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DECOLONISING THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION: CONSTRUCTING AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM BASED ON MALIK BENNABI'S THOUGHT

Muhammad Kharis Majid*, Mujamil Qomar** and Syamsun Ni'am***

Abstract: The sociology of religion has been predominantly shaped by Eurocentric and Christocentric frameworks that universalise Western historical experiences while marginalising non-Western religious traditions. This article advances a decolonial intervention by engaging the thought of Malik Bennabi to construct an alternative sociology of religion grounded in Islamic epistemology. Rather than treating Bennabi's work as normative, the article articulates his ideas as a constructive sociological paradigm that addresses colonial domination at the epistemic level, particularly through the colonisation of ideas and modes of knowledge production. Positioned within decolonial and postcolonial scholarship, the study places Bennabi in dialogue with classical sociological theories of religion and decolonial thinkers such as Anibal Quijano, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, and Syed Hussein Alatas. Relying on Bennabi's key texts, the article demonstrates how his framework integrates revelation, reason, and social reality within a unified civilisational perspective. The article argues that education constitutes the operational core of Bennabi's paradigm. Conceived as a holistic-integrative civilisational strategy, education functions to liberate the mind, restore moral agency, and overcome epistemic dependency. By foregrounding education, the article contributes to the sociology of the Islamic Golden Age and offers a coherent model for a decolonised sociology of religion that moves beyond critique toward paradigm construction.

Keywords: *decolonial epistemology, sociology of religion, Malik Bennabi, Islamic civilisation, integrated education*

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INTRODUCTION

Malik Bennabi was a prominent critic of Orientalism long before Edward Said published his famous critique in 1979 – *Orientalism* – as a threat to the historical orientation of Muslims.¹ According to Fawzia Bariun, it is not surprising that he is often referred to as the first Muslim sociologist after Ibn Khaldun, who explored the phenomenon of civilisation as a sociological study,² and is on a par with Muhammad Iqbal as a philosopher and reformer.³ Bennabi was born in Algeria in 1905, when it was under French colonial rule. Therefore, he witnessed firsthand the subjugation of Muslim societies, structurally and culturally.⁴ From here, Bennabi saw the declining condition of Muslims due to external factors in the form of colonialism and internal factors in the form of conditions suitable for colonisability.⁵

Colonisation operated not only through political and economic systems but also through the production of knowledge. This coloniality was reflected in the epistemological assumptions and methods of early Western studies of religion. Evolutionary models often positioned Western Christianity as the highest stage of religious and civilisational development, while non-Western religions, including Islam, were portrayed as static or resistant to modernity. Methodologically, textual criticism rooted in Biblical scholarship and ethnographic studies conducted in colonial settings frequently interpreted colonised societies through categories derived from European historical experiences. Consequently, knowledge about religion was not epistemologically neutral but shaped by colonial assumptions about civilisation, rationality, and religious development, which also influenced the formation of theories, concepts, and educational institutions.⁶

This is reinforced by Edward Said, in his book *Orientalism*, which critiques Western epistemology of knowledge using Michel Foucault's framework of power. He further argued that much of the intellectual engagement of Western scholars with Eastern societies has been closely intertwined with the interests and structures of imperialism.⁷

In the case of religious studies, for example, the colonial dimension of this discipline lies in the assumptions, methods, theories, and terminology used within religious studies. Essentially, the field of religious studies emerged from the past Western imperial culture. Proponents of this decolonial paradigm believe that religious studies in the West, since its

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (Vintage Books, 1979).

² Fawzia Bariun, "Malik Bennabi and the Intellectual Problems of the Muslim Ummah," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 9, no. 3 (1992), <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v9i3.2571>; Usman Syihab, *Membangun Peradaban Dengan Agama* [Building Civilisation Through Religion] (Dian Rakyat, 2010), 1, <https://repository.uinjkt.ac.id/dspace/handle/123456789/68003>.

³ Syihab, *Membangun Peradaban Dengan Agama*, 1.

⁴ Malik Bennabi, *Mudzakkirat Syaahid lil Qorni* [Memoirs of a Witness to the Century: Malek Bennabi] accessed February 14, 2026, http://archive.org/details/20210502_20210502_2119.

⁵ Malik Bennabi, *Al-Shiro' al-Fikri Fii al-Bilad al-Musta'miroh* [The Intellectual Conflict in Colonized Countries] (Dar al-Fikri, 1981).

⁶ Muhammad Rofiq Muzakkir, *Dekolonisasi, Metodologi Kritis Dalam Studi Humaniora Dan Studi Islam* [Decolonisation: A Critical Methodology in Humanities and Islamic Studies] (Yayasan Bentala Tamaddun Nusantara, 2022), 3.

⁷ Said, *Orientalism*.

inception, along with other disciplines, has been imbued with Eurocentric and Christocentric sensibilities.⁸

From an epistemological perspective, the sociology of religion developed as one of the principal approaches within the broader field of religious studies (*religionswissenschaft*), in which sociological theories and methods are employed to analyse religion as a social phenomenon.⁹ In the Indonesian context, for example, the home of the authors, Mukti Ali conceptualised this approach as scientific cum doctrinaire, emphasising that religion should be understood not only as an observable social reality but also as a system of beliefs, doctrines, and values that shape human behaviour.¹⁰ This perspective rejects the separation between empirical religious facts and theological meaning, recognising that religious doctrines and social practices are a mutually constitutive view that is also reflected in Weber's interpretive sociology of religion.¹¹

Despite these methodological developments, the emergence of religious studies as an academic discipline cannot be separated from its historical context. As numerous scholars have argued, the discipline developed within the intellectual and political milieu of Western imperial expansion, where Eurocentric and Christocentric assumptions profoundly shaped its conceptual frameworks, methods, and categories of analysis.¹² Consequently, many classical approaches tended to interpret non-Western religions through Western historical experiences and normative assumptions, often portraying religion primarily as a source of social conflict, irrationality, or resistance to modernity.¹³ Such perspectives not only universalised particular Western experiences but also reinforced colonial representations of Muslim societies by associating strong religious commitment with intolerance, extremism, and social conflict. These epistemological assumptions later became the target of critique by decolonial scholars, including Malik Bennabi, who argued for reconstructing the sociology of religion on a civilisational framework rooted in Islamic epistemology rather than inherited colonial categories.¹⁴

In recent decades, decolonial and postcolonial scholarship has challenged this epistemic dominance by exposing the entanglement of knowledge production with colonial power structures. Concepts such as the coloniality of power and knowledge, epistemic injustice, and

⁸ Muzakkir, *Dekolonisasi*, 16.

⁹ Moh Soehadha, "Menuju Sosiologi Beragama: Paradigma Keilmuan Dan Tantangan Kontemporer Kajian Sosiologi Agama Di Indonesia" [Towards a Sociology of Being Religious: Scientific Paradigms and Contemporary Challenges in the Sociological Study of Religion in Indonesia], *Jurnal Sosiologi Agama* 15, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.14421/jsa.2021.151-01>.

¹⁰ Ahmad Permata, *Metodologi Studi Agama* [Methodology of Religious Studies] (Pustaka Pelajar, 2000), 33.

¹¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Routledge Classics (Taylor and Francis, 2005).

¹² Muzakkir, *Dekolonisasi*.

¹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *Benturan Antar Peradaban Dan Masa Depan Politik Dunia* [The Clash of Civilisations and the Future of World Politics] (Penerbit Qalam, 1996), 380–81; Sukawarsini Djelantik, *Terorisme: Tinjauan Psiko-Politis, Peran Media, Kemiskinan, Dan Keamanan Nasional* [Terrorism: A Psycho-Political Overview, the Role of Media, Poverty, and National Security] (Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2010), 160.

Southern epistemologies have opened new pathways for rethinking social theory beyond Western universalism. Scholars such as Aníbal Quijano,¹⁵ Boaventura de Sousa Santos,¹⁶ and Syed Hussein Alatas¹⁷ have demonstrated how colonialism persists through intellectual dependency, conceptual reductionism, and the marginalisation of indigenous and religious knowledge systems.

The originality of this article lies in its systematic articulation of Bennabi's thought as a constructive sociological paradigm, rather than treating it as normative. By placing Bennabi in critical dialogue with classical sociological theories of religion and contemporary decolonial scholarship, the article demonstrates how his framework constitutes an internal Islamic response to epistemic coloniality. This contribution goes beyond existing postcolonial critiques by offering a theoretically coherent model for a decolonised sociology of religion that integrates revelation, reason, and social reality within a single analytical horizon.

This research examines the thoughts of prominent figures.¹⁸ It employs a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm.¹⁹ The approaches employed are socio-historical²⁰ and philosophical.²¹ The article distinguishes primary sources – Bennabi's major works, particularly *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World* and *The Conditions of the Renaissance* – from secondary sources, including classical sociology and decolonial scholarship. This work relies on Bennabi's texts, which examine the relationship between religion, ideas, and civilisation, forming the basis for an alternative sociology of religion that views religion as a force for social and civilisational transformation beyond Western intellectual dominance.

THE COLONIAL PARADIGM IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Colonialism reshaped religious life across the Muslim world by intervening in Islamic education, religious administration, and legal institutions. From French policies in North Africa and British reforms in South Asia to European interventions in Southeast Asia,

¹⁵ Aníbal Quijano, *Colonialidad Del Poder, Eurocentrismo y América Latina* [Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America] (CLACSO, 2014), <https://biblioteca-repositorio.clacso.edu.ar/handle/CLACSO/16249>.

¹⁶ Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Routledge, 2016).

¹⁷ Syed Alatas, "The Captive Mind and Creative Development," *International Social Science Journal* 26, no. 4 (1974).

¹⁸ Abdul Mustaqim, "Model Penelitian Tokoh (Dalam Teori Dan Aplikasi)" [Research Model on Figures (Theory and Application)], *Jurnal Studi Ilmu-Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis* 15, no. 2 (2014): 201–2, <https://doi.org/10.14421/qh.2014.1502-01>.

¹⁹ Hani Subakti, "Paradigma Penelitian Kualitatif" [Qualitative Research Paradigm], in *Bunga Rampai Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*, ed. Syaiful Bahri (Bandung:, 2023), 12, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Ahmad-Syamil/publication/376828943_Metodologi_Penelitian_Kualitatif/links/658ae7440bb2c7472b130b23/Metodologi-Penelitian-Kualitatif.pdf.

²⁰ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (Routledge, 2013), 78–79.

²¹ Amin Abdullah, *Studi Agama: Normativitas Atau Historisitas?* [The Study of Religion: Normativity or Historicity?], (Pustaka Pelajar, 1996), 249.

colonial powers promoted Western epistemological models that transformed religious knowledge and institutions beyond political and economic control.²²

Furthermore, colonialism introduced new social structures and hierarchies that influenced religious dynamics. This, in turn, influenced the religious structure and authority within society.²³ Furthermore, colonialism also encouraged the emergence of a postcolonial perspective that emphasises the importance of understanding religion within the framework of colonial history and its impact on the social and cultural structures of society. Postcolonial theory allows researchers to identify how religion changes and moves in colonial and postcolonial contexts, and how religious practices can be a form of resistance or adaptation to colonial domination.²⁴

In classical sociology of religion, secularisation is generally understood as a process associated with modernisation rather than Westernisation per se. However, because secularisation theory was formulated primarily from the historical experience of Western Europe, it often universalised that trajectory and assumed that religious decline would inevitably accompany modernisation across diverse civilisational contexts.²⁵

In the colonial context, this idea was used to justify the colonial project, with the view that more “civilised” societies were secularised. As with colonialism in the Muslim world and India, this reinforced the narrative that religion must be suppressed to modernise societies.²⁶ The colonial influence on sociological theories of religion is also evident in the concept of “primitive religion” introduced by anthropologists such as Edward Burnett Tylor and James Frazer. They considered religions found in non-Western societies to be the earliest forms of human religious development.²⁷ This thinking was influenced by colonial logic, which placed non-Western societies in an inferior position and thus always in need of the products or “enlightenment” of Western civilisation as a beacon of global progress.

The study of Islam in the sociology of religion was also heavily influenced by the colonial project. This can be seen in the thinking of Orientalists such as Ignaz Goldziher and Snouck Hurgronje, who were influenced by the colonial agenda, viewing Islam as a religion that needed to be regulated and controlled. Colonial influence is also evident in sociological

²² Zulfikar RH Pohan, “Jejak Kolonialisme Eropa Dalam Dikotomi Agama” [The Legacy of European Colonialism in the Religious Dichotomy], Gedung Sekolah Pascasarjana UGM, July 4, 2021, <https://crcs.ugm.ac.id/jejak-kolonialisme-eropa-dalam-dikotomi-agama/>.

²³ Mujianto Solichin and Muhammad Anwar, “Gerakan Sosial Keagamaan Pendidikan Islam Masa Kolonialisme” [Islamic Educational Socio-Religious Movements During the Colonial Era], *Dirasat: Jurnal Manajemen Dan Pendidikan Islam* 6, no. 1 (2020).

²⁴ Atika Silma Nabila, “Perlawanan Golongan Islam Terhadap Kolonialisme Belanda: Kajian Poskolonialisme Novel Pejuang-Pejuang Kali Pepe Karya Djamil Soeherman” [Islamic Resistance Against Dutch Colonialism: A Postcolonial Study of the Novel “Pejuang-Pejuang Kali Pepe” by Djamil Soeherman], *Jurnal Kajian Islam Interdisipliner* 6, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.14421/jkii.v6i1.1215>.

²⁵ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 14–21.

²⁶ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Open Road Media, 2011), 106–10.

²⁷ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Vol. 2* (Books on Demand, 2023), 25–30; James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion* (MacMillan, 1894), 60–65.

studies that view Islam as a threat or obstacle to the modernisation project. These theories influenced colonial policies that sought to weaken the role of religion in Muslim societies.²⁸

Colonial influence on the sociology of religion is evident in classical sociological theory, which emerged within a European context shaped by secularisation, industrialisation, and colonial expansion. Although Durkheim, Marx, and Weber developed influential approaches to religion as a social phenomenon, their theories largely reflected Western Christian experiences that were subsequently universalised and applied to non-Western, including Muslim, societies.

Emile Durkheim conceptualised religion primarily as a social institution that functions to generate cohesion and collective consciousness. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (originally published 1912), he reduced religion to a symbolic system arising from social forces, famously interpreting religion as society worshipping itself. Although Durkheim acknowledged the social power of religion, his functionalist reduction confined religion to a derivative of social structures, leaving little room for transcendence, revelation, or religion as an independent source of moral and civilisational transformation.²⁹ Moreover, Durkheim's reliance on totemism as a foundational model led to the implicit classification of non-Western religions, including Islam, as "primitive" stages of religious development.³⁰

Karl Marx, by contrast, approached religion through a materialist lens, interpreting it as an ideological reflection of economic relations and class struggle.³¹ Religion, in Marx's framework, functions as an instrument of domination and a compensatory illusion for material suffering.³² While Marx's critique exposed the entanglement of religion with power and exploitation, his economic reductionism ultimately stripped religion of any autonomous epistemic or moral agency.³³ Religion appears not as a creative social force, but as a symptom of alienation to be overcome through material transformation.³⁴

Max Weber offered a more nuanced approach by recognising religion as a meaningful system capable of shaping economic behaviour and social action.³⁵ His analysis of the

²⁸ Bryan Turner, *Religion and Social Theory: A Materialist Perspective* (Sage, 1983), 89–95; Muhammad Zaman, *Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age: Religious Authority and Internal Criticism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 152–60.

²⁹ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

³⁰ Arifuddin Arif, "Perspektif Teori Sosial Emile Durkheim Dalam Sosiologi Pendidikan" [Emile Durkheim's Social Theory Perspective in the Sociology of Education], *Moderasi: Jurnal Studi Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial* 1, no. 2 (2020): 8, <https://doi.org/10.24239/moderasi.Vol1.Iss2.28>.

³¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2002).

³² Karl Marx, *Marx on Religion*, ed. John C. Raines (Temple University Press, 2002), 7–14.

³³ Ibid., 5–6.

³⁴ Robert Ellwood, *The Encyclopedia of World Religions* (Infobase Publishing, 2008), 160–61; Megan Rogers and Mary Konieczny, "Does Religion Always Help the Poor? Variations in Religion and Social Class in the West and Societies in the Global South," *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0135-3>.

³⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (University of California Press, 1978), <http://archive.org/details/economysociety00webe>; Max Weber and Edward Shils, *Max Weber on the Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Free Press, 1949), <http://archive.org/details/maxweberonmethod00webe>.

Protestant ethic famously linked religious ideas to the emergence of modern capitalism.³⁶ This idea was expressed by Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (*Die Protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*).³⁷ However, Weber's interpretive sociology remained deeply embedded in a Eurocentric trajectory,³⁸ implicitly presenting Western modernity and Protestant Christianity,³⁹ in particular as the universal benchmark for rationalisation and progress.⁴⁰ Non-Western religious traditions, including Islam, were often assessed in terms of their perceived failure to generate similar trajectories of modernity.⁴¹

Taken together, these classical theories established a dominant sociological paradigm in which religion is functionally reduced (Durkheim), economically determined (Marx), or selectively universalised through Western experience (Weber).⁴² While analytically powerful within their contexts, these frameworks contributed to an epistemic hierarchy that marginalised non-Western religious worldviews and reinforced colonial patterns of knowledge production.⁴³

At this epistemic juncture, Malik Bennabi's critique becomes significant. Unlike classical sociologists who treated religion as a dependent variable of society, economy, or rationalisation, Bennabi conceptualised religion, particularly Islam, as an autonomous and productive civilisational force.⁴⁴ For Bennabi, religion cannot be reduced to social cohesion, economic ideology, or cultural ethos alone; rather, it constitutes a comprehensive epistemological framework that integrates revelation, reason, ethics, and social organisation.⁴⁵

Bennabi's critique does not merely reject classical sociology; instead, it exposes the limitations of its universalising claims and reorients the sociology of religion towards a non-Western epistemic foundation. In doing so, Bennabi challenges the coloniality embedded in sociological knowledge by proposing an alternative paradigm in which religion functions as a generator of ideas, values, and civilisational vitality – an approach that directly contests the reductionist assumptions of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber.⁴⁶ Early sociology of religion reflected colonial influence through Eurocentric interpretations of non-Western religions. Postcolonial scholars challenge this bias and call for a decolonised sociology that recognises how colonial legacies continue to shape religious knowledge and practice.

³⁶ Christel Gärtner, "Religious Change as a Challenge: Sociological Approaches in the Interpretation and Explanation of Religion," *Zeitschrift Für Religionswissenschaft* 27, no. 2 (2019): 270, <https://doi.org/10.1515/zfr-2018-0021>.

³⁷ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Scribner, 1930), <http://archive.org/details/protestantethics00webe>.

³⁸ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (Oxford University Press, 1947).

³⁹ George Ritzer, *Contemporary Sociological Theory and its Classical Roots: The Basics* (McGraw-Hill, 2007), 35–37, http://archive.org/details/contemporarysoci0000ritz_w0o6.

⁴⁰ Reinhard Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (University of California Press, 1977), 57, <http://archive.org/details/maxweberintellec0000bend>.

⁴¹ Gärtner, "Religious Change as a Challenge," 274.

⁴² Connell, *Southern Theory*, 45–50.

⁴³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 78–85.

⁴⁴ Malik Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World* (Islamic Book Trust, 2003).

⁴⁵ Rashid Asma and Bennabi Malik, *Islam in History and Society* (Kitab Bhavan, 1999), 90–95.

⁴⁶ Malik Bennabi, *On the Origins of Human Society* (Islamic Book Trust, 2002), 78–82.

MALIK BENNABI'S CRITIQUE OF COLONIAL INTELLECTUAL DOMINANCE

The discussion of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber shows that classical sociology of religion emerged within a historically Western epistemic context. Its functional reductionism, economic determinism, and Eurocentric universalisation produced influential yet limited frameworks for understanding religion in non-Western civilisations.⁴⁷ Malik Bennabi's thought should be situated at this critical epistemic juncture, not as a marginal critique from outside sociology, but as a constructive intervention that exposes the colonial foundations of sociological knowledge and proposes an alternative paradigm grounded in Islamic civilisational experience.⁴⁸

Bennabi challenges not only the claims of Durkheim, Marx, and Weber but also the epistemological assumptions that universalise Western historical trajectories. He critiques the hierarchy that reduces religion to a derivative social phenomenon while privileging Western rationality as the pinnacle of civilisation. By framing Islam as an epistemic and civilisational force, Bennabi advances a sociology of religion that seeks to reconstruct knowledge.⁴⁹

Malik Bennabi's contribution to the sociology of religion can be understood as an early formulation of what is now described as decolonial epistemology. Long before the emergence of contemporary decolonial theorists, Bennabi diagnosed the structural consequences of colonial domination not only in political and economic terms, but more profoundly in the realm of knowledge production. His concept of "colonisabilité" (colonisability) captures the internalisation of epistemic dependency, where colonised societies adopt foreign conceptual frameworks that erode their capacity for autonomous thought and civilisational creativity.⁵⁰

In this regard, according to Bennabi, the persistence of intellectual stagnation in Muslim societies cannot be explained solely through material underdevelopment or political subjugation; rather, it reflects a deeper epistemological rupture in which religion has been disconnected from its role as a generator of ideas, values, and social transformation. Bennabi argues that post-colonial Muslims have become consumers of Western civilisation, perceived as superior, due to their inability to produce original ideas. This is due to colonial domination, which has deprived the Muslim world of the ability to generate innovative and constructive ideas.⁵¹ Bennabi views colonialism as part of the civilisational crisis in the Islamic world. He believes that Muslims must confront this crisis through civilisational building based on Islamic values. According to Bennabi, the solution to overcoming colonial domination lies through spiritual, intellectual, and social revitalisation rooted in Islam.⁵²

⁴⁷ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (JHU Press, 1993), 27–34; Said, *Orientalism*.

⁴⁸ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

⁴⁹ Bennabi, *On the Origins of Human Society*, 78–82.

⁵⁰ Sujiat Zubaidi et al., "Relasi Agama Dan Ilmu Dengan Peradaban Dalam Perspektif Malik Bennabi" [The Relationship of Religion and Knowledge with Civilization from the Perspective of Malik Bennabi], *Tsaqafah* 16, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v16i2.4999>.

⁵¹ Asma and Malik, *Islam in History and Society*, 90–95.

⁵² Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

Bennabi's insistence on integrating revelation (*wahy*), reason (*'aql*), and ethical responsibility offers a civilisational epistemology that challenges the monopolisation of sociological theory by Western secular paradigms. Unlike classical sociology, which often confines religion to the realm of belief or ritual, Bennabi conceptualises religion as an active and constitutive force within social organisation, education, economy, and culture.⁵³

For Bennabi, the dominance of Eurocentric sociological frameworks in Muslim societies represents a form of intellectual captivity that inhibits creative development. His sociology of religion therefore functions not merely as a critique of Western thought, but as a project of epistemic liberation aimed at restoring the civilisational agency of Muslim societies.⁵⁴ This opinion is in accordance with Talal Asad's view, which shows that the concept of religion in the sociology of religion is influenced by the European Christian experience, so it is completely irrelevant to understanding other religions such as Islam.⁵⁵ Bennabi argued that true independence could only be achieved when colonised societies regained control of their cultural and intellectual narratives.⁵⁶

This is in accordance with the views of Anibal Quijano.⁵⁷ Quijano argued that colonialism persists through colonality, which sustains racial, cultural, and epistemic hierarchies that privilege Europe while marginalising non-European societies and knowledge. He therefore called for decolonising knowledge by challenging Eurocentrism and promoting epistemic plurality.⁵⁸

In addition, Boaventura de Sousa Santos emphasised that modern Western science is Eurocentric and produces abyssal thinking or a way of thinking that creates a dividing line between knowledge that is considered legitimate (Western, scientific) and knowledge that is excluded (local, indigenous, and the experiences of the global).⁵⁹ Through the idea of Southern epistemology, he proposed the concept of ecology of knowledge: an equal dialogue between diverse knowledge systems as the basis for cognitive justice and social transformation. The core of his thinking is a call for the decolonisation of knowledge, so Western social sciences no longer monopolise the truth, but side with the historical experiences and struggles of oppressed communities.⁶⁰

Syed Hussein Alatas in *The Captive Mind and Creative Development* develops the concept of "captive mind," a condition in which intellectuals and thinkers from non-Western societies are trapped in a mindset that imitates Western thought uncritically and without creativity, so they fail to create analytical tools, concepts, and theories relevant to their socio-cultural

⁵³ Malik Bennabi, *Fii Mahabbi al-Ma'rokah* [In the Thick of the Battle] (Dar al-Fikr, 2002), 12.

⁵⁴ Bennabi, *Al-Shiro' al-Fikri Fii al-Bilad al-Musta'miroh*.

⁵⁵ Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 27–34; Said, *Orientalism*.

⁵⁶ Badrane Benlahcene, *The Socio-Intellectual Foundations of Malek Bennabi's Approach to Civilization* (The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011).

⁵⁷ Quijano, *Colonialidad Del Poder*.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ De Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South*.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

context.⁶¹ Alatas explains that the captive mind arises through the dominance of Western intellectuals in educational and social science institutions in developing countries not only due to external pressure, but also due to the internalisation of Western norms, methodologies, and categories that make local thinkers “shackled” epistemically, unable to separate universal elements from the particular and often apply Western theories without contextual adaptation. As a solution, he proposed creative development – the formation of a creative and autonomous mindset that can project local knowledge critically, selectively, and productively – so intellectuals can formulate ideas that are more authentic, autonomous, and relevant to the realities of their society.⁶² Bennabi moved beyond anti-colonial rejection by selectively adopting Western sociology’s strengths while rejecting its reductionism and universalism, offering a constructive, dialogical sociology aimed at civilisational renewal.

Bennabi also criticised the negative impact of colonialism on the social and cultural structures of Muslim societies. He observed that colonialism had undermined the moral and ethical order of Islam, replacing it with materialistic values that weakened solidarity and social cohesion. In his analysis, Bennabi offered a concept of ethics or morality related to human moral strength in responding to the changes of modern life. According to him, building a more civilised Islamic civilisation requires a return to its primary sources, namely the Qur’an and hadith (Prophetic traditions).⁶³

Bennabi highlighted that colonialism created what he calls a “colonised mentality” in Muslim societies. This mentality makes Muslims feel inferior and dependent on Western thought, including in understanding their religion. Within the context of the sociology of religion, Bennabi critiqued how Muslim intellectuals often adopt Western theories without considering the Islamic context. This leads to “civilisational mimicry,” where Western concepts of secularisation, modernisation, and rationalisation are simply accepted without critical consideration.⁶⁴

Bennabi attributed colonialism’s success to *Qābiliyyah al-Isti‘mār*, an internal weakness marked by moral, intellectual, and social decline, and argued that Islamic civilisation must integrate religion and science rather than separate them through secularisation.⁶⁵ Bennabi located colonial domination partly in internal weaknesses within Muslim societies, particularly a colonised mentality, lack of self-awareness and creativity, and dependence on foreign civilisations.⁶⁶ Bennabi criticised Muslims who tend to adopt Western thought and values without rigorous filtering. He asserted that Muslims must develop independent thought that is not trapped by colonial intellectual hegemony.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Alatas, *The Captive Mind and Creative Development*.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Regina Arini, “Etika Islam Dalam Membangun Peradaban Menurut Malik Bennabi” [Islamic Ethics in Building Civilization According to Malik Bennabi], *Al-Ittihad: Jurnal Pemikiran Dan Hukum Islam* 6, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.61817/ittihad.v6i2.30>.

⁶⁴ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

⁶⁵ Zubaidi et al., “Relasi Agama Dan Ilmu Dengan.”

⁶⁶ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

⁶⁷ Bennabi, *On the Origins of Human Society*, 78–82.

Bennabi argued that colonialism produced a mindset through which Muslims view religion through Western lenses. He therefore called for an independent sociology of religion rooted in Islamic values and free from colonial thought.⁶⁸ Thus, Bennabi encouraged Muslims to become producers of civilisation rather than consumers of already established Western civilisation.

CONSTRUCTING AN ANTI-COLONIAL SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION FRAMEWORK

Bennabi emphasised that the rise of a civilisation begins with ideological and spiritual transformation. According to him, if religion is understood as a dynamic force that motivates humans to act, then religious ideas can play a central role in driving social change.⁶⁹ Therefore, Bennabi's sociological paradigm of religion encompasses the complex interactions between humans, the time that gives birth to and develops ideas, and the land as their environment. He argued that religion is a catalyst that harmonises these elements to build civilisation.⁷⁰

In Bennabi's view, religion functions not only as a belief system but also as a value system capable of shaping civilisation. He harshly criticised Muslim societies that only understood religion as a ritual without internalising its transformational values.⁷¹ This paradigm was used as a reference by anthropologists such as Edward Burnett Tylor and James Frazer. They considered religions found in non-Western societies to be the earliest forms of human religious development.⁷² Thinkers such as Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx developed theories of religion based on the experiences of European societies, particularly Christian societies, which were then considered universal norms.⁷³ In the colonial context, this thinking reinforced the view that religions outside Christianity, especially those in the Muslim world, Africa, and Asia, were considered "primitive" or "irrational." This is not surprising, because fundamentally, early sociological theories of religion developed under the influence of Eurocentrism, a view that places Western civilisation as the centre of world civilisation.

Looking at the perspectives of these Western thinkers, Bennabi saw the opposite: religion is not the scapegoat, but the key – religion can liberate Muslim societies from the post-colonial mentality that often traps them in cultural and economic dependence on the West. He encouraged a progressive understanding of religion to build community self-confidence.⁷⁴ Bennabi positioned religion as the core of social dynamics, encouraging society to move from a passive stage (underdevelopment) to an active stage (development). Religion was no longer

⁶⁸ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Malik Bennabi, *Syuruth al-Nahdhah* [Conditions for Renaissance], trans. 'Abd al-Shabur Syahin and Umar Kamil Misqawi (Dar al-Fikri, 1987), 61–65.

⁷¹ Asma and Malik, *Islam in History and Society*, 88–91.

⁷² Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 25–30; Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 60–65.

⁷³ Connell, *Southern Theory*, 45–50.

⁷⁴ Bennabi, *Syuruth al-Nahdhah*, 152.

seen merely as something spiritual, but also as a tool for social change.⁷⁵ Bennabi's alternative sociology of religion views religion as a source of intellectual and moral strength for civilisation, offering a relevant framework for Muslim societies still shaped by Western paradigms and capitalist imperatives.

STRATEGY FOR FORMULATING AN AUTHENTIC APPROACH BASED ON MALIK BENNABI'S THOUGHTS

Bennabi called for a sociology of religion grounded in the lived realities of Muslim communities, viewing religion as a productive social and civilisational force rather than merely ritual or doctrine.⁷⁶ The next strategy needed to formulate a new, authentic approach within the context of social reality to reformulate key Islamic ideas into actionable ideas that mobilise society for change.⁷⁷ This means not simply repeating old doctrines but grounding Islamic values in a modern context that, of course, adheres to Islamic values.

Equally important is developing an approach that does not separate faith from social life, but views religion as a guide to ethical and humanistic social transformation.⁷⁸ This strategy can encourage people's religious experiences to become part of the process of building systems of social justice, education, and social solidarity.

The next strategy is to develop an inclusive religious approach to local culture and wisdom, provided it does not conflict with religious values. Local culture should not be viewed as a threat, but as a medium for interpreting and actualising Islamic values.⁷⁹ Authentic religious practices should feel familiar, not foreign or forced, so they can address social issues within a given setting.

And finally, we must instil authentic religious values through education that not only maintains dogmatics but also fosters historical, ethical, and critical awareness. This will then lead to the actualisation of the idea of a civilisational revival, emerging through movements rooted in religious ideas.⁸⁰ This strategy encompasses reforms in the educational curriculum, the *da'wah* (preaching) movement, and public discourse to make them more grounded, thus liberating and enlightening society.

Malik Bennabi's approach positioned education as a process of shaping civilisational awareness, not merely the mastery of technical knowledge. Bennabi asserted that the decline of Muslims was not primarily caused by a lack of resources, but by a crisis of ideas and a colonised way of thinking. Therefore, education must be directed towards liberating reason and fostering moral and social responsibility.⁸¹ Integrated education, according to Bennabi,

⁷⁵ Malik Bennabi, *Daur Al-Muslim Wa Risalatuhu Fi al-Tsuluts al-Akhir Min al-Qarni al-'Isyir* [The Role and Mission of the Muslim in the Last Third of the Twentieth Century] (Dar al-Fikr, 1991), 51.

⁷⁶ Asma and Malik, *Islam in History and Society*, 63.

⁷⁷ Malek Bennabi, *The Problem of Ideas in the Muslim World* (Budaya Ilmu, 1994), 47.

⁷⁸ Bennabi, *Syuruth al-Nahdhah*, 105.

⁷⁹ Malik Bennabi, *Musykilah Tsaqofah* [Problems of Culture] (Daar al-Fikr al-Mu'ashir, 2000).

⁸⁰ Bennabi, *Syuruth al-Nahdhah*, 93.

⁸¹ Bennabi, *The Problem of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

must unite revelation, reason, and social reality so religion functions as a productive force in social life, not merely a ritual symbol.

Bennabi's uniqueness lies in his emphasis on education as an instrument for the reconstruction of civilisation and liberation from epistemic dependency. In "Islam in History and Society and The Conditions of the Renaissance," he demonstrates that the integration of religion and science cannot be achieved solely at the curriculum level but must be accompanied by the formation of an intellectual ethos, historical awareness, and social creativity.⁸² Thus, Bennabi filled the theoretical gap in holistic-integrative educational models that often stop at the pedagogical aspect, by offering an educational framework explicitly aimed at decolonising knowledge and the independent revival of Islamic civilisation.

With several of the strategies mentioned above, the sociology of religion approach in Malik Bennabi's perspective not only understands social phenomena, but can also become an instrument of change that builds an independent Islamic society that refers to Islamic values that are free from colonialism.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AN INDEPENDENT SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Implementing Bennabi's ideas requires a multidimensional sociology of religion that integrates Islamic values with rational social analysis. By cultivating religiously grounded ideas to address contemporary challenges, particularly through value-based and rational education, society can develop independent and anti-colonial thinkers.⁸³

For Bennabi, religion should be a living ethical framework guiding not only spiritual life but also social, economic, and political affairs, including policies grounded in Islamic principles of social justice.⁸⁴ Bennabi rejected Western cultural imitation and advocated integrating Islamic values with local cultures and community-based religious institutions.⁸⁵ Bennabi rejected the colonial mentality by promoting an independent paradigm rooted in Islamic perspectives and strengthening contextually relevant religious studies to counter Western intellectual dominance.⁸⁶

Bennabi viewed transforming the individual (*insan*) as central to social change, requiring personal renewal in awareness and thinking plus improvement of the surrounding social, cultural, and political environment.⁸⁷ According to Bennabi, religion must produce individuals who are socially and spiritually responsible. This is implemented by empowering individuals through education and training based on religious ethical values to create agents of change.⁸⁸

⁸² Asma and Malik, *Islam in History and Society*.

⁸³ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

⁸⁴ Asma and Malik, *Islam in History and Society*, 88–91.

⁸⁵ Bennabi, *Daur Al-Muslim Wa Risalatuhu*, 68–71.

⁸⁶ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

⁸⁷ Bennabi, *Syuruth al-Nahdhah*, 73.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 88–91.

Bennabi advocated integrating religion and science in sociology through interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches to understanding social phenomena.⁸⁹ Bennabi's paradigm integrated religious values, local culture, and science to foster an intellectually, spiritually, and socially independent society while rejecting Western imitation.

MALIK BENNABI'S CIVILISATIONAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE ISLAMIC GOLDEN AGE

Although Bennabi wrote in the 20th century, his civilisational theory explained the conditions that enabled the Islamic Golden Age by examining how societies generate knowledge, innovation, and intellectual creativity.⁹⁰ For Bennabi, civilisation begins not with political or economic power but with transformative ideas that enable religion to cultivate morally responsible and intellectually creative individuals.⁹¹ Religion functions as a civilisational catalyst that unites people, land, and time through shared values, providing ethical purpose, intellectual direction, and collective motivation.⁹² This perspective explains the Islamic Golden Age as the product of an epistemological culture integrating revelation, reason, and moral responsibility, with religion fostering scientific enquiry rather than hindering it.⁹³

Bennabi's concept of the "world of ideas" (*‘ālam al-afkār*) saw ideas as the engine of civilisation, shaping social behaviour, institutions, and intellectual creativity.⁹⁴ Consequently, the remarkable scientific achievements of Muslim scholars such as al-Khwarizmi,⁹⁵ Ibn Sina, al-Biruni, Ibn al-Haytham, al-Farabi, and Ibn Khaldun should not be understood merely as the accomplishments of exceptional individuals. They were products of an intellectual ecosystem sustained by educational institutions, scholarly networks, translation movements, libraries, and patronage systems that collectively nurtured the production, transmission, and critical development of knowledge. Such institutions emerged because Islamic civilisation regarded knowledge (*‘ilm*) as a religious and civilisational obligation rather than simply an instrument of political authority.⁹⁶

The translation movement centred in Bayt al-Ḥikmah provides a compelling illustration of Bennabi's argument regarding civilisation and the productive circulation of ideas. Rather than passively receiving Greek, Persian, or Indian knowledge, Muslim scholars critically appropriated, evaluated, and expanded these traditions within an Islamic intellectual

⁸⁹ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

⁹⁰ Benlahcene, *The Socio-Intellectual Foundations of Malek Bennabi's Approach to Civilization*.

⁹¹ Bennabi, *Syuruth al-Nahdhah*.

⁹² Bariun, "Malik Bennabi and the Intellectual Problems of the Muslim Ummah."

⁹³ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ M. Kharis Majid, "Angka Nol Sebagai Kontribusi Muslim Terhadap Matematika Modern" [The Number Zero as a Muslim Contribution to Modern Mathematics], *Kalimah: Jurnal Studi Agama Dan Pemikiran Islam* 17, no. 1 (2018).

⁹⁶ Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)* (Routledge, 1998); George Makdisi, *Rise of Colleges* (Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

framework. Dimitri Gutas demonstrates that the translation movement represented a conscious civilisational project rather than a mere accumulation of foreign texts.⁹⁷ Bennabi's concept of civilisational creativity helps explain this phenomenon by emphasising that successful civilisations are distinguished not by imitation but by their capacity to transform external knowledge into original intellectual production. Knowledge exchange therefore became a mechanism for innovation because Islamic civilisation possessed an independent epistemological confidence rooted in its worldview.⁹⁸

Closely related to this intellectual dynamism was the development of educational institutions that systematically cultivated scholarly excellence across the Muslim world. Bennabi consistently argued that education should not be understood merely as the transmission of information but as the formation of civilisational consciousness capable of generating creative individuals.⁹⁹ This perspective resonates strongly with the historical emergence of *madrasas* (educational institutions), libraries, observatories, hospitals, and scholarly circles that characterised the Islamic Golden Age. George Makdisi's seminal study demonstrates that institutions such as the *madrasa* played a decisive role in institutionalising advanced learning, creating transregional scholarly networks, and preserving intellectual continuity across generations.¹⁰⁰ From Bennabi's perspective, these institutions succeeded because they embodied a broader civilisational vision in which education integrated ethical formation, intellectual discipline, and social responsibility rather than separating knowledge from morality.

Bennabi explained civilisational decline as an internal crisis of ideas: societies weaken when they lose intellectual creativity and become passive consumers rather than producers of ideas, making external pressures decisive.¹⁰¹ From this perspective, the decline of Muslim intellectual leadership, for example, cannot be explained solely by military or political events but must also be understood as an epistemological transformation in which the dynamic relationship between religion, knowledge, and civilisation gradually weakened.

This supports the article's decolonial argument: unlike classical sociology, Bennabi viewed religion as an independent civilisational force capable of generating knowledge, education, institutions, and intellectual creativity, as demonstrated by the Islamic Golden Age.¹⁰² Bennabi connected the decolonisation of the sociology of religion with the Islamic Golden Age by showing how revelation, reason, ethics, education, and ideas collectively fostered scientific enquiry and knowledge production, challenging Eurocentric accounts of Islamic civilisation.

⁹⁷ Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*.

⁹⁸ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Makdisi, *Rise of Colleges*.

¹⁰¹ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*; Benlahcene, *The Socio-Intellectual Foundations of Malek Bennabi's Approach to Civilization*.

¹⁰² Bennabi, *Syuruth al-Nahdhah*; Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*.

CONCLUSION

This study argues that decolonising the sociology of religion requires more than exposing Eurocentric and Christocentric assumptions; it requires constructing an alternative epistemic framework. Malik Bennabi provides directions toward such a framework, some aspects of which are discussed in this article by treating religion as a productive civilisational force that connects revelation, reason, ethics, ideas, education, and social organisation. His critique of intellectual dependency, particularly through the concepts of colonisability and the colonised mentality, explains why political independence alone does not guarantee epistemic autonomy.

The article has also shown why Bennabi is relevant to the intellectual foundations of the Islamic Golden Age. His 20th century theory is not presented as a historical cause of that period, but as an analytical lens for identifying the conditions that made sustained knowledge production possible: a productive world of ideas, an integrated religious and intellectual ethos, educational institutions, knowledge exchange, and creative engagement with inherited traditions. The translation movement, scholarly networks, and educational institutions illustrate how these conditions supported scientific enquiry and innovation across the Muslim world.

Bennabi's contribution to the sociology of religion lies in moving from critique to paradigm construction. Education becomes the practical mechanism through which epistemic dependence can be overcome and creative social agency restored. Future research can test and refine this framework through comparative historical studies and empirical investigations of Muslim educational and intellectual institutions.

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