

Views and Comments

## Social Change as Seen by Malik Bennabi

Malik Bennabi (1905-1973), the noted Algerian thinker, was born in Constantine, Algeria in the midst of the French occupation of his country. Despite his education in French institutions both at home and in France itself, he was considered a second-class citizen, an *indigène*. During his formative years, he lived in the antithetical worlds of East-West, Africa-Europe, and Islam-Christianity. Nevertheless, Bennabi remained immune to the inferiority complex afflicting most of his Western-educated Muslim contemporaries. Although he may have suffered from what some scholars call "cultural schizophrenia," Bennabi strongly identified with Islam, its culture, and its history. His childhood education in Arabic and the Qur'an was an important reserve which he developed and drew upon at later age.<sup>1</sup>

The diversity of the social, economic, and political conditions of his people, "the colonized," and that of the French, "the colonizers," motivated and sharpened his intellectual ability. In the late forties, when he wrote *Les Conditions de la Renaissance* (translated into Arabic under the title of *Shurūṭ al Nahḍah*), Bennabi reached the conclusion that "the problem of any people is that of its civilization."<sup>2</sup>

Unlike other Arab and Muslim intellectuals and writers, Bennabi did not use expressions such as *taraqqi* (advancement), *taqqadum* (development), or *nahḍah* (renaissance). Rather, he consciously and carefully selected the term *ḥaḍārah* (civilization) to indicate his broad historical concept of the social phenomenon of human life. All of his books, therefore, including his autobiography, *Mudhakkirāt Shāhid al Qarn* (Memories of Century's Witness), and *Al Zāhirah al Qur'ānīyah* (The Qur'anic Phenomenon), bear the subtitle *Mushkilāt al Ḥaḍārah* (The Problems of Civilization).

Bennabi's training as an engineer made him aware of the necessity of defining his concepts, generally done through the methods of analysis and synthesis. It was this approach that caused him to declare: "Civilization is the sum of those moral and material means which enable a society to provide each of its members with all of the social services needed for them to pro-

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<sup>1</sup>See Fawzia Bariun, *Malik Bennabi's Life and Theory of Civilization*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>Malik Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al Nahḍah* (Damascus: Dār al Fikr, n.d.), 19.

gress.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, he views civilization as not merely a matter of economic progress, but rather as the product of dynamic, concrete elements, the first of which is the moral element.

Unlike Ibn Khaldūn, Bennabi did not adopt the concept of tribal cohesion (*aṣabiyyah*) as the means of material and nonmaterial progress. To Bennabi, religion was a prerequisite to the rise of any civilization, for he viewed it as the “compound” which gives man the time, the soil, and the spark to start a cycle of civilization. He considered the principles of current Western civilization to be based on Christian ethics and morals. Despite the fact that Christianity developed long before Islam, he pointed out that the civilization of Islam flourished long before that of Christianity. Civilization, Bennabi concluded, is born twice: “first when the religious idea is born, and second when the idea becomes recorded in souls and is entered into the events of history.”<sup>4</sup> Islamic civilization, on the other hand, had “both births” at once, Bennabi suggested.

### Social Change as a Premise to Civilization

Change, Bennabi believed, had to start inside the soul of the individual (*fard*) in order to transform him/her into a person (*shakhs*). This transformation is essential, for it allows him/her to modify the primary element connecting him/her to the human race and to encourage within himself/herself those social inclinations connecting him/her to society.<sup>5</sup> A person, Bennabi maintained, is not only an individual who creates a species; rather, an individual is the complicated being who produces a civilization, and who is at the same time a product of that civilization.

Humanity occupies a central position in Bennabi’s thought, particularly in his views of social change, for humanity is “the primary social device . . . if humanity moved, society and history moved, but if humanity paused, society and history paused.”<sup>6</sup> According to Bennabi, humanity has two identities. The first, fixed and unaffected by history, is that of a natural creature, honored by its Creator. Humanity, from an Islamic perspective, attained superiority over all other creatures, including the angels, by becoming the vicegerent through its acceptance of the trust Allah offered to other universal elements, all of which refused it. The second identity, changeable and in-

<sup>3</sup>Malik Bennabi, *Mushkilāt al Afkār fī al ‘Ālam al Islāmī* (Cairo: Maktabah Ammār, 1971), 50.

<sup>4</sup>*Shurut*, 55.

<sup>5</sup>Malik Bennabi, *Wijhat al ‘Ālam al Islāmī*, trans., A. Shahin (Damascus: Dār al Fikr, 1981), 55.

<sup>6</sup>Malik Bennabi, *Ḥadīth fī al Binā’ al Jadīd* (Beirut: Al Maktabah al ‘Asriyah, n.d.), 50.



fluenced by history and social circumstances, is that of a social entity.<sup>7</sup> In the first case, Bennabi was referring to the anatomical and physiological characteristics of human beings which determine their external shape. The second, then, represented the mental and psychological features shaped by social heritage and historical experiences.

It was this socio-historical structure to which Bennabi gave the greater importance. To him, social and historical actions are a result of three human elements: hand (*yad*), heart (*qalb*), and mind (*ʿaql*). Every social activity, therefore, derived from the motivation of the heart, the directions and justifications of the mind, and physical motions.<sup>8</sup>

Historical events and movements, according to Bennabi, derive from the interactions of three important realms: the "Realm of Figures," the "Realm of Ideas," and the "Realm of Things." Although the "Realm of Figures" occupies a more prominent position than the other two, the "Realm of Ideas" is extremely important in Bennabi's view. For him, a society's wealth is not measured by the "things" people possess, but by their ideas,<sup>9</sup> which results in the view that "it is civilization that gives birth to its products."<sup>10</sup> It would be impossible, therefore, to either quantitatively and qualitatively purchase the products of one civilization in order to create another, for in the words of Bennabi, "civilization cannot sell us its spirit, ideas, tastes, intimate wealth, or the accumulation of untouchable notions and meanings."<sup>11</sup>

The mistake of Muslim countries, particularly those which produce oil, was, according to Bennabi, that after achieving political independence they created a "thingness civilization" (*ḥaḍārah shayṭiyah*) based upon accumulation (*takdīs*). The idea that development could be inspired and encouraged by proper borrowing from the West was accepted by Bennabi. For him, civilization could not be created in isolation from other human experiences. After all, Christian civilization had benefitted from Islamic civilization, which itself had been nourished by interacting with cultures such as the classical Greek and the classical Indian.<sup>12</sup> Contemporary Muslims were defeated in their encounter with Western civilization mainly because they failed to distinguish between real necessities (*al ḍarūrāt al ḥaqīqīyah*) and forged necessities (*al muzayyafah*). This confusion, which affected the "Realm of Figures" and the "Realm of Ideas," generated moral chaos and behavior disorder. The Muslim conscience, claimed Bennabi, was torn between the desire to overcome social and political backwardness and the determination to save a moral legacy.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Malik Bennabi, *Ta'ammulāt fī al Mujtama' al Arabī* (Damascus: Dār al Fikr, 1985), 180.

<sup>8</sup>Malik Bennabi, *Milād Mujtama'*, trans. A. Shahin (Damascus: Dār al Fikr, 1985), 7.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>10</sup>*Shurūt*, 43.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>12</sup>*Ḥadīth*, 134-135.

<sup>13</sup>*Mushkilāt al Afkār*, 25.

In his intellectual effort to offer the Muslim ummah a resolution to its untenable status quo, Bennabi continued to stress the importance of religion as a motivating ideology in the process of any social change. However, for him the real problem lay not in “how to teach the Muslim his/her faith,” but rather it lay in “how to restore the effectiveness and the social impact of his/her faith.” In other words, Bennabi argued, “the problem was not in how to prove God’s existence to the Muslim, but to make him/her sense that His existence fills up his/her soul as a source of energy.”<sup>14</sup>

Bennabi was distinguished from other Arab thinkers by his use of the functional approach in interpreting the possible role of religion in social change. He therefore did not look to Islam as a metaphysical creed, but rather as a motivating ideology, a major part in a complex social system. For Bennabi, Islam, in its essence, was not only essential to provide the Muslims a feeling of equilibrium, but also to give them inspiration and motivation. Bennabi concluded through his study of history that religion and culture have always developed and interacted in dynamic ways. He also believed that the serious problems facing contemporary Muslims resulted from the fact that Islam had lost its social function among the Muslim masses.

The notion of the social function of religion was repeatedly mentioned in Bennabi’s thought. For him, the social function of Islam could be restored mainly by teaching the Qur’an so as to reveal to the Muslim’s conscience the Qur’anic revelation as if it had been revealed at that very instant.<sup>15</sup>

While studying the Qur’an, we find that Islam puts the Muslim conscience between two poles: that of promise (*wa’d*) and that of threat (*wa’id*). To Bennabi, Muslims exist in circumstances which enable them to respond well to challenges which are essentially spiritual.<sup>16</sup> The promise (*wa’d*) is the minimum level of motivation, and does not in itself stimulate any effective effort. This minimum, Bennabi maintained, is exemplified in the Qur’anic verse: “Never give up hope of God’s soothing mercy; truly no one gives up hope of God’s soothing mercy except those who have no faith.”<sup>17</sup> The threat (*wa’id*), on the other hand, is the maximum level of challenge, and it makes the effort impossible because the severity of the threat outweighs the individual’s spiritual capacity. This is exemplified in the following Qur’anic verse: “Did they then feel secure against the plan of God; but no one can feel secure against the plan of God except those doomed to ruin.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>*Wijhat*, 55.

<sup>15</sup>*Milād Mujtama’*, 106.

<sup>16</sup>*Milād*, 21.

<sup>17</sup>Qur’an 12:87.

<sup>18</sup>Qur’an 7:99.



## Cultural Change and Social Change

Bennabi was convinced that humanity, which is subjected to psycho-temporal factors, is a major factor in social change.<sup>19</sup> It is possible, therefore, to modify a given society's modes of living and future planning. Supporting his view, Bennabi repeatedly quoted the Qur'anic verse: "Verily God will never change the condition of a people until they change themselves."<sup>20</sup>

Changing the self on the individual level requires the regeneration of culture on the societal level. Culture, claims Bennabi, is therefore central to all aspects of Muslim life. He consequently dedicated two important books to the discussion of this idea: *Mushkilāt al Thaqāfah* (The Problems of Culture) and *Mushkilāt al Afkār fī al 'Ālam al Islāmī* (The Problems of Ideas in the Islamic World).

Bennabi was greatly concerned with culture as an important means for effecting social change. Culture, in his view, affected the three attributes through which human beings have an influence on their society: those of intellect (*'aql*), labor (*'amal*), and money (*māl*).<sup>21</sup> The directing of culture (*tawjīh al thaqāfah*) is one of Bennabi's broad concepts which both provides planning and defines goals.

In his thinking, Bennabi was careful to distinguish between culture (*thaqāfah*) and knowledge (*ma'rifah*). For him, culture was not a theory of learning (*ta'līm*), but rather a theory of education (*tarbiyah*). It has to do, then, with behavior (*sulūk*) rather than with knowledge and information.<sup>22</sup> The problem for the Muslim individual, therefore, is not what knowledge he/she has acquired, but how he/she reacts towards his/her problems.

Culture is the symbolic prism through which members of a society interpret the world and establish relations with reality and with one another. A culture, then, is characterized by its own specific historical evolution and its own distinctive views of life. One consequence of this, Bennabi indicated, is that a society can never import its culture.

In order to mobilize a society to change for the better, a cultural regeneration has to occur. Bennabi suggested major modifications to four fundamental cultural elements:<sup>23</sup> moral constitution (*al dustūr al khuluqī*), aesthetic sense (*al dhawq al jimālī*), practical logic (*al mantiq al 'amalī*), and technique (*al šinā'ah*).

Morals and ethics occupied a major place in Bennabi's cultural project,

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<sup>19</sup> *Wijhat*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> Qur'an 13:11

<sup>21</sup> *Shurūt*, 77.

<sup>22</sup> *Shurūt*, 88.

<sup>23</sup> Details and elaboration on these four elements are provided in *Shurūt*.

for he believed that they controlled the structure of the "Realm of Figures," without which the "Realm of Ideas" and the "Realm of Things" could not function. Muslims have to undergo a personal rehabilitation in order to bring about the activation of their Islamic ethics and principles. They should enact a profound change both on the personal and societal levels, for their failure to do so will make it impossible for them to fulfill their mission in this world, particularly in the last third of the twentieth century.

Social change, according to Bennabi, requires a given society to adopt a policy of self-reliance in undertaking the responsibility for self-criticism and cultural purification. The individual has to be the initiator of the process of changing from within. Bennabi's theories revolved around the idea of civilization. Moreover, he sought the active involvement of contemporary Muslims in world affairs not through political tactics, but through the establishment of a culture of moral principles.

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