Somewhere in the Arabian desert in the early seventh century, the Prophet of Islam proclaimed: Wisdom is the lost property of believers; they are most deserving of it irrespective of where they find it.

The unprecedented intellectual activity that erupted in the early centuries of Islam bears ample testimony that the Prophet’s followers did take his advice seriously. They correctly understood that the pursuit of wisdom is different from learning the mechanical or practical skills of livelihood. While everyone was forced to learn the latter in order to live, the former was largely a matter of choice that required a much greater commitment. The fruits of wisdom, they discovered, carried an entirely different kind of sweetness.

More importantly, their faith did not require the darkness of ignorance to survive and prosper; their faith was not only capable of meeting any challenges, it actually required them to observe carefully and think critically. Their faith was like a healthy seed that would thrive in a climate of learning and knowledge, and so it did.

The followers of the Prophet soon became avid collectors and serious critics of the stores of human knowledge that they inherited from generations past or that they found among their contemporaries. They did not blindly or passively absorb whatever came to them. Instead, they carefully separated the husk from the kernel. They creatively and critically engaged with the wisdom of their times and made their own fresh contributions. In the course of history, they became an important link in the human quest. They left an indelible mark on human knowledge that is visible even today.

Now fast forward to early twenty-first century, and consider this: After the great scholarly achievements of Muslim geniuses who lived in times past, have there been more recent contributions to the stores of human knowledge and wisdom?

The answer to this question is an emphatic “yes,” for human curiosity tolerates no ends or limits; it is too restless, too impatient to sit idle. While creative intellectual activity never disappeared from the Muslim world, it did slow down after the explosive growth of the classical period. But as it slowed down in one part of humanity, it gathered momentum in its other parts, often in response to the impetus originally provided by Muslims themselves.

This latter growth of knowledge took place in very different historical situations, and consequently it developed a number of peculiar features of its own. In the last half-a-millennium or so, the entire structure of human understanding underwent immense changes in every conceivable way. Instead of the East, this new explosion of human knowledge took place mostly in the West.

Today, Muslims find themselves in a similar, though not entirely identical, situation as the one faced by their predecessors. In some ways, history has changed a great deal; in other ways, things are exactly as they were before. Then we were dealing with the works of Greek, Byzantine, Chinese, and Indian civilizations; today, we face something called Western civilization, an entity that is increasingly becoming synonymous with
“civilization” as such. Western knowledge is now considered synonymous with modern knowledge. This rapidly growing store of knowledge and wisdom has both strengths and weaknesses, and is supported throughout the world by immense political, economic, and cultural forces. The power relations have changed tremendously between then and now. Yet, both the East and the West belong to Allah (SWT). A knowledge developed outside of the tradition of our faith is, still, human knowledge.

Today, many Muslims wish to disregard these more recent bodies of knowledge and understanding, for their contents often appear to be unfamiliar, foreign, misleading, and even dangerous. The question, however, is whether this is a real option for us. Unfortunately, the answer is “no.” What we are dealing with is simply too ubiquitous, too powerful to be ignored.

Generally speaking, we often feel that it is OK to learn architecture, modern medicine, or computer science—subjects of a mechanical or practical nature deemed necessary for earning one’s livelihood—but that it is useless to study the more amorphous subjects that deal with “thought.” Or, what is even worse, we may feel that studying these latter subjects is not just useless, it is outright hazardous to our faith. In either case, the bottom line is that we wish to take some fruits from the tree of Western civilization but not others; often, we do not see that both acceptable and unacceptable fruits are actually growing on the same tree.

To take from the West only her technical know-how and her applied sciences (the so-called neutral subjects) while avoiding her philosophical thought and her discoveries in the human or social sciences (the so-called Godless subjects) is not just a wrong strategy, it is sheer naïveté. The division of human knowledge and understanding into various disciplines and sub-disciplines is entirely a pragmatic device to make an enormous amount of information humanly manageable. In reality, these divisions are artificial and arbitrary. Thus, technology and applied sciences are nothing but extensions and outgrowths of ideas, assumptions, and world-views that are produced and maintained in the realms of humanities and social sciences—most clearly in the various branches of philosophy.

Consequently, it is very difficult to embrace cell phones, computers, stock markets, nuclear weapons, kidney transplants, satellite dishes, and gene mapping without getting soaked to the bones in the philosophical assumptions underlying these innovations.

The sort of bifurcation between the acceptable and unacceptable subjects of study that we wish to make is just that—a wish. In reality, it is not a question of which subjects are “safe” and which are “dangerous.” It is a question of how we approach them.

Are there risks to religious faith and practice in studying modern knowledge? Yes, most definitely. However, the risks involved in studying epidemiology or rocket mechanics are hardly less than those involved in studying epistemology or ethics. If anything, the former subjects are more dangerous, for they claim to be morally neutral and do not provide the tools with which their hidden assumptions may be uncovered.

We may feel that modern knowledge is like a haunted mansion, with ghosts and monsters lurking in every corner whose mission is to suck out any remnants of religious faith from our hearts and minds. While such dangers are real, the promise of wisdom, knowledge, and true understanding is genuine too. There are, indeed, valuable treasures to be found in this palace. It is the promise of these rewards that far outweighs the risks that one must take.

We cannot give up our claim over our own lost property just because it is risky or difficult to get our hands on it. Of course, truth and falsehood are often mixed together. Since it is our wisdom that we are seeking, it is up to us to rescue it from the clutches of falsehood. It is our lost treasure and we are responsible for getting it back.