

The Problems of Teaching Islāmic History

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Islāmic history began as an oral history among the disciples (*Ṣaḥābah*) of Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. Whenever they met one another, it was their habit to ask questions about the latest happenings in the life of the Prophet and his instructions to members of the community (*Ummah*), and to transmit the information orally from person to person. This process of transmission of news and views about the Prophet and his activities was a daily occurrence in the life of the Muslim community of Makkah before the *Hijrah*, and in Madīnan society after the emigration of Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. This method of transmitting news, views and revelations received by the Prophet came to be known as the *ḥadīth* (pl. *aḥādīth*) or Traditions. Thus Islāmic history germinated in the oral transmission of the Prophet's ideas, activities and approbations during most of the first Islāmic century (seventh century CE). From oral Traditions, written versions were made by collectors of the Traditions. Thus, the idea of Islāmic history was born in the '*ḥadīth* paradigm' in early Islāmic society. By the term *ḥadīth* paradigm we imply the adoption of the methodology of *ḥadīth* by early Muslim historians. A *ḥadīth* has two basic parts, namely *isnād* (chain of narrators) and *matn* (lit. text, which referred to the saying, doing and approbation of the Prophet). Early Islāmic historians including al-Ṭabarī (d. 923 CE) have followed the methodology of the science of *ḥadīth* in collecting, sifting and accepting historical information. One basic element of a Tradition is *isnād* or chain of narrators, which traced back the report of the event to an eyewitness. Each transmitter of the information had to be a trustworthy person whose credibility depended on his reputation and character. The biographies of the transmitters of Traditions were known as *Asmā' al-rijāl* which preserved critical biographical accounts of each narrator of a saying of the Prophet and events in his life. The early Islāmic historians, following the example of the Traditionists (*muḥaddithūn*), prepared complete dossiers about the persons who narrated historical information. Thus the early Muslim historians adopted the methodology of the *ḥadīth* collectors in laying down the foundation of early Islāmic historiography. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Dūrī discussed the circumstances leading to the writing of history among the Arabs in his book, *Baḥth fī nash' at 'Ilm al-ta' rīkh 'ind al-'Arab*.¹

The raw material of Islāmic history was transmitted orally by the disciples of the Prophet to their contemporaries and to the next generation during the first Islāmic century. During the second Islāmic century written compilations of historical information and records were available in the form of reports of the battles of the Prophet (*Maghāzī*) and the details of his blessed life in the form of *Sīrah* (biography). The *Ṣaḥābah* were the first-generation Muslims, who were eyewitness reporters and transmitters of historical information.

We would search in vain for the origins of Arabic/Islāmic historiography in the pre-Islāmic Arabic poetry called 'the register of the Arabs' (*al-Shi'ru Dīwān al-'Arab*), or in the tribal genealogies (*Ansāb*) or in the ancient Yemenite folklore of the Himyarite Kings. These were minor factors in the formation of historical outlook of the Arabs before the advent of Islām. The birth of history in the Arabian society began with the public activities of Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. The knowledge of the Prophet's biography was regarded as sacred knowledge because frequent reference was made to the statements of the Prophet on religious practices and legal precepts. An early Islāmic scholar, Abu'l-Husain ibn Fāris (d. c. 1000 CE), stated emphatically that, "every Muslim ought to have a very thorough knowledge of the biography of Muhammad ﷺ in all its details." Moreover, we can get an idea of the importance of history in Islāmic civilisation from the following statement by an Andalusian Muslim scholar, Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Khamīs (d. 1239

CE), who was reported to have said, “Next to the *Qur’ān* and the *Sunnah*, the subject deserving of utmost attention is history and biography.” Imām al-Bukhārī (d. 870 CE), the most famous collector of Traditions, had a special knowledge of early Islāmic history. He used to sit near the pulpit of the Prophet’s Mosque at Madīnah and write his great history (*Ta’rīkh al-Kabīr*), a book of *Asmā’ al-rijāl* about the lives of early Muslims, and record the collection of the *Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* alternately during day and moonlit nights. He used to pray two *rak’ahs* of prayer after writing down a *ḥadīth* or a piece of historical information about the *Ṣaḥābah* sitting near the tomb of the Prophet. For Imām Bukhārī the writing of history and the *Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic Traditions) were of equal merit. Thus the history of Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ and his disciples was invested with an aura of sanctity in the early Islāmic period. According to the information collected and recorded by the Muslim historian al-Sakhawī (d. 1497 CE), Islāmic history was treated by some Muslim scholars as an essential subject, and its preservation and transmission were the collective duty of the Muslim community (*Fard Kifāyah*).²

The Arabic generic term for history is *ta’rīkh*, which literally means an era or a date. The introduction of the term *ta’rīkh* in Islāmic society coincided with the adoption of the Islāmic calendar after the *Hijrah* (lit. emigration) of Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ from Makkah to Madīnah. The Muslim leader responsible for the introduction of the Islāmic calendar or *ta’rīkh* was Khalīfah ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 644 CE), *raḍi Allāhu ‘anhu*, in the seventeenth year (638 CE) after the *Hijrah*.³ Sakhawī has reviewed the variety of historical writings in Islāmic civilisation in a treatise entitled *al-I’lān bi’l-tawbīkh li-man dhamma al-ta’rīkh* which literally means ‘An open denunciation of the adverse critics of history’.⁴ And the Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406 CE), among many other historians, has given us a clear definition of history as follows: “History refers to events that are peculiar to a particular age or race.”⁵ There are of course other definitions of history by Islāmic historians. For instance, the Turkish historian Tashkopruzadeh (d. 1561 CE) defined history as a branch of learning about various groups of people, their countries, laws and customs, handicrafts and professions and the genealogies of the people as well as their chronologies. He also described the scope of history as covering famous persons such as the prophets, saints, theologians, philosophers and physicians (*ḥukamā’*), kings and sultans⁶ and such like.

Although Muslim historians had a clear perception of history, it was not often that they tried to define the subject. In other words, definitions of history are rather rare in Islāmic scholarship.

The teaching of Islāmic history in Muslim countries today faces many problems arising from two contrasting systems of education. The dichotomy in the education system has given rise to different approaches to the teaching methods of Islāmic history. The two approaches may be described as the traditional and the modern. The traditional approach is associated with the *Madrasah* education system, wherein Islāmic history is treated as a branch of theology (*Uṣūl al-Dīn*). The books on history most commonly followed and recommended by the ‘*ulamā’* (Muslim theologians) are the *Sīrah Rasūl Allāh* (Biography of Muḥammad *Rasūl Allāh*) by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767 CE) in the recension of Ibn Hishām (d. 834 CE) and the *Ta’rīkh al-Khulafā’* (History of the Caliphs) by Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505 CE). Some *Madrasahs* also recommend Ahmad Amin’s (d. 1954 CE) popular history books, *Fajr al-Islām* (The dawn of Islām), *Ḍuḥā’l-Islām* (Forenoon of Islām) and *Zuhr al-Islām* (Afternoon of Islām). It was probably with the *Madrasah* approach to Islāmic history in view that some modern scholars have made the devastating criticism that “the Muslim view of early Islāmic history is static and unproductive.”⁷ Such a general criticism of Islāmic history, in our view, is not appropriate.

Although some *Madrasah* teachers and a few university lecturers recommend Suyūṭī’s *Ta’rīkh al-Khulafā’* as a reference work, it is hardly an ideal textbook, being full of

incorrect chronology and misinterpretations of events. This history book gives a brief outline of the history of the Caliphs from Abū Bakr (d. 634 CE) to ‘Alī (d. 660 CE), Umayyads (661 – 750 CE), ‘Abbasids (750 – 1258 CE) and the shadow Caliphs of the ‘Abbasid dynasty under the tutelage of the Mamluke sultans (1260 – 1516 CE) of Egypt up to the end of the 15th century CE. The book covered nine hundred years of the history of the Caliphs providing a bird’s eye view of the Islāmic state till the last years of the author’s life. This is a theologian’s manual of Islāmic history which did not make his students and readers good historians. For instance, Suyūṭī’s history shows the professional ‘*ulamā*’s proclivity to narrate anecdotes and cite undigested information as quotations. He covered the history of the Fāṭimids (909 – 1171 CE) and Umayyad Spain (756 – 1031 CE) in three pages only. The author of this history book lacked critical judgement on historical developments, provided insufficient and often inaccurate chronology of events relating to Islāmic conquests which were fully documented by historians such as al-Balādhurī (d. 892 CE) in his *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān*, and in the history of al-Ṭabarī. Among the traditional historians we also include Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 1348 CE), Ibn al-‘Imād al-Ḥanbalī (d. 1678 CE) and others, but Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa’l-Mulūk* (History of the Prophets and Kings) and Ibn al-Athīr’s (d. 1232 CE) *al-Kāmil fī l-Ta’rīkh* (The Perfect book of History) have not been so popular with the traditional ‘*ulamā*’. Incidentally, the entire corpus of *Ta’rīkh al-Rusul wa’l-Mulūk* has recently been translated into English by a team of Orientalists and Muslim scholars as the History of al-Ṭabarī⁸ (ed. by Yar-Shater, State University of New York Press) in thirty-eight volumes. The traditional approach to Islāmic history is as archaic as the *Madrasah* system of education in some countries. Ahmad Shalaby of Al-Azhar University in Cairo and his colleagues are recent protagonists of the traditional approach to Islāmic history. Shalaby largely adopted Suyūṭī’s approach to the subject. On the other hand, there is a modern approach to Islāmic history which is closely associated with the school of Orientalists. In most of the universities of the Muslim world the modern approach to Islāmic history is now practised. Furthermore, the work of the Orientalists and that of Western historians of the Muslim countries has contributed to the introduction of Islāmic History as a subject in some European and American universities. The Orientalists’ approach to Eastern knowledge in general and to that of Islāmic history in particular is based on oriental classics. The Orientalists rely on a philological approach to the old historical, literary or religious texts of the Orient. Although Orientalism is in decline, some of their books are used as reference material for Islāmic and Middle Eastern history in many parts of the Muslim world.

During the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, the Islāmic peoples were in political decline and many parts of the Islāmic world were colonised by European powers such as Great Britain and France. Colonialism provided an opportunity for Europeans to come into close contact with the Muslims of Asia and Africa. While the Christian missionaries were busy with efforts to conquer Muslim souls, and colonial entrepreneurs were busy robbing the Muslim nations of their natural and cultural resources, there arose a group of Western scholars who learnt the Oriental languages as a key to understanding the Orient. These European scholars who thrived under European colonialism and thereafter, were known as Orientalists. A brief digression on Orientalism may be in order now. In a recent publication on Orientalism, Edward Said defined the concept and function of the Orientalists: “Anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the Orient – and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian or philologist – each in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism.”⁹ From the point of view of this Arab critic, “Orientalism is a style of thought, based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident.” Moreover, the author says that Orientalism

has a political purpose “for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.”

Bernard Lewis, in one of his most interesting papers, explained that there was a link between Western colonialism and the rise of Orientalism.¹⁰ The Orientalists usually studied oriental history, religion and classics and became expert on oriental subjects. They also became interested in Islāmic history, and tried to interpret the history of the Islāmic *Ummah* (global Islāmic community) according to Western concepts and interests. A combination of motives (colonial, diplomatic, commercial and intellectual) provided incentives for Western powers to open centres of Oriental Studies at various colleges, universities and institutes. Gradually, Islāmic Studies in general and Islāmic history in particular were studied critically by many European professors and specialists, who gained well-deserved recognition for their outstanding contributions to different fields of Oriental Studies.

Lewis also explained that Orientalism may have begun as a colonial enterprise but it ended up on the academic agenda of a number of universities. Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Czarist Russia provided some of the oldest centres of Oriental Studies in Europe. For instance, France established *École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes* in Paris in 1795 CE, to train interpreters for its Levant Service; it also trained officials for diplomatic and military service at a later date. This was the beginning of teaching of oriental languages such as Arabic, Turkish and Persian in France. Czar Alexander I of Russia (d. 1825 CE) founded a chair of oriental history and geography at the University of St. Petersburg in 1804 CE. This was followed by other Russian centres to teach Arabic, Turkish and Persian languages and even Islāmic history. The Southern part of Czarist Russia had a large Muslim population, hence chairs of Islāmic and Turkish studies were opened in many universities in the USSR during the twentieth century CE. There are now many chairs of Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Universities of London, Oxford, Cambridge, Manchester, Exeter, St. Andrews and Edinburgh of Britain, Sorbonne in Paris, the University of Rome, the University of Leiden, and a large number of American universities such as Chicago, Harvard, Princeton, Los Angeles, Connecticut and Yale.

According to recent surveys on the subject by Albert Hourani (d. 1993 CE), Islāmic history is taught in at least twenty universities in Western Europe, twenty universities in North America and another twenty universities in the Middle East and North Africa.¹¹ There are at least thirty professors who can devote their full attention to Islāmic history in America; and another fifteen to twenty teachers each in Britain, France and Germany. Similar numbers are found in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Israel and so on.

Unfortunately, Hourani’s report on Islāmic history does not take into account the status of Islāmic history in South Asian countries (with a Muslim population of nearly 400 million) such as Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, and the South-East Asian universities of Malaysia, Indonesia and Brunei Darussalam. There are at least forty professors and lecturers involved in teaching Islāmic history in those countries. However, Islāmic history in the Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi contexts not only includes the history of the caliphs and sultans of the Middle East but also the history of local and national Muslim dynasties. In South-East Asia, Islāmic history of the Middle East is taught in the Departments of Islāmic Studies of the University of Malaya, the Faculty of Islāmic Studies at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia) and in the Department of History of Brunei University. The emphasis of Islāmic history in South-East Asian countries is on the classical period of Islāmic history, from the era of the Prophet to the fall of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate. The recent trend in history teaching in regional universities emphasises the history of the Association of the South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN). According to Professor Hourani’s report, there are some two to three hundred teachers, lecturers and Professors of Islāmic history in the world, excluding

South and South-east Asian universities. I add to his figure at least forty more teaching Islāmic history at colleges and universities of Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei and so on. The total number of Islāmic historians today may be about 350. In spite of this, the state of Islāmic history is said to be at least a century behind the development of European history as an academic discipline. Islāmic history needs more full time researchers, teachers and professors to advance the subject to a higher standard of professionalism.

In the course of the twentieth century CE Western methods of historical research have been applied to the study of Islāmic history. Due to the involvement of Orientalists in the study of Islāmic history, there have been additions to the traditional sources of the subject. For instance, the traditional approach to the study of Islāmic history was to rely almost exclusively on the history books written by early Muslim historians. However, the situation is not the same now. The Islāmic historians trained by Orientalists have come to realise that the classical books on *ta'rikh* are not adequate in themselves for the study of any period of Islāmic history. One has to take into account all the literary, geographical, religious and historical sources of any period to achieve a proper understanding of its history. Moreover, the Orientalists have emphasised that we should not rely on the written sources only, but must also study the 'other sources' of Islāmic history, among them the inscriptions written on stone and metal objects such as coins, medals, and other artefacts, and archival sources of all kinds including papyrus documents found in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East. Thus, an Islāmic historian today has to take into account numismatic evidence, archival records, epigraphic sources, contemporary diplomatic documents, which may have been preserved in countries outside the Middle East, unpublished manuscripts which may be preserved in any library in the world, and so on. In the case of Islāmic cities and monuments, new archaeological findings and reports have been made available recently to the Islāmic historian. There are also many new research tools for Islāmic history available today such as bibliographies including *Index Islamicus*, *Index Iranicus*, *Index Arabicus*, *Studies on early Islāmic papyri*, and all publications and sources covered in the book, *Historians of the Middle East*.¹² Islāmic history is emerging as a newly developed discipline. It is fair to say that the Orientalists have widened the scope of inquiry of Islāmic history. For instance, R. S. Humphreys has recently published a book entitled *Islāmic History: A framework for inquiry* which evaluates some significant modern writings on various aspects of the subject.

Muslims in general take the term Islāmic history for granted. Muslim intellectuals of former generations have never defined the subject or explained its content. Hence Islāmic history, like the concept of history itself, remains an undefined discipline. Although it is highly probable that Muslims in the past used the term *ta'rikh* in the sense of Islāmic history, they also applied it to the general concept of history. However, the modern concept of Islāmic history, in the Orientalist sense, is something more than what the Muslims understood by *ta'rikh*. The definition of Islāmic history today is a matter of some complexity. Hence R. S. Humphreys admits, "Islāmic history presents severe challenges even to an experienced specialist. Many of these are technical in nature, e.g. the multitude of languages needed to read both sources and modern scholarship, the vast number of major texts still in manuscript, the poor organisation of libraries and archives. More important, however, is the difficulty of grasping the subject as a whole, of developing the clear sense of the broad themes and concepts through which this sprawling and underdeveloped field of study can be bound together."¹³ To understand the entire field of Islāmic history becomes an illusory goal. Although the Orientalists are nowadays much criticised and even demonised by some Arab scholars, such as 'Abd al-Laṭīf Tibāwī (d. 1981 CE) and Edward Said, their criticism is not specially focused on the field of Islāmic history. Therefore, the contributions of the Orientalists towards the expansion of the

field of Islāmic history can still be seen as useful. The way Islāmic history is taught depends largely on the professional expertise of individual teachers and professors. This situation gives the professors an opportunity to plan their syllabus according to the personnel and their sources at the disposal of institutions. However, in the West, the term Islāmic history may be used to cover any one of the following: (i) the history of the early Islāmic preaching (*da'wah*) and the founding of the Islāmic State, the territorial conquests of the Muslims and the expansion of the Islāmic state of Madinah into an Islāmic empire under the rule of the *Khalīfahs*; (ii) the history of the Arabs after the advent of Islām and of the Middle Eastern states; (iii) the history of the Islāmic religion and the achievements of Muslims in the fields of science, philosophy and literature; and (iv) the general history of the Islāmic peoples as well as their beliefs and dominant institutions.¹⁴ These are the four different approaches to Islāmic history in Western universities.

Recent writings on Islāmic history by Muslim writers from South Asia include: Abdul Hamid Siddiqi's (d. 1978 CE) *An Islāmic concept of history*¹⁵; Syed Ali Ashraf's *The Qur'ānic concept of History*¹⁶; Anis Ahmad's *Reorientation of Islāmic history*¹⁷; Ahmed Hasan Dani's *A Typology of Muslim Historiography* from the perspective of Islāmic philosophy of history¹⁸; and Qasim Hassan's *Some problems relating to the study of Islāmic civilisation*.¹⁹

All these essays were published during the last quarter of the twentieth century at a time when debates on Orientalism and Islāmic History were taking place elsewhere in the academia. Among these writers, Qasim Hassan, Anis Ahmad and Abdul Hamid Siddiqi were more involved in theology than history and their ideas of history are flawed, lacking in originality. Ahmed Hasan Dani and Syed Ali Ashraf, on the other hand, raised some points which are not directly relevant to Islāmic history although they subscribed to a philosophy of history of their own.

Ahmed Hasan Dani's statement on history is not only confusing but misleading in many respects. He says, "Thus from the Holy *Qur'ān* it is possible to derive the philosophy of history that can enlighten man in his effort to develop historical knowledge."²⁰ He is a well-known Muslim scholar who includes within the scope of his essay a brief reference to the 'creation myth', epistemology, eschatology and the travelogues of Abū Raiḥān al-Bīrūnī (d. 1051 CE) and Ibn Baṭṭūṭah (d. 1369 CE), as well as the so-called 'geographical history' of *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-mamālik* by Ibn Khurdadhbīh (d. 846 CE). It is hard to sympathise with the writer's superficial view of 'geographical history'; the 'road-books' (*Masālik*) are indeed sources for the study of economic geography of the 'Abbāsīd Empire, but not any kind of 'geographical history' as he assumes. It would have been helpful if Ahmed Dani had studied the original Arabic sources of Islāmic history. I suspect that he has based his statement on an English translation of Ibn Khurdadhbīh's 'road-book'. His philosophy of history was summed up in the following sentence: "The role of the individual in society is the deciding factor in history." Although Dani's statement is not original, still it is an echo of a certain idea of Aristotle (d. 322 BC) who allegedly said, "History is an account of what an individual human being has done and suffered",²¹ yet Dani must be aware of the view of other historians that history is not primarily concerned with any individual life, but is more interested in the collective life of the community and public events in society. Moreover, it is generally held that the study of an individual life is essentially the subject-matter of biography and not of history. There are many Muslim scholars who have been misled by this so-called philosophy of history. In fact, the latest view on the subject is that such a philosophy of history is neither philosophy nor history.

Syed Ali Ashraf's seminar paper on *The Qur'ānic Concept of History* is an appreciation and recognition of Abdul Hamid Siddiqi's earlier work on the subject. Ali Ashraf

emphasised two points. First, he thinks that history has an ethical purpose. Mankind should learn from the lessons of ancient nations which perished for violating God's message and spreading tyranny and injustice in human society. In fact, the history of a nation or nations may have many lessons for all of us. The Holy *Qur'ān* alludes to the history of many ancient peoples like Noah's folk, Lot's folk, Abraham's folk and the Ād, Thamūd,²² etc. and reminds us about the fate of nations which were destroyed in the past for violating God's commandments and forgetting divine revelations. The rise and fall of nations depend on their moral standard as ordained by God. Thus history and morality are intertwined. But an attempt to teach history for the sole purpose of deducing moral lessons for mankind would be a change, if not novelty, in the teaching of history. It would result in a separate kind of history, which we could call ethicohistory. Such an approach would make history an adjunct to theology and metaphysics.

Secondly, he held an unusual view on the concept of time which is somehow linked with a theory of long-range periodisation of history. As far as periodisation is concerned he thinks that there are three broad periods in world history. The first period extends from God's creation of the prototypes of mankind in the shapes of Adam and Eve and their descendants to the era of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ. This ancient period of history covered the Prophets and patriarchs – from Adam to Muḥammad (including Noah, Moses, Abraham and Jesus, peace be upon them). This is a vast subject which was covered in the first nine volumes of the translation of the *History of al-Ṭabarī*. The second (middle) period of history, according to the same author, begins with the Righteous Caliphs (*Khulafā' al-Rāshidīn*) till the regeneration of mankind after the second coming of Jesus ('*alaihi al-Salām*'). However, history only deals with the past and does not include the future. The third period will begin with mankind's gradual decline and downfall through loss of consciousness of spiritual and moral values, and the ultimate destruction of the entire creation by God. This part of periodisation is part of eschatology that is beyond the scope of history.

Periodisation or the division of history into specific periods is also an issue about which Muslim scholars are not quite sure of. Unlike the above theory, the periodisation of Islāmic history, in practice, begins with the life of the Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ, followed by the history of the *Khulafā' al-Rāshidīn*, followed by the Umayyads, 'Abbasids, Mamluks and Ottomans and their successor-states, etc. Such a division of Islāmic history into broad periods is essentially a dynastic approach²³ to history which assumes that personalities of rulers produced new characteristics in each period of history. Should we stick to this approach or change it to a cultural approach, or an area study approach? If the Muslim historians are serious about the future of Islāmic history as an academic discipline, they have to produce new discourse on the nature, objective, parameter and structure of Islāmic history. There is a need for much research and coordination of efforts among Muslim historians and various interested groups of academic scholars to promote Islāmic history as a subject of high standard and academic excellence.

As a conclusion to this discussion of Islāmic history as an academic discipline, it is necessary to consider the thought of some Muslim scholars of the twentieth century. Some believe that history is a source of nationalism. Their argument in favour of teaching history amounts to this: we need history as a source and justification for our nationalism. This attitude has affected not only the writings but also the teaching and interpretation of history in some Arab and Muslim countries where history is recast to cover the story of the nation-state. Nationalists have often idolised personalities or highlighted events in their national history with emotion and exaggeration. On the whole, nationalist historiography tends to favour a selective approach, recording some events of the nation's past and omitting others. Such an attitude is contrary to historical fact. Anwar G. Chejne (d. c. 1981 CE) drew the attention of his readers to the Syrian government's decree of 30

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May 1947 CE regarding the purpose of teaching history: “to strengthen the nationalist and patriotic sentiments in the hearts of the people ... because the knowledge of the nation’s past is one of the most important incentives to patriotic behaviour.” However, nationalism is not compatible with the universal message of Islām. Islāmic history is essentially an international history of the Islāmic community (*Ummah*). It is not conceived as an ethnic or racial history. This is one of the problems of the titles and interpretations of some books which, surprisingly, cover, partly or fully, the general field of Islāmic history, such as Syed Ameer Ali’s (d. 1928 CE) *A short history of the Saracens*, P. K. Hitti’s *History of the Arabs*, Bernard Lewis’ summary of *The Arabs in History* and Albert Hourani’s *A History of the Arab Peoples*. The authors of these books tend to make early Islāmic history an exclusively Arab affair. Demographically, the Arabs today hardly constitute 25% of all the Islāmic peoples.

On the other hand, there are few printed works that can effectively serve the purpose of textbooks of Islāmic history. Among the available books one could mention Carl Brockelmann’s (d. 1956 CE) balanced introduction to Islāmic history, entitled *History of the Islāmic Peoples*, which gives a vivid account of the Islāmic community from the pre-Islāmic period till the post-Ottoman era. The author covered not only political history but also cultural life of the various Muslim communities. The work embodies some good features of Western scholarship on Islāmic history written before the Second World War. *The Venture of Islām: Conscience and History in a World Civilisation* is a three-volume study of Islāmic religious and cultural history by Marshall G. S. Hodgson (d. 1968 CE), an American Quaker historian. The author takes a sociological approach to the religious and cultural history of the Muslims. Finally, we may refer to the two volumes of *Islāmic History: A New Interpretation* by M. A. Shaban (d. 1992 CE). The author’s claim to a ‘new interpretation’ of Islāmic history rests on his careful reading between the lines of the Arabic texts of the histories of Ṭabarī and Ibn al-Athīr, and also a refutation of misinterpretations by the Orientalists. By common consent, Shaban’s first volume of *Islāmic History: A New Interpretation* (600 – 750 CE) (Cambridge University Press, 1971 CE) is, in many ways, the best one-volume introduction to early Islāmic history. The second volume of *Islāmic History: A New Interpretation* (750 – 1055 CE) covers early ‘Abbāsīd history till the end of the Buwayhid amirate and the Fāṭimid Khalifate. Although the second volume of Shaban’s Islāmic history has new insights, it is not as original as the first volume. Among the twentieth century CE learned journals which have been well known for publishing research articles on Islāmic history, we should mention the *Islāmic Culture* (1927 – 1995 CE) published by the Dā’irat al-Ma’ārif al-Osmania, in Hyderabad Deccan, Andhra Pradesh, India. The latest edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islām* which is being published (1960 – 1996 CE) (eight volumes in print) by E. J. Brill, Leiden, is also an important reference work for the study of Islāmic history and civilisation. It publishes short scholarly articles written by Orientalists as well as Muslim contributors covering the entire period of Islāmic history.

I was impressed by a statement issued by the modern Turkish historian, Halil Inalcik, about the merit of Islāmic history as a unifying factor of the *Ummah*. He wrote in 1953, “In my opinion, historical studies will form a strong foundation for the real cultural movements in Islāmic countries today. The objective study of Islāmic history with Western methodology will bring about general progress in all Islāmic learning. Certain Islāmic fundamentals such as the *Qur’ān*, *Sharī’ah*, and the Islāmic institutions have provided the unity of Islām’s history and have played a role as the most important factor throughout the history of all Islāmic peoples. Thus, the history of any one Islāmic country cannot be understood unless it is studied in the general framework of Islāmic history.”²⁴

This is indeed a very interesting view of the role of Islāmic history within the broader context of the Islāmic community. It will probably be respected for years. But there is a

problem which may prevent Muslims of different backgrounds from accepting this view in its entirety. The idea of accepting Western epistemology unreservedly is a sensitive issue for conservative Muslims. Inalcik's suggestion that we study Islāmic history according to Western methodology will not be easy to swallow for many Islāmic historians, for those who would like to teach Islāmic history within the framework of Islāmic epistemology. Muslims may continue to resist any suggestion of accepting Western methodology in the pursuit of Islāmic history. The satisfactory resolution of this thorny issue may have to be left in the hands of the next generation of Islāmic historians.

It is essential for Islāmic historians to have a clear perception²⁵ of their subject, and to contribute towards teaching as well as research. Islāmic history binds and links the different segments of the entire Islāmic community to a common origin and heritage. All the nation-states of Muslims have their local and national history, but their identity as Muslims is rooted in Islāmic history. At some point in history Islām came to different parts of the Muslim world either through military conquests by Arabs, Persians, Turks, Berbers, Indians²⁶ and the Malays and other ethnic groups of Muslims, or through proselytisation by Muslim missionaries, preachers and emigrants. Islāmic history is like a thread that weaves all parts of the *Ummah* into a tapestry. As *Allāh* has beautifully said, Muslims are like a 'solid structure'.²⁷ The different parts of the Islāmic *Ummah*, the global Muslim community, are like bricks in that structure. Islāmic history is the collective memory of all the Muslim nations and groups. It is the record of our civilisation. Muslims should preserve the sources of their history and constantly add new chapters to it with objectivity and impartiality.

The historian Ibn al-Athīr²⁸ recognised many benefits, this worldly as well as otherworldly, to be derived from reading history. It reminded the people about the past and the transitoriness of human life. It provided examples of good rulers who were praised and wicked kings who were despised and condemned. History demonstrated the consequences of tyranny which ruined countries and civilisations, inflicting sufferings to people and causing losses of lives and property and perpetuating injustice and conflicts. History also supplies beneficial experiences from the past of mankind, and enriches human intellect and wisdom. Thus history teaches by past examples of individuals and nations. On the other hand, the goal of history, according to the Muslim scholar al-Sakhawī, is to seek God's kindness through good deeds. This is an indication of the serious intent and sacred duty of Muslim historians to investigate and record the truth, without bias or prejudice, regarding the affairs of humankind. This altruistic concept of 'the goal of history' originated in the Islāmic civilisation only a generation or so after the death of the great Muslim historian Ibn Khaldūn who wrote a cyclical theory of history and the concept of group solidarity (*'aṣabīyah*). Islāmic history mirrors the past of the Islāmic community and points to the right course of action, knowing the pitfalls of our forebears to avoid disasters and catastrophes, to pursue the right course of action along the straight path and thus ensure our survival with dignity, achieving success and triumphs.

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