Sayyid Qutb and Malik Bennabi's Thought:
Comparison and Contrast

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1. Introduction

The end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the fall of the Muslim world under Western colonialism. This largely contributed to the spread of western thought and philosophy amongst Muslim thinkers, shaking beliefs and religions convictions of some of them. However, many others in various places of the Muslim world were beginning to be concerned about the relative backwardness of their societies and were trying to find ways to enable Muslims reviving once again.

Among the latter category is Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966), a thinker of the famous Muslim Brotherhood group in Egypt. He is an influential revivalist figure in the second half of the twentieth century, who accepted the challenge and sacrificed his life for his beliefs (Abu-Rabi', 1996: 92). Malik Bennabi (1905-73) the Algerian intellectual who used to write in French is another figure of this category. Both are considered to be prominent theorists of the new Muslim generation (Tamimi, 2001: 29).

Qutb and Bennabi's thinking start from the question that imposes itself on Muslims, since they were shocked by the West occupying their land and minds. This question deals with the reasons behind the Muslims' decline, the conditions that can bring them back to their effectiveness and leadership, the position of today's Muslim world in contrast to its bright past, and the current dominance of the West.

The answer to these questions, however, was the keystone for their writings. Although both writers investigated the same problem, Qutb and Bennabi came to some different theories, especially on the issue of democracy and civilisation. So, on what ground did they both agree? And how can Qutb's views on both democracy and civilisation be compared to those of Bennabi's?

2. Democracy

Democracy comes from the Greek root words *demos*, meaning 'the people' and *kratia* meaning 'to rule'. Therefore, the basic definition of democracy is 'rule by the people' (Dahl, 1989: 3). Thus, can Islam be compatible with democracy?

The answer to this question, according to Bennabi (Tamimi, 2001: 65), can vary according to our approach of tackling the problem.

In democratic societies, people govern themselves as opposed to being ruled by someone above. If the matter is approached in light of the foundations and the origin of Democracy one would conclude it has nothing to do with Islam. On the contrary, it would be opposed to it.

Further, Bennabi (Tamimi, 2001: 65) confirmed that dealing with the term Democracy from its linguistic meaning and its ideology will certainly lead to the contradiction between Islam and Democracy. However, tackling it as a technical term without any historical background, will certainly bridge links with Islam.

Whereas, Bennabi (Tamimi, 2001: 65), on one hand, shared Qutb's (Moussalli, 1992: 151) view on the issue of legislation in a democracy where people are absolutely supreme, in the sense that they or their representatives are free to decide with majority vote on any issue, or pass or repeal any laws. This form of democracy is the antithesis of Islam because it puts what it calls the people in the place of God; in Islam only God has this absolute power of legislation.

The debate is over the form of democracy in which the right of people to legislate is limited by what is believed, by society, to be a higher law to which human law is subordinate and should not therefore be violated. The debate is over whether such a democracy is compatible with Islam or not?

Qutb objected to the idea of Democracy altogether (1991: 134). In his view this is an attempt of trying to compromise between Western theories and Islamic ideals in an apologetic approach that should be stopped (1991: 136). In Qutb's view (1991: 21), Islam should be completely separate from *Jāhilī*

(ignorant) Ideologies. As these ideologies have to be measured to Islam, not vice versa.

Bennabi (Tamimi, 2001: 66) urged a more moderate approach, believing that it depends on the nature and scope of the limits and on what is believed to be a higher law.

According to Bennabi (Tamimi, 2001: 67), Islam promotes democratic conscience through disregarding tyranny and encouraging equal rights and freedom. Bennabi believed that since the positive aspects of democracy are part of Islam, thereby undermining the case that Islam is incompatible with democracy. He (Tamimi, 2001: 65) further considers the early *khilāfa* period of Islamic history as a foundation of an Islamic democratic system, where the individual enjoyed his social, religious and political rights; moreover, the rulers were restricted in their power and legislation.

Although, Bennabi (1987:111) criticised the liberal democratic model, which makes the individual's freedom as its main goal, he praised another type that aims to the social contentment. This difference, he explained, refers to the primary foundation of the civilisation that holds this democracy. If morals are held in high esteem in such civilisation, this will lead to a positive democracy, where the individual's rights are not exceeding their boundaries over that of society.

In contrast, Qutb (1991: 42) believed that a system whereby people could legislate for themselves away from the divine law has to be avoided at all costs; because it will lead to bankruptcy.

Bennabi (Tamimi, 2001: 65) dealt with this term from three aspects: "democracy as an attitude toward the self, democracy as an attitude toward the other, and democracy as the combination of the socio-political conditions necessary for the formation and development of such attitudes in the individual."

He (Tamimi, 2001: 66) further argued that democratic attitude is in fact a balance between servitude and tyranny sentiments.

For Bennabi (Tamimi, 2001: 67), the answer of the question: "is there democracy in Islam?" would not be found in the *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) books, rather, it can be concluded by analysing the Islamic teaching that builds the democratic attitude both within the individual and in the whole society.

Since, it is possible to construct an Islamic democratic system that incorporates democracy advantages within the Islamic framework as an instrument to achieve higher Islamic goals such as justice, peace, equality, and rule of *sharīa*'. Therefore, democracy ought to be placed forward as an Islamic project that should be developed (Tamimi, 2001: 68).

In contrast, Qutb (1991: 7) believed that there is no need for Western democracy; in fact he regarded democracy as a barren ideology in the West that starts borrowing its economic system from the Eastern Block under the banner of socialism.

What the Muslims need according to Qutb (1991: 12) is a strong foundation 'vanguard'. The vanguard throughout the Muslim world is duty bound to bring back the moral sentiments of a human being and to stand in the forefront of the struggle for world guidance. They are required to struggle against the *Jāhilī* policies of aggression and materialism, to expose their deceptions and defeat their plans for corrupting the Islamic world. They are duty bound to educate people, raise their belief consciousness and guide the struggle for human salvation from its stagnant swamp in a proper *Qurâ'nic* direction (1991: 43). For Qutb, to assert the importance, indeed the sacredness, of social bounds was a way of asserting the necessity of a community founded not on blood but on shared belief. And when such community is found, the Islamic system will emerge automatically in a form that is suitable to them in all aspects of their life (no date, Ash-Shūra: 38).

However, Bennabi, insists on the compatibility between democracy and Islam. The *Qur'ân* (Muslims' holy book), for instance, gave the person the highest value that ever gets in the verse (17:70): "We have honoured the children of Adam". Bennabi (Tamimi, 2001: 67) reflects on this as laying the foundation of the best democratic model, dealing with man's spiritual element besides his human and social aspects.

As has been discussed, for Bennabi the development of democracy in Islam need not

be looked upon as a move away from Islamic principles, but, on the contrary, as a necessary stepping-stone towards reaching an ideal Islamic society.

From this standpoint, it seems that Bennabi's analysis of Democracy within the Islamic framework is more meaningful and precise than that of Qutb.

3. The Concept of Civilisation

3.1. The Civilised Society

As seen by Bennabi (1987: 107), wherever people join efforts together, regardless of their number, they will produce a special culture that carries their morals and aesthetics. With time, this formulation turns out to be the norm on which this society's civilisation stands. However, these two components according to Bennabi are the groundwork that directs that civilisation.

The Islamic civilisation, for instance, is dominated by the moral principle, which results into a modest society. Whereas, the Western society stands basically on aesthetics, and is going towards colonialism, liberty for women and family that is far from any modesty restrictions (1987: 109).

In contrast, Qutb (1991: 98) denies such society to be called civilised only because of its progress in industry, economics and science, while it is bankrupt of human values.

It seems, however, that both Qutb and Bennabi are at odd about the platform of civilisation. While Bennabi (1987: 109) still considers a platform with low morals and high aesthetics as a civilisation, though is not balanced. Qutb believes that the morals should be the ultimate base for any civilisation (1984: 139).

Bennabi (1987: 67) argues that the emergence of civil society depends on the effective use of the three basic elements: individual, soil and time. Moreover, these resources allow for the production and progress in different aspects depending on the dominant part in its composition whether morals or aesthetics.

Qutb (1984: 177) does not see any contradiction between the foundation of the Islamic civilisation and prosperity in material and scientific progress, since Islam is not a stranger to civilisation and innovation.

Moreover, Qutb (1984: 120) believes that Islam encourages such progress by considering the person as God's vicegerents on Earth. Since in the Islamic creed, this person has been created to live in a free and noble society where civilisation is expressed through Islamic morals, Islamic manners and the Islamic quest for justice, reason and knowledge, can not only be expressed but flourish (1991: 104).

For Qutb (1991: 94), however, the only civilised society is the Muslim society that adheres to the Islamic principles and morals. Any other society is backward. Since, civilisation should be based on high morals where freedom and rights of people take high precedence. In fact, he argues, only Islam possesses the principles that raised the human nature and cares about both the individual and society in balance taking into consideration the individual's rights and freedom and protecting society.

Any other source would be built on man's servitude to man; because, not accepting monotheism means servitude in different levels even to one's desires. In such cases where legislations serve these desires, the result can not be civilisation.

Here, Qutb (1991: 96) believed, is the immense difference between the Islamic society and the *jāhilī* backward societies. While, *jāhilī* society counts civilisation as the ascendancy of industry and technological advances where "belief in God is denied and human history is explained in terms of didactic materialism" or "God's domain is restricted to the heavens and His rule on earth is suspended"; the Islamic society, insists upon a thorough understanding of the basic principles of human values and freedom extracted from the divine law.

Thus, for Qutb (1991: 97), civilisation without Islamic principles, without a rebuilding of society on the basis of family and high spiritual and social morals, is only *jāhilī* and backward society.

In short, Qutb argues that the Islamic society that is led by the divine law is distinguished to be the only civilised one.

This view of Qutb towards civilisation led him to amend a book's title "The civilised society of Islam" by omitting the word (civilised), Bennabi interpreted that as a self-defence operation on Islam. Furthermore, he regretted it because, in his view, this action would deprive Qutb from facing the real problem. Qutb (1991: 94), on the other hand, interpreted Bennabi's comment as a difficulty in both understanding civilisation and realising that the Muslim society is the civilised one. He argued (Qutb, 1991: 94) that the cause for such difficulty is created by the Western influence on the concept of civilisation.

Bennabi (1987: 68) argued that there is soil for civilisation so long as fresh man and the system of motivating him by a religious goal exist to make the best use of both soil and time. This is an objective formula set by Bennabi that, in his view, can be applied to any nation.

In contrast, Qutb (1991: 95) considered this analysis specific to Muslims, and civilisation can only be achieved through Islam. These norms, according to him, can only work if they are based on the Islamic values because all other *jāhilī* values are corrupt and bankrupt. Even if these norms are to be followed, he argued, they will certainly lead to human materialism prosperity over human failure, which by no means can be called a civilisation.

Alternatively, Bennabi believed that the notion of Islamic civilisation potential is one thing; the fact of having a Muslim civilised society is another, and it is completely wrong to confuse the two (Tammimi, 2001: 32).

3.2. Civilisation Diagnosis

According to Bennabi (1987: 46) many Muslim thinkers were treating the symptoms rather than the illness. They kept reminding that salvation is in returning back to our religion. There is certainly no objection to such statement, but Bennabi (1987: 87) argued that it needs an extended treatment in order to highlight the social, intellectual and psychological defects that prevent the Muslim from grasping the true understanding of *Qur'ân* and *Sunnah* (the Prophet's tradition) and therefore, converting such understanding into a driving force towards change. From this point, Bennabi (1987: 21) started his diagnosis that the main problem of any nation is in fact a civilisation problem. Therefore, according to him, it is necessary to understand deeply the factors that build civilisations or ruin them.

Bennabi (1987: 77) further argued that any civilisation has to go through a cycle of three stages: spiritual, where people will have a system to control their desires and to raise their ambitions, the second is the intellectual stage, where their civilisation will reach its peak and stability and this can be seen as the beginning of the last stage. Since, their system of control will start to be weaker, and their desires will start to go out of control gradually. Ultimately, their civilisation will decline and reach its lowest point as it started. The last one, therefore, is the stage that is controlled by man's appetites.

For Bennabi (1987: 78), there is a crucial difference between the quality of people at the first stage and the last one, since civilisation starts with a fresh person full of potential that is used only to provide his basic needs. When this fresh person is filled with ambitions and religious purpose, his energy will burst out using time and soiling effectively. And here where civilisation will take place.

While the person who left his civilisation is full of psychological defects, with no energy to produce, no motivation and no ambitions like the drop of water that was used in producing electricity.

The problem of the backwardness of the Islamic society, according to Bennabi (1987: 82), is the individual who forms that society in the first place. The contemporary Muslim is a person of the third stage in the civilisation cycle or he is the used drop of water. As a result, he is not ready to carry any civilised act unless he is reformed in his thoughts and beliefs and injected by a religious drive. This is more correct for urban people, he claims, because they lost their self-assurance, they can be easily convinced with half solutions and this is why they engage into politics to get some of their rights, and not ask about their duties.

Bennabi (1987: 79) further advocated that this Muslim is not living a civilisation but he represents the remaining of the past Islamic civilisation. It is, therefore, necessary to place him once again into its cycle.

Since, the better educated and more organised the people with conscious freedom principles, and the more deeply these beliefs are embedded, the stronger will the society be in protecting itself from domination by others.

Bennabi (1987: 60) considered both Europe and Russia as civilised societies that were built on the Christian motive. He also believed that communism is a Christian civilisation crisis. He further admired both the Russian and Chinese civilisations for their well systematic planning (1987: 48).

Qutb (1991: 96), on the other hand, declared all of them to be *jāhilī* and backward societies that sacrifice human values at their altar.

Qutb (1982: 11) welcomed technological products, but without Western values. Rather, in his outlook and attitude towards it, he (1982a: 11) regarded the Western civilisation as a stagnated swamp that should not be taught to our new generation as an ideal. In fact it should be introduced with the full picture of its crimes all over the Muslim world.

4. Man and Religion

Qutb (1991: 95) divided the communities into two, the first is the Muslim community and the second is *jāhilī* one. The Islamic community is the one that practices Islam as a belief, worship and as a code of life, starting from the inner thoughts up to the political system. While the *jāhilī* community is where Islam is not being practiced, and its individuals are not judged by the Islamic concepts, values, morals and rules. Thus, it is not possible to label a community that does not apply the whole Islam as a Muslim community, even if they call themselves Muslims.

He argued (1971: 226) that *Jāhiliyah* (ignorance) is one condition of life which is not restricted to a certain phase, where *Hākimiyah* (sovereignty) and legislation are left to the people. This, however, confirmed the servitude of man to man. The liberation of man can only take place when man returns back in a complete servitude to his Lord in all his affairs. The restoration of this relation is what makes the believers civilised and leaders towards a bright future. In his view (1982b: 19), the stimulation of beliefs only does not help, because it will lead to religious anxiety. Studying these beliefs only academically will

dehydrate them from their spiritual moister and warmth. Hence, this will be reflected into practical life

Bennabi (1987: 64), on the other hand, believed that the way towards civilisation is possible as long as there is a religious idea that combines between the three elements: man, soil and time. The religious idea acts as a catalyst that activates a group of fresh people, who are full of belief and ready to sacrifice for their principles, to move according to an ideological set using the available materials.

Contrary to Qutb, Bennabi's (1987: 56) view is that a religious idea could be a real religion like Islam, remnants of a religion or even a human idea that affects and motivates people as religion can do. The strength of each civilisation, however, would depend on the strength of its religious band. More importantly, he believed that while the leaders for Western culture are the Greek and Roman artists, the Islamic Culture is lead by prophets and messengers.

The debate continued on the matter of Marxism theory, that production is a result of the need, and both the need and industry are two keystones that bound any specific civilisation both morally and materialistically. Bennabi (1987: 70) refuted such theory, as the reality proves that some civilisations were extinct, whereas, the needs of their societies did not experience any change. However, he considered Marx's philosophy as a religious motive that can be effective in building a civilisation.

Qutb (1991: 7), by contrast, believed that Marxism specifically and all other social theories, failed because they were 'against human nature' and its needs. He argued that it prospers only in the worst type of society and dictatorial government imaginable.

Bennabi (1987: 56) stressed on the importance of religion in the movement towards civilisation. Social structure of any society cannot be based solely on art, science and intellect, since the social relation is depending on the spiritual relation between the human and the deity. Religion is the motive that strengthens the social relations preparing society to take over its historical function, and strengthen its determination through a shared aim and spiritual bound. He further stressed

the importance of associating the moral values with the social relations declaring that any misbalance in that formulation will lead to collapse and decline. For Qutb (1981: 79), such morals can only exist within true Islamic environment without any kind of discrimination. Hence, the power of change is eternal in the essence of Islam, not specific only to the first Muslim generation; the essence of Islam is effective at any place and time. Islam, therefore, is not a social dogmatism to Qutb; it is a dynamic ever-emerging presence in reality and history, re-asserting itself at all aspects of both the society and individual's life.

Though Bennabi stands apart from Qutb in the kind of religion that can work as a civilisation catalyst, they both point out to the verse: "Verily, Allah will not change the (good) condition of a people as long as they do not change their state (of goodness) themselves" (Khan, 1996: Ar-Ra'd: 11).

Bennabi (1987: 65) stresses the fact that, although *Qur'ânic* values are the best religious principles which promote Islamic morals within the society, Muslims are still remaining backward for not benefiting from their religious civilisation potential and not using the social norms of achieving a civilisation. While others reach a civilisation, though not ideal as that of the early Islamic age, but it remains a civilisation that used some of its religious motives, following civilisation norms to get there.

5. Colonialism

Bennabi (1987: 57) divided the Islamic history into three phases:

- The spiritual period, in which the Muslims were sacrificing for their beliefs with the Prophet and his *khulafa'* (The four Muslim leaders after the Prophet's death).
- The intellectual period, that represents the peak of Muslim Civilisation.
- The desires period in which the Muslims are overcome by their individual urges, the social relations are broken, and Muslims are living on the margin of history.

Based on this understanding, Bennabi (1988: 103) went on to argue that the recent Islamic societies experienced colonialism because they were psychologically ready to it. Nevertheless, to blame the West, or the notion of colonialism that is all but alien to Muslims, would be a non-realistic option. He certainly agreed that the West has a great deal to answer for. He further argued that domination is not always imposed; sometimes, it is invited by the Muslim's backward situations (1987: 157). Qutb (1971: 180) stressed the same view from a different corner. For him the conscience servitude is the cause of decline. Thus, Muslims have to free their emotions from worshiping the Western world if they are to achieve their freedom. While as seen by Bennabi, the way to freedom is to be free from all the social illnesses that Muslim nations get from their culture, without realising and to build self consciousness.

Maintaining the same line of reasoning, Bennabi (1988) argued that dead ideologies and killing ideologies are two sides of the same coin that reflects the intellectual tragedy within the society under colonial power. Dead ideologies gravitate people to their backwardness preventing them from any attempt to improve; because these ideologies are the leftover of their past civilisation. Moreover, these dead ideologies will select the junk of the colonial civilisation as a quick remedy for the society's backwardness, but in fact, they act as a social killer. The first reflects the social colonialism readiness for this backward society, while the second reflects the colonial face.

Thus, the problem that needs intelligent discussion among Muslims should be: why do we choose to borrow the intellectual waste of the West instead of its good matters?

He further compared (1987: 48) the Japanese way of dealing with Western civilisation, taking its effective elements that helped them, within a short time, to positively change their situation, to that of Muslims who imported only the poison of that civilisation and inject it into its dead vein.

According to Qutb (1971: 170), the Western colonial powers realised the danger which Islamic creed holds against any servitude. Because once the spirit of Islam is awakened in the Muslims, they will not bear any humiliation. Furthermore, they would work towards unity and sacrifice for it.

Qutb's idea of struggling within oneself to remove the effects of *jāhilī* Muslim societies seems to be in line with that of Bennnabi's thought about the dead ideologies of backwardness and the need of building self consciousness. Qutb, further, expressed the need of Muslims to free themselves from the servitude of the West or any other man's ideologies. In parallel, Bennabi highlighted the killing ideologies of other nations and urged the Muslims to be aware of that as part of their cure.

Both Qutb and Bennabi view Western writers on Islam as a kind of intellectual colonialism, and should be rejected.

Bennabi (1987: 154) further believed that the colonial system has brought upon Muslims numerous problems, has caused people heavy suffering, but has also made them realise the level of their decline and the need of awakening.

6. The Way Out

For Bennabi (1987: 56), the way out is in raising the present Muslim society to the level of civilisation to be able to continue its function. This would not be possible without a strong charge of faith, and morals as those of the Prophet's companions. However, In relation to universal peace between Muslims and other nations, Bennabi's beliefs are very much in contrast to those of Qutb. According to the former (Bennabi, 1988: 18) the world is going towards discussing its problems peacefully and intellectually. He expressed his clear admiration for Ghandi, considering the Afro-Asian non-alliance organisation as a radiating field for the Islamic concept and non-violence. He looked up to it as a source of moral elements that are needed for building an Afro-Asian heritage (Bennabi, 1984: 110). Qutb (1971: 220) on the other hand praised Ghandi for his efforts and drew the real disastrous picture of Muslims after the murder of Ghandi. Thus, he called strongly to reject all forms of colonialism including all agreements and organisations and consider that as a form of treachery to humanity especially if it was with France, Britain, Israel and America, the enemies of human freedom in his view.

In line with this contrast we find Bennabi (1984:101) welcoming the idea of UNESCO as a step forward towards cultural exchange between different societies. However, Qutb (1971: 185) considered that as a deception to encourage Muslims to give up their culture and to admire the colonial's culture. He further, commented that it contains beautiful principles, which were practiced by Muslims 1400 years ago. He further stated that there would be no compromise on principles, and no peace with any one who took a little part of Muslim land or work against Islam.

It had always been the concern of Qutb to see *Qur'ân* as a source of foundational principles upon which the infrastructure of an organisation must be built as a complete system of life. Hence, according to him, this system of life when implemented, as a living force, is Islam and civilisation. For Qutb, if Islam is properly explained to people in the West, many of them would come to its fold, and many others would be influenced by many of its teachings, even if they did not embrace it (1984).

7. Conclusion

To sum up, according to Bennabi Muslims did not abandon their belief, but their belief lost its effectiveness. Thus, it is crucial to activate this belief intellectually and in attitudes rather than teaching them a creed that they already own. For Qutb, however, Muslims are influenced by *jāhilī* society in many aspects of their lives, and they have to purify their belief and join the vanguard based on *Qur'ân* and the Prophet's teachings.

It seems, however, that both Qutb and Bennabi agreed on the necessity of changing the Muslim's belief into action. However, while Bennabi's analysis is deeper in its diagnosis, Qutb's words are more motivating towards change.

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