whole of culture built on language" (Brandys 8).

important role reading and knowledge were going to play” in the Islamic way of life (Badawi 47).

Knowledge is so central to Islam that the German-American academic and Yale professor Franz Rosenthal (1914–2003) says that “*ilm* [knowledge] is one of those concepts that have dominated Islam and given Muslim civilization its distinctive shape and complexion” (2). He goes to the extent of equating knowledge with the religion and vice versa, stating: “*Ilm* is Islam, even if the theologians have been hesitant to accept the technical correctness of this equation” (Rosenthal 2).

In the Qur’an, knowledge and Divine revelation have been used synonymously, as many of its verses, such as 2:31, 2:251, 3:48, 12:37 and 18:65-66, “testify that prophets invariably received the inestimable blessing of knowledge from God” and “it was knowledge that they were commanded to disseminate first and foremost” (Hasan, “Approaching Teaching” 5). There are innumerable Qur’anic verses that emphasise the primacy of knowledge. For example: “Those truly fear Allah, among His servants, who are knowledgeable” (35:28). “Say: Are those who know and those who do not know equal, the same?” (39:9)

Likewise, there are many Prophetic traditions that highlight the value of knowledge. Prophet Muhammad says:

There is no envy except in two cases: 1) one whom God has given wealth and enabled them to spend it in the right causes, 2) and one whom God has given wisdom (knowledge) according to which they conduct themselves and teach it to others. (Bukhari and Muslim, qtd. in *Mishkat Ul Masabeeh* 58)

The superiority of an ‘alim (scholar) over an ‘abid (devotee) is like the prominence of a full moon over the stars. (Tirmidhi, qtd. in *Mishkat Ul Masabeeh* 61)

It is because of this primordial importance of knowledge in Islam that Pickthall regards the existence of ignorant Muslims as “a contradiction in terms” and says that in “the great days of Islam, an ignorant Muslim, like an indigent Muslim, could hardly have been found” (*The Cultural* 13). If truth be told, the current educational status of Muslims collectively does not tally with the level of emphasis their religion lays on intellectual practices.

Highlighting the importance of knowledge for Muslims both in this world and in the hereafter, Atiya Fyzee (1877-1967) states:

It is true that only knowledge benefits human beings. Honour in life and paradise in the after-life, it gives a rank in both worlds. May God make the light of learning shine again in our community. (161)

Regarding after-death rewards of knowledge producers, Prophet Muhammad says:

When a person dies, all his good deeds cease except for three: a perpetual act of charity, *beneficial knowledge*, and a righteous child who prays for them. (Muslim, qtd. in *Mishkat Ul Masabeeh* 58-59 [emphasis added])

One of the best ways to leave beneficial knowledge is through research and publication, which involves writing. Chapter 68 of the Qur'an is titled "al-Qalam" (the pen) which "indirectly stresses the act of writing" (Hasan "What Do Your Lockdown"); and, as mentioned before, God also mentions pen in verse 96:4 in the Qur'an. These facts are suggestive of the importance of knowledge production in Islam, which rounds off my discussion in this essay.

What I seek to reiterate here is this: Muslim academics need to engage in meaningful research and publication, and much more so to represent themselves and what they believe and stand for, not simply to work their way up to higher professional positions. Their inability in this respect will have far reaching consequences for themselves and for their communities.

### **Conclusion: A call for excellence in research and publication**

There is considerable interest among the global population to know about Islam and Muslims, and the onus is primarily on Muslim academics to satisfy this thirst for information about their religion and community. They cannot evade this duty, nor can they relegate it to others. Inferior research and poor publication output may not meet the challenges of the time and may even be counterproductive. In the past, the publication of a written material was often an event, as there were inadequate number of writers as well as publishing firms and platforms. Now writers are in great numbers and there are innumerable ways to have their works published, whereas readers' attention is being distracted by the preponderance of reading materials out there – both in the print and electronic media. Therefore, a book or article must have compelling reasons of superior quality to attract readers.

The twenty-first century has seen an explosion of published materials, and hence readers have many choices in front of them. A poorly researched and hastily and incoherently written work may not attract readers' attention and may only gather dust on the shelf or remain unread on the Internet. As I said in an earlier essay, "Nepotism or prejudice plays almost no role in scholarly material selection, as quality reigns supreme here" (Hasan "Publishing in Academic" 5). When selecting reading materials, readers think first about their merit not necessarily about the identity of their authors. Reading is an investment of time and energy in learning and knowing, and it is only logical and in consonance with their natural instinct that they will be cautious in making this investment. They are drawn to well-crafted materials even if written by strangers and distance themselves from half-baked publications even if authored by people known to them.



Therefore, the Qur’anic concept of ihsan or excellence is most pertinent to the field of research and publication. The Qur’an says: “And then, one whose weight [of good deeds] is heavy in the balance shall find themselves in a happy state of life” (101:6-7). What will make the difference on the Day of Judgement is the weight, not necessarily the volume, of work. Therefore, in order to maintain their relevance to their profession, Muslim academics need to aspire to be more competitive in writing and to produce high-quality, impactful (weighty) work. Only then their entry into the world of academia and research will be more worthwhile.

It is this quest for excellence in writing that guides me in the selection of manuscripts (from available submissions) for *Asiatic*. This issue of the journal is a testament to our commitment to produce quality knowledge. I am grateful to all authors and co-authors for choosing *Asiatic* as a home for their work, and to the reviewers for their time, efforts, and sincerity in providing suggestions for the improvement of manuscripts. The book review and creative writing editors of *Asiatic* have remained pillars of support for me in running the journal. Since I took over the responsibility of editing the journal, Atikah Yusri has been offering me unfailing (technical) support. Atikah has now graduated from IIUM and entered the world of work. In this editorial, I would like to register my gratitude and heartiest appreciation to her. Thank you, Atikah!

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