

# Who is ALIM in ISLAM?

By: Khurshid Imam

## A. Introduction

Round the globe, Muslims believe that ALIM means a Religious Scholar. A person is considered an 'Alim' if he has studied at a 'Madarsa' and completed the course of ALIM. Common masses have been made to believe that they can't go against an 'Alim'. People surrender their thought process and reasoning power in front of statements coming from an 'Alim'.

However, Quran uses this word in a different sense. 'Alim' as defined in Quran is different from 'Alim' of Muslim's present day perception.

## B. How Quran has used the word ULEMA

Word ULEMA is plural for word ALIM. Root word: ayn lām mīm (ع ل م) occurs 854 times in Quran. It is used in the general sense of KNOWLEDGE. Nowhere Quran has confined this word for 'theological knowledge' alone. Knowledge in any field is referred as ILM.

For example, Quran uses the word ALEEM [derived from root word ILM] for magicians who were expert in the field of magic.

قَالَ لِلْمَلَإِ حَوْلَهُ إِنَّ هَذَا لَسَاحِرٌ عَلِيمٌ

[Pharaoh] "said to the eminent ones around him, "Indeed, this is a **learned** [word ALEEM is used here] **magician**". Quran 26:34

Gaining knowledge is highly encouraged in the Quran and this is one of the parameter for better understanding of God and His majesty.

Quran has used the word "**ULEMA**" [Plural of ALIM] only two times.

### First use of ULEMA in Quran:

*"Do you not see that Allah sends down rain from the sky, and We produce thereby fruits of varying colors? And in the mountains are tracts, white and red of varying shades and [some] extremely black.*

*And among people and moving creatures and grazing livestock are various colors similarly. Only those fear Allah, from among His servants, **who have knowledge [ULEMA]**. Indeed, Allah is Exalted in Might and Forgiving". Quran 35:27-28*

In above two ayah, Allah has encouraged people to observe/ponder upon:

- a. The process of rain formation and coming down to Earth [Its study is called meteorology or hydrology]
- b. Production and growth of fruits of various colours. [It is about agriculture, farming, zoology, botany]
- c. Mountains having different colors and presence of paths in the mountains. [It is Geology, Geography]
- d. Different colors of human beings round the globe. [The branch of study of this field is called Phylogenetics]
- e. Different colors of creatures spread across the earth. [Scientists, Ecologist]

The ayah continues and tells that THOSE who have DEEP KNOWLEDGE [ULEMA word is used] of above phenomenon will be able to appreciate and grasp the majesty of Allah.

In other words we can say that those who possess knowledge of meteorology, hydrology, agriculture, farming, zoology, botany, geology, phylogenetics, ecology and science are referred as ULEMA in this ayah.

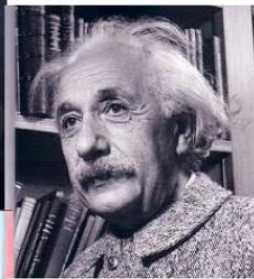
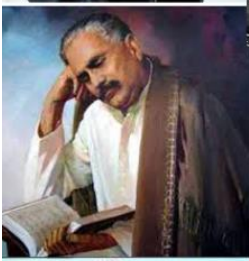
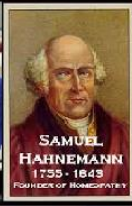
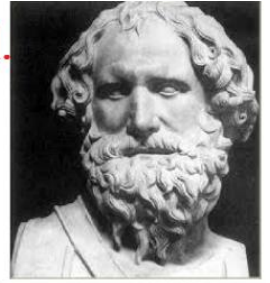
Second use of ULEMA in Quran:

"And has it not been a sign to them that it is recognized by the scholars of the Children of Israel?" Quran 26:197

Second time – the word ULEMA is used for knowledgeable people among *bani Israel*.



**Ulema = Experts of a field.**



### C. Who are AHBAAR?

A very surprising fact is that Quran has used a different word for what people consider as ULEMA. Quran has used the word 'AHBAAR' to refer to people who are doctors of law [expert in interpreting religion] or theological scholars.

**1. Quran 5:63 – “So-called-scholars” [Ahbaar] were responsible for not preventing people from uttering sinful words and eating things forbidden.**

لَوْلَا يَنْهَاهُمُ الرَّبَّانِيُّونَ وَالْأَحْبَارُ عَنْ قَوْلِهِمُ الْإِثْمَ وَأَكْلِهِمُ السَّحْتَ ۗ لَبِئْسَ مَا كَانُوا يَصْنَعُونَ

“Why do not the rabbis and the **doctors of Law** forbid them from their (habit of) uttering sinful words and eating things forbidden? Evil indeed are their works.” Quran 5:63

**2. Quran 9:31 - People took these "so-called-scholars" as their lord in place of Allah.**

اتَّخَذُوا أَحْبَارَهُمْ وَرُهَبَانَهُمْ أَرْبَابًا مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ وَالْمَسِيحَ ابْنَ مَرْيَمَ وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا إِلَهًا وَاحِدًا ۗ لَّا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۚ سُبْحَانَهُ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ

“They have taken their **scholars** and monks as lords besides Allah, and [also] the Messiah, the son of Mary. And they were not commanded except to worship one God; there is no deity except Him. Exalted is He above whatever they associate with Him.” Quran 9:31

**3. Quran 9:34 – There are many so-called-scholars who unlawfully grab money, wealth from the people. Also these “theological scholars” prevent people from giving money in the way of Allah [by manipulating laws of scriptures]. There is severe punishment promised for these fake-ulemas.**

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن كَثِيرًا مِّنَ الْأَحْبَارِ وَالرُّهْبَانِ لَيَأْكُلُونَ أَمْوَالَ النَّاسِ بِالْبَاطِلِ وَيَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ ۗ وَالَّذِينَ يَكْنِزُونَ الذَّهَبَ وَالْفِضَّةَ وَلَا يَنْفِقُونَهَا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَبَشِّرْهُم بِعَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ

“There are indeed many among the priests and **theological-scholars**, who in falsehood devour [eat] the substance of men and hinder (them) from the way of Allah. And there are those who bury gold and silver and spend it not in the way of Allah: announce unto them a most grievous penalty.” Quran 9:34

#### **D. Conclusion**

- Traditionally there has been veto power with theological class for interpreting, understanding, preaching, explaining and drawing conclusions on Deen of Allah.
- Only those who have studied at a Madarsa are considered to be scholars or ‘ulema’.
- Quran has used the word ‘ulema’ for those who are expert in any field.
- Those who can interpret laws of religion are referred as ‘ahbaar’ in Quran.
- Time and again Allah has warned reader of Quran to be careful of wrong doings done by so-called-scholars or ‘ahbaar’.

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