

A Nexus of Stigliz's and Islamic Concepts in Creating a Learning Society

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Abstract

Even a layman will find this talk by Joseph Stigliz worth noting. The talk took place late last year, meant for fellow researchers, economists, academicians and thinkers held in Scotland on this holistic topic “Creating a Learning Society”. In finding a nexus between the thoughts of a Nobel Laureate and Islam, such a propagation has well been documented more than fourteen hundred years ago when the Quran states in Surah Al Mujadilah 58:11 that “Allah will exalt those of you who believe, and those who are given knowledge, in high degrees; and Allah is Aware of what you do”. Also, the Hadith states as narrated by Anas bin Mâlik: The Messenger of Allah said “Seeking knowledge is a duty upon every Muslim” (Sunan Ibn e Majah, Book of Sunnah, Hadith no 224, Classified as Sahih By Allama Albani). Indeed, this is a principle to adhere to for all mankind to be in the wealth of knowledge, in order to transform a society.

In his talk, Stigliz mentioned of the transformation to what was to be termed as the learning society which took place around the period of 1800 for Western economies. When Asia was quoted as being transformed recently, it definitely appears questionable when the Islamic civilization began to take its roots since the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) more than a thousand years ago. This has subsequently

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been undertaken when the Sahabat began the transformation that included the primary spread of knowledge that includes the domains of social, economics, politics and culture, to almost every part of the world. With this note comes the reference to another Hadith that was narrated by Abu Hurairah: "The Messenger of Allah said: "...Whoever follows a path in pursuit of knowledge, Allah will make easy for him a path to Paradise. No people gather in one of houses of Allah, reciting the Book of Allah and teaching it to one another, but the angels will surround them, tranquility will descend upon them, mercy will envelop them and Allah will mention them to those who are with Him. And whoever is hindered because of his bad deeds, his lineage will be of no avail to him" (Sunan Ibn e Majah, Book of Sunnah, Hadith no 225, Classified as Sahih By Allama Albani).

Stiglitz did mention too that in creating a learning society, it has to include both on how people move the frontier of knowledge forward, and how people learn from each other. He has placed emphasis that a successful and sustained growth requires creating a learning society, especially true in the 21st century as the world moves into knowledge economy. Historically too, the Chinese civilization has since provided great impact not only to the local society, but also to the global citizens during the admirals' travels throughout the globe. It then set the pace for other Europeans to set sail towards Asia. Chinese civilization is recognized as one of the greatest ancient civilisation with written record that dated back to 4,000 years ago. Despite the waves of economic, political and social turmoils and jubilation, the country has continued to contribute to the world development of the same domain to this very day.

Another great note by Stiglitz in terms of education, was when he said that education has been a remarkable thing, especially looking into the university education in Scotland through its widespread education. In his talk Stiglitz quoted that 250 years ago, Scotland provided widespread access to education including access to university education. Universities have been so successful as it carries an open architecture where people talk. The same form of development has taken place almost a thousand years ago when Al-Azhar University in Egypt, deemed to be the oldest university in the world, was established. Although it began on the footing of Islamic religious studies, the addition of non-religious subjects were subsequently added. The growth of this University saw the study of a number of subjects in the same place as it was one of the first universities in the world as a modern university that has included both religious and secular courses in the curriculum.

However, the comprehensive nature of Islam necessitates that all forms of knowledge are helpful in building the Islamic society. The forms include a parcel of the 'Islamic Sciences', composing of physics

and biology, in synergy that creates transformation and development for the human good. The secular nature of the current sciences taught in schools or college is hurdled here, as opposed to Islamic Sciences that have the intention of better understanding the creations of Allah swt. It is doubtless that the knowledge of Qur'an and Hadith are the best form of knowledge, and without a 'minimum level' of knowledge of Qur'an and Hadith, all other forms of knowledge can become a 'trial' rather than a blessing.

Another interesting aspect of his talk was the issue on spill overs known as externalities. This giving of 'alms' does recreate wealth in life although it is unlike what Stiglitz mentioned on private goods like a chair. If one sits on it, no one else can sit on it, at least not comfortably, if it is being shared. However, he stated that knowledge is what economists called it public goods. This term is recognised as the way economist used as something that other people can benefit without taking away anything from the giver. This concept can be encompassed as in several forms of Islamic philanthropy. Also, the AlQuran has reiterated that "And whatever you give for interest to increase within the wealth of people will not increase with Allah. But what you give in zakah, desiring the countenance of Allah - those are the multipliers (Surah Ar-Rum: 39)". Islamic philanthropy has its impactful place in providing for the economic transformation. There are an estimated 1.57 billion Muslims making 23% of the world's population. They live across the continents and contribute substantially to the world economy. They are also significant players in the social sector, whereby, developing nonprofits that address human services and social needs. Their role has created charitable foundations that are distributing financial resources. It is within this group that there is a potentially enormous resource base on which philanthropies can build new initiatives to advance social justice.

All in all, central to his idea of creating a learning society, it is rightful to maintain that the nature the education system continues to focus on lifelong learning. He also reiterated that there is always the need to recognize only a small part of learning occurs in formal schooling. Lifelong learning increases the pace of innovation which then transforms the society. Nevertheless, Islamic teaching has never fallen short on continuing education of every member of the society too. In emphasizing the importance of education, the Prophet (pbuh) in his words once said "Acquire knowledge: it enables its possessor to distinguish right from the wrong, it lights the way to heaven; it is our friend in the desert, our society in solitude, our companion when friendless, it guides us to happiness; it sustains us in misery; it is an ornament among friends and an armour against enemies".

Today, as Stiglitz put it that the access to knowledge is unprecedented. His concern is not about stuffing the brain with knowledge, but teaching people how to access that knowledge, evaluate that knowledge, and put that knowledge into a theoretical framework that they can understand. As this remains his concern, so does it in the Islamic community. The rise of Muslims to the zenith of civilization has been based on Islam's emphasis on learning. This is obvious when one takes a look at the Qur'an and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) which are filled with references to learning, education, observation, and the use of reason. The very first verse of the Qur'an revealed to the Prophet of Islam on the night of 27th of Ramadan in 611 A.D., which reads: "Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created man from a clot. Recite: And thy Lord is the Most Generous Who taught by the pen, taught man that which he knew not" (Quran, 96: 1-5).

References

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