

The Intellectual Expansion of the Concept of Civilization and Ethics in the Thoughts of Malek Bennabi

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Abstract:

Malek Bennabi, a visionary intellectual, is heralded as an "engineer of civilization" for his profound analysis that spanned the breadth of the Islamic world, not merely the confines of Algerian society. His works intricately weave together the religious and political domains, elucidating how Islam, as a doctrine, orchestrates every facet of life in contrast to the principles of democracy that underpin most modern states. Within his exploration, Bennabi confronted the quandary of achieving a true civilization. His prescient observations remain remarkably relevant, reflecting on the essential prerequisites for a cultural renaissance and the imperative to keep pace with evolving civilizations. He warned against equating technological prowess with societal advancement, advocating instead for a foundational ethos of ethics. Bennabi posited that a deterioration in moral values inevitably precipitates the decline of civilizations, regardless of technological strides. This article endeavors to illuminate how Bennabi's insights continue to resonate, offering pertinent reflections on the contemporary crisis of civilization, inextricably linked to an ethical quandary.

Keywords: Civilization, Ethics, Development, Renaissance, Values, Islam.

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1. Introduction:

In a manner akin to other Arab Islamic societies, Algerian society grapples with the dichotomy of aspiring towards modern civilization and progress while clinging to its deep-seated traditions. This tension is particularly pronounced given the portrayal of Western societies as paragons of sophistication and modernity. Algerian society thus finds itself at a crossroads, struggling to preserve its unique identity, rich in traditions and cultural mores, while simultaneously striving to assimilate culturally and keep abreast of global advancements.

In the Western discourse, civilization ostensibly demands the renunciation of all ideological, ethnic, and traditional underpinnings in favor of a doctrine rooted in scientific rationale and secularism. This perspective champions a form of neutrality aimed at fostering justice and equality across religious lines and necessitates the dismantling of customary and traditional frameworks for societies seeking to align with the developed world.

Yet, the stark reality reveals that such detachment is unattainable for societies steeped in identity, particularly in Islamic contexts where religion permeates every aspect of life. Furthermore, the notion of disengagement often carries connotations of distress and loss, intensifying when it pertains to the rich tapestry of a people's history and culture.

This state of confusion between modernization and clinging to identity, between what we are and what we want to be, has created a chasm between our current situation and achieving civilized refinement. This crisis has, if it is right to say, attracted the attention of many thinkers since before independence and even in the post-independence period, each analyzing it and offering solutions from his specialty and perspective.

Yet, not many have been able to provide an analysis that reflects over a long span of time, which is why Malek Bennabi, who was schooled by Western thinkers influenced by Descartes and by Islamic reformers like Abdelhamid Ben Badis, emerged. This enabled him to grasp various aspects and look deeply and realistically at the problems faced by Algerian society.

It is worth mentioning here that Bennabi also based his analysis on studying previous civilizations, their factors of rise and sophistication, as well as their factors of collapse, whether they were Arab Islamic or Western civilizations. His extensive knowledge of these gateways of information provided us with an analysis not only applicable to the era he lived in but also extends and reflects on our present and the future we await.

2. Intellectual References of Malek Bennabi:

To fully appreciate the depth of Malek Bennabi's intellectual journey, it is crucial to examine the formative influences that shaped his perspectives. As a proponent for the renaissance of civilization and maintaining pace with Western advancements, Bennabi was deeply inspired by the reformist currents that swept through the Arab Islamic world

between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His educational encounters in France played a pivotal role, as he notes in his memoirs:

"Generally, our French teachers imbued us with a Cartesian clarity that pierced through the mists of a mythological mindset, one that was then sympathetic to the superstitions rampant in Algeria... For me, Professor Bobreiter was particularly transformative, not merely through his formal teachings on ancient history and French literature. which were undeniably impactful. but more so through the broader intellectual vistas he opened for us." (Bennabi, 1984, p. 60)

It is pertinent to recognize that while figures like Zaki Naguib Mahmoud and Taha Hussein called for a wholesale assimilation into Western civilization, often at the expense of Arab Islamic heritage, they inadvertently fostered Eurocentric biases. These thinkers advocated for a complete severance from traditional Arab Islamic elements, embracing Western thought entirely.

In contrast, Bennabi's approach to reform and renaissance was marked by a more nuanced and cautious ethos. He aspired to lift the Arab societies from their state of stagnation and propel them towards parity with the West by selectively integrating certain Western methodologies, despite his deep immersion in French culture. (Boukhalakh, 2012, p. 43) The reasons for his differing approach from other advocates may be attributed to the following factors:

- Bennabi was influenced by the Islamic reform movement that emerged during that period to counter colonial attempts to implant French culture among the educated youth. His writings reflect a deep engagement with the goals of this movement, recognizing its aim to preserve the Islamic identity, which has an organizational dimension in human life that does not conflict with the values of civilization but, on the contrary, focuses on ethical values that lay the foundations for civilization.
- The nature of Malek Bennabi's thinking was critical; he studied ideas, beliefs, and movements, analyzing them before accepting them. He was not content merely to be dazzled by them and follow them because they advocated for progress and modernization. Instead, he delved into their depths, extracting their positives and negatives, especially considering the unique characteristics of Algerian society, which differs from others.
- His precedence in the field of critical thinking towards the renaissance and civilizational thought, among other topics, was facilitated by a group of thinkers, allowing him to invest in their intellectual outputs, critically study them, and benefit from their experiences.
- His firsthand experience of French colonialism and his recognition of the difficult toll it exacted on his people made him develop an independent and conscious thought about what France was advocating.

3. The Civilization Problem in Bennabi's Perspective:

Malek Bennabi devoted considerable attention to the issue of civilization, aligning his thoughts with those of Ibn Khaldun, as both thinkers shared intersecting ideas. (Bennabi, 1986, p. 21) Both thinkers also possessed a futuristic vision that eluded their contemporaries, marking them as relevant across various eras. Their analyses probed deep into perennial issues that could recur, irrespective of changing circumstances, rather than merely addressing the superficial data presenting the problem at the time.

For Bennabi, civilization epitomizes the zenith of human endeavor and results from an amalgamation of factors. It can only be realized with a keen awareness of the crises' causes and the elements that either undermine or foster civilizations. This awareness is the foundational step in building civilizations, starting with an understanding of the current crises faced by those striving for progress.

The focus should not be on treating the symptoms but on addressing the core of the disease. Following this, there must be an awareness of the fundamental principles that construct civilization; ethics take precedence. Consider the example of establishing a factory to bolster the economy: what benefit does it serve if the employees neglect quality and the supervisor condones this neglect for personal financial gain?

Malek Bennabi intricately linked the crisis faced by the Islamic world to broader civilizational challenges. Historically, the Islamic world was a beacon of sophisticated civilizational advancements, yet it encountered a significant decline. Understanding this decline requires a detailed examination and the formulation of effective solutions. A pivotal element in Bennabi's discourse on civilization is the equation he posited: (Boukhalakh, 2012, p. 46)

$$\text{Civilization} = \text{Human} + \text{Soil} + \text{Time}.$$

His scholarly work meticulously dissected each component of this equation, addressing the prerequisites for a renaissance, the cultural challenges, and the trajectory of the Islamic world. Bennabi characterized civilization as "the sum of moral and material conditions that enable a society to provide necessary assistance to every member, from childhood through old age, at any stage of their development".

In his analysis, the resurgence of civilization and the accomplishment of a renaissance are deeply tied to ethical values. He argued that the persistent failures in sparking a civilizational renaissance in Algerian society, and in Arab-Islamic societies at large, stem primarily from moral decay and a lack of recognition of this decline. The elite, in their efforts to modernize through reforms, often neglect the crucial aspects of intellectual and ethical revitalization.

Bennabi's conception of civilization is both constructive and pragmatic, emphasizing that a true civilization requires not only the establishment of material infrastructures such as transportation systems, healthcare institutions, and economic frameworks, but also that these systems be managed ethically to serve their intended purposes effectively.

Moreover, he posited that simply addressing basic needs and advancing technology are insufficient. Societies must also cultivate fundamental ethical behaviors and ensure the preservation of state properties, which are intended to serve the populace. On one hand, no civilization can flourish without a society's acknowledgment of its own identity and its historical legacies, which have informed Western scientific and research foundations.

On the other hand, it is observed that Algerian society, along with other Arab-Islamic societies, is caught between two extremes. The first is the notion that civilization and progress are solely achievable through scientific and technological advancement, and economic growth, which purportedly requires the separation of religion from state affairs.

The second extreme is the deep-rooted inability to let go of their identity and cultural heritage, which includes religious beliefs and superstitious practices. Intriguingly, the foundational personality of the Algerian individual, regardless of educational level, still harbors beliefs in phenomena such as magic and the evil eye.

The profound influence of the collective unconscious on our behaviors cannot be underestimated; it directs not merely our actions but fundamentally shapes our thought processes. As our cultures strive to ascend to a level of civilization akin to that of the West, which is often seen as the epitome of human advancement, a palpable crisis emerges.

This crisis is exacerbated if we fail to establish a hierarchy of values that is congruent with our culture, ideology, and aspirations. Acknowledging the uniqueness of our identity and culture is the initial step towards true civilization. Furthermore, it must be understood that development and advancement are not solely the byproducts of economic accumulation but result from the synthesis of noble goals, correct behavior, and beneficial outcomes. The economy thrives and sustains productivity through the infusion of noble ethics.

Malek Bennabi's profound examination of the civilization dilemma, coupled with his acute awareness of its scope, prompted him to dissect the issue from multiple perspectives. Discussing civilization necessitates a discourse on culture and the human entity, who stands as both the origin and the culmination of societal momentum. While culture endows the individual with intellectual, ideological, and behavioral frameworks, transformative change hinges on the individual's decision to enact it.

Bennabi also identified a significant barrier to civilizational progress in the Arab world's susceptibility to colonial dominance and its enchantment with Western ideology and accomplishments, often to the point of cultural dissolution. It is imperative for us to acknowledge that each society possesses distinct characteristics and cultural elements. Rather than effacing our cultural identifiers, it would be more constructive to rejuvenate them while simultaneously embracing technological advancements.

Malek Bennabi was acutely aware of the detrimental separation between thought and politics in our society. He articulated, "Politics must encompass ethics, beauty, and

science to be historically meaningful"(Bennabi, 1964, p. 16). Political leaders often chase progress solely through measures of productivity and efficiency, neglecting the essential social discipline and values required for individuals to truly flourish. Thought is the precursor to behavior; it molds and guides it.

A flaw in thought inevitably translates to flawed behavior. Hence, Bennabi stressed the paramount importance of nurturing the individual and fostering their development. Each individual acts as a cellular component of the larger societal body. If the cell is healthy, the tissue is robust and cohesive; if it is tainted, the tissue becomes defective. This underscores the importance of focusing on individual development, which involves a keen emphasis on the nature of the social upbringing and education provided, as these elements are fundamentally inseparable.

When discussing education and upbringing, we emphasize the ensemble of values imparted to an individual. It is pivotal to prioritize firstly the values of citizenship, followed by civilized behaviors, and lastly, teamwork. Values of citizenship inspire individuals to consider collective goals beyond their personal interests, fostering a commitment to societal productivity. Civilized behaviors encourage the responsible maintenance of public property and prudent use of technology. (Bennabi, 2005, p. 12)

Teamwork is essential, as it enables all societal systems to function effectively and synergistically. Bennabi illustrates these concepts through the example of a citizen who evades taxes and is subsequently pursued by the police. Public perception might paint the individual as a victim, yet, from an ethical perspective, this scenario underscores a fundamental lack of citizenship awareness.(Bennabi, 1997, p. 58)

Bennabi conceptualizes civilization's evolution through three pivotal stages, each essential for its formation and sustenance:

- **The Stage of Spirit:** This initial stage represents the profound convictions that compel an individual to forsake certain natural inclinations and ideologies in favor of others, believed to be superior in virtue and correctness. These beliefs, once adopted by a group, become widespread. For Bennabi, the genesis of civilization is inherently linked to a sacred religious spirit. He cites the development of Christian civilization, propelled by the early saints who disseminated Christian doctrines, and similarly, Islamic civilization, which was founded on the pure spirit upheld by Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Bennabi poignantly notes, "Wherever the spirit is lost, civilization falls and degenerates because those who lose the ability to ascend will inevitably fall under the influence of gravity (Bennabi, 2005, p. 19)".
- **The Stage of Mind:** Following the establishment of faith, the role of the intellect and scientific inquiry becomes paramount in giving tangible form to civilization. Bennabi praises the intellectual and scientific achievements of both Islamic and Christian civilizations, particularly during the Abbasid period when Islamic civilization witnessed its golden age. This era saw a surge in scientific

advancements with the contributions of luminaries such as Ibn Sina, Al-Khwarizmi, and Al-Ghazali. Civilization during this phase was characterized by urban development underpinned by science, medicine, commerce, and literary achievements that enriched the language and cultural fabric.

- **The Stage of Instinct:** In the Stage of Instinct, the prominence of ethical values becomes evident. Bennabi critiques this phase as the point where superficiality prevails, with individuals prioritizing form over substance. This stage is marked by an emphasis on aesthetics that pleases the senses while neglecting the foundational principles. Common manifestations include venues like nightclubs being heralded as signs of progress, alongside diverse religious interpretations that either justify or condemn certain behaviors. Bennabi poignantly remarks, "Civilization is emasculated when its advocates stray from their true path in pursuit of communal activities, adopting disparate paths and methods that render meaningful activity futile. Some paths may lead to the enclave of mysticism, others may venture into the realm of wonders reminiscent of 'One Thousand and One Nights,' and still others may embrace dancing and singing under the guise of becoming civilized"(Bennabi, 1974, p. 104). He further categorizes the society that persists after the decline of its civilization as a post-civilization society.

4. Reformative Intellectual Contributions of Malek Bennabi:

Malek Bennabi's reformative thoughts were primarily centered on the profound social transformations witnessed by Islamic nations that once reached the zenith of urban sophistication and cultural renaissance, only to later descend into decline. His intellectual contributions serve multiple critical purposes: first, they remind us that in its golden age, the Islamic nation epitomized refinement, underscoring that Islam is inherently compatible with the principles of civilization; second, they urge a cautious approach toward the enchantment with Western nations, advocating for critical engagement rather than blind emulation; and third, they stress the importance of understanding both the reasons for the fall of ancient Arab civilizations and the dynamics of Western development, considering our unique cultural and social characteristics.

Bennabi also delved into the impacts of colonialism which instilled a readiness for subservience and ingrained a belief that the colonizers were inherently more civilized and advanced, thus the colonized should follow their lead. a fallacious notion that urgently needs rectification. He argued for a shift in perception that moves away from mimicking foreign models wholesale and toward adopting what is beneficial and appropriate for our context.

Through his extensive readings and travels, Bennabi observed that the stagnation in various Arab Islamic countries is strikingly similar despite their cultural and historical variances. He sought to dissect the urban decay dilemmas and define the conditions

necessary for a renaissance, concluding that achieving true civilization is contingent upon the fulfillment of several conditions:

- A. Islamic societies must cast aside the cultural residues left by colonialism, such as the dazzlement by the West, and embrace new ideas that are free from superstitions and historical impediments. Bennabi asserts, "We must rid ourselves, through an act of sidelining, of all that has afflicted our selves and our minds from the clutches and habits of the post-unitarians".(Bennabi, 1974, p. 91)
- B. Unified goal and collaborative effort, the resurgence of a nation is fundamentally tied to unity in vision, goals, and reform methodologies. Bennabi emphasized, "We must activate collective action to elevate society to a noble life; I mean civilization."
- C. While deeply immersed in French culture, Bennabi's engagement with Islamic reform movements helped him appreciate that Islam forms an essential component of our identity and offers a pathway out of stagnation, thanks to its profound ethical teachings.
- D. Bennabi was noted for his forward-thinking perspective that recognized the dangers of blindly pursuing technological advancements as the sole indicators of progress and civilization. He warned that such a narrow focus could have regressive effects and potentially stifle a civilizational renaissance if not grounded on solid foundations.
- E. He placed significant emphasis on ethics as the cornerstone upon which civilizations are built and nations are nurtured. For Bennabi, civilization transcends mere external appearances like elegance in attire or literacy; it fundamentally represents a mode of thinking and includes the art of mutual respect and ethical conduct. Our modest readings of Malek Bennabi's thought on the beginnings of building a civilization and the issue of ethics have led us to conclude the following: for a society to reach civilization, it must have the necessary preparations for urbanization. These preparations are not just logistical but must combine awareness of the current situation with discernment of what to embrace and what to leave behind. We must also have a long-term visionary outlook because investing in an individual's ethics and education is more important than investing in factories, as they do not run themselves autonomously.
- F. We must let go of our attachment to history and its revival because each era has its characteristics.

5. Between Science and Ethics:

For Malek Bennabi, the essence of moral excellence transcends mere polite behavior; it also embodies organization, methodology, and the precision of skillful work. He places utmost importance on scientific progress, which, in his view, should invariably be

intertwined with ethics. Science, a relentless pursuit of truth, becomes an ethical force once its truths are understood, possessing the power to challenge and rectify errors. (Bennabi, 1964, p. 46)

This perspective underscores Bennabi's deep-seated intellectual rigor and his insightful approach to societal issues. For example, while an economist might devise solutions focusing exclusively on productivity, and a political analyst might concentrate on national stability, Bennabi proposes that the integration of science and ethics. principles both advocated by Islam. enables the holistic achievement of these objectives.

Scientific advancements inevitably trigger cultural shifts that can affect society both immediately and over the long term. Although it may appear that such changes primarily alter the material world through technological innovations, the more profound transformations occur within the behaviors and values of individuals, fundamentally altering their ethical landscape. (Bennabi, 1997, p. 59)

Take, for instance, the mobile phone, which has dramatically changed individual behaviors, particularly among the youth, and consider the role of television and the internet, which have become cultural benchmarks for many. Despite being mere objects, these technologies have profoundly reshaped our customs, redefined our social interactions, and established new behavioral norms. This is the crux of what merits our attention.

Bennabi critically views the adoption of Western technological advances without the development of a corresponding cultural and intellectual foundation. He argues that individuals must recognize that a mobile phone is merely a tool with limitations, not a cultural beacon, and that social media should not be seen as a measure of our accomplishments but often as something that detracts from them.

Bennabi eloquently states, "In general, it is a matter of specific conditions. moral and intellectual. that are essential for a person to be able to create and achieve civilization"(Bennabi, 1997, p. 27). Hence, civilization is both more profound and simpler than the commonly held belief that it equates solely to technological advancement. Rather, civilization is a concept that strives for a noble purpose, characterized by modest behavior, virtuous character, and objectives that transcend individualistic desires and vanity, aiming instead for a collective endeavor that uplifts society as a whole.

6. Aesthetic Guidance and Ethics:

In the discourse on aesthetics and ethics, Malek Bennabi's profound observation stands out: "Beauty is the face of the homeland in the world; let us preserve our face to maintain our dignity and impose our respect on our neighbors, to whom we owe the same respect".(Bennabi, 1986, p. 57) By this, Bennabi suggests that the concept of beauty. or its absence. permeates all aspects of life.

Every abstract idea, behavior, or entity inherently possesses an aesthetic dimension, a value that we must recognize in our continuous quest for civilization. The absence of aesthetic sensitivity within our culture is manifest in everything we create and give form to, as these creations are mere extensions of our conceptualizations. Bennabi illustrates this with the poignant image of a child in tattered, dirty clothes, playing amidst refuse. The issue, he argues, is not merely poverty but a fundamental neglect of life itself.

This child, when grown, is likely to perpetuate the conditions of their upbringing, even if relocated to a modern apartment by authorities. Lacking an ingrained sense of aesthetic care, they may not maintain their new environment. Bennabi emphasizes, "An ugly image cannot inspire beautiful imagination or grand ideas; its ugliness instills an even uglier imagination within the soul. In a society filled with ugly images, this ugliness is bound to manifest in its thoughts, actions, and ambitions".(Bennabi, 1997, p. 85)

Therefore, it is crucial to understand that simplicity does not justify neglect, and poverty is not an excuse for disregarding oneself or one's environment. Cleanliness, a value strongly advocated by Islam, carries deep significances. Even simple possessions, arranged neatly, can create a harmonious and pleasing visual experience. Aesthetic appreciation in what we produce, no matter how modest, adds value and indicates that an individual has not only mastered but also innovated in their creation.

7. The Triad of Civilization, Religion, and Ethics

Malek Bennabi posited that religious scholars, in their initial calls for reform, adopted a more accurate and robust approach than politicians, although over time, they too veered towards political inclinations. He contended that the foundation of every civilization lies in its religion, which provides a base through moral values that fundamentally guide human behavior and liberate minds from trivial pursuits, while also uniting hearts and objectives.

These scholars endeavored to recalibrate the human soul towards faith. Religion, in Bennabi's view, comprises a set of values and ideals that govern an individual's conduct both personally and socially, shaping their interactions and the collective ethos of society. This perspective underscores the intrinsic link between ethical conduct, religious values, and the overarching fabric of civilization.

The values Bennabi referenced are those of a civilized person. awareness, respect for time and society, freedom of others, excellence in work, and commitment to productive teamwork. In advanced societies, as we know, individuals work toward both personal and higher societal goals. Yet, in societies that have not yet joined the civilizational path, people work simply to survive, focusing solely on personal aims. (Bennabi, 1997, p. 82)

Consequently, their awareness and thinking are confined to self-centered concerns, lacking the vision needed for transformative change. In the discourse on ethics amid the challenges posed by globalization and technological advances, the contributions of

philosopher Taha Abderrahmane are particularly pertinent. He contends that for societies in the Maghreb, the pursuit of civilization must be underpinned by a strong commitment to ethics and values; otherwise, such efforts are destined to fail.

Abderrahmane emphasizes that relying solely on science and reason, without anchoring them in ethics, leads to mere technical development, not a true civilization. He advocates for the integral role of Islam in uplifting humanity, as it inherently promotes ethical conduct. (Mouhoub, 2017, pp. 137-146) Although Algerian society is nominally governed by Islamic principles, there is often a disconnect between these principles and their practical implementation. This gap highlights a prevalent issue: professing values without practicing them fails to contribute to societal advancement.

Malek Bennabi critically addresses this issue by pointing out that mere dreaming and theorizing without practical application do not yield progress or build civilizations. He references Karl Marx's notion that an engineer who intends to build a beehive from wax must first conceive it in his mind. (Bennabi, 1997, p. 13) Similarly, while imagination is crucial, it must transition into action, which should holistically consider not only material resources but also ethical values, personal convictions, and cultural norms. Bennabi warns that indiscriminately adopting Western methods of progress might be futile if cultural differences and individual mindsets are ignored.

8. Conclusion:

In his seminal work *The Problem of Ideas in the Islamic World*, Malek Bennabi explores ethics from a societal rather than solely philosophical perspective. He intricately links ethics to religion and civilization, viewing them as a triad that is fundamentally interconnected. Ethics, for Bennabi, are akin to the cohesive force that binds individuals together, fostering communal life and a sense of belonging which, in turn, are essential for building civilizations.

He argues that the construction of civilization is contingent upon an individual's comprehension of the conditions necessary for its emergence and the factors that can lead to its deterioration. Thus, civilization is defined not merely by technological and scientific advancements but predominantly by the ethical frameworks that accompany these advancements, ensuring their correct utilization.

Bennabi places a significant emphasis on awareness, positing that a deep understanding of societal issues and phenomena is the first critical step before proposing solutions. This approach is analogous to clinical psychology, where a therapist often begins with guiding individuals towards recognizing their issues and the underlying causes as a precursor to treatment.

Similarly, awareness is the foundational step towards societal progress. Without a clear comprehension of the existing conditions and realities, genuine advancement remains elusive. In this context, it may even be prudent for Arab Muslim societies to reflect and

reassess in order to advance more effectively, recognizing that they possess the potential to be at the forefront of global civilization.

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