

# Exploring Abul Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī’s views on distinctive features of Islamic civilization

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## Abstract

The seventh to thirteenth centuries was a very glorious period of Islamic civilization. During this time, the Islamic world advanced in the arts and sciences and influenced other segments of the world. Unfortunately, due to the rise of Arab imperialism, Islamic civilization experienced many ups and downs, but the remarkable decline was noticed after Western dominance over the Muslim world started to increase a few centuries ago. Under the influence of Western civilization, the Muslim world began to regress towards backwardness. As a matter of fact, Muslims all over the world are in decline, and in order to retain their lofty status, Nadwī suggested reviving Islamic civilization as an alternative to Western civilization. He criticized Western civilization for its moral degradation and lack of spirituality. This paper, therefore, will explore Nadwī’s views on the most distinctive features of Islamic civilization in comparison to Western civilization. Nadwī strongly believed that Islamic civilization should be the pillar of world civilization that can guide humankind toward the right path in this world and otherworldly life.

**Key words** Features, Islamic civilization, Islamic revivalism, Western civilization

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

This paper will explore the views of Abul Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī and his vision of civilization from an Islamic perspective. He emphasized that Islamic civilization is different from other civilizations in its definition and characteristic. For Nadwī, civilization is not a mere project of copy and paste or a platform that would be structured after a few addition and subtractions to the borrowed theories and ideologies; rather there are some other necessary elements required for building a civilization. It forms in many stages and its contents surely represent the identities and distinct features of a nation, and perhaps, that is why the process has been referred to as a test of intelligence, ingenuity, determination, and religious understanding (Nadwī, 1963). In Nadwī’s



understanding, it is necessary to form a civilization based on one's strengths and resources rather than subscribing to someone else's ideologies and assets. However, that does not mean the prohibition of accepting virtuous works and knowledge from others (Nadwī, 1963).

## **2. Nadwī's criticism of western civilization**

Nadwī criticized Western civilization for its moral degradation. He claimed that the West paid no value to ethics if they had no practical utility, unlike Islam which values ethical and moral issues regardless of their practical utility or not. During the seventeenth century, Western philosophers advocated that the ethical principles which do not have a connection with the material progress need not to be cared seriously and those principles deserve no credit. Nadwī said;

“That new, utilitarian morality becomes daily more and more visible. All virtues having a direct bearing upon the material welfare of society, as, for example, technical efficiency, patriotism, nationalist group-sense, are being exalted and sometimes absurdly exaggerated in their value, while virtues which, until now, have been valued from a purely ethical point of view, as, for example, filial love or sexual fidelity, rapidly lose their importance because they do not confer a tangible, material benefit upon society” (Nadwī, 2005: 164-165).

Nadwī strongly believes that the power of the West today is not everlasting, and it will be over soon. For him, the Western civilization has lost the competence to survive, however, the breakthroughs in science and technologies have never been denied by anyone.

Apart from its moral crisis, the West is suffering from the devolution of some other core values. Even though it has excelled in showcasing the talents in various fields of humanities, social and natural sciences, it has tragically lost its balance (Nadwī, 1983a). Similarly, it is believed by scholars like Mumford that the West has lost the capacity of being in the operation of world leadership due to its moral decadence. It is therefore distracting and misleading the followers. Lewis Mumford said;

“The invisible breakdown of our civilization is.... the erosion of values, the dissipation of human purpose, the denial of the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, and reversion to sub-human levels of conduct” (Mumford, 1991:148).

Thus, Nadwī argued that the West cannot lead humanity, despite its extraordinary industrial capacities, its technological and economic progress, the excellency of merchandise, and a great deal of masterminds. It is also impossible for the West to derive benefit from the philosophies it created and to instruct the world through its guidance for it is missing the key of faith. Instilling this key is the way to overcome all the obstacles and move forward (Nadwī, 1979a).

Nadwī emphasized that the world needs to be led by a new order of leadership for the West has no more competency due to its moral decay and spiritual apathy. It is a serious need for new and innovative leadership that will bear prophetic guidance as a yardstick and his instruction as a parameter of worldly affairs and generate a course of balance and adjustment between religion and science, spirituality and materiality (Nadwī, 1983b). The most capable of this responsibility is the leadership of Muslims. The Muslims represent the best nation assigned for the guidance and leadership of the whole human community. It is not enough for them to be confined within the limited spheres of life ignoring other pragmatic issues of life; rather their responsibility includes the work for the holistic development of their fellow communities (Nadwī, 1979b). As an alternative to the Western leadership, Nadwī argued that Muslim leadership is the most suitable representative to head the nation in the right way as it is accorded with both spiritual and moral qualities.

Since Nadwī is pessimistic about the Western civilization and its leadership, he found it necessary to present an alternative, which in his view is a stable and virtuous civilization. This civilization is based on an accurate and sacred notion of God, His attributes, guidance, and the philosophy of life that guides a man to his rightful place in the total scheme of life (Nadwī, 1979a). Nadwī highlighted the features of Islamic civilization as an alternative legal power to accept the authority.

Western civilization, according to Nadwī, does not come under the definition and merits he outlined. He viewed self-centeredness that calls toward the absolute materialistic view of life. Having studied the nature and features of Western civilization, and analyzing those advocated slogans, Nadwī argued that this civilization does not accept people who belong to different cultures, and it gives emphasis on worldly progress with complete ignorance of ethical and spiritual aspects of life. On the contrary, Islamic civilization stands as an ideology personifying a balanced philosophy of life, ensuring material progress together with uplifting spirituality and strengthening moral foundations. It is the outcome of a dual relationship between man and God built on absolute faith, love, compassion, responsibilities as well as accountability (Nadwī, 1963). Therefore, Nadwī's alternative and ideal civilization is Islamic civilization.

Islamic civilization is not stagnant and irresponsive to changes that occurred with the change of time. To a Muslim, Islam means a worldview, not a mere religion. Hence, it accepts all social changes that do not create any contradiction with Islam and morality. Adopting the realities of everyday life does not impact on the basics; rather it continuously adds value. Thus, considering the dynamic and pragmatic facts of Islamic civilization in theory as well as practice, Nadwī mentioned in a laconic style that Islamic civilization

is as lenient as silk and as hard as steel (Nadwī, 2005). He believed that Islamic civilization should take the authority over the world leadership.

### 3. Distinctive features of Islamic civilization

Nadwī pointed out a few factors that implicitly or explicitly contributed to the rise of Islamic civilization and lacking those elements precipitated the decline of Muslims as well.

#### 3.1. Revealed guidance as a source of reference

During the early period of Islam, Muslims were very loyal to the revealed guidance, the *Qur'ān* and the *Sunnah*, and accepted them as solutions for all problems of life. They have made *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah* the primary source of reference instead of any other system or tradition (Nadwī, 2005). In his view, Nadwī claimed that the hidden power of the glorious days of Muslims was their steadfastness to the *Qur'ān* and the Prophet (PBUH), and their surrender to the injunctions of the *Qur'ān* and the Prophet (PBUH) turned their life into a balanced, moderate and good human being. The Prophet (PBUH) said;

“I have left two matters with you; as long as you hold to them, you will not go the wrong way; they are the Book of Allah (*Qur'ān*) and the *Sunnah* of the Prophet” (Mu'atta Mālik, Book 46, Ḥadīth 1628).

Thus, Nadwī believes that it is imperative to turn back to the revolutionary message of Islam. This message of God is the core of any revolution that happened to Islam and Muslims. It is ‘a simple, dynamic, radiant message, a grander and more majestic message than anything the world could hope to receive’ (Nadwī, 2005). The wholehearted submission and acceptance of this message caused dynamic changes in the course of history for Muslims in the past and gained many victories over the other nations. This can again be revived and lead to a renaissance if Muslims turn back to this message, which is meant for the guidance of humanity from all dark and evil ways to light (Nadwī, 1950). Nadwī’s argument is since the *Qur'ān* could spark a paradigm shift in the people of the early period of Islam, it is still capable of doing so again without a doubt, for Muslims still have the same *Qur'ān*. However, he observed that, despite having the *Qur'ān*, the reflection of its teachings is missing among Muslims.

Some Western ideologies, such as nationalism, liberalism, secularism, and others are prevailing in the Muslim societies, and those ideologies are well accepted by many Muslims in different parts of the world although they are harmful in various ways. Therefore, it is an urgent need for Muslims to reject the man-made doctrines or ideologies and turn back to the divine guidance of the *Qur'ān* and *Sunnah*.

#### 3.2. Role of intellectuals and leaders

Nadwī acknowledged the role of intellectuals and leaders in maintaining the proper social orders in society. Since the implementation of *Qur'ānic*



injunctions is one of the important factors for the revival of Islamic civilization, Nadwī emphasized that it is the responsibility of intellectuals or religious scholars to explain those injunctions as well as to get the support of the leaders for their applications. Nadwī connected his claim of great responsibility of intellectuals or religious scholars and ruling authorities by stating the saying of the Prophet (PBUH);

“Two types of people; scholars and the leaders, if they remain upright, the whole society will remain upright. If they are corrupted, then the whole society becomes corrupted too” (Al-Suyūṭī, 2008: 935).

Thus, scholars and rulers are an intrinsic element for the viability of a religion or ideology. Al-Suyūṭī (2008) notes that the above *hadith* highlighted three challenges for a religion; dissolute jurist, tyrant ruler, and ignorant scholar.

The other role of scholars and leaders is to ensure the unification of the *ummah* as the Islamic world, according to Nadwī, which is currently suffering from disunity. Nadwī noted that during the Arab-Israel war, the Arabs were missing unity among them (Nadwī, 2005). In addition, Arab and Muslim countries have changed greatly in terms of their attitude and behaviour. They discarded traditional values and embraced the Western ones. The abhorrence to the traditional roots and indifference to the Islamic elements eased the infiltration of the Western agenda into Muslim countries. At this critical juncture, Muslim leadership failed to take any serious steps to preserve the Islamic way of life, or to avert the cultural intrusion of the West. Nadwī claimed that the state authority of Muslim countries took no initiatives to prevent the crisis led by the infiltration of Western values, except for the attempts made by the social organization (Keda, 2006). Hence, the role of the leaders and scholars was critical in this regard to protect the *ummah* from Western socio-cultural encroachment and revive Islamic civilization.

### 3.3. Broad and far-reaching ideological vision

Nadwī believes, among the essential qualities of Muslims, their 'ākhīrah (after world life) centric world view, generosity, and commitment to the Islamic beliefs. These qualities were evident among the early Muslims who disseminated the message of peace, justice, truth, and humanity to all. These attitudes of the early Muslims somehow opened doors and broke fences between Arabs and non-Arabs, which ultimately gifted them victory in many cases. Nadwī emphasized that the ideology of cultural diversity, the ubiquity of equal rights, opportunities as well as open acceptance for all irrespective of colour, race, and religion were not a calibre of any tribe; rather is of an ideology that is meant for all human beings. Here, Islamic civilization came into contrast with the ideologies grounded on the sense of national, geographical, economical or linguistic sentiments.

Since the Arabs played a pioneering role in Islamic civilization, Nadwī reminded them repeatedly of their previous position in Islamic history and culture and investigated why and how Arabs were overtaken by European

colonial powers. Nadwī was very concerned about these issues and had always a special feeling toward the Arabs. He even said that if any community deserved his utmost praise and respect, it was surely the Arabs and he had enough reasons to offer that credit to the Arab community (Nadwī, 2006). Nadwī, therefore, dedicated several writings on his investigations and observations of the challenges which Arab communities were facing. When he observed that the scholars are focusing on how to alleviate the effects of the onslaught right after the Arab-Israeli War in 1967, Nadwī rather urged them to focus on the causes of the war and said that eliminating the causes of attack was better than removing the effects brought by it (ʿAwīs, 2005). Thus, he always emphasized on broad and far-reaching vision, for it can secure a bright future for the *ummah*.

#### 3.4. Harmonious blending between materiality and spirituality

Another feature of early Muslims, according to Nadwī, is maintaining a balance between dealing with worldly matters of comfort and enriching their souls with virtues as well as heavenly spirits. Excessive focus on the material and temporal issues might gain superiority in many aspects, but it adversely affects the moral and ethical ground of individuals. Likewise, one's denial of worldly temporal interests, comfort and materials may lead him to the way of celibacy which is strongly discouraged by Islam. Nadwī observed that the predecessors could make a bridge between the two (Nadwī, 2005). The problem with later Muslim generations that they fail to make a balance between material gains and divine spirits due to the conflation of means (material comforts) with the goals (the ultimate happiness). Thus, Nadwī urged Muslims to uphold the harmonious blend between worldly and otherworldly life. From an Islamic point of view, this worldly life is not the ending, and it is not the ultimate destination, rather, it is a means to reach the eternal life of happiness and blessings. It indeed does not demean the importance of worldly life. Fairly, all activities deserve great attention and care owing to the means for the goal and sources of life hereafter (Nadwī, 1963).

#### 3.5. Moral and spiritual ground

Nadwī observes that a crucial difference between Islam and the West is that Islam professes its ideologies through spiritual grounds whereas a Muslim concentrates more on moral, ethical and transcendental truths, unlike the West, which reveals its message through material manifestations. The pleasure of God, devotion and faith unto Him, and unquestionable submission to His law make a Muslim spirituality uplifted. These core spirits demarcate the line between Islam and the West. In his view, the Muslim *ummah* experiencing a very critical time. Muslims are oppressed in many parts of the world and their lands are occupied, even the holy place of *Bayt al-Maqdis*. According to Nadwī, the root cause of the suffering is the absence of strong faith, total submission, and loyalty, the attitude of reliance and trust unto God in facing

the challenges (Nadwī, 1950). Hence, these spirits are required to be reinstalled as preconditions of their revival and renaissance.

The great power of Muslims, according to Nadwī, is the power of faith in Allah. He warned Muslims about the strategies of enemies in destroying this power through creating doubts in religious issues and weakening their faith. In order to accomplish their objectives, the enemies applied two strategies; inferiority complex and pessimism (Nadwī, 1971). Nadwī believes that through permeating inferiority complex they want Muslims to denigrate all issues concerning Muslims' religious, cultural and ethical values, and admire to whatever is European and Western. The ultimate result of this will be that Muslims will believe that they are backward in true sense and the West is advanced and the Western mode of life is blissful. This is exactly the idea what the orientalists have promoted for decades and are successful in this regard.

Secondly, the spread of pessimism is aimed to divert the Muslim mind from Allah as a centre of hope and to depend on someone else. Sometimes, the foreign power takes advantage of the rough situations of Muslims by offering refuge, money, and all kinds of assistance. Muslims, fell prey to this tactic due to their lack of piety and sacrifice religion for material gains and betray their community for the sake of mere position and status (Nadwī, 1971). The two strategies marked by Nadwī are very significant. In fact, the first one will ultimately lead to the later one. Although Nadwī did not produce any clear proof for both Western strategies, orientalists' polemical works strengthen Nadwī's claim in this regard. The precipitations of many intellectual figures of the Muslim world are irrefutable in wake of Westernization in Muslim countries. Therefore, Nadwī emphasized the strengthening of the foundation of faith among Muslims to face Western domination. His three books *al-sirā'ubayna al-'imānwa al-māddīyah*, *mādhākebasira al-'alam bi inḥiṭāṭ al-muslimīn*, and *al-ṣirā'ubayna al-fikrah al-islāmīyyahwa al-gharbīyyah* provided a very particular idea on this matter (Qaraḏāwī, 2001).

Nadwī reminded that the status quo of Muslims must be changed in which they are required to restore valour, firm determination, and *tawakkul* (placing trust in Allah). At the same time, avoiding a slavish and cowardly attitude, feelings of inferiority and greed for material things. For Nadwī, the material objects have no power; it is the spirit of a man who can make use of those objects. Similarly, the bedrock for Muslim victory is not the war; rather it is the spirit and motive that inspire soldiers to fight for its cause (Arsalan, 1930). In this regard, Nadwī emphasized that the ultimate faith in God is very crucial to maintain, for it is the core of every activity of a Muslim's life.

In his deliberation on the course of the fall and rise of Islamic civilization, Nadwī did not mainly focus on the material loss that the Eastern and Muslim countries suffered; Rather his serious attention was on the spiritual loss that humanity faced. He wrote;

“We will not speak now of the grievous material losses the Eastern countries have suffered since the rise of the West. We will speak of the real, the moral and spiritual losses of mankind as a whole” (Euben, & Zaman, 2009: 125).

In short, Nadwī emphasized that Islamic civilization has a body and soul. The body of civilization is its material advancement in terms of buildings, industrial facilities, machinery or anything related to material advancement. Meanwhile, the soul of civilization is the set of creeds and concepts which condition the behaviours of individuals and groups, their mutual relationship and their worldview. The Islamic faith, imbued with its values and principles, is the soul of Islamic civilization and its basis. This, indeed, is a strong factor that contributed to the rise and prosperity of this civilization.

### 3.6. Moral and intellectual war

Morality is a great property of any society and it can be compared with the spirit and soul. Muslims were in the front line of culture and civilization as long as if they preserved their moral stature, therefore, moral decadence should be stopped for Islamic resurgence (Arsalan, 1930). In his writings, Nadwī marked the moral decline of Muslim leaders from the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties onwards, which affected largely their subjects and permeated gradually in the Muslim societies.

Nadwī claimed that Muslims in the current world do not have enough courage to preach Islam to the West for they themselves are far away from Islam and its moral guidance (Nadwī, 1978). Moreover, the power of science and technology is undeniable in the age of modernity. The system of war in the current world is quite different from any other period in history. Thus, there is no way to show the negligent and indifferent attitude toward scientific advancement as Muslims had shown in the past according to Lewis;

“The Renaissance, the Reformation, the technological revolution passed virtually unnoticed in the lands of Islam, where they were still inclined to dismiss the denizens of the lands beyond the Western frontier as benighted barbarians” (Lewis, 2002: 7).

I humbly disagree with such a blanket statement made by Lewis and argue that his claim does not reflect the whole response of the Muslim world. There are two other responses to Western technological revolutions by the Muslim world (by Muslim reformers; pro-west reformers and Islamic anti-west reformers) which cannot be denied.

However, the backwardness of Muslims must be overcome to survive with the waves of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Muslims must pursue excellence in all fields of knowledge. Nadwī believed that the revival of Muslims lies in overcoming the existing voids and securing excellence in all disciplines of arts, science, and technologies.

#### 4. Conclusion

The beginning of Islamic civilization was marked basically from the seventh century after the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) granted prophecy and started his missionary activities of Islam. It gradually disseminated and built a well-grounded foundation during the lifetime of the Prophet. After the demise of the Prophet (PBUH), Islamic civilization continued to flourish under the leadership of his companions and successors. The seventh to thirteenth centuries was very historic and glorious period of Islamic civilization. During this span of time the Islamic world advanced in the arts and sciences and influenced other segments of the world. Unfortunately, the Muslim world could not maintain the chain of its consecutive strides. Thus, it experienced many ups and downs, but the remarkable decline was noticed after Western dominance over the Muslim world started to increase a few centuries ago.

Despite its tremendous advancement, the Western civilization has been missing the key aspects of faith which according to Nadwī, is very fundamental to any civilization. Therefore, Western civilization does not have capacity to take a lead for humanity. The capacity does not belong to any civilization except Islamic civilization for it is grounded on monotheism (*tawhīd*) and universalism (*al-'ālamīyyah*) which is open for all irrespective of races and ethnicities. Faith in God, spirituality, moral and ethical values, divine transcendental truths are conceived as key elements of Islamic civilization, which are inescapable and cannot be ignored for the sake of human intellect and rationale. Nadwī emphasized that divine facts are always superior to human understanding for there are enormous opportunities for the rationale and human intellect to be misguided whereas divine theories are undoubtedly sound. It is true that Islamic civilization is overtaken by the rise of Western civilization, but it has enormous capacities to be revived if the existing challenges are overcome.

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