

## **IBN KHALDUN'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY: THE RISE AND FALL OF STATES AND CIVILIZATIONS\***

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Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to spend the next forty minutes or so with you in the discussion of the work of one of the most outstanding thinkers of medieval Islam. Our topic today is the work of Ibn Khaldun who ranks among the leading thinkers of the world, the man who set forth a system of historical speculation in a book which Arnold Toynbee has called "the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been created by any mind in any time or place." Ibn Khaldun has also been called "the father of social science" and "the founder of 'positive' or 'historical' or 'truly scientific' social science" in the Islamic world. While I concur with those voices that emphasize Ibn Khaldun's importance and originality, I cannot, however, agree with those that describe his as a positivist or even a true pragmatist in the contemporary sense, and I will return to this point a little later on. But let me now introduce you to Ibn Khaldun and to his work and then let me try to analyze, very briefly, that ultimate philosophical framework within which his thought unfolds.

Ibn Khaldun was not an usual member of the ulama class. He was not a lawyer-theologian of the normal mould, although he studied both theology and law and ended his life as a respected judge in Cairo. Ibn Khaldun was primarily an astute politician and then, secondly, a first-rate historian. He was also extremely devout and a firm believer: an attractive mixture which is reflected in his philosophy of history in which he manages to be perfectly realistic about human nature in general and human nature in the Islamic world in particular, without losing sight of the historic certainty of Muhammad's prophethood and the sanctity of the early theocratic state in Medina as founded by the Prophet in the early years of Islam. Ibn Khaldun was born in 1332 AD in Tunis of an immigrant

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powerful force in the creation of a civilization and its laws are the most effective instruments for preserving it.

Civilization, or the culture centered around life in the cities, is the natural completion of the life begun in the primitive culture. Primitive culture is an incomplete form of culture. It satisfies only man's immediate needs. Sedentary culture is complete. The conveniences and luxury can develop when large numbers of people live together in dense clusters, where some produce for all and a large amount of surplus labor is freed to produce the luxuries. There is now time and energy for the fulfillment of man's higher aspirations in the domains of the spirit and the intellect.

But the development of all these luxuries carries in itself the germ of degeneration and decline. The simplicity, the crude strength, the simple loyalty of the original group have become corroded. All societies, states, cities, economies, and cultural endeavors are caught in this inescapable cyclical development: they arise from a simple and forceful beginning, develop to an optimal point, and then corrode and decline.

The one cycle which fascinated Ibn Khaldun most - since his prime interest continued to lie in political matters - was the cycle of rise and fall of the state. Ibn Khaldun here distinguishes five stages. A state can go through the whole cycle within the span of three or four generations of rulers.

In the beginning, the first stage is the period of establishment. Group solidarity here is based on ties of family and on religion and is essential for the preservation of the state. The ruler is more a chief than a lord or a king. He himself has to follow the rules of religion.

In the second stage, the ruler succeeds in monopolizing power. He becomes an absolute master. This monopoly of power by the ruler is the natural and necessary end of the rule that began on the basis of natural group solidarity. The ruler can now build a well-ordered state. To achieve monopolization of power, he destroys those who share power with him, gets rid of the natural solidarity that supported him in the beginning, and purchases the support of bureaucrats and mercenaries who are loyal to him — their employer — and not to a kinship-solidarity or a religious cause. In addition to the paid army and administrative bureaucracy, a group of learned advisors becomes instrumental in preserving the state according to the ruler's wishes. On the matter of the advisory corps, Ibn Khaldun emphasizes that scholars make bad political advisors. Since they are trained to see the universals rather than the particulars, the species rather than the individual specimen, since they grasp social and political phenomena in analogy to others rather than on their own merits and in

their own, particular, uniqueness, they are prone to give bad political advice. Good political advice for the ruler comes from "ordinary, sound men of average intelligence."

The third is one of luxury and leisure when the ruler uses his authority to satisfy his personal needs. He reorganizes the finances of the state to increase his own personal income by lowering the tax burden on his subjects: this results in large revenue from small assessments. He then spends lavishly on public works and on the beautification of his cities. There is economic prosperity for everyone, the crafts, fine arts, sciences are encouraged, the new ruling class and even the upper strata of the middle class become avid patrons for cultural pursuits and projects. The atmosphere is one of leisure and self-indulgence, all men enjoy the comforts and pleasures of the world.

In all three of these stages, the rulers are powerful, independent, and creative. They satisfy their own desires and their subjects' desires without becoming slaves to them. The resulting economic prosperity constitutes an instrument of additional power for the ruler.

The fourth stage is a stage of contentment, satiation, and complacency. Luxury and comfort have become a habit. Ruler and ruled are confident that they will last forever. And they may indeed last for quite some time, as the length of this period depends upon the power and the solidity of the achievements of the founders of the state. But during this stage, the state is already, imperceptibly, starting to decline and to disintegrate, and the fifth and last stage of prodigality and waste begins.

It now becomes painfully evident that the vital forces of solidarity and religion were destroyed in the beginning and that the strong natural loyalty of the kinsmen was replaced with the purchased support of the army and the bureaucracy who are not willing to sacrifice themselves for the ruler. To ensure their continued support and to maintain the luxuries, the ruler has to raise the taxes, with the result that the newly increased tax assessments yield a small and ever-decreasing amount of revenue, because this tax policy discourages economic activity. As the income of the state declines, it ultimately becomes impossible for the ruler to support his new followers. The habits of comfort and luxury have generated physical weakness and vice. The rough and courageous manners of the early primitive life are forgotten. The population has become effeminate. The hopes of the ruled are weakened, public opinion is marked by despair, economic activity, building projects are halted. People refrain from making long-range plans. The birth rate drops. The entire population, physically weak and living in large crowded cities with environmental problems,

becomes subject to disease and plague. The state begins to disintegrate. From the outlying regions, princes, generals, dissatisfied kinsmen, and foreign conquerors snatch pieces of territory from the control of the state. The state is divided and subdivided into small provinces. Even in the capital, the military and the bureaucrats engage in intrigues to wrest the actual authority from the ruler, leaving him only with the insignia of his office and the name. Finally, an outside invasion by a young, healthy group may put an end to the life of the state, or it may decline further and further until it withers away "like a wick dying out in a lamp whose oil is gone."

Not every conquest has to mark a new beginning. Civilization is attractive to the primitive conquerors and so they try to imitate the customs and practices that they find when they arrive. The mastery of each craft or science, no matter how difficult, tends to become a habit, and therefore can be taught to others, provided that the proper methods of instruction are known and that the political upheaval is not too drastic and destructive.

And so all political life and all cultural life moves in never-ending, always repeated cycles. There is no progress from one cycle to the next. The notion of progress actually is lacking altogether in Ibn Khaldun's philosophy, as it is in all of Arab medieval thought.

As he depicts the rise and fall of dynasties and states and cultures in purely secular terms, Ibn Khaldun gives a much more accurate account of what happened in the Islamic world before and during his own time than those pious lawyer-theologians who tried to describe the Islamic Middle Ages in the terms of the early Islamic theocracy. And yet, Ibn Khaldun was a sincere believer and that early theocracy was as important to him as it was to those pious writers who struggled to keep their utopia alive. How then does Ibn Khaldun deal with the beginnings of Islam? He does so at an altogether different level. Things were not always this grim, he says, the movement of rise and decline was not always this inescapable. Both the establishment of Islam and its very early history represent a direct divine intervention in human affairs. For a few generations, group feeling was nothing and submission to the will of God was everything. The periods in which religion was the main force of motivation were the orthodox caliphate (632-661), the very early years of the Umayyad kingdom, and then again the very early years of the Abbasid empire. During these periods, the community flourished and conquered. But then the experience paled and its initial tremendous impact was lost. Islam ceased to be the sole source of unity and agreement, and the old mysterious cohesive power of natural group feeling had to come to the fore again.

And man who was too weak to keep the original faith experience alive had to revert to the inescapable grimness of cyclical existence. Here the Islamic community could have escaped the cycle: by holding fast to the laws of God and the new religion, and by avoiding materialism and greed and corruption. Their sinful failure to do so resulted in their loss of freedom and their inevitable decline.

Before I conclude with some remarks on the question of the "secularism" and hence the whole question of the "modernity" of Ibn Khaldun, let me say that Ibn Khaldun's ideas were in some ways too realistic and hence revolutionary for the intellectually stagnant society in which he lived and worked. There is very little evidence that he had any impact on Arab thought in the late 14th or early 15th centuries. It was only in the 16th and particularly in the 17th centuries that an Ibn Khaldun re-discovery got underway, and the people who rediscovered and read and commented upon him were the Ottoman Turks. The Ottomans, as you know, concentrated much of their intellectual interest upon history and political thought, and they were fascinated with Ibn Khaldun. In the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries, the study of Ibn Khaldun constituted an important segment of Turkish intellectual history. It was only in the 19th century that Europe joined the Turks in reading Ibn Khaldun.

You will agree with me that, as Ibn Khaldun grasps that fundamental and specific element which constitutes political reality, he comes across as a realist. In his description of the rise and fall of Islamic societies and cultures, in his analysis of Islamic states, this political realism, this interest in the concrete manifestations of social and political entities give his work a much more "modern" flavor than is to be found even with many present-day Muslims writers who are generally more theocratic/utopian in their ideas. Yet, when it comes to the relationship of religion and politics, there is a tremendous distance between Ibn Khaldun's political pragmatism and, let's say, Machiavelli's political philosophy. As Machiavelli ponders the rise and fall of nations and cultures in his *Discourses* and in *The Prince*, he also relies on religion as the main source for social solidarity. Paradoxically, he actually does so to an even higher degree than Ibn Khaldun. Without religion, says Machiavelli, nations cannot develop "virtue" (political strength and cohesiveness) since it is only on the basis of observed religion that good institutions can be established which then restrain individual selfishness and thus ensure the supremacy of the common good. In other words, Machiavelli sees religion as politically useful. However, he is not concerned with religion as God-given Truth and Law, not does he see the corruption of religion as a result of human weakness, and sin. Both the rise and fall of religion to

Machiavelli are merely observable historical facts. Religion, he says, is useful and even indispensable in politics, in the building of a civilization, and in deterring its decline, but he is completely indifferent to the truth of religion. Machiavelli is a true pragmatist and positivist. Ibn Khaldun, on the other hand, is not. The great emphasis which he puts on historical facts and reality gives his work the flavor of pragmatism. This pragmatism, however, is ultimately and essentially alien to his philosophy, because Ibn Khaldun ultimately views the concrete and particular events, their multiplicity and change, as only a beginning from which to get at the essential structure behind the brute facts of history. Ibn Khaldun sees religion, at least in the case of Islam, as not one more historical fact but as The Truth that provides "the underlying principle", the immutable standard that transcends all history and all political development. Ibn Khaldun, therefore, never perceived government as an autonomous, secular, activity capable of making its own morality which can be considered apart from religion.

Thus, I contend that Ibn Khaldun did not develop, nor did he seek to develop, a truly secular philosophy of history or a truly secular science of politics and society. Lately it has been fashionable to claim that he did. Yet just as Ibn Khaldun never recognized the idea of government as an autonomous secular activity so also did he not develop the idea of the state as independent from religion that derives its legitimacy from other sources and is fit to make its own morality. To my mind, therefore, Ibn Khaldun remained essentially and devoutly within the mainstream of orthodox Islamic political philosophy, and his philosophy of history reflects his conviction that while it is necessary to know the exact nature of man and society, both social and political, such knowledge is not possible "without knowing the true end of man and society." The notion of division and separation of religion and politics, which has gained ground in the West to a point where, in most peoples' opinion, political developments is "inversely related to religion in politics" —this notion has its roots in Western thought or, more specifically, in the Western Renaissance. Whether, of course, it has meant pure blessing or pure harm or something in between for our own civilization is another matter. But the ideal itself was not formulated by Ibn Khaldun, who is classical Islam's seemingly most pragmatic, seemingly most secular thinker. Underneath his pragmatism, Ibn Khaldun lets us perceive his deeper conviction: the conviction that adherence to the true religion can and should insure the creation of God's Kingdom on Earth, an everlasting Golden Age. It and when this is achieved, he tells us, civilizations need not and will not rise nor fall again.