

262984 - Some knowledge is an individual obligation and some is a communal obligation; is seeking knowledge obligatory for one who is capable of attaining it?

the question

I would like to know, having reviewed the fatwa on your website, that if seeking knowledge is, for certain matters, a communal obligation then how can we balance this between if a person has capabilities to learn his religion so he does not follow a madhab and between one, who, for example, may have time on his hands - or could, if he wanted, work lesser hours per week so he has more free time because his circumstances mean he is well off and he doesn't have any financial obligations that require much income - but does not utilise this time to learn his religion when he has the other capabilities to do so, such as the books, cassettes, a quiet study room, a good memory, good analytical skills and his abilities mean he has great potential to become well-versed in the Qur'ān and the Sunnah? Is this type of a person sinning because he is working extra hours when he does not need to do and that this time could be utilised better by engaging in learning his religion etc? Could this person still say that seeking knowledge is a communal obligation?

Detailed answer

Some Islamic knowledge is an individual obligation (fard 'ayn), and some of it is a communal obligation (fard kifaayah), and some of it is nafl (supererogatory).

With regard to beneficial worldly knowledge, it is a communal obligation or is permissible.

It says in Kashshaaf al-Qinaa' (1/411): The best of voluntary deeds is jihad. Ahmad said: I do not know of anything after the obligatory duties that is better than jihad...

Then comes knowledge, learning and teaching it, in the fields of hadith, fiqh and other fields, such as tafseer and usool, because of the hadith: "The superiority of the scholar over the worshipper is like my superiority over the least of you..." And Abu'd-Dardaa' said: The scholar

and the learner are equal in reward, and the rest of people are riffraff in whom there is nothing good.

Muhanna narrated that Imam Ahmad said: Seeking knowledge is the best of deeds for the one whose intention is sound. It was said: How can one have the right intention? He said: He should intend to be humble (after acquiring knowledge) and to eliminate ignorance thereby.

Ibn Haani' asked him: Should he seek hadith as much as he thinks he has benefited thereby (and then stop at that point)? He said: Nothing is as good as seeking knowledge.

Ibn Mansoor narrated that spending part of the night in discussing issues of knowledge was dearer to Ahmad than spending some part of it in prayer, and that is discussing the type of knowledge that benefits people in their religious affairs. I said: (Do you mean) prayer, fasting, Hajj, divorce and so on? He said: Yes.

Ahmad said: Everyone should seek of knowledge as much as he needs to carry out his religious duties. It was said to him: Do you mean that all types of shar'ī knowledge are required to help a person adhere to the teachings of his religion? He said: Whatever is required of him as an individual, he must seek the knowledge thereof.

It was said: Such as what? He said: Such as that which he cannot afford to be ignorant of, namely his prayer, his fasting and so on.

What Ahmad meant was the religious duties that are obligatory upon every individual; if that is not the case, then (knowledge of those matters) is a communal obligation. This was mentioned by our companions. So if any group of people acquire knowledge which it is not an obligation for every individual to acquire, then they have fulfilled a communal obligation, and whoever acquires this (communal) knowledge, then it is something extra in his case (and that is a good thing).

In Aadaab 'Uyoon al-Masaa'il it says: Knowledge is the best of deeds, and the closest of the scholars to Allah are those who fear Him the most. End quote.

In al-Mawsoo‘ah al-Fiqhiyyah (13/6) it says: Acquiring knowledge may be subject to the following rulings (as to whether it is obligatory):

- Learning may be an individual obligation (fard ‘ayn); this refers to learning that which a Muslim cannot do without knowing in order to carry out his religious duties, and to make his deeds sincerely for Allah alone, may He be exalted, and how to interact with other people. It is enjoined upon every accountable person, male or female – after learning what is needed in order to have proper understanding of the tenets of faith, which form the foundation of the religion – to learn about that which will help him to do acts of worship and to interact with others in the correct manner; that includes wudoo’, ghusl, prayer, fasting, rulings on Zakaah and Hajj, for those for whom these things are obligatory, and having a sincere intention for the sake of Allah when doing acts of worship.

It is obligatory to learn the rulings on buying and selling for businessmen, so that they can avoid dubious transactions and transactions involving improper elements in all their dealings. The same applies to people in all professions, and everyone who is involved in a thing must learn the rulings connected to it, so that he can avoid falling into haraam when engaging in his profession.

- However, learning may be a communal obligation (fard kifaayah); this applies to learning any branch of knowledge that is essential for people’s well-being in worldly terms, such as medicine, mathematics, grammar, language, ‘ilm al-kalaam, modes of recitation, the science of hadith, and so on.
- Some types of knowledge are encouraged, such as extensive study and research in fiqh, and finding out about subtle fiqhi issues; the same applies to other branches of shar‘i knowledge.
- Some types of knowledge may be haraam, such as learning about charlatanry, geomancy, witchcraft, soothsaying and fortune telling.
- Some types of knowledge may be makrooh (disliked), which includes verses of poetry which contain descriptions of specific women.

- Some types of knowledge may be permissible, which includes verses of poetry in which there is nothing objectionable such as ridiculing a Muslim or mentioning faults of Muslims and so on. End quote.

That which comes under the heading of a communal obligation or supererogatory knowledge does not become an individual obligation for someone just because he has some free time or has the ability to become a scholar.

But such a person may be missing out on much goodness if he decides not to seek knowledge or limits himself to learning only that which it is obligatory for him to learn. That is because seeking knowledge is one of the noblest of deeds, and the one who does that is one of the heirs of the Prophets, because he is showing people the way to Allah and teaching people about His religion.

With regard to the honour of knowledge, it is sufficient to note that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Whoever travels a road seeking knowledge thereby, Allah will cause him to travel one of the roads of Paradise. The angels lower their wings in approval of the seeker of knowledge. All those who are in the heavens and on earth, even the fish in the water, pray for forgiveness for the scholar. The superiority of the scholar over the worshipper is like the superiority of the moon over all other heavenly bodies. The scholars are the heirs of the Prophets. The Prophets did not leave behind dinars or dirhams, rather they left behind a heritage of knowledge, and the one who acquires it acquires an abundant portion.” Narrated by at-Tirmidhi (2682), Abu Daawood (3641) and Ibn Maajah (223); the hadith was classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh at-Tirmidhi.

There is nothing wrong with a person working additional hours, without needing to, if that will lead to him not acquiring further knowledge, so long as he has already learned what he needs to know.

Secondly:

Whoever wants to gain knowledge of fiqh has to study one of the madhhab. This is the way of people of knowledge both in the past and the present. It does not mean that he should adhere

fanatically to that madhhab and never accept any view from outside that madhhab.

Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Undoubtedly the individual should focus on a particular madhhab, studying it and its basic principles and guidelines. But this does not mean that he should adhere completely to the view of the imam of that madhhab as one should adhere to the words of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him); rather his study of fiqh should be based on that, but he should also be willing to accept from other madhhabs that which is based on sound evidence, as was the way of leading scholars who followed madhhabs, such as Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah, an-Nawawi, and others, so that his knowledge will be based on a sound foundation.

End quote from Majmoo‘ Fataawa Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (26/176-177).

[Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen] (may Allah have mercy on him) was asked: We see some students beginning their study of fiqh with comparative fiqh; is this way correct? Or does the study of fiqh require a gradual approach? Please explain that to us.

He replied:

What does comparative fiqh mean? It means giving different scholarly views on any fiqhi issue. No, this is wrong.

The one who starts his study of fiqh by reading books that show different views will undoubtedly become lost and confused.

It is better to focus on a particular madhhab and master its books. Once a student has a solid grasp of the fiqh of that madhhab, then he may look at books of comparative fiqh, and when he becomes well versed, he may be able to determine which view is more correct.

As for starting with differences of opinion when he is still a beginner, this is like someone who throws himself into the sea when he does not know how to swim.

End quote from Duroos li’sh-Shaykh al-‘Uthaymeen (11/29).

And Allah knows best.