

A Muslim Theory of Human Society— an Investigation into the Sociological Thought of Malik Bennabi

Mohamed Tahir El-Mesawi, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Thinker's Library, 1998, 177 pp.

The book is composed of an introduction, five chapters, a bibliography, and an index. In the first chapter, the author presents Malik Bennabi's understanding of religion and its place in human life. The second chapter outlines his views as to why human beings associate with each other and form societies. The third chapter deals with the constitution and dynamics of society as conceived by Bennabi. The fourth chapter is devoted to culture which features prominently in his writings. The final chapter discusses his cyclical theory of human socio-cultural and historical development.

The author informs us that he was introduced to Bennabi's thoughts by reading his *Le Phenomene Coranique* (The Qur'anic Phenomenon). He was so impressed with Bennabi's writing that when he contributed an article on the prospects of an Islamic theory of human society, he referred not only to the works of Ali Shariati, Muhammad Baqir as-Sadr, Murtaza Mutahhari, but also to Bennabi. An international seminar on Malik Bennabi held at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur in 1991 gave him the opportunity to read a paper dealing with Bennabi's contribution to social theory, in addition to inspiring

him to write a master's thesis which he submitted to the International Islamic University in 1994. Since then, he has embarked on translating some of Bennabi's major works into English. Two are listed in the bibliography: *On the Origins of Human Society* (a translation of *Milad Mujtama'*) and *Problem of Ideas in the Muslim World* (a translation of *Le Probleme des Idees dans le Monde Musulman*).

El-Mesawi is concerned with the lack of dialogue, constructive criticism and creative interaction among Muslim intellectuals who make no endeavor to develop contributions in various fields by discussing either previous or contemporary scholars. In his view, this is the reason why modern Muslim scholarship suffers from discontinuity, redundancy, repetitiveness, and irrelevancy. Tragically, any attempt at critically engaging the work of a scholar is perceived as undermining the personality of the scholar, rather than as an opportunity for positive interaction. It is in this respect, particularly, that El-Mesawi finds resonance in the works of Bennabi. The latter is particularly critical of Muslim scholars for having uncritically adopted the Western conception of culture.

The author decries the fact that Muslim scholars have not given Bennabi's approach to human society and civilization the attention it deserves. One possible reason for this could be that Bennabi chose to write several of his major works in French, thus, denying Arabic-reading and English-reading scholars access to these works. The international seminar, however, whose chief objective was to generate a greater awareness of Bennabi's thoughts and highlight his impact on contemporary Muslim society, appears to have achieved the desired effect. Judging from recent translations and publications of his works—many of which are listed in the bibliography—it is evident that contemporary scholars are increasingly focusing on Bennabi's writings.

Bennabi's dissatisfaction with the state of social studies and humanities in the Muslim World inspired him to develop a new/alternative paradigm for studying issues related to society and culture. For El-Mesawi, this provides the imperative to undertake a study of the theoretical and methodological framework underpinning Bennabi's writings. He is convinced that they constitute a theoretical framework for a Muslim theory of human society. The book under review is intended to encourage Muslim scholars to explore further Bennabi's ideas which, in El-Mesawi's opinion, will help them understand the historical development of modern Islamic thought, as well as add appreciably to the discourse on the Islamization of knowledge.

Bennabi approaches religion from a social perspective. Of course, we know that he is not the first to do so; Ibn Khaldun preceded him by several centuries. El-Mesawi, however, argues that while Ibn Khaldun regards material factors as the driving force behind human civilizational development, Bennabi gives

more weight to spiritual and ethical factors. His central concern is the role of religion in human life and civilization, and its dynamics in a sociocultural and historical process of human society. This interrogation of Ibn Khaldun's theory is refreshing in its approach and, hopefully, will succeed in encouraging further debate among Muslim scholars.

Though exploring the role of religion in human development is by no means a new enterprise, Bennabi's methodology and approach to the study of religion and sociocultural affairs—the author claims—differ markedly from that of the sociology of religion. Modern Western studies tends to explain religion by a simple historical interpretation, ignoring the inherent religiosity of humankind. It assumes that reason and science will fulfil the functions of religion. Thus, if humankind is able to master the human and natural environment, it is capable of fulfilling its material, cultural, and spiritual needs without religion. Science, in fact, is viewed as humanity's new religion.

In contrast, Bennabi's response to the fundamental question: "Are human beings religious by instinct or have they acquired a religious quality?" is that man is "a religious animal in essence." Religion, in his understanding, is a cosmic phenomenon governing human thought and civilization. This echoes the well-known hadith "every child is born in a state of *fitrah*." Muslim scholars interpret this hadith to mean that every individual was endowed at birth with a divine element. El-Mesawi concurs with Bennabi that religion has always been a characteristic of human life. This fact is attested to by philosophers, theologians, moralists and social scientists. The controversy over religion, El-Mesawi rightly concludes, is the dispute over the origins of life. In the modern era, the Darwinian theory has spurred much of the debate about the origin, nature, and purpose of human existence.

Bennabi circumvents the debate between science and religion that has been engaging the attention of Muslim scholars by reducing the difference between them to "that which defies matter" (materialism) and "that according to which God is the ultimate cause of everything" (theism). By this method, he avoids direct conflict between the realm of science or physics (according to which everything is determined by matter) and that of religion or metaphysics (according to which matter itself is determined). To him, the debate is groundless because we are dealing with what are essentially two contending belief systems.

Bennabi, we are informed, was in quest of the essence that would make human beings live together as "civilized" beings guided by their conscience. To this end, he devoted himself to a study of past and present human experience, believing that this would yield valuable lessons that could assist us in the contemporary age to establish a humane civilization. He recognizes two types

of societies: natural stationary (or primitive) and historical dynamic. He dismisses natural, stationary societies as inconsequential, and rejects Marxist theory as inadequate to explain the birth of society. He argues that the herd instinct, while it is suitable for the advancement and progress of the species, is not the real "cause" of society formation. Social scientists should rather focus on the dynamic aspects of human social life, which naturally entails a study of historical dynamic societies.

Is this tenable? Should any society be ignored because it does not fulfil the criteria of what Bennabi regards as a "dynamic" society? Perhaps he regards Dhu'l Qarnayn's treatment of the three peoples he encountered in his travels (Qur'an, 18:83–97) as the ideal approach to the study of human civilization. He did ignore those who lived a very unsophisticated life, however, whether this provides adequate justification for ignoring whole communities is debatable. El-Mesawi does not proffer a view in this regard.

Bennabi not only discounts the materialist economic explanation of the emergence of society, but also rejects the challenge-response and biological-instinctual hypotheses. For him, religion underlies societal evolution and cultural development. Bennabi views society as composed of three realms: persons, ideas, and objects, where ideas are regarded as more significant than objects. In terms of his cyclical view of history, humankind experiences birth and ascendancy, expansion and disintegration. This is in keeping with the Qur'anic descriptions of the rise and fall of nations.

In the debate over whether society or the individual is the actual agent of history and the true determinant of human destiny, Bennabi takes a third approach: both individual and society have real existence. The relationship between them is based on mutual engagement and dependency. In this sense, Bennabi is true to the Islamic position which attempts to strike a balance between the rights of the individual and that of society. He divides society into three stages: precivilized, civilized, and post-civilized. In the first stage, society is spiritually and ethically oriented, and experiences vertical development. In the second phase, it is expansionary and develops horizontally. In the third phase, there are forces which work against the ideal, becoming agents of destruction. The inspiration for this classification is undoubtedly early Islamic history as well as the peoples mentioned in the Qur'an, such as the 'Ad, the Thamud, and the people of Madyan.

Evidently, El-Mesawi's fascination with Bennabi's writings is precisely because in them he has discovered echoes of his own thoughts. Bennabi is not, like most Muslim social scientists, a mere imitator, but attempts to locate his theory in the matrix of the Islamic worldview. To put it another way, he ingeniously percolates the Islamic worldview through his theory of human develop-

ment. One of Bennabi's most profound contributions is that he advances compelling arguments against the common perception of social scientists that religion is merely a social phenomenon.

El-Mesawi's call for a new paradigm cannot be contested except by those who regard the prevailing dominant paradigms in the social sciences as sacrosanct. He succeeds in convincing the reader to take serious account of Bennabi's new paradigm for the study of society, at least as a starting point. El-Mesawi's work would have been enhanced even further had he included the Qur'anic verses that demonstrate Bennabi's paradigm.

The bibliography is fairly comprehensive and very valuable. It lists Bennabi's works, the works of contemporary Muslim scholars, and those of Western sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists. For some reason, the author has chosen to list some words commencing with "i" under "a" (see page 171), because they commence with the Arabic *'ayn*. This is a departure from the traditional method of listing only the words commencing with "i" under "i" in the index and is rather confusing. There are several typographical/proof errors; for example, WAJ on page xi (not numbered) should have been WAI and the word Abbreviation on the same page is spelled incorrectly. In a few instances, the language needs modification; e.g., "Here we are, once again, back to the first square" (p. 17). Perhaps the author was too intent on keeping to the original text during translation.

Despite these minor glitches, this book is a valuable addition to the collection of Bennabi's translated works. It should form part of the collection of scholars with an interest in contemporary Islamic thought in general, and to those involved in the Islamization process in particular. The author needs to be commended for his signal contribution to expanding the boundaries of Islamic scholarship.

Suleman Dangor
School of Religion and Culture
University of Durban-Westville
Durban

Digitized by srujanika@gmail.com

From the Department of Islamic Studies, Faculty of Theology, University of Durban-Westville, Durban, South Africa

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