

Why do Muslims study history?

Jumu'a Speech | 15th October 2025 | Ashton Central Mosque

Salawāt

In the Holy Qur'an and Sunna, we are told how difficult the Day of Judgement will be. It is a Day when a mother will flee from her own children, a Day when each person will be drowning in their own sweat. The only salvation on that Day will be at the blessed feet of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). He told us in advanced how to win his proximity on that Day:

أولى الناس بي يوم القيامة أكثرهم عليّ صلاة

The closest to me on the Day of Judgement is the one who sends most *salawāt* upon me.

Friday is the best of all days. In addition to the religious duties we do on this day - the Salah, the Surah al-Kahf, the bath, the clean clothes and more - we also send salutations and blessings upon the Best of all Creations ﷺ

الصلاة والسلام عليك يا رسول الله

Studying history - introduction

We Muslims take the study of history very seriously. When we look for inspiration, we remind ourselves of historical figures, not least the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and his noble Companions. The opinions of our pious predecessors matter in *aqidah*, *fiqh* and *akhlaq*. Ibn Khaldun, Hafiz Ibn Kathir and Imam al-Dhahabi were all renowned scholars of Islam; they were all outstanding historians too.

Today we will analyse briefly why history is important for Muslims. Before that there are three questions worthy of our reflection:

- (i) Why does the Qur'an contain so many stories, many from thousands of years ago? What purpose do they serve for us Muslims living now?
- (ii) Today, if a student wants to study political philosophy in any university in the world, then they will undoubtedly study Plato, Aristotle and Socrates. These figures lived three thousand years ago. So why do we study them?
- (iii) The *Ahl al-Sunna* take great pride in marking the *Urs* of the great *Awliya* that have lived in the past, like the figures of Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Jilani and Khwāja Gharib Nawaz (ra). What is the reason for this? What benefit do we derive from looking at their lives today?

Islam on history

For us Muslims, studying history is pivotal. Allah and His Messenger (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) have taught us three facts about history, all of which are very important today in the current climate:

- a. Human behaviour for most part never changes.
- b. History is cyclical, not linear.
- c. In materialism, history testifies that we are getting more advanced and better. In spiritualism, we are getting worse.

Point one: Human behaviour does not change.

Humans have always behaved in a certain way. Nothing has changed. This explains why Allah will not send a new prophet. If human behaviour *did* change, He would send new prophets to reflect that change. But the very fact that Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is the final Messenger until the Day of Judgement indicates that his Sunna is sufficient until then. It is sufficient because by far and large, human behaviour does not change. In any given society, culture, norms, practices, eating habits and language do change over time. Seldom do humans change. The Seven Deadly Sins outlined in the Bible 2000 years ago are still headlines today. Qarun was the ultimate show-off, as explained in the Qur'an. There are more show-offs today than ever before, thanks to Social Media and the Smart Phone. Fir'awn caused a genocide during his despotic rule. The same is happening today unfortunately. No one understood the human condition better than our Master, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him. And because human behaviour does not

change, it means his example, biography and inspiration still counts today. If anything, it is more important than ever before.

Point two: History repeats itself.

History is cyclical not linear. What this means is that if something happened in the past, there is a good chance it will happen again. This is why analysing what may happen tomorrow in society must also include an analysis of what *has* happened in the past. Today, the current political and social climate is not new. In fact, it closely resembles what happened only one hundred years ago:

1920s/1930s	Present day
1929 Great Wall St crash leads to global misery	2008 -US Mortgage collapse leads to misery
People lose jobs. They find a scapegoat in the Jews.	People lose jobs. They find a scapegoat in immigrants, refugees and Muslims
This led to the Great Depression of the 1930s	Mental illness
This then led to the appeal of Protectionism, Nationalism and the appeal of the Far Right	The Far Right has returned in all areas of the western world
This climate produced evil leaders like Hitler & Mussolini	Trump. Boris Johnson. Le Pen. Farage.
All this ultimately resulted in WWII	???

For Muslims this point is important. We always study the lives, contributions and lessons of the great Muslims of the past because they are a great indication of how to live in the present. The problems we face today are not radically different to the ones we have faced in the past. History is a brilliant guidebook on how to deal with the present and future.

This is why an *Urs* is important. An *Urs* is a window to the past. We commemorate an *Urs* to learn how the great figures of the past dealt with problems and calamities. Today, we face the external enemy as well as the internal. Ala Hazrat Imam Ahmad Raza Barelwi faced the same. In India, he had to deal with British Colonialism, the external enemy, and Wahhabism, the internal enemy. How did Ala Hazrat fight these two? By education - writing, teaching, inspiring and walking the path of academic excellence. The poor and underprivileged are oppressed today. By studying the life of the likes of Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Hasan Ajmeri - affectionately known as Gharib Nawaz (the benefactor of the poor) - we can truly learn how we should truly the poor and needy today.

Point three: In materialism, life is progressive. In spiritualism life is regressive.

Undoubtedly, we are living in a faster, swifter and more convenient world. Our homes, cars and gadgets are infinitely better than that of yesteryear. This is material advancement. However, the same cannot be said for development in our behaviour, our morality and decency. In spiritualism, man is getting worse. In the *ruhani* realm, the past is always better than today.

Our Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) described his generation as the best ever. He then said ‘then the ones after that, then the ones after that.’ In other words, the closer one was to the Prophet’s generation, the more pious and god-fearing the people were. The further we move away from his time, the harder it will be to find godly men. In an age void of spiritualism, an *Urs* is an excellent means of gaining inspiration from the pious figures of the past.

Conclusion

After this analysis, we are now in a better position to answer the three questions poised at the beginning.

- The reason why there are so many stories in the Qur'an is because they are still stories that matter today. Qur’anic stories are timeless. They are never outdated.
- The reason why universities still teach Plato and Aristotle today is because human behaviour has not really changed. Only the weather changes.
- The reason why we mark the *Urs* of celebrated Muslim figures is because they belonged to a better generation of believers, and thus they are better role models for us today.

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