

# The Role of a Muslim Scholar (part 1 of 2)

**Description:** The qualities possessed by a Muslim scholar.

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Objectives:

- To understand what makes a Muslim a scholar.
- To understand the role a Muslim scholar plays within the Muslim *Ummah*.

Arabic Terms:

- *Aalim* - (plural: *Ulama*) one who has knowledge. The term commonly refers to a Muslim religious scholar.
- *Faqeeh* - (plural: *fuqaha*) a jurist, i.e. one who has a deep understanding of Islam, its laws, and jurisprudence.
- *Ijtihad* - scholarly effort through which a jurist/scholar derives Islamic law on the basis of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*.
- *Mujtahid* - someone qualified to carry out *ijtihad*.
- *Usool* - principles, roots, foundations or fundamentals of a thing.
- *Fiqh* " Islamic jurisprudence.
- *Isnad* - chain of transmitters of any given *hadith*.
- *Hadith* - (plural: *ahadith*) is a piece of information or a story. In Islam it is a narrative record of the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.
- *Sahabah* - the plural form of "Sahabi," which translates to Companions. A sahabi, as the word is commonly used today, is someone who saw Prophet Muhammad, believed in him and died as a Muslim.
- *Shariah* " Islamic Law.
- *Ummah* - Refers to the whole Muslim community, irrespective of colour, race, language or nationality.
- *Fatwa* " (plural: *fatawa*) a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized authority.

- *Sunnah* - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.
- *Dawah* - sometimes spelt *Da'wah*. It means to call or invite others to Islam.

The one who calls people to Islam or teaches what knowledge he has with a sincere intention can be certain of a great reward. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, said, "Convey from me, even if it is a verse." He did not stipulate that the person should have vast knowledge; rather he stipulated that he should have knowledge of what he is teaching. Those who teach are not automatically scholars. Scholars possess certain traits and qualities and a very high level of Islamic education.



In Arabic the word for a scholar is *Aalim*. It is a word that carries a similar meaning to the words *faqeeh* and *mujtahid*; they all strive to reach a *Shariah* ruling via the evidence presented. This is generally a person who has spent many years acquiring the tools and prerequisites that are required to make *ijtihad*.

One of the most renowned scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Sheikh Ibn Uthaymeen described very succinctly what educational standard a Muslim should achieve in order to be considered a scholar.<sup>[1]</sup> His words are paraphrased below. Although the word 'he' is used, it is to be understood that these prerequisites apply to both male and female scholars.

Firstly, he (the *mujtahid*) should have knowledge of the evidences that he needs for the purpose of *ijtihad*, such as the verses of the Quran and *ahadith* that speak of rulings. He should have knowledge of the matters pertaining to the soundness or weakness of *hadith*, such as the *isnad*, and the narrators in the *isnad*. Next he should be aware of what abrogates and what is abrogated and issues on which there is consensus. He should have knowledge of various matters affecting the ruling, such as reports of specific meanings, reports that set limits, and so on. He should also have knowledge of the Arabic language and *Usool al-fiqh* (Principles of Islamic jurisprudence) that has to do with verbal evidence, such as what is general and what is specific, what is absolute and what is restricted, what is mentioned in brief and what is mentioned in detail, and so on, so that his rulings will be in accordance with what is indicated by that evidence. Lastly he should have the ability to use this knowledge to examine the evidence and derive rulings.

It should be noted that these terms, *aalim*, *faqeeh* and *mujtahid*, should not be used to describe just anyone who speaks about Islamic rulings or teaches Islamic material in schools, universities, or cultural centers, nor should it be used for everyone who works in the field of *dawah*. These terms denote a level of scholarship that cannot be acquired easily and often takes decades of study.

Prophet Muhammad spoke very eloquently about the superiority of people of

knowledge or scholars. oeThe superiority of an *aalim* over the devout is like my superiority over a worshipper or like that of the moon in the night when it is full, over the rest of the stars, and truly the scholars are the heirs of the prophets, and truly the prophets do not leave behind them gold or silver, they only leave knowledge as their heritage. So whosoever acquires knowledge acquires a huge fortune.”[2]

Knowing who is a scholar and who is not is something that every Muslim must endeavour to understand. In this digital age where information is freely available and easily accessible it is very easy for people who are not qualified to set themselves up as Islamic scholars and the damage they can do to hearts and minds is sometimes unrepairable. When an unqualified person gives a religious verdict people might be lead astray. Reading a book, often translated from Arabic does not make the reader a scholar. He or she is not able to make rulings. Speaking eloquently in front of a camera and posting it on YouTube is not a sign of scholarship.

The role of a Muslim scholar is to guide people to the right path and to help people feel and be closer to Allah. They need to be able to interpret not only the Quran and *Sunnah* but the body of scholarship that developed since the dawn of Islam. This is not a position to be taken lightly. In fact it holds so much responsibility that the *sahabah* and those who followed them avoided giving religious rulings if they were able to do so.

It is said that one of the great scholars of *Shariah*, Abdur-Rahman ibn Abu Laila, said, oeI was able to meet with one hundred and twenty of the *Sahabah*. Every one of these companions was asked about specific *Shariah* issues, seeking a verdict, but they avoided rendering a decision instead pointing to another companion to issue the answer. They were afraid to give an answer that would be incorrect for which they would be responsible before Allah.” Compare this to the ease with which those unqualified give rulings in this day and age.

Because of his level of study, the scholar holds a very high status amongst the Muslim *Ummah*. It is his or her role to help and encourage people to obey the rules of Allah and stay on a middle path in all things, belief, worship, ethics, morality, behavior, and social interactions.

It is also important to understand that scholars are not infallible. They might be the inheritors of the prophets but they are also human beings with all the foibles and imperfections that come with humanity. This is one of the reasons why scholars do not take religious rulings or fatawa lightly.

Imam Malik