

Islam Question & Answer

General Supervisor:
Shaykh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid

145071 - Who is a scholar ('aalim)?

the question

I would like to know the correct response to the issue of saying that the term scholar cannot be used for an Islamic teacher and it should be people like Shaykh Fawzan, Shaykh Ubayd and so on. In short, who can be called a scholar as this issue is causing division among the Salafi brothers in my country.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allaah.

The words 'aalim (scholar), faqeeh and mujtahid all carry the same meaning: they refer to one who strives to reach the shar'ī ruling and who has the ability to derive shar'ī rulings from the evidence.

This means that he has to acquire the tools (pre-requisites) of ijtihad. No one can be described in these terms ('aalim, mujtahid or faqeeh) except one who meets the pre-requisites of ijtihad.

The scholars paid attention to these pre-requisites so that the door is not open to just anyone, old or young, to say about the religion of Allah that of which he has no knowledge.

But we will content ourselves with just two reports from which we will demonstrate what these pre-requisites are.

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The first report was narrated from al-Shawkaani (may Allah have mercy on him) and what he said may be summed up in five points, listing five pre-requisites:

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(i)

He should have knowledge of the texts of the Qur'aan and Sunnah.

This does not necessarily mean that he should have memorised the Sunnah; rather it is sufficient for him to be able to find reports in their places and be familiar with the contents of the books of Sunnah, foremost among which are the well-known compilations of the Sunnah (Saheeh al-Bukhaari, Saheeh Muslim, Sunan Abi Dawood, Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Sunan al-Nasaa'i and Sunan Ibn Maajah), and so on.

He should also know what is saheeh (sound) and what is da'eef (weak) in the texts of the Sunnah.

(ii)

He should have knowledge of the issues of consensus (ijmaa')

(iii)

He should be well versed in the Arabic language.

It is not stipulated that he should have learned it by heart; rather he should be able to understand the meanings and structure of the language.

(iv)

He should have knowledge of usool al-fiqh (basic principles of Islamic jurisprudence), including analogy (qiyaas), because usool al-fiqh is the foundation for deriving rulings.

(v)

He should have knowledge of what abrogates and what is abrogated (al-naasikh wa'l-mansookh).

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See: Irshaad al-Fuhood, 2/297-303

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The second report was narrated from Shaykh Muhammad ibn 'Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him):

He mentioned the pre-requisites of the mujtahid without differing greatly from what al-Shawkaani (may Allah have mercy on him) mentioned, but he put it more clearly and said:

Ijtihad is subject to several conditions, including the following:

(i) He (the mujtahid) should have knowledge of the shar'ī evidence that he needs for the purpose of ijtihad, such as verses of the Qur'aan and hadeeths that speak of rulings.

(ii) He should have knowledge of the matters pertaining to the soundness or weakness of hadeeths, such as the isnaad, the men in the isnaad and so on.

(iii) He should be aware of what abrogates and what is abrogated (al-naasikh wa'l-mansookh) and issues on which there is consensus (ijmaa'), so that he will not issue a ruling on the basis of something that has been abrogated or that is contrary to scholarly consensus.

(iv) He should have knowledge of various matters affecting the ruling, such as reports of specific meanings, reports that set limits, and so on, so that he will not issue a ruling that is contrary to that.

(v) He should have knowledge of the Arabic language and usool al-fiqh 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.

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(vi) He should have the ability to derive rulings from the evidence.

End quote from al-Usool fi 'Ilm al-Usool, p. 85, 86; Sharh (commentary thereon), p. 584-590.

It should be pointed out that referring to the Sunnah now is much easier than it was before, because of the books that have been written on the Sunnah.

The one who fulfils these conditions is a scholar ('aalim) who can derive shar'i rulings from the evidence. Anyone who does not fit this description cannot be described as a 'aalim, faqeeh or mujtahid.

It should also be noted that these words ('aalim, mujtahid and faqeeh) are technical terms, as it were; according to the scholars they have specific meanings and pre-requisites. So it is not permissible to use them readily about anyone who speaks about Islamic rulings or teaches Islamic material in schools and universities, or who works in the field of da'wah (calling people to Allah). A man may be a daa'iyah, calling people to Allah, and putting a great deal of effort into that, without having reached the level of being a scholar ('aalim).

We ask Allah, may He be exalted, to teach us that which will benefit us and increase us in knowledge.

And Allah knows best.