

DEVELOPING A CRITICAL APPROACH TO MUSLIM HISTORY

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan

The history of a civilization often holds the key to understanding its present condition. A critical study and evaluation of history should enable one to learn lessons from the past as well as highlight the achievements of the past generations. Without good knowledge and thorough understanding of history, a serious analysis and evaluation of current existential condition is not feasible. A people that cannot understand the present cannot therefore hope to advance, progress and move towards a bright future. That is why the key to the future often lies in the past. The Holy Qur'an has referred to the significance of the past on more than one occasion. As it happens, a large portion of the Qur'an consists of historical data, referring to past events, anecdotal information about the ancients, stories of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and reminding us of the fate that had befallen the people of Ad, Thamud, Madian and their likes. The purpose of such information is simple: so that we may learn lessons from the past, and if we fail to take heed we will only have ourselves to blame, without God's ultimate plan being frustrated in any way.

The early Muslims understood this very well. That is why they were immensely successful in all spheres of human activity, thus making rapid political progress, economic development, cultural advancement as well as great intellectual contributions. Their achievements have, in many ways, remained unmatched to this day. They became the paragons of peace and progress, cultivators of human sciences as well as patrons of arts and architecture, symbols of civility and culture, the originators of a dazzling global civilization, stretching from the Pyrenees in the West to the Indus valley in the East. As the intellectual historian, Robert Van de Weyer pointed out, "Chinese and Indian civilizations glittered for well over a thousand years, but by the medieval period both were losing their brightness. Greek civilization shone with great intensity for a short period, and then was overtaken by the bolder and less subtle civilization of Rome, Islamic civilization spread westwards across the Roman world, and then eastwards to India and beyond; and for almost a thousand years its achievements in all sphere of human endeavor were dazzling." (*Islam and the West*, 2001, p48)

However, for the last two hundred years or so Muslims have had not only failed to live up to the high standards that were set by the earlier Muslims in their role and purpose as *khalifa Allah fi'l ard* (or 'God's vicegerents on earth'), but today's Muslims have also lost their sense of purpose and direction. It is true that in the past, Muslims frequently encountered obstacles and difficulties, experienced hardship and set-backs as we do today; some were martyred in the battlefield, while others were put through severe tests and trials, but unlike today's Muslims, they rarely faltered

because their main aim and mission in life, that is to say, their sense of purpose, justice and fair-play never deserted them. This is perhaps the most crucial difference between the earlier generations and today's Muslims. It was also on account of this that they were more successful and accomplished than we are today. Recently, have read a number of useful and interesting books on Islamic history by a number of scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim. By and large, most of these books are interpretive works dealing with a sequence of events, often beginning with the pre-Islamic times, tracing the journey of the Muslim world from the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) to the present, highlighting the ups and downs of Islamic history with minimal consideration and analysis of the reasons that triggered the sequence of events in the first place.

For example, why were the Muslims very successful during the time of the Prophet but were overtaken by internal dissension and division during the reigns of the third and fourth rightly-guided Caliphs, namely Uthman and Ali? Why was Abd al-Rahman III of Muslim Spain able to unite the differing groups and create one of the foremost centres of Islamic learning and scholarship in the heart of medieval Europe? What were the reasons for Salah al-Din's (Saladin) success against the crusaders in 1187 which enabled him to recapture Jerusalem from the latter without slaughtering its inhabitants en masse? Likewise, what were the causes that led to the decline and disintegration of the once-mighty Abbasid Empire, and the eventual destruction of Baghdad at the hands of the Mongols in 1258? If we are to learn lessons from the past, we have to ask higher questions which transcend and go beyond simply explaining the normal sequence of events and seek to explore and evaluate the political, economic, sociological, legal and cultural as well as the moral dimensions of Muslim history, its ups and downs, underpinned by a sound, mature and holistic approach. That is, we have to move away from the 'what' to the 'how' and 'why' of Islamic history if we are to get anywhere close to understanding the Muslim past and make sense of our current plight and predicament. This, I hasten to add, is also the Qur'anic approach to understanding and exploring human history.

In the words of Tamara Sonn, the author of *A Brief History of Islam* (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), "The early Muslim community was faced with the enormous challenge of institutionalising justice not only in their own communities, but sharing those ideals and institutions with others who had suffered injustice as they had. It is certainly to their credit that they relieved the region of the heavy burden of Roman and Persian imperialism. That conflicts would arise over the practical matters of governance is not surprising...in reality, the early years of Islam reflect both the benefits and the difficulties encountered in the transition from a community whose security is based on bonds of mutual and unquestioned loyalty, to a community committed to justice on a global scale. This is a struggle that continues to this day...Muslims continue to explore the implications of working for justice in a pluralistic society."

Indeed, the Qur'anic approach to, and interpretation of history is multi-layered and much more complex than is usually thought. The processes of historical evolution and change are not neutral according to the Islamic philosophy of history. According to the Qur'an, "God is on the side of those who fear Him and do (what is) good." (*Surah Al-Nahl*, verse 127) The classical Qur'anic commentators like Fakhr al-Din al-Razi that the 'fear of God' here refers to the respect that people show for God's commands

while ‘doing good’ means the kindness, generosity and benevolence which people show towards each other. In other words, people who personify virtue; ensure that fairness and justice underpin all their affairs, and treat people as fairly and equitably as possible without undue bias and favouritism, are assured of Divine help and support. By contrast, those who spread corruption and disorder; oppress the weak by their wrong-doing and failure to observe justice, the historical process defeats the purpose of such evil-doers. In the words of the Qur’an, “And when Abraham was tried with certain commands by his Lord. He fulfilled them. Then God said to him: I am about to make you a leader of men. Abraham said, but what about my descendants? God replied: My pledge does not include the wrongdoers”. (*Surah Al-Baqarah*, verse 124)

The Qur’anic approach to the historical process is equally selective, for God will separate those who are morally upright from the immoral ones, as clearly stated in *Surah Al-Imran* (verse 78), “God will not leave the believers in the condition in which they are until He separates the evil-doers from those who are virtuous”. However, the Qur’an makes it clear that historical change does not happen suddenly, overnight. Even in the face of great bloodshed, mass corruption, widespread disorder, and apparent injustice and wrongdoing, God does not chastise or punish willy-nilly. The time-factor is taken into consideration. “Your Lord”, reassures the Qur’an, “is Forgiving and Merciful: if He took them to task for the wrongs they have done, He would hasten the punishment on. They have an appointed time from which they will have no escape, [just like] the former communities We destroyed for doing wrong: We set an appointed time for their destruction.” (*Surah Al-Kahf*, verses 58-9)

In other words, the political, social and moral causes take time to produce effects. That is why the time-factor is taken into consideration before the Divine purpose and plan overtakes a people. It is clear from the above observations that the main causes of decline, disintegration and eventual demise of a people takes place gradually, step by step, as they slowly but surely begin to lose their sense of purpose, direction, fairness, justice and equality. This point requires serious thought and consideration from the Muslim historians especially in the context of the rapid rise and the subsequent decline of Islamic civilization. Why is this important? This is very important because there are too many examples in Islamic history where Muslims had wrought death, defeat, destruction and disaster on themselves by their failure to uphold the core principles and values of Islam including justice and fairness for the poor, weak and the defenceless. The Qur’anic warning to those who fail to live up to the high standards set by Divine Providence could not have been more clearer, “Say, He has power to send punishment on you from above or from under your very feet, or to divide you into discordant factions and make some taste the violence of others”. (*Surah Al-An’am*, verse 65) According to Ibn Abbas, who was one of the foremost early commentators of the Qur’an, the punishment from above refers to the tyranny of rulers and their cohorts, while chastisement from below refers to the violence and havoc created by those in the lower strata of the social ladder. The third form of punishment implied here is that the social and political unity of a people is destroyed so that they are divided into factions, thus becoming bitter enemies of each other, which, in turn, leads to their eventual disintegration and demise.

Additionally, according to the Qur’an, material progress including scientific and technological advancement minus moral development and spiritual elevation does not

in reality constitute progress and advancement. That is, material power and numerical supremacy in itself does not make a people morally or spiritually better or superior to other people unless material progress is combined with moral uprightness and spiritual development. Both material development and spiritual progress can co-exist, as was the case during the early period of Islamic history, and only sporadically thereafter. As such, material progress alone cannot prevent the decline and disintegration of a society or civilization. Likewise, total spiritual seclusion, leading to a complete detachment from reality, is not healthy either. The ability to forge a strong link between material power, social ethics and spirituality is the key to the development of a strong, healthy, and a just society and civilization.

Although eminent Muslim reformers like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, Shah Waliullah of Delhi and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan devoted their lives to bring about change and reform in order to reinvigorate Muslim societies, their valiant efforts achieved limited success. Why? Because these reformers endeavoured to revive Muslim societies from centuries of internal stagnation and decadence with no political or military support at all. They fought an uphill battle to restore the pride and prestige of the global Muslim community, and did so often on their own although for the ordinary Muslims, “essential Islam has always endured, regardless of the vagaries of history. It has endured as a daily, lived experience of faith in God’s power, benevolence, compassion, and mercy. With that faith, Muslims face the struggles of daily life. The effect of centuries of political conflict and the impression of spectacular criminal acts will no doubt take time to fade. But the effort of devout Muslims to reflect their faith in daily life continues, guided by revelation”. (*A Brief History of Islam*, p179)

It is also worth pointing out here that the Islamic concept of history is rather different from the modern Western interpretation of history as developed by historians like Oswald Spengler (author of *The Decline of the West*, 1954), Sir Arnold J Toynbee (author of *A Study of History*, 1956) and Karl Marx (co-author of the *Communist Manifesto*, 1888). The Islamic approach to history is based on a profound understanding and meditation on human nature, its potentialities and propensities, without ignoring the environmental factors or conditions in which our characters, personalities and psyche are formed and fortified, as we traverse in harmony with the march of time. By contrast, the modern Western philosophies of history, especially that of the Marxist slant dismisses the role played by human nature in the process of historical change. Nonetheless, a comprehensive study of Islamic and modern Western perspectives on history is indispensable for a proper and balanced understanding of our past so that we are able to face the challenges of the present, and move towards a bright and promising future for all, regardless of race, creed, colour, background or status.

Muhammad Mojlum Khan is a research scholar, literary critic and author of the widely acclaimed book, *The Muslim 100* (reprinted 2009), and *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal* (forthcoming); he is a Founding Director of *Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK*.