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“Malek Bennabi: An Analytical Study of His Theory of Civilization”

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### Introduction

In the aftermath of colonialism, the Arab and the Muslim worlds began to wake up to witness a deep crisis that prevailed all sectors of people’s life. Many Muslim thinkers have posed the question “what has gone wrong with modern Muslim culture...with a bitter acknowledgment that the Muslim world is far from sound and that the road to recovery is long indeed.”<sup>1</sup> The Western intervention in the Muslim countries due to its growing capitalism disrupted the political, economic, social and cultural realities of these countries. The political independence of these countries was not an outlet for then they came to face the worst reality; they came to witness their defeat and disequilibrium. Hence, most of these

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<sup>1</sup>Ibrahim M. Abu Rabi’, Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History (London: Pluto Press: 2004), 242.

countries focused their attention on finding out strategies for a rebirth and development. Efforts were made to modernize existing cities. Yet because of the social and administrative problems, these efforts went in vain. It just presented an unbalanced and a handicapped development. For many modern cities were established in rural and nomadic environments that are predominantly illiterate and undeveloped. Even when there was an awareness of existing social and economic problems the attempt was to borrow solutions alien to the realities and traditions of these environments. These solutions were examples of theories given birth in the socio-economic environment of the West and were successful in that particular environment. Applying them to the indigenous problems of the Muslim countries remained unfulfilling. A number of Muslim thinkers started to look into their foundations and their identity and rethink a number of issues in an attempt to reconstruct the Muslim power. Thus, the intellectual discourse in the Muslim countries took different paths, each presenting an ideal or a project, claiming it to be the key to the ultimate outlet to the crisis and each claimed to hold the answer to the predicaments of the Muslim countries. Therefore, the intellectual scene throughout the Muslim world became a cluster of ideas, projects and aspirations, all participating in a heated debate.

One issue, crucial to this debate, is the meaning of the west and Western civilization. A number of Arab and Muslim intellectuals who lived and studied in Europe came back home full of ideas and opinions about Europe and European civilizations. For example, Sayyid Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) fascinated by the Western science established the college of Aligarh in India aimed to spread nineteenth century European rationalism and natural philosophy. Also, some political figures admired the Western civilization and therefore sent envoys and students to the west to learn from it. At their return, they eventually brought

new values and outlooks in the lives of the indigenous populations of the Arab and Muslim countries, creating a confusion whose impact is still visible to this point of history.

However, the debate over this issue of civilization is not a new topic that has come to open discussion in the new era, but it is related to the long history of the Islamic thought. In fact, the fourteenth century Arab thinker Ibn Khaldun enlightened the world<sup>2</sup> at large with his deep insights into the workings of kingdoms and civilizations. Interestingly, some studies have averred that the Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi (1905-1973) was the most original Arab thinker since Ibn Khaldun when it came to speculating on the phenomenon of civilization.<sup>3</sup>

Malek Bennabi is a Muslim thinker, educated in the West and spent a long time trying to understand the Western civilization and culture. He believed that the decline of the Muslims is not because of Islam but because of the Muslims themselves. Belonging to a country (Algeria) that was colonized for more than a century, Bennabi looked deep for the essence of the problem to find out if it is mainly a problem of civilization. My question now is how did Malek Bennabi speculate on the issue of civilization and what are the solutions he proposed to overcome the contemporary problems of the Muslim world? To answer these questions, I will first analyze how Bennabi speculated on the question of building civilizations. Then, I will analyze Bennabi's views on the causes behind the decline of civilizations. Last, I will analyze the inner structure of Bennabi's theory of civilization. However, before proceeding with this task, let us first meet with our thinker Malek Bennabi.

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<sup>2</sup>This refers to the impact of Ibn Khaldun's thought in the western modern thought that contributed to the birth of major figure such as Arnold Toynbee.

<sup>3</sup>Fawzia Barium, "Malik Bennabi and the Intellectual Problems of the Muslim Ummah," The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences 9 (Fall, 1992): 325-37.

## I- Background

### a. Bennabi's Life<sup>4</sup>

Malek Bennabi was born to a poor but pious family in Constantine, Algeria in 1905. He had three sisters and was the only son of the family. An uncle and his wife who lived in Constantine adopted him. When this uncle died the wife became financially needy and had to return him to his parents in Tibissa. Bennabi presented his father as an educated and respected man who worked hard to support his family and also support him when he decided to go to France to study. As a child, Bennabi was fond of his grandmother who was the narrator in the family and whom he considers as his first teacher. His grandmother used to spontaneously gather children around her and tell them past stories. Bennabi enjoyed these stories which played a major role in shaping his cultural background and which filled his little head with ideas and feelings that served as the first inputs of his intellectual and psychological orientation. Bennabi went to a traditional school called *al Kuttaab* where he learnt Qur'an. Then, he joined the French school where he studied until he graduated with a high school diploma. During this period of his life, he was aware of the negative impact of colonialism on the Algerian society and hoped that one day Algeria would be a free state from the French administration. Since his early age, he showed a keen interest in study and research and during his vacations from school he studied Arabic and attended lectures of some religious scholars such as Shaikh 'Abdul Majid. In Constantine, he participated in the social and cultural activities of his generation and used to meet with his friends in Ben Yamina café to exchange ideas about different issues. Bennabi was familiar with books both in Arabic and French as well as newspapers that dealt with social and political events of his

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<sup>4</sup>Much of the following account has been summarized from Zaki Milad, Malek Bennabi Wa Mushkilat al Hadharah: Dirasah Tahliliyyah Wa Naqdiyyah (Damascus: Dar al Fikr, 1998); and Ali al Quraishi, al Taghyir al Ijtima'I 'inda Malek Bennabi: Mandhur Tarbawi Liqadhaya al Taghyir Di al Mujtama' al Muslim al Mu'asir (Cairo: al Zahra' Lil F'lam al 'Arabi, 1989).

environment. After he graduated from the French school, he tried to find a job but in vain. He, then, decided to go to France to continue his studies in 1930.

In France, Bennabi enrolled in an institute of engineering and became fond of studying science. As a North African, he became acquainted with Latin Quarter where he had the opportunity to meet with students from different Maghribian<sup>5</sup> societies and be familiar with their problems and concerns. He sympathized with these students who raised questions in an attempt to change the conditions of their societies, but he also tried to awaken them to the reality that unless a change in the psychological and social realities of people themselves is achieved, their questions are irrelevant. Bennabi's encounter with the European culture as well as many natural and social sciences has helped him in rethinking the problems of Muslims and connecting between the Muslim world and the rest of the world. He looked at the experience of Muslims as part of a broader human experience. In 1956, Bennabi immigrated to Egypt where he felt there was a support of the Algerian war and also sympathy with the Algerian national cause. There, he devoted himself to writing this time in Arabic while most of his previous books were translated from French into Arabic.<sup>6</sup> In 1963, he went to Algeria where he was appointed Director of High Studies in the Ministry of National Education. In 1971, he went to the pilgrimage with his wife and their three daughters. In a visit to Lebanon, he registered a legal document giving his friend Omar Masqawi the total authority over his books. He died in 1973.

#### **b. Bennabi's Work and Thought**

All of the studies that were made on the works of Malek Bennabi have come to the conclusion that the notion of *al-hadarab* (civilization) is the major idea in almost all of his

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<sup>5</sup>This is also an alternate name to the North African countries.

<sup>6</sup>These translations were done by Dr. Abd Sabur Shahin.

works. A mere examination of these works leads one to notice that most of them are published under the main title “The Problem of Civilization” (*Mushkilat al-Hadarah*). Thus, in order to get a full understanding of the ideas of Malik Bennabi, one has to grasp his notion of civilization. Malek Bennabi believes that the problem of any nation is in essence a problem of civilization.<sup>7</sup> At this point the key question is how Malek Bennabi defines the notion of civilization.

Malek Bennabi explains that, “*hadarah* can be defined in fact as a set of spiritual and material elements that allows a society to insure all social guarantees to every single individual.”<sup>8</sup> He explains that this set of necessary material and spiritual elements are necessary for the progress of this society and they become successful when they turn into a policy and a project, representing thus the world of ideas in this society on both the social and moral levels.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, *hadarah* emerges within the world of ideas and then it is transformed into a social regulation and a governing power within that society, framing itself with a spiritual control to assure its safe and right steering. Malek Bennabi points out that a society lacking *hadarah* cannot buy it from outside with a foreign currency. For there are spiritual and cultural values that one cannot import and the society itself has to produce them;<sup>10</sup> and he adds in his book *Fi mahabbi al-Ma’raka* (In the Battlefield) that *hadarah* is the outcome of the effort made by a society that wants to be civilized.<sup>11</sup>

As a whole, Malek Bennabi looks at *hadarah* as a complex phenomenon. First of all, he defines it as being in essence a culture (*thaqaafa*). In other words, every society is based on a set of cultural values. Second, *hadarah* is a product of the world of ideas, meaning that it is

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<sup>7</sup>Malik Bennabi, *Surut al-Nahdha* (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 1979), 21.

<sup>8</sup>Bennabi, *Mushkilat al-Afkar fi al-‘Alam al-Islami*, 24.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>10</sup>Bennabi, *Bayna al-Rashad wa al-Tih*, 195.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 136.

the living idea in a given society that produces *badarab*. Leading this society, then, into history. Third and according to Malek Bennabi, Civilization is defined as a function. He contends that the function of *badarab* is twofold: First, *badarab* functions within a particular society. Second it also has a function within human history, for the movement of human civilization as a whole is but the movement of history (*al-tarikh*) to a particular point.<sup>12</sup> Now, let us see what are the causes behind the rise of civilization according to Malek Bennabi.

## II- Theory of civilization: Birth and Decay

### a. Bennabi and Realm of Ideas:

What is development?<sup>13</sup> Such was Malek Bennabi's starting point. In answering this question, he points out that the economic development of the European countries is but an example of a general development he calls civilization. This economic development is the materialistic aspect of this civilization. Manifestations of advancement such as planes and machines are the products of this civilization. The European people gained these products after they built their civilization. When they first started to rethink themselves and their societies, they directed their will and ability to reconstruct their societies on the basis of civilization and not on the basis of its products.<sup>14</sup> Hence, Malek Bennabi argues that the problem of construction is linked to the problem of Man and that of ideas. In the light of these considerations, Bennabi urges that instead of asking the question of how can Muslims create the products of civilization, they should ask how to create a civilization. Bennabi's background as an engineer has made him look for more precise definitions. His scientific training implemented in him the task of analyzing and synthesizing to come up with full

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<sup>12</sup>Bennabi, Wijhat al-'Alam al-Islami, 150-161.

<sup>13</sup>Bennabi, al Qadaya al Kubra, 39.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 54.

definitions of concepts. That is why in answering this question, he explicitly points out to the necessity to adopt the same procedure as that of laboratory analysis by taking not the whole matter to the laboratory but simply a sample of it. Thus, applying a sociological analysis, he has broken civilization into three essential elements, namely Man (*insan*), soil (*turab*), and time (*waqt*). These three elements are expressed in the following formula:

$$\text{Man} + \text{Soil} + \text{Time} = \text{Civilization}^{15}$$

The product of all these three elements is civilization itself. Analyzing this equation, Malek Bennabi remarks that the problem of civilization can in fact be broken into three distinct problems, namely the problem of Man, the problem of Soil and the problem of Time.<sup>16</sup> Now, let us look closely at each of these elements.

1. Man:

According to Bennabi, Man has two identities: First, he has a natural identity.<sup>17</sup> This is Man's external shape that represents his physical characteristics. It is the unchangeable shape in which the Creator created Man. Second, Man has also a social identity.<sup>18</sup> This identity is made up by all the mental and the psychological features shaped by the social heritage and the historical era. This social identity is changeable because the problems that face Man as well as the solutions differ according to the environmental and the historical time. Bennabi's message is that it is the human being who directs things and makes civilization. That is why Man occupies a central position in his theory of civilization. In other words, for the other elements of civilization to fulfill their effectiveness and have value, Man first and foremost has to have value and effectiveness.<sup>19</sup> The importance

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<sup>15</sup>Bennabi, Shurut al Nahdha, 49-50.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 75.

<sup>18</sup>Bennabi, Milad Mujtama', 180.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 200.

Bennabi gives to the element of Man in the equation of *hadarah* is the result of his belief that the deterioration of Muslims in the Modern era is because of the social and historical deterioration of people themselves. Bennabi believes that Muslims in the Modern era are disoriented; they do not have a sense of direction or in other words they have lost their sense of direction and orientation. Thus, he explains that *tanjih* (orientation) is a key element to start with, for it is strength of foundation and a unity of goal. He adds that it saves time and effort. Therefore, he argues that tackling the issue of Man generates into three principle factors, namely *tanjih Thaqafa* (guidance of culture), *tanjih al-'Amal* (guidance of Action) and *tanjih ra's al-Mal* (guidance of Capital).<sup>20</sup> Now, let us see what he says about each of these factors:

a. *Tanjih Taqafa* (Guidance of Culture):

Malek Bennabi relates culture to civilization while he distinguishes between knowledge and culture. He points out that culture is a theory of behavior (*suluk*) more than it is a theory of knowledge (*ma'rifah*). He contends that the social behavior of the individual is related to self more than just to knowledge. To him, culture is a set of spiritual features as well as social values that the individual acquires since birth. In other words, culture is the environment that frames the individual's personality and its characteristics.<sup>21</sup> Giving an analogy, he identifies culture with the blood in the body of the society, for culture nourishes the society's civilization, carries the 'elite' ideas as well as the 'common' ones.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, Bennabi argues that there should be an elimination of all the decadent customs and traditions from the social and moral framework of the society.

b. *Tanjih al-'Amal* (Guidance of Action):

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<sup>20</sup>Bennabi, *Shurut Nahdha*, 113.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 89.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 93.

According to Bennabi, guidance of action is another essential factor in the analysis of the question of Man. In the process of the social build up in general, the guidance of action is in fact a guidance of all the efforts of the whole social grouping to one direction. Action is when all these efforts are used to change the situation of the individual and to create a new environment for him.<sup>23</sup> Bennabi comments that we work when we engage in the action of giving or taking in a way that influences History.<sup>24</sup> For him it is the action itself that traces the fate of things in the social framework. Though it is not an essential element as Man, Soil and Time, it is generated from all these three elements.<sup>25</sup>

c. *Tanjib al-Mal* (Guidance of Capital):

Malek Bennabi explains that *ra's al-mal*<sup>26</sup> (capital) is a mobile fund in essence whose social space extends according to its movement and its growth to reach a larger space than that of the individual.<sup>27</sup> He adds that capital does not refer to its owner for it extends the individual's use to move from one place to another. Capital, according to Bennabi, is judged by its quality and not by its quantity; the main thing is to make sure that every piece of money is moving along while creating a dynamic action. For the task is not to accumulate wealth but to socially activate the fund, balancing the interest of both the individual and the society.<sup>28</sup>

2. Soil:

It is obvious that the term 'soil' can be equated to nature or to the natural resources. In fact from an Islamic point of view "the term could be interpreted...as the earth, the globe or

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 114.

<sup>26</sup> Following the Economists, Malek Bennabi draws a distinction between wealth and capital. For him, wealth is connected to its owner while capital is set aside from its owner and becomes an abstract financial strength. For more detail, see Bennabi's *Shurut Nahdha*, pp.118-19.

<sup>27</sup>Bennabi, *Shurut Nahdha*, 119.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 121.

the universe that God has created for mankind to discover, utilize and develop.”<sup>29</sup> However, pointing to this term, Bennabi comments that he does not talk about nature and the particularities of the soil but he talks about its social value,<sup>30</sup> for he recognizes that “it is a pervasive and all-inclusive concept with a far-reaching scope.”<sup>31</sup> It is the ownership and the love of the land that is in play here and by extension the security and the social guarantees it entails. Besides, Bennabi explains that he purposely chooses the term ‘soil’ instead of *madda* (matter) because of its connotations as opposed to *ruh* (spirit) in ethics, and in science as opposed to *taqa* (energy), and in philosophy as opposed to *mithaliyat* (Idealism).

### 3. Time:

It is very important to point out that Bennabi’s understanding of time does not refer to the age of the individual but it has a social importance by contributing in the build-up of the active thoughts. Bennabi explains that time flows equally through all nations but for some, time is a wealth whereas for others it is rendered to nothingness.<sup>32</sup> He comments that the Muslim world lacks the true understanding of time, namely the valuable use of time in constructing active thoughts, meanings and things.<sup>33</sup> This social function has been weak among Muslims, though time is given a key role in Islam. He urges that time should be socially transformed into a social time whereby it becomes involved in all industrial, economic and cultural operations.<sup>34</sup> Now that we analyzed the causes that lead to the rise of civilization according to Malek Bennabi, let us see now how he answers the question of what causes the decline of civilization.

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<sup>29</sup>Fawzia Bariun, Malik bennabi: His Life and Theory of Civilization (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, 1993), 162.

<sup>30</sup>Bennabi, Shurut, 139.

<sup>31</sup>Bariun, Malik Bennabi, 162.

<sup>32</sup>Bennabi, Shurut, 145.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>34</sup>Bennabi, Afaq Jaza’iriyya: Lilhadharah, lithaqafah, lilmafhumiyya, 60.

### **b- Bennabi and the malaise in the Realm of Ideas-Persons-Things:**

Malek Bennabi contends that historical events are simply a reaction to the interaction of the three realms:

1. Realm of ideas
2. Realm of persons
3. Realm of objects/things

According to Bennabi, the interaction of these three realms is what leads to historical movement. The realm of persons plays the key role and this is due to the key role Bennabi assigns to man in his theory of civilization. For Bennabi the interaction of man with environment is what moves ahead the wheels of history because the first work to be done in an attempt for social change is the work that changes the individual into a person and gives him social features that connect him to society. A particular society, Bennabi explains, is defined as being developed when a healthy relationship is established between these three realms. However, when this relationship is shaken, the ties relating these realms become loose and they all fail to fulfill the collective work in an effective way. This is but a sign of a sickness in the body of the society. A deterioration of a given society is the result of a complete detachment among these three realms. The society, finally, becomes a memory buried in the books of history.

Bennabi contends that when the meaning of civilization in a society is rendered to be the importation of things from other nations or else the borrowing of its products or its thought (*fikruha*), then this meaning will certainly lead to the death of the civilizational ambition within this society. He adds that building civilization and getting rid of backwardness cannot be done through buying alien tools and products. Bennabi explains that one aspect of a deteriorated society is being full (*mujtama' mutakhim*) with persons, ideas and things/ objects

with no interaction between them. Bennabi here stands against an intellectual elite that emerged within the Muslim world and tried to convince the Muslim people that following the footsteps of the West and imitating its model is the solution to their problems. He clearly points that this call is both hopeless and misleading. He also disagrees with the opinion that blames the west and colonialism for the decline of the Muslims. Bennabi contends that the causes of the Muslims' decline did not come from outside but most importantly there are some internal causes that served as a cradle for this decline. He, then, sums them up as being a psychological defeat that the Muslims now experience referring to surah (13: 11) which states that 'Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in their heart.'<sup>35</sup> Bennabi, "Writing under the influence of French culture and colonialism, is deeply perturbed by what he perceives as the moral and social chaos in the modern Islam."<sup>36</sup> Bennabi distinguishes between the external colonialism and what he calls "colonisabilité" (an invented term) or *al qabiliyya lil al Isti'mar*, meaning the internal receptivity to colonialism. According to Bennabi, this "colonisabilité" comes from the psychology of the people themselves, from their tastes, from their ideas and from their habits.<sup>37</sup> Bennabi contends that "colonisabilité" is a reverse in the social evolution. In other words, the historical process starts with "colonisabilité" which later generates colonialism.<sup>38</sup> If one has to have a valid judgment, one has to take back the colonial process to its origin and not just look at its present existence; one has to look at it as a sociologist and not a politician.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, Bennabi adds, we can understand that colonialism is a historical necessity (*une nécessité historique*). However, Bennabi draws a fundamental distinction between a country

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<sup>35</sup>Majid, Fakhry, *An Interpretation of the Qur'an*, (New York: New York University press, 2002), 246.

<sup>36</sup>Abu Rabi', *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World*. 16.

<sup>37</sup>Bennabi, *Vocation de L' Islam*, 82.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>39</sup>Wafiq Raouf, "Malek Bennabi: Regard D'un Algérien Sur L' Occident", *EurOrient*, 4 (Février/Mai 1999): 81.

that is simply invaded or occupied and a country that is colonized, for in the first country there is the pre-existing synthesis of the individual, soil and time which implies that the individual is un-colonized whereas in the second country all the existing social conditions reveal the “colonisabilité” of the individual, which renders any external invasion to colonialism.<sup>40</sup>

This notion of “colonisabilité” or *al qabilīyya lil al Isti’mar* is a psychological feeling that does not only render a society unable to fight against colonialism but it also makes things easier for colonialism to perform its mission. The individual in a society that is backward and because of his/her psychological state renders the cause of his/her decline to the lack of the tools and products he/she sees in the hands of individuals in the developed society. For him/her, the solution is with activation in the realm of things. In addition, a society may direct its efforts to ‘thingness’ (*shay’iyyah*) and accumulation (*takdiss*) and that is a clear indication of its decline and a step out of the world of civilization. Bennabi argues that in fact accumulation (*takdiss*) is a social phenomenon and it may happen that in a certain period of its history a society may start to accumulate things/objects. This is a stage not of its development but of its decline because at this stage the society does not think and arrange its acts systematically according to its ideas and laws but it just accumulates things.<sup>41</sup> Bennabi argues that the Muslim world has witnessed an accumulation of the European modern products but it still suffers from underdevelopment. Hence, according to Bennabi, the efforts done in what is called the Renaissance (*Nabdhah*) have been merely examples of this accumulation. He adds that it is ideas and their effectiveness that play a key role in effectively placing a particular society among the wealthy ones and not the amount of the

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 164.

things it possesses.<sup>42</sup> However, this transformation is not done by the ideas themselves but it is the individual her/himself that is the major actor in the transformation. As I pointed earlier, Man is the key element in Bennabi's theory of civilization. Therefore, the realm of figures/persons is the qualified realm to reconstruct society and restore the vitality and effectiveness of ideas. In other words, a society steps out of civilization when its members are caught in the realm of things, directing their efforts and attention to accumulate borrowed things while they shut off any attempt to stimulate their own ideas and become actors and producers.

### III- STAGES OF CIVILIZATION

Bennabi divides societies into two kinds: the natural society and the historical society.<sup>43</sup> The natural society is a static society like that of ants, bees, the African society before colonialism and the Arab society before the rise of Islam.<sup>44</sup> The historical society (*al-Mujtama' al-Tarikhi*), however, is the one that appears in some particular initial situation but later it starts to develop its initial characteristics toward advancement.<sup>45</sup> In its development, this society undergoes three stages<sup>46</sup> that are:

1. A stage before development
2. A stage of development
3. A stage after development

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<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>43</sup>Bennabi, Milad, 9.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 9.

<sup>46</sup>Bennabi, Shurut, 74-80.

Bennabi identifies these three stages to those of the human being. For him, a civilization undergoes three stages similar to those of a child.<sup>47</sup> Those stages as he explains them are as follows:

1. Motherhood period (*Tawr al-Umumi*): As a baby, the human being remains unaware of the world of things, then he/she gradually starts to feel and sense things around him/her.

2. Pre-social period (*tawr qabla al'Ijtima'i*): In this period, the child is involved in the world of things and also the world of persons but still unaware of the world of ideas.

3. The social period (*Tawr al-Ijtima'i*): This period starts with schooling. The child now tries to make a link between the world of things and the world of ideas.

Bennabi comments that it is obvious that the internal contradiction between the causes of life and death in any biological operation is what leads the living entity to the peak of its growth and then to its final disintegration. In the social arena, however, this decidedness (*hatmiyyah*) is conditioned because the orientation and the lifetime of growth depend on some chronological and psychological conditions.

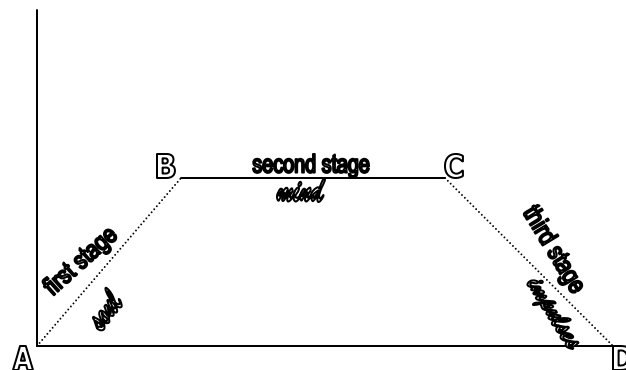
Speculating on the theory of civilization, Bennabi remarks that it is a fact that at a certain period in the chronological sequence of time, a nation may attain a high level in the growth of its civilization and at other periods it may be left behind to sink into deep sleep. Owing to this observation, Bennabi points out that Muslims should first determine their historical position in the cyclic movement of history before proceeding in any attempt to solve their current problems. Bennabi says that one of the major problems of the Muslims now is that they ignore where they stand vis-à-vis the historical cyclic movement; and this ignorance has led to their catastrophe. Therefore, one cannot talk about solutions while disregarding the historical position of his/her own people, but there should be coherence between one's

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<sup>47</sup>Bennabi, Fiktar Commonwealth al Islami, 26.

thoughts and procedures and between the demands of these people's era. Besides, importing solutions from the East or the West is but a waste of effort and an aggravation of the illness.

It is no wonder that Bennabi also talks about stages of civilization in his theory. According to Bennabi, each civilization is situated between two angles: Birth and disappearance.<sup>48</sup> In the first angle, civilization moves up toward development while in the second angle it heads down toward its decline and disappearance. In between these two angles, there is a middle point and that is where civilization in the course of its movement reaches the peak of its height.<sup>49</sup> It is the stage when civilization progresses and spreads. To give his theory a concrete and empirical aspect, Bennabi has provided a figure<sup>50</sup> through which he shows both the elements and movements of civilization. Now, let us look closely at this diagram.



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<sup>48</sup>Bennabi, *Shurut*, 73.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 65-66.

<sup>50</sup>Look at Malek Bennabi, *Shurut Nahdah*, P. 74; and also, *Mushkilat al-Afkar fi al-'Alam al-Islami*, P. 44.

As the diagram shows, the first stage (AB) is that of soul (Ruh) and here Bennabi's message is that civilization exclusively starts with the religious creed.<sup>51</sup> In other words, civilization always emerges from a revelation that turns out to be the law and the guide for its followers. Before Islam, the people of the Arabian Peninsula were mere Bedouins whose three components of man-soul-time were motionless with no function in the historical process. However, when the soul emerged from the cave of *hirah*, these three components generated a new civilization that started with the word *Iqra*<sup>52</sup> (read) which astonished both the illiterate Messenger and the world. Thus, the Arab tribes stepped onto the stage of history leading a new civilization to its peak of prosperity. Bennabi explains that the first stage - that of soul - of the Islamic civilization starts with the cave of *hirah* and ends with the battle of Siffin; in this stage the soul of the believer was the main psychological factor. The Battle of Siffin, however, marked the beginning of the stage of the mind (*al 'Aql*) and in the diagram is shown by the letters (BC). This stage is different from the first one, for now those natural dispositions or those natural impulses (*gharaa'iz*) are no more controlled because the mind (*'aql*) lacks the soul's control over them. These natural impulses at this point start to unchain themselves from all the limitations they had during the stage of the soul. Gradually, the soul loses its control over these impulses and eventually the whole society loses its control over the individual. At this point civilization starts to head towards its downfall.

Bennabi contends that from the time of the Battle of Siffin, the Islamic civilization continued to spread on earth due to what is left from its soul, reaching the peak of its productivity. In science, for example, great names such as Ibn Sina' and Al Farabi emerged

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<sup>51</sup>Bennabi points out that he is using this term in its broader sense, as did Waltar-Schubart in his book *Europe and the Soul of the East*.

<sup>52</sup>This is a reference to surah 96 - *Al 'Alaq* (the clot).

until the time of Ibn Khaldun whose genius enlightened the sunset of the Islamic civilization.<sup>53</sup>

The third stage is that of the impulses and it is illustrated by the letters (CD) in the figure above. It is a stage of decline caused by some psychological factors characterized to be of a lower level than that of the soul and the mind. In the first and the second stages, the individual listens only to the dictates of the soul and the mind. That is why these psychological factors somehow are hidden and are not overtly felt. In the third stage the soul becomes completely powerless while the natural impulses have their full freedom and become the governing power in the society. This is the ending cycle of civilization when the society starts to live the after-stage of civilization. Bennabi comments that such is the case of the Muslim today.

## **CONCLUSION**

Bennabi was troubled by the reality of his time and set out to search for the seeds of the decline of his people. He, thus, came to the conclusion that the problem of the problem of the Muslim world is a problem of its civilization. He argues that the Muslims did not develop an adequate response to the challenges of their age or of the West. To Bennabi, the Muslims, moved by the advancement of the West, blindly start to accumulate the material goods they imported from the West without any understanding of Western civilization. According to Bennabi, instead of going to the schools of Western civilization, the Muslims went to its stores and they ended up being stuck in the realm of “things.” However, Bennabi is not against learning from the West; he himself is a Western educated scholar, but he advocates an effective learning from Western civilization. Bennabi criticizes the Muslims

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<sup>53</sup>Bennabi, Shurut, 59.

when they start to import Western ideas in an attempt to create a civilization. He argues that the Muslims should create their own ideas that suit their socio-cultural environment.

Studying Bennabi's theory of civilization, I have deduced that there are some basic factors that interdependently work together in an attempt to construct or reconstruct a civilization. These factors are moral, psychological, social and economic.

According to Bennabi, religion, the moral factor, and its social function contribute greatly in the establishment of civilization. He gives the example of Islam and the great civilization it created. Besides this moral factor, the individual should be psychologically independent and get rid of his colonizability (*al Qabiliyyah lil 'Isti'maar*). The individual should get rid of his *'uqdat al Takballuf* (the backward complex) by stopping from imitating the other blindly. Bennabi rightly rejects the borrowing of ideas from the West and advocates that Muslims should attain an inner trust in themselves and be courageous to think their own ideas in the framework of their socio-cultural conditions.

Once the individual reaches this psychological state, he/she has to orient his/her action, for by doing this the individual will set up the goal and save time and effort. Time is also important in Bennabi's theory. It should be wisely used in a way beneficial to the society as a whole.

The importance of the individual is also manifested in how he/she uses the economic means he/she is in possession of. The individual has to know how to use the wealth of his soil such as raw materials in a way to benefit the whole society, thus reinforcing the organic relationship between the individual and his/her soil.

Capital is another element that has to be well oriented to benefit the society as a whole and not just the individual. This is a crucial point and if we look at the distribution of wealth in the Muslim world, we will find that the wealth is concentrated in the hands of the elite

while the rest of the population is left to face poverty, unemployment and social disintegration. This is a dramatic reality and Bennabi is advocating an effective social manipulation of capital for the welfare of society as a whole.

Bennabi talks about the cyclic movement of history that starts with a rise and finishes with a fall. Yet, unlike some views of some scholars that can be characterized as pessimistic, Bennabi does not talk about an inevitable fall with no possible rise. He, however, opens the door for a new start, but only when the conditions described in his theory are fulfilled. In sum, Bennabi's theory of civilization is a theory of hope, construction and a possible rebirth of Muslim civilization.