MALEK BENNABI: THE ISSUE OF THE DECADENCE OF THE MUSLIM WORLD AND THE THEORY OF CIVILIZATION AND DEMOCRACY WITH REGARD TO ISLAM?

Yrd.Doç.Dr.Harun IŞIK

Erciyes Ü. İlahiyat Fakültesi

Abstract: *With respect to Bennabi, Muslims have begun to live the years of retrocession being resulted from themselves, not Islam. The reasons of problems were two things: colonisibility (to be able to be colonised) and colonialism. Colonisibility was internal factor which arouse from the Muslim world. As for colonialism, it was external factor which was a result of internal factor. The solutions of these problems were the theory of civilisation and Islam itself. Civilisation includes all values which are necessary to a community such as intellectual, spiritual, cultural, political, economical and technical. Furthermore, Islam has the potential to foster the creation of independent, modern nations, free of colonial domination and based on rationality, progress, and modernity. This paper analyses how the Muslim world moved back while they were the most superior community in the world once upon a time in the light of the thoughts of Malek Bennabi, Algerian thinker.*

Key Words: *Islam, retrocession, colonisibility, colonialism, civilisation, progress*

I- Introduction

With beginning of colonial activities of the West toward the Muslim world, especially in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, French colonisers in Algeria and other western countries in other Muslim countries had tried to demoralize Islamic values and replace their own culture (Stone, 1997: 145-155). Many Muslim scholars and intellectuals in the face of this situation had asked this question themselves "What has gone wrong with modern Muslim culture?" (Abu-Rabi, 2004: 242). As an answer this question it had commenced the reform activities in the Muslim world in the intellectual, political, and social arena. The thinkers such as Ziya Pasha, Namik Kemal, and Rifa'a Badawi Rafi' al-Tahtawi tired to adjust the implementation of western institutions in Islamic terms rather than return the spirit of Islam (Kamrawa, 2006: 6-11). However, according to Kamrawa (2006: 7), Jamaladdin al-Afghani and his pupil Muhammad Abduh saw in Islam "the potential

_____

to foster the creation of independent, modern nations, free of colonial domination and based on rationality, progress, and modernity."

The Islamic reform movement had especially been effective with Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida in Algeria (Ruedy, 1992: 133-137). The Islamic revival in Algeria had many aspects such as the union of a civilization and religion, re-interpretation Islam and it tried to re-establish the original religious law, put into words that Islam would make possible genuine equality, socialism, modernization and re-understanding of politics from the Islamic perspective (Vatin, 1983: 98-119). In this context, reformers, and religious scholars like Sheikh Abdelhamid Benbadis (1889-1940) and Bashir al-Ibrahimi (1880-1965) laid a foundation of modern Algerian Islamism (Stone, 1997: 145-155). According to Arkoun;

"A well-organized Islamic movement started in Algeria in 1931 when Abdulhamid Ben Badis established the Algerian Ulama Association" (Arkoun, 1988: 171-181).

One of the representatives of the reform movement and founders of al-Qiyam which was declared the superiority of Islamic values within it after independence in Algeria and constituted as an answer colonialism and decadence was Malik b. Nabi known as Malek Bennabi (Stone, 1997: 145-155).

II-   Bennabi's Life and Thought
1-   His Life

Malek Bennabi was born in Constantine, Algeria in 1905 and died at his home in Algiers in 1973. (Bariun, 1993: 69-102) He was one of the most influential scholars, thinkers, writers and social philosophers of the post-World War II in Algeria (Bennabi, 1991: 1- 23). Bennabi who especially came into prominence in the field of history, philosophy, and sociology studied the faculty of Engineering in Paris and Algiers (Bariun, 1993: 69-102). Bennabi whose writings were published in news papers, journals and as a book had especially been influential in Algeria in 1940s (Willis, 1997: 56-59) and among the French-educated fundamentalists who took part in the University of Algiers in 1960s and 1970s (Zoubir, 1998a: 128-129).

 Bennabi who focused on the reasons of the decadence of the Muslim community and their solutions criticised reformist and *salafiyya* movement. According to him, al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh brought artificial suggestions on the subject of being cured the decline of Muslim community. For instance,

Muhammad Abduh stressed the simple teaching and dogma of the Islamic and forgot the efficiency and the social impulse of Islam faith (Willis, 1996: 56-59).

Bennabi who emphasised to the individual aspects and social functions of religion had been affected from Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) and Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) in his studies concerned with history, sociology and theory of civilization (Bariun, 1993: 113-136). While the Muslims were the most superior community in the world once upon a time, they have begun to live the years of retrocession being resulted from Muslims themselves, not Islam. He sought the reasons of problems and the solutions of them in his theory of civilization. My questions now are why did the Muslim world begin to decline? How did he consider the theory of civilization? And what solutions did he suggest for accomplishing the modern problems of the Muslim world?

2- His Thoughts

All of the studies about Malek Bennabi and his thoughts are in agreement that the major idea of Bennabi is the concept of civilization. While he was setting forth the civilization idea, it has been seen that he mentioned from two notions. One of them is colonisibility (be able to be colonized), and the other is colonialism. He had handled these two concepts in the context of the reasons for the decadence of the Muslim society. Let us see what he says about each of these notions and his main thought *"the idea of civilization"*.

a- Colonisibility and Colonialism

Bennabi observed these two concepts as reasons for the decadence of the Muslims. Colonisibility was internal factor which arouse from the Muslim world them. As for colonialism, it was external factor which was a result of internal factor, and imposed it on the Muslim world. Internal factors were connected with ethics, society, education, economy, and politics. External factors were related to deviation, humiliation, and destruction.

According to him, while the Muslim world was attempting to settle in the conditions of the new life had tried to adapt the Western values and social life to his community without any criteria, or criticism. These values and unusual life style had led to moral and social bankruptcy for being not suitable their own society (Bennabi, 1991: 45-59). He resembles sociological elements to blood transfusion:

_____

"Blood transfusion is possible only between similar organic constitutions, the sociological elements that characterise different cultures are not all and always interchangeable" (Bennabi, 1991: 47).

Moral depression had brought about intellectual paralysis. As a result of this, the community failed in thinking and acting and chose to give importance image rather than essence and values (Bennabi, 1991: 45-50).

He summed up the situation of education, economy and the inferiority complex in Algeria with three axioms:

"We can not do anything, because we are ignorant; we can not realise that, because we are poor; we cannot undertake this work, because there is the colonialism" (Bennabi, 1991; 50).

He believed that education must be socially effective, defined illiteracy as not to be useful to the community. If an educated man is useless, this is more dangerous than illiteracy. Furthermore, he has seen the myth of poverty as a dangerous factor well as ignorance. He pointed out that the money should encourage and aid culture . The duty is not to collect money and become rich; on the contrary, to use dynamically the fund for the benefit of the individual and community. Another internal problem in the Muslim world was politics. The political mythology has struggled by condemning colonialism instead of awakening the Muslim perception that it is necessary to act rather than speaking and be better rather than appear better. And also it did not any effort to convert efficiently the condition of man from colonosibility to an active synthesis of thought and action (Bennabi, 1991: 49-58; Donohue and Esposito, 1982: 32-33).

As for the external factor, colonialism, he explains the philosophy of colonialism as follows:

"She said: Verily, whenever kings enter a country they corrupt it and turn the noblest of its people into the most abject. And this is the way they always behave" (an-Naml/27-34)

While the Muslim world was waiting for the West in an inactive form as having been scattered dead-soil upon them, the West had come in order to make them forget their past, present and future. (Bennabi, 1991; 60-64). According to him:

"The colonial work is in fact an immense sabotage of history." (Bennabi, 1991; 62)

In respect of Bennabi, colonialism is a methodical activity that aims at installing a system which will destroy all moral, cultural, social, and political values in a country. Consequently, it had acted as essential element in the decadence of the Muslim society (Bennabi, 1991: 60-64). As a result, for Bennabi, the main reason for the decadence of the Muslim world had become colonisibility which results from Muslims themselves and also it had helped the colonial policy of the West. The solution is to ensure the Muslim renaissance by raising the Muslim world to the level of modern civilization. Likewise, Bennabi considered that the problem of any nation was in essence a problem of civilization. If we solve this problem, we can improve ourselves and our community (Bariun, 1993: 146-179). Let us see the theory of civilisation of him.

b- The Theory of Civilisation

The theory of civilization is very important to understand Bennabi's ideas. He defined the concept of civilization in this way:

"Civilisation is the sum total of those moral and material means that enable a society to provide each of its members with all the social services needed for him to progress." (Bariun, 1993: 163).

According to this definition, civilisation includes all values which are necessary to a community such as intellectual (the world of ideas), spiritual and cultural, political, economical and technical. In other words, civilisation connects with culture which every community has it on the one hand, relates with the world of ideas which provides the advancement of a society on the other (Boussalah, 2005). Civilisation which comes out within culture transforms into social rules and becomes a power that directs community. The most important element in civilisation is religion that gives form moral system in society. Any degeneration within the moral system gives rise to the decrement of values and appears lots of problem in everywhere (Bariun, 1993: 160-164). Bennabi who calls attention to the transitory aspect of civilisation explains that this concept allows talking about the circumstances of progressive advancement and also the factors of deterioration and decadence. In this context, he perceives man, soil and time as the most important elements in the course of transition of civilisation from one generation to another.

_____

The synthesis of man, soil and time constitutes civilisation (Bennabi, 1991: 7-11). Bennabi's equation of civilisation as follow:

Man + Soil + Time = Civilisation (Bariun, 1993: 162).

Man who inhabits central position in the theory of civilisation has social identity as much as natural identity which expresses his physical futures. Social identity takes shape by intellectual and psychological features by environmental and historical factors, and therefore it can change according to place and time. The decadence of the Muslim world today is as a consequence of the social and historical deterioration of Muslims themselves (Boussalah, 2005).

According to him, when man makes contact with his environment, history commences and ends with the disintegrated man (Bennabi, 1991: 7-11). The elements which lead to historical movements are realm of ideas, persons, and objects. If a society has got worse, this means that it has not been built up complete connection between these three elements. If the person who directs other two elements loses his ability of understanding and act, it means that history has ended (Boussalah, 2005). Because of person's unthoughtful and inactivity during the entire period of the decadence of the Muslim world, all social forms have become static (Bennabi, 1991: 12-15). With respect to soil, he remarks that soil expresses social value rather than natural features such as yielding something with his statement:

"It is a pervasive and all inclusive concept with a far-reaching scope." (Bariun, 1993: 162).

Bennabi who handles time from social point states that it is a social value which is produced active thoughts within it. The Muslim world has been unsuccessful on the point of evaluating time by generating active thoughts, meanings, and things (Boussalah, 2005). With respect to him, Man who rules soil and time and all life stands in the centre. It is necessary to walk in the history and progressing in the fields of thought, science, technology, and art, introducing the values which ensure to the community its identity. The only creature which will be able to achieve this is Man. At this point, he says:

"If Man moves society, history moves, but if he pauses, society and history pause" (Bariun, 1993: 167).

c- The Stages of Civilisation

Bennabi divided civilisation into three stages: The spiritual, rational and instinctive (Bariun, 1993: 113-120).

The spiritual stage: It had begun with the prophethood of Muhammad (PbuH). At this stage, Muslims had rescued from their natural instincts and states and commenced to adapt religion in their life. The first stage which the style of society's mind, attitude and life became especially religious and spiritual was quite important. Inasmuch as religion had a social role as a catalyser providing the transformation of values. Bennabi explains the role of religion with this statement:

"Only the spirit gives humanity the opportunity to rise and progress, to form civilization. When the spirit is lost the civilization falls, for who loses his ability to ascend, could not help but plunge due to gravitation" (Bariun, 1993: 117; Humbaracı, 1966: 26-29).

The Rational Stage: The society at this stage had reached the peak of its productivity in every field. However, while the influence of religion over the society was beginning to be lost, instinct gradually began to gain freedom. (Bariun, 1993: 116)

The Instinctive Stage: The society at this stage has lost his tension of faith and gone astray in history. The cycle of civilisation has ended with this stage and begun moral and political collapse in the Muslim world. Bennabi has pointed out the al-Muwahhid Dynasty as the last phase of Islamic civilisation and placed the post-al Muwahhidin man to outside of civilisation. This stage reflects the situation which the Muslim world is found it's inside today (Bariun, 1993: 116-118; Stone, 1997: 147).

The spiritual stage, which began with Muhammad (PbuH), ended with the battle of Siffin (h. 38), giving way to the rational stage. This stage continued until the time of Ibn Khaldun and the collapse of the Muwahhid Dynasty. At this point the Muslim world started its decline, passing into the instinctive stage. As noted above, religion is a major factor in civilization and therefore a religious reform is essential for all social transformation. This is just possible by bringing together the spirit of Islam and the demands of the modern age. Culture, too, which is a bridge between the past and future and the most important tool in transferring physical and spiritual values to the next generation is a causative agent in civilization. It is just possible to continue and carry forward civilization, which is a living dynamic idea with a moral

_____

and ethical system, aesthetic sense, practical logic and technique (Bennabi, 1991: 20-22; Bariun, 1993: 162-173).

According to him, if the Muslim world wants to rise up, it should open itself a more conscious manner toward the West by invoking criteria and practising criticism, experiencing it rather than reading about it, discovering its culture instead of getting a university diploma or satisfying a completely superficial interest, being a productive community in place of becoming a consuming society. Moreover, the Muslim world should act in history by producing a social synthesis of man, soil and time (Bennabi, 1991; 81-97). He gave an important place to politics, looked at the subject from an unusual perspective:

"To make politics is to prepare the psychological and material conditions of history, to prepare the man for creating history" (Bennabi, 1991; 83).

If politics want this philosophy to be embodied, it should tell people both their duties and rights, teach methods and techniques rather than words and slogans. Moreover they enable to the society to comprehend their capabilities and knowledge in an actual social form (Bennabi, 1991; 81-83).

d- Democracy and Islam

Bennabi emphasizes in particular the compatibility of Islam and democracy, as much as the suitability of the modern sciences in Islam in the process of development and progression. According to him, democracy reflects perfection and has emerged as a result of rational and cultural development (Zoubir, 1998b, 107-112). He focuses on democracy from three main points:

" As a feeling toward one's self, as a feeling towards others and as a cluster of social and political conditions necessary for the formulation and the blossoming of similar feelings in the individual" (Zoubir, 1998; 109).

As far as it has been understood, democracy is a system which addresses an individual's psychology on the one hand and also exerts social and political force on the other.

Bennabi divides democracy into two concepts: secular and Islamic. He criticised the former by saying that:

"Secular democracy detects in man the presence of humanity and society, the Islamic democratic conception recognizes in man the presence of God" (Zoubir, 1998; 109).

The individual has a transcendental perspective. He may have intended to say that Islamic democracy should appreciate life from the point of view of the Creator, while secular democracy disrupts the link between God and humanity. The secular democracy which emerged with post-Renaissance Man places him at the centre of the universe and embraces the world of ideas as independent of religion. It has nearly constituted a life without spirit in the context of Man, States and the World by acting in this way. He calls attention to the social dimension of democracy, believing that it can be best represented in Islam. In the Qur'an, anyone can find that Islam guarantees freedom of speech, the right to work and to travel, the privacy of the home, the rights of minorities and so on. As for the political dimension, the principle of consultation provides the individual with responsibility in the constitution of power and all the guarantees against its abusive use. (Zoubir, 1998b; 110-111).

According to Bennabi:

"Islam, which is a synthesis between political and social democracy, offers genuine democracy." (Zoubir, 1998b: 111).

In accordance with democracy, a regime which offers everyone equal rights, relations at the time of the four Caliphs between ruler and ruled reflect the best example of the democratic conscience in Islam (Zoubir, 1998b; 107-112). It is understood that Bennabi does not accept compromise between Islam and any system which is not based on divine inspiration (Vahy). He believed that the democratization process would only succeed when the Muslim world gave up living in the past, departing from the historical process and broke through the life of being colonized and enslaved.

III-   Conclusion

When it is looked at Bennabi's thoughts, it is considered that he wanted to evoke Muslims morally, socially, psychologically and politically. Bennabi has seen the society and culture as the most important factors in human development stated that we need produce new ideas for reaching dynamic society and culture, the level of modern civilization. Moreover he pointed out that politic, economic, cultural, social, and ideological independence will be able to gain by setting up a bridge

_____

between the past and future and protecting the basic fundamentals of Islam as presented in the Quran and the Sunna. And also it is necessary to impress the sense of community based on his own identity and religion among the Muslim world. As a result, if the Muslim world is saved from colonialism and decadence and gain independence must hold on to Islamic values and open its doors modern sciences and modern inquiry methods.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abu-Rabi, Ibrahim, (2004), Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History, (London: Pluto).

Arkoun, Muhammad, "Algeria", in Patrick Bannerman, Islam in Perspective: A Guide to Islamic Society, Politics and Law, (London: Routledge).

Bariun, Fawzia, (1993), Malik Bennabi: His Life and Theory of Civilization, (Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia).

Bennabi, Malek, (1991), Islam in History and Society, (Pakistan: Islamic Research Institute).

Boussalah, Zahra, (2005), "Malek Bennabi: An Analytical Study of His Theory of Civilization", AMSS 34th Annual Conference, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, September 30-October 2.

Donohue, John J. and Esposito, John L., (1982), Islam in Transition: Muslim Perspectives, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Humbaraci, Arslan, (1966), Algeria: A Revolution that Failed – A Political History since 1954, (New York-Washington-London: Frederick A. Praeger).

Kamrava, Mehran, (2006), The New Voices of Islam: Reforming Politics and Modernity: a Reader, (London, New York: I.B. Tauris).

Ruedy, John, (1992), Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation, (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana University Press).

Stone, Martin, (1997), The Agony of Algeria, (London: Hurst & Company).

Vatin, Jean-Claude, (1983), "Popular Puritanism versus State Reformism: Islam in Algeria", in James P. Piscatori, Islam in the Political Process, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Willis, Michael, (1996), the Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History, (New York: New York University Press).

Zobuir, Yahia H., (1998a), "State, Civil Society and the Question of Radical Fundamentalism in Algeria", in Ahmad S. Moussalli, Islamic Fundamentalism: Myths and Realities, Lebanon: Ithaca Press.

_____(1998b), "Democracy and Islam in Malek Bennabi's Thought", *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 15 / issue 1, 107-112.