

Conferences, Seminars, and Addresses

Islamic Perspectives on the Question of History

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Here at the outset, I should like to emphasize to my esteemed brothers and sisters that my knowledge of the study of history as an element in the contemporary social sciences is very limited. Yet, by making this admission before you, perhaps I can make my excuses early for asking too many questions, or for putting into words some of the major difficulties I have with this subject, and perhaps others have as well.

Indeed, when we think of this important branch of knowledge a number of issues immediately come to mind. Perhaps among the most significant of these issues are the following:

1. What is the overall meaning of human history? What is its legitimate subject? What are its contents?
2. Is there any way to connect, historically, the remarkable abundance of diverse and multiplex events experienced by humankind all over the globe? How are trends to be explained, in the light of logical, rational relationships that transcend the time and place of their occurrence, as well as the special limitations of peoples and societies? And, is there any way to translate what is gained from these events into laws and principles that may be applied to the present, or that may afford a glimpse into the future, or that may explain the meaning of good and evil?
3. Is it reasonable for us to think of human history as a logical, ordered process by means of which humankind proceeds from its beginning to its end? If so, was the master plan conceived from without? Or does it come about from history itself? Furthermore, is all this beyond the reach of man himself,

- so that he is unable to influence it? Or is the process, in fact, a part of his free will, of his conscious choice?
4. What is good? And what is evil? What are they to be measured by? What is their source? What does human will have to do with them? What is the role of humans in the occurrence of either one of them? What are the ways and means of realizing the good, and containing evil? What are the outside forces that work on these? Are they actual forces, imaginary forces, or supposed forces? And what is there to prove what kind they really are?
 5. What is evolution? And what is progress? What governs these things? And is progress the true objective of all history? How did the idea of progress arise? Is it possible to measure progress in terms of the progress and development of one society? And one people? Or may a judgment be made on the basis of analogy drawn with humanity in general?
 6. What is time? What is the reality of the past, present, and future? In consideration of what factors is it decided that a certain period of time is the past? And that another is the present? And that another is to be the future? And which of these periods is more deserving of receiving the appellation, "history"? Then, if all of these are entered into the logbook of history, can history or the historian enter other events and call them, implicitly, neither historical nor human? And does the intellectual ambit of the historian extend to the subject of what *may* occur?
 7. Is it possible to count or to observe the events of history, from the earliest times of man on earth? If we were to imagine this possible, would it be within our ability to find reliable academic sources that could verify what happened, and explain the ages of history? How may we overcome the plurality of historical truth? And the variety of its subjects? And the variance within it as it touches upon different societies and civilizations?

These are questions that must arise when one ponders over history, or speaks of it. Often, scholars of history are beset with these questions in the hope that they may define for contemporary man the reality of human history, and explain to him its meaning, and the significance of human will in the way it unfolds. These questions explain the contribution to history made by sacrifices endured by humans through the ages, the values and issues served by those sacrifices, and the objectives in the direction explain history is flowing.

These are questions that many of those concerned with the philosophy of history have attempted to answer. So Hegel and Kant, and Marx and Engels attempted to provide answers in the same way as Augustine before them, who tried to explain history in theological terms. It is not my intention to burden your ears here with an account of their explanations, theories, beliefs, or interpretations. Those, of course, are the grist, the rudiments of your specializations.

I would, however, like to draw your attention to what might be called the summary of the philosophical thinking undertaken by those individuals, which is that the meaning of history for all of them is very nearly "constant development along the way of constant progress toward a supposed goal for humanity."

Furthermore, they are all agreed that this definition is essential for any interpretation of historical movements, or of momentous historical events in the life of humankind, or for the purpose of setting for humanity any kind of meaningful objectives.

The theologian scholars of history link events of good and evil in human history with the will of God, and with His plan, and with the degree to which the deeds of mankind conform to that plan. Marx linked those events with the means of production. Others link them to human perfection, in an attempt to distance themselves from the standpoint of the theologian so as not to be thought "non-academic," or secular.

Indeed, the pervasiveness of Western thought and culture in today's world, and the folding of all other cultures in upon themselves, including Islamic culture, has made the sources for the answers to all these questions these very same Western philosophies—philosophies that represent a part of the philosophies of progress that appeared following the Enlightenment and that are considered on the whole, especially those dealing with history, to be secular readings of old theological problems.

Still, these philosophies, both the religious and the profane, have all been confronted, and continue to be confronted, by sharp criticism from within the same Western schools of historical thought. Nonetheless, the contemporary Westerner, in accordance with his custom to race toward pragmatism whenever he is unable to produce either a rational or a satisfactory academic alternative, finds solace in differentiating between reality and perceived reality, historical or otherwise. In this he intends either neutrality or self-deception before others, in order to escape the logical consequences of the answers he gives to the kind of questions that cannot be answered without reference to concepts like development, change, progress, growth, and becoming—concepts which he attempted to formulate in accordance with what he saw and chose, concepts to which he gave whatever meaning he pleased.

Western thought, as it watches the collapse of Marxism all over the world,

is now attempting to bury its head in the sand so as not to witness the logical conclusion of the philosophies to which it gave the stamp of academic authority and universality when such philosophies neither deserved nor earned. Now its attempt is to shield itself behind the balance of accumulated philosophies to its credit, and to revive these, far removed from Marxism, while claiming to be free of Marxism, which it now describes as being opposed to human nature, antithetical to freedom and democracy, and contradictory to the natural flow of history.

In these ways, Western thought explains the fall of Marxism. But in the attempt, it seems to be doing little more than offering protection for capitalist theory, and for the Western democracies which it portrays as being free of the fatal flaws that led to the downfall of Marxism.

The Western thinkers who are carrying out this exercise today are really attempting to stave off the same kind of capitulation for their own philosophies — philosophies they hope to present to Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and the Peoples' Republic of China as studied alternatives to Marxism; as if Marxism, in essence, never represented the sum and substance of all those other theories, even if it did differ with them in certain of its particulars.

Marxism made of European progress an entirely self-sufficient theoretical structure for theology that was worldly, man-made, and founded upon the refusal to recognize any otherworldly orientation, and upon discrediting the same academically, so as to maintain the materialist interpretation of history, which is not at all different from the rest of the Western philosophies except in regard to its explanation, in terms of production, of what constitutes good and evil.

So the outward glee in the West at the spectacle of collapsing Marxism will not last for long, not in my opinion. In the near future the weaknesses inherent in the West's own unnatural positions will be exposed — positions based on limiting philosophical generalizing about scientific results followed by the Marxists, positions that attempt to turn the clock back to a pre-Marxist era in order that peaceful and disciplined development might come about to satisfy some of man's spiritual aspirations, in addition to his material needs and desires. In this, however, Western thought is merely attempting to extract itself from generalizations, and to make use of what it supposes to be fragmented academic issues.

The suffering of humanity, however, will not come to an end as a result of any of that. In the same way that Marxism announced its bankruptcy, its Western philosophical sisters will be forced, sooner or later, to admit the same.

Indeed, contemporary humanity will not stop suffering, or be able to protect its accomplishments, unless it discovers an alternate philosophy, one so comprehensive as to be able to present a realistic and satisfactory interpretation of history, an overall conception of life, man, and the universe,

and a proper understanding of the issue of time. Only through such a philosophy will the West be able to revise its interpretation of the meaning of development, progress, change, growth, and so on.

Indeed, we may emphasize, in all confidence, that the Qur'an is the answer. The Qur'anic interpretation of time, life, the universe, mankind, history, and good and evil is the only interpretation capable of providing contemporary humanity with a philosophical and civilizational alternative that can shield mankind from the evil which now threatens him and all that he has achieved.

In no uncertain terms the Qur'an clarified the history of mankind, the origin of life, how mankind took up residence on earth, the purpose of existence, the details of what is of importance, and the laws which must be dealt with on the journey. Likewise, the Qur'an analyzed the phenomena of materialist movements and defined the link of the Creator to matter, in the same way that it defined the connection of mankind to matter so as to urge him to deal realistically with life, while sitting in a position of control, so that his dealings with life are transformed into a sort of fusion with unified creation, with the purpose of the Almighty, and with the universe. Thus, all sense of estrangement is erased as a natural and comprehensive peace descends as the blessing of the Almighty Hakim, the Merciful and Mercy-giving.

It was the Qur'an that taught man that good and evil were a test for him, and a trial, so that the best among people might be separated from the others—those whose deeds were the best, who most benefitted from their surroundings, who accepted the responsibilities of vicegerency, "*Khilāfah*."

So this test is what inspired mankind to accept the responsibility of vicegerency and everything attached to it, whether civilizational or universal. Thus, human beings may set out in the world as a part of the universe, as participants in history, as beyond the limits of time and space. Meanwhile, their Creator cares for them and prepares them, subjugates all of the creation for them, causes the angels to bow down, and teaches mankind all of the names so that not a single door is closed to mankind or to their knowledge; thus ruling out the possibility of a Prometheus entering and stealing it.

Certainly, the expectation from Muslim scholars of history, more than anyone else, is that they will search for the treasures having to do with this subject in the Holy Qur'an; and that, by means of the wisdom therein, they will be able to present solutions and alternatives to the pressing issues of today, issues that continue to confound contemporary scholars and historians.

Yet, a search of this nature into the secrets of the Qur'an requires a comprehensive analytical methodology that will enable the historian to understand the universals dealt with in the Qur'an and the ways in which these bear upon the reality of the present, as well as the past and the future.

Undoubtedly, there are great breakthroughs to be made in this field,

and the challenge to thinking Muslims of our age, and of every age, is to strive in establishing the framework upon which a fresh understanding of the timeless truths of the Qur'an may be based.

May Allah (SWT) grant that each of us be of service to knowledge, to the Muslims, and to Din al Islam!

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