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# Malek Bennabi's Contribution to Islamic Thought

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A century has passed since abolishment of Ottoman Caliphate, an event that proved the mettle of West and set forth never ending debate over reasons for Muslim Civilization to fall behind in race of progress and development from the West. Many brilliant minds had presented their theories and ideas over downfall and revival of Muslim World since 1<sup>st</sup> World War. Malek Bennabi, an Algerian philosopher and intellectual was a product of same colonialism which exploited and suppressed the indigenes. He is among rare breed of Muslim thinkers in a sense that he had witness modern inventions and technological creations unfolding before his eyes. He had extensive interest in the history, religion, sociology, philosophy, science, culture and technology. While pursuing education in French school he resumed his Islamic education in Madrasa, where he got acquainted with Nahda movement, which help him to conceptualise his unique ideas and systematic approach toward causes of 'al-Takhalluf' (cultural, economic and social retardation). This paper delves into thoughts behind his compiled works where he describes the culture as a medium to become progressive through ethical and technical values. He held responsible the prevalent ideology for the quiescence and perversion of society. Unfortunately, due to his work being in Arabic and French, even in translation his technical terminologies and content is intellectually higher for general readers remained little known in Muslim masses. Malek Bennabi coined the term 'Post-Almohad Man' to denote Muslims of modern world- lost of identity and progressive ideas. This article is an attempt to present Malek Benabi as assessable to all readers and introduced Muslims with his theories for Muslims and Modernism reconciliation.

**Key Words:** Ottoman Caliphate, Colonialism, Nahada, al-Takhalluf, Post-Almohad Man

## **Introduction**

Malek Bennabi was an Algerian writer and philosopher who specialised in writing about Muslim society and the causes of the decline of Muslim civilization. Malek Bennabi claimed that the dearth of innovative ideas in Islamic thinking led to what he called civilizational bankruptcy. He argued that Islamic society needed to transform into a setting where people feel empowered if it was to regain its past splendour. A Muslim needed to believe that his hard work and inventiveness would be rewarded in order to fulfil both his spiritual and material goals. Bennabi was born in 1905 in the Algerian city of Constantine. He lived his formative years there and in Tebessa (near the Tunisian border). After finishing public school in 1925, he travelled to France to study engineering. Before moving back to Algeria, he resided there during the 1930s and 1940s. In addition, he spent the middle of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s in Egypt, giving him a background in both French and Arab schooling. He published a number of autobiographies that described his upbringing and education in Egypt and France. He also pursued studies in religion, the social sciences, and humanities. His political, theological, and sociological thinking was shaped and influenced by these studies.<sup>1</sup> He saw the development of contemporary scientific and technological creations which changed the course of the human society. He was prompted by this to consider the issue of culture in the early nineteenth century. He took a straightforward approach, instead of simply repeating earlier discoveries, he looked for the fundamentals of culture and the origins of civilisation. Bennabi, whose works appeared in newspapers, magazines, and a book, had considerable sway in Algeria in the 1940s and among the fundamentalists with French education who attended the University of Algeria in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>2</sup> The Algerian philosopher Malek Bennabi serves as a sobering example of the brave but frequently futile endeavours made by lone intellectuals to create a critical discourse on culture in the Arab world that is untethered from the forces of colonialism and nationalism. Bennabi wrote extensively about the decline and rise of Islamic civilization. Because he produced most of his works in French, he is typically left out of studies on contemporary Arab thought; nonetheless, he is currently enjoying a renaissance among proponents of a liberal reform of Islam and for his thoughts on Afro-Asian cooperation in the 1950s.<sup>3</sup>

## **Malek Bennabi on Civilization**

The definitions of civilization offered by Bennabi are numerous, come from several angles, and are multifaceted phenomena. A society's moral and material conditions that

enable it to give each of its citizens the social protections required for their development are collectively referred to as its civilization. The term "civilization" refers to a balance between the ethical and material facets of human existence. In contrast to how anthropologists typically define civilization, Bennabi did not base his assessment of it solely on its material or moral and spiritual aspects. He was rather conscious of the significance of the whole of all conditions. "Self-force that refines the primitive features within the individual and societal context" is what civilization is.<sup>4</sup> It is merely "the ability to carry out a specific mission and accomplish a particular function".<sup>5</sup> It is a type of psychological and mental force that organises human potential and vitality to meet development and progress's requirements. As a result of civilization, people are able to manage their behaviours and energies and channel them for the good of society. According to Bennabi, civilization is fundamentally an idea and a plan for organised labour. To address a society's pressing issues, it stimulates social capacities. According to Bennabi, civilization is a social force that has a significant impact on how people and societies grow. It is the culmination of both the moral and material circumstances. These elements are not provided by the person; rather, society supplies them, creates civilization, and aids the individual in fulfilling his historical function as a force for civilization. In his definition, Bennabi places society above the individual. According to him, societies or groups rather than individuals are the ones who may start the process of civilisation and advance humanity's historical development. For human actions in the world of history, society provides the true meaning. It makes up the progressive environment that supports the individual in doing his duties in the form of a mission and a function.

According to Bennabi, the formula "Civilization = Man + Soil + Time" captures the structure-determining equation of civilisation. It provides us with the fundamental components of any action or creation of civilization. The formula Civilisation = Man + Soil + Time shows that the issue of civilization can be broken down into three main issues: the issue of man, the issue of land, and the issue of time. Hence, settling the issue or question of civilization could not be accomplished by gathering and stockpiling its goods, but rather by addressing its three core issues.<sup>6</sup> Bennabi asserts that if we examine all the byproducts of civilization, we arrive at the following equation: All byproducts of such a civilization = all men involved + all varieties of soil (matter) + all controlled periods of time. Bennabi realised that all things or objects that humans

produce are the result of three elements: man (Insn), soil (Turb), and time (Waqt) (ibid). Every society has these three elements, which together make up the foundations that allow any society to start the process of becoming civilised. Bennabi believed that it was not necessary for us to consider the goods and objects of a civilization when making plans for it. Instead, we ought to consider three factors: time, soil, and man. Only until we scientifically address these three problems—creating the human personality, using the soil, and managing time—will civilization be able to offer the support and social services that people require to grow.<sup>7</sup> The three components are the fundamental principles that Allah (SWT; Subhanahu Wa ta'ala; Glory be to Allah) has given to every individual as societal wealth. As long as "the three basic values: man, soil, and time (at the time of suffering) in the hands of the people... the people, without a doubt, has the key of his fate," he believes.<sup>8</sup>

Bennabi was aware of a fourth ingredient that was required for the three elements to interact dynamically positively or negatively to create processes that were either civilising or de-civilizing. He came to the realisation that all civilizations developed beneath the warm shadow of the religious notion, whatever that may be, based on historical examination of world civilizations in general and Muslim civilisation in particular. As a result, he included religion, which serves as a "catalyst of civilization," in his equation of civilization.

According to Bennabi, among the three structural components of civilization, man is the main engine of society. As a result, he is the driving force behind any civilising effort, and the other two components are useless without him. The driving force behind either advancement and progress or regress and decline is man. Since "man is the underlying condition of all civilizations and civilisation perpetually fixes the human condition," Bennabi thought it important to draw attention to the dialectic link between man and civilization.<sup>9</sup> In the end, he contends, it is man who establishes the social value of the civilisational equation. Although he does not diminish the importance of time and soil, if we rely solely on them, neither can we transform society or civilization. He also believes that Allah created man in his natural state (SWT). Man, however, is the result of socio-historical variables because of how strongly human circumstances and his social environment affect him and determine whether he will prosper or fail. A social being, man is. Since humans have interacted with time and space historically as social beings rather than as natural creatures, their perspective on existence has been changed by their ongoing exposure to a variety of obstacles. Man is a complex creature

that both creates and is a byproduct of civilisation. Bennabi criticised the reformist movement in the Muslim world for attempting to change the environment rather than the human element itself, and he contends that we must first change man before changing his environment. Consequently, he takes the passage "in fact, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves" as the foundation for his analysis of man's status.

It is apparent that civilization does not begin whenever or whenever people gather and congregate at a specific location or time. Instead, it begins with a man who is prepared to carry out his civilising duties and to start the civilising process. Bennabi distinguishes between integrated and disintegrated traits in man. As the first type of man begins the process of civilising society, the second type of man initiates its degeneration. "History commences with the integrated man, constantly adapting his effort to his ideal and needs, and accomplishing in society his double mission of actor and witness," claims Bennabi.<sup>10</sup> In other words, civilization advances with the kind of guy who is integrated and able to change his traits into his ideals in order to fulfil his social obligations. By the same token, "history ends with the disintegrating man, the corpuscle deprived of the centre of gravitation, the individual living in a dissolved society that no longer furnishes his existence with either moral or material base".<sup>11</sup> The two varieties of man reflect two distinct eras of civilization. The disintegrating man observes the stage of decline where he no longer engages in any civilising action and has lost all desire to get involved in any social movement, whereas the integrated man initiates the civilising process. Bennabi also introduces the raw and the conditioned man to distinguish between integrated and disintegrating man. He meant that the first is the result of nature in its most raw and basic form, whereas the second is created by society. It is the role of society to mould a person into its particular goals and perspective.

### **Role of Religion in the Development of Civilisation**

Three fundamental components—man, soil, and time—form the basis of Bennabi's equation of civilization; he then added a fourth component, religion, which is equally significant but not a structural component. The three elements interact dynamically to produce civilisation, and religion acts as a catalyst, motivator, and provider of the environment for this interaction. According to Bennabi, the factor that has the capacity to combine and synthesise the other three ingredients into dynamic interaction is the

"catalyst of civilisation" and is what creates a civilisation. The historical research demonstrates that this "religious notion," which has always accompanied the development of civilization throughout history, is actually the catalyst. Religion is a component of the historical process of building civilization. Bennabi contends that religion is the stimulus that facilitates and triggers this relationship, and his justification for this assertion draws on history and archaeology. When man, soil, and time are combined to construct history in the context of religious beliefs, history serves as the laboratory that validates this experiment.

According to Bennabi, if we research the history of civilizations

“...we will find clearly, that all civilizations have their roots in religious sentiments. For history will tell us that the Buddhist civilization has its roots in

Buddhism, the Muslim civilization in Islam and the Western civilization in Christianity.”<sup>12</sup>

Without religion, the three values (elements: man, soil, and time) cannot be organised and directed towards their civilising process. Religion is a crucial factor in the equation of civilisation. These three components function together harmoniously rather than separately or in isolation, giving civilised society its will and power. The issue of this perfect harmony consequently becomes very important. The significance of religion in Bennabi's perspective is primarily tied to its social function as a stimulant of human energies and capacities, rather than to its essence and supernatural source. Bennabi, a social thinker, was searching for the circumstances necessary to revive a new civilisation in the Muslim world. As a result, he was trying to find a means to integrate and reawaken those fundamental components of civilization. Religion creates a spiritual relationship network that, on the one hand, connects people's souls to their belief in God and, on the other hand, binds them together in a horizontal network of interactions. In other words, Bennabi sought to offer a paradigm that goes beyond the realm of this existence.<sup>13</sup>

Bennabi, a Muslim social thinker, emphasises the importance of Islam in addressing society's issues. He was influenced by the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad (SWS) and his followers, who established the first generation of Islam and were known for their pragmatic interpretation of the religion. He maintains that it is essential to teach people how to live in accordance with and have faith in Allah. He emphasises that doing this will enable the soul to exceed its constraints and acquire a high degree of

effectiveness and brilliance. The social role of religion, according to Bennabi's theoretical understanding of its function, is primarily that of a catalyst, favouring the transition of values from a natural to a psycho-temporal state, commensurate with a certain stage of civilisation.<sup>14</sup> The biological man is first transformed into a sociological being. It also transforms time from a basic measure of duration measured in "hours that pass" to a measure of sociological time measured in hours of labour. Thirdly, it transforms soil—which yields food for people in accordance with a straightforward process of consumption unilaterally and unconditionally—into a technologically advanced and prepared environment for meeting the many demands of social life in accordance with a process of production. Social values are then stimulated by religion. In history, every civilization has thrived under the watchful eye of religious concepts. According to Bennabi's theory, religion must first begin a civilising process that unites time, soil, and man in a single undertaking before it can begin to serve as a catalyst for advancing civilization. Bennabi believes that history and archaeology may help demonstrate the significance of religion in the development of civilization and provide support for his argument. The creation of a religious idea in the broadest sense is necessary for civilization to begin. Because of this, we must look for the theological roots of any civilization to understand how it came to be. Claiming that we may find the beginnings of both Buddhist and Brahman civilizations—Brahma and Buddhism—is not overstating the case. With the exception of revelation, which is revealed in order to create laws and a way of life for people, civilization cannot enter a given community. But, if a religious thought adheres to its metaphysical value, it cannot perform its social role in the creation and growth of social reality. If it is merely expressing our perspective on things that go beyond the material world, that is.<sup>15</sup>

### **Religion in Malek Bennabi Thoughts**

Bennabi often refers to all religions, quasi-religions, and ideologies when he uses the word "religion," not just Islam per se. According to Bennabi, religion refers to any form of connection a person has with a force that is either divine or social in origin. any theory or philosophy that shapes a certain bond and relationship between society's members and that guides people. Bennabi, in other words, considers any long-term social project—for building a civilization where the first generation takes the initial step and later generations will carry on the project—in the broad definition of religion.<sup>16</sup> Bennabi, however, believes that the uniqueness and approach of many

religions differ from one another. Bennabi bases his view of religion as a component of the cosmic order on the Qur'an and the many sciences described earlier. According to him, religion appears to be a cosmic phenomena that governs human intellect and civilization in the same way that gravity governs matter and influences its evolution. The initial law of the soul and the law of the physical body both appear to be a component of the universal order. It is the origin of the viewpoints that society adopts. Religion is more than just a spiritual or psychological pursuit for the human psyche. Instead, it is a part of the cosmic order that is profoundly ingrained in the universe's structure and a fundamental disposition of the human species. As a result, religion cannot be viewed as merely a moral category that humans have developed over time or in relation to their early phases of sociocultural development.

Bennabi is not the only person to bring up this topic, according to Mesawi, whose observations are supported by the thoughts of other philosophers, moralists, theologians, and social scientists. Being "Homo Religious" is a feature engrained in human nature because religion is a phenomena that is inextricably linked to humanity.<sup>17</sup> In a more theoretical vein, Bennabi asserts that every effort or action in society is composed of three categories that are derived from the foundational components of civilization. All task, activity, or action involves a worker, the tools necessary to carry it out, and the concept that motivated it.

### **Islamic Economic Thought of Bennabi**

Malik Bennabi is not regarded as an economist per se, but rather as a philosopher, writer, and thinker of the Renaissance of Civilization. This is due to the fact that he does not approach his discussion of economic issues in the manner in which economists do. Although most of these are summarised by the author in a book named *Al-Muslim fi 'Alam al-Iqtisad*, his publications on economic concerns are dispersed throughout numerous lectures, essays, and non-economics books. He did not regard economics as a science, but rather as a school of thinking and philosophy that was subject to Ijtihad. He described the economy as a crucial element for the success of civilization, a driving force behind cultural advancement, and a key element in its thriving.<sup>18</sup> Malek Bennabi is considered one of the very few people who has profoundly and consistently contributed to the discussion surrounding the topic of development. He asserts that<sup>19</sup> the intellectual search, treatment, and discovery of proper answers to the underdevelopment issue that the Islamic world faces, particularly in its economic aspect, will take a great deal of effort. Islamic philosophers and economists have a huge



obligation to address the issue of underdevelopment, hence they must exert every effort to accomplish so by using their *ijtihad*. Targeted solutions, in Bennabi's opinion, must fulfil the following two requirements:

1. The first is to not be traditional or utopian, far from the data of the times, but rather to be in agreement with the imperatives of the period, so that they are realistic and successful.
2. The second is that it adheres to the Islamic teachings, which are founded on the Quran and the Sunnah of Allah's Messenger, and is within permissible bounds.

After Algeria gained its independence from France, he criticised the economic theories and practises of the educated elite in Algeria who attempted to address the country's economic issues using either a liberal capitalist economy or a socialist materialist economy. He challenged their position on economic concerns in his book *Al Muslim fi 'Alam al-Iqtisad* (The Muslim in the World of Economics), classifying these thinkers into two groups:

1. Marxists who, maybe as a result of their atheism, are unconcerned with the materialist opposition to Islam and favour socialism.
2. The Liberals who, out of a lack of knowledge about Islamic economic principles, choose capitalism over materialism and atheism.

He implied the need to look for alternatives to capitalism and socialism as well as the necessity to investigate the causes of the failure of development programmes implemented in the third world on the basis of these two ideologies. Also, he challenged Islamic economists' perspectives on the economic crisis and suggested solutions. He stated that all of their efforts were focused on understanding banking and financial institutions in the economy, and he said that this was all just an effort to bring Islam and capitalism into harmony. In this respect, he implied the necessity of looking for alternatives to capitalism and socialism as well as the need to investigate the causes of the failure of development strategies implemented in the third world on the basis of these two philosophies. He cited, as an illustration, a student from a Muslim background who delivered his university thesis on "Investing without interest" before an American institution in 1971. He maintained that, despite the respect and admiration his thesis received from professors and colleagues, it is merely an effort to impose an Islamic slant on the liberal concept and makes an implicit decision in favour of that ideal. He emphasised the need to find a different strategy for advancing the economy

that deals not just with banking and interest-free financial investments, but also with social investments that address every area of the Muslim's socioeconomic situation.<sup>20</sup>

Bennabi outlined the reasons why economic policies implemented in Islamic nations failed and downplayed the importance of banks to the economy. He emphasised that they are only a component of the present economic environment and did not see them as being crucial to it. The first example is the Chinese economic policy, which maintained its dynamism without relying on financial investment. The second example is the United States economy, which achieved economic success without the necessity for banks or finance. The second example is the German Schacht experiment, which was undertaken in its first stages without an initial budget and was successful in recovering his nation's economy prior to World War Two. Bennabi, however, is opposed to using the same strategies created for some countries in other countries with distinct socioeconomic structures. He rejects the simple replication of ideas from abroad. He cites Indonesia's experience, which developed economic plans based on Schacht's plan but which utterly failed despite the country's material advantages in terms of natural and human resources, which are seen to be necessary ingredients for success. He attacked Sharht's plan for Indonesia and claimed that it failed because the social dynamics of the Indonesian people were ignored.

Bennabi also attacked individuals who accuse the Fuqaha' (Muslim jurists) of failing to provide remedies to the Muslims' economic woes. He said they are not qualified to offer economic answers based on the Qur'an, the Sunnah, or other Islamic Shari'ah sources. He pointed out that because it is their area of expertise, economists have a responsibility to offer economic answers. He next outlined the role of jurists, asking them to express their judgement on how closely the answers offered by economists adhere to Islamic Shari'ah.<sup>21</sup> Bennabi made several significant economic recommendations, some of which are included below:

- Quit trying to choose between capitalism and the Marxist style of thinking and consider searching for a third option.
- Dispel any misconceptions about the role that money and financial investment play in the economy.
- Show that ignoring the social equation and surrendering to foreign plans and projects based on equations that are foreign to the nations and societies in which they are implemented would fail terribly in addition to falling short of the desired results.

- Guide the handling of economic issues to ensure their effectiveness and significance.
- Explore new possibilities for harnessing social energy as a foundation for a robust economy that can handle the challenges of underdevelopment.
- Emphasize how it is crucial to consider the social equation when implementing economic strategies.
- Islamic principle should be put to practice while acting with freedom in the face of economic difficulties.
- Remove some of the Islamic-inspired contracts that have caused economic activity to stagnate.
- Break free from the constraints that foreign beliefs have placed on Islamic Ijtihad.
- Describe social investment in more detail as a substitute for financial investment.
- Examine and reevaluate the topic of how money works in economics.
- Demonstrate the error of determinism that limited the economic decision to the current curricula.
- Call attention to the necessity for Ijtihad to build a theory of economics distinct from both capitalism and socialism.

### **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, Malek Bennabi, an Algerian philosopher and Muslim intellectual, is less well recognised outside of the Arab world. Bennabi's brilliant work on critical analysis and conceptualization of cultural and civilizational concerns remained largely unavailable because he only wrote in Arabic or French. A few of his works were translated into English, but compared to those of his colleagues Maududi and Syed Qutb, these translations were unable to reach a broad readership. Very likely because the language and substance were unquestionably above the intellectual frequency of the average reader given its intricacy and design. In particular, it lacked the dominant decolonizing articulation found in the writings of people like Maududi and Syed Qutb, which had a strong emotional and political appeal. To sum up, the current study makes it quite evident that Bennabi was concerned with offering a conceptual framework to address the current state of Muslim society. As a result, he developed his own theory of civilization, which he believes is multidimensional at its core and requires an

interdisciplinary approach. In order to do this, Bennabi proposed his theory that religious concepts served as the impetus for the development of civilization by using the analytical approach to provide us the structural components of civilisation—man, land, and time. In addition, Bennabi's ideas about man as the foundation of civilization, orientation, and the distinction between the integrated and disintegrated man are expanded upon. Malek Bennabi, despite not being a traditional economist, has some extremely important views about how Islamic economics could be used. He offered a variety of strategies for bringing about economic reform in the Muslim world in order to help it escape its current state of underdevelopment.

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<sup>3</sup> Benali, ‘Les ancêtres fondateurs’, 201.

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<sup>6</sup> Bennabi, M. (1981) *Shurūt al-Nahzah (The Conditions of the Renaissance)*, Dār al-Fikr, Damascus, p. 45

<sup>7</sup> Bennabi, M. (1986) *Ta’ammulāt (Contemplations)*, Dār al-Fikr, Damascus, p. 170

<sup>8</sup> Bennabi, M. (1981) *Shurūt al-Nahzah (The Conditions of the Renaissance)*, Dār al-Fikr, Damascus, pp. 150-151

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<sup>12</sup> Bennabi, M. (1986) *Ta’ammulāt (Contemplations)*, Dār al-Fikr, Damascus, p. 198

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<sup>14</sup> Talbi, A. (1991) ‘The implication of Malek Bennabi’s view on contemporary Muslim society’, Paper presented at the International Seminar on Malek Bennabi, University Malaya, Malaysia, September, p. 11

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