

# Keynote Address to the International Seminar on Malik Bennabi

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The dominant theme one comes across in Bennabi's writings is how essential it is to cultivate ideas. He argued that proficiency and efficacy in nurturing ideas is a vital sign of intellectual and cultural development. In elaborating the role of ideas in the development of civilization, he went to the extent of saying that a civilization prospers only by the depth of its guiding ideas.

I am in accord with Shaykh Diraz of al Azhar when, writing in his preface to Bennabi's book *The Qur'anic Phenomena*, he praised him for the rectitude of his judgment, the zeal of his conviction, the precision of his terminology, and the beauty of his style. Apart from their profound intellectual implications, the pronouncements of Bennabi carry deep personal meanings for me.

These attributes of Bennabi's writings make him one of the most erudite intellectuals of the Muslim world. Moreover, what I discern in these attributes is that they rightly portray him in his totality. To me he is not an intellectual or a recluse, simply captivated by the bliss of his own awakening and without an organic link with his faith. Most assuredly, his pen symbolizes his faith, his convictions, and his ideological strategy. More than anything else, it serves as a constant reminder of the inevitability of the inner struggle for both personal and collective evolution.

Civilizations do not become great, acquire power, or wane by some mysterious flux of nature. A civilization is the translation of ideas into intellectual capacity and material means to organize one's environment. Ideas make the practice of power possible. Ideas devise the practical tools for living in the world. And ideas question whether we have attained our goal or failed our potential.

Bennabi tells us that those who do not have the moral courage to grasp the guiding ideas of their civilization have not only the repetition of history but their irrelevance to the march of time as their future. The Qur'an, the *raison d'être* of the ummah, is not a mere invitation; it is the imperative to think and

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reflect, to discuss and debate, to use ideas to be active in history. It binds us to the duty to change the world through the power of ideas. Yet thought, debate, and the originality of the intellect have as little currency in the Muslim world as when Bennabi wrestled with their absence four decades ago.

Bennabi lived at a time when the Muslim world was under the claw of colonialism. The uniqueness in Bennabi's experience of colonialism is that he neither succumbed to its brutality nor was he allured into a denial of self-identity. This integrity of mind and body seems to have given him a superb intellectual command to synthesize a vast array of ideas, both historical and contemporary.

Bennabi looked at the Muslim of the colonial era and said unequivocally that you have brought on your own colonization and *colonisibilité*. You colonize yourself. It is due to the melancholic intellect of the post al Muwahhidin man that the Muslim ummah continues to languish in the miserable paucity of guiding ideas.

Our postcolonial state of mind is no better than what it was during the time of Bennabi. Today, we must have the moral courage to acknowledge that political independence has dressed the subject in new clothes and renamed it, without altering basic relationships.

We have crossed the border of physical occupation of our lands, but our minds are the most fertile ground for the distortion of alien ideologies. The challenge of Bennabi as manifested through a juxtaposition of political versus intellectual independence is yet to be answered. We have yet to prove that our political independence is synonymous with the liberation of our minds.

True independence awaits us when we cease to blame our problems on other people. True independence is taking on the task of changing things for ourselves, becoming the architect of our future through the labor of our own ideas. True independence will arrive when we come to know that the ummah is first and foremost a moral concept of how to coexist in the free flow of ideas amongst other communities.

When Bennabi argued for intellectual independence, he did not altogether shun the Western intellectual tradition. Instead, he engaged himself in an incisive analysis of the same and, with a remarkable ability, demonstrated the inner dynamics of that tradition. He elaborated upon the social reciprocity of scholarly pursuits in the West. Therefore it must be understood that Muslim intellectual independence is not equivalent to a seclusion from the wider world of knowledge. On the contrary, a pluralistic discourse is integral for its genesis as well as actuality.

Without doubt, Bennabi's ideas have stood the test of time and are as relevant today as they were four decades ago. However, what is significant is whether or not we have understood the relevance of those ideas. For instance, it is legitimate to ask: Are we cognizant of the role of ideas in the advancement

of our civilization? Is the Muslim intellect better equipped to deal with contemporary problems? Has Bennabi's message instilled a new sense of moral and intellectual holism in us? We have nothing to fear from ideas, whatever their source. We reject neither the West nor modernity; we question both and would contribute to them through the intellectual quickening of our civilization. This should be the means we use to transcend tradition in peaceful synthesis. It is the genuine inner struggle of conscience that will liberate our intellect for constructive thought.

The social canvas across the Muslim world is one of moral bankruptcy, poverty, illiteracy, totalitarianism, and stagnation. Physical independence alone is not a panacea for all these ills. More than the monetary resources, it is the wealth of Muslim intellect that can begin to carve new avenues of social growth and a respectable rank in the community of nations.

Despotism is not manifested in political terms alone. Centuries of mental numbness have given birth to an intellectual totalitarianism in the Muslim world. It is most pronounced in our resistance to change. This status quo is nothing more than a disguised apology. Those Muslim intellectuals who lament the absence of intellectual freedom as an excuse for their own infirmity should be reminded of the intellectual struggle in places like Eastern Europe. The truth is that a pervasive lethargy has consumed our abilities and we are a living witness to our own slow but steady dissolution. Against the backdrop of a continuum of civilization, we simply complete our transition from a passive consumer to a dissipative structure.

Adjustment to change requires a mental ability. It calls for a metamorphosis of our intellect. While we are prepared to condemn our fellow Muslims on trivial issues, we remain curiously silent on major problems confronting the ummah. The voice of the Muslim intellect, which Bennabi held as the authentic voice of the ummah, is strangled. We stand ready to sacrifice the verity of the discourse at the altar of political efficiency. This we do at the cost of augmenting any efforts in improving the basic living conditions across the Muslim world. We find but little intellectual tenacity in dealing with the acute problems of economic disparity, social injustice, basic education, fundamental necessities of life, personal freedom, and other issues of greater significance. In this theater of intellectual repose, we are no bigger than living cadavers whose fate is determined by unsparing forces of the global order.

The ummah will be true to its guiding ideas and inner struggle of conscience when it becomes a community that cares for its own welfare because it cares for all people. True independence comes when we can cherish ideas and tolerate, promote, and stimulate the development of our men and women of ideas. True freedom and independence will not come without breaking down the bars of the self-imposed restraints we have made for ourselves. The

enemy of us all is the limitation of our imagination, the timidity of our conviction and the inhibition we impose upon the inner struggle with conscience.

Bennabi declared social and economic independence to be contingent upon the independence of ideas. In his words: "A society which does not make its own guiding ideas can make neither its consumer goods nor its equipment. It is not by means of ideas imported or imposed that a society can develop. We must recover our intellectual originality before we can regain our political and economic independence."

These words of Bennabi are of enduring significance. They provide a fresh stimulus to the growth of new ideas in the Muslim world. They serve as a constant reminder that a civilization is created not through the instruments but through the framework of ideas, because instruments are servile to ideological influence.

Bennabi stands as a testimony that men and women of ideas matter and are the quickeners of civilization. It is an indictment of our parochialism that Bennabi has been neglected because he wrote in French. It is an even greater indictment that he is neglected because he was an individual thinker and not the ideologue of a movement. Neither is sufficient reason for original thought to be marginalized.

Bennabi reminds us that past, present, and future are joined in this moment. In this moment we must commence the reconstruction of Muslim civilization. The imperative is to think so that we can act practically and appropriately. Only in our faith can we find the guiding ideas to liberate our minds. Only through a collective introspection applied to today's world can we meet the challenge of our time and call ourselves free members of the ummah.

The subservient intellect cannot blossom into enduring ideas. It cannot assume the role of a catalyst that stimulates social evolution. The message of Bennabi, in essence, is the inculcation of an intellectual tradition that is submissive neither to political authority nor to ideological prestige. It stands on its own, sustained by the unflinching power of faith. To me, this is the greatest message of hope for Muslim resilience in the face of our colonial legacy. Thus, in spite of our present predicament, Bennabi has delineated a strategy for Muslim survival, one in dire need of gaining social authentication.