

## The Confusion of the Scholars

by Yahiya Emerick

When I first became a Muslim, one of the things that was mentioned over and over was that there was no clergy in Islam. No "holy men" or intermediaries between Allah and people. Then I was introduced into the whole culture of "Scholars." That's where my alarm bells started to ring...

Have you ever been confronted with such stupidity that you were speechless? It happens all the time and in all spheres of life. The person driving ahead of you can't make up their mind whether to turn left, right, stop, go or travel ahead. The teenager is wearing a full "uniform" of baggy pants, shaved head, ear-ring and gold chains and exclaims he's being "unique." Or my favorite example is that of a man at an auto auction who yelled out "three hundred" when the auctioneer just lowered the price to fifty. Stupidity is sometimes an art form and many people spend a lifetime perfecting it. Usually, the strange actions and behavior of others have little immediate impact on our lives. It often takes a long time for the stupid actions of some to build up to a point where the rest of us suffer. Take for instance the problem of the United Nations. Two-faced people will stand up and tell us that it's the forum for the world and that it's committed to world peace, conflict resolution, justice, etc... But after almost fifty years of bungling, this front for Western, secular domination has prolonged more wars than it solved.

The UN's budget is riddled with corruption and inefficiency and UN headed military missions come with more feebleness, bad action and/or inaction than anything else. (Think Bosnia, Somalia, Korea, Rwanda, etc...) Twenty years ago it didn't matter as the two superpowers kept the world on a tight leash. But now that one superpower is gone, the UN's stupidity and confusion is unable to keep the last superpower in check, let alone tin-pot dictators. The prolonged weakness now makes the world more dangerous.

What about Muslims? Are there any incredibly stupid actions which have built up to a dangerous level. Of course! Of the many to choose from, which one am I going to pick on today? Yep, you guessed it. I'm going to point out how some (not all) "scholars" have steered us wrong and taken us away from the path of Islam.

You often hear the terms, Sheikh, Scholar, 'Alim, 'Ulema, Maulana, Mullah, Allamah, Imam, etc... There are so many people with these titles in front of their names that it's dizzying. You know how so many Muslims are into the whole "Doctor" thing? Seeking status by having everyone call them Doctor? Well, the whole scholar thing is there too and it's much older than the Western oriented "Doctor" worship. (Sometimes you see people writing their names as "Dr. Sheikh whatever." Now that's funny.

Here's the problem I see. When I first became a Muslim, I read so many books that extolled the wondrous virtues of the Islamic system. That is the system that I love. And one of the things that was mentioned over and over was that there was no clergy in Islam. No "Holy" men or intermediaries between Allah and people. Then I was introduced into the whole culture of "Scholars." That's where my alarm bells started to ring.

Of course, I have nothing against a person acquiring a lot of knowledge, whether it's for Islamic learning or worldly benefit. I have nothing against the concept of the scholar, the doctor, the engineer, etc... I do have a problem if some people use those terms as a cover for their arrogance and mistakes and then it affects me in a negative way, either directly or indirectly.

For example, as you well know, there are many competing groups of Muslims today in the ideological wars. There are the Saudi-funded Salafies, the Iranian funded Mullahs, the Egyptian/Syrian Brotherhood groups, the Tablighi Jamaati people, the mysterious Hizb at Tahreer, the Jamati Islami groups, the African American Muslim groups, the secularist Indo-Pak groups and about twenty others. Each group has its own scholars who "prove" to the faithful that the other groups are inferior. These same "scholars" often issue "Fatwas" or religious verdicts about items of concern for individual members and life goes on in the happy dreamland of exclusive truth.

These groups often issue contradictory Fatwas and rarely ever work together on anything. How many of you have been to a gathering of one of these or other groups where the "big scholar" is treated like a celebrity? Well-wishers and sycophants fawning all over him. (It's always a "Him.") What's the average, concerned Muslim supposed to think when the "scholars" are often so full of pride and arrogance that they are repulsive? The hierarchy involved in the "scholar" system is amazing! The big Maulanas are usually the fattest. The medium Maulanas have shorter beards and smaller bellies, while the Maulana wanna-bees are thin and stand off in the fringes of the great procession. (Don't get angry at me for pointing out what everyone knows.)

So where does the stupidity come in? There are several areas to look at and the first is on the issue of who is a "Scholar" or "Sheikh?" Allah is very harsh against the Jews and the Christians for considering their priests and rabbis as people who could make religious judgments without consulting Allah's revelations. The priests made the eating of pork allowed for Christians, with no authority from Allah or from Prophet Jesus, while the rabbis made laws such as a woman could not be in the house during her period and that milk and meat could not be eaten together. In this respect, the people "worshipped" their leaders besides Allah.

Sadly, this is exactly what Muslims have done for the last thousand years. In the early days of Islam, no one went around with ostentatious titles, as if they were somehow set apart from the rest of the people. Everyone was usually addressed as brother or sister. No one earned overly glorified titles, either, just because they studied with a Sahabi. The only real special term that I have ever come across which was frequently used by the Prophet to describe others is 'Alim (learned person). And this term was never used in the sense of a "priest" or Holy man. It was just that: a person who is learned.

In Madina, everyone was "learned" to one extent or another. The trader knew how to practice Islam, the housewife knew how to practice Islam and the traveler knew it too. If someone needed to ask a question about Islam that they didn't know, they would go to a friend or neighbor. For really detailed questions, they might consult someone who was known to be a teacher. But they wouldn't fawn all over the teacher nor would the teacher dress or act in such a way as to set him or herself apart from the rest of the believers.

Centuries passed and a funny thing happened. The Islamic world spread in so many different directions and millions of people were becoming Muslims. The common knowledge of Islam was not so common anymore. If a Muslim teacher went to any area where Islamic knowledge was scarce, suddenly, everyone was wanting to be around him. The teacher became special. (Think of Sufi-style Sheikh worship for example.) Fast forward many more centuries. There are millions of Muslims, but few know much about Islam. Teachers have become "holy" men and have such titles as "Sheikh" or "Maulana". They are a special class, or caste, of people who are sought after and revered by people who want to see their "god" in the flesh because the concept of an unseen Creator is too intellectual for most. (Hence, Muslim "Saints!")

So what of the world today? Any person who learns a few dozen ahadith and one or two ajza is calling himself a scholar and making pronouncements about Islam to his flock who knows little. I have met people who knew little about Islam calling themselves Imam, or Sheikh or whatever. Who made them Imam? Who promoted them to the role of a guardian of the Deen? Was it their ignorant followers? Was it by virtue of the fact that they attended some madrasa in

another culture? Is it because they're rich? Who knows? All I know is that a real scholar doesn't call himself by a title. He doesn't need it. A real knower of Islam realizes he knows so little and is humble. A title makes him feel uncomfortable. That is a real Muslim leader. But what we have mostly is a clergy class. (Think of that hadith about the Day of Judgment where the pretentious scholar is thrown in Hell.)

And what do the self-appointed scholars say? The stupidity is amazing! (These are all actual Fatwas:) One scholar will say that chewing gum does not break the fast. Another says that using a fork is haram. A third says that eating McDonald's meat is okay while a fourth says of it, no way. One scholar says human cloning is halal, while another says it's haram. One local scholar in New York says the Sunnah is not important and that most ahadith are fabricated. One in Egypt says that wife-beating is okay if the wife doesn't make an effort to look pretty while another says that mortgages are allowed under duress. (Have you ever heard the Fatwa that living in America is haram? It's there.) Each one of these scholars backs up their arguments with Qur'an and hadith, in a usually twisted way, and then says anyone who does otherwise is a kafir.

The Muslim masses, especially in the West, become very confused. The Blessed Prophet advised us to ask the learned people if a tough question comes up, but we have incredibly un-learned people leading us. I'm sure you are all aware of that hadith where the Prophet said that he doesn't punish a nation until the learned are no more. I'm sure you'll agree that having a lot of "scholars" doesn't preclude learning being gone.

The biggest confusion among the scholars that I've seen is the issue of Bida', or innovation in the Deen. The blessed Prophet once remarked that if anyone brings something new into Islam that it would be rejected. On another occasion, he said, referring to Islam, that every innovation was a wrong and that every wrong will be in the fire. So what have some of our self-proclaimed scholars gone and done? They have included ordinary, everyday things in this definition of Bida'. Even though the Prophet was talking about people changing the beliefs and practices of Islam, our "scholars," in their infinite wisdom, have said that any new invention after the time of the Prophet is also an "innovation" in Islam.

I'm sorry, I have no clue how a new type of saddle, weapon, hairbrush, toothpick or shovel can possibly be called an innovation in the Deen. They have no relation to the Deen. Everyday items for common use are just that, ordinary aspects of life. Of course, these "scholars" apply this rule selectively. They will take a plane when they go to Hajj, instead of riding a horse. They'll use a microphone instead of shouting and they'll print their ideas in books. (Remember, the Blessed Prophet did not use any printed books in his da'wah.) Oh my gosh! Bida'! (Look at page 691 of Reliance of the Traveller and you will read a hadith where the Prophet encourages good innovations. I guess the scholars didn't read that hadith from Sahih Muslim.)

If you think I'm exaggerating, then ponder over the things I've written. Have you seen anything like it? Have you seen pride on the faces of those who claim to be scholars? Which brings me to my last point. Many scholars make Islam seem totally distant and unreachable. How many times have I been sitting in a Masjid or lecture hall and saw some scholar expounding on Islam in an overly-technical way? Why do you think that teenagers and twenty-something Muslims run away from the Masjid? The scholars use too much Arabic terminology and don't explain things in a digestible way. If it's Sunnah to speak to people according to their level, why do our self-appointed leaders speak as if they're addressing a gathering of scholars all the time?

Don't get mad at me. Don't write angry letters about me. I'm telling you the truth. Listen, I understand the Arabic terminology. I understand even the most difficult concepts. Perhaps you do also. But the average Muslim has no clue what Taddabur is or what derivative verbs are or what Tassawaf is or what Usuli Fiqh is. We have ninety percent of our "next generation" one step away from kufr and these "scholars" give lectures that few of the youth, teenagers, converts or average Muslims can understand.

Of course, the older, immigrant Muslims may understand some of the speech or du'at because they grew up in a Muslim country and heard of some of the concepts. But Islamic knowledge is cut off in the generation raised in the West. Don't the "scholars" of Islam realize this? They are acting like they are teaching in Medina when in fact they are in pre-Islamic Mecca. (Do you know how many da'wah workers mess up their da'wah by using excessive Arabic grammar and concepts that American people don't understand?)

I've often lamented that in our Masajid and centers, in many cases, the Imams and "Scholars" have no clue about the needs of their community. They often can't counsel, teach effectively or even show compassion and understanding. I'm just glad that there are a few good scholars around. I just wish there were more, that they could be in the majority. Then we wouldn't have the confusion and stupidity on such a high level making it difficult for all of us. I know of one Masjid where the Imam carries a gun and has pulled it on Muslims in the Masjid! (How did he get to be an Imam?)

Have you ever heard of a Doctor of Divinity? It's a special degree that Christians usually get before they can become priests or ministers. The candidate must not only study the beliefs and teachings of his or her religion, they must also study: marriage counseling, youth psychology, administration, public speaking, philosophy, comparative religion, management, writing, literature, etc... Why doesn't the board of directors of Masjid X, Y or Z require this from their Imams and resident "scholars"? In many communities I've been in, the Imam, who is almost always a hafiz, is the least respected because all he knows is the Qur'an, he usually has no practical knowledge of anything else whatsoever. The Islamic movement needs real, well-rounded and versatile leaders. We need humble people who don't hide behind titles and enter exclusive "scholar's" clubs.

I don't want anyone to think I'm speaking out against the concept of scholars. I'm not. I repeat, I'm not. I'm speaking out against the laziness in the Ummah which has let our standards for what a scholar should be drop so low that anyone, regardless of intelligence can claim to be a scholar, and then have people follow him. (Do you know how many "Imams" I've seen carrying sticks to beat their students of Qur'an?) I'm also speaking out against those who have acquired such a high level of knowledge but then don't know how to relate it to the people. (Do you know how many big scholars I've seen drunk on their own knowledge while the people around them are lost?)

Some brothers from Saudi Arabia once told me an interesting thing. They said that in their country, everyone tries to get their children on the doctor track in the schools. If the child isn't smart enough to do that, then they try to direct them to the engineer track. But if they fail in that also, then they send them to the religious schools to be an Imam, and that is the lowest level of respect in society. May Allah help us to reclaim the middle ground and bring the knowledge of the real scholars to the masses who are in desperate need of it. Ameen.