

## Yoruba Muslims and Misplaced Priorities in Islam: a Discourse in the Light of Qur'an and Sunnah

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### Abstract

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The aim of this paper is to enlighten the Yoruba Muslims, in the light of the *Shari'ah*, scales that would assist them in placing religious obligations in the right order. It has been observed over the years that a number of Yoruba Muslims give preference to acts of worship whose virtues are not only contestable among the scholars but less meritorious in deeds than those whose extra virtues are not contestable and also solve social problems of the society. A typical example is the issue of *Umrah* and subsequent voluntary *Hajj* undertaken on annual basis. Despite the need for spending much money on issues like feeding the poor, treating the sick and promoting education, Yoruba Muslims, particularly the wealthy individuals prefer to undertake the *Umrah* and voluntary *Hajj* annually with colossal amounts in quest for a reward on an act of worship that could afford to wait than divert the use of the money to address urgent needs of the Muslims. Reason for all this cannot be unconnected with the fact that they lack detailed information and good understanding of their religion. This paper therefore, was able to explain the Islamic jurisprudence of priority in a number of ways and illustrations that make the relative merits of issues clear to them, individually and collectively, so as not to trade off or forsake the obligatory duties for the sake of supererogatory, or fall into a major sin

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### 1.0 Introduction

The view that Islām is a complete and practical way of life is undoubtable. It is a perfect religion which covers all spheres of human endeavours; it provides principles and guidance to regulate the various activities of its followers, such as religious obligations, economic, social, and political aspects of life as well as their rights and duties.

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Islām as a religion is based on knowledge, it requires from every Muslim good understanding of the religion; and therefore cautions against extreme religious practice and blind worship. It has been observed that some Yoruba Muslims due to the shallowness of their knowledge and little understanding of the religion exhibit a lot of flaws in their scale of priorities in regards to religious obligations and practices. This paper seeks to address the above problems of prioritization arising from acts of worship (*‘Ibādah*) and the seeking of knowledge in the light of the *Shar‘ah*, particularly in our contemporary society. While this paper does not intend to provide a comprehensive coverage of this topic, it does examine the concept of priorities from Islāmic perspective with vivid references from the Qur’ān and the *Sunnah*; followed by flaws and imbalance in Yoruba Muslims’ scales of priorities. It also dwells on prioritization of issues in relation to *‘Ibādah* (worship) and *‘ilm* (knowledge).

### 1.1 Conceptual and Contextual Analysis of the Term Priority

Since the main thrust of this paper is on priority, it is thus pertinent to give operational clarification of the term with the aim of giving an insight into the discussion in the body of the paper. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines priority as something that is more important than other things and should be dealt with first (Hornby, 2006: 926). It is also defined as precedence in order, rank,

or dignity; the right to precede others or to receive attention, supplies, etc before others (Simpson and Werner, 1989: 509). In short, priority implies the need to give something attention, consideration, service before others.

In the Islāmic framework, priority is described as ranking of deeds – religious ordinances, values, norms and obligations in a prioritized and hierarchical manner that is based on the *shari‘ah*. Such a prioritization, would help to avoid giving priority to trivial matters over important ones; to weighty matters over ones that are weightier; to the good over the better, or the better over the best (Bello,2003: 4).

In other words, ranking of deeds in a prioritized manners, would position everything, justly and deservedly, in its proper place, with no bias, no excesses, no deprivation. The Qur’ān affirms thus:

And the heaven has He raised high; and He has set up the balance (of justice) in order that you may not transgress (due) balance. So establish weight with justice and fall not short in the balance. (Qur'ān 55:7-9)

*Shari'ah* has made it clear that values, deeds, religious ordinances and obligations all differ a great deal in their weights. They do not all enjoy the same rank and status in Islām. Some of these ordinances and obligations are major while others are minor. Some are fundamentals and others are derivative and subsidiary (Bello, 2003: 5).

A clear reference from the Qur'ān states thus:

Do you make the giving of drink to pilgrims, or the maintenance of the sacred Mosque, equal to (the pious service of) those who believe in Allāh and the Last Day, and Strive with might and fight in the cause of Allāh? They are not comparable in the assessment of Allāh. And Allāh guides not those who do wrong. Those who believe and suffer exile and strive with might and fight in Allāh's cause, with their goods and their persons, have the highest rank in the assessment of Allāh: they are the people who will achieve salvation. (Qur'ān 9:19-20).

In the same token, the Noble Prophet (SAW) says:

*Al-ʾImān* (Faith) consists of seventy odds branches: the loftiest of them is (the declaration) that: There is no deity (worthy of worship) except Allah and the lowest is the removal of harmful things from the pathway. (Sahih Bukhari, vol.1, no.48).

In the above Prophetic tradition, the declaration of faith takes the utmost priority because it governs the relationship with the Creator, which is characterized by exclusive worship; whereas the removal of harmful things from the pathway takes less priority because it describes the nature of the relationship that ought to subsists between fellow creatures, which should be characterized by love and concern for their welfare in the widest sense.

More so, in a bid to move closer, in honour, to Allāh (SWT), the companions of the Prophet (SAW) made enquiries to know which duties are the best, or which Allāh (SWT) loves most.

The replies of the Prophet (SAW) usually come with such phrases like: "the best of deeds is such and such", or the deed most loved by Allah is such and such".

Examples of such replies are contained in the following Prophetic traditions:

The best charity is the charity you have given out while you enjoy good health (i.e. not on sick-bed, when the expectation of death is close at hand) (Sahih Bukhari, vol. 2 no.500).

(Observing), *Ṣalāt* in congregation is better than (observing), *Ṣalāt* alone by twenty seven ranks (Sahih Bukhari, vol.1, no.618).

The provisions of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* as given above have acquainted us with the standards for the clarification of what deeds, values and obligations that are better, preferable, and most loved by Allāh (SWT) and the reasons why they so greatly differ in their mutual merits. Furthermore, the Qur'ān has explained that people are not equal in their ranks, even though they may be equal in their essential status of humanity. They do differ a great deal, however, in respect of their knowledge and their deeds. The Qur'ān reiterates.

O mankind, we created you from a single (pair) of male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily, the most honoured of you in the assessment of Allāh is (he who) is the most righteous of you (Qur'ān 49:13).

Say: Are they equal, those who knew and those who do not know? (Qur'ān 39:9).

In this manner, we find that people do mutually differ and excel one another, just as deeds do mutually differ and excel between them. In other words, distinction between human beings arises from their knowledge, deeds, piety and *Jihad*.

## 2.1 The Yoruba Muslims: A Brief Outline

The 2006 National Census puts the population of the Yoruba people of Nigeria at about 28 million. This undoubtedly makes them the second largest Nigerian ethnic group after the Hausa.

They are mostly found in the South-western states of Nigeria like Oyo, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, Ekiti, Lagos as well as Northern States of Kwara and Kogi. Beyond the shores of Nigeria, the Yorubas are found in large numbers in the southern sections of some neighbouring countries such as Republic of Benin, Dahomey, Togo, and are spread in smaller numbers in Cote d'ivoire, Sierra Leone, Ghana and almost all other countries in West Africa (Opeloye, 2011:1).

The Muslims constitute about 55% of the Yoruba population. This is in spite of the fact that the Yoruba, like other Africans are traditional people. The advent of Islām as far back as the 15<sup>th</sup> century in this region had really robbed off on their traditions and customs with many of them abandoning their traditional religions and the way of life for Islām (Jimoh, 2012:82). In ancient Yoruba, the Yoruba Muslims are referred to as *Elesin Imale* (the people of the religion of the Malians) as the earliest introduction of the religion to that region was through Malian itinerant traders. However, with the passage of time, this nomenclature drastically changed as some of the Muslims who eventually imbibed western education did so with the western culture (Adetona, 2012: 44).

## 2.2 Noticeable Flaws and Imbalance in Yoruba Muslims' Scale of Priorities

In our contemporary society, a lot of amazing aberrations, imbalance, contradictions, and irregularities are found in Yoruba Muslims' scale of priorities on issues concerning not only their spiritual, but material, ideological, social, economic and political lives. They take precedence in anything that relates to comfort and luxury over whatever is attached to knowledge and *‘Ibādah*.

Instances abound of a significant number of Yoruba Muslims who bereft of the guiding light of knowledge and the discipline of mature understanding would venture into a less important task and ignore a more important one; at other times they are seen completely taking up less meritorious deeds while ignoring a more meritorious one.

For instance, often times, a number of otherwise very good Yoruba Muslims would spend several millions of naira sponsoring a significant number of Muslims on the *‘Umrah* and *Hajj* almost every year.

The funny part of this is that many of these people are not the first timers; they are individuals who have already previously discharged the *Hajj* obligation. Some other well to do Yoruba Muslims during the month of Ramaḍān would generously donate large amount of items running into several millions of naira for people to win on T.V. programmes for answering ordinary religious questions. Definitely the month of Ramaḍān is a month of generosity as charity is very common due to wide spread feeling of sympathy with the poor and less privileged. However, if such Muslims are requested to commit that much, or a fraction of it in financing a project that would take care of the orphans and widows, feed the hungry, provide shelter to the homeless, treat the sick, educate the ignorant, provide scholarship for the indigent students, publication of some useful books of Islām or provide employment to the unemployed, they would not respond.

Again, there are many Yoruba Muslims who are professionals in their chosen career, no sooner than they had been engaged, they abandon their jobs in order to free themselves for *daʿwah* (religious propagation), *tabligh* (religious transmission) and public spiritual guidance work. They are ignorant of the fact that they could discharge their professional responsibilities as acts of worship (<sup>ʿ</sup>*Ibādah*) if such duties were performed proficiently and within the limits set by Allāh (SWT). If perhaps, every Muslim was to abandon his/her trade, profession, or vocation, who then would look after the welfare of the Muslims. The Messenger of Allāh (SAW) was sent to humanity, and his companions were engaged in various callings. He did not require anyone of them to abandon his job in order to engage in *daʿwah* work. Every one of them remained on their work and occupation, both before and after the *Hijrah*. Whenever the occasion of *Jihād* arose and they were required to go forth, they would go forth, light-armed and heavy-armed, striving with their wealth and their lives in the way of Allāh.

More so, there are youths, who were admittedly devoted Muslims, yet their overall moral behaviours are nothing to write home about. They were harsh with their fathers, rough with their mothers, and stern with their siblings. Their reason for such behaviours was that their parents and siblings were sinners or deviants in religion. They have forgotten that Allāh (SWT) has enjoined kindness and respect to parents and relatives, even if they were polytheist.

In fact, it is in Islām, that parents have such great rights over their children, rights that are secondary to none but the rights of Allāh (Bello, 2003: 83).

There are also some Yoruba Muslims who are more interested in some pillars of Islām than they are with others. They show more regards for fasting than they have for the *Ṣalāt*. For instance, in the month of Ramaḍān, it is very rare to find a Yoruba Muslim who would fail to observe the Ramaḍān fast, whereas, his level of neglect for the *Ṣalāt* is astonishing. There are also some Yoruba Muslims who busy themselves with supererogatory deeds than they are with obligatory and imperative duties. They are seen on a weekly basis chanting various litanies (*adbkār*) in various *Asalatu* centres, with such great concern and enthusiasm. They would not show similar concern with regard to most of the obligatory duties.

The above mentioned instances form part of the amazing aberrations, contradictions, defects and imbalance in the Yoruba Muslims' scale of priorities in the domain of religion. This will eventually lead us to the discussion on the jurisprudence of priorities in relation to some very important aspects of our religion, Islām. These are: *ʿIbādah* (worship), and *ʿilm* (knowledge).

### 3.1 Priorities in Relation to *ʿIbādah* (Worship)

*ʿIbādah* means more than worship as it covers all types of acts through which a Muslim seeks the pleasure of Allāh. *ʿIbādah* therefore means worship, submission, and obedience as well as subjection and servitude in accordance with the perfect and just guidance of Almighty Allah. *ʿIbādah* is basically the external expression of faith (*ʿImān*) and through it the belief is consolidated and practicalized (Rauf, 1974: 17).

Islām as a way of life has clearly set out the purpose for which man has been created to worship Allāh and associate nothing with Him. This fact is very much emphasized in the following verses of the Qurʾān:

And I (Allāh) have not created the *jinn*s and the humans except they should worship Me (Alone) (Qurʾān 51:56)

O mankind, worship your Lord, Who created you and those before you, that you may become righteous. (Q2:21)

The types of worship that are permissible include beliefs, which form the bases of all other acts of worship and must centre on *tawhīd* (the belief that Allāh is the one and only Lord). There are also the actions of the heart which include love, fear, hope, submitting, trusting repenting and directing them only to Allāh. Also included is speech which involves seeking refuge with Allāh, seeking His help, calling upon Him, glorifying and praising Him, and reciting the Qurʾān. There are the Physical actions which include praying, fasting, performing *hajj*; and the financial actions which include payment of *Zakāt* and other forms of charity (Utz, 2011: 53).

Through *ʿIbādah* (worship) as highlighted above, a strong relationship and spiritual connection with the Creator (Allāh) is established. It should be borne in mind that worship in the Islāmic sense is not limited to the above mentioned ritualistic acts; it encompasses all actions that are done sincerely for the sake of Allāh and according to the *Shariʿah*. For example, abandoning what is forbidden, treating others with kindness, enjoining good and forbidding evil; paying visits to friends, good neighbourliness, taking care of the orphans, helping those who need help, even by a kind word, removing harmful object on the path; and many similar good acts are all considered acts of worship for which Muslims anticipate reward from Allāh (Utz, 2011).

From this premise Aisha has identified three essential components for which the act of *ʿIbādah* would be valid:

1. Purity of intention. If intentions are not purely for the sake of Allāh, good deeds will not be accepted. The Prophet said: "Actions are by intentions and every person shall have that which he intended..."
2. Sincerity, or a resolve to strive to obey the commands of Allāh and to avoid that which He has prohibited.
3. Following the messenger by worshipping according to what Allāh has prescribed through His Prophet Muhammad and his *Sunnah* (Utz, 2011: 54).

It is thus clear from the above analysis that all types of human activities – unless they are something forbidden like stealing, encroaching on others' rights, fornication etc., can be turned into an act of *ʿIbādah*, especially when it is accompanied by the intention of compliance with the divine command or the fulfillment of Allāh's will.



By deduction from the foregoing, if our natural disposition in this life is to worship Allāh alone, it would be impossible to do so perfectly and correctly without detailed information and good understanding in religion. Hence, the imperative for good understanding in religion (*Fiqh*) over intense worship (*ʿIbādah*).

### 3.2 Priority of Sound Understanding in Religion over Intense and Rigorous Worship

A narration in *ḥadīth Qudsī* commands that believers should know Allāh before worshipping Him, for if they fail to know Him, He cannot be worshipped (perfectly). It is from this tradition and such other ones, that superiority of knowledge and good understanding in religion (*Fiqh*) over intense worship emerges. It is thus imperative of every believer to seek for the good understanding in religion before making intense worship of Allāh. In Qurʾān 47:19, Allāh (SWT) instructs the Noble Prophet (SAW) to seek knowledge of the religion first before acting upon it. Although the command is primarily addressed to the Prophet (SAW), it extends to all members of his community.

A Striking evidence from the Qurʾān on good understanding in religion goes thus:

And whomsoever Allāh wills to guide, He opens his breast to Islām, and whomsoever He wills to send astray, He makes his breast closed constricted, as if he is climbing up to the sky. Thus Allāh puts the wrath on those who believe not. (Qurʾān 6:125)

From the *Sunnah* the Prophet (SAW) also corroborates:

If Allāh wants to do good to a person, He makes him comprehend the religion (the good understanding of the Qurʾān and *Sunnah*) (Sahīh Bukhārī, vol.1, no. 71).

This is to say that what Islām requires from us is sound understanding in religion and not engaging in intense and blind worship of Allāh. However, the following narration of a Prophetic tradition best describes the superiority of sound understanding in religion over intense worship.

Ibn Hibban has reported an instructive *ḥadīth* from ‘Abdullah bin Amr, "one day" he said, "the Messenger of Allāh (SAW) left one of his houses and entered the Mosque. Thereupon, he found

Two groups of people, one reciting the Qur'ān and supplicating to Allāh, and the other was seeking and teaching knowledge. He said, each of them is on a good cause. These are reciting the Qur'ān and supplicating to Allāh. If He wills, He grants them, and if He wills, He denies them. And these are seeking and teaching knowledge. I have been sent only as a teacher'. Then he sat with them (Sahīh Bukhārī, vol.1, no.80).

Abū Hurairah (R.A) upon hearing that the Messenger of Allah (SAW) said that: "Never has Allāh been worshiped with anything better than sound understanding in religion" made the following statement:

Verily, it is dearer to study and gain understanding for a given period than to keep vigil the whole night observing *Ṣalāt* until the day break. A person who understands the religion (*al-Faqīh*) is a greater force against the *Shayṭān* than one thousand worshippers are. Everything has a pillar and the pillar of religion is profound understanding (Bello, 2003: 79-80).

The knowledge of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) has also made us to understand that precedence should be accorded to fundamental duties over issues that are not fundamental especially such fundamental duties as the *Ṣalāt* and *Zakāt*. Emphasis should also be placed on duties that are more imperative over the discretionary ones.

It would therefore, be a mistake for people to engage themselves with optional, discretionary and supererogatory deeds - be they of *Ṣalāt*, fasting, or *ḥajj* to the detriment of obligatory duties. An apt example is where a great number of Yoruba Muslim individuals, out of inadequate knowledge of the *Shari‘ah* would keep vigil (*Tahajjud*) all night and in consequence of that unable to discharge their duty as expected in various duty posts. If only they knew that excellent performance of one's responsibility is an obligatory duty, and that negligence of duty is a betrayal of trust and cheating on the part of the employer; they would have spared themselves from keeping vigil, as it is no more than a supererogatory exercise, which neither Allāh nor His Messenger has made it compulsory for them.

There are also a significant number of Yoruba Muslim women who take precedence in engaging in optional deeds such as supererogatory fast at the detriment of their husbands' right. If only they knew that the rights of the husbands are more obligatory than the supererogatory fast, they would not have done so. Indeed, the Prophet (SAW) has forbidden a woman from observing a supererogatory fast when her husband is at home and has not given her permission to do so (Bello, 2003: 164). The implication of the above is that Allāh (SWT) does not accept supererogatory deeds until one has discharged the obligatory one. Thus the supererogatory deeds of a person who has neglected his duties are never accepted, as any extra performance could only arise after one has met the basic demands of the *Shari'ah*; as justice requires the doing of what is obligatory, while extra performance is implied only when one has accomplished more than what is obligatory (Bello, 2003: 56). The following Prophetic tradition reported by Abū Hurairah (RA) summarizes the superiority of obligatory deeds over supererogatory deeds.

Verily the first thing (from the rights of Allāh) that the servant (of Allāh) shall have checked and verified from his deeds, on the day of Resurrection is the *Ṣalāt*. If it is thus found to be in order, then, that is for him a happy and successful ending. If however, it is found not to be in order then that is for him a loss and failure.

Now, if anything is deficient in his duty (of *Ṣalāt*) the Lord blessed and sublime He - shall say (to His Angels and He knows better) check if my servant has any supererogatory deeds so that they may be used to make up for the deficiency in that duty. Therefore, all his other deeds shall be treated in this manner (Bello, 2003: 65).

Thus, the primary focuses of a Muslim's *ʿIbādah* is on obligatory duties. Supererogatory deeds are but patching materials for the deficiencies.

### 3.3 Priorities of knowledge over Deeds

Basically, Islām as a religion gives preference to knowledge over deeds and as such enjoins its adherents to acquire knowledge. It urges them to learn, read, write and conduct research. Knowledge is very vital to the cause and course of Islām. In fact, no religion values or encourages learning as much as Islam.

Empirical evidences abound in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah* to corroborate the validity of this assertion (Qur'ān 58:11, 96: 1-5, 45:4).

A more familiar justification of the priority of knowledge over deeds is in the first revelation of the Qur'ān which commands 'Read' as contained thus:

Read in the Name of your Lord Who created, He created man from a clot of Blood. Read, and your Lord is the most Gracious who taught by the pen. He taught man what he did not know. (Qur'ān 96:1-5).

The command to work later on came in this reference:

O thou wrapped up (in a mantle): Arise and warn! And your Lord do magnify, and your garments do purify (Qur'ān 74:1-4).

Knowledge quite logically, takes precedence over deeds. This is because, it is knowledge that distinguishes what is true and what is spurious in matters concerning faith and conviction, and between what is right and reasonable, and what is wrong and absurd in claims and statements. Nothing could be truer than the statement of ʿUmar bin ʿAbdul ʿAzeez (RA) that:

If a man works without knowledge, then what he destroys is greater than what he sets right (Ibn Abd Barr, 1982:27).

This observation is obvious in respect of the present situation of Nigeria. The major problem facing Nigeria as a Nation, on the part of average citizens are three elements. These are ignorance, poverty and diseases; the most deadly is ignorance which can only be eradicated when majority of people become enlightened. As said earlier, the first revelation of the Qur'ān emphasizes the importance and great necessity of knowledge. Prophet Ādam (AS) was the first man created and bestowed with divine knowledge of all things. The endorsement of knowledge placed him over and above the angels who were then asked to bow down for him (Qur'ān 2: 31-34).

Knowledge is a prerequisite for any leadership role, be it political, military, judicial, administrative and religious. This is to say that in any chosen endeavour or career, knowledge takes precedence.

For example, in the political realm of our society, anybody aspiring for any post must possess some basic knowledge with which he/she discharges his/her duty. An ignoramus has no place in the scheme of things within the political leadership cycle; likewise, in the military, judicial, administrative and religious affairs. A vivid reference in the Qur'ān is found in the role of Prophet Yūsuf (AS) in respect of which the King of Egypt said to him:

Be assured this day, you are, before our own presence with rank firmly established and fidelity fully proved. He (Yūsuf) said, appoint me over the storehouses of the Land. I am indeed (trustworthy) custodian and very learned. (Qur'ān 12:54-55).

In the above reference, Yūsuf (AS) points out at his personal competencies which qualify him for this important job. His suitability for the job derives from two factors: Proper custody (by which he means trustworthiness) and sufficient knowledge (which here refers to experience and proficiency).

The four rightly guided caliphs who assumed the headship of the Muslim Ummah after the Prophet (SAW) were appointed firstly, based on their knowledge and requisite experience for the task. This explains why every religious leader - be it Imām, *Mufti*, *Dā'iyyah* etc. attach great importance to the pursuit of knowledge; particularly when Islām admonishes and enjoins humanity to seek for knowledge. In the propagation of Islām and the control of the Muslim populace; a religious leader must acquire a certain standard in the dissemination of knowledge to others in such a way that he would be seen as a guide and not to mislead his followers.

#### **4.0 Conclusion**

Our attempt so far in this study has been to address from the point of view of the *Shari'ah* the flaws exhibited by Yoruba Muslims in the Prioritization of issues as it relate to religious obligations and ordinances. The study however discovered that many of those Muslims who exhibit such flaws, particularly in the area of *'Ibādah* (worship) lacked detailed information and good understanding of the religion they practice. Hence they accord precedence to discretionary and less important duties over fundamental and imperative ones.

More so, many Yoruba Muslims who have assumed leadership posts in Islām, such as Chief Imāms, Chief Missionaries, *Muftīs* etc. do not possess adequate and sufficient knowledge and good grasp of the religion. As a result, they go about forbidding what is permissible and vice-versa. Not only this, they make compulsory on people what Allāh has not made compulsory, sanctifying and validating innovations, declaring the faithful as unbelievers or excusing the denials of the unbelievers.

This study therefore calls on such uninformed Yoruba Muslims to intensify learning the basic and fundamental principles of the religion with a view to having good understanding of all its aspects. The wealthy Yoruba Muslims should also be aware that the huge amount of money they spend on the *Umrah* and subsequent performance of *Hajj* on annual basis are mere voluntary and supererogatory duties which could afford to wait; whereas, spending such amount of money to solve social problems like feeding the poor, treating the sick, promoting education by way of providing scholarship for the indigent students and taking care of the orphans are imperative duties of the moment which should be discharged forthwith. Furthermore, any Yoruba Muslim assuming a particular post of leadership in Islām must be well grounded in knowledge of fundamental sources of Islam, viz: Holy Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, followed by others such as, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), *sīrah* (Islāmic History) and contemporary studies. Such a person should not be a *muqallid* (i.e. one who echoes or parrots the knowledge of others). By so doing, precedence would be given to the greater of any two obligations and to the more beneficial of any two issues in accordance with the *Shari'ah*.

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