

What does it mean to be civilized?

(Spahic Omer)

Among the names given to Madinah as the first Islamic city was *Taybah*, which means "good", "pure", "wholesome" and "virtuous". The name was given by none other than Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him).

In doing so the Prophet (pbuh) wanted to teach people more than a few lessons on the meaning and scope of what later came to be known as culture and civilization.

The Prophet (pbuh) also called Madinah *Tabah*, whose meaning is similar to that of *Taybah*. Both *Taybah* and *Tabah* are derived from the Arabic verb *taba/yatibu*, which means to be "good", "pure" and "upright". Related to the verb are the noun *tibah*, which means "goodness", "purity" and "righteousness", and the adjective *tayyib*, which means "good", "pure" and "righteous".

The Prophet (pbuh) added another name (*Tabah*) to the name *Taybah* - albeit with the same connotation - most probably with the intention of bringing the importance of the Madinah marvel home to people, and to draw their attention to how crucial its transformative undertakings were.

The Prophet (pbuh) migrated with his companions from Makkah to Madinah primarily because he realized that the former's predominantly hostile conditions were uncondusive for the full implementation of Islam as a total way and code of life. Having spent thirteen years in Makkah trying the impossible, the Prophet (pbuh)

needed to consider other more favourable options. Madinah proved the perfect one.

As a matter of fact, there was no then Madinah as such. There was only a vast geographical area with a number of loosely interrelated and interconnected big and small tribal settlements. The area was called Yathrib.

The name Yathrib was derived from the Arabic words *tharb* and *tathrib*. The words contained some negative connotations such as blaming, condemning and misbehaving. The Prophet (pbuh) disliked the name, seeing it inappropriate for the world-shattering Madinah phenomenon. Therefore, he immediately rescinded the place's old name and called the emerging urban wonder *Madinah*.

No sooner had the Prophet (pbuh) arrived in Yathrib (Madinah) than he embarked on planning, building and organizing a city: the city of Madinah. The undertaking encompassed community integration as well.

The word *madinah* means "city". By naming thus the prototype Islamic city, and in general by his overall urbanization and development policies and programs, the Prophet (pbuh) indirectly suggested that Islam with its global and inclusive disposition favours urban and settled over rural and desert, or unsettled, life.

That also means that Islam favours organization, order, elegance, culture, dynamism, sufficient wherewithal and peace, over disorder, anarchy, rudeness, vulgarity, lethargy, poverty and conflict.

All the ideals of Islam were achieved most unequivocally in the city-state of Madinah under the leadership of the Prophet (pbuh). Hence, Madinah was called *taybah*. The description unmistakably echoed what the city, at once as a concept and sensory reality, entailed and stood for.

Madinah became a personification of purity, goodness and virtue at all levels of its existence and operation. It was a symbol of success in this world and a gateway to success in the hereafter.

The Prophet (pbuh) dubbed Madinah *taybah* perhaps by analogy with the Qur'anic vocabulary according to which the successful and prosperous homeland of Sheba was called *baldah tayyibah* (a land most goodly, pure and happy) (Saba', 15).

The Qur'an likewise calls a good, clean and productive land *al-balad al-tayyib*. It yields rich produce by the permission of Allah at all times (al-A'raf, 58). In a similar way, all things, occurrences, dealings, environments, as well as persons, that are *tayyib* (good, clean and productive) can only lead to and generate more *tayyib*.

Tayyib is an antidote to depravity and all sorts of impurity. It incessantly breeds but more *tayyib*, just as "barren soil (land, life systems and milieus) yields nothing but poor produce (or it springs up hardly anything useful)" (al-A'raf, 58).

Madinah as *Taybah* was the culmination of a process that was initiated in Heaven. It further signified the final result of a continuous interaction between Heaven and earth, and between spirit and matter, exhibiting how the latter can be employed as a means for achieving the interests of the former as an existential goal.

Madinah connoted the confluence of the two spheres. It was a physical locus to which the most important aspects of the metaphysical realm were transported and were given a terrestrial chi and nuance.

Maybe that is why - and Allah knows best - the blessed *Rawdah*, a space inside the Prophet's Mosque between his house, which adjoined the Mosque, and his *minbar* (pulpit), is designated by Allah as a garden

of the gardens of Paradise. The *minbar* itself is said to be upon the Prophet's cistern (*hawd*), as a prominent element of the hereafter (Sahih al-Bukhari).

Goodness and purity from Allah to people

Madinah as *Taybah* was a composite, consisting of and being enriched by several other factors and influences that carried the same substance.

For example, behind everything that was happening stood Almighty Allah who is *Tayyib* (the Good, the Pure, the Kind and the Source as well as Bestower of all goodness, wholesomeness and purity) and who accepts only that which is *tayyib* (good and pure) in deed, saying and thought.

Moreover, Allah blesses people with good provision, making only the good, pure and beneficial things lawful (*tayyibat*), and prohibiting the bad ones whether in food, drinks, deeds, manners and beliefs.

This leads to the creation of good, pure and virtuous men (*tayyibun*) and women (*tayyibat*) who are bent on living good, pure and virtuous lives (*hayah tayyibah*). They do things that are good (*tayyib*), shunning the bad or evil ones (*khabith*). They heed the words of Allah: "Not equal are things that are bad (*khabith*) and things that are good (*tayyib*) even though the abundance of the bad may dazzle you. So be mindful of Allah, O people of reason, so you may be successful" (al-Ma'idah, 100).

Allah supports good and pure men and women (*tayyibun* and *tayyibat*) with the good, authentic and firm word of faith (*kalimah tayyibah*). The word is compared to "a good tree (*shajarah tayyibah*), firmly rooted, reaching out with its branches towards the sky" (Ibrahim, 24, 27). Those men and women will be rewarded on the Day of Judgment

with Paradise and its goodly and splendid mansions (*masakin tayyibah*) (al-Saff, 12).

All this takes place in a societal context that is infused with an amalgamation of the heavenly and earthly goodness, virtue and integrity. That context with its people and their productive ways of life becomes a quintessence of everything good and positive. It becomes a pure, good and happy land. It becomes *tayyibah*.

No other land or settlement deserved more to be called *taybah* than the city of the Prophet (pbuh). That was so because: Madinah is a sanctuary and enjoys sanctity; it was the place of *hijrah* (migration) where many leading *sahabah* (companions) settled and died; it was the first centre of *jihād*; it was the first centre of authentic Islamic culture and civilization; in it most of the verses on rulings and laws were revealed; in it the Prophet (pbuh) also settled and died, even though Makkah, his birthplace, was eventually liberated; faith will retreat to Madinah "as a snake retreats to its hole"; in it there is the Prophet's holy Mosque and the blessed *Rawdah*; in it there is the blessed valley of al-'Aqiq; no one intends ill towards the people of Madinah but Allah will destroy him; and finally, because it is the gathering-point of the Muslims in the beginning and at the end.

The scholars of Islam are unanimous that Makkah and Madinah are the best places on earth. However, they differ as to which of them is best.

The meaning of civilization in Islam

Madinah as *Taybah* gives us a clue as to the meaning of progress and civilization in Islam.

In Islam, man is created as Allah's vicegerent on earth. His exclusive task is to submit to and worship his Creator. That is to say that man

is created to worship no other deity except Allah, and to live and appreciate life not according to his limited knowledge, selfish fantasies and vested interests, but according to the divine will and infinite knowledge of his Creator and the Creator of all that exists.

In order to facilitate man's realization of his terrestrial mission, Allah vowed that man's permanent companions on earth will be His heavenly guidance conveyed by numerous prophets, alongside His infinite compassion, love and providence. To make things yet better and more aided, man is created with *fitrah* or the primordial nature, which incessantly yearns for its Creator and Cherisher. In addition, endless signs that indicate the presence and greatness of Allah have been planted throughout the universe including all its animate and inanimate beings.

In this fashion, the truth was rendered a normality and falsehood an anomaly in life. Worshipping Allah the Creator became man's *raison d'etre*. Everything else is inadequate and eventually turns out to be, one way or another, a form of existential futility and superficiality. Nothing other than following the way of Allah ensures victory in this world and Paradise in the hereafter.

That being said, man is created on the right path and in the right environment. He is Allah's trustee on earth and the earth belongs to Allah alone. Man is created good, innocent and pure. His only job is to stay the course and not to deviate therefrom into the abyss of untruth and deceit.

Man is furthermore created intelligent with the seeds and potentials to become highly enlightened, cultured and refined. He inherently abhors evil and all sorts of impropriety. By the same token, he loves to strive and succeed, and loathes unproductivity and failure.

Accordingly, civilization would be any socio-politico-economic systems and development models that aim to recognize man as he is, to help him attain his self-realization and thus fulfil his existential purpose and mission, and to work on removing all potential impediments that stand in man's and his noble mission's way.

Civilization is to be viewed rigidly neither through the lens of the cyclic nor linear progression patterns. Rather, civilization - as a sign of man's advanced social and cultural consciousness and growth - is to be seen as a heavenly gift to man and as an intended constant reality of life. Man and civilization are one. They should not be set apart.

Man is created civilized in the sense that from the very beginning he always had opportunities to rise to the challenges of his life status and mission, and so, to succeed and be happy. He was always in the know and was able to do what was necessary to obtain the pleasure of his Creator and his Paradise.

The first man and prophet on earth, Adam, was civilized, in that he succeeded in life and is now in the afterlife enjoying the fruits of his earthly success. Adam did and achieved exactly what everyone in every time and place should do and dream to achieve.

The same could be said about all the successful and prosperous people throughout human history, including Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his companions in Madinah. They all succeeded in their life assignments. Their successes bred contentment, inner peace and happiness. The Creator was also happy with them.

They were all civilized in the truest sense of the word. Moreover, they and their life paradigms were exemplars of civilization. Every person from any subsequent age and generation, who aspires to be truly civilized, should emulate them. He should learn from the masters.

In other words, authentic civilization is synonymous with authentic success, happiness, wisdom and certainty. Civilized people are only those who epitomize and put into effect those benchmarks. Both civilization and backwardness, culture and primitivism, can be found in any age and place.

No conglomeration of science, technology, urban development, arts, architecture, crafts, manners, ways of social life, styles of culture and conduct of politics - which promotes a life of spiritual waywardness, immorality, destruction of values, and exaltation of matter and animal desires, deserves to be called a civilization. A true civilization never advocates the prospects of degrading and destroying the true meaning and purpose of man and life. Nor does it lead man to perversity in this world and perdition in the hereafter.

Allah says about individual and organized evil forces on earth: "They invite you to the Fire while Allah invites you to Paradise and forgiveness by His grace..." (al-Baqarah, 221).

Certainly, there can be no good whatsoever in any person, idea or system that promotes and invites to the Fire, whereas all good lies in persons, ideas and systems that exemplify, uphold and invite to Allah's Paradise and His forgiveness.

In generating Islamic civilization, Muslims ought to concentrate as much on the past and the role model set by the Prophet (pbuh) and whosoever followed in his footsteps, as on the present and future. Islamic civilization is a delicate blend of giving and taking in connection with the prescriptions of the past and the challenges and opportunities of the present and future times.

Islamic civilization furthermore is a combination of evolution (growth), revolution (reform and change) and devolution (backward

evolution to earlier times). It is a combination of following in religion and inventing in worldly matters. It is about shaping the earth and being shaped by Heaven.

How important is material development?

In the Islamic worldview, material development is relevant only inasmuch as it functions as resources and means for the actualization and facilitation of the spiritual, ethical, intellectual and cultural developments. Material development is not an end in itself. Its importance is conditional. It will always play second fiddle to the other non-material forms of development and prosperity.

Man is made of body and soul. The former constantly decays and will in the end perish - like the rest of the physical world. Whereas the latter can always thrive, and lives on. It is only logical and genuinely productive that humankind's cultural and civilizational efforts focus on the enduring and generously rewarding needs of the soul, instead of the short-lived and meagre returns from the acts of glorifying and serving the body (matter).

Material aspects of civilization are relative. They should not be pursued at the expense of the spiritual ones. It is true that certain material and quantifiable factors, such as the military, a new-found wealth, nationalism and Ibn Khaldun's 'asabiyyah (social solidarity), often exert a great deal of influence on the rise and fall of civilizations.

However, without the authentic spiritual and moral factors, those influences are destined to wither very fast. Under such circumstances, no civilizational longevity, impact and vestige are warranted. The civilizational legacies resulting therefrom will always be questioned by posterity.

It stands to reason that civilization is all about the truth: how and how much it has been recognized, actualized, applied, and its propagation and advancement supported and facilitated. Needless to say that the truth is age, space, geography and nationality-blind. It transcends them all. So should man likewise rise above all those artificial frontiers in his thinking, deportment, and cultural as well as civilizational drives.

Civilization is measured against the truth and what kind of people it produces. Material aspects are secondary. They too are measured against their services to the truth and to the people who are its servants.

Civilization is about possessing the right worldview, building the human character, moulding the human mind, producing and training people to lead successful and happy lives, and about creating strong bonds between a man and his self, between a man and other people, between a man and his environment, and between a man and Heaven.

Material development alone is deceptive and useless. It can be dangerous and anti-civilization. For instance, what is intrinsically significant about unsustainable development and future, concrete jungles, workaholism, endless consumerism, junk entertainment, unfulfilling pop culture, aesthetic subjectivism or relativism, the art of confusion, and irresponsible exploration and exploitation of the natural world, particularly so when they are connected with the people who are disoriented, sceptical, immoral, and ignorant about the fundamental things pertaining to their selves, life and ontological destiny?

For goodness' sake, how can it be said that a person is civilized who - despite making remarkable progress in a number of fields - believes that life is an accident and purposeless; that man had evolved from

apes and is the result of a series of cosmic accidents (Stephen Hawking, one of the "greatest" modern scientific minds, said that people are just an advanced breed of monkeys); that man's life is meaningless and purposeless; that nothing exists except matter and its movements and modifications; and that physical pleasure and comfort are the solitary existential goals of man?

Furthermore, how can it be acknowledged that a person is civilized who still wonders who/what man is, what life is, why we are here, and what human rights are; who struggles to comprehend and define marriage and family, and whether the white man and the rest are completely the same and equal; who lives and rules by the principle of "might is right"; and who believes in alien worlds and civilizations, and in humanity's impending contacts, or conflicts, with some of them - for if life on earth is an accident, similar accidents could happen anywhere else, on any other planet?

By no means can the notion of civilization be advanced on the basis of ignorance, doubt, snobbery and defiance of reason and Heaven. Sheer quantity and form should not take precedence over quality and substance. Nor should the real value and profundity be bartered for superficiality and a charade.

Correspondingly, short-term material gains should not eclipse quests for long-term wholesome benefits and happiness. As Ernst Schumacher, a German-British economist, once said: "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius - and a lot of courage to move in the opposite direction."

It follows that as far as the Islamic monotheistic message is concerned, seldom is there a civilizational and cultural output stemming from such a materialistic and nihilistic worldview that can

be totally appropriate, pure and trustworthy. Most civilizational components are contaminated one way or another, and some more and others less.

As a consequence, many wonder if modern Western civilization - anchored in agnosticism, double standards, exploitation, moral degradation, pleasure-seeking and confusion - is a form of modern primitivism or primitive modernity. Yet some regard it as a modern *jahiliyyah* (age of ignorance).

It is no surprise that many Muslim scholars call for an Islamization, or purification, of the most critical and most unavoidable aspects of modern civilization before they are resorted to and integrated into the fabrics of Muslim societies. That is to say, they call for rendering those aspects wholesome and pure (*tayyib*). In any case, no unconditional and wholehearted adoption of modern Western civilization is possible for the Muslims.

The perpetual confrontations between civilization and primitivism

Since man was created inclined to the truth and civilized, his both individual and collective attention should aim at how to cultivate to the fullest and sustain such a dormant potential of his. This should be the heart and soul of what we call today sustainability and sustainable development.

And sure enough, whenever humanity plunged into the darkness of excessive wickedness, immorality and sin - often on behalf of material development and wellbeing, civilization, super-patriotism, social cohesion and culture - Allah sent His messengers to try to save the day and to set things right. Allah sent His cures for the prevalent corruption, malice and misconduct. The latter were the antitheses of

the truth and proper civilization for which they were unwelcome both on earth and in Heaven.

For example, the epic conflict between Prophet Musa (Moses) and Pharaoh was a conflict between the truth and calls for a genuine civilization, on the one hand, and the widespread falsehood, ignorance, corruption and the lack of true civilization, on the other. The same holds true with regard to all other messengers of Allah and their prophetic missions.

Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) lived and created a civilization surrounded by the two superpowers of the day and their respective civilizations: the Romans and the Persians. However, he was never moved by their ostensible supremacy and wealth. On the contrary, in his eyes, they were misguided and were the sources of much mischief on earth, annulling thereby most of what was associated with them in the name of civilization and its advancement. Thus, they too were the target of the Prophet's preaching. They too were invited to mend their ways and to return to the path of the truth, light and trustworthy civilization.

The Prophet's Madinah fulfilled all the necessary civilizational requirements and criteria. Therefore, it was the most civilized city-state, and the Prophet's time was the most civilized epoch in the history of mankind. It was the golden age of Islamic, yet human, civilization. All subsequent geographical milieus and historical periods fell short in more than one aspect of the Prophet's pattern of civilization building.

Indeed, there was only one Madinah and one Taybah. There was only one archetypal, almost utopian, civilizational model: the Prophet's model. Hence, the earnest and open-minded researchers can't get enough of it. In its depths lie the answers to all civilizational conundrums of man.

The Prophet (pbuh) said: "The best people are those of my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them. Then, there will come people after them whose testimony precedes their oaths and their oaths precede their testimony" (Sahih al-Bukhari).

It should be observed that the Prophet (pbuh) said "the best people" and not "the best Muslims". The abovementioned *hadith* (tradition) of the Prophet (pbuh) was meant to be universal and all-inclusive.

In passing, some people consider especially the first Abbasid period as the golden age of Islamic civilization. Elements of this appraisal are strewn in our academic references and teaching textbooks. However, this is wide of the mark. It is the unfortunate result of observing Islamic civilization merely through the prism of the Western materialistic outlook.

In doing so, one sees only remarkable strides made in science, technology, art and architecture. But one does not see a serious decline in people's spirituality and genuine religious scholarship; that the intellectual and religious leadership was at perennial odds with the political leadership; that especially religious scholars suffered greatly, with many spending years in prisons tortured and humiliated; that Islamic orthodoxy was recurrently endangered; that the Muslim community was seriously divided and was beset by gory civil wars, etc.

One wonders, then, what was golden in that particular period when compared with the Prophet's Madinah and its status as *Taybah*. The answer is: very little. In fact, authentic Islamic civilization suffered a lot during that time. It was the beginning of a process that ultimately resulted in the invasion and destruction of significant parts of the Islamic state by the Mongols. It was a time when the Muslims

and Islamic civilization were brought to their knees. They barely recovered thereafter.

Civilization in the West as a problematic concept

The concept of civilization in the West today is a polar opposite of what the Islamic worldview espouses. Its exclusive emphasis on humanism, materialism and material development - and everything that goes with that, with reference to the socio-political and economic progress based on the desacralization of man and the cosmos, and on a perceived separation from and an egocentric domination over the natural environment - is what Islam and its civilization tries to avoid at all costs.

Civilization in the West is perceived along the lines of the ideology of the transformational or linear evolution of man and society. Modern man is seen as evolved from a primitive to a civilized state, the latter representing the high watermark of human potential. "History is generally understood as an evolutionary advancement from the backwardness of Stone Age humans to the sophistication of the moderns."

The modern conception of civilization emerged during the Renaissance, Age of Reason and Enlightenment eras, in order to mark those latest and most promising phases in human socio-politico-economic development.

The English word "civilization" comes from the 16th-century French "civilise" ("civilized"), from Latin "civilis" ("civil"), which is related to "civis" ("citizen") and "civitas" ("city").

The first use in English is attributed to Adam Ferguson - a Scottish philosopher and historian of the Scottish Enlightenment - who in his 1767 "Essay on the History of Civil Society" wrote: "Not only the

individual advances from infancy to manhood, but the species itself from rudeness to civilization." The word "civilization" was therefore opposed to barbarism or rudeness, in the active pursuit of progress characteristic of the Age of Enlightenment (*Civilization*, Wikipedia).

The Renaissance, Age of Reason and Enlightenment eras served as precursors to modernity. Their chief doctrines revolved around severe criticism and outright rejection of tradition, spiritual certitude, moral conformity, and religious beliefs and values. Put differently, the protagonists of modernity and its ideological harbingers championed the idea of repudiating God and deifying man. Man's exaggerated talents and inflated abilities were placed on a pedestal.

For that reason, as a matter of fact, there are no fully comparable words in Arabic for the idea of civilization and what it entails. The most widely used term is *hadarah*, which simply means "living in cities and other permanent settlements", as opposed to *badw* or *badawah*, which means the opposite, that is, "living in the desert as nomads, or in impermanent settlements".

The term *hadarah* or *hidarah* was used long before the emergence of the Western concept of civilization by Ibn Khaldun in his *Muqaddimah* and Ibn Manzur in his *Lisan al-'Arab*, but that was only in relation to the word's linguistic meaning (life in cities and permanent settlements), and not for its possible technical meaning in relation to the notion of civilization. Translating Ibn Khaldun's and Ibn Manzur's *hadarah* or *hidarah* as "civilization" and applying the same at once in the Islamic and Western contexts is a form of scientific distortion.

Another word for civilization in Arabic is *tamaddun*, which is derived from *madinah* ("city") and thus contains the corresponding meanings.

These two terms (*hadarah* and *tamaddun*) were used because they were closest to what the novel Western expression of civilization involved. At the same time, however, they were able to comprise only the basic meanings and dimensions of civilization as endorsed by the Islamic message. Hence, articulating the concepts of *hadarah* and *tamaddun* in the context of Islamic culture and civilization can be very tricky, in which case an injustice to the latter can be done.

The terms were approximate translations of the newly fashioned concept in the West and its civilization. They were meant to be as shallow and superficial as the subject matter they defined. Nevertheless, authentic Islamic civilization is more profound and much richer than anything the term "civilization" and all its alternative expressions can put forward.

Initially, there was no equivalent Arabic word for civilization. The reason for that was simple: there was no concept of civilization either. There were only various expressions for life realities that later fell under the purview of civilization. (By the way, for the similar reasons, the same applies to translating into Arabic the idea of culture.)

An excellent example is Ibn Khaldun again. Since the thorough concept of civilization was yet to be formulated, he used various terms for articulating his ground-breaking thoughts. The most frequent and standardized term was the concept of *'umran*, which means "development", "urbanization", "construction" and "urban refinement". In the title of one of his *Muqaddimah's* chapters, Ibn Khaldun used the complex term of *al-'umran al-hadari* (city urbanization and development). He thus combined the notions of development and *hadari* or *hadarah* in one context.

On account of all this, Ibn Khaldun is regarded as one of the greatest scientists in the world. He is legitimately regarded as a founding

father of sociology and the philosophy of history. Thus, he should be duly acknowledged and followed even in the domains of philosophy and language. In no way should he be portrayed as a follower, not even in the slightest.

All in all, the term *taybah*, with all its sister expressions, seems to be most comprehensive and most suitable for the phenomenon of Islamic civilization. It was the Qur'anic way and the way of the Prophet (pbuh) to convey the message of what the true Islamic civilization should be.

Therefore, from *taybah* and its root word, perhaps a unique term for Islamic civilization should be derived, a term that will perfectly mirror the true meaning and character of Islamic civilization. *Hadarah* and *tamaddun* perform the task only in some measure, just as the word "civilization" - for whose translation they have been used - does.

Finally, civilization is generally identifiable with cities. There is a causal relationship between them, cities being the cause and civilization the effect. Villages and other smaller-than-cities settlements are not included thereby. Intentionally or otherwise, they are practically not roped into the span of civilization. Which is unfair because those small settlements and their communities can, and certainly do, contribute in more ways than one to the civilization of a place.

This thinking was of the main reasons for the frenzied and uncontrolled urbanization in the late 19th and the entire 20th century. People were desperate to migrate to cities to seek prosperity and become "civilized". Today, the problems associated with mismanaged urbanization are some of the worst problems that plague humanity. They threaten to undo everything civilizational in cities.