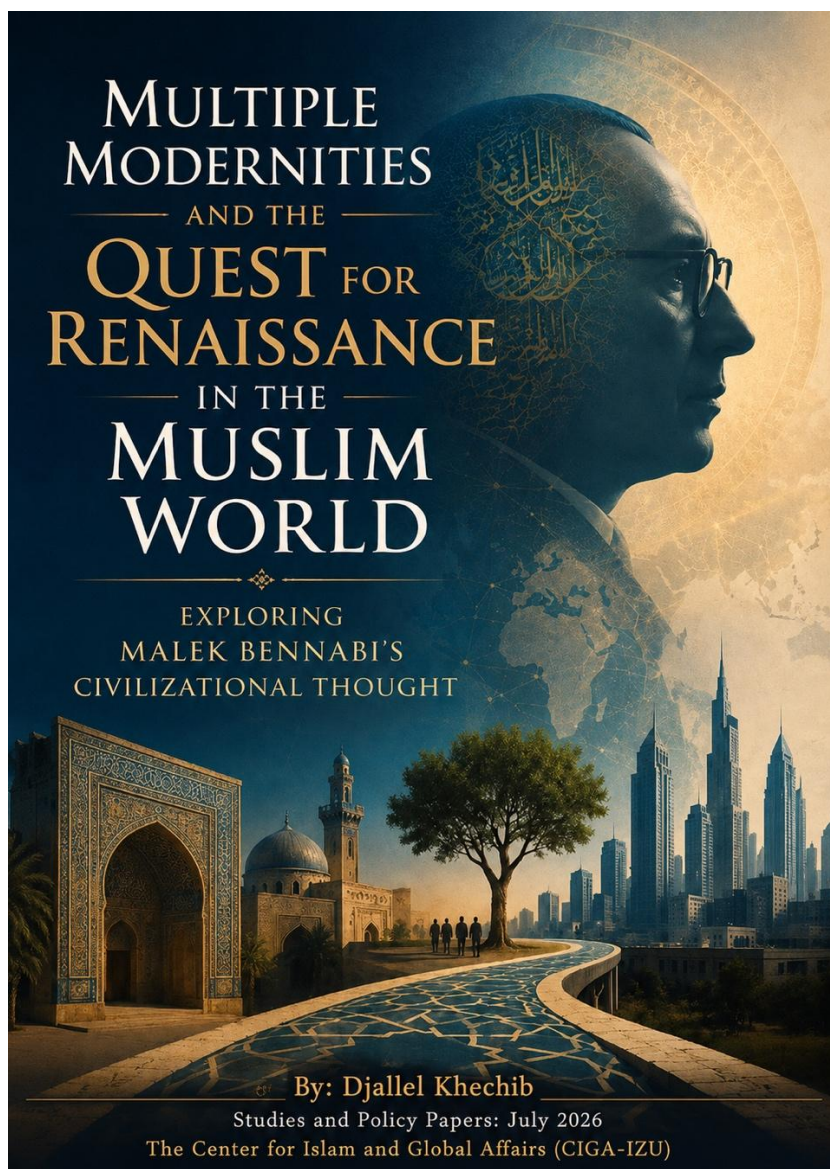


## Multiple Modernities and the Quest for Renaissance in the Muslim World:

*Exploring Malek Bennabi's Civilizational Thought*



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### **Abstract:**

This paper explores Malek Bennabi’s theoretical contribution to the paradigm of multiple modernities, offering a civilizational perspective deeply rooted in the historical, geographical, and cultural context of the Muslim world. Distinct from the Western experience, Bennabi envisions the possibility of an alternative path to modernity—one that reflects the unique conditions, values, and developmental logic of Islamic civilization. The paper highlights Bennabi’s critical role in diagnosing the intellectual problems facing Muslim societies and his engagement with the controversial debates triggered by Western modernity within the Muslim world, particularly around issues such as religion and culture, authenticity and modernity, and colonialism and Westernization, among others.

**Keywords:** *Malek Bennabi, Modernity, Multiple Modernities, Civilizational Renaissance*

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## **Introduction:**

Modernity has long occupied a central place in intellectual debates concerning the path to progress, renaissance, social transformation, and historical change. Traditionally, it has been closely associated with the Western experience and regarded as a universal model that all societies must adopt to overcome stagnation and underdevelopment, and to achieve meaningful human advancement. However, the growing recognition of cultural pluralism and the multiplicity of historical trajectories, especially in the aftermath of the Cold War, has challenged this singular, Eurocentric conception. In response, the concept of “multiple” or “alternative modernities” has emerged, marking a significant theoretical shift. Modernity is no longer understood as a monolithic Western project, but rather as a plurality of developmental paths shaped by the specific cultural, historical, and civilizational contexts of different societies.

Within this broader rethinking, the Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi stands out as an early and pioneering voice who offered a civilizational perspective on an alternative modernity for the Muslim world. Deeply rooted in the historical, geographical, and cultural specificities of his context, Bennabi envisioned a path to modernity distinct from the Western trajectory, one that would reflect the internal dynamics, values, and logic of development inherent to Islamic civilization.

This paper examines Bennabi’s contribution to conceptualizing such an alternative path. It explores this issue through his diagnosis of the intellectual and structural challenges facing Muslim societies, his articulation of the conditions necessary for a civilizational renaissance, and his vision of what a culturally grounded modernity might look like. The paper also situates Bennabi within the broader intellectual debates provoked by Western modernity in the Muslim world, particularly those related to religion and culture, authenticity and modernity, and colonialism and Westernization. Ultimately, it asks if Malek Bennabi succeed in offering a genuinely distinct and viable vision of modernity and renaissance in the Muslim world, one that moves beyond the Eurocentric paradigm established over the past centuries.

## **I. On Modernity and Multiple Modernity:**

This section briefly outlines the concept of multiple/alternative modernities and how it departs from classical understandings of modernity and modernization.

### **1. Modernity and Modernization: Concepts and Origins:**

Modernity is not merely a historical period that began in the seventeenth century, marked by sweeping social transformations. It also represents a particular worldview that emerged from the Enlightenment and positivist thought, which propelled Western Europe forward by making an epistemological break with its own past. At its core, modernity is grounded in the belief in reason and empirical observation as the primary sources of knowledge, rather than religion or tradition. Modern knowledge is constructed through observation, experimentation, and scientific verification, and it is evaluated by its practical outcomes rather than its antiquity or sacredness. Doubt, rather than faith, becomes the foundation of epistemology. Consequently, a range of concepts has come to embody the key features of modernity, including: progress, science as a substitute for faith, the centrality of the human being—through reason and the senses—in the universe, positivism, the experimental sciences, rationalism, secularism, individualism, humanism, liberal democracy, institutionalism, capitalism, and technological advancement. These elements collectively form the pillars of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

The scholar Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar argues that modernity originated in the West under specific socio-historical conditions. It did not emerge abruptly, but rather evolved gradually, with its consciousness forming step by step through civilizational interactions. Its transmission initially occurred through trade, and its features later spread across the globe through global media, migration, capital flows, and other mechanisms of globalization.<sup>2</sup>

Modernization, by contrast, refers to the process by which societies transition from traditional or less developed institutions to those characteristic of more advanced, industrialized societies, particularly in terms of industrialization, urbanization, and rational administration. Until the late twentieth century, modernization was widely viewed as a uniquely Western trajectory, and one that non-Western societies could only follow by abandoning their traditional cultures and

assimilating Western technological and moral frameworks that were deemed to be universally superior.<sup>3</sup>

At its core, the dominant conceptions of modernity and modernization presuppose a single, universal path to intellectual and material progress: one modeled on the Western historical experience.<sup>4</sup> This effectively equates Western modernity with modernity itself, casting it as the normative blueprint for all societies. As a result, Western Europe is positioned as both the center and the intellectual, moral, and material standard of reference for the rest of the world.

## 2. Multiple Modernities: Beyond the Eurocentric Paradigm:

The theory of multiple modernities, or alternative modernities, as developed by Shmuel Eisenstadt, offers a direct and critical challenge to the Eurocentric assumption that modernity must follow a single, universal trajectory derived from the Western historical experience. Instead, Eisenstadt proposes that modernity is not a monolith but a constellation of diverse paths that have emerged across different societies, shaped by their distinct cultural frameworks and historical contexts. While these paths may share certain foundational features of modernity, such as institutionalism and rationalization, they have taken varied and context-specific forms. Western modernity, though influential, has not been simply replicated. Rather, non-Western societies have reinterpreted and localized modernity's meanings and structures, producing their own distinct institutional and ideological configurations that are modern but not Western.

At the core of this theoretical shift lies the critical distinction between modernity and Westernization. Eisenstadt underscores that modernity is not synonymous with Western cultural hegemony. Social actors, intellectual movements, and political forces within non-Western contexts have played a crucial role in reconstructing modernity according to their own priorities and values. This has led to the emergence of multiple modernities, forms of modernity that are globally engaged yet deeply rooted in local civilizational traditions.<sup>5</sup>

Eisenstadt further notes that the movements of multiple modernities are marked by a high degree of self-awareness. They reformulate the question of modernity within new historical settings and seek to expand globally through a variety of media, particularly in the context of accelerating globalization.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, in Eisenstadt's view, some formulations of alternative modernity, especially those emerging from contemporary religious or communal movements, engage in a selective and intensive rejection of certain core tenets of modernity. These movements often adopt a confrontational stance not only toward the West but also toward anything perceived as Western. They aspire to appropriate modernity and participate in the global order on their own terms, frequently in ways that are explicitly anti-Western. Their objective is not to assimilate into a new dominant civilization, but rather to reshape the global stage and redefine modernity in

alignment with their own traditions and civilizational narratives. They consciously reject the Western cultural program as the ideal model of modernity.<sup>7</sup>

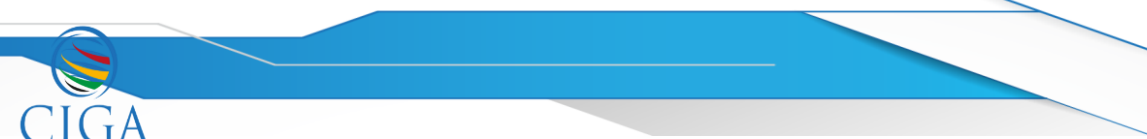
In the wake of the global rise of new powers such as China, India, and Türkiye, especially since the late twentieth century, and amid the growing prominence of civilizational discourses, the theory of multiple modernities has become a powerful tool for understanding how societies like Japan, India, Türkiye, and Iran have pursued their own modernizing trajectories without blindly replicating the Western model. These cases demonstrate that modernity is not a singular historical condition but a pluralistic phenomenon that continuously interacts with and adapts to diverse civilizational inheritances.

This perspective has been further advanced by notable scholars who challenge Europe's centrality and underscore the plurality of modernities. Among them is Dipesh Chakrabarty, who stresses the need to understand the experiences of the Global South on their own terms, without imposing the European model. He argues that every transition to modernity represents a localized "translation" of modernity that is shaped by specific cultural and historical contexts.<sup>8</sup>

Gurminder Bhambra, meanwhile, has worked to dismantle the notion of European centrality in interpreting modernity, stressing that modernity is formed across diverse contexts. She contends that the myth that positions Europe as the ultimate cultural benchmark is a narrative that can be thoroughly challenged and disproven through rigorous scholarly research.<sup>9</sup>

Anthony Giddens also challenges the notion of a singular European model of modernity, conceptualizing modernity as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon that emerges within dynamic global frameworks. He advocates adopting the plural term "modernities" to more accurately capture the diverse social transformations occurring across various cultures.<sup>10</sup>

Within this same framework, several notable figures stand out, such as Daryush Shayegan, Hamid Dabashi, Arjun Appadurai, Jane and John Comaroff, as well as, more indirectly, Amitav Acharya, and Barry Buzan, among others.



Thus, the theory of multiple modernities provides a vital conceptual framework for deconstructing Eurocentric narratives and reimagining progress, renaissance, and modernization as a pluralistic, historically contingent, and culturally embedded process.

## **II. Alternative Modernity in Muslim World: Malik Bennabi's Approach:**

Against the backdrop of colonial domination and intellectual stagnation that characterized Algeria and much of the Muslim world throughout the twentieth century, Malek Bennabi (1905–1973) emerged as one of the most influential Muslim thinkers to articulate a vision for civilizational renewal. He offered a penetrating critique of the Muslim world's historical decline and developed a comprehensive framework for renaissance grounded in ethical and intellectual reform. This section examines Bennabi's early contributions to what would later be conceptualized as an "alternative modernity," offering a distinctive approach to reconceptualizing modernity from within the epistemological and civilizational foundations of the Islamic tradition.

### **1. On Malek Bennabi: The Intellectual and Political Context of His Era and the Foundations of His Thought:**

Malek Bennabi was an Algerian philosopher and reformist thinker who spent much of his life in France, where he pursued his higher education and authored most of his works in French. Deeply influenced in his youth by the Islamic reform movement led by Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis, and Ibn Khaldun's philosophy of history, Bennabi developed a wide-ranging intellectual vision informed by both Islamic and Western thought. His work reflects an encyclopedic grasp of philosophy, sociology, and history, all of which converge in his civilizational analysis.<sup>11</sup>

In his autobiographical work, "Memoirs of a Witness to the Century", Bennabi reflects on French colonialism's destructive impact, particularly its role in dismantling Algerian society's moral and social foundations<sup>12</sup> through the imposition of what Hamid Dabashi would later term "colonial modernity."<sup>13</sup> This experience fostered in Bennabi a resistant consciousness and a reformist impulse oriented toward the revival of Algeria and the broader Muslim world through a comprehensive rethinking of culture, religion, and progress.

Bennabi's ideas emerged during a critical historical juncture for the Muslim world, following the disruptions and aspirations sparked by the Islamic reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The intellectual legacy of figures such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani had introduced a new era of questioning and self-reflection among Muslims.<sup>14</sup> Yet, Bennabi was critical of this reformist tradition. He argued that its efforts remained fragmented—focusing narrowly on political reform (as in Afghani's activism) or theological renewal (as in Muhammad Abduh's work)—while neglecting cultural reform and overlooking decline's deeper cultural and epistemic dimensions. In Bennabi's view, the ineffectiveness of the reform movement stemmed from its failure to translate religion's social function into actions. The movement's glorification of the past, he argued, disconnected its ideas from contemporary realities and rendered them inert. Reform efforts, he believed, had remained incomplete due to an insufficient diagnosis of the Muslim world's civilizational crisis.<sup>15</sup>

Bennabi proposed a more integrated and systemic approach. He criticized earlier reformers for what he called their fragmented problem-solving, rooted in three fundamental shortcomings: “the absence of a clearly defined goal for renaissance, an inaccurate diagnosis of the problems at hand, and a failure to align the means with both the intended outcomes and the actual capacities available.”<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Bennabi's intellectual project presents a multidimensional framework that links theoretical analysis with practical application, grounded in a close reading of socio-historical reality.<sup>17</sup> Importantly, Bennabi's vision was not limited by parochial or national concerns. His thought was marked by a global humanistic orientation. While addressing issues pertinent to the Islamic world, he consistently framed them within broader civilizational and universal contexts.<sup>18</sup>

Bennabi authored over twenty-four works, many of which were organized under the influential series “Problems of Civilization”. Among his most notable titles are “The Conditions of the Renaissance”, “The Qur’anic Phenomenon”, “The Problem of Culture”, and “The Problem of Ideas in the Muslim World”.<sup>19</sup> His writings profoundly shaped subsequent generations of Muslim intellectuals. The historian Imad al-Din Khalil (1939), for instance, noted that works such as *The Qur’anic Phenomenon*, *The Conditions of the Renaissance*, and *The Direction of the Islamic World* played a pivotal role in shaping the intellectual foundations of the

contemporary Islamic revivalist movement.<sup>20</sup> As such, Malek Bennabi may be considered one of the foundational figures of modern Arab-Islamic thought and a leading voice in the intellectual and liberationist movements that sought to reimagine the future of the Muslim world.

## **2. Theoretical Analysis: “Bennabi's Alternative Modernity” and the Conditions of Renaissance:**

Malek Bennabi’s intellectual project stands as part of a broader tradition concerned with diagnosing the condition of civilization—particularly Islamic civilization—in order to analyze its foundational structures, identify its internal dysfunctions, and understand the factors behind its stagnation, decline, and potential for renewal. His work aimed to uncover both the forces that have historically driven civilizations, especially Islamic ones, toward flourishing (modernity), and those that have precipitated their collapse. From this analytical effort emerged Bennabi’s theory of civilizational revival and a vision of modernity rooted not in Western paradigm, but in Islam’s ethical, spiritual, and epistemological framework, and in accordance with the historical and cultural specificities of Muslim societies.

### **2.1. The Religious Impulse in History's Movement and the Birth of Civilization:**

Epistemologically, Bennabi advanced a distinctive theory on the philosophy of history, positioning himself within the tradition of civilizational theorists, a lineage that includes Ibn Khaldun, Arnold Toynbee, and Oswald Spengler. Civilizational theorists tend to think of civilizations as rising and falling in a cyclical pattern in contrast to the linear conception of history associated with thinkers such as Karl Marx and G.W.F. Hegel. While the cyclical model likens the rise and fall of civilizations to a revolving wheel where history loops back on itself, the linear model sees history as a straight path with a fixed trajectory, culminating in a definitive endpoint, which Francis Fukuyama famously dubbed “the end of history.”<sup>21</sup> Modernist and modernization theorists have largely adhered to the linear paradigm, positing a singular, idealized path to societal progress modeled after the Western experience. Bennabi, however, rejects this universalist, teleological model.

In analyzing the trajectory of Islamic civilization and identifying the conditions for its renaissance/modernity, he argues that the crisis of any given society is fundamentally a crisis of its civilization. No society, he contends, can resolve its problems without first raising its consciousness to a level where it can grasp the broader dynamics of human history, particularly the forces that either construct or dismantle civilizations. For Bennabi, history is not merely a sequence of events, but rather a social movement propelled by psychological energy, what he

terms the impulse of the spirit. This inner drive is fueled by faith, which animates the individual and serves as the primary engine of historical transformation. At the heart of this spiritual dynamism lies the religious idea, which refers to any belief system that instills conviction, purpose, and collective meaning. Just as communism functioned as a quasi-religious idea for communists, other ideologies can likewise serve this generative role.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, Bennabi elevates the religious impulse to a core explanatory factor in civilizational development; one that is either ignored or actively dismissed by Western models of modernity.

Bennabi contends that every civilization experiences two births. The first occurs with the emergence of a formative religious (or ideological) idea, while the second marks the moment this idea takes root in human consciousness and begins to shape historical events. Civilization, in his view, unfolds in cycles—each defined by a specific psychological and social configuration, typically initiated by a spiritual or moral awakening. The life cycle of a civilization is marked by three stages: birth, expansion, and eventual decline.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, Bennabi insists that civilization is not merely an accumulation of elements that enable progress. It is a harmonious synthesis of interconnected elements; meanings and things consciously organized around a unifying purpose. He expresses this idea in the form of a well-known equation: **Civilization = Man (Insan) + Soil (Turab) + Time (Waqf)**, with **the religious idea** serving as the condition that binds and activates these three elements. This is not a mechanical summation of discrete parts, but rather a directed integration, a process in which the components are harmonized through the orienting power of a foundational idea, giving rise to a civilization that serves human flourishing in its fullest sense.<sup>24</sup>

To fully grasp this framework, one must understand the interaction among what Bennabi calls the “Three Realms”: the realm of ideas (*Alamu Al-Afkar*), the realm of objects (*Alamu Al-Ashyaa*), and the realm of persons (*Alamu Al-Ashkhas*).

## 2.2. The Question of the Three Realms:

In Bennabi's theory, ideas occupy a foundational role in the dynamics of societal development. Importantly, ideas here does not refer to abstract ideas in isolation, but rather to ideas that have entered the realm of historical action, that is, those that are capable of generating transformation, whether constructive or destructive. Ideas, in this sense, have a central function in orienting the individual, society, state, and civilization. For Bennabi, a society's richness or poverty is measured not by its material assets, but by the ideas it possesses. A society in crisis must begin its reform by revisiting its relationship to the realm of ideas. As he writes, "Every time we are confronted with a symptom of ineffectiveness in Muslim society, we are compelled to trace it back to our realm of ideas—for it is there that our remedy resides."<sup>25</sup>

In his analysis of the historical movement of societies, Bennabi argues that every society is animated by the interplay of three fundamental realms. "The realm of objects" provides the tools of action, while "the realm of persons" provide the ends to society, and "the realm of ideas" provides its intellectual-ideological orientation. These three realms are the essential elements of historical movement. When a society takes shape, it gives rise to a fourth realm—what Bennabi calls "the network of social relations"—which he considers society's first and natural product at the moment of its civilizational birth.<sup>26</sup>

Bennabi further classifies "the realm of ideas" into distinct categories: "Positive ideas" (subdivided into "genuine ideas" and "effective-operative ideas"), and "Negative ideas", (which include "dead ideas" and "fatal ideas"). He calls on societies to critically evaluate the ideas they internalize and circulate—distinguishing between "genuine" yet "ineffective ideas", and between "dead ideas" and "fatal ideas" that may be obsolete or detrimental. For example, outdated traditions, rigid political structures, or imported ideas may inhibit a society's progress. Societies must therefore engage in a process of intellectual purification, retaining only those ideas that are genuine, vital, and effective. In this sense, Bennabi offers a normative framework for identifying the intellectual content necessary for civilizational renewal.<sup>27</sup>

For him, the function of civilization cannot be fulfilled unless a society is guided by "living-vital ideas" that shape both political and economic action through sound development plans.

Thus, the root of civilizational crises often lies in “the realm of ideas”, not in “the realms of objects or persons”. For Bennabi, any dysfunction in the realms of persons or objects is, ultimately, a symptom of a prior failure in the realm of ideas. He insists that the point of departure for any genuine civilizational project must begin with a transformation in the “realm of ideas”, which in turn reconfigures the realm of persons. Bennabi writes, “In the realm of ideas within society, there is a hierarchy: some ideas transform the human being, while others transform material objects. The former prepare human vitality for the civilizational threshold; the latter adapt material resources to meet civilizational needs in later phases of development.”<sup>28</sup>

Bennabi conceives of civilizational birth as sparked by a spiritual idea that resonates deeply within the individual’s soul. This generates what he calls “inner tension”, a form of existential urgency that motivates human beings to translate the spiritual idea into reality. As the idea becomes institutionalized, the realms of persons and objects become balanced during what Bennabi calls “the rational phase”, wherein the idea is transmitted and operationalized. However, over time, this inner tension weakens. Eventually, the realm of objects begins to dominate the idea, bending it to its own logic. This marks the final stage of civilizational decline, which Bennabi terms the “instinctual phase”—a state where thought loses its efficacy in shaping social action. Despite this cyclical decline, Bennabi remains committed to the possibility of renewal. His entire intellectual project is predicated on the belief that societies can re-enter the civilizational cycle by diagnosing and correcting the distortions within their conceptual frameworks.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, Bennabi distinguishes between “impressed ideas” (Al-Afkaru Al-Matbuaa), and “expressed ideas” (Al-Afkaru Al-Mawduaa). In his analysis, ideas remain effective in propelling societal movement as long as they are tied to their ideal models—the archetypes that serve as molds through which the various aspects of social activity are formed and embedded within society. Over time, however, these molds become deformed, and the ideas produced through them appear as faded reflections of their original models. The former, the original, foundational patterns, are what Bennabi refers to as “impressed ideas”, while the latter, the weakened and increasingly detached versions, are what he calls “expressed ideas.” This divergence between the two kinds of ideas introduced by successive generations represents a

betrayal of the former by the latter. As a result, society's intellectual and practical life becomes subject to the retribution of the original "impressed ideas" against the deviant "expressed" ones. While the effects of such retribution may be immediately visible and tangible in material domains—like a poorly designed bridge collapsing when its structure is flawed—societies too may face collapse in similar fashion, even if the signs are not as visibly apparent. Indeed, the great disasters of history are, Bennabi suggests, in essence the outcome of authentic ideas exacting their revenge after they were abandoned and betrayed.<sup>30</sup>

The root cause of decay, therefore, lies in ideas becoming disconnected from their "ideal models". When a society loses its "impressed ideas", and its "'expressed ideas" become shapeless, disordered, and ineffective, it enters a stage where ideas die, minds are empty, and language becomes powerless. At this point, society regresses to a state of intellectual childhood. Strange phenomena begin to surface, mechanisms through which society attempts to compensate for its intellectual deficiency with pale substitutes.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear from the aforementioned that Malek Bennabi placed great emphasis on the role of "genuine ideas" and "effective-operative ideas" in transforming society and civilization, diagnosing its ailments, and even in understanding its rise and decline. In most of his works, he stresses the vital importance of culture and the moral-intellectual dimensions of civilization, consistently granting primacy to the "realm of ideas" over the realms of objects and persons. For Bennabi, a society's wealth is "not measured by what it possesses in terms of material things, but by the richness of its ideas." Thus, even if the "realm of objects" collapses as a result of some catastrophe, ideas do not perish with it; rather, they remain capable of reconstructing it. Bennabi illustrates this with the example of post-World War II Germany, where the nation's cultural and intellectual vitality rose to the challenge and successfully rebuilt its realm of objects.<sup>32</sup>

### 2.3. The Cycle of Civilization and Desired Alternative Modernity:

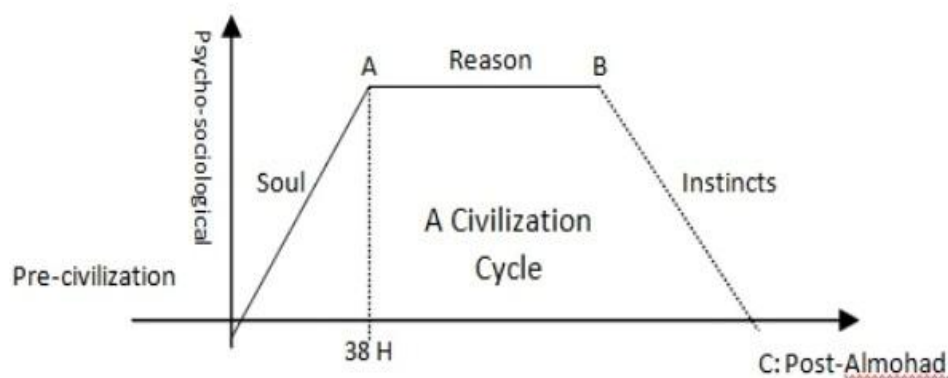
Based on his conception of the three realms and his analysis of the realms of ideas, Malek Bennabi argues that Arab-Muslim society has passed through three distinct stages since the advent of Islam: the “pre-civilizational stage,” the “civilizational stage,” and the “post-civilizational stage.” In the pre-civilizational phase, society lived in a primitive, pre-Islamic state (*Jahiliya*) marked by a limited repertoire of ideas and objects. Its cultural world revolved around simple objects (such as the tent, the bow, the sword, and the horse), and a restricted realm of persons (the tribe). The realm of ideas too was modest, consisting mainly of a few poetic verses and tribal speeches. This phase lasted until the first word of divine revelation “*Iqra*” (“Read”), which encountered empty (innate) souls and awakened within them a vital energy that changed the course of history. It birthed a new world in which objects and persons were reoriented around new, living ideas. It is here that the process of civilization, or the civilizational stage, begins. From Bennabi’s perspective, all major societal transformations, whether economic, political, or moral, ultimately stem from psychological forces triggered by the religious idea, which alone has the power to bring about profound historical change.<sup>33</sup>

Bennabi applies his theory of change to the historical dynamics of Muslim society following its entry into the civilizational phase, arguing that it passed through three major phases:

- **The Stage of the Spirit:** This began with the revelation, during which there was a deep harmony between the realm of persons (e.g., the Muhājirūn and the Anṣār) and the realm of ideas (the divine revelation). This synergy enabled society to generate a realm of objects, complete its network of social relations, and subordinate instinct to the imperatives of the spirit. Human energy reached its peak and was directed toward serving society in a way that fulfilled the social function of religious belief.
- **The Stage of Reason (Mind):** As a product of the previous stage, this phase marked the material expansion and spread of civilization. However, new challenges emerged, as wealth (especially the spoils of war) began to accumulate, competition for material gain intensified, and luxury crept in. Instincts began to loosen as the influence of the spirit waned. While the spirit still held some sway, its authority was no longer as powerful as in the first phase.

- **The Stage of Instinct:** Here, the weakening of spiritual power reaches a critical point. Luxury and instinct dominate, and the realms of persons and ideas become subservient to the realm of objects. The social function of the religious idea fades, and belief is reduced to a form of individual salvation, e.g., through mystical or Sufi practices. This manifests in what Bennabi described as the phenomenon of sectarianism and passive mysticism.<sup>34</sup>

Bennabi dates the “spiritual stage” of Islamic civilization from the the Revelation of Prophethood to the year 38 AH /658 CE—marked by the Battle of Saffin between Ali Ibn Abī Tālib and Mu‘āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān. The “rational phase” follows, extending to the fall of the Almohad dynasty—roughly the period after Ibn Khaldūn, around 667 AH/1268 CE. The “instinctual phase” begins from that point onward and continues to the present day. This does not mean that any of these phases is completely devoid of the other elements, rather that one factor tends to dominate and characterizes the general nature of the period.<sup>35</sup> According to Bennabi, the Muslim world has existed outside the civilizational cycle since the 13th century CE. If it wishes to return to this cycle and achieve a true renaissance, it must realign itself with the key factors laid out in the civilizational equation. Bennabi visually explains this through the following graph:



Graph illustrating Malek Bennabi’s theory of the civilizational cycle in Islamic history.<sup>36</sup>

Before concluding this section, it is important to highlight a key concept employed by Bennabi in his historical explanation of the rise and decline of Islamic civilization (or its modern trajectory): the concept of “la colonisabilité” or colonizability, i.e. receptivity to colonization. By this, Bennabi refers to the Islamic world’s internal state after the fall of the Almohads—marked by numerous social and psychological pathologies that gave rise to a submissive collective mentality. This internal predisposition—psychological, social, and cultural—paved the way for colonial domination.<sup>37</sup>

Colonialism, Bennabi argued, does not arise solely from the power of the colonizer; it also stems from a void within the colonized society, a collapse in internal structure that renders it vulnerable to subjugation. This “colonizability” is the product of a diminished civilizational consciousness, a lack of individual and collective dignity, and the erosion of moral and ethical foundations. It also results from social inertia manifested in dependence, passivity, and reliance on others, and from the abdication of reason, marked by the death of critical thought and the absence of civilizational initiative. Bennabi thus viewed colonizability as a grave civilizational disease—one that not only welcomes the colonizer but even justifies his presence and continues to reproduce.

### 3. Practical Lessons from Japan: Malek Bennabi's Rethinking of Tradition and Modernity in the Islamic Context:

The questions of modernity and alternative modernity—including debates around religion, secularism, modernization, and Westernization—emerge in Bennabi's writings under closely related themes. These include his discussions of the civilizational renaissance and its tensions between authenticity (tradition and heritage) and modernity (renewal and reform), as well as his reflections on the foundational requirements, principles, and references of such a renaissance, whether in Algeria or the broader Islamic world. As previously mentioned, Bennabi proceeds from an Islamic epistemological framework. He grounds any civilizational transformation or "alternative modernity" in verse 11 of Surah al-Ra'd: *"Indeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."* According to him, this verse establishes inner self-transformation at the level of individuals and their ideas as the primary foundation for any civilizational revival. This transformation in the "realm of ideas" begins with the spiritual impulse or religious component offered by revelation to the "Islamic ummah", namely the Qur'an and the Prophetic Sunnah.<sup>38</sup>

There is, according to Bennabi, an epistemological linkage between religion as a moral, educational, and spiritual source and the civilizational renaissance (alternative modernity) of the Muslim world and the way of life it should adopt. Thus, he identifies the gradual weakening and eventual disappearance of the original spiritual impulse that birthed Islamic civilization as the principal cause of its collapse and exit from the cycle of history. He argues that there can be no return to the civilizational cycle except through another spiritual impulse provided by religion.

In this regard, Bennabi stands in direct contrast to Arab secular thinkers such as Abdallah Al-Arrawi in Morocco, who argues that the Muslim world's revival requires an epistemological rupture between its heritage and its present, advocating secularism as the only viable path to modernity. Bennabi, by contrast, rejects secularism as a worldview and as a method for organizing life in general. He regards it as a flawed idea imported from Western thought, a form of "fatal ideas" foreign to the Muslim context and that obstruct genuine progress and must be discarded for true modernity to emerge.<sup>39</sup>

In my view, this makes Bennabi one of the earliest pioneers of the concept of "Islamic modernity" as later developed by many contemporary thinkers, chief among them his fellow North African Taha Abderrahmane. Nonetheless, Bennabi does not oppose drawing beneficial insights from the West—its ideas, technologies, scientific knowledge, and forms of governance. What he opposes are the so-called "imported" or "fatal ideas" that originate in Western contexts and conflict with the cultural particularities of Muslim societies.

- **What the Muslim World Can Learn from Japan's Path to Modernity:**

Malek Bennabi offers the Japanese model of renaissance and modernity as a practical example for the Muslim world that embodies his vision. Japan, according to him, succeeded in benefiting from the achievements of Western modernity while preserving its own cultural foundations, merging both in a way that led to the miracle of its renaissance during the Meiji era, starting in 1868.

Bennabi sees the turning point in Japanese history as beginning with the country's forced opening to the West under pressure from the American Commodore Matthew Perry in 1854. This event revealed Japan's military and technological backwardness, which in turn motivated a critical reassessment of its internal conditions. Indeed, Colonialism, Bennabi argues, can sometimes have a positive effect in awakening stagnant societies. Japan responded forcefully to this "challenge" (in a way that echoes Toynbee's theory of "challenge and response"), which resulted in a popular movement that overthrew the "shogunate" and inaugurated a new imperial era. This era sought to restore national sovereignty and centered political life around a "moral principle" and the dignity of the Japanese people. Bennabi insists that this revolution would not have been possible without the presence of a national psyche devoid of what he calls the "colonizability complex"—unlike what prevails in many Muslim societies, which suffer from a deep-rooted colonizability. Japan, in contrast, embodied a collective will driven by national awareness, led by what Toynbee describes as a "creative minority" — one animated by consciousness and a belief in the necessity of change.<sup>40</sup>

Bennabi also highlights the importance of breaking with "dead ideas" in the Japanese experience—ideas that paralyze social dynamism, such as insularity and attachment to rigid

class traditions. These were replaced with “living ideas” that promoted equality, individual efficacy, and modernization. In this context, Bennabi draws attention to the foundational role played by the “Kokutai” (national essence) doctrine which functioned as the equivalent of a religious or spiritual impetus. “Kokutai” sanctified both the land and the emperor and laid the basis for a customary legitimacy founded on absolute loyalty and sacrifice for the nation and its leadership. The Emperor was seen as a benevolent father, and the people were to respond to him with filial respect. This vision is deeply rooted in Japanese culture, heavily influenced by Confucian ideals, which emphasize compassion, mutual respect, and social harmony. Simultaneously, Japan abandoned certain "dead ideas" introduced by Buddhist thought, particularly those that entrenched rigid social hierarchies, thereby paving the way for the dominance of "living ideas," foremost among them the principle of equality.<sup>41</sup>

These intellectual and social transformations created an environment conducive to creativity and individual productivity, based on the belief that each person is personally responsible for contributing to the nation’s renaissance, not by delegation, but through actual participation. All of this unfolded in complete harmony between enduring cultural values and the demands of modern life. Thus, Japan’s engagement with the West was this time both conscious and selective. It did not sacrifice national sovereignty or cultural identity, but rather harnessed modernity as a means toward national renaissance.

Bennabi concludes that Japan’s success lies in the liberation of thought before the liberation of territory. Genuine renaissance, he argues, requires first the dismantling of the structures of backwardness in both mind and society, and the abandonment of dead ideas. As Nietzsche asserts, the prerequisite for human life is to free oneself from things that are dying.<sup>42</sup>

## Conclusion:

Malek Bennabi's thought highlights the importance of reexamining dominant conceptions of modernity, particularly in non-Western contexts, where modernity cannot be reduced to a single model born from the European historical experience. Bennabi laid, from an early stage, the groundwork for an alternative civilizational approach that addresses the conditions for renaissance within the Muslim world through a perspective that transcends the binary of tradition and Westernization. His analysis is grounded in a structural reading of the Islamic reality, articulated through a rigorous conceptual arsenal such as "colonizability," "the realm of ideas," "the realm of persons," "the realm of objects," as well as distinctions between "genuine/living ideas", "effective-operative ideas, and "dead and fatal ideas."

In this light, Bennabi's thought intersects with the paradigm of "multiple/alternative modernities," particularly in its critique of the centrality of the Western model and its affirmation of the possibility of diverse paths to modernity—paths shaped by the historical, cultural, and civilizational specificities of each society. His intellectual project stands as an early attempt to reconstruct modernity through an Islamic referential framework without falling into orthodox traditionalism or uncritical mimicry of the West. Instead, Bennabi envisions a dynamic conception of renaissance, one capable of engaging with the epistemological, social, and political complexities of the postcolonial era.

Revisiting Bennabi's vision in today's debates on modernity and renaissance offers a pathway to developing a critical understanding of modernity in Islamic contexts. It also enables a reframing of the relationship between Islam and modernity within a renewed civilizational horizon—one grounded not in imitation, but in the conscious and thoughtful reappropriation of values and knowledge.

## Footnotes:

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2. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (ed.), [Alternative Modernities](#), Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1999, 1.
3. Ronald Inglehart and Wayne E. Baker, "[Modernization, Cultural Change, and the Persistence of Traditional Values](#)," *American Sociological Review* vol. 65, No. 1, 2000, 19.
4. Or what I term the "Ideal Society of Happiness," representing the ultimate culmination of humanity's quest for the perfect model of life. Karl Marx envisioned this ideal in the communist society; Friedrich Hegel saw it in the liberal society ushered in by the French Revolution; and Francis Fukuyama expressed it as the "end of history," referring to the liberal capitalist society exemplified by the American model at the conclusion of the Cold War.
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8. See: Dipesh Chakrabarty, [Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference](#), Princeton University Press, 2000.
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17. Ibid.

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23. Ibid.
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27. Malek Bennabi, **The Problem of Ideas in the Muslim World**, op. cit. 146-152.
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**Dr. Djallel Khechib** is a researcher specializing in geopolitics and international relations. Since 2020, he has served as a Research Fellow at the Center for Islam and Global Affairs (CIGA) at Istanbul Sabahattin Zaim University, Türkiye. He holds a Ph.D. in Asian Studies and International Relations from the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations at the University of Algiers 3.

Khechib completed his third Master's degree in September 2025—this time in Mediterranean Cooperation and Security—at the Luiss School of Government, Luiss Guido Carli University in Rome, Italy. His graduation project was titled “Emerging Middle Powers' Rivalry Over Maritime Ports and Routes in the Wider Mediterranean and Its Implications for European Security: The Case of Türkiye and the UAE in the 21st Century.”

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In 2015, he received another scholarship for academic excellence from Algeria's Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, allowing him to undertake a short-term scientific fellowship at Sakarya University, Türkiye.

Originally from Algeria, Khechib moved to Türkiye in 2014, where he gained nine years of academic and professional experience. During this period, he collaborated with numerous Turkish and Arab research centers both locally and internationally. He also spent a year in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, and an academic year in Rome, Italy further expanding his academic and cultural horizons.

Since 2015, Khechib has been affiliated with several research institutions, including IDRAK Center for Studies and Consultations (Istanbul), the Egyptian Institute for Studies (Istanbul), the International Relations Academy (Istanbul), SETA Foundation's Turkish Insight Journal (Istanbul), IHH INSAMER Center for Humanitarian and Social Studies (Istanbul), TRT Arabi (Istanbul), and Siyaset Arabbiya Journal, published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (Doha), Future for Advanced Research and Studies (Abu Dhabi, U.A.E), the Mediterranean Platform (Rome), the Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum-MENAF, in Cambridge (England), the Stimson Center (Washington DC), among others.

Khechib's research spans a wide range of topics, including geopolitics, international relations theory, great and middle power politics, the Dynamics of Change in the International System/Order, and the geopolitics of North Africa, Mediterranean region, Middle East, and the South China Sea. He has a particular interest in the foreign policies of the United States, China, Russia, Türkiye, and Algeria.

An accomplished scholar, Khechib has been writing regularly since 2010. He has published over 50 academic studies in peer-reviewed journals and research centers across the Arab world and internationally, alongside 55 academic translations of academic works in geopolitics and international relations/IR from English to Arabic. His contributions also include 152 academic summaries of articles and studies authored by leading scholars in geopolitics and international relations, published in Geopolitical Compass Reports and Geopolitics Bridges Magazine, issued by CIGA in English, Arabic, and Turkish. From 2019 to now-2026, he served as the executive editor and supervisor of these publications and oversaw CIGA's Critical Voices platform.

In December 2018, Khechib won first place in the Dr. Mahathir Mohamad International Award for Intellectual Creativity, organized by the Kuala Lumpur Forum for Thought and Civilization in Malaysia. His winning research, "The Impact of Islamic Movements on Malaysia's Democratic Transition: Islamization of Democracy or Democratization of Islam?", formed the basis of one of his published books.

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["The Struggle for Free Will: Turkish Foreign Policy in a Changing International System \(1923-2017\)" \(Second Ed 2024\).](#)

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["The Prospects for Democratic Transition in Russia, a Critical Study for Structures and Challenges", \(2015\).](#)

In addition to his publications, Khechib has presented research papers at numerous international academic conferences and participated as a guest speaker in seminars, workshops, and training sessions in countries such as Algeria, Türkiye, Qatar, Russia, Iran, the UAE, Jordan, Lebanon, Italy, and Spain. Khechib is a native Arabic speaker and conducts his research in Arabic, English, French, and Turkish.

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