

## **What is history?**

Abdullahil Ahsan<sup>\*</sup>

**Abstract:** This article aims at elucidating the role of history in human civilization and the way history has been shaped through ages. It is essential for Muslims to understand the distinctions between history and pseudo-history and the purpose for which history is often written. This article defines history, describes how the idea of recording history came into existence, early historians and their method of history writing, and how history could be divided into various periods. It also briefly describes human origin in history, sources of history and their utilization in history writing. Then it describes the differences between history and pseudo-history, differences between history and other disciplines in humanities and social sciences. It concludes by highlighting the importance of history.

**Keywords:** Civilization, Neolithic & Paleolithic Age, Cuneiform script, Gilgamesh, Hammurabi.

### **Introduction**

Anything that has happened in the past is history. History includes all human activities, from the birth of an individual to the formation of a family and a society, leading to the growth of a civilization. History also includes changes in the cosmos and their impact on the physical earth. These include natural calamities and environmental changes. Although the growth and spread of plants and animals are also part of history, essentially history refers to human history; it is the history of human beings on earth. This is because human beings have established their superiority and control over the plant and animal world at a very early stage of world history. But at the same time human beings are subject to all cosmological changes in the universe.

History of human activities not only includes every single event of the past, it also includes growth of all sorts of ideas leading to political changes and other societal developments. History includes politics, economy, social systems, religion, individual achievements etc. But not all events are equally important:

---

<sup>\*</sup> Dr. Abdullahil Ahsan is Professor, Department of History and Civilization, Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, International Islamic University Malaysia. E-mail: [abdullah.ahsan2011@gmail.com](mailto:abdullah.ahsan2011@gmail.com)

some events are forgotten as soon as they happen, sometimes, certain happenings are not even noticed, and yet some events leave ever-lasting impact on human history. Therefore, even though fundamentally history is the storehouse of information and knowledge about everything that has happened in the past – from an event that has happened a moment ago to the most ancient time – humans are selective in storing that knowledge and information in their mind. That is why history is not what has happened in the past, but rather history is what is recorded by historians. Before proceeding further, it is necessary to explain what history is and how history began to be recorded and how historians understood history. This is followed by the discussion on the periodization of history, sources of history and their classification. The paper concludes with a note on the importance of history for mankind as a whole.

The first recorded narrative in history is an anecdote – the story of Gilgamesh – an account of a king who lived about five thousand years ago. This story seems to have been circulated orally in different languages till it was written in the Sumerian cuneiform script several hundred years later. This means history was first transmitted orally, not in writing. There are a number of other problems in this story: first, it is not sure whether Gilgamesh really lived in history; second, the story was not recorded in the written form till centuries later. The story might have changed during transmission from one person to the next. Also, it is not known who recorded it in written form (Mark, 2010). In any case, the essence of the story is that Gilgamesh, the king, wanted to conquer and be master of the whole world. He thought that his trusted friend, Enkidu, would assist in achieving this goal. But Enkidu died in one encounter which made Gilgamesh depressed and he began to wonder why human beings die and why human beings could not be immortal. Eventually, Gilgamesh became immortal by recording his story – the story of human limitation.

The story of Gilgamesh is considered a fiction, not history. But because of the moral lesson behind the story, i.e. a portrayal of the human limitation, it is considered not only an important source of moral lesson, but also provides some clue to understand how knowledge used to be disseminated before reading and writing became common. The story of Gilgamesh also recorded an event of a huge flood that had one time inundated the whole world – a story that has been related in the Bible as well as in the Qur'an. Interestingly, the story of Gilgamesh is the first written source which has mentioned this huge flood. That is why even though the story of Gilgamesh is not considered proper history, it may be considered to have given an important clue for world history.

The anecdote about the human creation was widespread in various traditions which were later endorsed by the Bible and the Qur'an. Some historians consider such stories as myth. According to a historian, "myths are tales that incorporate religious or supernatural notions to explain natural phenomena and social events or to express cultural values" (Greaves et.al., 1997: 3). Although almost all historians agree with the view that religious ideas played a very important role in history, they disagree in distinguishing between what is natural and what is supernatural. Are supernatural phenomena scientific? This has led many historians and philosophers to debate the distinction between miracle and magic.

### **History of writing history**

The word history in the English language originated from the Latin word *historia* which means an account of one's enquiries. The earliest form of history began by recording of events, experiences and systematic record of all types of happenings. Greek historian Herodotus (484-425BCE) is considered the "father of history" because he first recorded events of his time systematically. He wrote about the origin of Greco-Persian war in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. He apparently recorded whatever he heard about the war, and that is why one may find contradiction in his narration because he didn't carefully evaluate the information he received from different sources. Thucydides (460-395BCE), however, was more careful in recording the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta, which occurred during his lifetime. He analysed the causes of the war, and his approach is considered more realistic and reliable as opposed to that of Herodotus. In fact, Thucydides participated in the Peloponnesian war. That is why some later historians consider his work as a partisan one. However, in this process history writing became more professional. Following these examples, the Roman historian Cicero (106-43BCE) understood history as "the witness that testifies to the passing of time; it illuminates reality, vitalizes memory, provides guidance in daily life, and brings us tidings of antiquity" (Special Dictionary, nd).

Muslim historians generally used the word *tarikh* for history. Muhammad Shihab Al-Zuhri (705-741) was the first to record events during the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW). The first biographer of the prophet (SAW), Ibn Ishaq (704-768), extensively used information related by al-Zuhri. But al-Zuhri's records were not systematic and chronologically organized. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century early Muslim historian al-Tabari (838-923) used the term in the sense of chronicle of events and stories. He recorded everything that he read and heard, not only of the period in which he lived, but also whatever he heard happened from the earliest time. Al-Tabari was the first to write what may be called world history and his 30

volume work known as *Tarikh at-Tabari* has been preserved and extensively used by all historians of Islam and Muslims. However, in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) disputed al-Tabari's method of history writing: "History must seek the truth," he declared. Ibn Khaldun's methodology of writing history laid down the foundation for modern scientific history writing. Modern historians improved the method of studying history further by developing a system of conducting a careful study of the past and selecting information in writing history.

Writing of history took a different form with the rise of Western civilization. It began with the Renaissance and matured during the Enlightenment period (18<sup>th</sup> century). The Europeans made further progress in studying and writing history: they adopted a method called a "rational and scientific method" of studying history. Pointing out to the contribution of Francis Bacon (1561-1626) one historian writes, "Bacon turned science into an activity of the pious; doing God's work with nature became as important as knowing God's biblical world (Perry, 2009: 411)." Following Bacon, Rene Descartes (1596-1650) and Isaac Newton (1643-1727) paved the way to the Scientific Revolution which established the method of seeking the truth scientifically, a fundamental motto in writing history.

But since the historian is a human being, the historian only records what appeals to him or her. In a sense everybody is a historian because everybody records something either in the form of writing or transmitting information orally. And this became the main challenge for historical writing in the modern world. With the development of technology one can now record in the form of audio or video; they may also post that information in the net through personal blog or social media. But are they all correct? Or was the information put carelessly without seriously examining its authenticity? What happens when someone posts false information to achieve a self-seeking aspiration? The possibility of such manipulation in politics is much higher than in other fields. This is because most political actors are more interested in gaining and retaining power than serving the interests of common people or seeking the truth. And political history is one of the most important fields of history. The possibility of such information being circulated in the ancient times was much more than today. But interestingly although developments in communication have made verification of information much easier in some areas, in other areas verification of information have become much tougher.

Some aspects of ancient history may help understand how one may misunderstand facts of history. Historians generally depend on archaeologists for information about ancient history. An archaeologist in modern days may study

ruins of an ancient civilization and claim a mammoth discovery about the lifestyle of that civilization. The archaeologist may suggest, from the drawing or an artefact or a figurine that those objects for having religious significance. This is because religious ideas are supposed to have played significant role in the organization of ancient societies. In many cases, archaeologists have suggested that most of those figures were objects of worship. Now imagine the city of New York is destroyed in an earthquake and rediscovered five thousand years later where people fail to decipher the language used by the people of New York today. The discoverers will invariably find the Statue of Liberty as one of the important objects in the ruins. And knowing that the people of New York might have been religious, they may erroneously determine that the New Yorkers used to worship the statue. Another scholar may find out many Mickey/ Minnie Mouse or Barbie dolls in the ruins to suggest, again erroneously, that the New Yorkers were worshippers of that doll. This kind of confusion may occur even with written materials. That is why serious historians such as Thucydides and Ibn Khaldun introduced critical thinking in recording history which requires further elaboration.

In contemporary times, the attack on the World Trade Centre (WTC) in New York on September 11, 2001, known as 9/11, is a significant event. Although the most known stories about the event suggest that some terrorists living in the Hindu Kush Mountains have claimed that they were responsible and some passengers travelling in airplanes that had hit WTC, many observers have expressed reservations about the narrative. Many architects and engineers believe that steel-framed buildings such as the WTC should not have come down because of being hit by flying planes. They also have challenged the official description of another building known as “Building 7” which was destroyed at the same time as the WTC. They also complain that inquiry reports on the event have not been conducted in a transparent manner (9/11 Truth, 2013). Historians should demand complete transparency in all matters and critically examine in order to dig out the truth.

A historian always reconstructs history. Reconstruction of history does not mean reinvention of facts; rather it means to re-evaluate an event that has happened in the past in the light of later developments such as finding new evidence on certain issues. That is why historians write about the same subject time and again. For example, scholars have written many times on the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) during the past 14 centuries. These scholars did not discover new facts about his life. Most authors wrote because they wanted to emphasize different aspects of the Prophet’s life. Some wanted to highlight the kindness of the Prophet while others wanted to highlight his statesmanship.

Some wanted to propagate negative ideas about him and others wanted to correct those ideas.

Sometimes new information about certain idea or event may emerge in order for historians to reconsider writing history on the subject: For example, during the First World War (1914-1918) one of the main players in the war, Britain, made a number of secret pacts with various groups in order to gain upper hand against its enemies. In the process, seeds for the current problem in Palestine were sown. Scholars on the subject have given different interpretations of those agreements and have produced new history books. Sometimes new information may emerge on a subject; for example, one may discover a new diary of a statesman actively involved during WWI challenging perceptions prevailed about the war. Obviously, this would inspire a historian to produce new works on the subject. Basically writing history is a living process that involves the systematic discussion and interpretation of issues.

### **History and historians**

The role of history as a subject for studies of the past may become clearer by examining the definitions of history given by some historians. As noted earlier, Cicero believed that history provides guidance in daily life. This created a strong desire among historians to record knowledge and information wherever they were available. Al-Tabari and Ibn Khaldun adopted different method in history writing. Although both approaches are acceptable in history writing, critical analyses of knowledge and information is necessary in establishing the truth if one is really serious in finding guidance for daily life from one's study of history. Historians of the 18<sup>th</sup> century European Enlightenment further improved and advanced the study of history as an academic discipline.

A real and serious historian, therefore, looks for finding the truth in history. In order to find the truth, the historian first asks what really happened. But to find out what really happened the historian extends the question by asking more questions like how did it happen or why did it happen, why a specific event happened at a particular time – these questions may lead the historian to ask even more basic questions such as where did it happen, who were the main players of the event etc. Similar questions may be raised on the origin of ideas or on the impact of certain ideas. In other words a historian must critically examine given information in order to establish it as a fact. This is necessary for using history as a source for guidance for life.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) claimed that people and governments have never learned anything from history, or

acted on principles deduced from it. If nobody learns from history then what is the use of recording history? Why should then history be taught at schools and universities? These are genuine questions. However, one must understand what Hegel really meant. Hegel seems to be making a reference to the human nature. For example, although everybody knows that lying is bad or deceiving others is bad, yet many people lie or deceive others. This happens mostly in amoral politics and diplomacy, particularly in relations to other people. This “other” could be people from different ethnic, linguistic, national or religious groups. One finds examples of such deceiving behaviour when the other group is relatively poorer and weaker. Most wars in history have occurred because of such discrimination. And yet human beings have not behaved with their fellow human beings in a just and fair manner. In his statement, Hegel seems to have highlighted this aspect of human nature. This means in order to understand the past everybody needs to understand human nature.

Another European historian, Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), wrote:

To each eye, perhaps, the outlines of a great civilization present a different picture. In the wide ocean upon which we venture, the possible ways and directions are many; and the same studies which have served for my work might easily, in other hands, not only receive a wholly different treatment and application, but lead to essentially different conclusions (Burckhardt, n.d.).

In this statement, Burckhardt takes the factor of the human nature into consideration and admits that every individual looks at a phenomenon differently. When one studies an early civilization one finds so many facts of the life of that particular civilization. Not all facts appeal everyone equally. One may find the cause of decline and fall of an earlier civilization in the inability of the people of that civilization to secure themselves from outside invasion and others in the lack of scientific and technological knowledge and backwardness of its people. One may also find lack of cooperation among people and willingness to defend the civilization because of the lack of the sense of belonging to it. These historians usually take a long view of history. They believe that a civilization normally takes a long period of decline before it finally collapses. It needs to be pointed out that different historians may take different views of what really happened in history.

Since 19<sup>th</sup> century history writings took a new turn, various ideologies emerged in Europe to replace religious outlook of the society and this made an impact on the writings of history. Ideologies such as conservatism, liberalism, communism, Marxism, positivism, socialism, and utilitarianism developed various approaches toward writing history.

### **Periodization in history**

Since everything that has taken place in the past is history, one needs to distinguish whether an event has occurred in the recent past or in a distant past. This kind of distinction of events in time may be called periodization. The period before the development of writing is generally called pre-history. And most probably evolutions of plants and animals occurred during the pre-historic period. This is because human beings cannot survive without the support of plants and animals. Some scholars, mainly anthropologists, identify pre-history with the early emergence and development of the human species. They believe that human beings emerged from another human-like species through a long process of slow evolutionary progress. Archaeologists too are interested in pre-history where very little written evidences are found. It is almost impossible to identify pre-historical time with specific dates. Archaeologists sometimes try to specify approximate dates of their artefacts through some form of chemical tests, but they are not very reliable. For many historians real history began with the invention of writing.

Sumerians were the first to develop cuneiform method of writing about five thousand years ago. Scholars usually classify Sumerian civilization as the earliest among ancient civilizations. This term ancient is a classification in periodization as some historians divide history into ancient, medieval and modern periods. Some ancient civilizations such as ancient Greece are sometimes referred also as classical Greece. There are other ways of identifying periods in history. Sometimes historians classify historical periods with major specific events. For example, the birth of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) has been identified as the year of elephant when Arabs saw elephants for the first time during an invasion by a Yemeni king. They would have identified other less important events by calculating how many years before or after the year of elephant the other event took place.

Identification of historical periods with dynastic rules also is common with historians. Chinese Ming, European Hapsburg, Islamic Abbasid dynastic rules are commonly referred to by many historians. Historians also refer to group rule such as the Viking period, Saxon rule, or Mongol period etc. Sometimes specific rulers rule also are used: For example, the reign of Alexander the great, or Charlemagne, or Harun al-Rashid are referred. Sometimes historians refer to a certain historical period identifying with developments of specific nature such as Victorian Era of the British history, Napoleonic Era in France or Stalinist Russia or Maoist China. Sometimes historical periods have been identified with specific developments during a specified period. For example, 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe has identified “the Enlightenment” or “the Age of Reason” and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has

been branded as “the Age of Revolutions.” A short period during the French Revolution has been identified as “the Reign of Terror.”

The introduction of the calendar in identifying time period was a major development in world history. Many civilizations developed their calendar: while ancient Mesopotamians followed lunar calendar, the ancient Egyptians developed solar calendar. It is interesting to note that all calendars divided the year into twelve months and all civilizations in history divided the week into seven days. It is not known how this happened. However, Gregorian calendar is the most common one in the world today. Others use Julian, Persian, Hebrew, Chinese, Indian, and Islamic calendars. The Gregorian calendar uses the birth of Jesus as a land mark for identification of historical dates before and after his perceived date of birth. Dates before the birth of Jesus are generally referred to as BC or before Christ. In order to make the date religiously neutral some historians developed the term BCE (before the Common Era), and CE for Common Era to refer to the time since Jesus’ birth. The Islamic *hijri* calendar began with the time of the Prophet (SAW)’s migration from Makkah to Madinah, which was introduced during the reign of the 2<sup>nd</sup> caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab.

While discussing calendar and various historical periods many people raise the question about the beginning of time. Questions may be raised about the beginning of the plant world or the animal world, or even the birth of the planet Earth. Some scholars would like to grasp history with the beginning of time. But for historians it is a difficult job. As mentioned earlier, professional historians are mainly concerned about human history. However, even in history, it is very difficult to ascertain when human beings began to inhabit the earth. This period could have been hundreds or even thousands of years before the development of writing and it is very difficult for historians to ascertain any fact that might have happened before writing developed in history.

### **Human origin in history**

When did human beings emerge in history? Scientists have discovered the existence of humanlike species on earth almost 4.5 million years ago. They are called *hominids*. Scientists also believe that the hominids began to walk on two feet who knew how to use tools like primitive stones and they are called *Homo erectus*. This period is called Paleolithic or Old Stone Age. Scientists also believe that slowly these species became *Homo sapiens* or thinking genus. This period was followed by Neolithic or New Stone Age. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “The starting point of the Neolithic Period is much debated, with different parts of the world having achieved the Neolithic stage at different times, but it is generally thought to have occurred sometime about 10,000 BCE.”

Although the anthropologists would like to put the date for human habitation on earth encompassing hundreds and thousands of years, interest of historians begin only with the Neolithic Age. This is because the agricultural revolution along with domestication of animals seemed to have occurred around that time. There are evidences of earliest organized human habitats only around this time. Ruins of villages such as Jericho (Hirst, n.d.) in Palestine and Çatalhöyük in modern Turkey are examples of such habitation (Hodder, n.d.). However, the most important question in this context is whether human beings appeared in history completely naturally or they were part of a divine design as most religions claim. Did they appear as a group of people from another species or they originated through some form of divine intervention. If there is any divine intervention in the process of the origin of human history, whether that happened in an evolutionary way or in a revolutionary process, are some important issues in this regard.

In the present context, one very important question is about the origin of human speech and inter-human communication. When and how did the human beings learn how to communicate with one another? Anthropologists and other scientists hold diverse opinion about this issue. Some have debated and have tried to demonstrate how various human organs which are involved in speech have slowly evolved over thousands of years. Others have highlighted how human speeches were unique and different from the noise and sound uttered by animals. While the latter view reflects a genuine fact, the former view appears problematic. Human beings are such a creature that cannot survive without other's support even for days, how could they live for thousands of years to develop necessary organs for speech? As opposed to these views, religions simply suggest that God has taught him (mankind) the speech (al-Qur'an, 55: 4). From the Qur'anic perspective, this seems to have happened instantly, not through an evolutionary process. The subject of the relationship between religious teachings and a rational understanding of history is challenging.

### **Sources of history**

Sources are the evidences on the basis of which a historian writes. Like all other human beings, historians are also brought up with their specific backgrounds and occasionally their own bias and prejudice. But historians are supposed to go beyond their old baggage and try to explore all available information on their subject of study. In other words, historians have to consult and examine all sources of information and knowledge. First of all, the historian must have made up his or her mind based on certain knowledge or information. This would be the historian's first source. The historian might have received this knowledge or information from the books he or she has read during school days to the time of

writing his/ her new book on the subject, or from a newspaper article, or from a private letter diary of an active participant in the war. Interestingly many people even now write new books about prophet Muhammad (SAW) who lived in history more than 1400 hundred years ago. These authors do not create new source but what they do is to see the same information or fact in a new light of understanding. This is why it is important to know the background of the historian and his sources.

Historians have more difficulty about sources of information concerning pre-civilizational period. This is mainly because there is no written information about villages such as Jericho and Çatalhöyük. Historians usually rely on archaeologists for information about these Neolithic villages. Also, to an extent, historians rely on archaeologists pertaining to pre-Islamic and pre-Western civilizations. Although historians are able to read most ancient scripts, they have not been able to decipher the language of ancient Indus valley civilization. Historians are able to read languages of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. These writings have been found in clay tablets and in stone inscriptions. But there is no information as to who wrote them and who the rulers were at the time of those writings. Therefore, historians are not able to formulate very accurate and dependable opinion when they write about ancient civilizations. Also one should not forget that, as mentioned in the story of Gilgamesh, many stories survived orally for a long time before they were put into written form. As for Islamic and Western civilizations, these two civilizations came into existence when writing became quite common and there exists plenty of information from various sources to formulate one's opinion from dependable sources.

Then there is the question of prejudice and favouritism on the part of the author. As mentioned earlier, history is what historians understand from his sources. Many history books were sponsored by kings and queens while in power. Obviously most of the times monarchs wanted to promote themselves for legitimacy. In the recent past, some Western countries had attacked Iraq accusing the Iraqi leadership of developing what they called weapons of mass destruction and the Iraqi government was toppled. Later it was found out that the information about Iraq's program for weapons was false. But action was already taken against the Iraqi government. Therefore, a historian must know that truths are sometimes suppressed deliberately. That is why a historian must be very careful and know when, how and who produced his sources.

### **Classification and the method of utilization of sources**

Historical sources may be categorized as primary and secondary sources. Eye-witness accounts, individual memoirs, personal letters, statements and reports by

players of specific events, printed documents related to a topic for research, audio or video recordings of an event under consideration, statistical data on specific reports, data on economic growth, land surveys, account books census reports by governments etc. are all primary sources for historians. Books, articles, reports, films and documents of similar nature become secondary sources for further research on a given topic.

A historian utilizes his or her sources to support findings and viewpoints. He supports his position by citing his sources. A careful historian always ensures the authenticity and reliability of his resources. This can be clearly evidenced in the collection of *hadith* or Sunnah. Sunnah or *sunan* (in plural) is the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings, silent permissions (or disapprovals) of Muhammad (SAW), as well as various reports about his companions, which became the second most important source for Islamic jurisprudence. But before they were formalized many Muslims were using the Prophet's saying to justify their claims. Many times these claims went against the fundamental teachings of Islam. That is why some leading scholars of Islam felt that there was a need for authenticating sayings and deeds of the Prophet (SAW) for the sake of truth. Muhammad al-Bukhari (810-870) and many others among his contemporaries developed a science of authenticating Sunnah and classified sayings and deeds of the Prophet as authentic, sound, weak etc.

The historian should also be able to determine the time and space of his sources. For example, if someone brings a document and claims that the piece was written by Shakespeare, and has been found recently, then the historian should examine the document by conducting a textual analysis. Textual analysis is the method of examining the language, style of presentation and content of the document to ascertain the truthfulness of the document. English language has changed, spelling of certain words have changed since the time of Shakespeare, and it should not be difficult for the historian to verify whether the writing style of the document and that of Shakespeare match or not. Historians are also able to conduct, what has been known as the carbon test of a document. If someone produces some clay tablets and claims that the documents belonged to Mesopotamian king Hammurabi's (r. 1792-1750 BCE) period, the historian should conduct a chemical test called carbon test to verify their truth. The chemical test will determine the tentative date of the document by analyzing the clay tablet. For studies of ancient civilizations these tests are crucial.

Also if a story today claims that in 1916, hundred years ago mobile phones were common, a historian should be able to immediately recognize that the story was false because the cell phone technology did not exist in 1916. Similarly if a

news story describes the city of London or New York having many high-rise multi-storied buildings in 1816, a historian should immediately be able to recognize the deceit because elevators, which are essential for high-rise buildings, did not exist in 1816, and, therefore, height of most buildings at that time did not exceed five or six stories. Basically a historian should carefully examine all his/her sources when evaluating documents.

Historians usually support their arguments by quoting sources as evidence. If the supporting evidence has been produced on the same page below the main text, it is called footnote; and if the evidence is produced at the end of the chapter or the book, it is called endnote. However, the historian uses other's writings without acknowledgement, it would be considered forgery or plagiarism which is a major offence in history writing and students of history must refrain from such acts.

### **History and other academic disciplines**

Historical information is essential for every discipline. That is why history has been called mother of all social sciences and humanities. In fact a good historian is supposed to know, or at least should possess some idea about all disciplines. Before compartmentalization of knowledge into many disciplines, historians used to possess primary knowledge about all fields. That is why historian Ibn Khaldun has occasionally been identified as a sociologist and sometimes as an economist. But academic disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economics, political science, mass communication – all these disciplines heavily depend on history for their primary information.

Not only social sciences but natural sciences such as medicine and engineering, too, need to be equipped with the knowledge of history. A medical doctor needs to know history of the patient as well as of all diseases that a patient might have become victim of. Similarly, engineers also need to know the background and growth of specific technology that they are studying. A businessman or an accountant must know the history of his company or department well in order for him to determine whether the company is making progress or regress.

### **History and pseudo-history**

A distinction need to be made between pseudo history and sources of history. Fiction stories like the story of Gilgamesh may be considered pseudo history. This is so because most of the times fiction writers exaggerate the role of historical characters. But sometimes these fiction stories may provide very good clues to

historical facts. For example, Homer's epic works *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which were written around the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC, describes a war held in the city of Troy on the eastern Mediterranean coast in which the city was destroyed. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century one European businessman, fascinated by Homer's description, decided to find the ruined city. He began to dig in the area described by Homer. Surprisingly the ruins were discovered with all the signs of a war. In this way one historical truth was found out through a fiction story. Although, it is difficult to find all the information about the war but it is known that there was some truth about what Homer wrote.

The question of pseudo history is a challenging issue. It demands a critical but rational and sympathetic mind-set on the part of the student of history to distinguish between history and pseudo history. Some consideration to a similar question may shed some light on the problem. How to distinguish between religiosity and pseudo-religiosity? The Qur'an gives an interesting outlook on the subject. It raises question, "Have you seen those who give lie to religion (al-Qur'an, 107: 1)?" "These are the people who shove orphans away and feel no urge to feed the needy (al-Qur'an, 107: 2-3)," the Qur'an continues. In other words, one must relate ideas and realities, theories and practices on making distinction between real practices and pseudo practices. The Qur'an seems to be demanding the growth of a mind-set. The study of history too helps everybody develop an outlook toward civilization and society.

### **Fields of history**

The discussion about periodization introduced the concepts of ancient, medieval, and modern history. This kind of chronological division of historical studies are classified as fields of history. One may also divide historical studies thematically and geographically. A historian may specialize in any field of historical studies.

A historian of ancient history would usually study civilizations before the rise of Islamic and Western civilizations. In other words they study civilizations in ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece, Rome, China, India and other parts of the world till about 500 CE fall in the areas of ancient civilizations. But a historian may concentrate his/her studies on Chinese history, and study not only ancient China but also medieval and modern China. Such historian would be specializing in the field of the geographical territory of China. One may become an expert on European history, or Islamic/Muslim history, Latin American history or Malaysian history and so on. These historians are concerned not only about the chronological developments in the area, but they also study the language, culture, customs, and other aspects of the area.

Some historians pursue thematic studies in history such as political history, diplomatic history, economic history, military history, social history and so on. History of ideas is called intellectual history. Historians of politics concentrate on political institutions and practices, diplomatic relations and warfare – these subjects have occupied the traditional core of historical studies. Social historians are generally interested in social organizations and behaviour of the people. Gender relations, the role of women or other diverse groups in society, attitude toward social events such as formation of class, social mobility and social stratification – all are parts of social history.

Economic historians usually devote their attention in economic progress and collect statistical data on economic changes and financial records. They study economic policies of governments and international institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. In late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Germany historians developed this field and after extensive debate economic history has emerged as a well-established discipline with its own academic journals.

History of ideas has fascinated many historians. How ideas have motivated people for action and how those actions have resulted into historical changes are subjects of studies of many historians. History of ideas has sometimes even defined periods of history as “the Age of Reason” and the period of “the Enlightenment.” This field of history is called intellectual history. Histories of communism, liberalism, socialism, romanticism, history of the idea of progress – all fall into this category of historical studies.

## **Conclusion**

Importance of studying history cannot be underestimated. It is the storehouse of knowledge. History is vital for all disciplines; it supplies background information for everything that is being studied. Basically, history explains the present and helps understand people and societies. It is only a thorough understanding of history that would enable mankind to comprehend how civilizations have risen and declined and fallen in history. Indeed the Qur’an solicits humanity to learn from history and seek guidance about how to lead a comfortable and successful life. Muslims are taught in the opening chapter of the Qur’an to seek God’s guidance from those that God has favoured, and keep away from those who have gone astray in the past (al-Qur’an, 1: 6-7). The Qur’an, in numerous verses, asks mankind to travel around the earth and study ruins of early civilizations which were materially advanced but yet have vanquished with the passage of time.

History helps formation of identities. Although human family is supposed to be one, they are diverse in race, religion, language and culture. It is possible to

understand these differences only through the study of history. That is why many nations have made the study of history compulsory at their primary and secondary school curriculum. Memories of common suffering and joy always inspire people for stronger bond. A good understanding of history is helpful not only for the formation of one's own group identity; it is also valuable to understand others. Sound knowledge of history is essential for good citizenship. Formation of any successful group demands cooperation and cooperation cannot be secured without ensuring individual dignity and rights. Values such as dignity and human rights on their part demands good citizenship and voluntary submission to rule of law. People have to learn from history because as the literature teaches, "history repeats itself." However, students of history should be very careful in making sweeping statements.

### References

- Burckhardt, Jakob. (n.d.). "Cultural History" at [http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/history/historian/jacob\\_burckhardt.html](http://www.age-of-the-sage.org/history/historian/jacob_burckhardt.html) (Accessed December 12, 2015).
- Encyclopedia Britannica, "Neolithic Period" at <http://www.britannica.com/event/Neolithic-Period> (Accessed December 15, 2015).
- Greaves, et.al, Richard L. (1997). *Civilizations of the World: The Human Adventure*. (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers.
- Hirst, K. Kris, "The Archaeology of the Ancient City of Jericho" at <http://archaeology.about.com/od/jterms/qt/jericho.htm> Jericho (Palestine) (Accessed May 12, 2016).
- Hodder, Ian, n.d. "Mysteries of Catalhoyuk" at <http://www.smm.org/catal/introduction/> (Accessed January 14, 2016).
- Mark, Joshua J. 13 October 2010. "Gilgamesh" at <http://www.ancient.eu/gilgamesh/> (Accessed April 5, 2016).
- Special Dictionary, "Famous quotes/Cicero" at [http://www.special-dictionary.com/quotes/authors/c/cicero\\_rea.htm](http://www.special-dictionary.com/quotes/authors/c/cicero_rea.htm) (Accessed December 12, 2015).
- Perry, et.al., Marvin. (2009). *Western Civilization: Ideas, Politics and Society*. 9<sup>th</sup> Edition. Vol. 2. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- 9/11 Truth. January 19, 2013. Explosive Evidence- Experts Speak Out, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MoXwQl0mns> (Accessed April 20, 2016).