

VALORIZING TIME AS A CIVILIZATIONAL ASSET:  
GLIMPSES INTO THE VIEWS OF MALIK BENNABI  
AND SAID NURSI

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the notion of time not only as an interval or period or unit of measurement made of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years, but essentially as a civilizational and spiritual asset. We need to valorize time as a source of civilizational progress and development. Time is seen as a value and a source of civilizational activity leading to progress and socio-cultural development. Our understanding, appreciation and utilization of time will partly depend on our perspective of life itself be it temporal or eternal. How our worldviews articulate the notion of time bears heavily on our action and dynamism in history and life. Our worldview will make the notion of time a civilizing power and a place for added value and progress or a way to decline. This paper addresses the question of civilizational and spiritual value of time stressing the need for educating people about time as a wealth that is crucial in their self and collective development and progress. It examines the notion of time as a civilizational asset that adds value to the life and development of the individual and society as well. A special reference will be made to selected views of both Malik Bennabi (1905-1973) and Said Nursi (1878-1960), who might be considered among the pioneering Muslim thinkers, who studied the notion of time reflecting on its civilizational and spiritual dimensions. The paper concludes that both scholars have made important contribution to the study of time from an Islamic perspective. While Malik Bennabi underscores the civilizational and social aspects of time, Said Nursi stresses the importance of metaphysical, spiritual and moral aspects of time. This paper also*

*shows that the Quranic view of time is more comprehensive and all-encompassing.*

**Keywords:** Valorization of Time, Civilizational Asset, Equation of Civilization- Civilizing power of time.

## **Introduction**

In general terms, one may claim that the concept of time is seen throughout the history of man as one of the most debated issues on merit and interest. It is evident that each and every civilization has its own worldview and perception of time. Each and every worldview be it revealed or man-made must have, by its very nature, a vision about God, universe, man and life. In other words, it should answer the ultimate questions related to those crucial themes of existence. In a cosmological sense, life as one major theme of worldview falls directly under the ambit of the conception of time. In general terms, worldview “is a general overview of reality, of truth, of the world, of space and time of human history and destiny.”<sup>1</sup> The life of man, the life of other creatures, the life of the universe and nature are all but units of time measured in terms of action, motion, activities and deeds undertaken by individuals and societies in the life span given to them by the Creator. Hence, the conception of time and its study in terms of its value and impact is crucial to human existence and life as a whole.

As there are many approaches and perspectives on the study and articulation of the notion of time, this paper examines it from a civilizational as well as a metaphysical-spiritual aspect. Through civilizational aspect, this paper perceives time as an asset and wealth given to individuals and societies to be exploited in the form of impactful activities, deeds and actions contributing to development and progress. This is the value-added meaning of the social and civilizational dimension of time. It is a time that becomes linked with progress and social development. Here time becomes a wealth

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<sup>1</sup> Ismail R. Al-Faruqi, *al-Tawhid: Its Implications for Thought and Life* (Herndon: IIIT, 1982), 10.

resulting from its positive and efficient exploitation of impactful deeds and actions.

By metaphysical and spiritual aspects of time, this paper refers to the continuity of time in both this world and the hereafter. This cosmic meaning of time encompasses the temporal life span of time in this world as well as the eternal lasting time of the hereafter. This metaphysical expansion of time and life has a direct impact on our spiritual and moral being. By understanding that time and life are not merely in this world and that they are expanded to the everlasting life and the hereafter, will create spiritual and moral strength leading to the positive exploitation of time to achieve success in this world and hereafter.

In order to provide a better understanding of these two aspects of time, this paper refers to two Muslim scholars who made important contributions to the study of the notion of time, namely Malik Bennabi and Said Nursi. The former, has studied time as part and parcel of the equation of civilization considering it as an important ingredient of the civilizing process and social development. While, the later, perceived time from a more metaphysical, spiritual and moral aspect, stressing its impact on our spiritual and moral development and progress.

On another level, this paper also stresses the importance of worldview on our perception of time, shedding some lights on the Quranic perspective of time. Accordingly, it should be clear that by adopting the Quranic view of time, we must see time in its both temporal and transcendental, physical and metaphysical and seen and unseen lights and perspectives. This position is in accordance with the Islamic worldview. Referring to Al-Attas, the Islamic worldview have the following features and aspects:

According to the perspective of [the] Islam worldview is: the vision of reality and truth that appears before our mind's eye revealing what existence is all about; for it is the world of existence in its totality that Islam is projecting...The Islamic view of reality and truth, which is a: metaphysical survey of the visible and invisible worlds including the perspective of life as a whole, is not a worldview that is formed merely by the gathering

together of various cultural objects, values and phenomena into artificial coherence.<sup>2</sup>

Here we stress the concept of life as a whole leading to an understanding of time that encompasses both this world and the hereafter. On the other hand, from a Quranic perspective there appears clearly a direct relation between worldview, time and civilization as well as correlation between man's understanding and exploitation of time as a civilizational value. In this regard, the Qur'an urges man to valorize time through actions and endeavors toward improving himself, contributing to the progress of his society and responding the calls of his Lord as a vicegerent who is entrusted with the mission of vicegerency and human association.

This paper uses mainly textual analysis in order to introduce a notion of time that is dynamic and value adding to the development of the individual and society as well. Not many scholars of civilization and cultural transformation give due importance to the concept of time and how it influences our perception of change and development. Despite the existence of many theories and views about the notion of time from cosmological, epistemological, anthropological and philosophical perspectives, there is still a need to approach it from a socio-cultural and civilizational<sup>3</sup> angle emphasizing its psychological and social-cultural value. Lastly, I have to stress that this paper is not meant to provide a comparative study of both thinkers rather it is more of presenting two complementing views of the notion of time.

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<sup>2</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur, 1995), 1-2.

<sup>3</sup> Abdelaziz Berghout, "Importance of Religion, Man and Knowledge in Civilisational Development: Views of Malik Bennabi and Said Nursi," *Journal of Islam in Asia*, A Refereed International Biannual Arabic-English Journal, (Kuala Lumpur, IIUM Press), Vol. 10, No. 2, December 2013, 102.

## **I. Malik Bennabi's Notion of Time: Valorizing the Civilizational Value of Time**

### **A. Importance of the Notion of Time in the "Equation of Civilisation"**

In his theoretical framework for the study of civilization, Malik Bennabi coined what he terms "equation of civilization". In this equation there are four important ingredients, namely man, soil, time and religion. The latter is considered as a catalyzer that creates the dynamic formula of civilizational development. As such, every human society in its initial stage of development does not own sophisticated and developed objects and instruments. Rather, it has a simple realm of objects. However, every society has an original wealth that represents its social capital in all its stages of development. This natural wealth is the driving force that allows every society to commence its civilizing process and to construct its civilization. This wealth consists of three important ingredients, namely man, soil and time, in addition to another important element, i.e., religion or the moral principle or worldview. In his own words, Bennabi states, "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:

$$\text{Civilization} = \text{Man} + \text{Soil} + \text{Time.}$$

It is so far clear that all ingredients of this equation are, in a sense, raw material or original sources that every human society possesses as a gift bestowed upon people by God. A positive interaction of these rudimentary elements could generate, if planned and oriented well, a civilizing process that can assist society to develop. To clarify this equation, one can take any human product or object and examine its essential ingredients. In the final analysis any product involves a process that contains the three elements of civilization. It needs a man, a material taken from the soil and an

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<sup>4</sup> Bennabi, *Shurut al-Nahda*, (Dimashq, Dar al-fikr 1981), 50.