

Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

The International Seminar on Malik Bennabi

Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Malaya
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Safar 22-25, 1412/September 1-4, 1991

This conference was the first international seminar in the Muslim world to focus on the thought of Malik Bennabi (1905-1973), an Algerian thinker known to English readers for his book *The Qur'anic Phenomenon*. It was organized by the University of Malaya, the Institute of Policy Research, and several other academic institutions. The seminar's patron was Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, the Malaysian minister of finance, a political activist and intellectual who has a great interest in Malik Bennabi's thought. The seminar's objectives were to generate a greater interest in Bennabi's ideas among Malaysian intellectuals and to highlight his impact on contemporary Muslim society.

The keynote and official address was given by Anwar Ibrahim. In his speech, he emphasized that while Muslims are faced with economic, political, and technological challenges, the most important challenge is the intellectual one, as this penetrates the deepest and has the strongest impact. Ideas which examine this challenge and investigate the static temperaments of our thinking process are urgently needed. Within this framework, "time has vindicated Bennabi's avowal that ideas are the catalysts behind the growth of civilization," for civilization is not an accumulation, as Bennabi maintains, but rather a construction and an architecture. In his concise speech, Anwar Ibrahim presented and elaborated on some of Bennabi's insights found in his *Islam in History and Sociology*, translated from the French *Vocation de l'Islam* by Asma Rashid of Pakistan. The second printing of his book, containing a forward by Anwar Ibrahim and published by Berita, was released during the seminar along with its translation into Bahasa Malayu, the Malaysian national language.

The afternoon session consisted of a special address by Abdullah Nasif, the secretary general of Rabitah. Nasif, who had met Bennabi in Cairo very briefly and became acquainted with his ideas later on, stated that these ideas as just as relevant to the condition of Muslims today as they were decades ago. He then highlighted some of Bennabi's speculations by addressing questions such as: Have we identified our dilemma? Are we making use of the trends interacting within the ummah such as those of the last twenty years of the Islamic awakening (*ṣaḥwah*)? Are we making plans for the future? Have we become capable of conducting research and moving from individual

work to teamwork? How much can we take from Western methodology and technology? These questions provoked many other questions and comments from the audience.

The first paper, entitled "Malik Bennabi and Muhammad Iqbal: A Comparison Study," was given by Asma Rashid. Her point of comparison between the two thinkers was the economic speculations in Iqbal's *Ilm al Iqtisād* (1903) and Bennabi's *al Muslim fī 'Ālam al Iqtisād* (1972). The paper concluded that Bennabi, who developed some of Iqbal's economic ideas into a theoretical framework, was the first to use the terminology "North" and "South" to explain the prevailing international economic disparity. His equation of will + power = civilization emphasizes social investment over economic investment. For him, economic dynamics should be conditioned by two axioms: a) Every mouth has the right to a morsel of bread and b) every arm has the duty to work. He also offered profound insights on how to distinguish between *ḥaq* (right) as a means of *istihlāk* (consumption) and *wājib* (obligation) as a tool of *intāj* (production). The social equation is positive if production exceeds consumption, but if the latter exceeds the former the social equation is definitely negative. If the latter condition were true, then the society in question would be labeled as decadent.

The second paper, entitled "The Implications of Malik Bennabi's Views on Contemporary Muslim Society," was presented by Abdul Rahman Doi, deputy dean of academic affairs at the International Islamic University of Malaysia, as its author, Dr. Ammar Talbi, an Algerian intellectual who had worked with Bennabi, was unable to attend. In his paper, Talbi explained Bennabi's theory of the three states (precivilization—civilization—post civilization) and his theory of the three ages (of the thing—of the person—of the idea). Muslim society, according to Bennabi, has expended a great deal of effort to reset itself in motion. Its takeoff, however, appears to be slow when compared with other societies like the Japanese and the Chinese. In his view, this slowness was caused by the absence of a preorganized plan of reform, an oversight which resulted in much time and energy being wasted. Consequently, the ummah's lack of ideas and intellectual productivity facilitated the adoption of everything available in the West, "even tastes and needs." A Muslim finds it easier to buy a refrigerator, for example, than to come up with the ideas needed to produce one. This shows that the Muslim world is still in its childhood, a stage characterized by being attracted more to "things" than to "ideas."

The morning session of the following day consisted of two papers. The first one, entitled "Bennabi's View of the Political-Cultural Crosscurrent Underlying the Contemporary State of Muslim Society," was presented by Zafar Ansari, director general of the Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan. In his paper, Ansari dealt with Bennabi's historical categorization

of the ummah since the rise of Islam to the recent era of post-al Muwaḥḥid-īn.¹ The reform movements led by al Afghānī, 'Abduh, Benbadis, and the modernists were analyzed by Bennabi in an attempt to address the question of mobilizing the ummah so that it could begin a new cycle of civilization. The paper explained how Bennabi considered the symptom of "colonisability" a historical necessity caused by inner weakness and decay, something our ummah has had to deal with even after achieving political independence.

The second paper, entitled "Reflections of Some of the Ideas and Thoughts of Malik Bennabi," was given by Muhammad Kamal Hassan, deputy director of the International Islamic University of Malaysia. Bennabi's significance, according to him, derives from his scientific training combined with a historical, sociological, and philosophical outlook which enabled him to fathom the roots of the European civilization and gain a deep understanding of its culture as well as from his original thinking and analysis of the ummah's strengths and weaknesses. His scope, therefore, ranged over social, political, economic, moral, and theological speculations. As for Bennabi's analysis of the ideological struggle (*al sirā' al fikrī*), Hassan concluded that "the invasion of anti-Islamic values, ideas and ideologies will undoubtedly continue in many forms and through many channels until the Muslim world is able to stand on its own feet in terms of technological know-how, intellectual and scientific creativity, moral strength and political stability."

The last segment of the morning session was a panel discussion on Bennabi's thought and its implications for contemporary Islamic movements. The scheduled participants were Mohd. Nor Manuty, president of the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia; Asma Rashid, Islamic Research Institute—Islamabad; and Rashid Benaisa, an Algerian intellectual, disciple, and friend of Bennabi. Unfortunately, the latter was unable to attend.

The afternoon session featured a paper by Osman Bakr, deputy dean of the Faculty of Science, University of Malaya, entitled "Malik Bennabi's Philosophy of Science." Bakr explained that even though none of Bennabi's works specifically dealt with the philosophy of science, elements of his philosophy may be gathered from his views on science's place and role in his conception of civilization. Basically, Bennabi poses the materialist view of the world as the primary cause of itself. He sees the debate as "between

¹Malik Bennabi viewed the fall of the North African/Spanish al Muwaḥḥid dynasty (1130-1269 CE) as "the fall of a civilization at the end of its breath." Thus Muslims who lived, and live, in the era of decadence that followed (even to the present) were termed by Bennabi as "post al Muwaḥḥid." He wrote: "Generally speaking, under whatever aspect he exists—*pāshā*, false 'ālim, false intellectual, or beggar—the post al Muwaḥḥid man is an essential component of all the problems of the Muslim world ever since the decline of its civilization . . ." Asma Rashid, trans., *Islam in History and Society* (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute, 1987), 14-5.

two religions: between theism and materialism, between the religion which has God as a basis and that which postulates matter as an absolute." A human being, according to Bennabi, is "essentially a religious animal." As a Muslim philosopher of science, Bennabi asserted that there is no necessary causal link between science and atheism. Science may, in fact, be integrated into any and all metaphysical systems. For Bennabi, the relationship between natural phenomenon and its metaphysical causes is embodied in the Qur'anic idea of *kun, fa yakum* (Be! And it is).

The last paper of the day was that of Abd al Sabur Shaheen, an Egyptian linguist who has translated eight of Bennabi's books into Arabic. His paper, entitled "Malik Bennabi's Impact on Muslim Society with Special Reference to the Middle East," dealt mainly with personal reflections on Bennabi as a person, writer, and thinker. The speech did not really touch upon Bennabi's impact on the Muslim society of the Middle East as the title indicated, but it is expected that the written paper will.

The last day of the seminar was reserved for two papers and the closing ceremony. The first paper, delivered by Fawzia Bariun of IIIT-USA, was entitled "Malik Bennabi and the Intellectual Problems of the Muslim Ummah." The paper dealt with Ibn Khaldūn's influence on Bennabi's view of the three stages of civilization (birth-peak-decline), his theory of the three stages (spiritual-rational-instinctive), and his three major elements of history and civilization (the realm of things—the realm of figures—the realm of ideas). The intellectual problems of Muslims, according to Bennabi, are embodied in a post-al Muwahhīdīn man who is "out of civilization" and unable to reenter its mainstream.

The paper classified the aspects of these intellectual problems as methodological, psychological, and sociocultural. According to Bennabi, the methodological aspect is reflected in referring to external enemies as the cause for decadence while ignoring internal weaknesses. Within the ummah, different problems have been arranged in preestablished categories such as poverty, illiteracy, and external occupation. On the psychological level, post-al Muwahhīd man holds a "sick soul" shaped in an atmosphere saturated with moral, social, philosophical, and political bankruptcy. On the sociocultural level, the intellectual problem is mainly seen in the absence of what Bennabi called the cultural communication network (*shabakat al 'alāqāt al thaqā-fīyah*) as well as in the absence of efficacy (*fā'iliyah*).

The last paper, entitled "Malik Bennabi's Contribution to Islamic Social Theory" and presented by Muhammad Tahir al Misawie, a graduate student at the International Islamic University of Malaysia, explained how Bennabi rejected the concept of primitive culture and primitive civilization as expounded upon mainly in ethnographic and anthropological literature. As a group of human individuals, society begins its evolution driven by a sacred ideal or

belief which acts as a catalyzer. However, when humanity "loses the 'civilizing élan,' it also loses the thirst to understand and the will to act." This is the end of a cycle, and the departure of civilization to another place to take on a new biohistorical synthesis is soon underway.

The closing ceremony took place in the afternoon and was attended by Dato Raja Ariffin Raja Sulaiman, the deputy minister in the prime minister's department. After the speeches by the chairman of the organizing committee and the vice chancellor of the University of Malaya, the closing speech was given by the deputy minister. He congratulated the participants and the audience on the success of the seminar and encouraged more intellectual efforts of such a caliber to assist the ummah in performing its mission in history.

Fawzia Bariun
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Abstract
The article discusses the role of the Islamic community in the development of a new biohistorical synthesis. It highlights the importance of intellectual efforts and the role of the ummah in performing its mission in history. The author, Fawzia Bariun, is affiliated with the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan.