

A Typology of Muslim Historiography from the Perspective of the Islamic Philosophy of History

Ahmed/Hasan Dani

I. The Epistemology of History

History is an enquiry into the human conduct of affairs with a specific purpose to increase man's knowledge about himself. Hence all history is human. Historical knowledge cannot go beyond human perception of man's actions. In this sense history is factual, descriptive and scientific in observing individual person's and related events. But their appearance may be different in the eyes of different persons and may be reported differently in accordance with each person's capacity and manner of reporting. However honest and morally superior a person may be, one's narration is limited to the angle from which one has seen things and one's reporting depends upon the kind of perception that one has been able to gain of the persons or things described.

Historical description is a mental reconstruction designed to project one's ideas about persons and events connected with them. Hence all history, even though rooted in the human experience of the reality of this life, ultimately becomes ideational when communicated to others. The process of reconstruction and the process of transmission to others follow in several stages, in which the connecting link is the motivation of the person doing the narrating. In this sense history is purposive and it is the purpose that defines the objective of historical knowledge. The purpose may be explicit, and the story moved around it. In this case, it is the purpose that comes out boldly and the events become only examples to illustrate the purpose. On the other hand, the purpose may be implicit, and the events appear to follow one another in historical time. Here it is the events themselves that stand out boldly and create different situational factors in time but these factors cannot be grasped by man without an intentional effort to perceive them. One perceives them in the light

of one's own purpose although one does not state it. The factors in history reflect the influence of time but at any given moment of history they are constant. It is their reconstruction that varies from person to person, from place to place, from society to society, and from period to period, according to the purpose one has in evaluating the events of history. Such reconstruction will always vary according to what one wants to make of history, or according to one's growing experience in developing new historical insights.

II. The Purpose and Eschatology of History

While historical events are things of the past, purpose implies some futurity—a hope to restate those events in a fashion that can throw light on the shape of events in the future. Man hopes to know where these historical forces are leading him. He wants to know the end of history. In this sense history is goal-oriented and it is the goal that gives meaning to history and keeps history on the right track. But the goal of humanity, as perceived by man, is limited to the extent he understands his own place in the universe of creation. He is not the creator of himself nor is he in a position to dictate the end. Therefore the beginning and the end of history are not within the power of man. These lie above the human field of thought and experience. They are the two poles that correctly determine the bearing or direction of history and it is this direction that gives meaning to human life in the whole process of creation.

The purposiveness of history man has to take for granted as the factor beyond his control. In reliance on Allah, man accepts his own place and understands the meaning of his earthly existence, and the guidance and the light shown to him from time to time. This knowledge is given to him. He cannot challenge it. It is beyond the ken of human history, but following that light man can build his own historical knowledge and keep it within the boundaries of universal principles so that this knowledge is not abused by dubious or false reconstructions. Such a historical knowledge amounts to rediscovery of the role of humanity, which keeps him on the straight path. Man falters, fails, and roams about in his ignorance, but he strives again to come back to the right path. All these failings and strivings constitute human experience. While he is in a position to gather human experience, he does not know how he comes back to the right path. Actually he is led to the right path. History cannot explain this whole process, but human history can certainly extend the horizons of human experience. Such an extension of knowledge may be the purpose.

III. Qur'anic Historiography

The Holy Qur'an contains the germs of historical principles. When the story of the creation of man is traced to Ādam, (AS), there is a definite concept of the beginning of history, and when the goal of man is completed in the world hereafter, the end of history is clearly visualized. These two poles determine the true direction of history. Present human historical knowledge is narrow and limited because the tools of historical discovery are imperfect. Man's own perception about the beginning and end of history therefore is vague and enveloped in darkness. It is all the more necessary that man should strive to better his tools until he comes to the true path of realization. When the Holy Qur'an gives historical examples right from the time of Prophet Nūḥ (Noah) (AS), and of several other prophets, tribes, and peoples, there is a clear-cut methodology laid down for the enquirers to extend the knowledge of human experience by taking into consideration the behavior of other peoples. Human history is thus all-comprehensive and at the same time continuous as is beautifully illustrated in the different phases of the history of the Jews, ranging from in the early religious community of Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) (AS), to their encounter with the Egyptian Pharaoh, their final migration and settlement in the land of Judea and finally their dispersal to a wider world, homeless and forlorn. It is this continuity in human history that comes out clearly in the final emergence of the religion of Islam, as given to us by the last Messenger of Allah. But this Message can be understood only in the long perspective of history, which explains the importance of historical knowledge to the Muslims.

Islam is born in the clarity of history and the *sīrah* or life of the Prophet (SAAS) is narrated with a purpose, namely, to provide an illustration for human beings on how they should mould their life in accordance with the guidance provided in the Holy Qur'an. But such a biographical narration is not an end in itself. The Holy Qur'an also gives the details of actual living conditions among the pagan Arabs and shows how to reconstruct the actual environment in which Islam was born. At the same time, this historical narrative delineates the historical forces created by the supporters and opponents of Islam, and illuminates all aspects of events—political, social, economic, legal, constitutional and other—that ensued in Arabia of that time. The history presented in the Holy Qur'an is not a political history of kings and nobles, but is a total reconstruction of life in seventh-century Arabia. Such a reconstruction is meant to inspire future historians to view history from the totality of human life rather than from a narrow angle. In this sense history is all-comprehensive. It can hardly afford to limit itself to one or another aspect of human life. The historical scene of the time of the Prophet (SAAS) is an example in the process of human history that can be seen as a reference point for the different ways of human

living. But certainly history cannot stop there. The purpose of Allah must be fulfilled in the future unfolding of history. And hence the continuity has to be traced in the succeeding periods through attempts to gain a total comprehension of life.

Thus from the Holy Qur'an it is possible to derive a philosophy of history that can enlighten man in his effort to develop historical knowledge. But such a philosophy, as reconstructed here, is arrived at by inference and is open to future improvement. It is not a dictum, as is assumed by Professor Rosenthal in his *Muslim Historiography*, that has sealed for ever any further research in this field of philosophy. At the same time, historical methodology emerges from the way events have been handled and narrated in the Holy Book. The most important is the reconstruction of the contemporary scene, which, sociologically speaking, presents a complete picture of the inter-relationship of the different human groups as creative participants in human life. The presentation is entirely different from the journalistic picture of society as reconstructed today by contemporary historians or political scientists. This methodology is certainly the best for understanding the behaviour pattern of society. Yet this methodology itself is reconstructed. It has not been given to us as a permanent dictum. Hence the reconstruction leaves enough scope for future development.

IV. A Typology of Muslim Historiography

The profundity of historical knowledge in the Holy Book has created a historical sense among Muslims. Muslims, however have differed widely in the methods they have used to understand the historical forces that have governed their society. Several types of historical reconstruction can be clearly recognized.

1) The first is the pattern of *Universal History*, introduced by Al-Ṭabarī, in which the events of the known world are accounted year by year in chronological order with a view to set them in historical time. This pattern led to the creation of Muslim chronicles, which are available in plenty all over the Muslim world and as a result of which there is no lack of historical data. But the kind of material available in these chronicles is limited in scope. It is limited by the interest of the author, and again the data are presented as the events occur year by year, the only interrelationship being the time factor. The motivation seems to be a religious zeal of a kind that certainly characterized the historians themselves, but no method was developed to determine whether it also moved the current socio-political power or not. The time factor was sequential but not causal, and stress was placed on the aspects of human life that the historian considered to be important government fac-

tors in human society. Such "universal histories" gave details about the spread of Islam in the three continents, but they hardly noticed the new social forces that emerged as a result of the acceptance of Islam by a wide variety of peoples.

2) Others interested in the true faith realized the need of collecting all the data necessary to transmit the practices of the faithful to new generations. This realization created the great bulk of *Ḥadīth* literature by referring back to the time of the Prophet (ṢAAS). While *Ḥadīth* provided a guideline for the followers of the faith, the historians were satisfied by leaving to posterity mere chronicles, which are more factual than substantive. It is hard to find in them a total picture of social living as we get about the contemporary Arabian scene in the Holy Qur'an. Sociological construction was far from their perception. Similarly no new methodology is developed to analyze the information of past history. The past was accepted as a great tradition and that tradition was included so as to maintain continuity in history. No new urge is evident to discover the meaning of the tradition. And yet every attempt was made to collect the tradition from the most reliable reporter. This attempt led to the building up of a precise methodology in order to preserve the correct tradition from honest reporters. This method is certainly a contribution of these historians, but the scope of the enquiry was limited, so the historical accounts were circumscribed and relevant only to certain aspects of human life.

3) The third method, in addition to chronicles and *Aḥādīth*, may be described as ethnological history, as found in the *Murūj al Dhahab* of al Mas'ūdī or in *Kitāb al Hind* of al Birūnī. Here the urge for knowledge about non-Muslim societies led these scholars to gather first hand material about them, even by learning their languages and by personal contact with their scholars. All they learned was put in a form designed to be readable to their own audience. Such a tendency led to several translations and even to the founding of *Bayt al Ḥikmah* by al Ma'mūn. As a result the scientific and literary traditions contained in Greek, Syriac, Pahlevi, and Sanskrit languages were translated into Arabic. Consequently the Arabic language became a great store of contemporary learning. It is this variety of ideas and information that generated new thought in the Islamic world. Apart from this scientific development, what we have called ethnological history could not develop any new methodology and hence could not lead to the foundation of a new science. The study of other societies was limited to gathering information and enlightening the readers at home. At best these historians compared behavior patterns. But they did not inquire into the very nature of other societies. Why do societies after all differ from one another? Why do they have different behavior patterns? How is it that different societies embrace different goals of life? These and many other questions could have led to a new kind of historical science and perhaps enabled them to grasp the change that was coming in the Muslim

society in the course of history.

Once the major information was transmitted into Arabic, there certainly grew several schools of thought in different fields of studies. Such schools however, became saturated with their own traditions on the basis of what were then new techniques. Because the historians' approach was not sociologically relevant, the impact of this new thought process on social development remained unnoticed. The historical sense that Islam gave to Muslims remained confined to an aspect of development that could not move the whole society nor urge the Muslims to discover new ways to progress. Even works of great importance, produced by these early masters could not sustain a new discipline and continue to enrich and extend the horizons of historical knowledge.

4) In the fourth category of history-writing we can include Ibn Khurdadhbah's *Kitāb al Masālik wa al Mamālik* and also al Biladhuri's *Futūḥ al Buldān*. They have the merit of collecting much geographical information about other countries and at the same time bringing together the historical data and interrelating it so as to produce a sort of geographical history. Each geographical region finds a description along with the important cities and routes, followed by an historical account. Such historians later on influenced the preparation of several books on geography. They gave relatively complete information on the physical map of the then known world. As a result new contacts were established, trade and commerce developed, and Islam spread along the maritime routes. Several new societies came within the purview of the Islamic world. While these societies felt the impact of Islam and the geographic extent of Islamic culture expanded greatly, many different kinds of human experiences in the various geographic regions were accepted into the fold of Islam. What was their impact on the Muslims in general? While geographic histories recorded the variations, no historical geography developed to visualize the growth of different patterns in human society. While geographic variations were noted, the geographic factors were not analyzed to throw light on the differences among human societies. Muslim society remained confined to its own developed norms and ideals. Although this stabilized the society, under-currents of social variations flowed in the body politic unnoticed and unmoved. Awareness of these factors could have extended the horizons of historical knowledge.

5) Travel accounts form the fifth category of historical works. Among them the *Riḥlah* (Journey) of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah occupies a prominent place. The geographical information accumulated by Muslims was of tremendous help in arousing curiosity about different peoples. It was this thirst to visit new places and learn about the people living there that made such intelligent travellers keep records and later write them in the form of memoirs of their visit. Whether the records were kept in the form of diaries or otherwise is difficult to say. The manner of gathering information also is nowhere stated.

Obviously personal contact and keen observation of the new places visited and new peoples observed must have formed the primary basis for collecting data. These travellers were not just ambassadors but were common men of the society and hence had the advantage of mixing with different social groups. As they lived with these people and shared their joys and sorrows, they participated in their social life. The way in which they approached the new peoples could be described as the "participant observer" method, as the term used today in anthropology. But certainly these travellers were not anthropologists and hence it is not possible to expect from them the analytical approach of an anthropologist.

Their methodology also cannot be called empirical, although they collected the data on the spot by freely observing people. Out of a wealth of available details, they selected only whatever struck them as useful. Their accounts are full of historical material, but are narrated in the fashion of travel accounts or stories about unknown and far away people. Rightly speaking, they are not histories, although they do contain a lot of historical data. As the data were collected on the spot, their value for historical purposes is immense. In cases like that of Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, who accepted jobs under local governments, he got first hand information on how they worked. He could compare one system of government with another and examine how different institutions functioned. Yet the travellers's account could hardly go beyond simple observation. That was quite sufficient to satisfy his curiosity. As his inspiration did not come from any set purpose except that of travel, his account should be understood only from that angle.

6) With the development of monarchical institutions in the Islamic world, another category of history writing came into vogue, this may be classed as regional or dynastic history. The methodology is to narrate the account chronologically, but the purpose of these chronologies is to glorify the role of the *sulṭān* or of the dynasty and sometimes to make their military achievements appear as an inherent part in the progress of Islam. This tendency on the part of the historians is natural because they were moved by the great Islamic fervor that had come to them as a result of their scholarly pursuit. On the other hand a *sulṭān*, or a ruling dynasty, was motivated by political ambition. The *sulṭān* used his knowledge of statecraft to advance his own power. The result seemed always to be victory over the non-Muslims and sometimes over another Muslim *sulṭān*. The tendency is to idolize the victorious and see in him and in his ambition the role of Islam and the embodiment of Islamic virtues. Their historical narration developed under the influence of another similar motivation, namely to reconstruct history from the angle of a particular *sulṭān* or ruling dynasty. Therefore all the events were arranged in a manner pleasing to the *sulṭān* or the *sulṭān's* followers. The idolized personality of the *sulṭān* rose above his human personality and therefore the historical

account was also constructed in the same idealistic manner. There was no room to understand the *sulṭān* as an ordinary human or to look at historical forces from the perspective of ordinary human affairs.

This new tendency in historiography was designed to reconstruct what history should be rather than what history is. Such a lack of critical analysis has had a great appeal to those who regard history as a glorification of the past. This tendency has colored the writings of many modern writers who wish to see their ideal of glory in the acts of past heroes or, as seen today, in the glorification of their own national histories. This tendency has departed from the earlier practice of looking at events from the Islamic perspective. At best these heroes, who may have been motivated by their personal ambitions, are made to play a role in line with the spirit of Islam, so that the glory of Islam is seen in the actions of the Muslim *sulṭāns* or other heroes. The purpose of history has changed, although the methodology remained the same. Historical knowledge is distorted to meet the new requirement of hero worship but actual historical events and forces and trends follow a pattern that remains hidden from the eyes of the historians. The currents of history march in one direction but their accounts follow another set pattern in order to satisfy human vanity. To see an ideal virtue in a hero is something different from the actual role that the hero plays in history. Here movement in a society is held to be subservient to the initiatives and moves of the hero himself. He comes out as a charismatic leader and history becomes a story of charisma rather than an appraisal of different historical forces.

7) In the final category, we can place Ibn Khaldūn, who applied a new hypothesis to understand movement in history and thereby gave us a new reconstruction of history rather than a chronicle. His reconstruction is interpretative rather than descriptive. He does not idolize any ruler but tries to see his role in the development of society. Living as he did in North Africa, he could see society as an interplay of different tribes. In the pure nature of the cohesive force of tribes he saw the binding living force of all societies—a force which he termed tribal solidarity. Without this cohesive bond, a society cannot flourish. The rise and fall of society is traced to the elements that go to make up this bond.

The approach of Ibn Khaldūn to history is sociological. Since he had a unique experience in viewing the role of the tribes in North African society, it was natural for him to extend his own experience to the explanation of social development on its basis. Ibn Khaldūn stands alone in presenting to us a new methodology and a new historiography which was far superior to any then known or followed by other Muslim historians after him. His example was not followed, probably because the purpose of other historians was entirely different from his own.

In choosing the tribe as a unit for understanding history, he introduced an

entirely new concept and thus adopted an approach that was different from what we see in the interpretation of the contemporary scene in the Holy Qur'an. The Holy Book stresses the role of the individuals who compose the *millat* or religious community and defines the place of individual persons on the basis of each person's virtue. The *millat* was the *summum bonum* of the collective spirit of virtue, and as long as man moulds himself in submission to Allah by following the virtuous path, the *millat* remains intact on the straight path toward the final goal of life.

Ibn Khaldūn did not oppose this idea, but in order to save the *millat* from pitfalls, he proposed that the bonding spirit of the tribe might serve more reliably as the cohesive force in society. If the tribe itself stagnates in an archaic system and loses momentum in forward progress because new incentives are lacking, it is regarded by Ibn Khaldūn as the old age of social growth and explained it on the basis of cyclic theory. A society however, is not an organic whole like a human body. It is the individual persons, as laid down in the Holy Qur'ān, who compose the society and who are responsible for movement in the society. The individuals and the society act and react, but it is the nature of the individuals that is reflected in the society. It is probably for this reason that history today places so much importance on the role of the individual and tries to understand him, not simply on the basis of his virtues, but on the basis of his human nature, his failings and achievements, his capacity to choose and decide, and his will to chose any path shown to him by God. The role of the individual in society is the deciding factor in history. It is by gathering human experiences that we add to our historical knowledge. Such experiences are seen in the long and short perspective of history. The longer the view, the better the perception man has about himself, i.e. his own nebulous place in the vast creation of Allah (SWT).