10690 - How should a Muslim deal with books of knowledge?

the question

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Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

1.How should he deal with the book?

Dealing with the book involves several things:

1 – Knowing the subject of the book – so that he can benefit from it, because he needs to specialize. It may be a book of sihr (witchcraft) or trickery or falsehood. So he has to know the subject of the book so that he can benefit from it.

2 – He has to know its terminology. Because knowing the terminology means that you will save a lot of time. This is what the scholars do in the introduction to their books, for example we know that when the author of Buloogh al Maraam says “agreed upon”, he means that the hadeeth was narrated by al-Bukhaari and Muslim, whereas the author of al-Muntaqaa uses this phrase in a different manner – when he says “agreed upon”, he means that the hadeeth was narrated by Imaam Ahmad, al-Bukhaari and Muslim. Similarly in books of fiqh, the scholars use the words qawlayn, wajhayn, riwaayatayn and ihtimaalayn differently. Riwaayatayn (two reports) means two reports from the imaam; wajhayn (two views) means two views among the companions, i.e., the companions of the leaders of the madhhab; ihtimaalayn (two possibilities) is used in cases of uncertainty as to which of the two views is correct; and qawlayn (two opinions) is more general in meaning than that.

Similarly, we also need to know what an author means if he says ijmaa’ (consensus) or wifaaq (agreement). If he says ijmaa’, he means consensus among the ummah, and if he says wifaaq he

means agreement with the three imams, as is the usage of the author of al-Furoo' concerning Hanbali fiqh. Similarly the followers of each madhhab all have their own terminology, so it is essential to know the terminology of the author.

3 – Knowing the style and phrases used in the book. Hence you will find that when you read a book for the first time, especially the academic books which are filled with knowledge, you will come across a phrase whose meaning you will have to ponder over, because you are not familiar with it. But if you read the book again you will become familiar with it.

There is also something which needs to be added to the book, which is writing comments in the margins and at the foot of the pages. This is something which the seeker of knowledge needs to make the most of. If he comes across something which needs further explanation or evidence, and he is afraid that he may forget it, then he should make a note either in the margin or at the foot of the page. Often a person misses out on such benefits because he does not make notes which take no more than a minute or two to do. Then when he comes back he may or may not remember it.

The seeker of knowledge has to pay attention to that, especially in books of fiqh. In some books you may come across a matter and its rulings which causes you to be confused and have doubts. If you refer to books which are more comprehensive than the book you are reading, and you find something which explains the matter, then you should make a note of it so that you can refer to it again if you need to, without having to refer to the original book from which you have quoted it. This will save you time.

2 – Reading books is of two types

1 – Reading in depth to ponder and understand. This necessarily takes time.

2 – A quick reading to get an idea of the subject of the book, the topics covered and the content of the book. This is done by thumbing through the book and skimming it. This does not involve the same level of thinking as the first method. The best way to read books is to ponder the meanings and seek help from scholars who have understanding. It comes as no surprise that the book which is most deserving of such a reading is the Book of Allaah. You must be patient and persist in

reading, for man has not been given any greater gift than patience.

3 – Collecting books

The seeker of knowledge should be keen to collect books, but he should prioritize. If a person does not have much money, then it is not good and is not wise to buy a lot of books and have to pay for them, because this is bad management. If you cannot buy books with your own money, then you can borrow them from any library.

4 – Being keen to read important books

The seeker of knowledge must be keen to read the most important reference books, not modern works, because some of the modern writers do not have deep knowledge, so if you read what they have written you will find that it is superficial. They may quote things verbatim, or they may distort them to make them longer, but it is all waffle. So you have to read the most important reference works written by the salaf, because they are better and more blessed than many of the books of the later generation. Most of the books of the later writers are short on meanings but long-winded. You may read a whole page which could have been summarized in one or two lines. But you will find the books of the salaf to be easy, straightforward and well written, with not even one word that has no meaning.

Among the best books that the seeker of knowledge must be keen to read are the books of Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah and his student Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allaah have mercy on them both). It is known that the books of Ibn al-Qayyim are easier, because the style of Ibn Taymiyah is strongly-worded because of his abundant knowledge and alert mind, and Ibn al-Qayyim saw the knowledge of Ibn Taymiyah as a well-built house, and his own role as that of organizing and adorning. But Ibn al-Qayyim was free minded; if he thought that his shaykh's view differed from what he thought was correct, he would speak up. When he thought that the pilgrim should go out of ihraam for Hajj then re-enter ihraam for 'Umrah, because Ibn 'Abbaas (may Allaah be pleased with him) thought that if the person who has not brought an animal for sacrifice enters ihraam for Hajj or Qiraan, he must go out of ihraam for Hajj then enter ihraam for 'Umrah, whereas Ibn Taymiyah thought that

this applied only to the Sahaabah, he [Ibn al-Qayyim] said, “I am more inclined towards the opinion of Ibn ‘Abbaas than to the opinion of my shaykh.” He clearly stated that he was of a different view, so he was independent in his thinking. But it comes as no surprise that he followed his shaykh (may Allaah have mercy on him) in matters which he thought were true and correct. Undoubtedly if you think about most of the opinions of Ibn Taymiyah you will find that they are correct. This is something which anyone who ponders his books will know.

5 – Evaluating books

Books may be divided into three types:

1 – Good books

2 – Bad books

3 – Books which are neither good nor bad.

Try to make sure that your bookshelf is free of books which have bad content. There are books which are described as literature, but they simply kill time without producing any benefit. And there are harmful books which contain specific ideas or promote incorrect ideology. These also should not be allowed on your bookshelf, whether that is because the methodology the use is wrong, or because of their wrong understanding of ‘aqeedah, and revolutionary books which promote a harmful ideology.

In general, no harmful book should be allowed on your bookshelf, because books nourish the soul just as food and drink nourish the body. If you nourish it with books such as those it will cause you a great deal of harm and you will follow a methodology which goes against the methodology of the seeker of sound knowledge.