

Islamic Approach to the Study of History

Sayyid Muhammad Yunus Gilani*

There are several approaches to the study of history, ranging from the objective phenomenological approach to the glorifying nationalistic approach. Mawlana Mawdudi (1903-79 C.E.) had tried to delineate Islamic approach of objective-evaluative study of history. This article starts with an attempt to give a liberal English translation of his views that appeared in Urdu in his *Shakhsiyat* (Pages 173-177) and reproduced in *Tarjamanul Quran* (Urdu monthly) November 2000 (Pages 19-21). It is followed by an analysis of the Islamic perspective on history and the evaluation of a specimen of the treatment of historical material in the holy *Qur'an*.

History, in fact, is the human memory. It presents the records of past experiences, not only of nations and communities, but of the whole mankind, so that in the light of these experiences man may analyse and evaluate his present and correct his future as per his experience of good and protect it on the basis of his experiences of evil.

In these records we see the contribution of representative personalities, institutions, nations and societies as integrated and continuous conduct and behavior. It helps us to understand their psychology, bent of mind, character and conduct, so that in future we deal with them well -acquainted and informed, and not as strangers.

History for the collective life is more important in degree but equally in kind, compared to the memory of an individual. If

* Professor of Islamic Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, (Currently associated with the International Islamic University Malaysia).

an individual is bereft of his memory he shall continuously commit and be a victim of his own mistakes. In the absence of the record of a person's past life (before us), we shall not be able to frame a correct opinion about him nor be able to take right decision with regard to our attitude towards him. Similar is the case with the collective and social life.

If we are not in know of the past records of the mankind, of our own, and of the nations and institutions we come across, our social life shall be a collection of mistaken views and wrong deeds. Thus, it is important that we analyze again and again old and far off past records.

Methods of studying the history

To analyze the historical records there are three possible points of view. One of them is simply an objective study, i.e., to see the past events and conditions just as they occurred. Another is nationalistic view of the study of history. This is to see past events with a feeling to support a race, nation or country to which we belong; to derive the conclusions and frame opinion about personalities and nations accordingly.

A third point of view is based on *maqasid* (aims) and *usul* (principles). Above racial and nationalistic prejudices holding the human *falah* (success and welfare) and *sa'adah* (happiness) as our *maqsood* (objective & motive) of study and having an impartial criteria of good and evil, we analyse and evaluate various aspects of human history and thus frame objective- evaluative opinions.

The first method is merely 'historical' and useful in getting to the correct facts but not of any benefit by itself. The second method is very attractive. Without exaggeration 98% of the students of history are attracted by it because every student of history belongs to some race, nation or country and his selfishness

expands and transforms from individual selfishness to national interests/selfishness. And he tends to study history from his individual and nationalistic point of view. He gets in it some icons and Idols for pride and this intoxication of 'worship' helps him and his nation in its rise and thus he gets some targets for hate and animosity to focus his emotion of anger and wrath; he achieves the objectives of integration, success in competition and superiority of his nation. Most of the lies have spread and gained currency in the world because of this very view of study of history.

Many bad persons 'became' good and many devils the heroes for worship because of this view. Many good people 'turned' bad and many righteous persons were condemned as a result of this method. The role of this method in injuring the humanity and filling the world with *fasad* (mischief and corruption), is in no way small. This disease has developed all over the world to a level that now for "national cause" history is concocted. A nation with no past writes its history as per whim and paints black history of other nation (s) that it confronts so that among new generations, all the malice is developed against the 'enemy'.

The third view is certainly the best and for it to be correct and right and to be effective and to have good results, it depends on two points: Firstly, the view of human *falah* (welfare and success) and *sa'adah* (happiness), and the criteria of good and evil, must be right and correct. Secondly, the facts on which the arguments are based should be derived through objective study and not modeled in a peculiar way as per own ideological view.

Islamic View

Islam is not a particular nationality but a way of life definitely concerned with man and his *sa'adat* (happiness and welfare). It is not at all interested in the prejudices which arise out

of racial, national and geographical differences in the humanity. Thus it has adopted this last (third) attitude towards history. If a Muslim with right Islamic mind studies history it is his obligation, as far as possible, to see without any prejudices the events exactly as they factually and actually occurred. And then as per the Islamic criteria of truth and falsehood, evaluate the role of personalities, nations and institutions and come to objective conclusions. He should figure out frankly the mistakes and shortcomings and search out the causes of their origin, and their ways and amount of effects on human welfare.

Similarly whatever and whenever the Islamic student of history finds something good, he should frankly take it into cognizance and work out its good effects or the causes of failures in producing the effects. This is the way the Quran has applied while discussing the biographies of individuals and history of nations.

This is the Islamic methodology of study of history and this should be the way of every Muslim. Unfortunately some historical and cultural reasons have turned the Muslims from an ideological community to an ethnic and cultural nationality. Viewing and aping the attitude of other nations in the world, the Muslims too have developed among themselves the feelings of nationalism. Therefore even the Muslims follow the nationalistic view of history. They too study their history just to find out a few heroes to be proud of. They too search for icons of pride and anger for communal animosity. It is in this very (un-Islamic) communal and nationalistic way that they have developed the emotions to show that the individuals or groups in their past history were all flawless, paragons of virtues and ideal personalities. This way they put unknowingly their weakness on the head of Islam and present a wrong picture of Islam's position.

This view in its essence is un-Islamic. Islam refuses to

value that very passion and emotion which motivates in this direction of vain glorification. When nationalism takes the shape of 'Muslim nationalism' and tries to glorify and appreciate Muslims instead of non Muslims, then every 'shortcoming' is painted as good, and even sins are depicted as *fada'il* (virtues). In this condition to differentiate truth from falsehood and holding to the objective righteousness and virtue becomes difficult even to virtuous souls of high standard. Compared to territorial nationalism, the 'Muslim nationalism' in its spirit has the same un-Islamic nature, with the only difference that it is more difficult to understand.¹

Islamic Perspective on History

Religious quest in Islam is to be pursued on the basis of the *Qur'an* and Sunnah (i.e., the dynamics of the Holy Prophet Muhammad's Personality), together with an ever-deepening understanding of Nature and History as repositories of the Signs of God. (The *Qur'an* 3:189-190; 14:5).²

For the Christian, history is irrelevant, superfluous and evil, it is for the Muslim the theater, the material, the test, the substance, and the very purpose of creation. It follows that Islam defines its adherent as he who is existentially "serious", who ponders creation and exclaims "Praise be to you O Lord! For you have not created all this in sport!" [*Qur'an*, 191]; who leads the dangerous life of interfering with the processes of nature and history to the maximum degree possible; and who is willing to be judged by his achievements and failures in history. *Tawhid* thus enables the Muslim to see himself as the vortex of history because he is the only vicegerent who can bring the will of God to fulfillment in history. This is the only perspective capable of explaining the conduct of the Prophet (S.A.W.) as well as of his companions (RAA) and early generations of Muslims. Muhammad's vision in the cave of Hira, and his communion with

divinity through Jibril(AS), sent him into Makkah to act and transform men and history.³

“Caught by the prophet’s vision and his personal fire, the early Muslims plunged headlong into the arenas of history, changing the internal constitution of individuals of all races and cultures, and the patterns of their daily lives, the cultures of whole societies as well as the maps, contours and skylines of villages, cities and whole empires. ‘Uqbah ibn Nafi’s famous speech on the shore of Atlantic in the Maghrib [Morocco], “O Ocean, if I knew that there is earth beyond you I would cross you, on horse back!” is typical of the spirit of that generation brought up by Islam.”⁴

Islamic insight into history

Reflect on such an unreasonable, narrow-minded, and shallow conception, one which considers - on “religious grounds” - the study of Islamic history *haram*. A history of a nation, with all its positive and negative aspects, its victories and defeats, is a rich mine upon which that nation draws in order to reconstruct and redirect its present. A nation which neglects its history is like a person who has lost his memory; or like a nation without roots or sense of belonging or direction. How could any group make such an unhealthy and abnormal condition the bases of its survival? Further, history is the mirror in which Allah’s *sunan* [natural divine patterns] are reflected in the whole universe in general and in human life in particular. This is why *Qur’an* has given special attention to the impact of the historical perspective and the wisdom that can be drawn from it. There are various *Qur’anic* references to this. Let us contemplate the following verses:

Many were the ways of life [*sunan*] that have passed away before you: Travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who rejected Truth (3:137)

Allah’s *sunan*, however, are characterized by consistency-

they never change or alter.⁵

“Wisdom is not drawn from the history of the believers alone, but from that of the atheists as well as from both the pious and the profligate, because Allah’s *sunan* - like natural patterns – operate upon both parties without favoritism towards the monotheist or the pagan.”⁶

The study of history is not just a recognition of events in their time sequence, but an activity that requires insight and perception into the events in order to comprehend their essence, draw wisdom from them, and spell out Allah’s *sunan* in them. Mere observation of the ruins of earlier nations serves no purpose.⁷

Qura`nic Evaluation of History

Along with the knowledge of Nature, i.e., physical sciences and knowledge of man himself, the *Qur’an* persistently asks man to travel on earth and see for himself what happened to bygone civilizations and why they rose and fell.⁸

The story of Adam (AS), in this context, is the first event in human history, and as such contains the most essential features of the life on earth. Therefore, it may be apt to consider its *Qur’anic* account as an introduction to human history, with indications to its global, rather universal aspects. It is not an event that should be disregarded as mythology. It is the first episode of historical continuation of which we are an integral part.

The story of Adam (AS) is the story of (every) man. That story reveals to us that man is a maker of his deeds, and hence fully responsible for what he does.

Moreover, the story of our father Adam (AS) shows up that history and the life in general are based on certain laws which are of two kinds and have two sources: Divine guidance through revelation and the satanic temptation from Iblis. Human actions

do not overpass these boundaries. Refuting any of these laws implies inevitable consequences, which must be comprehended as a result of synthesis of man's action, and the natural as well as historical laws, and as a lesson for those who are coming and exposing themselves to the identical laws.

Adam (AS) was a representative of human beings' destiny composed of the fall and the rise. Nevertheless, he was a Prophet. It signifies the constant presence of divine elements throughout the history. Yes, it is absolutely correct that God had constructed the *sunnatullah* (historical laws of rise and fall), and He is administrator over them, but it never implies His isolation from them. Yet, when man prepares the ground and conditions, Almighty intervenes and interferes into the man's affairs and the historical courses. That intervention could be either punishment or reward.

There has always been an antagonism between good and evil, and good doers and evil doers. Allah Almighty created man as vicegerent on earth. It means that he has to establish absolute harmony and healthy relations with his Lord, his surroundings and with himself. If he properly fulfils his tasks Allah will reward him now and in the Hereafter. But if he does not perform so Allah may punish him now and in the Hereafter. The reward and the punishment in this world might be understood as the historical process of the selection, in the sense that Allah sifts those who are morally unfit from those who can function effectively as the bearers of culture and civilizations. The *Qur'anic* concept of civilization is essentially ethical and spiritual action that man takes in material and social realm conforming to Divine guidance. From this base it may be said that history is a spiritual and moral agency through which eventually the morally superior elements raise to the top, while those who are morally inferior sink to the bottom. This is because Allah created the world with truth which demands justice. But justice requires that the oppressed should be

supported against the oppressors and the distinction must be made between the virtuous and the wrong-doers. The historical process of the selection, eventually, defeats the purposes of the evil-doers.⁹

The story of the Prophet Ibrahim and the children of Israel (Ya'qub)

It is appropriate to study these two diametrically opposite (of each other) stories, so that we are able to cover many aspects of *Qur'anic* philosophy of history. To follow the chronological order and begin the discourse with the Prophet Ibrahim (AS).

Analyzing carefully *Qur'anic* philosophy of history it may be concluded that the *Qur'an* attaches a very little importance to material (if it amounts to materialistic) progress and development. As a matter of fact, material progress is acceptable only if it is not materialistic but grounded and rooted in the spiritual world-view.

The Quran says:

It is not your wealth nor your sons, that will bring you nearer to Us in degree: but those who believe and work righteousness— these are the ones for whom there is a multiplied reward for their deeds... (34:37)

The Prophet Ibrahim (AS) was fully aware of that fact, and therefore, he was ready to sacrifice everything for his Lord: all his property and even his son. He was capable to undergo all hardships and challenges. In other words Ibrahim (AS) was ready to be appointed by Allah as an *Imam*, leader. He had full realization that leadership belongs only to those who deserve it and fulfill their obligations in accordance with its requisites. Blood relationship does not have any function in the historical process of selection and change effected by *sunnatullah*.¹⁰

Ibrahim (AS) lived his life in righteousness under the

guidance and the shadow of Allah's commands. The task of the leadership has been confided to him, and he endeavored to perpetuate it and to carve the bright side of the history which will be an unforgotten lesson for mankind in general and the children of Israel (Ibrahim's grandchildren and progeny – a race now) in particular.

Therefore, Ibrahim (AS) enjoins upon his sons to accept the Faith and implement it in each and every aspect of life. Moreover, he prays to his Lord to make him, his sons and all his progeny a *Muslim* (obedient) people bowing to His will. He prays also for the continuity of the Faith among his sons and progeny. Such continuity is possible only when Allah makes his city a place of peace and persists to send down His Prophets. The culmination of Ibrahim's (AS) *islam* (submission) to his Lord as well as his attempt to perpetuate the healthy environment is (re)building of the Ka'bah. From the historical perspective the Ka'bah is the first house (for the worship) of Allah built by the Prophet Adam (AS) and later re-built by the Prophets (Ibrahim and Ismail), but from the philosophical perspective it is the eternal sign raised in the particular historical moment in absolute submission to Allah, who ordered to (re)build it and perpetuate his (Abraham's) influence upon those who follow his *millat* (path), and his warning to those who are misguided.

Among those who had been given the leadership on earth and preferred to others, but who ultimately betrayed the trust and the faith, are the children of Israel. They not only disobeyed Allah and His Prophets but also ignored all warnings and historical lessons including that of Ibrahim (AS).

It is certain that historical changes do not occur suddenly. Man's contribution is major throughout history and its general laws. The *Qur'an* is very clear that Allah neither brings down any nation from the throne of leadership, nor punishes them unjustly

as long as their moral conduct is on an adequately satisfactory level. ¹¹

The natural law or *Sunnatullah* that rules radical historical changes is the revolt of a minority which has been kept too long under subjection and suffered all kinds of hardships. The most applicable example here is the exodus of the Banu Israel from Egypt where they lived for a long time under the oppressive rule of the Pharaohs.

Allah saved them and bestowed them with preference over others. Many Prophets were sent down to them, to warn them constantly and keep them in ceaseless contact with the realm of divinity.

Notwithstanding they chose another strategy and constantly disobeyed the Prophets and persisted as an undisciplined nation. They followed their desires rather than the guidance of the Prophets. Instead of complete submission and obedience they continuously asked for what eventually tends to lose spiritual and social discipline.

Among the most significant phases in their history is the establishment of a state by Prophet Dawud (AS). Here is an obvious reflection of their global behavior that determined their further historical moments. The leadership was given to them by Allah as a response to their request, but as seen from the story of Ibrahim (AS), the leadership and rulership demands high moral qualification that the children of Israel (quite a few generations after Ibrahim) now did not possess.

Allah appointed Lut as their chief. He was powerful and physically strong. However the *Qur'an* underlies the conception that seems to be that of his control over his bodily passions. The children of Israel seem not to accept him as their chief because he was not gifted with abundance of wealth. They showed their real

immoral state in their battle against Jalut whereby Allah tested them. Except a few they failed. ¹²

Whatever happened to the Prophet Ibrahim (AS) and the children of Israel is not a coincidence. It is a recurring phenomenon of history. It is general laws of historical change, and not merely referring to the particular aspects of religious and moral life, and the removal of the evils. The history takes an account only of the practical conduct of affairs in a human society and does not concern itself with the abstract principles unless they are effectively translated into the action. For history and its laws it is relevant what man does and not what he just thinks.

From the historical stories in the holy *Qur'an* and particularly the story of children of Israel, one arrives at the conclusion that conflicts of nations, groups or civilizations are not merely the seizure of the power of one group by another. That substitution, or rather punishment, has never been unjust. Allah has been giving an opportunity for the learning and improvement by sending down His Prophets with His Divine Message. But a full system that could not renew itself from time to time must degenerate and produce corruption and injustice, which can be removed by the victory of another group with a different and better system of life and higher moral values.

This is how the *Qur'an* makes its addressees to learn spiritual-ethical lessons from the historical process of rise and fall of people in history.

References and End Notes

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11. *Ibid.*, 8:53; 13:11.
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