

ISLĀMIC CONTRIBUTIONS TO HISTORY

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It will be assumed that the word *tārīkh*, used in Arabic and other Islāmic languages for “history”, is understood to signify in its wider connotation, both in the Western Christian and Eastern Moslem traditions, “A systematic written account of events, particularly of those affecting a nation, institution, science, or art, usually connected with a philosophical explanation of their causes.” (Webster’s *New Collegiate Dictionary*, G & C. Merriam Co., 1953).

The great North African Muslim Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn who died in the early fifteenth century (1332-1406) stated it in much the same way when he said in his celebrated *Muqaddimah*, or Introduction to his universal history:

“History is a science of fine principles, manifold uses, and noble purpose. It informs us about the people of the past — the characters of nations, the lives of prophets, the kingdoms and policies of kings — thus usefully providing example for the emulation of those who desire it in religious and worldly affairs. The writer of history requires many sources and varied knowledge; he also requires keen judgement and careful scrutiny to lead him to the truth and away from lapses and errors. If reliance is placed on simple narrative as transmitted, without studying the roots of custom, the foundation of politics, the nature of civilization, and the circumstances of human society, and without comparing far with near and past with present — then there will often be danger of slipping and stumbling and straying from the right road.”¹

¹Ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*. Beirut, 1961, p. 12. The translation is reproduced from B. Lewis, *Islām* (from the Prophet Muḥammad to the Capture of Constantinople). Harper Torchbooks, volume I.

These two complementary concepts on the meaning of history — the one Western, and the other Islāmic — will be kept in mind throughout the present investigation on the Islāmic contributions to history.

I. The Relation Between Religion And History

The decision by responsible early Muslim leaders to collect “the word of God” (as it was revealed to the Prophet) and preserve it in book-form for future generations is certainly the first, and in many ways the most crucial, step in Muslim historiography. For the *Qur’ān* is indeed the first history book in Islām. Accepting the collected record as definitive, and discarding all other variants became the cornerstone of all future writing on Islām. However, when the first attempts were made to understand the meaning of the revelation in the great Qur’ān commentaries, the text was subjected to historical investigation and scrutiny in order to determine the so-called “causes for the revelation” (*asbāb al nuzūl*). This special Qur’ānic science was nothing short than subjecting the contents of the Book to textual and historical criticism.

The word *tārīkh* (history) does not occur in the Qur’ān. Other words such as *asātir* (legends), with a curious etymological similarity to the Greek word *istoria*, and *qīṣaṣ* (stories)* are often used with reference to past societies. But the religious and spiritual content of the Book is so pervasive that it set the tone for all future writing in Islām including history. Thus history and religion became inextricably intertwined. “In all fields of intellectual endeavour cultivated by the Sharī’ah-minded, a set of intellectual patterns arose which shared many techniques in common but also, more significantly, bore the impress of a common spirit: a spirit populistic and factualistic, *with a persistent sense of the moral importance of historical events*” (emphasis added).² With such a powerful book as the Qur’ān ever present in their minds, therefore, Muslim historians almost invariably emphasized the moralistic approach in their writings, and sought to substantiate “God’s ways” in the life of past generations as well as their own.

Less religious in content (since it had no divine sanction) but infinitely more important as a model for later historical writing, is the material collected during the Second Muslim century on the life of the

²Hodgson, M.G.S., *The Venture of Islam*, Chicago Un. Press, 1974, 1, 351.

* واذ تتلى عليهم آياتنا قالوا قد سمعنا لو نشاء لقلنا مثل هذا إن هذا إلا أساطير الأولين * وقالوا أساطير الأولين إكتتبها فهي تملى عليه بكرة وأصيلا * لقد كان في قصصهم عبرة لأولي الألباب * كذلك نقص عليك من أنباء ما قد سبق .

Prophet which came to be known as the Sunnah.**

This religio-biographical work exercised a tremendous influence on all subsequent Muslim historians who committed to writing the oral traditions that were passed on from generation to generation, thus preserving for posterity the details of the life of the Prophet and early Muslim society. Here again, the narrators of these traditions were subjected to scrutiny and investigation with a view to establishing their trustworthiness and the veracity of their accounts, according to the system of *jarḥ* and *ta'dīl*, the entire corpus of *ḥadīth* literature was sifted and classified, and an auxiliary historical science of *Ṭabaqāt* (biographies) came into being.

Thus, with the *Qur'ān* as the supreme guide, and the life of Muḥammad as the worthiest of all examples, the relation between religion and history was firmly established. Let me paraphrase a few lines from Yāqūt's *Mu'jam al-Udabā'* as a rather curious example of this relation. After writing his 20-volume biographical masterpiece, he reflects on his achievement in a lengthy "Introduction":

"I am fully aware, he says, of the ignorant critic who may claim that working on religious matters is more important and more rewarding both in this world and in the hereafter.

Does he not know that individuals have different natures, and that if all persons work on one branch of knowledge the rest will be lost? God, in his wisdom, has ordained for every subject someone who would specialize in it and organize it; and man has to perform that for which he was created.

However, I do not deny that, if I had kept to my mosque and prayer, and worked in my life on that which would gain me rewards in the other world, it would have been better and more worthy for acquiring peace of mind in my afterlife. But seeking

**** Editor's Note:**

The Sunnah of the Prophet may not be said to be "less religious in content" than the Qur'ān. The two make an indissoluble unity, complementing and buttressing each other. Nor is it true that the Sunnah "had no divine sanction." The Qur'ān explicitly commanded the Muslims to accept as true and normative what the Prophet gave them, to obey him, and equated obedience to him with obedience to God (59:7; 3:32, 132; 4:68, 80). The Qur'ān further described the life of the Prophet as the example-to-follow, and assigned to him the task of clarifying, concretizing and substantiating the divine imperatives (33:21; 5:16, 21; 14:4; 16:44). For Muslims, it is blasphemous to describe the ḥadīth as "infinitely more important than the Qur'ān" in any sense.

that which is impossible to attain is not within my reach; and carrying out that which is preferable is beyond my capabilities. It is sufficient, therefore, that man should not engage in unlawful things (*maḥẓūr*), and should not follow the path which would lead him astray.”³

This half-hearted, and in a way unconvincing, apologia by a leading figure of Muslim historiography (and of geographical writing if one includes his *Muʿjam al-Buldān*) does reflect on the approach which Muslim historians had to their subject. Although it comes from a later period (the early thirteenth century), and although earlier historians were not perhaps as cynical as Yāqūt (if indeed his words could be taken as a mild expression of cynicism), still this religio-historical approach should always be taken into consideration when interpreting and evaluating the entire corpus of Muslim historical writings.

II. History and the State.

The Muslim historians were fully aware of the importance of the new political order established by Muḥammad as soon as he arrived in Madīnah, and of the Caliphate system established by the early Muslim leadership immediately upon the death of the Prophet. Next to Islām, the religion, the founding of a state to protect it and preserve it was the second major achievement of the early Muslim community.

The treatment of the state in Muslim historical writings varied with the change of circumstances from Madīnah to Damascus (and briefly Kūfah) to Baghdād and to other centers in the post-Baghdād periods all the way to the end of the eighteenth century. There was a radical but temporary change during the long dark night of the colonial period, but contemporary signs (if they are to be interpreted correctly) point to a new continuity.

The Muslim historians treated the settlement of the political question by Muḥammad upon his arrival in Madīnah, and the birth of the Caliphate system on the “porch” of Banū Sāʿidah, with reverence and respect. On the one hand, we may have here the beginnings of Islāmic political science judging by such terminology as the “constitution” of Madīnah which some modern writers have given to Muḥammad’s invention. On the other hand, the concept of the “golden age” of Madīnah, stressing the political acumen of the Prophet and the resourcefulness of the early Muslim leadership who developed the idea of consultation (*shūrā*) in the settlement of political issues, nostalgically grew up essentially to compensate for the later periods of dissension and

³Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-Udabāʾ*, Cairo, 1936, I, 52-53.

strife.*** Ibn Ishāq's version of what took place when Muḥammad assumed political (and religious) leadership in Madīnah, and Ṭabarī's accounts of the political convention on the "porch" of Banū Sā'idah (based, among others, on the authority of Abū Mikhnaf)⁴ are only two of many specimens of Muslim historiography which point to the way Muslim historians handled the question of the rise of political authority during the early decades of Islām.

Lest I be accused of partiality, let me give another example which treats of historiography on the Shī'ī side and sheds light on the issue of the Imāmate which, together with the Caliphate, form the two sides of the coin of the political theory of the state in Islām.

As we all know, Ḥusayn son of 'Ali and the "darling" grandson of the Prophet, was "invited" to Kūfah to claim his rightful succession after the death of Mu'āwiyah. And now let us turn to Ibn Khaldūn:

"Ḥusayn believed that the rise against Yazīd was incumbent (*muta'ayyin*) upon him because of the latter's sinfulness or dissolute life (*fīsq*). It is especially incumbent upon those who possess the power to do so. He thought that this applied to him because of his qualifications (sing. *ahliyyah*) and capability/power (*shawkah*). As for his qualifications, he was in fact more than qualified; but as for his capability, he was wrong — may God be merciful unto him.

For the tribal solidarity (*'aṣabiyyah*) of Muḍar was in Quraysh, and the *'aṣabiyyah* of Quraysh was in 'Abd Manāf, and the *'aṣabiyyah* of 'Abd Manāf was surely in Banū Umayyah — a fact recognized by Quraysh and everybody else. Nobody denied that. However, this situation was forgotten (or rather the people became oblivious of it) in early Islām because the Muslim community was dazzled by the unusual events that had occurred; by the phenomenon of prophetic inspiration, and by the coming of the angels to help the Muslims. Custom was thus cast aside, and the pre-Islāmic *'aṣabiyyah* and the disputes arising from it were temporarily forgotten. All that remained was the natural *'aṣabiyyah* of protection and defense which was made use of in

***** Editor's Note:**

It is not true that "the idea of... Shūrā" was "developed... by the early Muslim leadership." It is ordained by God in the Qur'ān (3:159; 42:38). The life of the Prophet is full of instances in which this Qur'ānic imperative was applied.

⁴Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, Leiden edition, i, pp. 1837-1844. For a translation see Lewis, *Islam*, 1, 2-5.

establishing the (new) religion and the performance of holy war (*jihād*), against the infidels. In a case like this, religion becomes paramount and custom is set aside.

However, when the period of prophecy and the extraordinary events ended, rule (*ḥukm*) reverted somewhat to the (old) customs. *‘Aṣabiyyah* thus returned to the way it had been; and so Muḍar became more amenable to Banū Umayyah than to any other group on the basis on conditions that had been prevalent before.”⁵

Ibn Khaldūn, the social scientist, is sternly correct, and there is no room in his rigorously balanced argument for Ḥusayn or his cause. But the Shī‘ī political concept of the Imāmate had developed long before Ibn Khaldūn; and at the religious-eschatological level, the Shī‘ī scholars decided to “occult” the Twelfth Imām to the end of time thus instituting a new political theory that all secular authority does in fact usurp his power. The novel concept of “*rahbar*” (leader, guide) in the modern Islāmic constitution of Īrān marks a new and interesting departure.

Muslim historians, therefore, were fully conscious of the rise of the Islāmic state, of the factionalism attendant on the move to Damascus, and of the great synthesis that accompanied the Baghdād period. They understood the relations between the “independent” dynasties that rose in Khurāsān and Māwarā’a al Nahr and the central government of the Caliphate. They also realized the temporary disruption caused by the Mongol conquests; and after the dust settled down, they continued to write universal histories, this time in Persian, such as those composed by Rashīd al Dīn, Faḍl Allah, Mīr Khwānd, and Khwānd Amīr — milestones in the continuity of the Islāmic system. And when the Ottoman Turks assumed the leadership of the central Muslim lands, their historians kept alive the enduring concepts of the early Muslim state with minor additions borrowed from their original home in Central Asia.

Muslim historians through the ages never lost sight of the great institution of the state that Islām created. To understand the historiographical development of Muslim political theory is to keep in mind this unity between the Church and State in Islām. It is totally different from the struggle between Church and State in contemporary Medieval Europe.

⁵Ibn Khaldūn, *op. cit.*, 382-83. Cf. Franz Rosenthal’s translation, I. 443-44.

III. History and the Muslim Community.

Muslim historical writings have sometimes been criticized for being dry narratives of series of events with very little evaluation and interpretation, for dealing primarily with the rulers and their courts and their intrigues, and for paying little attention to the everyday life of ordinary people in the community. This of course is not true even if we limit our view to the core disciplines of history, biography, geography, and genealogy. There may be some justification for such statements in certain cases of official and dynastic chronicles. But there is no doubt, however, that when the scribal tradition was established during the second century of Islām (the first paper factory was set up in Baghdād in 178/794-95)⁶ Muslim writers, fascinated by the great achievements of their civilization, became actively engaged in recording for their contemporaries and for future generations and for themselves, the tremendous accomplishment of the Islāmic community. As Ibn al Athīr says:

« شرعت في تاليف تاريخ جامع لأخبار ملوك الشرق والغرب وما بينهما ليكون لي تذكرة
أراجعه خوف النسيان »
بيروت ١٩٦٥ الكامل في التاريخ ، المجلد ١ ، المقدمة ، ص ٣ .

And as Dūrī puts it, “A sense of their importance grew up among the Arabs when they realized that they were the possessors of an international message in Islām. This feeling is connected with the establishment of the Arab-Islāmic empire ... The idea of the *Ummah* began to influence their interest in accounts (*akhbār*) and stories (*qiṣaṣ*) that went beyond the tribe and encompassed the society as a whole. The door was thus open for historical investigation and study.”⁷

This interest in the affairs of the Muslim community can be seen even clearer if we move into such allied disciplines as travel literature or Ṣūfī compositions. A work like Ibn Baṭṭūṭah's *Riḥlah* is a mirror of Islāmic society from Tangier to Delhi during the fourteenth century. Less credit has been given to the social contents of works on Ṣūfī masters and their times.

One such work is Ibn al Bazzāz, *Ṣafwat al Ṣafā*, which deals with Shaykh Ṣafīyy al Dīn Ardabīlī, the most celebrated Ṣūfī master in Irān during the fourteenth century (whose descendants in the sixth generation established the Ṣafawī dynasty in Irān in the early sixteenth century). The political history of this post-Mongol period in Irān is richly recorded by such great historians as ‘Aṭā’ Malik Juwaynī, Ḥamd Allāh Mustawfī Qazwīnī, Rashēd al Dīn Faḍl Allāh, and others. But

⁶H.A.R. Gibb. “Tā rīkh” *E.I.*, *Supplement*, Leiden, 1938.

⁷ ‘Abd al ‘Azīz al Dūrī, *Baḥth fi Nash’at ‘Ilm al tārīkh ‘ind’ al ‘Arab*, Beirut, 1960, 132.

the intimate everyday life of Iranians in Adharbayjān and the neighboring regions at this time can best be found described in detail in *Ṣafwat al Ṣafā*. A short section made up of two items (*ḥikāyāt*) that deals specifically with the childhood days of Shaykh Ṣafiyy al Dīn (indicating certain miraculous occurrences that point to his future greatness) incidentally describes such mundane things as the games children play and the sources of energy with which village people used to cook their food. This social historiography is a veritable mine of information on a topic long neglected by the modern researcher.⁸

But even historical writings that deal with dynastic reigns and rulers are full of insights into the life of these rulers who supposedly live above society in the dark recesses of their palaces and courts. A case in point is that of the Ṣafawī ruler Ismā'il II and his story as told by Iskandar Munshī in his *Tārīkh-i 'Ālam-ārā-yi 'Abbāsī*. Modern historians who have dealt with this subject have drawn this ruler as a bloody tyrant. A closer look at Munshī's account shows him to be a very sensitive man whose mind is occupied with very serious thoughts about Sunnī-Shī'ī problems the resolution of which could (had he reigned more than one year) have changed the entire course of Persian history.⁹

Another minor historian of Tunisia, on his way to the pilgrimage, stopped to visit Ustādh 'Abd al Ghanī al Nābulusī, the great Muslim authority in Damascus during the eighteenth century. The 80-year old man was enjoying a smoke; and out of respect for his visitor he laid the apparatus (*al dawah*) aside. "Go ahead and smoke, My Master," said the Tunisian; "I am not one who would deny you this..I then took the pipe and drew at it once or twice then handed it back to him. He was pleased and smiled, and began smoking again."¹⁰

Amongst all Muslim writers, the historian was closest to the society in which he lived. His writings are in many ways a true reflection of the anthropological and sociological conditions of his times. Through the annual pilgrimage, through the Ṣūfī brotherhoods, and through personal travel and curiosity, the Muslim historian kept in touch with a vibrant Muslim community which, despite the divisions in the post-Caliphal periods, remained united in its outlook and unified in its way of life.

This underlying unity of Islāmic life seemed to come to an abrupt end towards the end of the eighteenth century. Two years before the end of the century (in June of 1798 to be exact) warships carrying the French

⁸Ibn-i-Bazzāz, *Ṣafwat al Ṣafā* (Un. of Leiden, MS. 465), folios 9b-10b.

⁹Iskandar Munshī, *Tārīkh-i 'Ālam-ārā-yi 'Abbāsī*, Tehran 1334/1956, I, 199-221; English translation by R.M. Savory, *History of Shah 'Abbas the Great*, Boulder 1978, I, 294-330.

¹⁰Ḥusayn Khūjah, *Dhayl li-kutūb Bashā'ir ahl al Imān*, Tunis, 1326/1908, 244.

Revolution army under Napoleon was sighted off Alexandria harbor. The contemporary great Muslim historian, 'Abd al Rahman al Jabartī, records his reaction as he begins volume three of his *'Ajā'ib al Āthār* in the following heart-rending words:

(*) وهي أول سني الملاحم العظيمة والحوادث الجسيمة والوقائع النازلة والنوازل الهائلة وتضاعف الشرور وترادف الامور وتوالي المحن وإختلال الزمن وانعكاس المطبوع وانقلاب الموضوع وتتابع الاهوال واختلاف الاحوال وفساد التدبير وحصول التدمير وعموم الخراب وتواتر الاسباب

“This is the first year of the great catastrophe, the monstrous events, the terrible happenings; Evils have multiplied; the affairs of state have become tragic, and misfortunes have descended upon us all. Time has become perverse, things have gone contrary to nature (*in'ikās al-maḥbū'*), and the situation is upside-down in confusion and disarray.”¹¹

Already the British were carving up India, and Russian armies were pushing southwards against Irān and Central Asia. The Ottoman Turks were slowly but surely retreating from the European scene. For about two centuries, the Muslim peoples of the world were not allowed to manage their own affairs.

It is only recently, after the phasing out of colonial domination, that we are beginning to see the Muslim peoples looking again, more seriously than ever before, into their great cultural tradition. They will find it best preserved in the writings of their historians.

IV. Further Points To Study

Aside from the three points discussed in this paper (i.e., History and religion; History and the state; and History and the *Ummah*), it was originally intended to deal with three other points:

4. History and Islāmic civilization: The Muslim historians were aware of the achievements of Islāmic civilization and culture, especially in literature and the arts. There is always a sense of pride in their writings, coupled with contempt for non-Islāmic things.

5. History between past and present: In spite of the tremendous changes that occurred in Muslim societies during the 19th and 20th centuries (secularization, modernization, Westernization, etc.), Muslim historical writings in modern times reflect a strong sense of belonging to one of the great world traditions. The little “alienation” there is appears to have touched small groups here and there, and this is essentially superficial.

¹¹ 'Abd al Rahman al Jabartī, *'Ajā'ib al Āthār*, Cairo, Būlāq, 1879, III, 2.

6. History and the historian: The style and techniques of Muslim historical writings have of course undergone many changes from one period to another. The approach is more scientific, but the pervading spirit is Islāmic with powerful sense of continuity. At the very end of his *Muqaddimah* (Beirut, 1961 edition, p. 1169), Ibn Khaldūn puts it like this:

“We have discussed enough points to satisfy our purposes. Perhaps he who comes after us, guided by a good mind and a clear knowledge, will go deeper than we did in these matters. For the originator of a science cannot cover all its aspects; he merely indicates the line of argument and points out the various approaches. Later writers follow up after him, one leads after another, so that the science in time will become complete.”

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