



# THE NOTION OF PROGRESS AS SEEN THROUGH EASTERN AND WESTERN EYES

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## Introduction

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries marked the beginning of a new phase in attempts to establish closer relations between “Eastern” and “Western” civilizations, with contacts and exchanges taking place between two sides that differed from each other not only in their cultures but also in their religions and ideas. The West was no longer dominated by the Church and now saw itself as being guided by the intellect in an “Age of Enlightenment”, while Eastern civilization was still rooted in religion and regarded mankind’s Golden Age as lying behind it rather than ahead of it.

This is why any inter-cultural discussion about “progress” entails an objective approach to the history of “East-West” relations, along with a recognition of the specific characteristics that distinguish the cultures from each other. A “spiritual interaction” between historically or geographically different civilizations will necessarily



be motivated by a need to overcome their peoples' respective crises, even if the crises themselves might be both ostensibly and essentially dissimilar. Meanwhile, exchanges of knowledge and information have proved to be the most effective way of developing fruitful bilateral relationships.

In this article we shall endeavour to examine the origins of the idea of “progress” in Western civilization and see how it relates to the culture of the Arab East. As a concept it represents a philosophical vision of history as a linear process that moves forward from the “lower” to the “higher”. This view is based upon a succession of historical examples in which modern Western civilization is seen as representing the peak.

Its Eastern counterpart can be seen in the Renaissance of Arab culture – a phenomenon which, while following the Western path, has transformed its self-image from one of cultural subservience to one that sees itself as being authentically “progressive”, so that the concept of “Renaissance” has acquired the connotation of “progress” – one of the elements that form part of Western culture's essential make-up. At the same time, it has caused other concepts such as “reform”, “renewal”, “modernisation” and “enlightenment” to become acceptable to intellectuals in the East.

Arab “Renaissance discourse” is fond of using terms like “backwardness”, “slumber” and “subjection” to describe the state of the East (that is to say, to describe its situation since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, or from the era of the Ottoman Empire), when comparing it with the “rationalism”, “liberty” and “progress” associated with the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. The term “backwardness” defines one state of reality as against another – the reality of the East versus the reality of the West – assigning the East to the Age of Benightedness and the West to the Age of Progress and Momentum. The historic meeting between “backwardness” and “progress” began when al Tahtawi (1801-1873) visited France and this duality (backwardness-progress/East-West) came to represent the initial face of the Arab Renaissance. We can see historical evidence of that Eastern “backwardness” in the dominance of the quasi-feudal mode of production, as well as in the stagnant but complex social relationships that existed. Other elements included political despotism and a resistance

to cultural innovation fed by the traditional religious educational establishments. These traits are brought into sharp relief when we compare them with the West's historic progress as a result of the capitalist mode of production, which also gave rise to democratic political institutions and the spread of rationalist thought.

### The meaning of progress

The word “progress” indicates that something exists before another thing so that the second cannot exist unless there has been a first. Philosophers class it in four categories:

**One:** Progress whereby a “one before” needs a “one after” in the same way that one needs two.

**Two:** Progress in the context of time, whereby the “one before” is present at a time in which the “one after” is not present, such as Aristotle being the “one before” and al Farabi being the “one after”.

**Three:** Progress in degree or order, whereby the “one before” is closer to a particular starting point; this degree or order may be either intrinsic – such as with a succession of categories and types – or random, such as the order of students in a class according to their proximity or distance from the teacher.

**Four:** Progress in causality, in which a cause is “entitled” to exist before its effect.

Philosophers assign these categories to two classes: “rational” and “temporal”. “Rational progress” applies when there is a logical connection between two things, whereby if one of them is a first cause and the other is a consequence, then the first is rationally or intrinsically the “one before”. “Temporal progress” applies when one of two things is older in time than the other.<sup>1</sup>

The word itself – “progress” (in Arabic “*taqaddum*”) – indicates moving forward, or movement in a particular direction. (That is the meaning of

<sup>1</sup> Jamil Saliba: *Al Mu'jam al Falsafi*, Dar al Kitab al Lubnani, Beirut, Lebanon, 1971, p. 321.



the English word “progress” and its French counterpart “progres”; the two words are derived from the Latin “progressus”, which comes from the verb “progredere”, meaning “to move forward”<sup>1</sup>. This word is the opposite of “retrogradation”, “retreat” or “backwardness”. We can use it in the context of things like “industrial progress”, the “progress of an illness” or the “progress (or advance) of an army”. True progress is “continuous progress” which is “finite”, in the sense that it is heading towards a specific goal in a specific field; when something is “infinite” it entails a continuous transition under specific conditions from a previous point to a subsequent point and so on, such as a sequence of numbers or a sequence of causes and effects.

There is also “incremental” or “absolute” progress. “Incremental progress” is the transition from good to better – that is, from a state that people regard as “backward” to a state that they consider to be “consummate” or “complete”. People will differ according to their values over the nature of this transition. “Absolute progress” is progress resulting from historical or existential inevitability, or from the finality which dominates the changes that occur in life.<sup>2</sup>

Some people confuse “progress” with “change”. “Change” is a term applied to existential evolution and the world of physical phenomena. It is also used in the context of social and historical phenomena related to nature and the forces that exist in the universe. On the other hand, “progress” (in this context) is one aspect of “change”, but it applies specifically to “value-related change” – i.e. when people see an event occur and attach a particular human significance to it that is relevant to the individual or society.

Belief in progress is a feature of a philosophy that endorses and accepts movement as a positive value, while rejecting the idea of certainty

1 *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Simon Blackburn, Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 305. See also Wilson H. Coates: *What is Progress?* *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 45, and No. 3 (Jan. 29<sup>th</sup> 1948), p. 67.

2 *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Paul Edwards, Editor-in-Chief, the Macmillan Company and the Free Press, New York, 1967, Vol. 6, p. 483. See also Jamil Saliba: *Ibid.* p. 322, and Andrew Edgar and Peter Sayyid Huwaik: *Mawsu’at al Nadhariyyah al Thaqafiyyah, Basic Concepts and Terms*, translated by Hana’ al Gowhari, Edited with commentary by Mohammad al Gohari, Al Markaz al Aqwmi li’l Tarjumah, Cairo, 2009, p. 199.

being a necessary element of human knowledge or experience. Or to put it another way, support for progress is a characteristic of a philosophy which says that the world is deficient and incomplete.

In this connection, and by contrast, the philosopher Plato (427-347 BC) is an example of a philosophy which does not accept the concept of “progress” because it (i.e. his philosophy) basically rejects the idea of “change”; in his view the “Virtuous City” must remain for ever, because – as the human incarnation of the ideal world – it is the ultimate embodiment of human perfection. Equally, the revealed religions believe that the changes that have occurred in the human condition are not “progress”. Rather, they represent “retrogression” when seen in comparison with the state of total bliss enjoyed by Adam and Eve.<sup>1</sup>

It is easy to understand that every civilization has encountered the concept of “progress”. However, Western civilization has come to see it as being pivotal to the “knowledge system”. During the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century modern thought expressed its full confidence in the intellectual and methodological principles that it had been establishing during the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, while distancing itself from the traditional ideas and values of the previous centuries. The philosophical and mathematical systems based on the principle of perfection became increasingly popular and every philosopher began to set up his own school of thought in opposition to the previous prevailing school, and leading proponents of the “new science” felt that their knowledge was superior to that of the previous centuries. Their approach drew a clear distinction between reason and revelation and between science and faith and they exulted in their own “progress” and “development”.

All these trends were grouped together under the general heading of

1 *Al Mawsu'ah al Falsafiyah al 'Arabiyyah*, edited by Ma'an Ziyadah, Ma'had al Inma' al 'Arabi, 1986, Vol. 1, Terms and Concepts, p. 294.

-See also Ralph Barton Perry: *Afaq al Qimah; Dirasah Naqdiyyah li'l Hadharah al Insaniyyah*, translated by Abdel Muhsin'Atif Salam, edited by Mohammad 'Ali al 'Ariyan, Intro. by Zaki Naguib Mahmoud, Maktabat al Nahdah al Misriyyah, 1968, p. 540.



“The Enlightenment”<sup>1</sup> – a social construct for the concept of “natural light” previously mooted by Descartes (1596-1650) and Spinoza (1632-1677).<sup>2</sup> The “Age of Enlightenment” was chock full of philosophers of the “progress” variety such as Turgot (1727-1781), who tried to trace the history of the human race on the basis of the concept of “progress” and summarised the idea in his book *A Discourse on World History*, which was published in 1750. In his view the human race (as a single society and a single body) is constantly moving ahead towards a state of perfection and progress; however, as it moves forward its tendency is towards slow and deliberate movement rather than haste and improvisation. In doing so it sometimes acts and produces in a calm and tranquil manner, while at other times it leaps ahead and follows the path of revolution.

Turgot believed that there must be a general law under which mankind is inevitably and continuously moving forward and progressing from a primitive state to one of civilization and progress. As he saw it: “Experience teaches people how they can constantly improve the meaning of what it is to be human within themselves. In recent times they have come to share a general sense of mutual love and noble sentiments, and this has tempered a strong tendency among individuals and nations to seek revenge [for wrongs done to them]”.<sup>3</sup>

Condorcet (1743-1794) produced a blueprint for the history of civilization based on the idea of “progress” and described what he saw as the historical progress of the human mind. The main focus of his idea was on the unbreakable unity between intellectual progress, liberty, virtue and respect for natural rights, and he believed that science

**1** The 18<sup>th</sup> century is known as the “Age of Enlightenment” – an era in which experimental rational philosophy came to the fore, rejecting metaphysics and religion and focusing on mathematics, astronomy, natural sciences, physics, chemistry, natural history, geography and medicine. It was a philosophy which believed in change and sought “renewal” in everything, placing all its trust in the intellect.

**2** Hasan Hanafi: *Qadhaya Mu’asirah*, Dar al Tanwir, Beirut, Lebanon, Part 2, p. 101.

**3** Edited by Frank E. Manue: *The Prophets of Paris: Turgot, Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Fourier and Comte*, Harper and Row, New York, 1965.

-Compare with Abdel ‘Aziz ‘Ezzat: *Falsafat al Tarikh wa ‘Ilm al Ijtima’*, Maktabat al Fikrah, Cairo, 1951, pp. 183-184.

had a major part to play in eradicating bigotry. In his view, all political and moral failings stemmed from beliefs based on false premises which were intimately related to ignorance of physics and the laws of nature. According to him, the new “school of progress” was a tool for enlightenment which would deal a mortal blow to bigotry and narrow-mindedness. He then proceeded to prove – on the basis of the facts of history – that in the process of developing mankind’s natural dispositions Nature is not bound by any conditions or limitations; indeed, the only consideration that can prevent the achievement of perfection is the question of how long the earth will last.<sup>1</sup>

Auguste Comte (1820-1903) saw the progress of human societies as a straight line rising from lower to higher; i.e. societies move forward “automatically” and are driven by the laws of necessity.

This was also the age which saw the publication of the *French Encyclopaedia*, edited by Diderot (1713-1784) and d’Alembert (1717-1783). This monumental work included contributions from writers and thinkers who glorified the intellect and the power of reason and saw “progress” in knowledge as an accepted fact. One of these contributors – Fontenelle (1657-1757) – raised the banners of progress and reason and, in an appeal for the “progress of the new knowledge”, declared war upon “the old knowledge”. This optimistic view which characterised the Age of Enlightenment was a particularly French phenomenon and was championed by French Enlightenment philosophers during the reign of King Louis XIV when life was easy and the better-off classes were steeped in luxury. Even so, there were some dissident voices that objected to the notion of “progress”. The clergy made no effort to hide their disapproval of “reason”. Pascal (1623-1662) did not recognize the sovereignty of reason and the intellect, while Luther (1483-1546) dismissed it in uncompromising terms as a Satanic affliction. Rousseau (1712-1778) tried to prove that

1 J. B. Bury: *The Idea of Progress*, translated by Ahmad Hamdi Mahmoud, edited by Ahmad Khaki, al Majlis al A’la li’l Thaqafah, Cairo, 1982, pp. 182-184.

-See also Antoine Nicolas de Condorcet: *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind*, Translated by June Barraclough, with an Introduction by Stuart Hampshire, London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1955, p. 60.



history had in fact retrogressed when he declared that our souls “are exposed to corruption at the same time as our knowledge and arts are progressing towards perfection”.<sup>1</sup>

Britain showed little enthusiasm for the notion of “progress”, possibly because its political and social situation was stable. Consequently, most people there wanted to preserve that stability and this led British intellectuals to adopt a cautious attitude towards the idea. Hume (1711-1776) maintained that the world had to pass through various stages from childhood and maturity to middle age and senility. Mankind was part of this process and the arts and sciences thrived from time to time before starting to decline again.<sup>2</sup>

Despite all the caveats, reservations and criticisms that some intellectuals expressed about the idea of “progress”, the major scientific discoveries and inventions of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries resulted in absolute trust being placed – irreversibly – in the power of the human mind. The tremendous scientific progress led philosophers to see the notion of “progress” as an inescapable historical necessity, so that they imagined that civilization was capable of “infinite progress”. Consequently they began to abandon the idea of corruption and decline.

This led to the emergence of a speculative, hypothetical approach to history in the 18<sup>th</sup> century in which reason was applied as a tool for discovering the natural laws governing the evolution and development of the human race as a whole. The thinkers of that period came to see “progress” not as an accidental phenomenon, but as a historical necessity.<sup>3</sup>

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1 J. B. Bury: *Ibid.* p. 161.

2 David Spadafora: *The Idea of Progress in the Eighteenth Century*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1990, p. 18.  
-See also J. B. Bury: *ibid.* pp. 189-190.

3 Ahmad Mahmoud Subhi: *Fi Falsafat al Tarikh*, Mu’assasat al Thaqafah al Gami’iyah, Alexandria, 1975, pp. 177-179.  
-See also ‘Atiyat Abu Sa’ud: *Falsafat al Tarikh ‘inda Giambattista Vico*, Dar al Tanwir li’l Tiba’ah wa’l Nashr wa’l Tawzi ‘, Beirut, Lebanon, 2006, p. 5.

Most Eastern thinkers see the concept of “progress” as an embodiment of self-awareness and a proper understanding of history and it is regarded as one of the most significant issues preoccupying the intellectuals of today. While it may actually be only one of the many matters that are of major importance to scholars and philosophers, “progress” is probably the sole subject with universal appeal to Eastern thought. At the same time, it is also the driving force behind the intellectual contribution to shaping the modern world. However, the word “*taqaddum*” – which means “progress” in Arabic – is not the term most commonly used by thinkers in the Arab East. Several other expressions gained considerably wider currency during the period between the two World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of these is “*taraqqi*”, which suggests qualitative improvement and rising to a higher level on the ladder of existence, and another is *tahadhdhur*, which has connotations of *taharrur* (throwing off shackles) and the attainment of human dignity. Thus, any endeavour leading to greater *taharrur*, and any ability Man might acquire in order to bend Nature to his will, relieve mankind from tyranny or liberate the self from its narrow limitations should be seen as a “progressive gain”.<sup>1</sup>

“*Tahdith*”<sup>2</sup> – or “modernisation” – is another alternative term which conveys the idea of intellectual and cultural change and renewal and opening up new horizons in those fields. “*Islah*” – or “reform” – is associated with the religious renewal movement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries led by al Kawakibi (1848-1902) and Mohammad Abduh (1849-1905). “*Islah*” also means non-radical change in the form of government or social relations while leaving the basic elements in place; in other words, improvements to the political and social systems.

1 Dr. Fahmi Jad’an: *Usus al Taqaddum ‘inda Mufakkiri’l Islam fi’l ‘Alam al ‘Arabi al Hadith*, Dar al Shuruq li’l Nashr wa’l Tawzi’, Amman, Jordan, 1988, p. 11.

-See also Qustantin Zuraq: *Fi Ma’rakati’l Hadharah*, Dar al ‘Ilm li’l Malayin, Beirut, Lebanon, 1981, p. 293.

2 “*Tahdith*” in Arab thought is believed by some thinkers to start with an assertion of identity. Once it has been secured, it is possible to move on to a positive “opening up” to contemporary cultures. In doing so, it is necessary to acquire the scientific capabilities and technological and organisational skills that form the basis of political, economic, social and intellectual life in today’s world. Only then will it be possible for a nation to achieve its national goals and resume its role as a full participant in global civilization.



The term “*tanwir*” – or “enlightenment” – also indicates rebellion; that is, revolution and a rejection of the existing situation and a desire to change the present-day reality. “*Tanwir*” is a movement for a fundamental change in Arab culture – in the broader anthropological sense of the word “culture” – and it is the result of direct cultural contact with the West and the impact of the intellectual values upon which Western culture is based.

“*Nahdhah*”<sup>1</sup> – which means “renaissance” – is a term that has its origins in the movement that swept through the Arab countries and awakened their peoples to their illustrious past and the reality of their present-day backwardness. The word “*nahdhah*” refers to the Arabs’ efforts to revive that past, overcome their present failure to join the march of civilization and work for a better future.<sup>2</sup>

## How the idea of “progress” evolved historically

The concept of “progress” is a central element of Western civilization. It has its origins in Classical Greek philosophy and is linked to the notion of “perfectability” – i.e. the idea that perfection is achievable and that it is possible to attain a state of virtue, wisdom and happiness. The Greeks were also familiar with the view that human civilization goes through a process of gradual development which takes man from savagery to a nobler state. Aeschylus (452-525 BC) – one of the leading Ancient Greek tragedians – depicted how people originally lived in damp, dark caves until Prometheus<sup>3</sup> rescued them from their primitive state after teaching them the higher things of life.

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- 1 The word “renaissance” (“*nahdhah*”), which means “rebirth” and “renewal”, comes from the French verb “*renaitre*” – “to be born again” – and from the Latin “*renasci*”. In European culture it refers to a historical reality that actually happened and it is a term that was coined “subsequently”. In Arab thought and culture it is completely different. It refers not to a reality that has already occurred (as is the case with European thought), but to a reality that the Arabs “aspire to achieve”. In other words, in Arab culture the term has been coined “in advance”; it refers not to something which exists and has actually happened, but to something that might happen in the future.
  - 2 Compare Anwar Abdul Malik: *Al Fikr al ‘Arabi fi Ma’rakat al Nahdhah*, translated and edited by Badruddin ‘Arudaki, Dar al Adab, Beirut, Lebanon, 1978, p. 17, and Kamal Abdel Latif: *Salamah Musa wa Ishkaliyyat al Nahdhah*, Ru’yah li’l Nashr wa’l Tawzi ‘, Cairo, 2009, pp. 23-30.
  - 3 Prometheus was a Titan in Greek mythology who created the human race out of clay. He stole the heavenly fire from the chariot of the sun and hid it in a hollow stick. Then he took it down to earth and gave it to mankind.

So the idea of human evolution and progress is consistent with the mythological tradition of Divine intervention raising Man from a natural state to a supernatural one – that is, the concept is based on eternal truths that recognize that there is a permanent link between the lower world and the sacred worlds of the spirit.<sup>1</sup> This view is not incompatible with the belief that Man’s early existence began with a Fall from Grace, before he gradually improved his social and material well-being during subsequent eras.

Although the Greek philosophers recognized the concept of “relative progress”, their general view was that Man is living in an age of inescapable decline and decay - inescapable because the force of Nature compels him to follow the path it has chosen for him. In Plato’s view the world was created by God; it draws its driving force from Him and one of its attributes is perfection since it is His creation. At the same time, however, it is not eternal and contains the seeds of its own destruction or corruption.<sup>2</sup> This notion offers one of several examples which demonstrate that the Greeks saw society as being governed by an ideal system; they believed that when this system is stable, any deviation from it leads to a change for the worse. When Aristotle (322-384 BC) looked at the concept from a practical angle, he concluded that it was not feasible to change any firmly established social system.<sup>3</sup>

The Stoic philosopher Seneca (3 BC- 65 CE) believed that human life was destined to be regularly subjected to disasters in the form of fires, floods and other catastrophes. In his view, every historical period begins with a Golden Age in which its people live simple, tranquil lives, before it is followed by decline and fall. The arts and inventions play a contributory role in the process of decline because they create the conditions for decadence and vice.

On the other hand, the Epicurean philosophy rejected the idea of a Golden Age and subsequent decline, since this was clearly incompatible

<sup>1</sup> For further details see Firas al Sawwah: *Al Usturah wa'l Ma'na; Dirasat fi'l Mithulujjiya wa'l Diyanat al Sharqiyyah*, Manshurat Dar Ala' al Din, Damascus, 1997, p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Rupert C. Loge: *Plato and Progress*, The Philosophical Review, Vol. 55, No. 6 (Nov. 1946), p.651.

<sup>3</sup> J. B. Bury: *The Idea of Progress*, p. 36.



with their theory that the world was comprised of atoms (these atoms were invisible and perpetual and varied in size, weight and form) and that there was no such thing as Divine intervention.<sup>1</sup> They believed that the first humans lived in similar conditions to those of the animals and that from this primitive and “wretched” state they progressed until they reached their current level of civilization.

In dismissing the theory of “decline” the Epicureans took an important step towards embracing the idea of “progress” since they saw civilization as developing through a succession of stages due to the efforts of Man himself and Man alone. However, they did not move far beyond that position, since their interest was limited to the individual in the present day (the here and now). Consequently, they studied human history from this subjective angle, while their understanding of previous human progress was determined by their own current approach to everyday life.<sup>2</sup> Thus it would be true to say that the idea of “progress” in its modern sense held little appeal for the Greeks because of their limited experience of history. The same applied to their attitude to the polar opposites of “progress” – i.e. the concepts of decline and “civilizational cycles”.

The Christian position, as propounded by the Church Fathers, particularly St. Augustine (354-430), saw the march of history as inevitably leading to human happiness, with the result that it did not accept that human history on earth left any further prospect for “progress” beyond this. In St. Augustine’s view, history would be complete when Man’s span on earth came to its conclusion in the best possible manner; it was of no interest to him whether there might be a connection between a gradual improvement in the state of society and human knowledge and the time-span remaining until the Day of Reckoning. In his book *The City of God* he divides the history of mankind into the Dominion of God and the Dominion

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1 The Epicureans believed that the gods had attributes that were totally different from the ones generally ascribed to them; they lived happy lives in worlds among the stars and had no interest in the human world, because this would interfere with their happiness. Hence mankind owed nothing to Divine intervention and had nothing to fear from the gods. Man should therefore use his life in order to derive the maximum amount of pleasure for himself and not fear any supernatural powers.

2 George S. Painter: *The Idea of Progress*, *The American Journal*, 23, *Sociology*, Vol. 28, No. 3, (Nov. 1922), p. 253.

of the Devil and sees it as being engaged in a constant battle between Good and Evil. He believed that history is moving towards a decisive outcome in which the battle will be won by the forces of Good, because God has predetermined such a victory. According to him, the battle had passed through six stages until it reached the Time of the Messiah; this marked the beginning of the final stage which would end on the Day of Judgement when the virtuous people would be sorted out from the evil ones. This view of human history dominated Christian thought over the succeeding centuries and was supported by the leading theologians and philosophers of the Middle Ages.<sup>1</sup>

Roger Bacon (1214-1294) was indisputably a pioneer of the idea of “progress” and the first to call for a “rebirth” of knowledge and science. He believed that the way to achieve this was to do away with scriptural ascriptions and refuse to accept the opinion of any person, whatever his reputation might be, so that recognition would be given only to those things that are derived from true rational knowledge. He had a holistic approach to knowledge and, in addition to attempting to classify the sciences under a system which put natural philosophy at the top of the list, he sought to promote educational reform that would include science-based studies as a means to understanding some theological questions. In his book *Opus Majus (The Greater Work)* he claimed that philosophy was an important step along the road to acquiring that total Christian wisdom which is to be found in the Bible and canon law. He based his reform plan on the principle of interaction between the different branches of knowledge and the unity of the sciences. However, despite his enlightened ideas, he was in many respects a child of his time; he shared the general mediaeval view of the universe and his view of human history was not significantly different from St. Augustine’s.<sup>2</sup>

So we can see how impossible it was for the idea of “progress” to gain currency in the Middle Ages. The prevailing views on the role of

<sup>1</sup> See Etienne Gilson: *The Spirit of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, translated by Imam Abdel Fattah, Maktabat Madbuli, Cairo, 1996, p. 444, and ‘Ismat Nassar: *Falsafat al Lahut al Masihi*, Dar al Hidayah li’l Tiba’ah wa’l Nashr wa’l Tawzi’, Cairo, 2008, p. 204, and J. B. Bury: *Ibid.* p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Nisbet: *History of the Idea of Progress*, Basic Books Inc. Publishers, New York, 1980, p. 47.



Divine Grace and the end of the world were as influential as the ideas of the Ancient Greeks had been about “change” and the “cyclical process”, because they were the result not of deduction based upon rational proofs, but of dogmatic beliefs based upon Divine Authority. The mediaeval view of human destiny was even more pessimistic than that of the Greeks, who at least held out hope of finding happiness in another world. At the same time, it discouraged Man from seeking his destiny in the terrestrial world.

Glimmerings of the idea of “progress” began to appear at the beginning of the European Renaissance in the wake of some impressive human achievements during that period, including a revival of intellectual self-confidence following attempts to liberate the mind from the authority of the Church and the clergy, a revolt against the accepted religion-based moral code and a rejection of the philosophical school that had dominated intellectual life during the Middle Ages. There was also a recognition of the value of life on earth, regardless of any hopes or fears related to life after death. The leading figures of the Renaissance also took a close interest in the disputes of the Ancient Greek philosophers and their beliefs.

However, although there were some revolutionary new discoveries during that period, most thinkers were more interested in rediscovering, expanding, criticising and emulating the knowledge of the past. The new “humanism” helped breathe new life into the writings of the Ancients and revived the Classical heritage of rhetoric, literature, grammar, philosophy and history. Publications included the books of the Roman historians Titus Livius (59 BC- 17 CE) and Tacitus (55-c120), which were highly regarded for their educational and moral merits, and Plutarch (46-120), who wrote biographies of the great men of the past including Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

There were no serious signs that mankind could be embarking upon a new era until the final years of the Renaissance.<sup>1</sup> With his progressive ideas, Francis Bacon (1561-1626) made a significant contribution to the advances in scientific thought at the start of the age of modern philosophy. His main interest was in science in general and its relationship

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Bury: *Ibid.* p. 49.

to philosophical questions concerning the universe and man, and it was thanks to his influence that philosophical speculation adopted a scientific approach. Descartes,<sup>1</sup> who was interested in “method” and how it affected the sciences and life, drew a fine distinction between rational knowledge based on scientific principles and knowledge based on human experience, such as we find with knowledge of languages, history and geography. He also called for the rejection of any power or authority that tried to impose itself upon thought and only accepted the verdict of reason which recognized “spontaneity and clarity” as the sole yardsticks for determining the truth. The sceptical tendency – a legacy of Descartes – was concerned with interpreting “progress” from a historical point of view through understanding what happened in the past, rather than on the basis of suppositions and principles. As well as the sceptics and critics, we also find people who had a strong belief in science and progress – possibly almost to the point of insanity – such as Fontenelle, who declared at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century that there could be no end to human progress.

### The idea of “progress” and the meaning of “enlightenment”

As we pointed out earlier, a belief in the power of reason was one of the distinguishing features of Western civilization’s Age of Enlightenment. Perhaps no-one during this period glorified reason more than the German philosopher Wolff (1679-1754), who maintained that the greatest thing Man had received from God was his intellect and that the more a person used his intellectual powers, the greater his entitlement to be called a human being. Voltaire (1694-1778) surpassed his contemporaries in glorifying the intellect and the liberation of human consciousness, though while in his numerous books he gave prominence to progress in the arts and sciences, he was also aware that happiness and progress had their counterparts in the pain and suffering caused by the wars and upheavals of his time.

Turgot, Condorcet, the leaders of the French Revolution and others believed that “progress” was something that travelled in a straight line and they endeavoured to prove this by rational deduction. To them, “progress”

<sup>1</sup> Peter Schouls: *Descartes and the Idea of Progress*, History of Philosophy Quarterly, Vol. 4, No. 4 (Oct. 1987), p. 423.



would put an end to wars so that peace would prevail. To Hegel (1770-1831), “progress” meant advances in Man’s consciousness of freedom or his consciousness of the concept of progress, while Marx (1818-1883) saw it as society’s movement towards a classless socialist society. Adam Smith (1723-1790)<sup>1</sup> saw progress as movement towards favourable results that would create harmony for individuals through their activities, competition and attainment of their own particular goals. Vico (1668-1744) was more interested in the circumstances that produce intellectual progress in human history and the factors that lead to corruption and decadence. Montesquieu (1689-1755) created a methodological revolution with his theory of “social physics”, which he conceived of as adopting the same methodologies as the natural sciences, thereby enabling human society and the way it functioned to be analysed scientifically. His book *De l’Esprit des Lois (The Spirit of the Laws)*, regarded as the greatest work of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, includes a comparative study of the English and French systems of government, as well as references to the development of the Roman and other past and present government and political systems. He concludes with the rule that in order to become successful, political systems need to be in harmony with “natural life” and rational realities.<sup>2</sup> Hence the objective of Europe’s Age of Enlightenment was faith in the intellect and the glorification of awareness. The former (faith in the intellect) was always accompanied by the optimistic belief that Man is able to rise through his own efforts and nothing can prevent his progress.

The banner of “Enlightenment” in the East was carried by thinkers in that region as an act of rebellion against the deteriorating conditions of their societies. These people played an active role in bringing radical change to the social and political structures of their societies after the emergence of new factors that facilitated close cultural contact with the West in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century – a time when it was believed that human progress was possible in every field. This resulted in a cultural, social and

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1 *Progress: Fact or Illusion*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1996, p. 28.  
-See also J. B. Bury: Ibid. p. 137.

2 Montesquieu: *Ruh al Sharayi’*, translated by ‘Adel Za’aier, Al Hay’ah al Misriyyah al ‘Aamah li’l Kitab, Cairo, 2010, p. 13 of the author’s *Introduction*.

political transformation from backwardness and stagnation to a more mobile and progressive state – a jump from staid, traditional, inherited culture (which was afraid of change on the grounds that it could upset the “balance of society”) to a more dynamic phase that was prepared to accept new ideas from abroad and endeavour to assimilate them, or at least adapt them to suit the traditions and values of a society that had aspirations towards progress. Where the East is concerned, the West has always exerted its influence – deliberately – through the traditional structures; consequently those structures did not adopt a negative attitude towards Western culture; instead, they embraced every aspect of Western life, behaviour and values indiscriminately, as well as the Western world view, and sought to mix the “imported” with the “indigenous” in an organic, integrated cultural whole with its own specific character. This is reflected in varying degrees in the writings of the “enlightenment thinkers” from al Tahtawi (1801-1873) and al Tunisi (1825-1889) to al Afghani (1838-1897), Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1929), Shibli Shumayyil (1850-1917) and Farah Antoun (1874-1922), to name but a few.

France’s Age of Enlightenment left a strong impression on al Tahtawi.<sup>1</sup> During his mission in France he learnt about European life and Europe’s scientific achievements.<sup>2</sup> He also gained a thorough knowledge of the French language and an understanding of the problems of translation from French into Arabic. He read books on ancient history and Greek philosophy, studied mythology, geography, mathematics and logic, and read a biography of Napoleon (1769-1821) as well as some of the poetry of Racine (1639-1699) and the *Letters of Lord Chesterfield to His Son (Philip)*. He was also familiar with the leading philosophers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century such

1 Al Tahtawi expounded his views on “progress” in two important books: *Takhlis al Ibriz fi Talkhis Bareez (A Paris Profile)* and *Manahij al Albal al Misriyyah fi Mabahij al Adab al ‘Asriyyah (The Methodology of Egyptian Minds with Regard to the Marvels of Modern Literature)*. The first book includes a general history of France and European culture, while the second is a study of Egyptian economic activity and public utilities.

2 In *A Paris Profile* al Tahtawi wrote: “The city enjoys a level of civilization commensurate with its level of knowledge and its distance from roughness and savagery. The Land of the Franks is teeming with all kinds of knowledge and literature which no person can deny is conducive to pleasure and fine architecture. “See Rifa’ah Rafi’ al Tahtawi: *Takhlis al Ibriz fi Talkhis Bareez*, Al Hay’ah al Misriyyah al ‘Aamah li’l Kitab, Cairo, 1993, No. 2 *Al Tanwir*, p. 193.



as Voltaire and Condillac (1715-1780), Rousseau's thoughts on the Social Contract and Montesquieu's main works.

Their ideas were not alien to someone who had been brought up in the tradition of Islamic political thought; for example, the notion that a person reaches a state of self-realisation when he becomes a full member of society, that a good society is one that is ruled by the principle of justice, or that the purpose of government is the welfare of its subjects. The same could be said of Rousseau's idea of a lawgiver – a person who applies his intellectual skills to deduce good laws which he expresses in religious terms that the mass of the people can understand and accept; this view is not totally dissimilar to the Muslim philosophers' ideas on the nature of the Prophet and his Message.<sup>1</sup>

However, we can also see the influence of a number of new ideas in al Tahtawi's writings, such as the statement that the people can participate in the process of government and therefore need to be groomed for that purpose, or that laws should change in line with changing circumstances. He may also have taken the idea of the "Nation" from Montesquieu, who said that states rise and fall for specific reasons and that those reasons are to be found in the "spirit of the Nation", and that "the lawgiver must follow the spirit of the Nation when it is not in conflict with the government's principles."<sup>2</sup>

These ideas, particularly those inspired by Montesquieu's book, included: "some thoughts on the greatness of the Romans and their decline" and reflected al Tahtawi's determination to find the answer to the question posed by Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) in his *Muqaddimah* (*Prolegomenon*): "How and why do civilizations fall? And consequently, how do nations and civilizations arise?" Al Tahtawi was aware of the fact that the Islamic civilization had collapsed and he observed the gap which had opened up between his *Ummah* (Nation) and the "Nation of the Franks" when, during his time in France, he saw the way Europeans lived and the progress they had achieved. The question that he was desperate to find the

1 Albert Hourani: Ibid. p. 92.

-See also Fahmi Jad'an: *Usus al Taqaddum 'inda Mufakkiri'l Islam fi'l 'Alami'l 'Arabi al Hadith*, pp. 117-118.

2 Montesquieu: Ibid. p. 436.

answer to was: “How can we ourselves achieve progress and become part of the modern civilized world?”

Khair al Din al Tunisi differed from the other leading figures of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “Enlightenment”, because he was a statesman as well as a thinker. This put him in the unique position of having personal experience of the kinds of issues discussed by other reformers in the Arab and Islamic region. Moreover, the political posts he occupied enabled him to put some of his reformist ideas into practice. These ideas are described in his book *Aqwam al Masalik fi Ma’rifat Ahwal al Mamalik* (*The Surest Path to Knowledge Regarding the Condition of Countries*).<sup>1</sup> Al Tunisi was the driving force behind the reforms that took place in Tunisia, so that his nickname “*Abu’l Nahdhah*” (“Father of the Renaissance”) is well deserved.<sup>2</sup> His aim was to modernise the country’s political, social and economic structures and institutions, purge the state of its corrupt officials and reform the economy. In doing so he paved the way for a meeting of Western and Islamic cultures. His reforms covered every area of life, from the press to education and legislation and from the judiciary to the revival of Tunisia’s crafts and small industries, which were threatened with extinction. When he began tackling the question of how to provide the Islamic Nation with the means to attain a higher level of civilization and prosperity in order to take it forward to a state of “*husn al hal*” (“good condition” – a term which, along with *tamaddun*, or civilization/refinement, he used to describe the broadening of the Nation’s areas of knowledge, improvements

1 In his book *Aqwam al Masalik fi Ma’rifat Ahwal al Mamalik* al Tunisi endeavoured to follow in Ibn Khaldun’s footsteps and his book has a “*Muqaddimah*” (*Prolegomenon*) and a “*Tarikh*” (*History*). His *Muqaddimah* focuses on the reasons for the Muslims’ backwardness after their previous eras of prosperity, as well as the means they can adopt in order to revive their fortunes. In his *Tarikh* his main theme is Europe’s achievements, culture and civilization. As well as giving a description of the Ottoman State, he also described several European countries including France, England, Russia, Germany, Italy, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Denmark, Switzerland and Greece. On this subject he wrote: “I have long pondered over the reasons why nations progress and fall behind from one generation to another and as far as possible I have taken the histories of Islam and Europe as my models, including the views of historians from both sides on the Islamic Nation’s past, present and future.”

-Khair al Din al Tunisi: *Aqwam al Masalik fi Ma’rifat Ahwal al Mamalik*, edited by Ma’an Za’idah, Al Mu’assasatu’l Jami’iyyah li’l Dirasat wa’l Nashr wa’l Tawzi’, Beirut, Lebanon, 1985, pp. 145-146

2 *Mawsu’at ‘Asr al Nahdhah, Khair al Din al Tunisi, Abu’l Nahdhah al Tunisiyyah*, edited by Samir Hamdan, Al Sharikah al ‘Aalmiyyah li’l Tiba’ah wa’l Nashr wa’l Tawzi’, Beirut, Lebanon, 1993, p. 5.



to its agricultural and trading practices, the promotion of industries and the elimination of the causes of unemployment), he looked to the achievements of the West – particularly France<sup>1</sup> – in the way it had refined the concept of “democracy”. He began by introducing an elected *Majlis al Shura* (Consultation Council or parliament) composed of men who had distinguished themselves in the scientific and cultural fields, and assigned it the responsibility for reforming the Nation. He also finally put an end to one-man rule and established a system for monitoring the day-to-day running of the state and its institutions.

By setting up the *Majlis al Shura* al Tunisi sought to imitate the political practices of the West, where the ruler did not preside over an unaccountable despotic regime but represented the people and their hopes and aspirations for progress and prosperity. After studying France’s democratic systems and institutions, he concluded that the only way to liberate Tunisia from its backwardness and poverty was to follow the democratic path.

Jamal al Din al Afghani was aware that the West’s successes were due to the enormous progress it had achieved in the field of knowledge and its practical applications, and he also knew that the weakness of the East – as represented by the Islamic states – was the result of ignorance and a failure to reap the benefits of Western *madaniyyah* (civilization/refinement). Although al Afghani attached great importance to the idea of *madaniyyah* because of its association with “progress” – he was wary of the dangers of European expansionism in the Arab Islamic regions. Accordingly, he called for that expansionism to be resisted and appealed for national unity and the creation of constitutional governments that would implement social reforms which would put the Islamic countries on an equal footing with their Western counterparts. In *Al ‘Urwa al Wuthqa* (*The Firm Hold*)<sup>2</sup> he

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1 Al Tunisi modelled his reform ideas on the European system and compared the state of the European nations with Tunisia. See Ahmad Amin: *Zu‘ama’ al Islah fi’l ‘Asr al Hadith*, Dar al Kitab al ‘Arabi, Beirut, Lebanon, 1965, p. 155.

2 *Al ‘Urwa al Wuthqa* was an Arabic language magazine established by al Afghani and Mohammad ‘Abduh. Most of its pages were devoted to analysis of the policies of the big powers in the Islamic world, particularly British policies in Egypt and the Sudan. It also dealt with Muslim weakness and urged the Muslims to tackle it.

wrote: “The Islamic countries are in a state of decadence and weakness to the extent that they are unable to manage their own affairs themselves. Meanwhile, these selfsame countries are prepared to use thousands of pretexts – including wars, iron and fire – in order to crush every movement for renewal and reform in the Islamic countries. Therefore the Islamic world must unite in a major defensive pact so that it can preserve itself from annihilation. To this end, it must embrace the means that have led to progress in the West.”<sup>1</sup>

Syed Ameer Ali<sup>2</sup> had an extensive knowledge of both Eastern and Western cultures. He learnt Arabic and Persian and during his youth he was in contact with the leading English men of letters in India. He made an in-depth study of English literature and read most of the plays of Shakespeare (1564-1616), as well as *Paradise Lost* by John Milton (1608-1674), the works of Pyrrhon (270-360 BC) and Thomas More (1478-1535), all the novels of Walter Scott (1771-1832) and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), which was one of the most widely read books during the French Revolution.

He led the Islamic political movement in India, supported reform and set up associations to promote good relations between Indians of all classes and faiths. At the same time, he worked strenuously to protect the Muslims’ interests and called upon them to safeguard their political rights. In this connection he said: “The Muslims in India have clear political rights in respect of the government and the Hindus...What they are demanding is their due entitlement... They are demanding fair political representation in accordance with their numbers, status and history. The Muslims do not accept that the Hindus should have any political rights that they do not have themselves. If all are treated equally, the Muslims will welcome reform.”<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jamal al Din al Afghani and Mohammad Abduh: *Al ‘Urwa al Wuthqa wa’l Thawrah al Taharruriyyah al Kubra*, edited by Salah al Din al Bustany, Dar al ‘Arab, Cairo, 1993, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> Syed Ameer Ali published two books: *A Brief History of the Arabs* and *The Spirit of Islam*. In the former he summarises the history of the Muslims and describes their social situation in an attractive, readable style. In the latter he explains the Islamic Faith and the Message of Muhammad. It is considered one of the finest books to be written about Islam.

<sup>3</sup> From Ahmad Amin. See above, p. 142. See also Syed Ameer Ali: *A Brief History of the Arabs*.



Shibli Shumayyil<sup>1</sup> is one of the leading figures in the history of the Arab Renaissance and his ideas helped lay the foundations of the “scientific trend” in modern thought. He was part of the great movement which appeared towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and regarded science as being more than just a way of discovering the system that determines how things are related, but rather the key to the mysteries of the universe and almost a kind of religion in itself. To Shumayyil science meant the metaphysical system devised by Huxley (1834-1895) and Spencer (1820-1903) in England and Ernst Haeckel (1825-1919) and Ludwig Buchner (1824-1899) in Germany on the basis of Charles Darwin (1809-1882)’s Theory of Evolution hypothesis.

Shumayyil’s work *Falsafat al Nushu’ wa’l Irtiqah’ (The Philosophy of Development and Evolution)*<sup>2</sup> contains articles on Darwin’s theory of the origins of species, as well as the book *Al Haqiqah (The Truth)*, which supports that position and replies to its detractors. It also includes numerous scientific topics and discussions about physical life, in addition to a commentary on Buchner’s ideas and numerous other subjects.

As well as his views on science, Shumayyil’s writings also convey his profound sense of the cultural gap between East and West. While the West was reaping the fruits of the changes for which the seeds had been sown during the Renaissance (a time of huge significance for advances and discoveries in the field of science), the East was in a state of deep hibernation and completely unaware of the West’s progress. There was one exception – Japan<sup>3</sup> – which had undergone a Renaissance of its own

1 Researchers into the history of modern Arab thought are almost unanimously of the opinion that Shumayyil is its leading proponent of the idea of evolution (in the natural sciences) and a pioneer of progressive Arab thought.

2 According to Shibli Shumayyil: “I chose the title *Falsafat al Nushu’ wa’l Irtiqah’* because I did not wish to limit myself to the simplistic way of looking at the evolutionary sequence of living things. Instead, I took a broader view and applied it to the whole of nature including inanimate things, plants and animals. In doing so I examined their origins, the way they developed and their relationships to one another, thereby demonstrating that they are all inextricably linked, whether they are part of ‘silent nature’, growing, living things, dumb animals or articulate human beings.”  
- See also *Falsafat al Nushu’ wa’l Irtiqah’*, Dar Maroun ‘Abboud, 1983, p. (a).

3 See Nabil Abdul Hamid Abdul Jabbar: *Al Naz’ah al ‘Ilmiyyah fi’l Fikr al ‘Arabi al Hadith*, Dar Dijlah li’l Nashr wa’l Tawzi’, Amman, Jordan, 2007, p. 101.

that had almost bridged the gap between it and the West. It had been able to do this through “science”; indeed, the East had fallen behind for no other reason than the fact that it lacked science both as a methodology and way of thinking and as a tool for uncovering the secrets of Nature and channelling them for the benefit of mankind.

Farah Antoun read the works of the leading thinkers of the Age of Enlightenment including Voltaire. He was particularly attracted by Voltaire’s appeals for a belief in reason and liberty, his anti-clericalism, his call for a war on fanaticism fanned by the flames of ignorance, superstition and outdated traditions which had insinuated themselves into the religion, and for religious tolerance between followers of the different denominations. Antoun regarded Voltaire as the greatest of the philosophers who had contributed to Europe’s liberation. He also wrote about Rousseau and Montesquieu and was influenced by the ideas of Jules Simon (1814-1896)<sup>1</sup> and his work as a social reformer. It was Simon who led Antoun to recognize the importance of moral education and spurred him on to work for the realisation of his own dream – the reform of Eastern society.

In the magazine *Al Jami’ah* (of which he was the editor-in-chief) Antoun wrote about the progressive European thought of his day, as well as about Ibn Rushd and his philosophy,<sup>2</sup> though he admitted that his only purpose in writing about Ibn Rushd was “to reconcile the elements of the East with the ‘washing of hearts’ and the ‘uniting of the word’”.

In conclusion, we can say that the fundamental question preoccupying Arab thinkers – particularly during their most intellectually active period – has been the search for the right way to reform society and enable it to resist Western imperialist expansion. Because of the cultural environment

1 Antoun was interested in the French philosopher Jules Simon’s ideas about morality as set out in his book *Le Devoir*, published in 1845 as a primer on philosophy for the general reader.

2 Antoun explains why he wrote about Ibn Rushd as follows: “The purpose behind writing this book is to reconcile the elements of the East with the ‘washing of hearts’ and the ‘uniting of the word’, not so that the ‘first party’ can prove to the ‘second party’ that his religion is better than his religion. That is something whose time has come and gone... This is the age of science and philosophy which requires every party to respect the other’s opinions and beliefs.” See Farah Antoun: *Falsafat Ibn Rushd*, *Al Hay’ah al ‘Aamah li’l Kitab*, Cairo, 1993, *Al Tanwir (I)*, Author’s Introduction.



in which they grew up they were aware of the East's problems, including its ignorance and backwardness and the threats their societies faced to their very existence. These threats have included – and continue to include – the danger of disintegration due to widespread discord, internecine fighting and disunity, and the possibility of invasion and occupation by Western countries.

With their awareness of the complex issues that needed to be resolved, Arab thinkers concluded that the East was in desperate need of a social contract or a contract that would bring all its elements together and instil a proper sense that its peoples shared a single origin and a common destiny. After all, they shared a common history, while during the present stage of their existence they faced common problems and shared common hopes for the future.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Albert Hourani: *Al Fikr al 'Arabi fi 'Asr al Nahdhah*, p. 304.