
Fahmi Jadān, the well-known Palestinian professor of philosophy, may be right in describing Bennabi as the most prominent Arab thinker since Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) to be seriously concerned with the question of civilization. Bennabi (1905–1973) wrote numerous works on civilization and its relationship with culture, moral values and social behaviour. The Algerian electric engineer, who spent most of his young manhood in France, came to Egypt in 1956 to find a more congenial atmosphere to serve the cause of his colonized country and the whole Muslim ummah. He realized that it was through intellectual contribution that the road could be paved for the Muslim world’s progress and renaissance. He was deeply concerned about the degeneration of Muslim societies, which had once reached the apex of civilized existence. As a committed Muslim thinker, he felt that it was his duty to show the way to the rebirth of the ummah.

The present book is a translation of the Arabic original, *Mālid Mūjtama’*, which was first published in Cairo in 1962. The translator has made a good effort to convey the carefully chosen expressions of Bennabi and has added many useful notes. The author says in his *Preface* that the purpose of his work is to expound, in a systematic way, the theoretical concepts about the historical factors upon which the birth of the society depends. The book, according to the author, is a response to the desire of the Muslim reader who is endeavouring to re-enter the scene of history after a long period of slumber. It contains 16 short chapters, half of them about social relations, two about social education, while two chapters deal with social wealth and social pathology. The emphasis on different aspects of social life is a prominent feature of the book.

Bennabi gives a special definition of the key term “society”: it is a group of human beings which perpetually changes its social features to perceive the objectives it seeks to achieve. The definition suggests the concepts of movement and direction, the basic idea being that a society either moves to a higher form of collective life or that it degenerates. A civilization emerges when a society moves upwards and changes itself in order to achieve its goals.

To explain the dynamic of movement in society, Bennabi borrows Toynbee’s theory of challenge and response. The optimum challenge which generates an adequate response in a society is capable of motivating the forces
of change that lead to the creation of a civilization. However, Bennabi does not find this explanation adequate in the case of the Islamic society. He attributes the rise of that society to the psychological factors which gave impetus to the spiritual forces. In the case of Muslims, the challenge is essentially spiritual. The Qur’ān places the Muslim conscience between two limits: between warning (wa’d) which is the lowest level of response and promise (wa’d) which is the highest level. Between these two limits, the spiritual strength stands in proportion to the efficient effort furnished by a society which acts according to the dictates of a mission. As a matter of fact, Bennabi defends the thesis that in the final analysis the dynamism of all historical movements emanates from the psychological factors which originate from certain spiritual forces. It is these spiritual forces which make of the soul the driving force in the history of mankind. It is plausible to accept that the beginnings of civilizations are motivated by spiritual forces but it is difficult to explain the developments that take place in all civilizations in spiritual terms.

To him the making of history results from the interaction of three social categories: persons, ideas, and objects. They interact together as determined by ideological archetypes originating from the realm of ideas to be applied by means of objects in order to achieve the high goals specified by persons. This implies the existence of a set of relations which link together the realms of the three components, both separately and collectively. This becomes the fourth realm in the formula, which is the sum-total of the interaction. Bennabi calls the last realm the social relations network. It represents the synthesis of these social realms in a way which would actualize the transformation of the various aspects of life, i.e. the evolution of human society. Social relations are of a cultural nature because it is culture, with its set of ethical and aesthetic values, which moulds the personality of the individual.

To Bennabi, the social wealth of a collectivity is measured by “ideas” rather than by “objects”. Objects may be destroyed under adverse circumstances but ideas are not easily lost; in fact they can reconstruct the realm of objects as did Germany after the Second World War. However, the network of social relations is essential for such a reconstruction. The Muslim society failed to reconstruct itself despite its vast wealth of ideas during the late ‘Abbāsid period because it lacked the necessary network of social relations. The efficacy of ideas depends upon the network of relations. The ideal position of social evolution is achieved when a society reaches its utmost level of integration in which moral strength and transparency are at their highest levels. Conversely, a society approaches its fatal end-point when it gradually loses the quality of coherence and integration. It becomes devoid of the ability to perform its common activity, which means that it ceases to be a society.
The cycle of human evolution corresponds to three stages: (1) The ideal stage is reached when all the human qualities and talents of the individual are under the dominion of the soul. (2) The second stage is reached when all the human qualities are under the control of reason and are thus oriented to tackling practical problems of life. (3) The last stage, which marks the degeneration of a society, is reached when the qualities and talents of the individual are under the sway of the instinct, freed from the guidance of both soul and reason. At this stage, the society's common activity becomes impossible and chaos prevails. Bennabi points out that the societies of our age would achieve the stage of harmony and integrality only if they succeed to create an extensive formal and non-personal network of relationships. Social pathology is manifested when the network's texture loosens up and is no longer capable of effectively holding up the collective activity. If the network is entirely undone, it amounts to the virtual death of that society. Before that stage diseases creep into the social body in the form of breaks and ruptures. This pathological situation may last for a long or a short time. Social diseases manifest themselves mostly in a feeling of conceit and self-gratification, which subsequently leads to social disintegration in favour of sheer individualism. Once the psychological complexes float on the surface of the self, its concerted action becomes difficult, if not impossible. At this stage of decadence, no one would care to tackle the real problems of society as the great scholars of Islamic jurisprudence used to do. Emphasis would instead be placed on mere fictitious problems. All the ailments of a society in its different fields of economics, politics, technology, etc. manifest the state of inefficacy of its social relations network. Every corrupt relationship in the realm of persons has a direct impact on both the realm of ideas and the realm of objects.

To explain the role of religion in society, the author presents a very interesting hypothesis. He believes that the religious idea runs deep throughout the entire history of mankind. He argues that the human society does not create the moral values which regulate its life. It is the synthesis of Man, Soil and Time which marks the starting point of a society that takes place after the occurrence of an exceptional circumstance. This exceptional circumstance coincides with the advent of a religious ideal that would comprise all the society’s potentials. Therefore, it is the spiritual relationship between God and man that creates and determines the social bonds between persons. It is the social and religious relationships which generate the movement of social change, i.e., the dawn of a new civilization.

In conclusion, Bennabi warns the leaders of the Muslim world against borrowing solutions from the developed western countries because each human order has its criteria of workability. Any solution pertaining to social
matters involves some specific elements which are integral parts of its original social environment within which it has taken shape. It is doomed to fail if it is transplanted in a different social order. Borrowed solutions have to be adapted to the cultural postulates and social foundations of the borrowing country. Bennabi observes a dichotomy between the spiritual and social aspects of the Muslim’s life. His behaviour in the mosque is different from that in the public life. This means that he does not find in public life the necessary environment which helps him to preserve his moral integrity. The social effort is bound to fail if it is not strongly linked to the moral and spiritual forces of the human being. The primordial task that must constitute the corner-stone in any strategy for Islamic renaissance is to reorganize and reorientate the vital energies of Muslims because this is the basic condition that will endow the efforts of renaissance and reconstruction with the needed efficacy. The Muslim needs to feel that his pursuit of worldly matters are not in contradiction with his ideal, and that he is engaged with fellow Muslims in carrying out a concerted action that must culminate in the realization of that ideal.

Bennabi admits that to give his reflections any practical significance, they need to be tested in the form of an actual educational programme at the level of the Muslim ummah. He called upon Muslim governments to embark on such a programme in order to revive and regenerate the Muslim ummah. It is to be remembered that for the sake of a sublime ideal, people are always ready to willingly bear the hardships of an austere order that would establish equity and justice.

In his work Bennabi demonstrates a vast knowledge of western thought in addition to Islamic thought and history. He makes with great ease references to both the traditions to support his arguments. His methodology is systematic, logical and consistent. He presents a thesis about social change and civilization which is as plausible as that of Hegel or Toynbee. However, it requires a detailed historical and sociological research to put muscles and nerves in the skeletal structure. Like many social thinkers, Bennabi may be criticized that he gave too much emphasis to his major theme of social relations network at the expense of other factors such as politics and economics. He may well argue that these factors form part of the social relations.

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