

The Spiritual Function of Civilisation

By

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(An Address given in Arabic at the Azhar University, Cairo, during the Islamic Conference of 1964).

WE have heard many times during this conference the words "development"¹: (*tatawwur*) and "progress" (*taqaddum*) and "renewal" (*tajdid*) and "renaissance" (*nandah*), and perhaps it will not be a waste of time to pause and consider what they mean. "Development" means moving away from the principles; and although it is necessary to move a certain distance from the principles in order to make applications of them, it is of vital importance to remain near enough for contact with them to be fully effective. Development must therefore, never go beyond a certain point. Our ancestors were acutely conscious that this danger point had been reached in Islam hundreds of years ago; and for us, who are so much further removed in time than they were from the ideal community of the Prophet and his companions, the danger is all the greater. How then shall we presume not to be on our guard? How shall we presume not to live in fear of increasing our distance from the principles to the point where development becomes degeneration? And indeed it may well be asked as regards most of what is proudly spoken of today as development: is it not in fact degeneration?

As for "progress", every individual should hope to progress, and that is the meaning of our prayer *Lead us along the straight path.*² The word "development" could also be used of individuals in the same positive sense. But communities do not progress; if they did, what community was better qualified to progress than the first Islamic community in all the impetus of its youth? Yet the Prophet said: "The best of my people are my generation; then those that come after them; then those that come after them." And we must conclude from the Quran that with the passage of the centuries a general hardening of hearts is inevitable, for it says of one community *a long length of time passed over them so that their hearts were hardened*; and this same truth is to be understood also from what the Quran says of the elect, that they are *many in the earlier generations and few in the later generations*. The hope of communities must lie, not in "progress" or "development", but in "renewal", that is, restoration. The word "renewal" has been used so far throughout this conference mainly as a rather vague synonym of "development," but in its traditional, apostolic sense, renewal is the opposite of development, for it means a restoration of something of the primordial vigour of Islam, and it is thus a movement of return. That is, a movement in a backward rather than a forward direction. Renewal has taken place from time to time, often more or less suddenly, when a renewer has been providentially sent to arrest development and to pull back the community to a closer contact with the principles.

As to "renaissance" it might in itself be used in the same sense as "renewal"; but this word "renaissance" has very inauspicious associations, because the movement which is called the European Renaissance was nothing other, if we examine it carefully, than a renewal of the paganism of ancient Greece and Rome; and that the same "renaissance" marked the end of the traditional Christian civilization, and the beginning of this modern materialistic civilization. Is

the "renaissance" which we now hear of as taking place in the Arab states different from that one, or is it of the same kind?

There is not one of us, whether he be Arab or non-Arab, who does not rejoice in the independence of the Arab states and of Islamic countries in general; and it was to be hoped that this independence would bring about a return to the noble civilization of Islam. But what do we see? We see the doors flung wide open to everything that comes from Europe and America without the slightest discrimination. And it is to be noticed that the terms, *mandub* (strongly recommended)³ and *makrûh* (strongly discouraged) have changed their significance. Thus, in the eyes of the champions of this "renaissance" which we are now supposed to be enjoying, what is to be "strongly discouraged" is everything that is left of the Islamic civilization in the way of customs⁴ such as wearing the turban and not shaving off the beard, whereas what is "strongly recommended" is everything that comes from the West. It may well be that only a very few actually go so far as to say that this or that is to be discouraged because it belongs to the civilization of our pious ancestors or that a thing is to be recommended because it comes from the West. But to judge by the facts, one might imagine that such words were on every tongue, such thoughts in every head. And what is the result of this? The result is that the rising generation is more ignorant of the practices of the Messenger of God, and more cut off from those practices, than any generation that has come into existence since the dawn of Islam. How then shall we augur well of the present situation? And how shall we not shrink from the word "renaissance" as from an evil omen?

All this was foreseen by the Prophet. He said: "You will follow the ways of those that were before you⁵ span for span and cubit for cubit until if they went down into the hole of a poisonous reptile you would follow them down." That descent is now taking place; and it is called "development" and "progress".

More than one delegate has mentioned, during this conference, that Islam embraces the whole of life, and no one doubts this. But what is actually happening today in many if not most Islamic countries is that life is embracing Islam—embracing, no, for it is a stranglehold rather than an embrace! Life is crowding religion out, pushing it into a little corner and stifling it more and more so that it can scarcely breathe.

And what is the remedy?

By way of answering this question, let us recollect certain outer aspects of our civilization—I mean, the Islamic civilization—aspects whose function was, and can be again, to act as a protective shell for the kernel, that is, for the religion itself. The fabric of our civilization is woven out of the example set by our Prophet; and particularly significant in this connection is the fact that his house was a prolongation of his Mosque. Thus for twelve hundred years—and more in many Islamic countries—the houses of his people were prolongations of the Mosques. The Muslim would take off his shoes when he entered his house just as he would take them off when he entered the Mosque; he would sit in his house in the same manner as he sat in the Mosque; he would put such ornaments on the walls of his house as he saw on the walls of the Mosque; nor would he put in his house any ornaments which would not be suitable for the Mosque. Thus he was continually surrounded by reminders of the spiritual dignity and spiritual responsibilities of man; and he dressed himself according to the same principles. His clothes were in keeping with the dignity of man's function as representative of God on earth, and at the same time they made it easy for him to perform the ablution, and they were in perfect conformity with the movements of

the prayer. Moreover they were an ornament to the prayer, unlike modern European clothes which rob the movements of the prayer of all their beauty, and impede them, just as they act as a barrier between the body and the ablution.

All that I have mentioned is outward: but the outward acts upon the inward and a man's clothes and his home are the nearest of all things to his soul, and their influence on it is perpetual and therefore incalculably powerful. There can be no doubt that these outward things were one of the secrets of the depth of piety among Muslims, for twelve hundred years; and this brings us back to the saying that Islam embraces the whole of life. Thanks to the outer aspects of the Islamic civilization the whole of life was in fact penetrated by religion; and I see no other remedy for our present religious crisis but a return to that noble civilization whose function it is to create a worthy setting for the spirit of the religion, a setting which makes relatively easy the fulfilment of our ritual obligations. Nor can the community dispense with the help of anything that makes this spiritual life easier, for *man was created weak*. But this return can only be accomplished by the widespread setting of examples.

Arabs, you are in the abode of Islam,⁶ where after your independence you are free to do what you will; and we look towards you from outside that abode and place our hopes in you. Do not disappoint us.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

In the philosophy that we are considering, only the contemplative and active lives are reckoned human. The life of pleasure only, one of which the end is pleasure, is subhuman; every animal "knows what it likes," and seeks for it. This is not an exclusion of pleasure from life as if pleasure were wrong in itself, it is an exclusion of the pursuit of pleasure thought of as a "diversion," and apart from "life." It is in life itself, in "proper operation," that pleasure arises naturally, and this very pleasure is said to "perfect the operation" itself. In the same way in the case of the pleasures of use or the understanding of use.

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¹ The conference in question was officially held "in response to the spirit of development," and there are reasons to think that it was intended to be something of a parallel to the Vatican Council.

² Quotations from the Quran are in italics

³ In Islam—and the same must be implicitly if not explicitly true of all religions—every earthly possibility falls in to one of five categories, being either obligatory (*fard*), strongly recommended (*mandub*), allowed (*mubâh*), strongly discouraged (*makrûh*) or forbidden (*haram*). It is against the second and fourth of these that a subversive movement will direct its efforts, at any rate to begin with, for since they are less absolute than the first and the fifth, it is easier to break through their defences.

⁴ *Sunan* (sing. *sunnah*), that is, customs of the Prophet.

⁵ The Jews and the Christians.

⁶ *Dar al-Islam*, strictly speaking that part of the world which is under Islamic law, but here used more loosely to include any state that is officially Islamic.