

Editorial

Historical thinking, a necessary tool for us to make sense of an increasingly complex world, is on a path of decline across the world. In a recent *New Yorker* article entitled “The Decline of Historical Thinking” (February 4, 2019), Eric Alterman, an English Professor at CUNY and a public intellectual, bemoaned the nosedive that enrollment in history departments has taken in universities across the United States. For the past decade, history has been declining more rapidly than any other major and across all ethnic and racial groups, even as more and more students attend college. The steep decline in history graduates (about a third!) becomes especially visible after 2011, presumably in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis when students and parents at the lower rungs of society began to worry about the financial return of investment in a college education. History is the top loser, but it is not the only one; in fact, nearly the same rate of decline is evident in other humanities fields including area studies, languages, philosophy, and, to a slightly lesser extent, social sciences (political science, anthropology, sociology, IR, education). The winners, not surprisingly, are STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math), particularly computer science and health related majors.¹ This trend is not a great surprise in itself. What is unexpected, however, is that the decline is not uniform. In elite universities in the United States, the humanities majors are thriving; history remains among the top declared majors at Yale, for instance. The educated elite, in other words, are becoming systematically differentiated from the vast majority of people (“the demos”) in a powerful democracy, one that still sets intellectual and political trends in the world, and one

whose military strength still decides the fate of nations, social movements, and mass aspirations around the globe. As a trend-setter, the United States influences (but also reflects and amplifies) developments in European countries and elsewhere, as the rise of ethnic nationalism makes amply evident in Western Europe, Russia, India, and elsewhere. The trend over the last few years of angry, nativist, jingoistic, and uneducated masses turning against and overtaking smug, globalist, educated, and self-centered elites in the Western world, in other words, is about to get worse.

My concern is not limited to the woes of higher education in the United States. Rather, it is about the problem of inequality in education and understanding of the world that is nearly as dire as that of income and wealth inequality and the resultant hysterias of the kind that produced the two World Wars and escalated the Cold War.

It is not news that humanities education allows us to make sense of the human experience different from our own, of an increasingly interpenetrated world in which everyone has become a minority, and every identity is hyphenated. As historians may remind us, this state of affairs may have been the norm in the long view of history, where homogeneities of the kind produced by the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century are the exception (and therefore, in and of themselves, not worrisome). History as well as other forms of social knowledge—proper, academic knowledge with respect for both facts and interpretations presented with methodological rigor and reciprocal acknowledgement of various viewpoints—is perhaps the best antidote to ethnic nationalism, racism, national propaganda dressed as history, and religious extremism, bigotry, and sectarianism.

Yet, lest we get carried away by this halcyonic image of the humanities, we should not forget that “the humanities” have their roots in that greatest sin of man, the collective narcissism and self-worship of the human race called *humanism*. Humanities education has likewise been a vehicle for secularization and delivery of Enlightenment propaganda, namely, the myth of progress, the futility of tradition and the past as a guide to the future or truth, and the opposition of reason to all tradition. As atheist philosopher John Gray has argued, the myth of moral progress (as opposed to material progress based on accumulating scientific knowledge and technological know-how, which he admits is a fact) has been far more historically destructive than any religion.²

Admittedly, rigorous and self-critical trends in the very disciplines spawned by the Enlightenment have come a long way, beginning the colossal task of dismantling its last but most stubborn myths. As the Enlight-

enment's own children are beginning to take it to task, its redemption is farther from sight than ever, as its sins—killing off the wisdom and practices of the past, providing justification for rapacious colonization, eliminating human wisdom worldwide—all in the name of progress have led to irreversible damage to natural and intellectual worlds. How, then, can the humanities be defended? Why should there be any redemption sought for the Enlightenment ideals of reason, freedom, and scientific inquiry, laced as they all were with Voltairian arrogance?

The question, I believe, is fundamental, that is, theological, as it touches on one's beliefs about the nature of life, about one's notion of history. For some burgeoning counter-myths, modernity is the devil incarnate: all that was premodern in a sublime, uncontaminated form was good, enchanted, god-infused; and all that is modern is secular, disenchanting, crass, and godless. Yet for Muslim scholars who study and imbue the tradition of Islamic learning rather than worship a phantasm called "tradition," such a crass temporalization of good and evil is not merely wrong and silly, it is dangerous. From the very first stories of humankind, starting with Adam and Eve's disobedience to the fratricide of Abel by Cain, evil, culminating in the worship of false gods in every age, is ever-present, as is the possibility of good. All human eras and endeavors, therefore, are potential building blocks for a God-centered civilization, even those whose founding salvo was rebellion against it.

For such Islamic scholars, therefore, recording the human experience and ruminating over its contents (the activity of the humanities) is not only a worthy endeavor but a necessary one. It is necessary precisely because the very building blocks of our imagination, the very furniture of our minds, the very categories of our thought, have become nearly inseparable from the new scientific cosmology and notions of causality, much as the old building blocks were inseparable from other shared ideas of how the world works. The old Galenic medicine was incorporated into the world of Islam; Muslims participated in and indeed *Islamized* that body of knowledge.

The fields of the humanities and social sciences, laced with theological (or anti-theological) claims as they are, are necessary for the Muslim scholars (the 'ulama') as well as the middle classes of the "secularly" educated Muslim consumers of Islamic knowledge, in order to be able to both participate in as well as deconstruct the secular human bodies of knowledge. It is in this context that the decline of the humanities in the American universities must be seen, namely, as a threat that will render the masses of

westerners ever more xenophobic and uninformed, yet also as an opportunity for Muslim intellectuals and institutions to take up the baton.

One of the chief tasks of an active and functional humanities education system in a society or civilization (a collection of societies) is the balancing of “facts” and “truths.” By facts, I mean knowledge that is established by human instruments, either through direct observation or through dedicated systems of knowledge, such as science, and institutional arrangements for establishing or vetting social facts, such as investigative journalism. Fact is to be contrasted with truth, a deeper statement of reality maintained through complex social and religious systems, culture, and tradition. Truth has a natural affinity to tradition because it is timeless, and therefore, often sought after in the ancients’ wisdom. It is in this sense that the ancient Greek authors like Hesiod associate the speech of *mythos* with truth (*alethea*) and the speech of *logos* (rational argument) with lies and dissimulation. In Homer, *logos* refers to speech that is designed to placate someone and aimed at dissuading warriors from combat.³ Poetry, on this view, is (often) truthful, reason is (often) sophistry.

This Greek sentiment is contradicted or at least nuanced by the Qur’an, where poetry is (often) false because its utterers do not do what they say, and wander in valleys of fantasy rather than search for the truth; except the believing ones who act righteously (Q. 26:224–226). Allah also rejects the label myth (*asāṭīr*) for the Qur’an: it is not mere myth but truth, one that will be fulfilled in time. In Islam, then, truth and fact come together. The Qur’anic world is one of theological optimism, where the good prevail and facts, therefore, are reconciled to truth, if momentarily—in contrast to religious traditions in which this world’s facts are always deceptive, its struggles being the theater of fallen humanity, where facts never reflect truth.

To return to the distinction between truth and fact, I can scarcely do better than quote a rabbi I once heard speak on the subject: *fact* is the case from the human perspective, whereas *truth* is the case from the divine perspective. Without God (or more properly, when God is replaced by false gods), truth is impossible. The field of humanities—history, literature, interpretation, poetry—is deeply theological because it balances facts with *its* truths; when these truths have no divine foundation, it serves as the vehicle to seek alternatives. It is not always false for that reason: it has the potential to be both true and false. Humans, after all, sometimes seek in poetry and literature those truths that their inherited dogma or calcified philosophy do not offer.

Human societies that sever relationship to either facts or truths become unsustainable in themselves and dangerous to others. No serious human enterprise can be sustained without constantly maintaining a balance between deeper truths and facts. Not even natural science. As Thomas Kuhn argued in his groundbreaking *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), science too functions based on “truths,” called paradigms, which are equivalent to the grand narratives that help generate questions and explain the data obtained as a result.

The distinction between what I am calling fact and truth is subtle but supremely important, even if its appreciation is often implicit and expressed in different idioms. A piece of fiction may be true, whereas a factual anecdote may be untrue. Take, for instance, the simple, widely observed fact that bad guys often win, that dishonesty and cruelty seem to pay well, that narcissists, liars, and cheats often get more in life than do self-effacing, honest, modest, and compassionate human beings. This fact, widely observed, is resisted by moral humans everywhere and in all ages through deeper truths, sometimes told through stories. Stories help us see the bigger picture as it unfolds in time. In the story of Islam, all wrongs are set right by God at the end of earthly time, and often in our own lifetime, in response to our moral struggle.

No ethical truth (here, that good conduct is desirable because beneficial in the end) will survive a moment in the real world if it is abandoned at the first empirical example of a contradiction, such as a bad guy winning and a good guy losing. Parents teach their children the fundamental truth of all ethics that opposes purely utilitarian and selfish conduct: the good guys ultimately win in some way; being good is in some way beneficial. Even if they do not possess lucid faith in divine or cosmic accountability, humans have always found a way to this truth. The intergenerational survival of families and communities requires going beyond facts and believing in the truths of reciprocity, gratitude, and patience. The fact of might-is-right, interpreted in isolation without the knowledge of final endings, evidences the triumph of self-serving, unethical behavior, and must be overcome by the strength of deeper truths, often truths beyond the confines of material life, be it the Hindu notion of *karma* or the Abrahamic religions’ notion of divine reward and punishment.

Facts, therefore, must be resisted with deeper truths. But the opposite is also equally true. If our “truths” contradict facts persistently, then they become myths. Myths can become dangerous. The fact of anthropogenic climate change, for instance, nearly unanimously agreed-upon by scien-

tists and now increasingly observed in our daily experiences in the form of actualized scientific prophecies, has not convinced the most scientifically-advanced society in the world of its facticity. For reasons ranging from financial (that is, short-term) self-interest to democracy's fundamental limitation in dealing with long-term challenges, and liberalism's fundamental limitation in responding to collective rather than individual problems, the response to climate change unleashed by the Industrial Revolution and its continuous rampage down to the twenty-first century has been too little, too late. But even as the liberal (i.e., educated) elite begin to respond, in part due to the proper alignment of political interests, the capitalist form of this democracy has made an effective response impossible. But it is also in large part the religious "truths" of conservative Christianity which refuse to admit the fact of climate change. Who can deny that the great bounty of capitalism has enriched Christians, allowing them to missionize among the wretched poor worldwide, which it has also created and continues to proliferate? Any society that becomes impervious to facts in defense of its "truths" becomes a threat to itself and to others. Nor can a society be attained without truths, and it can be no better than the quality of its "truths." The problem is not the disregard of facts (for there are many, contradictory facts), but an imbalance between truths and facts. The Christian Right has lashed back against the liberal mainstream of science that has been overplaying its hand for nearly a century, presenting its versions of facts as absolute truths all the while claiming to be nothing more than a neutral collector of facts.

Walter Lippmann warned about a century ago, in his seminal "Liberty and the News," that "Men who have lost their grip upon the relevant facts of their environment are the inevitable victims of agitation and propaganda. The quack, the charlatan, the jingo . . . can flourish only where the audience is deprived of independent access to information." Cultural commentators have lately entertained us with the phenomenon of "truthiness," as having taken over the political side they disagree with. The attitude of "truthiness"—of preferring "truths" over facts—has a rationale. We can never know enough about what we need to know. Therefore, we create frames of truths, what Kuhn would call 'paradigms'. When (under what conditions) does "truth" become truthiness, and what is needed to avoid truthiness, are the real questions. Truths that help us make sense of facts can withstand contradiction by some facts, but ultimately, when facts are routinely violated, when lies are systematically ingrained, the myth or truth for which facts are scorned also dies. It becomes a falsehood, and then tyranny.

Scholars have long observed the phenomenon of how the human mind deals with facts, or rather, how it prefers not to. Another *New Yorker* article (February 27, 2017) is tellingly entitled, “Why facts don’t change our minds: New discoveries about the human mind show the limitations of reason.” The authors of the book *The Enigma of Reason* (Harvard University Press, 2017) argue that “reason is not geared to solitary use, to arriving at better beliefs and decisions on our own. What reason does, rather, is help us justify our beliefs and actions to others, convince them through argumentation, and evaluate the justifications and arguments that others address to us.” They argue that “reason is biased in favor of what we already believe, [and] it may lead to terrible ideas and yet is indispensable to spreading good ones.” The reason for this poor performance of independent, individual reason is, the authors argue, that this faculty has evolved as a means for the survival of the group, not of individuals. The small amount of good news they intimate is this: we can train ourselves to be better reasoners, if and only if the groups of which we are a part can accept and encourage fact-finding and reasoning. We are not born rational, but we can be cultivated, trained, nourished, and challenged into become more truthful reasoners.

Put differently, one conclusion we can draw is that human beings are not rational animals; rather, we are *rationalizing* animals. Although empirical science has only recently caught up, theorists and philosophers have long recognized this trait of humans. Every culture needs to find its way out of truthiness, but all such escapes will be temporary and contingent. Such conditions are met only for fleeting moments in history; we witness brief islands of “factual truths” in the humanity’s ocean of “truthiness.” I do not mean to ameliorate the problems raised by aversion to facts in the name of our favorite “truths,” but rather give a realistic assessment of how often and why people turn to myths and conspiracy theories. A twisted attitude toward facts is not a preserve of the any one age or political orientation, even if it gets worse under certain conditions.

As one Muslim theologian, al-Ghazālī, famously argued, the heart is to the intellect what the king is to the vizier; the king gives the objectives, and intellect goes about finding means, justifications, and reasons for it. The task, according to Islamic theorists, is for the heart to *love* truth, so that the mind labors to attain it. We must nurture the capacity to process facts, which might require giving up our cherished myths. Muslim scholars have long undertaken this perilous journey to face the facts in order to really know the truth, which is why one of the most important of God’s names in Islamic spiritual tradition is *al-Ḥaqq*, the Truth.

This means confronting myths that surround us, including those that we hold ourselves, by a systematic development of inquiry and learning. The education that the humanities provide, namely the creation, discovery, and reception of stories—whether factual stories in the form of history or truth-seeking stories in the form of fiction—in which human beings confront life is perhaps the best vehicle to nurture this love of truth and reasoning. Equally important are institutions that undertake the task of investigation of facts: universities, seminaries, investigative and locally-grounded journalism, and scientific and intellectual freedom. Facts in a complex world are increasingly beyond the critical evaluative oversight of ordinary individuals, no matter how well-educated. When widespread trust in such institutions breaks down, populism and demagoguery and conspiracy theories take their place. This is the world we now inhabit nearly everywhere. We ought to get busy nurturing families, communities, cultures, and institutions that cherish both facts and truths.



This issue features two articles and a forum essay. Kareem Rosshandler's "A Review of Contemporary Arabic Scholarship on the Use of *Isrā'iliyyāt* for Interpreting the Qur'an" is an important, albeit initial, exploration into the ways in which the use of Israelite tradition has been seen in Qur'anic exegesis among classical and modern Muslim exegetes. Rosshandler classifies the exegetes' reception of Israelite lore into three categories: moderate acceptance, minimalist acceptance, and total rejection. He raises pertinent questions about the context and motives of the modern exegetes' preferences for their approaches, and invites us to reopen this important area of inquiry.

Abbas Ahsan's "Quine's Ontology and the Islamic Tradition" is a meticulous philosophical treatment of a fundamental point: whether naturalist philosophy, particularly in its Quinean form, is commensurable with the Islamic notion of God as expressed in certain dominant theological forms where God is believed to be absolutely transcendent. Ahsan's response is in the negative. In so arguing, Ahsan contends that Islamic theology may be an entirely different sort of exercise than the Christian analytical theology which has recently resurfaced. Rather than an account of the various notions of theology (namely, conceptions of God and His attributes) in Islam, Ahsan's remarkably well-argued and daring article focuses on American philosopher W.V.O. Quine's emphatically naturalist version of analytic philosophy, showing that it is incapable of accounting for, and incommensu-

rate with, an utterly transcendent idea of God. For non-philosophers, this argument will require a careful, patient reading but one entirely worth it since it has great significance for scholars in Islamic studies and theology in general.

Finally, in a refreshing and provocative essay, “Islam in English,” Oludamini Ogunnaike and Mohammed Rustom make a case for new vocabulary that could express, not merely describe, Islam in English.

Ovimir Anjum, Editor, American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences
Imam Khattab Chair of Islamic Studies
Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies
Affiliated Faculty, Department of History
University of Toledo, Toledo, OH

Endnotes

1. B. M. Schmidt, “The History BA since the Great Recession: The 2018 AHA Majors Report,” in *Perspectives on History*, November 26, 2018, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/december-2018/the-history-ba-since-the-great-recession-the-2018-aha-majors-report>.
2. John Gray, *Enlightenment’s Wake* (Routledge Classics, 2007 [orig. 1995]); also Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (Granta Books, 2003).
3. Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth* (1999), quoted in Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 26-28.