

History and Human Evolution Lecture I of II

The subject of our discussion is the meaning of evolution in history, or in other words, man's social evolution and progress. Men of science assume two types of evolution for man: one of which is biological evolution, about which you may have read in biology and know that man is considered as the most perfect animal and the last link in the natural evolution of animals.

The meaning of biological evolution is clear: it is an evolution that the process of nature has produced without the intervention of man himself and without his asking for it. In this respect there is no difference between man and other animals; since every animal has reached a stage of evolution by a natural and coercive process. The same process has brought man to the stage that we call him a human being, and consider him a specific kind of species as distinct from other species.

But the historical or social evolution means a new process of evolution in which nature does not play the role it played in man's biological evolution. This evolution is an acquired one, namely, an evolution that man has secured by his own effort, and in every period has transferred it to the next generation through teaching and learning, and not through heredity.

The biological evolution has taken place without man's will power and initiative, and has been achieved through a series of laws of heredity. But the social or historical evolution, being acquired by man's effort, has not been handed down from one generation to another, or from zone to zone through heredity, and there is not even a possibility of its being such. It has been accomplished through education, teaching and learning, and primarily through the art of writing.

We see that the Quran swears in the name of the pen and tools of writing¹, and addresses the Prophet thus: "Read in the name of your God, Who created man from clotted blood. Read, and your God is the most exalted; He, who taught with the pen."² This means that God taught man how to use the pen; that is, He granted him the power to make progress in his historical and social evolution.

There is no doubt that human society since its origin, that is, since civilization first began to appear, has continuously progressed and evolved. We all know that like the biological evolution, social evolution, too,

has been gradual, with one difference, and that is, with the passage of time the rate of evolution has increased in speed; in other words, it has followed a course of acceleration. It has moved on and on and has not been stationary, and the motion, too, has not been a fixed one. A car may move at a fixed speed of a hundred kilometers for several hours; but a speed with an acceleration means a gradual increase of speed in which the speed increases every minute.

But although evolution and progress seem an obvious matter, you may be surprised that there have been learned men who have doubted whether what has happened can be called progress or evolution. One may wonder that there should be any room for doubt in this matter. But the reason why they have expressed doubt about it will be discussed later on. Here, it is sufficient to say that although we do not consider their doubt justified and we believe that human society has continued its course of an all-round evolution and is approaching its final phase, at the same time their doubts are not quite without foundation. Nevertheless, we must clarify the cause for this doubt in order to be able to fully understand the meaning of evolution.

What is Evolution?

We must first define evolution. Many matters seem at first so obvious as to require no definition. But when one tries to define them, he finds it very hard and is faced with difficulties. I have no intention of quoting all the definitions which philosophers have given for evolution. There is a fine point in Islamic philosophy which is subject to argument from the viewpoint of the Quran, and that is the difference between “complete” and “perfect”.

We use the word “complete” as the antonym of “defective”, and again we use “perfect” as the antonym of the same word “defective”. But does “complete” mean “perfect”? No. There is a verse in the Quran which is related to the question of *Imamah* and *wilayah*. It says:

“Now We made your religion perfect, and completed Our blessings on you and were content for Islam to be your religion.” (Quran, 5:3)

This shows that the Quran attributes two meanings to “perfection” and “completeness”. The blessings were completed from a defective state, and religion was perfected from a defective condition. But before explaining the difference between the two words, let me first explain the difference between evolution and progress, and then return to this matter.

Is progress the same as evolution, and is evolution identical with progress? They happen to have a difference and you may consider their usage. We sometimes speak of a sickness which is progressing, but we do not say it is evolving. If an army which is fighting in a land occupies a part of it, we say that the army is advancing, but we do not say that it is evolving. Why not? Because there is a sense of exaltation in evolution: evolution is an upward movement, a vertical movement, from a lower level to a higher plane.

But progress and advance is always on a horizontal level. When an army has occupied a territory and added some land to its own possessions, we say that it has advanced, which means that it has moved ahead but on the same plane that it had before. Why do we not say that it has evolved? Because, there is the idea of exaltation in evolution. So, when we speak of social evolution, it means man's social exaltation and not just progress.

Many things may be considered progress for man and society without being evolution and exaltation for the human society. We say this to show that if some scholars have expressed doubts about such progress' worthiness to be called an evolution, their view is not without foundation. Although we do not confirm their view, yet what they have stated is not entirely pointless. Therefore, there is a difference between evolution on the one hand and progress and development on the other; for progress and development are almost similar in meaning.

But the difference between perfect and complete can be explained in this fashion: If something consists of a number of parts, such as a building or a car, as long as all the necessary parts do not exist in it, we say that it is imperfect. But when we place the last part in it, then we can say that it is "complete". In comparison, evolution has many phases and stages.

When a child is born with some defect in his limbs, we consider him defective; but even when he is born with all his limbs complete, it is still considered defective from another point of view; he must pass through many stages of evolution in his education which are for him a form of exaltation and ascension by degrees and steps. So far our discussion was about the definition of evolution in the social and biological sense. But now we deal with other matters in this connection, the most important of which may be stated in three questions:

1. Has man, in his social life and throughout history, achieved evolution and exaltation?
2. Is human society undergoing evolution and will reach a fully evolved state in future?
3. If it is undergoing evolution, what is that ideal society, or, as Plato would say, that utopia of man, and what are its peculiarities?

We can understand the course of history up to the present; but what about the future? Should we close our eyes about the future and say that history inevitably moves on an evolutionary course? Is evolution in nature imposed by time? Is the ship of time voyaging on an evolutionary course without the slightest intervention of man and without any responsibility on his part? Have human beings in the past had no role as beings endowed with free will, freedom of choice and responsibility? Has the role of human beings in the past been secondary and subject to determinism or if there has been no such determining force in the past?

Human beings, by their own free will and choice and their own initiative and planning of their society, have determined an evolutionary course for their society, and have advanced it. This matter of free will

and freedom of human beings in the past should not be forgotten.

Therefore, a group of men are worthy of praise and admiration, and they are those who had the choice to stand against historical evolution, or deprive it of their support, and prefer their personal welfare to the struggle for the sake of progress. But they chose the other way, and freely, by their own choice, followed the way of evolution, and sacrificed themselves. Similarly other human beings should be reproached and even cursed for posing hindrances in the way of this evolution.

If we do not recognize the future and have no plan for it, and if we pay no attention to our responsibility for making history, we too deserve being reproached by future generations. History is made by man, and not man by history. If we have no plan for the future, and do not realize our responsibility for the future of history, no one can promise us that this ship will reach its destination automatically.

The least that can be said is that it may either go ahead or turn backwards. This matter of ability to advance or reverse the course of events, the idea that there isn't a blind coercive force that drives events ahead, is in Islam, and especially in Shi'ism, a question, which from a sociological viewpoint (as I have explained in my book, *Man and Destiny*), may be considered one of the most sublime of Islamic teachings.

The Problem of Bada' (Revision)

In Islam there is an issue called *bada'* (revision). The concept of *bada'* has an apparent meaning which few would regard as acceptable. Some have even criticized the Shi'ah for believing in *bada'*. The meaning of *bada'* is revision in Divine Destiny (*qada'*), meaning that God has not fixed a definite and final form for the course of human history.

In other words, God says to man: "You yourselves are in charge of the fulfilment of Divine Destiny, and it is you who can advance, stop or reverse the course of history." There is no blind determinism either on the part of nature or the means of life or from the viewpoint of Divine Destiny, to rule over history. This is one way of looking at man, his history and destiny.

Therefore, as long as we do not understand the direction of evolution and man's ultimate goal, we cannot speak of evolution and merely state that man is progressing; for then, immediately, the question arises: towards what? If we cannot answer this question, what right do we have to speak of evolution? Don't we study history in order to open a way for the future?

If by studying history we get only so far as to allow it to introduce itself without showing a way for the future, what is the use of history? But we see that the Quran surveys history in a way to show us the path for the future, and this is how it should be. Therefore, our discussion is related to the past up to the present, and then the future. The question of our duty and responsibility is determinable only when, after becoming familiar with the past, we gain an understanding of the future too.

The Evolution of History in the Past

If we regard history from two points of view, there has been indubitable progress of man, if not an evolution. One of them is in the matter of tools and implements of life. Man has certainly made progress in making tools, and, of course, an amazing progress it has been. Once his tools consisted of unhewn stone, which later on was hewn and polished. Today he has attained the present advanced state of technology, craft and industry.

Man has not only advanced in technical skills and achieved stunning progress in production of tools, but he has made such a marvelous progress that if our predecessors and philosophers of a hundred or two hundred years ago had been told that man would advance so much in a hundred years time, as he has today, no one would have believed it.

You may call it whatever you like, either “progress” or “evolution”, there can be no doubt that man has made tremendous progress in making tools, and it may be expected to continue in future too, on condition, however, that it is not, checked by a historic catastrophe, a calamity which is again predicted by some men of learning.

They consider it probable that man's technical and industrial progress will reach a point when man may destroy himself and all his achievements in science and technology, his books, his learning and civilization and all its vestiges. A new type of human being may appear to start life from the beginning. If no such catastrophe occurs, there is no doubt that the creation of tools may further advance to a stage which may not be imaginable today.

This evolution is produced by the evolution of man's experience and his knowledge, for man has made so much progress in his experimental understanding and knowledge of nature that he has been able to conquer nature and turn it into a docile servant. This was one aspect of human progress.

Another aspect of man's evolution (which again may hardly be called “evolution”) is in the relations of social life and the structure of society (by “relations” here is not meant human relationships). Human society has gradually been transformed from a simple one into a complex structure. In other words, in the same way as he has advanced in technical and industrial matters from the simple cars of yesterday to the present day aircrafts and sophisticated spacecrafts, in the same way as in natural evolution a unicellular organism is so simple as compared with an animal like man in bodily structure, human society, too, has changed from a simple to an extremely complex structure.

Some have defined evolution as a process involving two stages: at first, there is an accumulation, that is, a multiplication of parts followed by division, characterized by a movement from homogeneity towards heterogeneity, or, in other words, movement towards organization between parts and organs interconnected by a unifying relationship.

For example, we know that in the process of fertilization, a cell which is formed by the combination of male sperm and female ovum has a simple form at first; then it begins the process of division (accumulation); one cell divides into two, the two into four, the four into eight, the eight into sixteen, and this division goes on. But it is only a question of quantity until a stage is reached when there takes place another form of division; this is, one part becomes the nervous system, another emerges as the heart and system of blood circulation, and so on, and all these organs are interrelated forming an organized unity which is the human body.

In this respect, human society, too, has progressed, whether you may choose to call it 'evolution' or not. That is, the structure of human society has changed from a simple state into something complex. The structure of primitive and tribal societies was very simple. Someone was the chief of a tribe consisting of a number of people, and the chief divided the tasks between them, and these tasks were few in number. But you see that with the progress of science and technology, such division of work has become complicated because there are more tasks and more people to perform them. Compare the existing variety of jobs, tasks, professions and crafts of modern day with those of the societies of a hundred years ago.

Or look at the degree of specialization at the administrative and scientific levels. In the past, a man was able to master all the sciences of his own time. He could become an Aristotle or an Ibn Sina. But now the system of education has undergone such subdivisions, that we have hundreds of the like of Aristotle and Ibn Sina, each a specialist in his own field, who are not the least acquainted with other branches of science and quite unaware of even their existence in the world. This is a characteristic of our time, a quality that removes uniformity and homogeneity from among human beings and replaces it with differences and distinctions.

For, as man creates work, work too builds up man. As a result, although all are human beings living in one society, but they seem to possess different natures, since everyone is dealing with a task which is unknown to another who is engaged in another task. Every one of them seems to live in a different world of his own. The result is that human beings vary from one another. If we speak of progress or evolution in connection with society and its organization and division of labour, skills and talents, again the structure of human society has changed from a simple into a complex and extremely entangled one.

You may, from these remarks, realize that if things go on in this fashion, there is a danger of the creation of so many differences that the unity of mankind will be threatened; that is, human beings will resemble one another only in appearance, but their mental, spiritual, emotional and educational structures will be totally different from one another; and this is a great danger for humanity.

That is why it is said that technological progress has alienated man from himself, and made him a stranger to himself. It has turned man into a creature styled and tailored to the needs of his job and profession, and destroyed human unity. This is in itself a serious problem. In any case, we may say that from the viewpoint of social structure too, societies have evolved in the past. However, here, in addition

to the problem of power and domination over nature and besides the structure of human society and social organizations, there are a number of other problems which are related to human nature, and that is the relationship of individuals with one another.

Human Relationships

Has man made progress in the quality of relationships of human beings with one another in the same way as he has made progress in the creation of tools, and in the complexity of social structure? If he has, then we may call it evolution and exaltation. Have human beings progressed in the sense of co-operation? Does a human being of today feel more co-operative towards others than in the past?

Has he made a proportionate advance in the sense of responsibility towards other human beings? Has man's exploitation of other human beings been really effaced? Or is it that only its form has been altered and that it has increased in degree? Has man's aggression against the rights of others diminished?

Have human relations improved in proportion to the advances made in building tools and with the complexity of social structure? Or have these problems remained the same as before? Or there may be some who claim that not only no progress has been made in this connection, but also there has even been a retrogression? In other words, can it be said in general that human values, and everything that is the criterion of the humanity of man, have advanced proportionately?

Different views have been expressed in this connection; some cynically deny it totally that man has made any progress whatsoever in this respect, for, they say, if the criterion of progress is welfare and happiness, we may hardly call it progress. For example, even in the case of tools, it is doubted whether they have provided man with welfare. As an example, speed is one of the things which has greatly advanced as exhibited by the telephone, airplane and other such things.

But can this improvement in speed be called progress when measured by the criterion of human welfare? Or, since speed is a means, it has produced comfort in one respect; in other respects it has deprived man of welfare: it carries a good man promptly to his destination, but it also carries a wicked man as quickly to his goal and as promptly in his evil purpose. A sound and honest man has found stronger hands and quicker legs.

A wicked man, too, has the same advantages. These means have made possible the transfer of a criminal from one part of the world to another part in a few hours, to kill thousands or even millions of people at once. What, then, is the final conclusion? Though I am not in favour of this cynicism, yet I wish to explain why it has been expressed by some. For example, is the progress in medicine a true progress? In appearance, it is, for I see that when a child suffers from diphtheria, right drugs and proper medical treatment are readily available.

This is progress. But some people like Alexis Carl who measure these things with the criterion of

humanity, believe that medicine is gradually weakening human species. They say: In the past, human beings had resistance against diseases; the weak were destroyed and the strong remained alive, and this made successive generations stronger and resistant to diseases, and also prevented the unnecessary increase of population.

But now, medicine is artificially preserving weak persons who otherwise would have perished and were really condemned to death by nature. Therefore, the successive generations are not fit to survive, and so every generation becomes weaker than its predecessor. A child born in the seventh month of pregnancy is by the law of nature condemned to death; but now medicine, with its progress and means, preserves this baby.

But what will become of the next generation? Moreover, there is the question of over-population. It happens that those who are fitter for the improvement of the human race are destroyed and those who are not competent to bring about this improvement somehow manage to survive. This is the reason for doubt in this matter.

Another Example

In connection with the mass media, one may think it wonderful to sit in a corner and at the right moment hear the news in which he is interested. But remember that this same thing creates so much anxiety and worry for human beings; for, in many matters, it is more advisable for man not to hear such news.

For instance, in the past the people who lived in Shiraz were unaware of the flood which overran Ghuchan, drowning so many people and making others homeless. But now they learn of it immediately and feel sad and anxious. There are thousands of such unpleasant happenings occurring in various parts of the world.

It was from the viewpoint of human welfare, and welfare as a criterion that learned men have doubted whether to regard speed as a measure of progress and evolution or not. However, we have nothing to do with these problems, for as we believe, there is ultimately an evolution and all these difficulties may be overcome—a subject which we will discuss later.

Thus, in the question of human relationships, we cannot say that any progress or evolution has taken place, or, even if it has occurred, it is not proportionate to the progress made in making tools and to the growth in social organization.

The Relation of Man with Himself

Another question is the relation of man with himself, which is termed 'ethics'. If we do not say that all the happiness of man lies in the establishment of a good relationship with oneself—and we do not say so because it would be an exaggeration—yet we may say that if the means of man's happiness are

compared with one another to find a percentage of role of every factor, a greater part of human happiness would be found to lie in the relation of man with himself, or with his “self”: the relationship of man with his animal aspect.

For, man, in spite of his humanness and the human values inherent in his nature, is also an animal; that is, he is an animal on which humanity has been imposed. In other words, he is an animal, which, by the side of his animality, also possesses humanity.

The question arises here whether the humanity of man is subordinate to his animal side, or if his animality is subservient to his humanity. The Quran says:

He who purifies the soul indeed attains deliverance, and one who corrupts it certainly fails (91:9–10)

The problem here is of self-purification, which means not being captivated by greed and concupiscence of the self, and not being in the clutches of one's base animal characteristics. As long as man has not evolved ethically and has not attained internal emancipation from his own animality, it is not possible for him to establish good relations with other human beings. Good human relations can come into existence when man liberates himself from the captivity of other human beings, and is also able to abstain from subjugating other human beings to himself.

So far we have discussed four points:

1. The relation of man with nature, in which he has made progress.
2. The relation of man with his society, which has progressed from the viewpoint of social structure and organization.
3. The relation of man with other human beings, and the quality of his relations with other members of his kind, which depends again on his spirituality and is linked with the substance of his humanity. In this matter there is doubt as to whether he has made progress or not: that his progress in this sphere has not been on a par with other aspects is beyond doubt; the real question is whether he has made any progress at all.
4. The relation of man with himself, which is the subject of ethics.

The Role of Prophets and religion on the Historical Evolution

Has man of today overcome his animality more than his ancestors in the past, and have the higher human values been realized in his existence? Or, has the quality of human existence been better in the past? The role of the prophets in the historical evolution, their role in the past and in the future, becomes clear in this connection.

Here we can discover the role of religion in the past and thereby find out its role in the future, and on the basis of scientific and sociological evidence, we can guess whether man requires religion in future for his evolution or not; because, the survival or annihilation of every thing is subject to its being able to fulfill human need. This principle has been stated by the Quran and is affirmed by science. The Quran says:

“As for the scum, it vanishes as jetsam, and what profits men abides in the earth ...” (13 :17)

There is a parable which I have repeatedly used in my lectures, and that is the parable of flood and the foam on water. It says that the foam disappears quickly and the water remains. Right and wrong are compared to water and foam, and what is beneficial remains, and what is useless disappears.

The question whether religion will survive in the future is related to its role in human evolution, that is, in the evolution of his essence, his spirituality and humanity and the evolution of good relation of man with himself and with other human beings—something which cannot be replaced by anything else, either now or in future.

The question, therefore, is that, either, in the future, human society will dissolve and mankind will be effaced from the face of earth as a result of collective suicide, or human society will attain its true destiny, which is an all-round evolution (evolution in his relation with nature, evolution in awareness, in power, in liberty, in emotions and sentiments and other kinds of human feelings). We believe that this evolution will be achieved—a belief which, in the first place, we have obtained under the inspiration of our religious teachings.

In a lecture entitled “*The Significance of Occult Aids in Human Life*” I have stated the point that this optimism concerning the future of humanity and human evolution and man's deliverance from reaching a dead-end, cannot be provided by anything except religion. It is the role of religion in human life which alone guarantees the evolution in the human essence of man's being.

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