

**The Inquisitive Mindset and the Qur'anic Ethos:  
An exploration into Islamic Inquisitiveness**

**Dasar Pemikiran Inkuisitif Dan Nilai-Nilai Etika Dalam Quran:  
Penerokaan Ke Dalam Inkuisitif Islam**

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**Abstract**

The Qur'anic Ethos stresses the importance of an inquisitive mindset. The aim of this paper is to show the depth of theoretical information and practical advice the Qur'an provides, in regards to fostering and nurturing an inquisitive Mindset. This article will elaborate on the Qur'anic teachings on inquisitiveness. There are more than one thousand two hundred questions in the Qur'an, which are analysed to examine their contribution to fostering inquisitive thinking. The multiple characteristics of an inquisitive mindset are explained by recourse to several prominent classical exegetists. The Qur'anic blueprint for inquisitive learning is sketched briefly with an excursion into the etiquettes of inquisitiveness. A practical application of the theoretical discussion of inquisitiveness is provided in the context of recovering the Khaldūnian Legacy in sociology. The article concludes that fostering inquisitiveness is of the utmost importance, especially in our (post) modern times. It is hoped that the article will show, with innumerable evidence, that the Qur'an is a rich source for finding methods on developing an individual's inquisitive mindset.

**Keywords:** Inquisitiveness, Inquisitive Mindset, Qur'anic Ethos, Khaldūnian legacy.

**Abstrak**

Etos Al-Qur'an menekankan peri pentingnya pemikiran atau perasaan ingin tahu. Tujuan kertas ini adalah untuk menunjukkan kedalaman maklumat teori dan nasihat praktikal yang disediakan oleh Alquran, dalam hal memupuk pemikiran ingin tahu. Artikel ini akan menghuraikan ajaran Al-Quran tentang pemikiran ingin tahu. Terdapat lebih dari seribu dua ratus soalan dalam Al-Qur'an, yang dianalisa dapat menyumbang kepada pemikiran ingin tahu. Ciri-ciri pemikiran ingin tahu telah dijelaskan oleh rekursi kepada beberapa eksegetis klasik yang terkenal. Pola pemikiran ingin tahu yang dijelaskan dalam Alquran digambarkan dengan penerokaan terhadap etika-etika pemikiran

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tersebut. Penggunaan praktikal teori pemikiran ingin tahu didapati dalam konteks pemuliharaan Warisan Khaldun dalam sosiologi. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahawa memupuk perasaan ingin tahu adalah sangat penting, terutamanya pada zaman moden ini. Di-harapkan artikel ini akan membuktikan bahawa Al-Qur'an adalah sumber yang kaya dengan kaedah-kaedah pembangunan pemikiran ingin tahu bagi seseorang individu.

**Kata Kunci:** Kepintaran, Pemikiran Sasaran, Etika Al-Qur'an, warisan Khaldun.

### **Introduction**

The inquisitive mindset is the basis of culture. Humans have risen above the brute no thanks to evolution, but rather thanks to the inquiring spark that mysteriously ignited man's passion for discovery, while lessening his chances of survival. This mindset, more than the soul, differentiates humans from automatons. Thus, exploring inquisitiveness is akin to flying a voyager into the deep space of man's essence. All this highfalutin rhetorical wandering can hardly push the reader to interest if the reader's inquisitiveness is incapacitated.

Inquisitiveness has been studied and elaborated upon in the domains of psychology and education. Rarely is inquisitiveness explained or metaphorically dissected in the operating light of the Qur'an. The Qur'an is viewed commonly as a liturgical book, a list of moral codes, and an icon of interest to only one third of the world's overpopulated population. To see the Qur'an as a source of insight into inquisitiveness is seen as unnecessary, either because the Qur'an is too high to explain this concept, or too low, depending on your taste.

This article aims to show the width and breadth of insights that the Qur'an contains regarding the inquisitive mindset. In section one, the more than one thousand questions in the Qur'an are analysed to examine their contribution towards fostering inquisitive thinking. In section two, the multiple characteristics of the inquisitive mindset are explained by recourse to several prominent classical exegetists. In section three, the Qur'anic blueprint for inquisitive learning is sketched briefly with an excursion into the etiquettes of inquisitiveness. In section four, a practical application of the theoretical discussion of inquisitiveness is provided in the context of recovering the Khaldūnian Legacy in sociology. The article concludes that it is a must to cherish inquisitiveness.

### Qur'anic Questions

The Qur'an is the word of Allah that was revealed to His Last Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to be conveyed and communicated to all humankind. Thus, it is not surprising to find that the Qur'an contains a variety of questions. These questions are utilized to widen the scope of human perception in order to have a better understanding of the message and even better, answering the vague questions people have. They may also be taken as a means for communicating the message to people with different cognitive preferences.

The scholars of Islam have made it emphatically clear that the Qur'an is a Book that is capable of reaching the minds of everyone in society. Everyone, of course, has different cognitive preferences. Muhammad Abdu said that the Prophets were sent to both the masses and to the intellectual elite. Among the people in society are the ignorant and the knowledgeable, the servant and the master, etc. The Qur'an speaks to all of these groups in a way where their cognitive capacities can fully capture and comprehend the message. That is why the Quran contains verses that are *Mutashābih*.<sup>1</sup>

The *Mutashābih* verses are not the only feature of the Quran that deal with conveying the message to a stratified audience. The Quran contains about 1,200 questions.<sup>2</sup> These questions allow people of different cognitive capacities and preferences to engage in inquisitive thinking without trapping people into a certain cognitive level.

The Quran says, "Were they created out of nothing? Were they the creators? \* Did they create the heavens and the earth?" (52:35-36).<sup>3</sup> The uneducated masses who lack sophistication will see in this verse a rhetorical question that points to the common-sense notion that God created the world. The sophisticated philosopher will find in the verse an argument of contingency for God's existence. Thus, the questions posed allow anyone, whatever his education and intellectual capacity, to engage in inquisitive cognition.

In this regard, Ibn Rushd makes an opposite remark. Ibn Rushd divides people into three categories. The first category, are those who are not among the people of understanding. By this, he refers to the masses.

<sup>1</sup> Moḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr Al-Manār*, (Dar Al-Fikr: Damascus, 1973), vol. 3, p. 170-171.

<sup>2</sup> Jamal Ahmad Badi, and Tajdin M, *Creative Thinking: An Islamic Perspective*, (Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Translation of Qur'anic verses taken from M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an: A new translation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

The second category, are those who have argumentative understanding. By this, he refers to the *Mutakallimūn*. The third category, are those who have certain understanding. By this, he refers to the *Falāsifa*.

When any of the people of the last category tries to teach, or proclaim his understanding of the Qur'an to the people of the first and second category, the people of the first and second category will be left in confusion. This is because, as Ibn Rushd says, the people of the first and second category cannot comprehend what is being said.<sup>4</sup>

One need not agree with Ibn Rushd's biased preference of his own philosophical school over others to appreciate his schema of people's cognitive capacities. The first category of people is what we would term today as "the man on the street". Though educated, the man on the street has little specialised knowledge in interpreting the Qur'an. The second category of people can be redefined as "the cultured man", who delves into books of knowledge. The third category of people can be renamed "the scholarly specialists", whose careers are dedicated to understanding the Qur'an.

For each of these categories, the Quran supplies abundant questions to nurture their inquisitiveness and foster their open-mindedness.

It should be noted that Ibn Rushd's categorisation of people is not in any way evidence of him holding a double-theory of truth. Leaman (1988) has argued that Ibn Rushd believed that philosophy and religion reach different truths that are sometimes contradictory. This view cannot be substantiated from Ibn Rushd's own writings.<sup>5</sup> In *Al-Kashf 'An Minhāj Al-Adilla Fi 'Aqāid Al-Millah*, Ibn Rushd asserts that religion is for people of all levels of intellectual growth. To teach people the religion in the same way is tantamount to obliging people to do one specific supererogatory act of worship, instead of allowing people to choose which acts of worship they find closer to their individual preferences.<sup>6</sup> Ali, the Companion of the Prophet, said, "Talk to people on a level they can understand. Do you want them to disbelieve in Allah and His Messenger?"<sup>7</sup> Ibn Rushd's division of knowledge was a *pedagogical* tool — nothing more.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Faṣl Al-Maqāl Fīmā Baina Al-Ḥikma wa Al-Sharī'a min Al-Ittiṣāl*, (Cairo: Dar Al-Ma'ārif, 1999), P. 58-59.

<sup>5</sup> Leaman, O, *Averroes and his Philosophy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Rushd, *Al-Kashf 'An Minhāj Al-Adilla Fi 'Aqāid Al-Millah*, (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmiyya, 2002), p. 83-4.

<sup>7</sup> M. I. Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, (Riyadh: Dar As-Salam, 1999), vol. 3, page. 127.

The Qur'an is a multi-layered text. It is easy for readers of the text to only recognise one layer of meaning, while neglecting the other layers. The remedy to this shallow reading is questioning. The Qur'anic questions force the reader to pause and engage their cognitive skills with the text, instead of them simply reading the printed words on the *Mushaf*. Shabbir Akhtar has nicely stated of the Qur'an:

The text can sustain multiple layers of significance without necessarily distorting and denaturing the originally religious word. The Quranic vocabulary conceals latent and patent meanings. This is a tribute to the fecundity of the Quranic vocabulary.<sup>8</sup>

The Qur'anic questions are pointers to this fecundity as they simultaneously channel and expand the reader's cognition as he reads the Qur'an. So, for instance the Qur'an says, "Do they have knowledge of the unseen that enables them to write it down?" (68:47). This Qur'anic question not only points to the historical polemics between the Prophet and the *Mushrikīn*, but also points to the human condition uncircumscribed by a specific time or specific location. As Muhammad Asad pointed out, the historical content of the Qur'anic verses does not supersede the underlying message regarding the human condition.<sup>9</sup> The Qur'anic question of 68:47<sup>10</sup> makes the reader ponder over how the future is unseen and unknown to him, and how he cannot act with knowledge regarding the future, but can only have *Tawakkul* in Allah's providence.

From the above, it is clear that questioning, a mode of rejuvenating the inquisitive mindset, is an essential aspect of the Qur'anic text and a key Qur'anic strategy to engage readers from all levels of cognitive strength and to open the reader's mind to the various vistas of meaning contained in the Qur'anic text.

### **Characteristics of the Inquisitive Mindset**

The Qur'an does not foster the inquisitive mindset by using questions alone. The Qur'an also gives practical and concrete examples of inquisitive thinking being put to practice. These examples will allow the reader to gain inspiration to think inquisitively, rather than just passively.

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<sup>8</sup> Shabbir Akhtar, *The Quran and the Secular Mind*, (Routledge: Oxon, 2008), p. 172.

<sup>9</sup> Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an*, (Gibraltar: Dar Al-Andalus, 1984), p. vii.

<sup>10</sup> Al-Qur'an, 68:47.

One of these examples is the Qur'anic account of how Ibrahim proclaimed monotheism and disowned polytheism.

The relevant Qur'anic passage is:

*Remember when Abraham said to his father, Azar, 'How can you take idols as gods? I see you and your people have clearly gone astray.' \* In this way We showed Abraham [God's] mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth, so that he might be a firm believer. \* When the night grew dark over him he saw a star and said, 'This is my Lord,' but when it set, he said, 'I do not like things that set.' \* And when he saw the moon rising he said, 'This is my Lord,' but when it too set, he said, 'If my Lord does not guide me, I shall be one of those who go astray.' \* Then he saw the sun rising and cried, 'This is my Lord! This is greater.' But when the sun set, he said, 'My people, I disown all that you worship beside God. \* I have turned my face as a true believer towards Him who created the heavens and the earth. I am not one of the polytheists.'*<sup>11</sup>

The Qur'anic passage shows how Ibrahim reached the truth of monotheism and the falsity of polytheism via inquiring about the world around him. This section of the article will explore how the various *Mufasssirūn* understood Ibrahim's inquisitiveness, and what it means with regards to the inquisitive mindset.

Al-Māwardi states that Ibrahim expressed the divinity of the stars, moon, and sun when he was a child and had yet to reach puberty.<sup>12</sup> This is because at the age before puberty, a person is not obliged to hold onto the truth of monotheism i.e. he has no *Taklīf*. If Ibrahim expressed what he did after puberty, then he would have uttered statements of *Shirk*.

Al-Māwardi's statement is interesting, because it implies that children are more inquisitive than adults. This is true not only from experience, but also from the Qur'anic passage itself. Ibrahim's father, Azar, believed that the stars, moon, and sun were gods worthy of worship. He did not feel the need to inquire into his belief and he did not have the interest to scrutinise the heavens and seek out answers.

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<sup>11</sup> Al-Quran, 6: 74-79).

<sup>12</sup> Al-Māwardi, *Al-Nukat Wa Al-'Uyūn*, (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmiya, 1992), vol. 2, p. 136.

The inquisitive mindset is closer to the mindset of a child, than to that of an adult. This does not mean that adults cannot increase their inquisitive capacities. By juxtaposing Ibrahim the child with Azar the adult, the Qur'an is telling the reader to follow the mindset of Ibrahim, *the child*, and eschew the mindset of Azar, *the adult*.

Children are open to learning and are less constrained by social norms in their actions, whereas adults are the opposite. Islam encourages people to think more like children and less like adults. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "No person is born except upon a state of *Fitra*, but his parents make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian".<sup>13</sup> If people can recapture the zest for learning, the childlike openness, and the energising curiosity of youth, then they can live and learn more inquisitively; they can return to their *Fitra*.

An-Nasafi said that Ibrahim was an adult when he pointed to the stars and said as quoted in the Quran,<sup>14</sup> "(You polytheists claim) *This* is my Lord!" Thus, Ibrahim's exclamation was not meant as a sign of discovery, but as a sign of mockery. He pointed out the gods to the polytheist, then showed them that their gods disappear ("set") and are thus not worthy of worship. Ibrahim's words are thus not a monologue, but a dialogue and debate that he had in the presence of polytheists.

An-Nasafi's interpretation shows that the inquisitive mindset includes rational reasoning. An inquisitive mindset puts all its socially acquired knowledge to the test of reason. Just because a society may claim something, it does not mean we shouldn't see whether or not reason substantiates a society's claim. Logic, thus, is an essential tool for the inquisitive.

Unfortunately today, logic is rarely studied by people. They use the term "logical" to mean "reasonable". But what is reasonable to one person is unreasonable to another. Azar thought it was reasonable to worship idols, while Ibrahim thought not. In the Qur'anic passage, Ibrahim shows the falsity of the gods by using a *logical demonstration*. He first accepts an assumption ('this moon is a god') then notes an indisputable fact ('the moon disappears') and draws out the contradiction between assumption and fact ('god who cannot disappear disappears').

Muslim scholars have written many treatises on logic that can help people in organising their reasoning processes. These treatises, though written centuries ago, still remain definitive and useful in the

<sup>13</sup> Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, 23:1358).

<sup>14</sup> Al-Nasafi, *Tafsir Al-Nasafi*, (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmiya, 2001), vol. 1, p. 373.

same way that Aristotle's *Organon* is still relevant today. Readers can refer to modern treatises on logic such as Ḥabanka's *Ḍawābit Al-Ma'rifa* and Al-Shinqīti's *Adāb Al-Baḥth Wa Al-Munāḍra*.<sup>15</sup> It is hoped that it is made compulsory for university students to study even one book of logic during their studies; for if universities do not teach students logic, who else will? Parents? Television? Internet?

Al-Qāsimi states that Ibrahim's argument against the polytheists was in three stages. In the first stage he accepts their claim, as a means of persuading them that he is objective and not prejudiced. In the second stage, he tells the polytheists that their creed causes confusion. In the third stage, he explicitly rejects their belief.<sup>16</sup> Ibrahim's argument was structured in this way, because he wanted to show that he empathised with the polytheists, rather than him showing animosity towards them.

Ibrahim's argument shows that empathy is essential to the inquisitive mindset. The inquisitive person empathises with the viewpoints of other people even if he himself does not accept them. Moreover, the inquisitive person is able to put himself in the shoes of others. This shows that the inquisitive mindset is not the exclusive domain of IQ, but also includes EI (emotional intelligence).

Abu Bakr Al-Jazāiri said that Ibrahim's dialogue is a specification of the verse "In this way We showed Abraham [God's] mighty dominion over the heavens and the earth, so that he might be a firm believer".<sup>17</sup> That is, the three-tiered argument Ibrahim utilised is the way God made him a firm believer. This means that God showed Ibrahim the truth, by Ibrahim contemplating on the stars, moon, and sun. In other words, if we also contemplate on the stars, moon, and sun, God will show us the truth. This suggests that *everything* is significant. It is this viewpoint that fosters inquisitiveness.

When you view every single thing as containing significance, you start pondering deeply over the world around you. The inquisitive mindset understands that a lesson can be learnt in the commonest item, a discovery can be made in the most ordinary places, a problem can be solved

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<sup>15</sup> M. A. Al-Shinqīti, *Adāb Al-Baḥth Wa Al-Munāḍra*, (Mecca: Dar 'Ālam Al-Fawāid, 2005), and A. Ḥ. Ḥabanka, *Ḍawābit Al-Ma'rifa Wa Usūl Al-Istidlāl Wa Al-Munāḍra*, (Damascus: Dar Al-Qalam, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> M. J. Al-Qāsimi, *Tafsīr Al-Qāsimi*, (Beirut: Dar Ihya Al-Turāth Al-'Arabi, 1994), vol. 3, p. 351.

<sup>17</sup> Abu Bakr Al-Jazāiri, *Aysar Al-Tafāsīr*, (Medina: Maktaba Al-'Ulūm Wa Al-Hikma, 2000), p. 344.



in a single glance. When Muslims say that God personally speaks to man, they mean that every single facet of life contains wisdom that can help us in life.

Many people today have an incorrect conception of inquisitiveness. They think that to be inquisitive you need to seek out the new. In reality, however, inquisitiveness means seeking the new in the old, the extraordinary in the ordinary. That is how Newton discovered gravity.

Al-Sulami interpreted the Qur'anic passage in a way unfamiliar to most people. He noted the following view: "In the beginning of the Qur'anic passage, God showed Ibrahim the universe. The sight of the universe overpowered Ibrahim to the point that he lost sight of God and focused on the universe. He spent his time analysing the universe, but then God gave him a sudden inspiration (*Kasf*). When he received this inspiration, he disowned the universe and the analysis of the mind and held firmly onto God Himself."<sup>18</sup>

This interpretation is nuanced and subtle. Al-Sullami is pointing out that true knowledge can be obtained without recourse to observation or reflection. True knowledge is spontaneous and arises with no effort on our part. The more effort we put into obtaining knowledge, the less knowledge we attain.

This interpretation shows that observations can limit our sight, and cognition can limit our understanding. But what does this mean in practical terms? It means we need to value the spontaneous over the deliberate, the impulsive over the calculated. An example may clarify this.

In art and literature, the best works are inspired, not by prolonged contemplation, but by sudden flashes of genius. These sudden flashes occur to the artists and writers without them consciously trying to attain them. If the artist or writer neglects these sudden flashes, his/her works will look mechanical and sound inauthentic. Imaginative breakthroughs often arise out of the vacuum of a person's mind. The polytheists Ibrahim dealt with had a limited imagination. Their imaginative sight was limited by their immediate sensory experience. That's why they worshipped what they could see — the stars, the moon, the sun. Ibrahim's analysis of his senses left him in confusion. When the sudden flash occurred to him, he was able to imaginatively grasp what was beyond not only his immediate sensory experience, but also what lay beyond *any* sensory experience.

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<sup>18</sup> Al-Sulami, *Haqāiq Al-Tafsir*, (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmiya, 2001), vol. 1, p. 204)

Al-Sulami's interpretation shows that the inquisitive mindset includes a paradox: the more inquisitive you are, the less you seek. True knowledge will come to you in a flash of genius, in a certain impulse, in a random thought.

Abu Ḥayyān Al-Andalusi mentioned that some scholars interpreted the stars, moon, and sun in the Qur'anic passage in a symbolic way. They interpreted the stars to be a symbol of sense perception, the moon to be a symbol of the imaginative faculty, and the sun to be reason.<sup>19</sup> These scholars said that the Qur'anic passage shows that the senses, the imagination, and reason cannot fully encompass and comprehend reality. Ibrahim found enlightenment when he realised this.

This idea may sound like irrationalism, but it is far from irrationalism — it is a highly rational view. The more science advances, the more we realise how much we do not know. The deeper we search molecules, the more we realise how simplistic our sophisticated inventions are compared to the basics of our biology. The deeper we search space, the more we realise how insignificant humans are in the universe. The deeper we search human psychology, the less faith we have in the powers of human rationality.

The view that the human faculties can encompass and comprehend the total of reality is a view based on what can be termed *epistemological anthropomorphism*. This view assumes that knowledge (i.e. what is true) is in the form of human understanding. Epistemological anthropomorphism has a lot of charm, but has one crucial weakness: it goes against the verified facts. Ibrahim's final exclamation expresses his disavowal of epistemological anthropomorphism. The inquisitive mindset is one that recognises its own limits.

Admittedly, Abu Ḥayyān Al-Andalusi harshly criticised the aforementioned symbolic interpretation of the Qur'anic passage. It must be said, however, that his criticism lacks substance and is mostly *ad hominem*. He asks Allah to curse these scholars and says the Qur'an cannot be symbolically interpreted. He is "certain of the falsity" of this symbolic interpretation, without giving any evidence. He goes so far as to say that he wishes these symbolic interpretations to be erased from the books, and eradicated from the records. His antipathy towards the abovementioned interpretation can easily be explained. Abu Ḥayyān Al-Andalusi is a ra-

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<sup>19</sup> Abu Ḥayyān Al-Andalusi, *Al-Baḥr Al-Muḥīṭ*, (Beirut: Dar Al-Kutub Al-'Ilmiya, 2001), vol. 4, p. 173.

tionalist and the very existence of symbolism puts to doubt his rationalistic hermeneutics, but there is no need for exclusivity in this matter. The Qur'an, as mentioned before, is multifaceted thus it has both a rational aspect and a symbolic aspect as well. Both the rationalist interpretation of the Qur'an and the symbolic interpretation of the Qur'an are correct.<sup>20</sup>

It is hoped that this section has shed light on the various characteristics of the inquisitive mindset, and has shown the complexity in the inquisitive mindset. Generally people think being inquisitive means simply being curious or being willing to ask questions. The *Mufasssirūn* see it as something greater.

### **Etiquette of inquisitiveness**

The scholars of Islam have detailed many etiquettes regarding inquisitiveness. These etiquettes were meant to be adhered to by seekers of knowledge, and these etiquettes were aimed at helping the inquisitive searchers of truth to find what they were craving for. This section will briefly describe some of these etiquettes and how they can contribute to strengthening the inquisitive mindset.

Before any discussion of etiquettes can be broached, there is a need to clarify the exact function that etiquette plays in social interactions. There are two widely held views regarding the social function of etiquette. The first is that etiquette is of little importance as it is pretentiousness codified into practice. The second is that etiquette is of great importance as it is a socially accepted norm of acceptable actions. Both these views are incorrect.

The first view is incorrect in seeing little importance in etiquette. The second view is incorrect in seeing etiquette as nothing more than social norms. Etiquette, in fact, is the *best* way to do something. There are many ways to do something, but the best way is the way we call etiquette. For example, there are many ways to speak to someone, but there is a best way to speak to someone, and that best way is labelled the etiquette of talking. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, "The best of you are the best of you in etiquette".<sup>21</sup> To see etiquette as simply social norms is to degrade following etiquette into a socially constructed habit.

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<sup>20</sup> Rule: A symbolic interpretation of the Qur'an is acceptable if it is substantiated by Qur'anic verses. A good example of such symbolic interpretation can be found in Qāḍi 'Iyād', *Ash-Shifā*, (Dubai: Jāizat Dubay Al-Dawliyya Lil Qur'an Al-Karim, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, 61:3559.

When the scholars talk about the etiquette of seeking knowledge, for instance, they are not talking about simply being polite; rather, they are talking about the *best way* to seek knowledge. The etiquette of inquisitiveness is not moral constraints on inquisitiveness that are imposed onto us by society. The etiquette of inquisitiveness is the best way to fulfilling your inquisitiveness; it is the maximal method and optimal strategy in inquisitiveness.

Ibn Jamā'ah cites Mujāhid, the famous Tābi'ī, saying, "The shy person and the arrogant person do not learn knowledge".<sup>22</sup> This is because learning knowledge is a form of inquiring about what you do not know. A shy person will feel ashamed to admit to people that he is ignorant of something. An arrogant person will not admit that his views are wrong. The inquisitive mindset, is thus free from being shy and free from being arrogant.

Shyness arises from an inferiority complex, while arrogance arises from denial. The shy person is acutely aware of his inferiority and lets that stunt his inquisitiveness. The arrogant person is unaware of his inferiority and lets that cripple his inquisitiveness. To foster the inquisitive mindset, the shy person can combat his inferiority complex by realising that his inferiority is actually a sign of strength. More accurately, by being aware of his weaknesses will allow him to pinpoint the areas he needs to develop; hence, he can focus his energy on becoming a better person. The arrogant person is disadvantaged in that he does not even know his weaknesses. He does, however, possess an advantage over the shy person. He has the self-confidence to move his mind along the path of knowledge, even if the path he chooses is a never-ending cul-de-sac. He can overcome his arrogance by practicing humility.

Aisha', the Prophet's wife, said, "May Allah's Mercy be upon the women of the Ansār. They did not let shyness stop them from gaining understanding in religion".<sup>23</sup> This *Athar* is a clear refutation of the islamophobic claim that Islam dissuades women from learning, or that inquisitiveness in Islam is exclusive to men. This claim is touted in the media and among some "experts". Serious scholarship does not support it. Akhmetova has given a detailed account of female contributions to Mus-

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<sup>22</sup> B. Ibn Jamā'ah, *Tadhkirat Al-Sāmi' Wa Al-Mutakallim*, (Beirut: Dar Al-Bashāir Al-Islāmiyya, 2012), vol. 1, p. 120)

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

lim scholarship.<sup>24</sup> Sayeed has shown how Muslim women were essential in the transmission of knowledge in the Muslim world. In Islam, the etiquette of inquisitiveness shows that education is not limited to men, but that it encompasses both men and women.<sup>25</sup>

Ibn Abdel-Bar recorded an *Athar* where Ali said, “Wisdom is the shadow of the believer; so, take it even from the hands of polytheists”.<sup>26</sup> At the time of the Prophet, the polytheists were waging war against the Muslims and torturing Muslim women and children; yet, this did not stop the Muslims from learning wisdom from the polytheists.

An important etiquette of inquisitiveness is openness. You have to be open to gaining new knowledge from whoever may possess it, even from your bitterest enemy. You have to be open to the extent that you learn wisdom from the most unwise. There is the famous hadith of the Prophet consenting to Abu Hurayra learning from Satan.<sup>27</sup> Sometimes it is the insane and the ignorant who know what is right, and it is the sane and knowledgeable who are mistaken.

This openness neither entails abandoning one’s beliefs nor encourages a relativist conception of truth. You can be open to new ideas without needing to efface your own views. While helpful in fostering openness, a relativist conception of truth dulls the critical faculties making a person unable to distinguish between fact and fiction. Openness *does* entail limiting your dislike of others so that your dislike does not hinder your inquisitiveness.

This openness in learning has been at the centre of Islamic teachings; yet, suitably well-informed people attempt to deny this in all seriousness. Take as an example Bernard Lewis who wrote:

It was military necessity, even more than the need for political intelligence, that drove Muslims to undertake the distasteful task of learning infidel languages and, even worse, venturing into infidel lands.<sup>28</sup>

Firstly, Lewis portrays Muslims as people who learn only so they can make war. But as Ali made clear, learning is the very shadow of a

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<sup>24</sup> E. Akhmetova, “Women in Islamic civilisation: their rights and contributions.” *Islam and Civilisational Renewal* 7, no. 4 (2016).

<sup>25</sup> A. Sayeed, *Women and the Transmission of Religious Knowledge in Islam*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Abdel-Bar, *Sahih Jāmi’ Bayān Al-’Ilm Wa Faḍlih*, (Cairo: Maktaba Ibn Taymiyya, 1996), p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> Bukhari, *Sahih Bukhari*, 40: 2311.

<sup>28</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 34.

Muslim; a Muslim is learning every second he is awake. Secondly, Lewis uses the adjective “distasteful” in a poor attempt at humour. Learning ‘non-Muslim’ languages was not seen as distasteful. The Prophet asked Zaid b. Thābit to learn Syriac, which he did in half a month.<sup>29</sup> Neither the Prophet nor Zaid expressed any distaste. Thirdly, Lewis suggests that Muslims considered it bad to explore non-Muslim countries, and to learn from these countries. This suggestion is incomprehensible when we keep in mind the rich heritage of Muslim travel writings. It is as if Lewis never heard of Al-Birūni or Ibn Faḍlān.

Ibn Taymiya explicated on the openness needed in inquisitiveness. He comments on Qur'anic verses 2:89-91 saying that *Bani Isrā'īl* did not accept the truth, because the truth came from others and not from them. Ibn Taymiya then says that many people of knowledge exhibit the same close-minded attitude as *Bani Isrā'īl*. These people of knowledge only accept the truth if it comes from their *Madhhab* or *'Ālim*. These people easily reject the truth when it is found in others who do not follow their school of thought.<sup>30</sup> This shows that inquisitiveness and sectarianism cannot co-exist.

Al-Khaṭīb Al-Baghdādi cites Zaid b. Aslam who said to a student, “Go and learn how to ask, then come to me and ask”.<sup>31</sup> Inquisitiveness is a skill that can be learned. Some people are naturally inquisitive, while others are not. Those who are not shouldn't feel disappointed; with practice and discipline they can gain inquisitiveness.

Dweck and Legget discussed two types of mindsets. The fixed mindset is the psychology where a person thinks his abilities are fixed, and that it is difficult to go beyond his innate abilities. The growth mindset is the psychology where a person thinks that with effort and time he can improve himself and extend his abilities beyond what it initially was. The growth mindset is part of the etiquettes of inquisitiveness.<sup>32</sup>

Dweck argued that people with a fixed mindset usually do not put in hard work due to their belief that they cannot achieve the tasks at

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<sup>29</sup> Tirmidhi, *Jāmi' At-Tirmidhi*, (Riyadh: Dar As-Salam, 1999). 40: 2715.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Taymiya, *Iqtīḍa Sirāt Al-Mustaqīm*. (Beirut: Dar 'Ālam Al-Kutub, 1999), p. 86-7.

<sup>31</sup> Al-Khaṭīb, A. Al-Baghdādi, *Al-Jami' li Akhlāq Ar-Rāwi Wa Adāb As-Sāmi*, (Beirut: Muassasa Al-Risāla, 1996), vol. 1, p. 325.

<sup>32</sup> C. S. Dweck, and E. L. Leggett, “A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality.” *Psychological Review* 95, no. 2 (1988).

hand. Zaid b. Aslam pointed out to the student that tasks can be achieved, but only after you learn the proper method of achieving them.<sup>33</sup>

There are numerous etiquettes of inquisitiveness, but the above discussion will suffice to substantiate the point that Islam not only acknowledges inquisitiveness as a trait, but also lays out various blueprints for an individual to follow in order to expand his inquisitive mindset. All the etiquettes of inquisitiveness are simply an elaboration of the Qur'anic verse 68:4: "Truly you have a strong character."

### **Inquisitiveness and the Khaldūnian Legacy**

Having discussed various aspects of inquisitiveness, readers may have gained a firmer theoretical appreciation of the inquisitive mindset, but may still find the practical translation of such theoretical appreciation to be vague, distant, and/or hazy. This section will give a practical example of inquisitiveness with regards to the Khaldūnian legacy in academia. This example has been specifically chosen to show how a famous and much studied figure as Ibn Khaldun could end up in the unending circle of repetitive mechanical production and consumption of knowledge, instead of being a focal point for inquisitive research.

Ibn Khaldun should be seen as a lighthouse of inquisitiveness. His originality of thought led H. E. Barnes (1970) to effuse:

[T]he first writer to possess the modern dynamic idea of progress and the unity of the social process was the Muslim historian and statesman, ibn-Khaldun... But the most important of the innovations of this interesting writer was his grasp of the unity and continuity of the historical process. In sharp contrast to the static conceptions of the prevailing Christian historiography, he grasped the fundamental conception that the stages of civilization are always in a constant process of change, like the life of the individual. He pointed out clearly the co-operation of psychic and environmental factors in this process of historical development. All in all, Khaldun [sic], rather than Vico, has the best claim to the honour of having founded the philosophy of history, and his view of the factors involved in the historical process was sounder and more modern than that of the Italian of three centuries later.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> C. S. Dweck, *Mindset: The new psychology of success*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> (H. E. Barnes, "Ancient and Medieval Social Philosophy" Paper presented in *An Introduction to the History of Sociology*, ed, H. E. Barnes, (Chicago and London. University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 25-6.

In his famous *Muqadima*, Ibn Khaldun ventures to look at history from a newer more critical light. He criticises past historians for recording records without inquiring into the possibility of such records being authentic and realistic. He gives ample examples of this. The first example he shows is the historian Al-Mas'ūdi recording that the army of Moses consisted of 600,000 soldiers. Ibn Khaldun asks, for example, if it is possible for an army of 600,000 soldiers to be seen at all, let alone counted, because the army would extend far beyond what the eye could see. This critique, in itself, is enough to cast doubt on the plausibility of the scenario let alone the authenticity of the report. He gives several more devastating critiques of the veracity of this report.<sup>35</sup> Ibn Khaldun, thus, was not content to merely accept the works of past historians. He wanted to inquire into them and see their underlying structure. The study of Ibn Khaldun, unfortunately, has fallen for what he escaped from.

Syed Farid Alatas has convincingly argued how Ibn Khaldun's sociology has been discarded and not appreciated. One of the reasons for this is the rampant Eurocentrism found in modern sociology. He charts the four main traits of Eurocentrism in the social sciences, then shows how these traits affect the social science curriculum.<sup>36</sup>

While it is understandable why Eurocentrists would discard Ibn Khaldun, it is puzzling why some Muslims would discard him too. Farid Alatas explains:

What is being said here with regard to the state of Ibn Khaldūn studies in the West holds equally true for the Arab and Muslim worlds. Since the education systems in the Muslim world are mirror images of those in the West, it follows that the problems of Eurocentrism are defining features of the social sciences there as well, with the added dimension that in the Muslim world Eurocentrism implies alienation from the Muslim tradition of scholarship.<sup>37</sup>

In other words, social studies in the Muslim world is defined by a lack of inquisitiveness. It is a simple parroting of Eurocentric argot without inquiring thoughtfully, questioningly and critically into what is being vocalised. If the study of sociology in Muslim countries is based on a wholesale acquiescence towards Eurocentric thought, then it is hardly reasonable for anyone to assume that Muslim societies, in their constant

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<sup>35</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *Muqadima Ibn Khaldun*, (Damascus: Dar Yu'rab, 2004), p. 92-5.

<sup>36</sup> Syed Farid Alatas, *Applying Ibn Khaldūn: The recovery of a lost tradition in sociology*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 50-53.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, p2.



development, will ever be free to express their unique multicultural identity. Muslim academia is in a headlock and needs to break free if it wants to start contributing to world knowledge, instead of just reproducing the same stale imported products.

But how can Muslim academia break free from Eurocentrism? Farid Alatas gives practical solutions. For instance, he changed the syllabus for the course “Social Thought and Social Theory” at the National University of Singapore, and included in it the ideas of sociologists who were not white males — for instance, Ibn Khaldun, Benoy Kumar and Harriet Martineau, to name a few.<sup>38</sup> This is an example of inquisitiveness *in theory* becoming inquisitiveness *in practice*.

Ibn Khaldun’s legacy has been extensively written about, but most of these writings do not go any step further than acknowledging Ibn Khaldun’s contribution to history. Very few scholars have tried to apply Ibn Khaldun’s theory to new societies and scenarios. His theory is thus appreciated as one appreciates an antique. Farid Alatas tries to rectify this state of affairs by showing the possibility of applying Ibn Khaldun’s theory to various situations that arose after Ibn Khaldun’s time. He applies Ibn Khaldun’s framework to the Ottoman Empire, the Safavid State, Saudi Arabia, and Assad’s Syria.

It is a curious affair that Western academia finds modern applications of pre-modern Western theories, while Muslim academia rarely extrapolates the pre-modern Muslim theories to modern times. Eurocentrism is partly to blame for this, but apathy to inquisitiveness among Muslim scholarship is also to blame.

Sayed Farid Alatas’ book “*Applying Ibn Khaldūn: The recovery of a lost tradition in sociology*”, is a practically tangible example of inquisitiveness in academia. It is hoped that Muslim academia can regain its inquisitive streak and start giving unique contributions to the world. Muslim intellectual heritage is a rich reservoir of ideas and theories that has been barely tapped into, let alone developed into modern times. This reservoir (from philosophy to psychology has barely been drunk from because of the numbing of the inquisitive mindset in Muslim academia.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) warned of the dangers of Eurocentrism in a famous hadith: “You will follow the path of those who came before you step by step even if they were to enter a lizard’s hole, you would enter it too.”<sup>39</sup> This abject obeisance stems from a lack of in-

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, pp. 153-4.

<sup>39</sup> Bukhari, Sahih al-Bukhari, 96:7320.

quisitiveness, which leads some non-Europeans to say such fantastic things as “we need to follow the Europeans...[and] be their partners in culture, in the good and the bad, in the sweet and sour, in what is loved and hated, in what is praiseworthy and what isn't”.<sup>40</sup> While you are abdicating your throne, might as well burn down your castle.

### Conclusion:

The Qur'an uses a holistic approach to kindling inquisitiveness. It uses questions, more than a thousand to be precise, to ignite inquiry into the minds of every person on every level of society. It is multi-layered, allowing people to dive into deeper levels of meaning, giving them the chance to discover new horizons. Several views of scholars were mentioned in explaining the various facets of the inquisitive mindset. A few etiquettes of inquisitiveness were mentioned, and a practical example of inquisitiveness in action was given. All this would hopefully light up the path for society to develop its inquiring faculties.

The inquiring mindset, while alive and well in the technological industry, is declining in most aspects of life. One reason for this is due to the shift in culture. Adorno (2001) used the term “culture industry”.<sup>41</sup> Most of culture is now a product of an industrial process, where inquisitiveness has given way to mechanisation.

What is needed is a revitalisation, a revitalisation of inquisitiveness. That is where studies of inquisitiveness come in. It is no longer a matter of self-help therapy or therapeutic psychology. Culture was built upon the inquisitive mindset of many men and women. If culture is to be saved, inquisitiveness must be nurtured. That's where the Qur'an can help us.

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<sup>40</sup> T. Hussein, *Mustaqbal Al-Thaqāfa Fi Misr*, (Cairo: Al-Haya Al-Miṣriyya Al-Āma, 1993), p. 41.

<sup>41</sup> T. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, (New York: Routledge, 2001).

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