

Reflections

***Iqra'*— The Pursuit of Knowledge**

Sanusi bin Junid*

As we know, Islam is the only religion with a book, the first word of which is the command to "read". As Allah (SWT) did not position the word *Iqra'* by accident, it is therefore a divine indication on the importance of acquiring knowledge. Our Prophet Muhammad (SAS) stated that the acquisition of knowledge is a duty imposed upon every Muslim, man and woman. Muslims are taught to pray for an increase in knowledge "*Rabbi zidnī 'ilmā.*" We are exhorted to vigorously pursue knowledge. But knowledge, as is beauty and good deeds, is neutral. Knowledge recognizes no religious, racial, cultural or political barriers. It is not prejudicial against color, size or family background. It is common to see Muslims studying about Islam from non-Muslims or from books written by them. A man of knowledge is an honorable man. But being a Muslim does not make it easier for us to acquire knowledge. We have been taught through a ḥadīth that "wisdom is the lost property of the Muslims, he recovers it where so ever he finds it". The Prophet further said: "Learn, even if it is from China." There are therefore no boundaries beyond which Muslims must not seek knowledge. There is no person from whom knowledge cannot be acquired. But knowledge it must be, not just wrong information.

Lessons from the Second World War

Much as Islam puts knowledge and the acquisition of knowledge as a priority, the non-Muslims appear to take it more seriously. The Japanese know that they lost the Second World War to science and technology. With their *bushido* spirit and their suicide squads they could not have lost had their technology equalled that of the allied powers. The Germans had alienated the Jews, and therefore alienated the vast

* YB. Tan Sri Dato' Seri Sanusi bin Junid is President of International Islamic University Malaysia. This is a part of the convocation address delivered at the 16th convocation of IIUM on 12th Rajab 1421/10th October 2000.

knowledge that the Jews had. In the book entitled *Einstein's German World* the eminent historian Fritz Stern lamented that without the Nazi atrocities and the flight of the Jews, the twentieth century could have been the German century. The Jews of Germany and other European countries overrun by the Germans emigrated to Britain and the United States. Many Jews, sensing the growth of Nazism, fled Germany as early as during the First World War and after. Germany lost the war to the emigrated Jewish technology.

Winston Churchill, who was not noted for his academic achievement, recognized the importance of knowledge and ideas. He said: "The future emperor of the world is the emperor of ideas." It appears that the West does not need a religious commandment to inspire, at least enough number of them, to obsessively pursue knowledge to extremities; but insufficient number of Muslims are paying enough attention to the call of *Iqra'*.

Where is Knowledge?

However, in our search for knowledge we should know where to look. Otherwise we shall never find it. There is a German anecdote about a man searching under a street light for something he had lost. The dialogue goes -

Haben sie etwas verloren?

Have you lost something?

Ja, ich habe etwas verloren.

Yes, I have lost something.

Haben sie etwas hier verloren, unter den licht?

Have you lost it here under this light?

Hein, ich habe es nicht hier verloren

No, I have not lost it here

Wann sie nicht hier verloren, warum suchen sie hier dann?

Since you did not lose it here, why are you searching here then?

Es gibt hier licht.

Because there is light here.

In pursuing the ḥadīth "... wisdom is the lost property of the Muslims, he recovers it where so ever he finds it..." Muslim of the world must know where to find the lost wisdom, for otherwise we will be on a wild goose chase and searching the haystack when the pin is not there.

Acquisition and Discovery of Knowledge

The acquisition of knowledge or the discovery of it is a continuous process. Except for students of history or religion, where anything new is mostly reinterpretations of familiar, but difficult subjects, information

and new knowledge or interpretations, particularly in the sciences are disseminated in explosively amazing volumes all the time.

In the United States alone there are more than 14,000 magazines published for the general public. Above these magazines there are 55,000 trade books published annually; that is one professional book every 10 minutes, excluding specialized journals and scientific books. Items in the Library of Congress are doubling every 7 years on the subject of environment alone, as an example, and the number of publications is doubling every 18 months. From these sources it is difficult to identify, classify and claim the contributions of Muslims in substantial ways, except if we look at knowledge as a continuous flow of discoveries; for then, ignoring the Muslims' numerous contributions along the way might have stopped or delayed recent discoveries of certain knowledge. The reverse, that is, the Muslims' recent findings in new discoveries must also have had non-Muslim contributions along the way must also be true. It cannot be otherwise.

Future of the Ummah

It was in the light of this consciousness that in 1982, in a paper entitled "Islamization of Knowledge and the Future of the Ummah," Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed reminded all Muslims about the content of the Qur'an which stressed that "Allah does not change the fate of men unless they change themselves." Dr. Mahathir reminded us that when Islam came it was a modernizing force, and that Muslims must be dynamic in order to survive in this world as well as the hereafter. These words of wisdom are as true today as they were 18 years ago. There are 3,800 scientists and engineers per million of people in the northern hemisphere, whereas there are less than 200 scientists in the southern hemisphere where most of the Muslims live. This university, with a very well thought out philosophy, with a clear vision and a far-sighted mission has a lot to cope up with. It is clearly said in our mission statement that we are to "achieve the concept of Islamization of human knowledge in teaching, research, consultancy, dissemination of knowledge and the development of academic excellence in the university." I was not there when they set up this mission, for otherwise I would have added more. However, with your help we are to realize this mission, *inshā' Allah*. Let us hope that together with other universities in the south and in the Muslim world, we will be able to do better.

International Institute for Muslim Unity

On 16th August, 2000 the Prime Minister of Malaysia signed a letter, addressed to me, with this historic message: "*Saya bersetuju dengan*

nama International Institute for Muslim Unity". The translation is "I agree with the name International Institute for Muslim Unity." With this letter he has chosen our university as a home to an institute with the noble task of bringing about Muslim unity. A lot of questions have come to our mind when charged with this new responsibility, with a new paradigm, in addition to the unfinished task of accumulating and disseminating knowledge.

Are the academic staff of this university interested in Muslim unity? Are the students of this university united enough to make a success of this mission? Are the local and international students, in this university, interacting well with one another and each other? Are they accepting each other and one another as brothers and sisters in Islam? Are you, the new graduates, together with the earlier graduates, willing to assist us in this new mission? Are we prepared to put aside our petty, and mostly untried schemes which we call agendas, and play a role as the vector of social change in a modernizing society? Are we prepared to liberate the Muslim mind from fear of differences, new and foreign, and to promote a respect for diversity in a shared collectivity? Should we not, for that higher purpose, called Muslim unity, promote bonds that transcend race and culture with a more tolerant framework? Are we able to put our family members, close friends, bosses, teachers, students, mentors or heroes, in the right perspective, under all circumstances, so as not to blur our greater vision for Muslim unity?

Help from Enemies

Should we only unite as Muslims, when we are threatened by the Zionists, who are disciples of Vladimir Jabotinsky, whom Ben-Gurion described as Vladimir Hitler? Should we wait for another Salman Rushdie to humiliate us, so as to anger us, that we may unite? Should we only unite in temporary anger, when a neighbor in old age, being rich, purchases 100 unnecessarily expensive military toys, with exorbitant sales commissions, as a last filing, paid to whoever managed to undermine the faith of a government by convincing the populace that they are under threat, but recognizing the need for technology, which they do not have? What a pity that one should talk about technology for war when we are talking about science and technology for peace. One should not be talking about war with a neighbor just after visiting the neighbor for a friendly last supper.

The Challenges

We currently have in this university intellectual expertise from over 43 countries, whose skills range from fundamental Islamic revealed knowledge to the most modern medical expertise in our *Kulliyah* of

Medicine, and the latest advances in manufacturing and Mechatronics in the *Kulliyyah* of Engineering. Can all these brains from 43 countries, which have excelled in the more difficult intellectual fields which each one of them have mastered, be of use in our effort towards achieving that higher purpose, Muslim unity? Can we obsessively promote unity, as an idea, and without threat to anybody, to satisfy the quotation of Victor Hugo, a French poet, novelist and dramatist, who lived between 1802 to 1885 and wrote in his book *The Future of Man* that "... no army on earth, however big, can stop the advance of an idea whose time has come". Can we suppress our individual ego, and with humility submit our untried private plans, if any exist, for incorporation with every other plan for Muslim unity? Can we always say to another Muslim "your idea is also good." I soliloquise in distress. For if we cannot, who can?

Unity

With unity we can marshal our financial resources, which otherwise are used for buying weapons for use against one another, and spend the money saved for research and development in all fields and endeavors. We can marshal our human and natural resources to enhance and alleviate the economic and social standing of our brothers and sisters worldwide. We will launch a jihād against ignorance. We will aggressively promote the *Iqra'* culture. We will execute our jihād against poverty. We will strive to wipe out poverty from our midst. Sayidinā ‘Alī *Karramallahu Wajhahū* was once reported to have said: "If poverty exists in human form, I will take it upon myself to kill it." We can marshal our resources and say as Steve Jobs said, to his team who design the Apple Macintosh computer, "we hope to make a dent in the universe." We will therefore organize the brains within the university, and with "creative collaboration," *inshā' Allah*, we will succeed.

Beware

To the new graduates, while wishing each one of you very good luck I would like to remind you of what Alexander Frazer Tytler, a Scottish Economist, wrote in 1873 that man moves:

From bondage to spiritual faith;
 From spiritual faith to great courage;
 From courage to liberty;
 From liberty to abundance;
 From abundance to selfishness;
 From selfishness to complacency;
 From complacency to apathy;

From apathy to dependency; and
 From dependency back to bondage again.

All of you today are as united as you can be, being homogeneous in your will to unite your common experience and common suffering, after having been together at this university for a few years, in line with Labayonne's prescription for unity. Should you see changes in any of your friends, at any time in the future, you should look back to Tytler's scale in order to understand as to what is affecting your friend under different environment and circumstances. While in this university it is easy for you to preach trustworthiness when nobody has really distrusted you. It is very easy to be honest when nobody has tried to deceive you. It is easy to be straight when you are not exposed to the opportunities to enjoy and benefit from wickedness. No amount of rhetoric can help you. I have seen the real thing. The real world is totally different. The challenges are different from that faced by a student. Let us make *du'ā* and hope that you survive the challenges. The above yardstick by Alexander Frazer Tytler will help you to know in which position you are in and in which direction you are moving as you travel along the way.

Noble Task

You have a noble task ahead of you. Just as this university has helped you in the past, we hope that you will help this university, wherever you are, in the future. Let us together face the trials and tribulations in this new and challenging millennium. Let us move forward for the survival of the Ummah. This university is very proud of you, and we hope the people of Malaysia, and the Muslims of the world, will be very proud of this university for the services that its graduates have provided or will be providing. May Allah *subhānahū wata'ālā* constantly grant us *tawfīq* and *hidāyah*.