

The view of Islam on asking and answering questions

Talk by Dr Zahid Aziz

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The Holy Quran contains many verses beginning with the words: “They ask you...”, followed by a question put to the Holy Prophet Muhammad.

- Some such questions are from his followers, asking about how to implement a particular teaching of Islam in their lives, what to do in certain situations, etc.
- Others are from the opponents of Islam putting forward an objection, or being sarcastic.
- There is a third type of question we find in Hadith, being asked by Muslims. More on that later. This is where they challenge whether something they heard is actually a teaching of Islam.

All this shows clearly that asking questions and giving answers played a vital role, from the beginning of Islam, in the spread of knowledge of Islam in the world.

The Quran

1. In an early revelation, Allah tells the Holy Prophet:

“Did He not find you an orphan and give (you) shelter? And find you groping, so He showed the way? And find you in want, so He enriched you?

Therefore the orphan, oppress him not. And him who asks, rebuke him not. And the favour of your Lord, do proclaim.” (93:6–11)

Here the Holy Prophet is told that he himself lacked certain things, and these were then granted to him by Allah. So as regards those people well who still lack those things, the Holy Prophet should treat them with goodness and kindly because he was in their position at one time.

One of these things is: “Did Allah not find you groping (to find true guidance and knowledge), and He showed you the way?” Therefore, he is given the instruction that, when anyone who asks him a question, do not rebuke him, do not scold him, do not tell him off.

From this we learn that if we are asked a question by someone who seeks the knowledge which we are fortunate to possess, we must not rebuke him, because we were in his position once. Hazrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad instructed his Jamaat as follows about this:

“عالم ہو کر نادانوں کو نصیحت کرو، نہ خود نمائی سے انکی تذلیل“

“If you are learned, give good counsel to the ignorant and the foolish, instead of degrading and humiliating them in order to show off.” (*Kishti-i Nuh*, p. 11)

In other words, don't behave as if you are superior to the questioner, and don't look down on those who know less than you. When you answer questions, don't do it to show off your knowledge, but impart the knowledge which benefits the questioner.

2. Muslims are aware of the well-known incident, related in the Quran, that in the early days of the mission of the Holy Prophet, he was once preaching to important chieftains of his tribe, when a blind man came and interrupted him, asking to be given guidance on Islam. The Holy Prophet showed dislike of this untimely interruption and a frown appeared on his face. Allah then revealed to him that this was not the right thing to do. Allah said:

“He frowned and turned away, because the blind man came to him. And what would make you know that he might purify himself, or be mindful, so the Reminder should benefit him?” (80:1–4)

The revelation goes on to say that the Prophet was giving his attention to those who considered themselves above need of guidance, but he was paying no regard to one who had come to him with a great struggle and fearing God.

From this we learn that, in answering questions from people, we should not give preference to those who are considered important in society, and give less attention to those who are ordinary. What matters is who is making the greater effort to learn. And certainly, we must not mind genuine and sincere requests for knowledge from any quarter.

3. Another point is found from the following verse:

“They ask you about the Hour, when will it take place? Say: Its knowledge is with my Lord only. None but He will manifest it at its time. It is momentous in the heavens and the earth. It will not come to you but suddenly. They ask you as if you could find out about it (by effort). Say: Its knowledge is with Allah only, but most people do not know.” (7:187)

The “hour” which the opponents of the Holy Prophet were asking him about could be the final Day of Judgment, or it could be the day when the Holy Prophet achieves success and triumph in his mission — the hour of their end.

The Holy Prophet only knew about it broadly, and not in detail. So that is the answer he gives. This teaches us that if we don't know the full answer to a question, then we should only go as far as what we know, and say: “This is the limit of my knowledge, like it or not. I can't go further than this.”

4. Allah also tells the Holy Prophet:

“And they cannot bring you a question, but We have brought you the truth and the best explanation.” (25:33)

From this we learn that we must strive to give the best possible answer, in line with the truth.

Hadith

In Hadith we find that the Companions of the Holy Prophet, men and women, not only asked him questions **about what to do, but also about why he said or did certain things**. After his death they asked each other questions in order to correct and verify their knowledge of some matter. For this purpose sometimes they travelled long distances.

Aishah said that whenever she heard something which she did not understand, she asked the Holy Prophet again and again till she understood it. She gave an example that the Holy Prophet said something which she felt contradicted the Quran. So she put to him such a verse of the Quran, and said to him: But the Quran says this. He then clarified what he said and showed that it did not contradict the Quran. Maulana Muhammad Ali writes as follows about this incident:

“This shows that it is allowed to raise an objection to a statement made by a religious teacher or leader in order to ascertain what is correct.”

”واعظ یا معلم یا امام پر اعتراض کرنا یا اس سے سوال کرنا صحیح علم حاصل کرنے کے لئے جائز ہے۔“

(*Fazl-ul-Bari*, Urdu commentary on Sahih Bukhari, on hadith 103)

Maulana Aftab-ud-Din Ahmad writes under this hadith in his English translation of Bukhari:

“This shows that the Holy Prophet encouraged questions on himself. A real teacher should not only be careful of what he teaches but also whether his teachings are fully understood. He should not mind even being repeatedly asked such questions. This is not a disregard for the teacher. Nor should the teacher assume the role of an infallible guide. The Holy Prophet himself did not assume such a role, and people lesser than him must not assume that they are above all mistakes.”

(English translation of *Fazl-ul-Bari*, first edition, published 1956)

Sometimes a Companion of the Holy Prophet would challenge another Companion’s opinion or interpretation, or even question whether a hadith related by him was correct. Today we swallow anything attributed to the Holy Prophet that is circulated by e-mail or on social media without asking: Is it in accordance with the Quran, does it clash with any principle of Islam, does it make sense at all?

We read in Hadith that ordinary Muslim women used to ask the Holy Prophet questions about personal hygiene or sexual matters.

- In Sahih Muslim there is a hadith that a woman of the Ansar of Madinah asked him how a woman should clean her body after the monthly periods and after sex. He told her what to do. Aishah said: “How good are the women of the Ansar that their modesty (or shyness) does not prevent them from trying to understand religion.” (Sahih Muslim, hadith 332c, book on Menstruation)
- In Sahih Bukhari there is a chapter with the heading: “Shyness in the matter of knowledge”. It also quotes this statement of Aishah which I just read out. It also quotes another great Muslim scholar as saying:

“One who is shy about knowledge, or feels proud, cannot learn knowledge.” (Book 3: Knowledge, ch. 50)

The meaning is that a person who is too shy to ask a question, or too proud to let people find out that he lacks knowledge, or too proud that people will consider him stupid for asking a question. Such a person can never gain knowledge.

- In that same chapter in Bukhari, there is a hadith that an ordinary Muslim woman came to the Holy Prophet to ask a question of an embarrassing personal nature about herself. She began with these words:

“O Messenger of Allah, Allah is not shy in telling matters of fact.” (hadith 130)

This was her justification for asking such a question. She points out that when it comes to giving people the knowledge they need for their own good, even Allah in His revelation speaks directly without shyness.

- When Hazrat Umar was khalifa, many Muslim men had to be sent to other countries as soldiers to take part in battles. They had to spend a long time away from their wives. The wives started missing love and affection from their husbands. Hazrat Umar came to realise this by talking to such a lonely wife. He then asked his daughter, Hafsah:

“I need your help. Tell me, how long can a wife remain separated from her husband without becoming desperate for him?”

Hafsah looked down in embarrassment. Hazrat Umar said: “Allah is not shy in telling matters of fact.” Hafsah indicated by her hand that it was three or four months. So Hazrat Umar ordered that no married man should be required to serve abroad for more than four months. (*Tarikh-ul-Khulafa* by Jalal-ud-Din Suyuti; for reference see pages 148–149 of the English translation by A. Clarke, 3rd edition, 2008.)

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