

## **Importance of Religion, Man and Knowledge in Civilizational Development Views of Malik Bennabi and Sa‘id Nūrsī**

### **Kepentingan Agama, Manusia dan Ilmu dalam Pembangunan Ketamadunan Pandangan Malik Bennabi dan Said Nursi**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper examines the views of Malik Bennabi (1905-1973) and Sa‘id Nūrsī (1878-1960) on the importance of religion, man and knowledge in civilisational development. Despite their different backgrounds, historical contexts and approaches, the two scholars shared the view that these three elements form the core foundations of civilisational development. For the purpose of this paper, the discussion of Malik Bennabi focuses on his views regarding the crucial roles played by religion and human factors in driving humanity toward progress and societal transformation; while the discussion of Sa‘id Nūrsī focuses on his views of knowledge as an important foundation for civilisational development. The paper concludes with the observation that both Bennabi’s and Nūrsī’s approaches to the issue of the foundations of civilisational development are rooted in Islamic thought.

**Keywords:** Bennabi, Nūrsī, Civilizational Development, Religion, Man, Knowledge.

#### **Abstrak**

Malik Bennabi dan Said Nursi adalah tokoh pemikir Islam yang terkenal dalam sejarah Islam terkini. Pandangan mereka terhadap kepentingan agama, manusia dan pengetahuan dalam pembangunan ketamadunan adalah teramat signifikan. Kedua-dua ulama nyatakan hakikat bahawa ketiga-tiga elemen (agama, manusia, dan ilmu) menjadi asas-asas teras pembangunan ketamadunan. Bagi Malik Bennabi, artikel ini memilih peranan agama dan faktor manusia dalam proses pembangunan ketamadunan. Bagi beliau kedua-dua asas adalah penting dalam mana-mana aktiviti pembangunan yang membawa kemajuan dan perubahan masyarakat. Beliau cuba membuktikan bahawa agama dan manusia adalah asas penting bagi kemajuan manusia. Bagi Said Nursi,

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artikel ini memilih pandangannya terhadap ilmu sebagai salah satu asas penting dalam pembangunan ketamadunan. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahawa agama, manusia dan ilmu pengetahuan adalah asas-asas penting dalam pembangunan ketamadunan; dan bahawa pendekatan Bennabi dan Nursi untuk kajian asas-asas pembangunan ketamadunan amatlah mulia secara semula jadi.

**Kata Kunci:** Malik Bennabi, Said Nursi, Pembangunan Ketamadunan, Agama, Manusia, Ilmu

### **Introduction**

Malik Bennabi (1905-1973) was born in Constantine, Algeria of parents of Algerian origin. He spent an important portion of his childhood traveling between Constantine and Tebessa. He enrolled in several schools which offered traditional as well as secular education. By the year 1935, Bennabi graduated from one of the French institution as an electrical engineer. In the year 1956, Bennabi traveled to Egypt as a political refugee. This exile was another station in his life and intellectual career. In 1959, he visited other countries; such as Syria and Lebanon where he met some scholars and opened the dialogue with them. He delivered talks in the cultural centers and universities. It was for him an occasion to present himself and his ideas to the Arab world. He participated in many seminars in Cairo, al-Hijaz, Kuwait and Tripoli. In 1963, he arrived in Algeria with a view to advocate the ideas of renaissance among the Algerians. In 1965, Bennabi was appointed as the Director of Higher Studies in the Ministry of National Education and was relatively close to the Algerian leadership, who called upon him several times for consultation. In 1967, Bennabi resigned from his post to concentrate on the intellectual activities. In the year 1971, he went for pilgrimage with his Algerian wife and three daughters. After a year from his return to his homeland, Bennabi died in October 1973. He was 68 years old and left a rich intellectual legacy in many crucial issues posed by the contemporary Islamic movement. His works are, among others, the Memoirs of a Century's Witness, the Qur'anic phenomenon, the Problem of Ideas in The Muslim World, Birth of A Society: Social Relations Network, the Problem of Culture, the Muslim in the Realm of Economics, Role of the Muslim and his Message in the Last Third of the Twentieth Century, Islam in

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History and Society, the Intellectual Conflict in Colonized Countries, In the Whirlwind of the Battle, the Work of the Orientalists and its Impact On the Muslim Thought, Between Clear Direction and Aimless Wandering, the Conditions of the Renaissance, the Afro-Asiatism, Discourse on the New Construction, S.O.S Algeria, the Idea of an Islamic Commonwealth, Speculations on the Arabic Society, and Algerian Perspectives.<sup>1</sup>

Bediuzzaman Sa‘id Nūrsī (1878–1960), might be considered as one of the most prominent scholars in the contemporary times. He compiled his ideas in *Risālah Nūr*, a work which spreads over six thousand pages. Believing that modern science and logic were to dominate the future, he advocated teaching religious sciences in secular schools and modern sciences in religious schools. Nūrsī inspired a faith movement that has played a vital role in the revival of Islam in Turkey and elsewhere in the Muslim world.<sup>2</sup>

These two scholars from the Muslim world have talked in a serious manner, among other things, about how the civilizational development could be ensured. Civilizational development may be defined as a process whereby a society undertakes a course of transformation in order to achieve certain levels of progress in various aspects, social, economic, political, technological, scientific, cultural etc. It simply means that the study of civilizational development would need a systematic approach so

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<sup>1</sup> See: Bariun, Fawzia. *Malik Bennabi: His Life and Theory of Civilization*, (Malaysia: Budaya Ilmu Sdn. Bhd, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the biography and contributions of Sa‘id Nūrsī refer to: Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi‘. Islam at the Crossroads Suny Press, 2003; Fred A. Reed. Anatolia junction: A journey into hidden Turkey. Talonbooks. 1999; Michel, Thomas, Said Nursi's Views on Muslim-Christian Understanding; Ian Markham Engaging with Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, A Model of Interfaith Dialogue. Ashgate, 2009; Islam in Modern Turkey,Sukran Vahide, (Suny Press, 2005); Ian Markham A Theology of Engagement. Blackwell, 2003; Ian Markham Globalization, Ethics and Islam: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi, 2005; Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi‘. Spiritual Dimensions of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur. Suny Press, 2008; Barnett, Peter, Guardian of the Flame[1]; Mardin, Serif, Religion and social change in modern Turkey: The case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi. Suny Press, 1989; Kalin, Ibrahim, Islam in Turkey Oxford University Press, 2010; Şahin, Mustafa Gökhan, Said Nursi and the Nur Movement in Turkey: An Atomistic Approach [2]; Turner, Colin, Horkuc, Hasan Said Nursi, Makers of Islamic Civilization Oxford, 2009.

that the phenomenon is understood and well-articulated for conceptualization and implementation purposes. Bennabi and Nūrsī have both discussed foundations which affect civilizational development from the angles of inception, evolution, expansion, stabilization, deterioration and other phases. Indeed, the stronger and firm the foundations, the everlasting the impact of civilizational development on individuals and groups.

No doubt, there are many foundations including religion, man, knowledge, technology, socio-economic condition, and culture that lay the scaffold of any civilizational development. As for Malik Bennabi, this article selected the role of religion and human factors in the process of civilizational development. To him these two foundations are crucial in any developmental activity leading to progress and transformation of society. He scrutinized and analytically proved that religion and man are essential foundations of human progress. All other factors and foundations come as complementary to these two foundations without which civilizational development would not be materialized. As for Sa‘īd Nūrsī, this article selected his view of knowledge as one important foundation of civilizational development. Even though he elaborated on many foundations such as Qur’anic worldview, vicegerent of Good (man), and values, this article deems appropriate to focus on his explanation of knowledge as foundation of civilizational development with a view to complementing the views of Bennabi and draw a clear picture of how the three elements influence civilizational development.

### **Malik Bennabi’s Views on Religion<sup>3</sup> as a Catalyst of Civilizational Development**

Bennabi, debates that in order to build a civilization, in the true sense of the word, there should be three important elements namely; man, soil and time. In addition to another ingredient which synthesizes

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<sup>3</sup>The term “Dīn” “has four meanings in the Qur’ān: (1) submission, as in 16:52 {*To Him belongs what is in the heavens and the earth, and it is to Him that submission must always be made*}. See also 39:2; (2) a system of beliefs, or, roughly, religion, as in 3:83 {*Do they desire a religion other than the religion of God?*}; (3) law, as in 12:76 (*It was not for him [Joseph] to detain his brother in accordance with the law of the king.*); and (4) recompense, as in 51:6 {*And recompense shall be meted out.*}. See. Mir, Dictionary of Qur’anic Terms, Op. cit., p. 49.

these elements in the form of a civilization, that is, religion or the moral principle. He clearly submits that “in these three elements lie the social wealth of any society and these are the factors which drive it onto history”.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, civilization is the result of man plus soil plus time. If one puts these elements in the form of a mathematical equation it will be as follows: Civilization = Man + Soil + Time. However, the three elements cannot form any type of civilizational development unless and until a religious idea synthesizes them into a civilization.

One may note that the ingredients of this equation are, in a sense, raw material or original sources that every human society possesses. A positive interaction of these preliminary elements could generate a civilizing process that can assist society to develop. Hence, civilizational development needs man, objects taken from the soil and an interval of time. That is to say, one should synthesize man, soil and time in a transforming process by using religion as a guiding framework and catalyst. In Bennabi's view, when we plan for the construction of a civilization<sup>5</sup>, we should think of its fundamental equation i.e., man, soil and time. In other words, we need to resolve scientifically these three problems, by constructing human personality, exploiting soil and benefiting from time.<sup>6</sup> In this context, religion is the catalyst of the three mentioned elements of civilization. Bennabi maintains that religion cannot commence its civilizational function as a civilizational catalyst unless it synthesizes man, soil and time in one single project of civilizational development. It is the initial driving force that pushes the human energy to the state of civilization and development.

Bennabi reserves an important role for religion in the civilizing process. He sees Islam as the most pivotal religion that could construct a civilization and initiate civilizational development in its social profound meaning. He emphasizes that “here religion delivers its greatest message,

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<sup>4</sup>Malik Bennabi, *Shurūt al-Nahdah* (Dimashq: Dar al-Fikr, 1981), p. 50.

<sup>5</sup>A civilization is an embodiment of its total spiritual and material culture. It is an open, and to some extent, self-perpetuating interchange between man, the values and norms inherent in his worldview and cosmology in their numerous dimensions and order. See. Ziauddin Sadar, *Explorations in Islamic Sciences*, (London: Mansell, 1989), p. 69.

<sup>6</sup>Bennabi, *Ta'ammulāt fī al-Mujtama‘ al-'Arabī* (Dimashq: Dar al-Fikr, 1986), p. 170.

whose burdens cannot be carried except by it, and whose constructive objectives and well-guided goals cannot be realized except on its bases and principles. Thus, religion ties together the moral criterion which it lays down for people and self-love which is centered in their nature.”<sup>7</sup> Whereas, the non-revealed religion is different because of its human sources and its man-made method. In line with this, Bennabi views that:

*“The non-religion morality, as much as it makes sense, analyzes human action on its immediate personal interest. The secular system is based on this fact. Certainly, the personal interest is also reckoned in the monotheistic ethics but here it is more altruistic. In fact, it is viewed as a merit of an individual, rather than his benefit.”<sup>8</sup>*

On the other hand, he explained how religion plays a significant role in the movement of any civilization leading to some kind of progress. In this respect, it is significant enough to underline the social function of religion. Bennabi asserted that almost all human civilizations are rooted in a religious context or at least this context constitute the initial force that drives a society onto history. In the following pivotal text Bennabi explained his view:

*“As far back as we look into the past history of man either into the most beautiful periods of his civilization or into the most rudimentary stages of his social evolution, we always find there a trace of religious thought. Archeology has always revealed, among the vestiges, which it brings to light, the remnants of monuments which were consecrated to some cult by the ancients. For the simple dolmen to the most imposing temple, architecture has evolved on a par with religious thought, which also included the laws and even the science of man. Besides, civilizations were born in the shadow of temples, such as that of Solomon, or that of the Kaaba. Thus, it was from these places that civilization radiated out to illuminate the world to brighten its universities and laboratories and to enlighten in particular, the political debates in parliaments. The laws of modern nation are essentially canonical. As for their civil laws, there is not least of religious essence in France, particularly where it was borrowed from Muslim law, customs and habits of peoples are modeled by a*

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<sup>7</sup>Muhammad Baqir Al-Sadr, *Our Philosophy*, Trans. Shams C. Inati, forwarded by Sayyid Husayn Nasr, (London: The Muhammadi Trust, 1989), p. 28.

<sup>8</sup>Bennabi, *Al-Zāhirah al-Qur’āniyyah* (Malaysia: I.I.F.S.O, 1983), p. 193.

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*metaphysical preoccupation, which sends even the smallest Negro village around a small hut especially and carefully built for the more or less primitive spiritual life of the people.”<sup>9</sup>*

From the above and similar passages, it is clear that Bennabi returned every civilizing process and civilizational development of man to a religious idea in the general sense of the term. According to him, every civilization started from this religious drive that pushes the society to start its historical action and civilizational development. Therefore, he considered that religion was naturally inscribed itself in the origin of all human transformations<sup>10</sup> that occurred in the history of man. For instance, even the religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity... formulated the original synthesis of man, soil and time in the crib of a religious idea.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, a civilization does not take off except with the emergence of a religious idea in its broad sense. Therefore, one has to search in every civilization for its religious foundations which caused its appearance in history. As a matter of fact, it is not an exaggeration to claim that we could find in Buddhism the seeds of Budic civilization and in Brahma the seeds of a Brahman civilization. Accordingly, as Bennabi debates, civilization cannot appear in a nation except in the form of revelation, in its broad sense, which formulates a legislation and a method of conduct for people or at least its foundation is based on an idea that directs the human vital energy towards an unseen power. “It seems that it is decreed for man that he will not see the radiation of a civilization unless he extends his horizon beyond his earthly life.”<sup>12</sup>

According to Bennabi, Islam<sup>13</sup> as a revealed religion is the most dynamic catalyst of a civilization leading to civilizational development. This is a fact that is not verified only by the texts and methods of Islam per se but also by the facts and patterns of history and the civilizational

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<sup>9</sup>Bennabi, *Al-Zāhirah*, Op. cit., p. 65.

<sup>10</sup>Bennabi, *Islam in History and Society*, Trans. Asma Rachid, (Malaysia: Berita Studies in Contemporary Thought, 1993), p. 89.

<sup>11</sup>Bennabi, *Qaḍāyā Kubrā* (Dimashq: Dar al-Fikr, 1991), p. 60.

<sup>12</sup>Bennabi, *Shurūt*, Op. cit., pp. 50-51.

<sup>13</sup> See. Mir, *Dictionary of Qur'anic Terms*, Op. cit., pp. 108-109.

legacy of Islam. Therefore, the Muslim society will not synthesize man, soil and time in the form of a civilization unless it returns back to the values and ethics given by the Qur'an. Bennabi further argues that in the light of the Holy Qur'an religion appears as a

*“Cosmic phenomenon, regulating the thought and the civilization of man, as gravitation regulates the matter and conditions its evolution. Thus, the religion appears imbued in the universal order, as the original law of the soul, which gravitates on many orbits, beginning that of Islam, up to that of the most elementary fetishism around the same center, always dazzling and ever-mysterious.”<sup>14</sup>*

In fact, Islam was an essential component in the previous Muslim civilization. It was the initial driving-force that synthesized man, soil and time and molded them in the form of a historical civilization. On this canvas, Islam was revealed to introduce its admirable civilization, giving to the world dominated by individualism cohesion and a sense of the collectiveness that determined its historical orientation. Bennabi argues that the Qur'an transformed “the Bedouin into a sedentary, who left in Spain and the south of France, the evidence of an agricultural science. This fixation of man to the soil immediately produced its effect.”<sup>15</sup> Having attributed such an important function and role to religion, it is worth discussing the civilizing function of religion as articulated by Malik Bennabi.

### **Civilizational Development and the Civilizing Power of Religion**

Referring back to Bennabi's equation of civilization, it is evident that these three elements are original values and resources that God (S.W.T.) has bestowed upon people as their social wealth. “The three substantial values: man, soil and time, are the essential impetus in the time of hardship and while these values are owned by people they undoubtedly possess the key for their development.”<sup>16</sup> However, an important ques-

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<sup>14</sup>Bennabi, *Al-Zāhirah*, Op. cit., p. 288.

<sup>15</sup>Bennabi, *Islam in History and Society*, Op. cit., pp. 17-18.

<sup>16</sup>Bennabi, *Shurūt*, Op. cit., pp. 150-151.

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tion could be posed in this regard. If every society has these three values: man, soil and time, why many of them are still uncivilized? And precisely why the present Islamic society is still degenerating? As a matter of fact, our society has those values, but it is undergoing a long period of backwardness viz.-a-viz. other societies. Consciously, Bennabi discussed this matter and maintained that these three elements cannot work separately. By his account, there must be a religious idea or a moral principle that can synthesize them in the form of a civilization. This is what he called as the catalyst of a civilization. He asserted that this is the:

*“Coefficient which influence the process of composing and synthesizing the other three elements with each other in order to formulate a civilization. As it is shown in the analysis, the Catalyseur<sup>17</sup> is eventually existing. It is the religious idea that followed the process of constructing civilization in history.”<sup>18</sup>*

Bennabi further argues that the relations among these three elements of civilization are not simply additive, but interactive. Hence, similar to all interactive relations, one may find in nature the interaction of these three elements in contingent on the presence of a stimulus whose main function is to facilitate and accelerate the interaction. If one looks in the laboratory of history, Bennabi maintains that “one will find clearly that all civilizations have their roots in religious sentiments.”<sup>19</sup> For history will tell us that the Buddhist civilization has its roots in Buddhism, Islamic civilization in Islam and western civilization in Christianity.”<sup>20</sup>

According to Bennabi, the importance of religion is not only related to influencing the self- characteristics of individuals but essentially to transforming the collective resolve into civilizational action. It is a catalyst of the human energies and capabilities. He describes its function in the following passage:

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<sup>17</sup> Al-Qurayshī, *Al-Taghyīr al-Ijtīmā'i 'inda Malik Bennabi* (al-Qāhirah: al- Zahrah li al-I'lām al-'Arabī, 1989), p. 110.

<sup>18</sup> Bennabi, *Shuruṭ*, Op. cit., pp. 45-46.

<sup>19</sup> Bariun, Fawzia. *Malik Bennabi: His Life and Theory of Civilization* (Malaysia: Budaya Ilmu Sdn. Bhd, 1993), p. 118.

<sup>20</sup> Bennabi, *Ta'ammulāt*, Op. cit., p.198.

*"The social role of religion is here essentially that of a catalyseur, favoring the transformation of values that pass from a natural to a psycho-temporal state, corresponding to a certain stage of civilization. This transformation turns the biological man into a sociological entity; time-simple chronological duration evaluated in hours that pass- into socio-logical time, evaluated in hours of labor; and soil- yielding unilaterally and unconditionally the nourishment for man according to a simple process of consumption- into a technically equipped and conditioned terrain for catering to the multiple needs of social life according to the conditions of a process of production. Religion is then catalyseur of the social values."*<sup>21</sup>

### **Malik Bennabi's Views on Man as the Driving Force of Civilizational Development**

Bennabi extensively argued that the human factor constitute one crucial foundation of development. Indeed, Bennabi reserved an exceptional position for the issue of man per se and his role in civilizational development. By his account, man is the primary social actor because he is the central force in any civilizing process. He asserted that man is "the fundamental condition of all civilizations and civilizations constantly stress the role of the human factors."<sup>22</sup> That is to say, the first matter of concern in the civilizing process is man because history showed to our clear eyes how man engineered civilizational development throughout the life span of many civilizations. It is man, at the final account, who determines the social value of the civilizational equation, because "soil and time could not achieve any, if we rely on them only, social or civilizational transformation."<sup>23</sup>

However, Bennabi made an important distinction between two types of man: the integral man and the disintegrated man. According to him, history or civilization, "commences with the integral man, constantly adapting his effort to his ideal and needs, and accomplishing in society his double mission of actor and witness. But history ends with disintegrated man, the corpuscle deprived of the center of gravitation, the indi-

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<sup>21</sup>Bennabi, *Islam in History and Society*, Op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>22</sup>Bennabi, *Islam in History and Society*, Op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>23</sup>Bennabi, *Fikrat Kumanwilth Islami*, (al-Qāhirah: Maktabat Ammār, 1960), pp. 52-53.

vidual living in a dissolved society that no longer furnishes his existence with either moral or material base.”<sup>24</sup>

It is obvious that civilization does not commence wherever or whenever people meet and assemble in a given place or time. Rather, it starts with a man who is prepared to perform his civilizational responsibilities. The man who is ready to thrust onto a civilizing process and act as a driving force of the social transformation. In fact, Allah (S.W.T.) has created man in the best of shape, but human conditions and social surroundings influence his personality, life and civilizational destination. According to Bennabi, man as a prior condition for civilization has two values: (1) the raw and elementary and (2) the conditioned and formulated within the social context. The first exists in every human being in his biological structure and it is represented by his original preparedness to utilize his intelligence, soil and time. While, the second value is the one, which he gains from his social milieu. It is represented in the means and experiences that the individual could find in his social ambiance in order to develop his personality and capacity of understanding life as well as coping with the demands of a civilizing process. In the following passage, Bennabi described the difference between the two types of man:

*“The basic unit of a society is not the elementary individual; but it is the (conditioned individual). In fact, nature provides the individual in a rude state. Then the society reformulates him in conformity with its specific objectives. This is the meaning that is clearly demonstrated by the Prophet (S.A.W.) in this tradition: (every child is born on the fitrah and it is his parents who make him a Jew, A Christian, or a Magian).”<sup>25</sup>*

It is clearly stated here that transforming man of civilization demands certain changes in his personality and thought. Qualifying man to play his role in history requires such a profound change in his social surroundings. Indeed, Bennabi stressed in his method, that the role of the transformed man in history is to construct a social context that would al-

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<sup>24</sup>Bennabi, *Islam in History and Society*, Op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>25</sup>Bennabi, *Mīlād Mujtama': Shabakat al-'Alāqāt al-Ijtimā'īyyah*, Trans. 'Abd al-Şabūr Shāhīn, (Dimashq: Dar al-Fikr, 1985), p. 145.

low the members of the society to enjoy the fruits of their civilization. Therefore, the real civilizing process should aim at formulating this man. Furthermore, he argues that the problem of any civilization is substantially related to the human agent. Thus, any thinking in the problem of man is thinking in the problem of a civilization.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Bennabi debated that man acts not only in terms of temporality of his material needs, but also “in terms of his psychism, of his spirituality. Therein lies the complete reality of man which one must take into account for seizing it in its totality.”<sup>27</sup> This is the complete picture, which Bennabi draws for a man of civilization. When he dealt with the problem of Islamic civilization, he aspired towards directing our attention to this kind of historical man. Our crucial need, Bennabi explained, is in the world of soul and not in the world of objects. “Our dire need is a man, a civilized man.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Sa‘īd Nūrsī’s Views on Knowledge as a Foundation of Civilizational Development**

Sa‘īd Nūrsī lived in a time where the Muslim World faced all sorts of decline and aggression from without and from within. He made immense contributions to the study and development of Islam and Muslim civilization. In all his endeavors he stressed the importance of religion, values, ethics, human factors and knowledge in the civilizational development activities. He has made many efforts towards regaining back the dynamism of Islam and its role in the development of the Islamic world. According to him, returning to the Qur'an and the traditions of the Last Prophet (s.a.w.) is the foundation of any civilizational development in the Muslim world.

### **Knowledge and Civilizational Development**

Nūrsī vehemently stressed the importance of knowledge and its function in civilizational development. To him knowledge has a civilizational

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<sup>26</sup>Bennabi, *Mushkilat al-Afkār fī al-‘Ālam al-Islāmī* (Dimashq: Dar al-Fikr, 1988), p. 100.

<sup>27</sup>Bennabi, *Islam In History and Society*, Op. cit., p. 90.

<sup>28</sup>Bennabi, *Ta’ammulāt*, Op. cit., p. 190.

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function through which the education of man and society takes place leading to the discovery of the necessary knowledge required for any endeavors to civilize the society. Nūrsī perceives knowledge not only in its human rational dimension but also and more importantly from its divine revealed dimension. By the divine dimension Nūrsī refers to revelation and its inimitability. In this sense, knowledge reflects the divine will of God and stems from God's all Knowing knowledge. Hence, this knowledge is essential to man's endeavors of civilizational development as it provides the necessary worldview, wisdom, guidance, method, and injunctions required for the orientation of civilizational development activities.

Nūrsī argues that the highest level of this knowledge is to recognize and be thankful to the almighty Allah and submit to His will<sup>29</sup>. He says: "The purpose for the sending of man to this world and the wisdom implicit in it, consists of recognizing the Creator of all beings and believing in Him and worshipping Him. The primordial duty of man and the obligation incumbent upon him are to know God and believe in Him."<sup>30</sup> Thus, according to him, one who possesses such knowledge will have a vigorous, active capacity and propensity to assimilate at a high level the method of revelation, and its Sharī'ah and beliefs. Knowledge of God is thus crucial for man's development and civilizational progress. Lacking this type of knowledge means that civilization falls short of its essence and substance. Nūrsī puts it clearly that "one who knows and loves God Almighty is potentially able to receive endless bounties, happiness, lights, and mysteries."<sup>31</sup> Thus, so long as mankind does not advance in belief in the true sense, it cannot advance in science, technology, and industry in a balanced manner.

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<sup>29</sup> See,Abdelaziz Berghout, *The Place of knowledge in the Vicegerency and Civilizational Process in the Thought of Nursi*, The fourth International Symposium on Badiuzzaman: A contemporary approach to understanding the Qur'an, 21-22/8/99. Society for Culture and Sciences, Istanbul.

<sup>30</sup> Nūrsī, Bediuzzaman, *The Rays Collection*, Engl. Trans, (Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 1998), p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Nūrsī Bediuzzaman, *Letters 1928-1932*, Engl. trans, (Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 2nd edn., 1997), p. 265

To move one step further in discerning the function of knowledge in civilizational development Nūrsī proposes that knowledge should be related to belief in the oneness of God stressing that the highest level of knowledge is the knowledge of God. The latter leads to the love of God causing the real happiness and success in this world and in the hereafter. Nūrsī says: “The highest aim of creation and its most important result is belief in God. The most exalted rank in humanity and its highest degree is the knowledge of God contained within belief in God. The most radiant happiness and sweetest bounty for jinn and human beings is the love of God contained within the knowledge of God.”<sup>32</sup>

Adopting this view of knowledge shows the importance of revelation in guiding reason and man to the right path and approach to knowledge creation and implementation, which will lead to a balanced and guided method of knowledge and its use for the benefit of man and his civilization. “Thus, we may interpret the Qur'an putting knowledge and revelation in the same context in this way: revelation permeates knowledge, illuminating it and thus ensuring it is truth. In this way, the dimension of belief which revelation adds to knowledge demonstrates itself.”<sup>33</sup>

### **Knowledge and Patterns of God**

One of the important aspects of knowledge in Nūrsī's framework of analysis is the dimension of patterns and laws (Sunnatullāh Dimension). By his account, the real knowledge is the knowledge of the laws of God in the cosmos and human association. By having this knowledge and using it people can build civilization and achieve development based on the patterns and laws of God. It is realized by linking knowledge in orderly and regular fashion to the causes, laws, and principles in force in life itself. Throughout his works, Nūrsī emphasizes the concept of Sunnatullāh and stresses the necessity of conforming to it in any human

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<sup>32</sup> Nūrsī, *Letters*, p. 265.

<sup>33</sup> Açıkgöz, Alpaslan, ‘An Evaluation of the *Risale-i Nur* from the Point of View of Knowledge and the Categorization of Knowledge,’ in Third International Symposium on Bediuzzaman Nursi, 1995 [Engl. trans.] (Istanbul: Sözler Neşriyat, 1997) ii, 106.

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endeavors<sup>34</sup>. He says: “Just as there is obedience and rebellion in the face of the commands of the Shari‘a, so too there is obedience and rebellion in the face of the creative commands in the universe.”<sup>35</sup> He further argued “If one who opens up a new way in the life of human society does not act in conformity with the natural laws in force in the universe, he cannot be successful in beneficial works and in progress.”<sup>36</sup> Hence, it is vital to realize the practical, vital, and civilizing dimension of knowledge. In other words man should use knowledge to discern the pattern of God in human association, on the one hand, and use them to achieve the highest possible level of development and progress, on the other.

Nūrsī stresses the impact of knowledge on human personality and behavior. He advances the idea that for knowledge to play its social and civilizational function it needs to be part and parcel of one’s personality and bringing up. If knowledge is established on sound foundations and is the guide in all actions, such actions will be correct and in harmony with man’s life. In this way, man’s actions come to have an active and productive influence on life and civilization. Thus, Nūrsī presents knowledge as a vital and active concept, a channel for the Divine laws colored by belief, with a practical and behavioral impact.<sup>37</sup>

Nūrsī suggests that in order for knowledge to play a foundational role in civilizational development man should undertake his responsibility in carrying knowledge and realizing its aim on earth. Man as a vicegerent of God entrusted with the divine knowledge in order to achieve the aims of vicegerency. In turn, all human endeavors and activities revolving around vicegerency lead to what we call today human civilization and development.

### Knowledge and Names of God

<sup>34</sup>Refer to: Abdelaziz Berghout , *The Place of knowledge*, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> Nūrsī, *Letters*, p, 552.

<sup>36</sup> Nūrsī, S. *The Flashes Collection*, Trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Neshriyat, 1995), p. 25.

<sup>37</sup> Refer to: *Abdelaziz Berghout, The Place of knowledge*, op. cit.

The other leading view of Nūrsī regarding the role of knowledge in civilizational development is his attempt to relate the divine knowledge to the names of God. According to him, those names such as all Knowing, merciful, omnipotent, the forgiver, the sustainer etc. are crucial in man's life and civilization. By understanding the meaning of those names and realizing them in human life through practicing their connotations would lead to better life and relations among humans as well as pave the way for a better human civilization and life.

In order to justify his arguments, Nūrsī refers to the Qur'anic verse 2:31: "And He taught Adam the names, all of them", and says:

*Adam's (Peace be upon him) greatest miracle in the question of the supreme vicegerency was the teaching of the names. ... Since as a proof of their superiority over the angels in the question of the vicegerency, I taught your forefathers all the names, you too, since you are his sons and the inheritors of his abilities, should learn all the names and in your position as holder of the Supreme Trust demonstrate your worthiness before all creatures. For the way is open to you to rise to exalted rank such as holding the highest positions over all beings in the universe, and for vast creatures like the earth to be subjected to you. Come on, step forward, adhere to all My names, and rise! ... Continuously raising your head and studying carefully my most beautiful names, make your sciences and your progress steps by which to ascend to those heavens. Then you may rise to My dominical names, which are the realities and sources of your sciences and attainments, and you may look to your Sustainer with your hearts through the telescope of the names.*<sup>38</sup>

According to Nūrsī, the teaching of the names comprises one meaning in relation to determining the reality and function of knowledge in Islam. 'The teaching of the names' is a term referring to man's intellectual, mental, and spiritual faculties, by means of which the treasures of wisdom, consciousness, and good are opened to him, and through which the horizons of civilization and the vicegerency unfold. It is these faculties which represent the crown of man's abilities, and enable him to be God's vicegerent on earth. For God Almighty deposited in man a vast

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<sup>38</sup> Nūrsī, S. *The Words Collection* Trans. Sukran Vahide (Istanbul: Sozler Neshriyat, 1993), pp. 269-70.

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innate capacity and potential vicegerency which render him capable of assuming the Trust and struggling with its requirements and conditions by means of consciousness, reason and thought, which affect the universe and life.<sup>39</sup> In one of the ‘Points’ of the Twentieth Word, Nūrsī elucidates this as follows:

*“By describing under the title of ‘the teaching of the names’ all the attainments of learning and scientific progress and wonders of technology which man manifests through his comprehensive disposition, this wondrous verse contains the following subtle and elevated allusion: all attainments and perfections, all learning, all progress, and all sciences, have an elevated reality which is based on one of the Divine Names.”<sup>40</sup>*

It is as though the teaching of the names is “the basis of developing our understanding of existence and exercising our power at the highest level, which is to align our thought on the way of reality which God Almighty created. How appropriate for the one who is the Creator’s vicegerent to be prepared to interact with the world of existence, which God created, in a way that will demonstrate his worthiness to be vicegerent!”<sup>41</sup>

According to Nūrsī, the teaching of the names expresses the perfect human capacity necessary to achieve mental progress and advancement in knowledge so that man may learn about God Almighty, interact with the universe, reflect on existence, build civilization, and in this way bring to realization God’s vicegerency on the earth. By virtue of man’s consciousness and thought, the vicegerency extends beyond the dimension of fleeting time, and through the power of knowledge, which is connected to the cord of revelation and the line of Prophethood and Divine guidance for humanity, is extended to a power which will be effective over the heavens and the earth.<sup>42</sup> Nūrsī says:

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<sup>39</sup> Refer to: Abdelaziz Berghout, *The Place of knowledge*, op. cit.

<sup>40</sup> Nūrsī, *The Words*, op. cit., p. 270.

<sup>41</sup> Demirdaş, Mahmud Faraj, *Wa 'Allama Ādam al-Asmā' kullahā* (Cairo: 1st edn., 1996), p. 58.

<sup>42</sup> Refer to: Abdelaziz Berghout, *The Place of Knowledge*, op. cit.

*“And He taught Adam the names, all of them [2:31]; that is to say, Almighty God made Adam (PUB) with an elevated nature containing the sources of all attainments and perfections; He created him with a large capacity as the tillage for the seeds of all meanings; and He equipped him with an elevated conscience and comprehensive ten senses which embrace all beings. And bestowing on him these three qualities, He prepared him so that He might teach him the realities of all things, then He taught him all the names.”<sup>43</sup>*

This profundity of man’s innate disposition and capacity both show us his power to read, think, consider, and plan, and his place in the cosmic and human enterprise. In turn, man will be able to translate his abilities into real human activities and endeavors toward civilizational development. Nūrsī profoundly describes this dimension of man’s abilities and faculties:

*“For sure man is transitory, but he was created for immortality, and as the mirror to an Enduring One, and he was charged with duties which produce enduring fruits, and was given a form which is the means to manifesting the impresses of an Enduring One’s enduring Names. In which case, the true duty and happiness of man is to cling with all his powers and faculties to the Names of that Eternally Enduring One within the bounds of those things that please Him; it is to be turned towards the Enduring One, and to go to Him.”<sup>44</sup>*

It is man himself who is responsible for the discovery of his abilities and faculties that will aid him in understanding the names of God and manifesting them in his own life and civilization. Nūrsī clearly states “all attainments and perfections, all learning, all progress, and all sciences, have an elevated reality which is based on one of the Divine Names. On being based on the Name, which is concealed under numerous veils and has various manifestations and different spheres, the sciences and arts and attainments find their perfection and become reality.”<sup>45</sup> For example “the All-Wise Qur’an strikes the hand of encouragement on man’s

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<sup>43</sup> Nursi, S. *Signs of Miraculousness: The Inimitability of the Qur'an's Conciseness*, Trans. Sukran Vahide, (Istanbul: Sozler Neshriyat, 2007), p. 210.

<sup>44</sup> Nursi, *The Flashes Collection*, Op. Cit., p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Nūrsī, *The Words*, p. 270.

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back, urging him to the highest peaks, the farthest limits, the final degrees, which he is far behind at the present degree of his progress.”<sup>46</sup>

It is so far clear that Nūrsī sees knowledge and its functions in man’s life and civilization as one of the major foundations of civilizational development. Thus, it is man who should undertake the trust of unlocking his power to achieve the highest possible levels of development and progress. According to Nūrsī, development and civilization start within oneself. The power is within. He says:

*“Thus, he who knows his own self in this way, and realizes and acts according to it, is included in the good news of. Truly he succeeds who purifies it.[91:9] He truly carries out the Trust, and through the telescope of his ‘I’, he sees what the universe is and what duties it is performing. When he obtains information about the universe, he sees that his ‘I’ confirms it. This knowledge will remain as light and wisdom for him, and will not be transformed into darkness and futility. When the ‘I’ fulfils its duty in this way, it abandons its imaginary dominicality and supposed ownership, which are the units of measurement, and it says: ‘His is the sovereignty and to Him is due all praise; His is the judgment and to Him will you all be brought back.’<sup>47</sup>*

He goes further to stress that man is the key but he needs the true knowledge to unlock the treasures of creation and civilization:

*“Just as the ‘I’ is the key to the Divine Names, which are hidden treasures, so is it the key to the locked talisman of creation; it is a problem-solving riddle, a wondrous talisman. When its nature is known, both the ‘I’ itself, that strange riddle, that amazing talisman, is disclosed, and it discloses the talisman of the universe and the treasures of the Necessary World. ... The key to the world is in the hand of man and is attached to his self. For while being apparently open, the doors of the universe are in fact closed. God Almighty has given to man by way of a Trust, such a key, called the ‘I’, that it opens all the doors of the world; He has given*

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<sup>46</sup> Nūrsī, *The Words*, p. 271.

<sup>47</sup> Nūrsī, *The Words*, p. 559.

*him an enigmatic 'I' with which he may discover the hidden treasures of the Creator of the universe.*<sup>48</sup>

**Conclusion**

Sa‘id Nūrsī as an Islamic religious scholar hailing from a traditional set up and environment of learning, views revealed knowledge as the soul of civilization and its light. He resorted to a more revealed knowledge based approach whereby the text of the Qur'an and traditions of the Last Prophet (s.a.w.) form the core edifice of his study and analysis of what civilization is all about and what it means to have development based on Islamic revealed knowledge framework. Malik Bennabi coming from a different background and schooling system approached the question of civilizational development from social and human sciences based paradigm. As a mechanical engineer who was trained in quantitative based paradigm, he found himself approaching the question of civilization from the angle of the contemporary human sciences providing one of the most insightful and systematic analysis. His approach led him to emphasize the essentiality of religion and human factors in civilizational development.

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<sup>48</sup> Nūrsī, *The Words*, p. 558.