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Understanding the Qur'ān in the Light of Historical Change

ABDUL KABIR HUSSAIN SOLIHU

Introduction

'History', in its classic usage, refers to the actual happening of the past or the narration of that happening.¹ A narrative account of a historical event is posterior to the act of understanding, simply because to give an account of an event presupposes a prior understanding of it. It is history in the first sense rather than the second that is primarily associated with the process of understanding.

Of all happenings, however, the subject-matter of history is confined to human thoughts and actions. It includes all those things which can be evaluated according to particular standards, i.e. as beneficial or harmful, good or bad, satisfactory or unsatisfactory. Many things in these categories are subject to change. Political economies, norms of sexual behaviour, structure of family and society, acts of hostility and conciliation, and the myriad aspects pertaining to arts, science and religion, to conduct and morality, and the numerous modes of transaction, commerce, communication, and transportation undergo a steady change so much so that it is said with much justification that "change is the only constant in life".²

That the physical world could be part of the subject-matter of history has been disputed on the grounds that it could not be re-enacted in the historian's mind.³ However, the development of human thought and action in a given context cannot be dissociated entirely from its physical surroundings. It has been convincingly demonstrated how the general aspects of nature, such as climate, food, soil, etc., have, through the faculties of perception, exercised a great impact on the association of ideas, stirring the imagination and giving

¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans., J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publication, 1956), 60.

² Graeme Donald Snooks, *The Laws of History* (London: Routledge, 1998), 1.

³ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 302.

rise to different habits in the course of human history.⁴ Human beings are thus inextricably related to the natural world. From this perspective, 'historical change' will be viewed in this paper as an inclusive concept that refers to alterations in various social phenomena and the natural world.

Looking at history from that wide perspective, we observe many things undergoing change, but not all of them have proved to be satisfactory. Some have brought an ecstasy of delight and success while others have led to great distress and devastation. To understand the Qur'ān in such a fluctuating context, several questions immediately come to mind. Does the Qur'ān recognise the phenomenon of change at all? If it does, then how can we understand the Infinite (that is, the Qur'ān) in the light of the finite (that is, history)? Is the phenomenon itself real? If it is, should we let our understanding change as history changes? Or rather, should we reject the reality of the change so that our understanding may remain impervious vicissitudes of history. Alternatively, should we deny any link between change and understanding? In short, which course should we follow and how? These are the questions that this paper aims to address.

In addressing these questions, we shall have recourse to the inductive method. Several Qur'ānic verses concerning change in human organisation and the physical world and its relationship with our understanding will be examined in order to extrapolate from the Qur'ān the nature of understanding within the phenomenon of change.⁵ It is hoped that this will guide us to work out a general criterion that could be workable in concrete human social organisations in the course of historical change.

Historical change is not considered in the Qur'ān as an exclusive basis of, but as an aid to the correct understanding of the meaning of the Qur'ān. Otherwise, historical events and phenomena are themselves interpreted in the light of the immutable principles of change enunciated in the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, both the interpretation of texts and the interpretation of events fall under the category of hermeneutical inquiry.⁶

⁴ See, for example, Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn*, ed., 'Alī 'Abd al-Wāhid Wāfi (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 1979), 1: 387–397; *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans., Franz Rosenthal (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 1: 167–183; Henry Thomas Buckle, "History and the Operation of Universal Laws" in *Theories of History*, ed., Patrick Gardiner (New York: The Free Press, 1959), 119–123.

⁵ It may be noted that in quoting the English translation of the Qur'ānic verses we have mainly depended upon two translations of the Qur'ān. These are Abdullah Yusuf Ali's *The Holy Qur'ān: Text, Translation and Commentary* (Lahore: Ashraf, 1983) and Muhammad Asad's *The Message of the Qur'ān* (Gibraltar: Dār al-Andalus, 1984).

⁶ 'Hermeneutics' is defined as "the science of reflecting on how a word or an event in a past time and culture may be understood and become existentially meaningful in our present situation". See Carl Braaten, *History of Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 131; or as

Before an exposition of the nature of historical change and how it may affect our understanding of the Qur'ān, it is pertinent to first examine the Qur'ānic view of, and attitude towards, change in history. This will assist us to know how the Qur'ān itself can be understood within the parameters of historical change. Such an examination, however, is apparently vulnerable to either of two charges. To single out the non-historical aspects of the Qur'ān may be charged with attempting to portray the Qur'ān as stagnant, lacking the sequential nature of history. On the other hand, reading the Qur'ān from an historical perspective may be seen as an attempt to confine its universal message to a particular period in history. To see the Qur'ān in its right perspective, however, it would be necessary to concern ourselves with both the aspects. This will be demonstrated in what follows.

The Qur'ānic View of Change in History

The Qur'ān has the distinction of being God's revelation which God Himself preserved in its totality, as is confirmed by the Qur'ān itself (15: 9; 41: 42). From generation after generation, Muslims have taken steps to preserve the text of the Qur'ān and maintain its authenticity. No matter how dramatically history might have changed, not a single verse of the Qur'ān was tampered with; that is, nothing was added to, or taken away from or altered in the original text of the Qur'ān. Thus, at the level of the form and structure of the Qur'ān, historical change is out of the question.

At the level of understanding, however, the picture is somewhat different. Unlike the form of the Qur'ān, which is definitive, its meaning is liable to undergo change. It is an established fact that our faculty of understanding is channelled partly through our senses-perception of our surroundings, and that is dynamic and subject to change. It follows that the change in the sense-perception of the world around us will impart some change in our understanding as well. Unless the outer world is negated, it continues to act as a stimulus to our understanding. As will be discussed later, the Qur'ān regards the alteration in the physical world as one of the bases for a proper understanding.

Also in the concept of *naskh* (abrogation) one can discern the Qur'ānic view of change of meaning. Based on this doctrine, we have instances where an earlier verse came to convey a certain meaning which, in due course, and due to certain changes in circumstance, was superseded by another verse with a

simply as "the study of the methodological principles of interpretations and explanation". See entry "hermeneutics" in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of English Language Unabridged* (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, 1993).

different meaning (see, for instance, Qur'an 2: 106; 16: 101-102). This construction of *al-naskh* (abrogation) resonates its classical definition, which is "the suspension or replacement of one *sharī'ah* ruling by another, provided that the latter is a subsequent ruling".⁷ This definition, however, has been disputed by some Muslim jurists on the grounds that it did not represent the Qur'anic usage of the term. Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī (d. 790/1388) sorted out the four senses of the term common to the early Muslim generations. They are, first, the clarification of a general or an ambiguous statement contained in a preceding verse; second, the particularisation of the meaning of a former general verse; third, restriction of the meaning of an inclusive/broad verse revealed earlier; and fourth, the suspension of a former *sharī'ah* ruling by a later one.⁸ While the first sense of *al-naskh* may not represent the actuality of meaning-change, the last three senses do indicate that a verse revealed later supplemented or supplanted one revealed earlier.

Moreover, the Qur'an mentions that the Words of God are inexhaustible:

Say: If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the words of my Lord, sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord, even if We added another ocean like it, for its aid (Qur'an 18: 109).

And if all the trees on earth were pens and the ocean (were ink), with seven oceans behind it to add to its (supply), yet would not the words of Allāh be exhausted (in the writing): for Allāh is Exalted in power, full of Wisdom (Qur'an 31: 27).

Although the phrase "*kalimāt rabbī*" (the words of my Sustainer) or "*kalimāt Allāh*" (the words of Allah) can refer to *Umm al-Kitāb* (the archetype of Books) from which the Qur'an was derived, it can also mean the words of the Qur'an themselves (2: 75; 9: 6; 48: 15) or their actualisation and meaning (7: 137).⁹ But since the *āyāt* of the Qur'an are already completed, *kalimāt* presumably refer to the meaning of the Qur'an. In addition, there are two other verses that indicate that the *āyāt* or the signs of Allāh will continue to be unveiled through the passage of time:

And say: "Praise be to Allāh, Who will soon show you His Signs, so that ye shall know them; and thy Lord is not unmindful of all that ye do" (27: 93).

⁷ Muḥammad 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Manāwī, *al-Tawqīf 'alā Mubimmāt al-Ta'arīf*, ed., Muḥammad Riḍwān (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1410 AH), 150, 697.

⁸ Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt*, ed., 'Abd Allāh Darāz (Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), 3: 18.

⁹ "*Kalimāt rabbika*" here refers to the preceding sentence on God's fulfilment of His promise by making the Children of Israel the inheritors of the land.

Soon will We show them Our Signs in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth (41: 53).

These verses obviously cannot refer to the past, because the past is already done. Even a new insight that may be obtained through reflection upon a historical vestige is not an action of the past but a process of the present or the future. How, then, could a new meaning be obtained if all the possible meanings had been exhausted in the past? Compared to the past, the future is pregnant with unpredictable possibilities by which our understanding of the Qur'ān should interact. In Islam, both the natural world and the Qur'ān emanate from the same source and both complement one another. Indeed, the more one learns about human history and the natural world, the better one grasps the meaning of the Qur'ān.

Before proceeding to explain how the Qur'ān accounts for historical change, it is pertinent to acquaint ourselves with some Qur'ānic ideas pertaining to 'time', 'change' and 'development', each of which plays an important role in our understanding. As we shall see, the Qur'ān recognises the reality of change in regard to some things and denies it in regard to others; it also recognises in regard to some things at a certain level and denies it in regard to the same things at a different level.

Some parts that recognise change concern the creation of humankind and the physical world. The creation and formation of humankind is said to have gone through stages. Adam was created from 'dust'. The dust was transformed to a 'sounding clay' and then to 'mud moulded into shape'. By virtue of God's *rūḥ* (spirit) that was breathed into it, Adam became a living creature (Qur'ān 15: 26). Commenting on these Qur'ānic references to the creation of Adam, Muhammad Asad observes that these terms refer to various organic and inorganic substances as well as to the continuous transmutation of those substances.¹⁰

Like the creation of Adam, human procreation also undergoes a steady development. It starts with a drop of sperm; the sperm then develops into a clot of congealed blood, to a lump (foetus), and to bones; the bones are then clothed with flesh (Qur'ān 23: 12-14). Having been a full creation, the foetus remains in the womb for an appointed term, after which it is born as an infant. From infancy it might live to reach maturity and even to old age and senility or it might be short-lived. In either case, it would die and then be resurrected on the Doomsday. (See Qur'ān 22: 5 and 40: 67).

Before the creation of the human, the natural world was subject to mutation and development from one stage to another. The Qur'ān tells us that

¹⁰ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān*, 520, n. 4.

the heaven and earth were *ratqan* (joined together) before they were cloven asunder by the Divine command (Qur'ān 21: 30). Elaborating it further, it states that the natural world was created in six (celestial) days (or aeons):¹¹ earth in two days, heaven in two days, and all that is therein also in two days (Qur'ān 41: 9–12; 50: 38). Moreover, there are many other 'time' indicators: *fajr* (dawn), *ṣubḥ* (morning), *duḥā* (forenoon), *zubr* (afternoon), *masā'*, *'ishā'* (evening) *layl* (night), *nabār* (daylight), *ghuduww* (early mornings), *āṣāl* (later evenings), *ams* (yesterday), *yawm* (today), *ghadan* (tomorrow), *sā'ah* (a short while), *shahr* (month), *sanah* (year), *waqt* (time), *ḥīn* (period, time) *amad* (period, span of time), *ajal* (term, period). As a whole, three progressive periods can be discerned: first, the time when there was no human being on earth; second, the time when the human existed and still continues to exist; and third, the time he/she will cease to exist, and then be transformed into another form of creation (in the Hereafter). This alteration in the physical world and successive stages in human creation and development are regarded as stimulus to a proper understanding (Qur'ān 3: 190; 10: 6 and 71: 13–14 respectively). In fact, what was classically expounded by theologians as 'cosmological argument' to demonstrate the existence of God¹² was largely drawn from the changing and moving objects of the universe.

However, all these time indicator words are considered as changing only when they are seen from a particular standpoint; otherwise, they themselves are not subject to change. To say that the 'day' of those who lived before us is different from our 'day', is true only when we see it from, or compare it to, our own context. It may even be argued that the distinction between 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow' is not real. For example, for one who died today, yesterday would be his past while tomorrow his future. By contrast, for him who died yesterday, both today and tomorrow would be his future while for him who will die tomorrow, both today and yesterday would be his past. It all depends on the vantage point of the observer. In essence, we have only 'one day' and that 'day' has been given different names or dates depending on the observer's standpoint. The only 'Morrow' proper is the Hereafter (Qur'ān

¹¹ Muhammad Asad prefers to interpret the term *yawm* as "aeon" to indicate a long but definite time-lapse during which the universe was created. See *ibid.*, 211 (n. 43); 731 (n. 7).

¹² In Islam, see Abū Bakr Muḥammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī, *al-Dalā'il*, ed., 'Imād al-Dīn Aḥmad Ḥaydar (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Kutub al-Thaqāfiyyah, 1987), 43; Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn 'Umar al-Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1985), 23: 88. In Christianity, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans., Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1981), 1: 13–14. In Judaism, see Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans., Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 2: 235–239.

59: 18) when the whole system of this world will be transformed into a different type (Qur'ān 14: 48).

As has been shown above, the alteration of time is recognised when those terms are seen in their particulars and compared one to another; when they are seen as a whole, however, they are portrayed as a single phenomenon and subsumed under the word *al-dunyā* (this world). This implies that whatever changes occur in history — the alternation of day and night, month and year, yesterday, today and tomorrow — they are not permanent. It also implies that when these words are seen from a different level of existence, the way we count it may be different. The Qur'ān reports that the unbelievers, when asked in the Hereafter about their long life-span on earth, will count it as a day or a half-day (23: 112–114; 20: 103–104). It is also stated that 'one day' at a certain level of existence is equivalent to one thousand years and at another level, fifty thousand years (see Qur'ān 32: 5 and 70: 4 respectively). In a similar manner, modern physics has demonstrated through what is called "time-dilation" that the farther one goes away from this earth and gets closer to the speed of light, the slower time becomes from the viewpoint of an inertial observer.¹³ That is to say, time is not absolute but relative to a frame of reference. The implication of this is that when history is seen in its particulars, the changes happening within it are acknowledged, but when it is seen as a whole, it is considered as one single entity that does not change. It all depends on the frame of reference from which an assessment is made.

A similar double expression of meaning can be discerned in the Qur'ānic notion of revelation in history. The Qur'ān confirms that God sent a succession of messengers to many nations some of whom are mentioned in the Qur'ān while others are not (4: 163–164; 40: 78). The existence of different *sharā'i'* is a recognition of this development taking place across time and space. Yet the Qur'ān consistently maintains that the revelations brought by these messengers are from the same origin and that they are the same in their essence. No true prophet ever called others to worship him or to worship other gods besides the One True God, known in the Qur'ān as "Allāh". To be just, to be faithful, to be steadfast, to be righteous, to do good to others and to give alms to the needy, to respect one's parents; not to kill an innocent soul, not to cheat, not to lie, not to steal, and not to spread mischief on earth, are among the primordial ethical virtues which have never changed since time immemorial. Based on this, the Qur'ān assigns to itself, in its relation to the earlier revealed books, the double task of "confirmation" — by preserving those well-established fundamentals, and "preponderance" — by correcting and

¹³ John R. Taylor and Chris D. Zafiratos, *Modern Physics for Scientists and Engineers* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1991), 25–26.

restoring those corrupted principles back to their natural order (Qur'ān 5: 48).¹⁴ Because of this continuity in the chain of messages and messengers, the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) was to double-check from the then reliable sources whether there had ever been a true deity other than Allāh, the Most Gracious (Qur'ān 43: 45).

Let there be no confusion about the two types — the fundamentals that can never change and the particulars that can change in accordance with socio-historical demands. The Qur'ān maintains both types simultaneously. One can simply pore over the way the Qur'ān narrates the succession of God's messengers in history, particularly as being presented in *Sūrat al-Shu'arā'* (*Sūrah* 26). Every message was tailored to suit the socio-historical context of every nation concerned. Even two *sharā'i'* (i.e., Mūsā's *sharī'ah* with Shu'ayb's *sharī'ah*, and Ibrāhīm's *sharī'ah* with Lūṭ's *sharī'ah*) were contemporaneous in order to meet the particularities of their respective social needs.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate both principles is to consider the relationship between the three Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as presented in the Qur'ān. The Prophet 'Īsā (peace be on him) was sent with a double mission. He was charged to settle some ongoing disputes among the Jews (part of which is to restore what had been corrupted) and to legalise certain objects, previously banned under the *sharī'ah* of the Prophet Mūsā (peace be on him) (see Qur'ān 3: 50–51; 43: 63–64). The first mission represented the unchangeable while the second mission represented the changeable.

The same thing applies to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him). He was sent with a double mission: the first one was to restore the Word of God (part of which was to settle the ongoing disputes between the Jews and the Christians, particularly on the divinity of Jesus Christ). This represented the unchangeable part of revelation. However, "to restore the Word of God" alone cannot account for the more pervasive question: "what called for another scripture at all called the Qur'ān?" It could have been easier for the Qur'ān to stop at the restoration point; but due to the social and historical development, the new inputs into the codes of human affairs became imperative. This is the second mission of the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him), represented by the Islamic *sharī'ah*. To fulfil this double mission is what the Qur'ān pre-eminently stands for.

This being the case, it follows that if there is any defect in the first mission or any need for the second mission, there will definitely be a new

¹⁴ Muḥammad al-Tāhir ibn 'Āshūr, *Tafsīr al-Tahrīr wa al-Tanwīr* (Tunis: Dār al-Sadād al-Tūnisīyah li al-Nashr, 1984), 6: 221.

revelation, because God always cares for His creatures. However, the continuous existence of the Qur'ān in its original and pristine form, as it ever was, rules out the need for the first mission — restoring the fundamentals. Still it is this availability of the Qur'ān in its original form that makes a new *sharī'ah* or code of life uncalled for; that is, as far as the Qur'ān continues to remain in its form, its social and ethical teachings can be reinterpreted and then implemented to meet the unfolding events in social history.

This cursory exposition indicates that the Qur'ān recognises the phenomenon of change in history and properly accounts for it. However, it holds that human understanding of revelation generally tends to be negative in the course of historical change. The reason for this can be explained as follows:

'Understanding' is, by nature, dynamic. It is always in a process of either progress or regress; it cannot remain static. For a text to maintain its credibility and true meaning, it has to prove its relationship and relevance to all such matters newly encountered in human social organisations. Otherwise, it becomes obsolete, succumbing to historical challenges, and dies off, or it gradually turns into a different meaning altogether. However, through our experience we come to the fact that the longer the distance between the time in which the text was first introduced and the time it was later interpreted was, the more difficult it became to relate the text to the new context. Thus, the challenge of cultural change tends to override the (inherited) meaning of a text. The history of the interpretation (particularly of revered texts) testifies that the 'allegorical interpretation' was introduced (after the literal interpretation) mainly to preserve the relevance of the sacred texts in the face of inevitable cultural change.¹⁵

In one instance, the Qur'ān notes that the heart becomes indurate and hardened, mainly due to a long time-lapse with no messenger (or reformer). Referring to Israelis, the Qur'ān attributes their transgression to the long time lapse: "Has not the time arrived for the Believers that their hearts in all humility should engage in the remembrance of Allāh and of the Truth which has been revealed (to them), and that they should not become like those to whom was given Revelation aforetime, *but long ages passed over them and their hearts grew hard*?" (Qur'ān 57: 16). To prevent the later generations of the Israelis from making the same excuse, the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be on him) was sent, as it is related in the Qur'ān: "O People of the Book! Now, after a long time during which no apostles have appeared, there has come unto you (this) Our Apostle to make (the truth) clear to you, lest you say: "There

¹⁵ Morton W. Bloomfield, "Allegory as Interpretation" in *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation*, 3: 2 (1972), 302; Deborah L. Madsen, *Rereading Allegory: A Narrative Approach* (Houndmills: Macmillan Press, 1995), 30–31.

came unto us no bringer of glad tidings and no warner (from evil)”; for now has come unto you a bringer of glad tidings and a warner (from evil)” (Qur’ān 5: 19).

While the above verse refers specifically to the Israelis, it also holds good for other nations. After a long hiatus of revelation, humankind tends to be forgetful, overwhelmed with superstitions, myths and all types of false notions. However, this negative dimension of human disposition is not the basis for accountability. Out of His mercifulness, God would not take anyone responsible unless he/she had been informed of revelation (Qur’ān 28: 59; 98: 1–2). Therefore, to wash off those froths and concoctions contaminated in the countenance of history, a series of prophets was sent, one coming after another. After the closure of prophethood, the onus of this regeneration of meaning was shifted onto the shoulders of reformers. In one famous Prophetic *ḥadīth*, it was reported that “God will send to this *Ummah* at the beginning of every century a scholar (or scholars) who will regenerate their religion for them”.¹⁶ All this indicates the role history plays in human understanding. It is ironic, however, that the same agent that can unfold the true meaning of revelation can become its impediment!

Once these are clear — the dynamic characteristic of understanding and human propensity to forgetfulness — we come to realise why historical understanding in itself is negative. In order to make good use of history, then, there should be a constant reactivation of both the changeable and the unchangeable; the former being understood in the light of the latter. Otherwise, both are submerged under the historical forces and sink into oblivion.

After all, the question as to why the Qur’ān has used such a double expression inevitably arises. Sometimes the creation of the universe is said to have taken a developmental procedure; at other times it appears to have a matter of *kun fayakūn* (“Be”, and it is) (Qur’ān 2: 117). The creation of Adam and the procreation of his progeny are often said to have been developmental; yet occasionally it is said to have been an instantaneous creation by a divine decree of *kun fayakūn* (“Be”, and it is) (Qur’ān 3: 47, 59). The fact is that the Qur’ān speaks at different levels to different people of different interests and understandings. It depends largely on the frame of reference from which an assessment is made and the intellectual calibre of the possible audiences. In understanding the Qur’ān, some would be content to descend from the general to the particular while others would prefer the reverse order. Similarly, we have observed the changeable and the unchangeable aspects of God’s

¹⁶ Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn al-‘Ash’ath, *Sunan Abi Dāwūd* (Beirut: al-Maktabah al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2001); 4: 108.

revelation in history. Both are in fact inextricably linked and their constant functionality in their *respective* levels and fields can best be enclosed in the network of the Qur'ānic expression *Sunnat Allāh*, which literally means: “the pathway of Allāh”. It has been accentuated in the Qur'ān on many occasions that *Sunnat Allāh* will never change (Qur'ān 17: 77; 33: 62; 35: 43); but central to this immutable *Sunnah* is the decree that something within it would continue to change.¹⁷

On this account, the question is not so much as to whether the meaning of revelation is subject to change in the course of historical process as much as to how the true meaning of revelation could be maintained in the midst of this unavoidable change. Thus understanding is subject to change, but not all types of change in the natural world or in the human social organisation could help us to grasp the true meaning of the Qur'ān. Before we examine which and how historical change could enrich our understanding, let us point to some conundrums posed by historical change.

The Challenge of Socio-historical Change

History, as a mine of all events, tolerates all sorts of change. True and false events, fact and fabrication all are rampant and become part of historical process. The complexity or mystery of historical process is strikingly illustrated in Jorge Luis Borges' famous twentieth-century short story entitled “The Library of Babel”. Borges portrayed the universe as a vast, seemingly infinite library of books. These books, all of one size and length, contained every conceivable combination of twenty-two letters of the alphabet, the comma, the period, and the space. Most of the books are incomprehensible and formless. For example, one book contains the letters of MCV repeated over and over again; another consists of cacophonous characters of “dhcmrlchtdj”.¹⁸ However, occasionally a perfectly comprehensible book could be found among the unfathomable volumes. The library, in fact, contains:

Everything: the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangel's autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands

¹⁷ Many modern Muslim scholars interpret *Sunnat Allāh* as “the laws of nature” and/or “the laws of history”. One of the grand works on *Sunnat Allāh* as the laws of history is al-Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir al-Ṣadr's book, *al-Madrasah al-Qur'āniyyah* (Beirut: Dār al-Ta'āraf, n.d.), an English translation of which can be found in “The Holy Qur'ān and the Laws of Historical Change” in *al-Tawḥīd* [part 1] 9: 4 (1991–1992), 13–29; [part 2] 10: 2 & 3 (1992–1993), 27–40; [part 3] 10: 4 (1993), 25–41; [part 4] 11: 1&2 (1994), 30–58; [part 5] 11: 3 & 4 (1994), 13–42.

¹⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel” in *Labyrinths* (London: Penguin, 1970), 79–80, 84.

of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary of the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.¹⁹

For this, scholars have long realised that not all happenings deserve to be mentioned when writing national history, let alone world history. It is agreed that what counts in history must be unique, unusual, held worthy of being kept in remembrance. However, what is that unique, unusual is a question which, to some extent, different people would answer in different ways. According to many historians, it is often held to be 'events' and 'occurrences';²⁰ and to many philosophers of history, it is more associated with 'thoughts'.²¹ Still, what is exactly the unique event or thought differs from one person to another. However, despite these differences, there is an agreement that what is of historical importance must be something out of the common, which, for one reason or another, arrests the attention of its observers.

There is still much to be worked out when we come to the question of 'understanding' in history. The mere uniqueness of things does not seem to address the query of 'understanding' them. Both fact and fiction, or true and false events may be unique or meaningful in a certain sense or another; however, to put both on a par is repugnant even to common sense. How to grapple with this phenomenon has been a common theme in various fields of scholarly enterprise. Writing in sociology, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Khaldūn (732–808/1332–1406) provides three criteria that will help us to know the most meaningful, the less meaningful, and the meaningless in historical information of human social organisation. According to him, one must sort out, first, the things that are essentials to civilisation as required by its very nature; secondly, the things that are accidental to it and cannot be counted on; and, thirdly, the things that cannot possibly attach themselves to it.²² G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) follows suit when writing on scientific understanding in history. He cautions that we should distinguish what is essential from what is non-essential in our investigation because mere nature is too weak to keep its genus and species pure when commingling with alien elementary influences. Giving an example of human physical structure, he says:

¹⁹ Ibid., 81–82.

²⁰ Frederick J. Teggart, *Theory and Processes of History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 18.

²¹ Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, 216–217.

²² Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimat Ibn Khaldūn*, 1: 331; *The Muqaddimah*, 1: 77.

If...we assert that brain, heart, and so forth are essential to its organic life, some miserable abortion may be adduced, which has on the whole the human form or parts of it... in which nevertheless no brain and no heart is found. If such an instance is quoted against the general conception of a human being... it can be proved that a real, concrete human being is a truly different object; that such a being must have a brain in its head, and heart in its breast.²³

Another type of ambiguity posed by socio-historical change concerns the constantly changing “standard”. An idea or action popular in one period may be condemned as heresy in another period, which, however, in its turn may be replaced by subsequent novelty in other periods. The standard is constantly fluctuating. This fluctuating standard has been laid to rest recently, thanks to the post-modern notion of relativity. No ultimate truth or universal reality is now attested to, except the relativity of everything.

In such a context, where fact and fiction are mixed and equally celebrated like Borges’ mythical library, and where the standard is put on a slippery ground, how can we understand the meaning of the Qur’ān? This is the main problem of understanding a revered book amidst an unavoidable, uncertain context.

Understanding the Qur’ān in the Light of the Essentials and Accidentals in History

Our brief survey of the Qur’ānic view of the changing and the unchanging aspects in revelation and history on the one hand, and the nature of challenges posed by socio-historical change on the other, compel us to seek for a clear criterion that stands the test of time. Such a foundation should be global, meeting the interest of the immense majority of humankind at all times. This will be examined in the light of what may be referred to as “true fact” and “false fact”.

The word “fact” is defined as “something that has really occurred or is actually the case; something certainly known to be of this character; hence, a particular truth known by actual observer or authentic testimony, as opposed to what is merely inferred or to a conjecture or fiction; a datum of experience as distinguished from the conclusion that may be based upon it”.²⁴ Among the definitions of “true”, are: something that is “conformable to fact: in accordance with the actual state of affairs: not false or erroneous”; “conformable to nature, reality, or an original: accurate in delineating or

²³ Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 65.

²⁴ See entry “fact” 1.a in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 5: 651.

expressing the essential elements; and “designed or functioning in a manner regarded as essential to meeting a standard”.²⁵ “Fact”, is then neutral and more general. “Truth”, by contrast, can be synonymous to “fact”, as the first definition indicates; but it can also be used to give value to a factual thing, as can be observed in the last two definitions. In this latter sense, it signifies suitability to the requirements of the proper places of things as recognised by wisdom and true judgement.²⁶ The antonym of “truth” in all its three senses is “false”. In what follows, the use of “truth” (and “false” as its antonym) will be based on its last two senses.

On this account, the true fact is that which conforms to an essential property (*jawhar, dhāt*) of a thing and a false fact is that which corresponds to an accidental property (*ʿarād*) of a thing.²⁷ For example, if ‘flying’ is essential to eagle, “eagle that flies” is a true fact because it conforms to the natural quality of eagle. “Eagle that cannot fly” is, by contrast, a false fact. It is a fact because we can perceive it through our senses; but it is false because ‘flying’ is central to the nature of eagle. In human history, the true fact is that which is essential and compatible with human nature and the false fact is that which is accidental and inimical to human nature.

How we came to this general principle is not far to seek. God creates humans to be His vicegerents on earth (Qurʾān 2: 30; 27: 62). There is no doubt that the Qurʾān aims to preserve the true nature of human and the natural world at the uttermost pattern. The human is created in the best conceivable pattern (Qurʾān 95: 4; 40: 64; 64: 3; 82: 7–8; 23: 14). The animal and plant kingdoms were created to suit the human’s needs (Qurʾān 6: 141–142; 16: 5–11; 36: 33–36, 71–73; 40: 79–80). Even though the creation of the physical world is more complex and sophisticated than the creation of man (Qurʾān 40: 57), the physical world too is made subservient for man (Qurʾān 14: 32–34; 16: 12–18; 21: 30–33; 27: 60–61; 28: 71–73). Indeed, man has been raised far above most other creatures (Qurʾān 17: 70). No other planet can be more habitable, sustainable and hospitable to man to carry out his mission

²⁵ See entry “true” 2.a. (1 & 2), 3.a. (4) in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of English Language Unabridged*.

²⁶ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of the Future* (London: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1985), 180; “Islam and the Philosophy of Science”, *MAAS Journal of Islamic Science*, 6: 1 (1990), 70–72.

²⁷ The classification made here has been adopted from Ibn Khaldūn’s and Hegel’s distinctions between the essentials and accidentals, as has been discussed in the last section. It also resonates al-Attas’ definition of *ḥaqq* (truth) as “a suitability to the requirements of the proper places of things as recognised by true judgement”, besides being ‘correspondent’ and ‘coherent’ with the fact. See al-Attas, *Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of the Future*, 180; “Islam and the Philosophy of Science”, 70–72.

than where he now lives. Just as man's organic and inorganic surroundings are natural to him, so is his true religion. Islam is that innate, natural religion (Qur'ān 30: 30) and the Qur'ān being 'a reminder' (*dhikrā*) (Qur'ān 21: 50; 36: 69; 38: 87; 68: 52; 81: 27) to that innate, natural code of living. The nature of man, that of the universe in which he lives, that of the Religion he practises, and that of the Book sent to him, are all in perfect harmony. As God's vicegerent on earth, man is required to preserve this divinely structured universe in its immaculately precise balance, making good use of God's benevolences. Finally, Satan is said to be the agent luring man to corrupt the creation of God and to deform the majestic natural order of creatures (Qur'ān 4: 117–121). This is the pith of the Qur'ānic worldview.

Now, any attempt to help us enhance our understanding of the true fact in human organisation and the natural world will be highly commendable. We would understand the meanings of the Qur'ān afresh, modify our presuppositions, and enhance our knowledge, all in the light of what is true fact in history. The true fact, as has been established by the Qur'ān, does not change, but our understanding of its particulars and functionalities may change in the course of time. Take, for instance, the principles of the first creation and the resurrection. It was forcefully established in the Qur'ān that the creation has a beginning and that recreation will equally take place in the Hereafter. To the Qur'ān, both principles are immutable. "As We produced the first Creation, so shall We produce a new one: a promise We have undertaken: truly shall We fulfil it". (Qur'ān 21: 104). "Allāh — save whom there is no deity — will surely gather you all together on the Day of Resurrection (the coming of) which is beyond all doubt: and whose word can be truer than Allāh's?" (Qur'ān 4: 87). And that both creations are done not in vain, but for certain purposes (Qur'ān 21: 16–17; 23: 115; 44: 38–339; 38: 27; 20: 15; 99: 6–7). Yet the door to know more about how these principles apply are not closed for men of understanding and curiosity. The Qur'ān does invite human beings to travel over earth and explore how both principles function — how the first creation took place and how, in turn, the resurrection will come about (Qur'ān 29: 19–20). If no other detailed information, apart from the ones already explained in the verses of the Qur'ān, could be learned in history, the meaningfulness of such an invitation to exploration will be seriously undermined.

In the realm of revelation, the true fact includes the unchangeable and the changeable aspects, as has been examined above. The Qur'ān holds some principles to be immutable and that the world at large cannot sustain without those principles being firmly established. Foremost among them is the Oneness of deity. Whether all people believe in Him or not is a different

matter; but the point is that the universe could not be as it now stands had there been more than One God. The Qur'ān states:

If there were, in the heavens and the earth, other gods besides Allāh, there would have been confusion in both! But glory to Allāh, the Lord of the Throne: (High is He) above what they attribute to Him! (Qur'ān 21: 22; also 27: 59–61).

Like the unchangeable, the changeable aspects are parts of the divine system, as mentioned above, and thus true fact. Humans are required to exercise their free choice in these changeable aspects. The Qur'ān states that “it is out of His Mercy that He has made for you Night and Day — that ye may rest therein, and that ye may seek of His Grace — and in order that ye may be grateful” (Qur'ān 28: 73; see also 25: 47). Therefore, both the changeable and the unchangeable are to be active concomitantly. While we are expected to hold to the principles of the first creation and resurrection, we are required, in the same vein, to observe the demands of historical developments taking place out there, as has been indicated in the previous verse. Working within both aspects — the unchangeable that we have no power to alter, and the changeable in which we can exercise our free will — is pithily expressed at three places in the Qur'ān: 74: 56–56, 76: 29–30, 81: 28–29. The first *āyah* in each *sūrah* is related to the changeable and the second *āyah* to the unchangeable. The interconnectivity and complexity of this matter has given rise to the debate over Free Will and Predestination in the circle of religious and philosophical thought.

A false fact, by contrast, is that which is not in accordance with the essential quality of, or is an anathema to, human nature. It includes all those events and phenomena that are detrimental to the sustainability of humankind. These events and phenomena that threaten human existence may be classified into three types: (a) events based in violence, such as war, conflict, intimidation, etc.; (b) events based in degradation and deprivation, such as environmental degradation, political and economic deprivation, etc.; (c) events based in Nature, such as earthquakes, cyclones, volcanic eruptions, droughts, floods, etc.²⁸

Although the phenomenon of false fact is not unforeseen, it is to be deciphered in the light of what is essential in human nature and the physical world. To put all the above-mentioned disasters, particularly nature-based disasters, under the rubric of false fact, however, may raise more questions

²⁸ P. A. Merriman and C. W. A. Browitt, eds., *Natural Disasters: Protecting Vulnerable Communities*, Proceedings of the Conference held in London, 13–15 October 1993 (London: Thomas Telford, 1993), 2.

than it may attempt to answer. The Qur'ān does mention several natural cataclysms wreaked upon tyrant and defiant nations, such as *tūfān* (flood) (Qur'ān 29: 14), *rajfah* (earthquake) (Qur'ān 29: 37), *ṣayḥab* (mighty Blast) (Qur'ān 11: 67, 94) *ḥāṣīb* (violent tornado) (Qur'ān 54: 34). One may wonder as to why such false facts exist along with the true facts.

One way of interpreting such phenomena is that they exist in order to instil and preserve the Creator's consciousness in man. If the Divine benevolence and sustenance did not prove to be effective in winning the hearts of the disobedient and bringing them to observe the norms of righteous behaviour, the drought and other similar omens may do. In other words, these natural disasters could be seen as a means to *discipline* the errant individuals and nations (Qur'ān 4: 147; 6: 42–43; 7: 94–96), and thereafter as an example to the succeeding generations (Qur'ān 2: 66; 43: 56). That is why the torment that was about to befall the folk of Yūnus (Jonah) was drawn off once the requirement for their sustainability was fulfilled (Qur'ān 10: 98). It should also be observed that these natural disasters were restricted to particular nations at particular times. It would be instructive to compare how 'wind' is seen as a bane for a set particular people and as a boon for humankind in general (see Qur'ān 51: 41 and 15: 22). The only global natural disasters are eschatological incidents related to the Last Day or the Hereafter and not of this world (see, for example, Qur'ān 22: 1; 99: 1). Undoubtedly, the greater part of the Qur'ānic verses on natural phenomena indicates the stability and sustainability of the universe as quoted above. How could one then assume that God intended to produce an unstable and unsustainable universe while the greater part of the Qur'ān indicates otherwise?

Some philosophers have attempted to justify the existence of such vices and unfavourable phenomena along with the more propitious conditions and benevolences ingrained in all creations (Qur'ān 20: 50; 23: 14; 32: 7). When explaining the meaning of divine providence and the existence of evil in God's decree, Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) (368–427/980–1037) says that virtue is common and essential to all things while vice is nominal and accidental; yet the existence of the latter is indispensable for the former to remain as it is.²⁹ If 'fire' lacks the power or potential to burn an aristocrat's cloth (which deserves burning), its general benefit or utilisation is imperfect. Thus, a virtuous thing will remain so as long as it can produce the vice.³⁰

Perhaps more appropriate to our case is an answer similar to the one given by Abū 'l-Walīd Ibn Ruṣhd (520–595/1126–1198) when justifying the

²⁹ Abū 'Alī Ibn Sīnā, *al-Najāh fi 'l-Hikmah al-Mantiqiyyah wa al-Ṭabī'iyyah wa al-Ilābiyyah*, ed., 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Umayrah (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1992), 147–51.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

existence of double meaning in the Qur'ān.³¹ The false fact exists in order for men to exercise the intellectual, moral and all other potentials ingrained in them to bring it into conformity with the true fact.

Let us now examine this more closely by giving some illustrations. Human pair of male and female is a true fact, created by God. Many Qur'ānic verses are abundant on the fashion of the gender — male and female (Qur'ān 3: 36,195; 4: 1,124; 16: 97; 40: 40; 42: 49; 49: 13; 53: 21,45; 75: 39; 92: 3) and many legislations are based on this gender classification. Such a fashion is counted as a blessing of God, aimed, among other things, to set procreation in motion (16: 72; 30: 21; 42: 49; 53: 45; 75: 39). Now one may venture to challenge the Qur'ānic legislation on the grounds that it did not account for a married gay or lesbian. Such an argument is baseless because the male is naturally made for the female and vice versa. Same-sex marriage is a false fact, one opposed to human nature. If everyone's partner is from his/her own gender — male marrying male and female marrying female — human beings will cease to exist, say no longer than after a century. Besides, the same-sex marriage has serious repercussions on Islamic laws on issues related to personal and marital affairs. This kind of change in history, however, is a fact because it is happening before our eyes, but it is false because it is anathema to human existence.³² Thus instead of understanding the Qur'ān based on that type of change, we should resist such a change and bring it back to the natural order of things.

Another example is the problem of infertility. Fertility is God's blessing (Qur'ān 3: 38–39; 16: 72; 30: 21; 42: 49) and the stages of human procreation from the very point of conception to the birth are detailed in the Qur'ān (see 22: 5; 23: 14; 39: 6). Infertility is mentioned on three occasions. The first occasion is related to the Prophet Ibrāhīm's family (Qur'ān 11: 69–73; 15: 51–56; 51: 24–30). The second occasion is related to the Prophet Zakariyyā's family (3: 38–41; 21: 89–90; 19: 2–15), and the third occasion complements fertility (Qur'ān 42: 50). The first two occasions ended with fertility (with the

³¹ Ibn Rushd states that: "The reason why we have received a Scripture with both an apparent and an inner meaning lies in the diversity of people's natural capacities and the difference of their innate dispositions with regard to assent. The reason why we have received in Scripture texts whose apparent meanings contradict each other is in order to draw the attention of those who are well grounded in science to the interpretation which reconciles them". See Abū 'l-Walid Ibn Rushd, *Kitāb Faṣl al-Maqāl wa Taḥrīr mā bayn al-Sharī'ah wa al-Ḥikmah min al-Ittiṣāl*, ed., George F. Hourani (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), 15. The quotation was translated by George F. Hourani in his translation of Ibn Rushd's work: *Averroes: On the Harmony of Religion and Philosophy* (London: Messrs. Luzac & Co., 1976), 51.

³² Michael Levin argued against homosexuality, not on religious or moral grounds, but on the grounds of 'evolutionary development' and 'natural selection' in his "Why Homosexual is Abnormal" in *The Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry*, 67: 2 (1984), 251–283.

birth of Prophet Ishāq and Prophet Yaḥyā respectively); only the third one remained unsolved but counted as part of the system. Because fertility leads to procreation making continuous existence possible, it is a true fact. Infertility, by contrast, is accidental and is needed to be medically treated by legal means, thanks to the advancement in medicine that has helped to overcome many problems related to infertility.³³

Conclusive scientific discovery is in general part of the true fact, for in Islam both the natural world and humankind are the handiwork of God, a fact that affords no discrepancy. Indeed, the prospect of scientific discoveries is certainly more cheering now than ever before. However, out of non-essential aspects of the nature, some conclusive scientific discoveries, which are harmful to human existence, may be generated. For that, science may fall within the true fact or the false fact, depending on its correspondence to the general objectives of the Qur'ān and the essentials of nature. It is a true fact if it is aimed to preserve the ecosystem of the universe. It is a false fact if it produces dangerous ecological effects.

The nature of historical understanding being proposed here is circular, which consists of three steps. What is considered as true fact is derived from the Qur'ān, exemplified and actualised in history, which in turn needs to be recertified by the Qur'ān. The first step is necessary for any object of understanding and more prominently in the case of the Qur'ān. No matter how great or little the so-called 'pre-understanding' or 'pre-supposition' might be, priority must be given to the Qur'ān. It is mainly because the Qur'ān made Muslims and not the reverse.³⁴ Moreover, by starting from the Qur'ān and obtaining what is 'natural', we avoid other uses, or rather misuses, often associated with the word 'nature', as it has been employed by deists and theists for different meanings. The second step means that the actual understanding takes place within history. It is very hard to imagine understanding the Qur'ān

³³ 'Infertility' is defined as "inability of a couple to conceive after a year of coitus without contraception". It is estimated that approximately 10 per cent of couples or one in every eight couples have an infertility problem. Many causes related to infertility have been identified to be medically curable. Out of every 100 cases of infertility, only 10 to 15 per cent are attributed to unknown factors. See Melvin L. Taymor, *The Management of Infertility* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 1969), 8; E. V. Van Hall, "The Infertile Couple and Gynaecologist: Psychosocial and Emotional Aspects" in R. F. Harrisan, ed., *Fertility and Sterility* (Lancaster: MTP Press, 1984), 361.

³⁴ Wilfred Cantwell Smith rightly observes that "other communities have produced sacred books, as we know; in the Islamic case it was the sacred book, rather, that produced the community. Muslims, from the beginning until now, are that group of people that has coalesced around the Qur'ān". See his "Scripture as Form and Concept: Their Emergence for the Western World" in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, ed., Miriam Levering (New York: State University of New York, 1989), 30.

in abstraction; even if it is possible to do so, the very exercise of abstract thought happens within history. But because history is so fathomless and vulnerable to misinterpretation that at times the standard of judgement is turned upside down, our understanding needs to go back to the Qur'ān in order to verify the extent to which our existing understanding remains on course. This is the function of the third step.

We are now in the best position to see more clearly the role history partakes in our understanding. It occupies a mediatory position. As far as the true fact goes, history enriches or changes our understanding. As regards the false fact, however, history is malleable and subject to our understanding (of course if we are prepared to take initiation) gained either directly from the true fact or from other sources, i.e., authentic *ḥadīth* report, reflection, intuition, and illumination. By containing false facts, history enables us to exercise our role and change something in history by implementing the Qur'ānic teachings and bringing the false fact back to the natural order of creatures. The relationship of human mind to history is reciprocal: human mind not only takes from history but also contributes to its movement. To overemphasise one of them at the expense of the other will put one on the horns of a dilemma of Determinism and Free Will. Therefore, just as the meaning of the Qur'ān and signs of God unfold in the course of history, the Qur'ān is also a book to be implemented in history (see Qur'ān 5: 48–49; 6: 155; 7: 3).

After all, to work out a single criterion to assist in human understanding that is valid beyond its historical and cultural context has been suspected by many hermeneutists, particularly those who reject the use of scientific naturalistic method in the investigation of the historical phenomena. Despite this challenge, this paper regards nature as the most cogent among all possible alternatives and the least disputable standard. If the present could ever understand the past and foresee the future or if a culture could appreciate other cultures, it is because it has something in common with them. It is the nature that makes it possible. It permeates and traverses the inner detail of many cultures and generations. It is the beauty wedded to simplicity. History, let it be remembered, is already perplexed and still perplexing. In such a situation, to formulate a new sophisticated standard for the cause of 'understanding' will simply add another knot to an already vexed problem.

Should the standard set forth herein be seen as another type of subjectivity, as biased and thus relative to the writer's contextual history? A Jamaican immigrant in U.K., ostracised from his country for his homosexuality, was asked whether he would return to his country when the situation is changed. To this question he confidently replied: "In Jamaica, the

situation can never, never, never change".³⁵ One may think that his reply was a mere exaggeration or an unwarranted prediction. But it was a right statement. Since it is against the human nature, homosexuality is not expected to become the norm in Jamaica or elsewhere at all times.³⁶ Even though it might be weakened from one time to another or from one culture to another, the voice of nature can never disappear. After all, if this standard is still branded as personal, particular and relative, let it be so. But we must not lose sight of the fact that a series of remarkably parallel and interconnected particulars is synonymous to universal. Let that standard be our guidance in the ever changing history.

Conclusion

In this study, history has been regarded as a horizon of possibilities which give us a finite but open perspective from which to understand the Qur'ān. From the Qur'ānic notion of revelation in history two levels of revelation have been observed: the changeable and the unchangeable. To make the best use of history, then there should be a constant revitalisation of both the changeable and the unchangeable, the former being understood in the light of the latter. New methods of presentation should also be employed so that the unchangeable might not succumb to historical forces or sink into oblivion and the changeable might be rightly appraised in different socio-historical contexts.

The study concludes that historical change could have a considerable influence on our understanding, but that not all types of change in the natural world or in the human social organisation could help us understand the true meaning of the Qur'ān. To see historical change in its right perspective, the study suggests that the essentials in history should serve as the basis for our understanding under which the accidentals should be subsumed. This distinction was drawn on the Qur'ānic view of change in history and the requirements of continuous existence of a viable human organisation in the course of historical change.



³⁵ "Outlook", BBC programme broadcast (in Southeast Asia) on January 1, 2003 at 01: 05 – 01: 45 (GMT).

³⁶ See n. 31 above.