Contents

Foreword vii
Author’s Preface to the Second Arabic edition 1
Author’s Preface to the First Arabic edition 3

Chapter One: A Psychological Analysis of Culture 9
Basic Considerations 9
The Process of Definition 12
The Idea of Culture 13
Culture and Sociology 15
Some Ideas 17
An Evaluation of These Ideas 20
Another View of the Issue 22
Another Definition of Culture 24
Psychological and Social Aspects 28
The Nature of the Cultural Relationship 33
Culture and Subjective Criteria 37

Chapter Two: A Psychological Synthesis of Culture 41
The Orientation of Ideas 45
The Orientation of Culture 48
Literalism in Culture 52
The Significance of Culture in History 53
The Significance of Culture in Education 54
Moral Orientation 55
Aesthetic Orientation 57
Practical Logic 60
Technical Orientation and Industry 62
Cultural Crisis 63
Chapter Three: Co-existence of Cultures 68
Reflections on the Co-existence of Cultures 68
Cultural Co-existence on the Tangier-Jakarta Axis 70

Chapter Four: Orientation of Culture Towards Universalism 81

Chapter Five: Anti Culture 93

Conclusion 100

Endnotes 103
Bibliography 119
Index 121
interested in reproducing what Clifford Geertz, justly called the
spinning discussions of what might constitute culture. Nor was he
Benjamin’s aim was not to discover new data, nor to provide him-

wholly occupied his intellectual career. Yet, is not one of his works in which he does
thoughtful, for it never ceased to occupy his mind throughout his
Culture was a central and recurrent theme in Mallinckrodt’s

Foreword
“conceptual morass”, which had developed around this concept. Bennabi’s approach was different from that of most Arab academic writers of his time, who contented themselves with merely parroting Western theories of culture. Rather, he was in search of what constitutes the essence of culture, that essence which enables us to visualize it as a mode of living and a program of action, equipping human beings with the skill of living together meaningfully and in harmony with their environment.

Chronologically speaking, Bennabi first expressed his views on culture in a chapter of his book Les Conditions de la Renaissance (1948). Here he discussed what he called the idea of “orientation” defined as soundness of foundations, harmony and resolution of movement and unity of purpose. In that context, he defined culture as the mode of being and becoming of a people. This mode of being and becoming has an aesthetic, ethical, pragmatic and technical content. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, these preliminary views were on various occasions subjected to further reflection, elaboration and strengthening until they culminated in a truly Bennabic theory of culture.

The book now in the reader’s hands accurately reflects that development of Bennabi’s theorization of culture and describes the essence of his views in a comprehensive manner. Its content draws on many of the author’s works in the form of books, articles and conference papers. This does not mean, however, that the present book is a mere summary or literal reproduction of those works. Rather, it is a synthesis aimed at providing an integrated and holistic understanding of culture from a clearly interdisciplinary perspective. This foreword is an attempt to give an overview of Bennabi’s thinking about culture so as to place the present book in the appropriate context of his thought.

Starting from the premise that every social reality is essentially an actualized cultural value, Bennabi theorizes that the final shape and determinant character of that reality depends on the relative
weight of each of the essential components of culture, namely, ethics, aesthetics, practical logic and technique. Culture is an integrated and complex whole consisting of an inter-subjective wealth of symbols, values, concepts, attitudes and tastes, and constituting the essential bond between the individual and society. Therefore, according to Bennabi, culture is the source that provides human beings with the means of self-control and mastery over nature and over the products of their own genius. As he defines it in more appropriate terms, Islamically speaking, it is culture that permits human beings to regulate and harmonize their relations and interactions with one another, their environment and the universe in general. In parallel with the world of nature or the biosphere, which allows the physical growth of human beings, culture is a *noosphere* creating the framework for their spiritual well-being and psycho-mental development.

Without underestimating the importance of technique and practical logic, which are necessary for the efficiency and efficacy of human social action, Bennabi considers ethics and aesthetics the most important of the essential components of culture mentioned above. His reasoning is that it is the dialogical relationship between ethical and aesthetic values which ultimately determines the character and orientation of a society’s values. Depending on whether priority is given to one or the other of these main types of values, the historical experience of humankind has oscillated between the ethically based culture and that which is aesthetically based.

While insisting on the ethical and the aesthetic as complementary values indispensable to human life and culture, Bennabi observes that humankind has suffered a serious bifurcation in their pursuit, especially in the modern age. No truly balanced and viable synthesis has been achieved, in which ethics and aesthetics can go hand in hand to make the pursuit of the moral and the beautiful indivisible. Apparently influenced by his Islamic attitude, Bennabi clearly seems to be in favor of the moral
over the aesthetic where there is ultimate and irreconcilable conflict. Nevertheless, he emphasizes that the norm is to strive for the complementary and indivisible relationship of ethics and aesthetics. Otherwise, the cost will always be heavy, especially during cultural decline and degeneration. As he expresses it, when a culture whose axis is ethics degenerates, it always sinks into mysticism, escapism, vagueness and mimesis, for it is mainly inward-looking. Conversely, a culture revolving around aesthetics, being largely outward-looking and driven to creating forms, will always degenerate into ponderosity, consumerism, materialism and imperialism. In Bennabi’s opinion, modern Western culture not only reflects the alienation between ethical and aesthetic values, but it is also a typical example of the degeneration of a power-driven culture (culture d’empire), which, since the European Renaissance, has placed the meaning of truth (vérité) in the realm of the beautiful (le beau) instead of the real (le vrai).

A major concern motivating much of Bennabi’s thought about culture is the quest for a way out of the impasse in which humankind has been stuck by the desire for power that is overwhelmingly prevalent in modern Western culture. The world, he repeatedly indicates, is in pressing need of an ecumenical humanism that will safeguard the human species from imminent destruction. The notion of humanism has been one of the foremost ideals preached by modern Western civilization. Nevertheless, Bennabi is of the opinion that this humanism has been plagued by formalism and lacks any solid moral foundation (assise morale) owing to its origins within a culture that has derived its roots from the Graeco-Roman humanities. Modern Western humanism has found its most resounding formulation in the universal declaration of human rights. However, Bennabi argues, deprived of the metaphysical and transcendent basis in the original dignity invested in humankind by its Creator, this humanism has amounted to no more than a mere work of literature.
It is within that general context that Bennabi’s *The Question of Culture* (Mushkilat al-Thaqāfah) finds its appropriate place and can be best appreciated. As the reader will certainly realize, the author’s analysis and reconstruction of the meaning of culture and the discussion of questions regarding cultural coexistence, cultural crisis and cultural universalism are clearly influenced by the theoretical and practical preoccupations briefly outlined above. Although this translation is long overdue, it will undoubtedly soon occupy a prominent place in the continuing debate about the future and destiny of the human race.

Finally, I wish to thank the publishers, the International Institute of Islamic Thought and the Islamic Book Trust, for entrusting me with the task of revising and annotating this translation and introducing it to the readers. Without underestimating the competent efforts of Professor ‘Abdul Wahid Lu’lu’a in translating the book from Arabic into English, part of my task has been to ensure that the translation reflects faithfully Bennabi’s views, based on my humble expertise in his legacy. The second, and indeed, most important part of that task has been to document the many references in the book and provide annotations that I considered necessary to explain various aspects of the text. The highly skilled and very accurate editing done by Sister Sylvia J. Hunt has superbly complemented the work of both the translator and reviser.

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Rajab 1423/September 2002
Author’s Preface to the Second Arabic Edition

The first Arabic edition of this book was published in Cairo in 1959. At that particular time the ideas presented were, I feel, rather unfamiliar to the educated in the Arab world, especially since no earlier Arab scholar had dealt with such a topic. A perusal of the first few chapters quickly show that not only was I attempting to examine the subject from a new perspective, but was also trying to find a missing element within it.

In the Western world, including Eastern Europe, sociologists handle this topic with a feeling that they are describing a social reality that is quite visible to them; in the systems of their country, in the active behaviour of those around them, and in the obvious interaction between their fellow citizens and their society. This interaction can be better understood as a mutual commitment between the community and the individuals comprising it. This commitment appeared to me to be a fading feature of modern society, and I set out to try to understand and define the sources from which it drew its existence in an age where isolation or alienation seemed to be the dominating forces of the day, forces whose philosophical expression is best summarized by that dreaded motto “mind your own business”. This motto has been reiterated by generations of Muslims across the ages.

The views presented in this study will be unfamiliar to the ordinary readers for two main reasons:

1- They do not follow a standard Western methodology in their elucidation. The reasons for this will be explained in subsequent pages.

2- The ideas themselves are comprised of, on the one hand, an extension and analytical explanation and, on the other, a synthesis of ideas taken from the chapter of one
of my works entitled *The Conditions of Renaissance*. This was published in French in 1948, at a time when the topic was rather new, in both the Muslim as well as the Western world.

Reviewing my standing as an author, I find that in the first edition I seem to have adopted the principle of "all is well with the world"; that is to say, one does well to present the positive aspects of a question in order to help and guide readers to start searching for a solution.

However, the passage of time teaches one greater wisdom, experience and maturity. The years that have passed since the publication of the first edition have shown me that the matter is not as simple as I first thought it to be. That is to say, to define what is good, though good in itself, is not sufficient to achieve good in the practical field, unless such a definition is coupled with an attempt to warn of the pitfalls which can hamper the course of any particular action taken.

It is with this in mind that I have added to this edition a new section entitled "Cultural Crisis". I felt it necessary not only to present the reader with some further dimensions of the issue, but also to provide a warning against the existence of certain pitfalls, negative in nature, which only serve to halt societal progression. I hope that Muslim readers will find it worthy of their interest.

Malik Bennabi
Beirut: 6 Rabī‘ al-Thānī, 1391 AH
12 June, 1971 AD
Author's Preface to
the First Arabic Edition

It has been customary, when culture is the topic of discussion, that
the issue in the readers' minds remains one of ideas.

It is true that the issue is such in one of its aspects.
Nevertheless, culture does not comprise ideas alone. It is much
more comprehensive than that. It covers, as we shall presently see,
the lifestyle of a certain society on the one hand, and the social
behaviour of individuals in that society on the other.

However, if we had no other incentive for this study than the
issue of ideas, this would still be a sufficient reason in the present
circumstances prevailing in the Muslim world including the Arab
countries. Such an incentive would be significant on two or
probably three levels.

The organization of society, its life and movement, indeed, its
deterioration and stagnation, all have a functional relation with the
system of ideas found in that society. If that system were to
change in one way or another, all other social characteristics
would follow suit and adapt in the same direction. Ideas, as a
whole, form an important part of the means of development in a
given society. The various stages of development in such a society
are indeed various forms of its intellectual development. If one of
those stages corresponds to what is called "renaissance", it will
mean that society at that stage is enjoying a wonderful system of
ideas, a system that can provide a suitable solution to each of the
vital problems in that society.

To illustrate this, consider the different approaches applied by
contemporary societies to solve the simple problem of flies! This
difference does not emanate from a technical point in the problem,
but from a difference in the effectiveness of the approaches
applied. In China, members of society are recruited to exterminate the flies; while in America, the insects are fought with DDT.

In one area, we may see the influence of ideas in fighting insects. In another, we may see their role in spreading disease. It is known, for instance, that living bodies may acquire disease through contamination. Since Pasteur and Koch, however, we have learnt that it is the germs which transmit these diseases.

We are aware, too, that there is another form of contagion, that which passes on social diseases from one generation to another. This leads us to state that there are other types of germs that transmit social diseases. These are contagious ideas that hinder the growth of societies and destroy them.

Thus, we find that ideas influence the life of a given society in two different ways: either they are factors of growth of social life or, on the contrary, they assume the role of factors of contagion, thus rendering social growth rather difficult or even impossible.

There is yet another aspect of the importance of ideas in the modern world. In the nineteenth century, the relations among nations were based on power, for the position of a nation was dependent on the number of its factories, cannons, fleets and gold reserves. However, the twentieth century introduced a new development in which ideas are held in high esteem as national and international values. This development has not been strongly felt in many underdeveloped countries, for their inferiority complex has created a warped infatuation with the criteria of power, that is, criteria based on objects.

Muslims living in an underdeveloped country will no doubt feel that they are inferior to people living in a developed country. They will gradually realize that what separates peoples is not geographical distance, but distance of another nature.
As a result of this feeling of inferiority, Muslims ascribe this
distance to the field of objects. They see their situation caused by
lack of weapons, aeroplanes and banks. Thus, their inferiority
complex will lose its social efficacy, leading only to pessimism on
the psychological level. On the social level, it will lead to what we
have elsewhere called *takdis* (heaping-up).\(^1\) To turn this feeling
into an effective driving-force, Muslims should ascribe their
backwardness to the level of ideas, not to that of "objects", for the
development of the new world depends increasingly on ideational
and intellectual criteria.

We may now consider the situation of two representatives of
two "world powers" to see how they stand on this point. These are
two men whose respective countries possess the largest variety of
objects: from refrigerators to ballistic missiles.

At the Twenty-first Congress of the Communist Party, held in
Moscow, Khrushchev tried to embarrass his rivals by saying,
"economic success is the soundest criterion of sound ideas". Thus,
the effectiveness of ideas is seen in a national economic frame of
reference. That is to say, when ideas are sound, the economy
thrives. By contrast, George Kennan,\(^2\) an American diplomat,
published a book entitled *Russia, the Atom and the West*, in which
he presented a significant analysis of the current world situation.
The gist of Kennan's ideas is that there is a balance of power on
both sides that should force both parties to stop bragging about
arms, and to be proud of ideas instead.

In the underdeveloped countries, which are still within the
sphere of influence of the superpowers, arms and oil revenues are
no longer sufficient to support that influence: ideas alone can do
the job.

The world has, therefore, entered a stage at which most of its
problems can be solved only by certain systems of ideas. Therefore, Arab and other Muslim countries, especially those
which do not possess a great deal of material power, should give
more weight to the issue of ideas. The supposition that this is the only basic element in a certain culture is in itself a sufficient justification for this study.

Readers may discover other unexpected aspects of this study, which have nothing to do with politics. However, when we realize that the question of culture has its own historical and social aspects at a given time and place, and that any culture, by dint of these aspects, has its own existence on the map, it will be difficult not to connect this theoretical remark with the political problems which interest the world as a whole and the countries concerned in particular.

If we consider, for instance, the attitude of the countries that have adopted in their international policy the principle of the Bandung Conference, that is, the policy of "positive neutrality", it will be only natural to expect these countries to plan their economy, and their general policy as well, in accordance with the spirit of that policy. Yet, is it not also natural to expect these countries to plan their cultural policy in accordance with the idea of positive neutrality?

On first consideration, this question may sound illogical or fanciful, for it apparently conflicts with the subjective elements of the problem. Nevertheless, the social situation in the Afro-Asian countries, including the Muslim countries, carries, at the present stage of their development, many subjective elements compatible with the idea of "positive neutrality" as a consequence of internal necessity. There is, then, a culture that matches this political tendency quite naturally. Readers will be able to recognize that aspect in the present study.

Nowadays, the issue of culture in the Muslim countries is, in fact, related to other aspects. That leads me to believe that, in addition to the main theme of this study, "A Psychological Analysis of Culture", it will be useful to include some other ideas which appeared in previous studies under the two titles: "A
Psychological Structure of Culture”, and “Co-existence of Cultures”. I feel that this addition is necessitated by the nature of the approach and the unity of the theme.

Malik Bennabi
Cairo: 26 February, 1959
In his book on culture, Bennabi's aim is not to discover new data, nor provide hair-splitting descriptions of what may constitute culture, nor is he interested in reproducing what Clifford Geertz justly called the 'conceptual morass' that has developed around this concept. Unlike most Arab academic writers of his time, he does not parrot Western theories of culture. Rather, he is in search of what would constitute the essence of a culture that would enable human beings to visualize it as a way of life and a program for action, equipping them with the means of living together meaningfully and in harmony with their environment.