

Knowledge and Wealth in the Islamic Tradition

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One of the key mythological constructs of Western scientific and economic development is embodied in the often cited but little understood phrase 'knowledge is power.' Francis Bacon, European philosopher and would-be statesman, spoke these infamous words in the early 17th century CE. Nowadays, Bacon is often credited as the "father of modern science," yet his celebrated dictum is rarely situated in the context he intended. Bacon believed that "human knowledge and human power meet as one" so that nature can be "forced out of her natural state and squeezed and moulded" in order to "establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race over the universe." Bacon insisted that this knowledge of power over nature remains the exclusive trust for elite corps, later to be known as "scientists," and who must "take an oath of secrecy for the concealing of that which we think fit to keep secret." From an Islamic perspective, there are grave errors in Bacon's thinking. First of all, since only Allah has dominion over the universe, its fatal flaw—and that which exposes it as a Satanic temptation—is the insistence that humankind use its knowledge to extend "dominion of the human race over the universe." Nevertheless, this has not stopped the West from forging itself upon Bacon's dictum. Bacon's conspiracy of silence, thought, and action fueled Western civilization for 400 years. Knowledge was indeed power, but only for those who already possessed power. The Baconian vision allowed the West to establish a stranglehold on nature, wringing from it the minerals and other resources to fuel its civilization at the expense of the rest of the world. Today, that legacy means that barely 20% of the world's population consume over 80% of all the natural resources. Americans are on the vanguard of the Baconian vision, with their meagre 5% of the world's population consuming a full one-third of all resources. And compared to the world averages of consumption, Americans use over three times the arable land, five times the energy resources, three times the fresh water, and over seven times the paper, to name only a few areas of use. Not only is the Western system wasteful and destructive, but it is apparent from such statistics that it is impossible for the rest of humanity to enjoy the opulent lifestyles lived by those privileged segments of Western society, who are precisely those people trying to normalize the Western relationship to wealth and the environment for the rest of humanity. The idea of "knowledge is power" has well served the Western world elite over the centuries,

and some of the most brutal wars have been fought to protect its exclusivity. It still underwrites the international system of recolonization we are calling Western development. But this just makes it more difficult to see why Bacon's dictum is today splattered all over the mental environment. From internet commercials to school logos, in advertising and entertainment, "knowledge is power" has become commonplace and is repeated on the tips of people's tongues from all walks of life.

Bacon's dictum is no longer secret. In fact, now everyone is encouraged to buy the latest computer technology or pay for high priced schooling precisely because "knowledge is power."

It is clear that Bacon and his successors knew that the real power lie in the exclusivity of knowledge, so how is it that the West now wants everyone to know its secret? The answer is that "knowledge is power" is no longer the driving force behind Western civilization, so it is no longer necessary to keep it secret.

While the West certainly still enjoys, and jealously guards, the fruits of implementing four centuries of the Baconian dictum, it is no longer useful or even relevant in and of itself. A new dictum is dethroning "knowledge is power." In Bacon's day, the Church and the feudal establishment were the benefactors and beneficiaries of the "knowledge is power" apparatus. Today's universities and corporations have taken over that role, so one can find evidence of the new dictum in corporate boardrooms and elite educational establishments.

"Knowledge is wealth" is replacing "knowledge is power" as the generative force behind Western civilization. Glimpses of the new dictum can be uncovered if one knows where to look. For instance, the National Centre on Education and Economy (NCEE), a Washington DC think-tank funded by big business and the Carnegie and other large foundations, has taken a leading role in school reform in the US. The NCEE mission statement reads: "Knowledge and the capacity to put knowledge to good use is now the only dependable source of wealth all over the world. The people, organizations and nations that succeed will be those that make the most of the human desire and capacity for never-ending learning." What is carried over from Bacon's day, though not as successfully, is the necessity for secrecy, or for some other way of assuring that, just as knowledge was power only for the powerful, knowledge will be wealth only for the wealthy.

For now, what we have here is a faint glimpse at the blueprint for the new world order of globalize corporate power emanating from Western based institutions and fueled by Western science. Building on their exclusive domination over the fruits of the Baconian dictum, the West is now moving into the realm of knowledge and intellect. Think of what this means. While the results of four centuries of the Baconian order, besides the gross inequities cited above, are

seen in an increasingly strained natural environment, the West's habit of consumption, its venerated "way of life," is putting a terrible strain on global ecosystems, with many now at the point of collapse.

Meanwhile, the old and the new dictums of the West are intertwined when one looks at issues of "intellectual property rights" in the context of food, botany, and genetics. If the Baconian dictum of the past means the environmental destruction of today, then it is not too far a leap to see that the new dictum of today may be the "mental" destruction of tomorrow.

Reconfiguring knowledge as "the only dependable source of wealth all over the world" has many severe implications, among them being the specter of patenting various forms of life, such as seeds and genes. An advantage of knowing this is that it may enable some kind of pre-emptive measures to disallow the West from making the transition from imperial control over natural resources to imperial control over natural and mental resources.

While Muslims have largely bought into the Baconian dictum of knowledge is power, with mixed results and with little sense of how this contributes to environmental destruction, we may want to think hard and twice about the emerging dictum. For instance, what does the Islamic tradition say about the relationship between knowledge and wealth? Is it possible to develop an Islamic alternative before the new Western paradigm shift is complete, and before its fruits and mechanisms are too hard to resist?

The Prophet Muhammad (S) once declared: "There are two kinds of greedy people who cannot be satisfied: the seeker of knowledge (ilm) and the seeker of this world (dunya). While the seeker of knowledge receives an increase in Allah's pleasures, the seeker of this world extends deeply into tyranny." The profound wisdom of this hadith becomes more apparent the more one spends time in reflection.

In one aspect, it suggests that knowledge and wealth are separate, yet linked. But how are they linked? Does the Islamic tradition support the emerging vision of knowledge as wealth? What are the alternatives? The books of history and tradition are full of wisdom to help sort out this emerging dilemma.

In answering such questions, Muslims need to develop some Islamic grounded criteria for making distinctions between knowledge and wealth, and the subtle interplay therein. It is well beyond the scope of this short article to present an exhaustive account of the Islamic traditions on these matters, but it is possible to point the way in a few directions, from history and tradition.

The Prophetic recognition cited above, that the seeker of both knowledge and wealth is insatiable, was born out on several occasions in early Islamic history. For example, when Imam

'Ali ('a) was the leader of the Muslims, he faced a severe problem with the emergence of dynastic rule within Bani Umayyah.

The Imam had first-hand experience with the relationship between knowledge and wealth, and this became more acute as dynastic rule solidified under the Abbasids. During that period, the great Muslim scholars and Imams, like Imam Ja'far Sadiq ('a) and other Muslim jurists and traditionists, such as Ibn Hanbal, languished in prisons because they exhorted people to knowledge—as defined by the Prophet—while the dynastic regimes exhorted people to wealth and superfluity. This legacy is worth a closer look.

During the time of the Imams, they had knowledge and the Abbasid rulers had wealth. The rulers feared the popularity of the Imams among the people, who respected them for their knowledge. Fearing a threat to their legitimacy, the Abbasids under Harun al- Rashid and Ma'mun decided to use their wealth to buy what they thought was knowledge. They could not buy the Imams, just like the Quraysh could not buy the Prophet, so they turned to other sources of knowledge besides the blessed Imams.

This led to a massive, well-funded, and indiscriminate translation movement from Greek, Sanskrit and other languages, the products of which Ma'mun put in his newly endowed library called Bayt al-Hikmah, which was intended to compete with the Ahl al-Bayt. This crystallizes the confusion about the definition of knowledge, and about the relationship between knowledge and wealth. In other words, they used their wealth to redefine knowledge, and this confusion remains with us today, as does the tendency to intermingle knowledge and wealth. But the Prophet is quite clear on the definition of knowledge, and the Imam is quite clear on the relationship between knowledge and wealth. Seen in this historical framework, it is safe to assume that these are taghuti tendencies that have been with us for quite some time. Standard histories of the Bayt al-Hikmah celebrate it as the introduction of science into the Muslim world, as an altruistic quest for knowledge and as beneficent for the people. It is none of these.

It is a political act by a shrewd ruler.

Ma'mun also tried to co-opt Imam Reza ('a) into his sphere, by offering him leadership succession, but when the Imam put haqq before expediency—breaking the cardinal rule of wealth driven politics—he was promptly poisoned by Ma'mun. This was part of the Abbasids three-part plan to maintain the rule of wealth in the lands of Islam: redefine knowledge, co-opt the Shi'ite Imams, and imprison the Sunni jurists.

The reign of Imam 'Ali ('a), upon whom be peace, lies at the crossroads of this shift from Prophetic wisdom and frugality to dynastic superfluity and greed, so his deeds and sayings are instructive in our study. It is also necessary to consider the Imam's teachings because the

corrupted tendencies in Muslim thought embodied in the dynastic shift are precisely those which seem to allow Western development schemes to make sense in the present day Islamic world.

Providing a warning, the Imam is recorded as having said to his companion Kumayl: "Knowledge is better than wealth sevenfold. First, knowledge is the heritage of the Prophets, while wealth is the heritage of the Pharaohs. Second, wealth decreases by spending, while knowledge multiplies. Third, wealth is in need of protection, while knowledge protects those who have it. Fourth, knowledge enters into the burial cloth, while wealth stays behind. Fifth, wealth happens to disbelievers and believers alike, whereas knowledge does not happen except to the believers especially. Sixth, everyone is in need of knowledge in matters of religion, whereas no one needs the owner of wealth. Seventh, knowledge empowers humankind to pass within the straight path, whereas wealth blocks it." In such a view, knowledge cannot be construed as wealth. Wealth is a corrupting influence, and its intermingling may have a corrupting effect on world knowledge systems, thus preventing people from finding true alternatives to Western scientific and economic development schemes. It is this capacity of wealth and the dunya to lead people astray that is of major concern for our purposes here. Western economic development schemes rely on a love of the dunya in order to perpetuate themselves. As Muslims are well aware, in the Islamic tradition worldly possessions are looked upon with careful suspicion. In the Nahj al-Balaghah, there is a profound and complex hadith from Imam 'Ali ('a), that offers relevant guidance on some of these issues. The Imam addresses the nass in this hadith, so it is not only intended for the believers. He is reported to have said: "Worldly possessions are poisonous weeds, so avoid grazing among them. Tearing them out is favorable to seeking satisfaction, and sustenance is better than opulence. Poverty has been ordained upon whoever seeks riches, while comfort is destined for those who stay away. The eyes of those who are attracted by worldly possessions will be blinded. And for those who display eagerness toward wealth, the deepest recesses of their hearts will be filled with alternating grief, some of which causes worry, and others causing pain. This continues until the suffocation of death overwhelms them, at which point their hearts will be flung open and severed. It is easy for Allah to cause their death, and for their companions to bury them. Believers see this world with eyes that derive instruction, taking from it food enough for their barest needs, while they hear of this world only with ears of enmity. If it is said that someone has become rich, it is also said that they have become destitute, and if pleasure is felt in living then grief will

be felt at death. This is the situation, and the day has not yet come when people will be disheartened."

And, in a similar set of teachings recorded by Shaykh al- Mufid in Kitab al-Irshad, the Imam warns: 'The world is just like a snake, soft to the touch but vicious in its sting. Therefore, avoid those things which please you in it because of the short time which they will be with you there. Be as familiar as you can with what is there while being as wary as you can of its possessions. For whenever one who possesses the world seeks to take ease from it, it diverts him toward what is hateful.

" And on another occasion, the Imam exhorts the children of Adam to take heed: "Let not the greatest of your concerns be what happens to you today. For if it passes you by, it was not meant for you. Your concern should be now and on every day which comes to you, that Allah will provide you with provision for it.

You should know that you will never acquire anything beyond your own sustenance, save as one who looks after things on behalf of others. If your share of wealth in this world is abundant, then soon your heir will take it over and together with him your account on the Day of Resurrection will be lengthy.

So be happy with what you have and make provision for the day of your return to Allah, which is ahead of you. The journey is long, the appointment is the Resurrection, the destiny is Heaven or Hell." Commentary on such teachings can easily exceed this brief study, but in general they warn Muslims to take heed of the trappings of the dunya, to not be seduced by schemes that promise to fulfill their worldly desires, no matter how tempting.

For whoever gives into the temptation to develop along Western scientific and economic lines, the results will be as the Imam has warned: 'The people of this world (dunya) are excessive in eating, laughing, sleeping, and anger. They find little satisfaction, and do not apologize to whomever they offend, nor do they accept apologies from whoever has offended them. They are lazy in their obedience but courageous in their disobedience. They are not responsible for their inner wants and desires.

They are of little advantage to anyone, yet they are excessive in their speech. They have no piety or fear, and show great enthusiasm in consuming. The people of this world are not thankful for their prosperity, nor are they patient in distress. They praise themselves about that which they do not deserve, and speak often about that which they desire. They expose other people's shortcomings but conceal their positive attributes. And they are not modest to those they meet." The Western world seeks to normalize a system of thought and action the outcome of which is producing "people of the dunya." Though disguised as a program to eradicate

poverty, the Western economic development scheme is implanting a wasteful and destructive culture of consumption. And, in the true sense of the word, consumption is a disease characterized by wasting away.

Western development wastes away both the natural resources upon which humanity subsists, and the cultural resources that once formed healthy, prosperous, and meaningful lives for all.

The noble Islamic tradition, from the Qur'an and hadith to the teachings of the great Imams and scholars, are resplendent with such relevant wisdom, especially on the endeavour of seeking knowledge. It is necessary to study this corpus and derive from it an authentically Islamic way of understanding the relationships between knowledge, information, and wealth, and which operates outside the Satanic Western order and its concomitant systems of thought and practice as embodied in programs such as the Western development described herein. With "knowledge is power" exposed as the spinner of inequality, greed, and destruction in the environmental health of humanity, and with "knowledge is wealth" potentially being wielded by the same powers, the mental health of humanity may depend on the abilities of Muslims to configure another way, which is rooted in the Islamic tradition. This will be necessary to avoid Western colonial schemes, and to regenerate healthy and prosperous communities, societies, and civilizations