

History and Historical Consciousness

The view of history in the Muslim mind is, and should be, a prophetic one. In the Qur'an over and over again the historic sequence is repeated — a warning, followed by either repentance or destruction, as Allah (SWT) sent His messengers to one nation after another. The Qur'an thus provides a basis for a moral interpretation of history. The course of history is a moral agency through which the morally superior elements rise to the top, while those who are morally inferior sink to the bottom. Thus virtuous living, which is the outcome of a healthy religious faith, must inevitably lead to success. This interpretation is deeper and broader than that of Karl Marx — who was greatly influenced by the materialistic evolutionary philosophies of his time — because it covers both the moral and material aspects. Religion is not opium for the people. The impulse towards social emancipation is surely found in Islam. It in fact always aims at a society where equality, justice, and prosperity will prevail. Islam teaches that Allah (SWT) is concerned not only with moral and spiritual life of man but also with total emancipation, justice, and betterment of economic conditions. The Holy Prophet (SAW) left for us not just a theory that is preached, but also concrete experience and historical facts.

Let us here pause to cast a cursory glance at contemporary Western philosophies of history. In a closely argued and well-presented article "The Philosophy in History," Albert Hofstadter, a former professor at Columbia University, has rightly asserted that the historian has two basic tasks to fulfill in reaching an account of the individual life. He must, on the one hand, uncover the striving, failing, succeeding through which the life achieves whatever form it does, and on the other hand he must reveal the degree

of meaningfulness and validity that is therein realized. And these, in his view, are not themselves separate. He only distinguishes them because in accomplishing the concrete task itself the historian is obliged to look in two directions at once and bring together the threads of account from two sources: (1) the facts of life and (2) an ultimately philosophical understanding of the stratified phases of human life-form. An obvious implication is that it is a mistake to think of history as a mere combination of chronicle and causal explanation of the details of the chronicle. This mistake stems from thinking of history as belonging to the same genus of knowledge as natural sciences. But the aim is different. Causal explanations are only part of the contexture of historical thinking and writing, they are ingredients rather than goals. History aims at giving a view of its subject in which one understands, comprehends, the life as a life. There are elements of appreciation, valuation, and — our language is deficient here — the grasp of ultimate validities such as is striven for in art, religion, and philosophy. These cannot be understood in merely causal terms. They have their own intrinsic modes of intelligibility, which must equally be given in historical accounts. And since these latter validities are comprehensive in scope, it is they, rather than the causal relation, that qualify and give meaning to the temporal historical slab of being.

Twentieth-century system-builders like Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee have offered accounts of history with more obvious claims to "scientific" status. Both Spengler and Toynbee argue inductively to laws governing the standard development of cultures or civilizations and use them to predict the fate of their own. Both take seriously the task of exemplifying, if not rigorously testing, their large hypotheses in a wide range of historical material. Toynbee specially has to his disposal a wealth of historical data never approached in the history of speculation. Spengler's *Decline of the West* (1881-1922) claims to discern, by aesthetic insight, a number of central organisms which are born, mature, grow old, and die after exhausting

the possibilities of a characteristic style of life. Toynbee's *A Study of History* (1934-1954) finds in history a spiritual progress arising out of men's response to the challenge of the breakdown and disintegration of successive generations of civilizations. This century has also seen a revival of straightforwardly theological attempts to declare the meaning of history. The works of Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Christopher Dawson and others are examples.

For the modern mindset history has assumed ultimate paramountcy. All knowledge about human society, it is claimed today with assertive confidence, is historical knowledge. History nowadays is no longer construed as a chronicle of the past, composed of the deeds and sufferings of men, but it has become a process, the only man-made, all-encompassing process which transcends nature and imparts meaning to human existence. The central motif of Hegelian metaphysics — and its off-shoots, both Left and Right — is history. Modernity quite rightly regards it foolish to believe that history is concerned only with the past. History not only tells us something about the past, it also influences present and shapes our future. As such, history transcends time. And, because individuals and societies constantly move in history, modern mind places a great deal of emphasis on the study of history. For Marx and modern man in general, history is merely a process, man-made process which, because of the absence of fate, Divine intervention, or the incomprehensibility of its governing "laws," may be controlled and modified. History therefore assumes the shape of the arena for human struggle and liberation. It also becomes full of promise, indeed salvation itself. The meaning of history, however, lies in the future and salvation comes not through Divine grace but through collective human effort. History for Marxists thus replace the eschatology of traditional religion but, for its salvation, requires as much faith as does salvation for the latter.

Some contemporary historians treat history as though it was only concerned with the past,

with people of bygone ages, with objects that are worthy only of being in a museum. This approach to history is largely responsible for the loss of historical perspective in various societies and cultures. People are thus alienated from their past. This point has been elaborately studied and explained in "The New Face of Imperialism," an article included in the present issue of *The Qur'anic Horizons*. People seem to exist only in and for the present. And they have no conception of the role of history in shaping their destiny. History, as it is now taught and studied in most History departments in Pakistani universities, is hopelessly selective: it ignores most of human experience and concentrates almost exclusively on gathering facts and showing the interplay of power politics. This approach to history, which is akin to stamp collecting, led Karl Popper to talk of the poverty of historicism and argue that "history has no meaning." Indeed, facts, including facts of history, have in themselves no meaning. They acquire meaning only when we place value-judgments and give meaning to the "facts" of history. History can acquire meaning and coherence, come about and develop, only in connection with a world-view. Societies and cultures make their own history and their own future only within it. Forms of thought create their own social organizations and economic and political institutions, just as they in turn create forms of thinking. The most suitable methods of studying history, in our view, go beyond the one dimensional positivist analysis and the conventional sociological approach. They approach history not as a linear or circular but rather a spiral phenomenon in which certain traits appear and disappear in different guise, but the underlying moral principles and values always envelope society.

For the committed Muslim, neither the flow of history itself nor the study and interpretation of it can be considered apart from the realm of the sacred and the workings of the divine. Allah (SWT) as creator is also the maker of history; His hand controls every moment in time, every historical event. History is the arena in which His will is made manifest, His dominion is expressed, and His commitment to the

fulfillment of its Divinely ordained rules is evidenced. And yet in the Islamic understanding it is not God alone who is responsible for the historical process. Every individual shares in the responsibility insofar as he has assumed, through his heritage and according to the verification of the Qur'an, a part of the God-given legacy to be a vicegerent, to represent the Divine Will on earth. That role which the Jews and Christians relinquished by veering away from the true worship of the one God is assumed by Muslims as their full and final responsibility. Islam thus bears the obligation to make known to the world the reality of the historical revelation of the Qur'an, that which provides for the proper understanding of God's continuing action in history. Thus the claim of the immutability of "historic laws" — a tenet of the Marxist dogma — cannot subsume the historicity of the *Ummah*. Islamic faith — the *Deen* of transcendent norms and values — cannot be interiorised to the extent that Muslim history becomes nothing but a quest for some metahistorical salvation. Neither can the dictates of the Islamic faith be sacrificed at the altar of some unproven and whimsical set of 'historical laws'. It is so because history for a Muslim is not only a search for theoretical meaning but an arena of practical action as well. His faith dictates that the process of history be subdued to the Will of Allah (SWT). To be part of the historical process is to be aware and to be active, bearing fully the responsibility placed on man by his Creator. Nicholas Berdyaev in "The Meaning of History" offers a description of the function of history which captures well, though it was not his intention, the significance of the relationship of past and present for the Muslim:

History invites two elements, the creative and the conservative. The historical process would not be possible without their union. By the conservative element, I mean a tie with the spiritual past, and inner tradition, and an acceptance of the sacred heritage of the past. But history also demands a dynamic-creative element, a creative sequence and purpose, and urge towards self-fulfillment. Thus the free audacity and the creative principle

coexist with an inner tie and a profound communion with the past. The absence of either of these elements invalidates the postulates of history.

Islam exhorts a Muslim to see not only the outward manifestations of the different happenings of human life, but to study the undercurrent of ideals and motives that have shaped those happenings. The historical references and the accounts of past events are given in the Qur'an, not so much to fill in the gaps of our factual knowledge, but to systematize and generalize it and to take lessons from it. The Holy Qur'an treats the events of the past not only with a view of reviving them in our memory, but — more importantly — for making them meaningful and instructive to us. It selects the significant events, interprets them in the light of moral laws, and then evaluates them according to ethical judgments; and in the whole process of selecting, interpreting, and evaluating the facts it provides answers to the crucial question about the destiny of mankind. The attitude of Islam towards historical knowledge of different civilizations and cultures is of great significance in human understanding. The Muslim historians not only kept the high ideal of objectivity and exactitude in surveying the entire course of human development, but they also sought to determine its origin and goal as well. This can be illustrated from the fact that the famous world-history of Ibn Khaldun is entitled *Kitab Al-Ibar*. The word *ibar* here stands as a prominent key word, which reveals the underlying idea, for which history was studied by the Muslims.

The Holy Qur'an and the *hadith* urge us to review the past events, both reported and experienced, as indications that they should awaken in us a strong moral sense and at the same time enhance our ability to act according to the commands of Allah (SWT), to penetrate into the apparently meaningless succession of events and discern the ever-present Design and Will of the Creator, and to perceive that all being and happening in the world is the outcome of a conscious, all-embracing Power, and unless one is in spiritual accord with the demands of that

Power, one cannot fulfill the Divine purpose for which he has been sent to this world. It is not without a purpose that Allah (SWT) gives dominance to certain people at one time, and deprives them of this position at another occasion. That ebb and rise of the people has a Divine purpose to serve. Thus Qur'an observes:

If a wound has afflicted you, be sure a wound like it also afflicted the disbelieving people. And We bring these days to men by turn, that Allah may know those who believe and take witnesses from among you. And Allah loves not the wrongdoers. (Aal Imran 3:140)

In the above lines I talked about the loss of historical perspective in various societies and cultures that leads to total alienation from their past. This phenomenon becomes all too clear and irrefutable in the case of Pakistan. No country in the Muslim block except Pakistan had come into existence in the name of Islam and with the declared promise to serve Islam and unite the Muslim *Ummah*. But unfortunately many foreign writers and their acolytes within the country think that Pakistan is still in search of an identity. That perhaps is the most painful dilemma that Pakistan faces on the eve of the 51st anniversary of its independence. Pakistan's bold decision to carry out nuclear tests in May this year holds the promise of a glorious new era for the entire *Ummah*. But successful atomic explosions themselves will not make Pakistan a citadel of Islam. For that an "explosion" of another type is the need of the hour — the resolve on the part of Pakistani leadership to make Qur'an and *Sunnah* supreme in the Constitution of Pakistan, and to purge our economy from all non-Islamic elements. Pakistan, as we have been repeatedly asserting in this journal, came into being as a result of four hundred years' of revivalist effort undertaken by great divines and luminaries in this part of the world. As such, Pakistan is deeply rooted in

history and cannot be like any other nation-state in the world with entirely this-worldly agenda. Unless and until Pakistan's nuclear capability is matched by a firm and real commitment to Islam, it cannot possibly become an invincible power with dignity and self-confidence.

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