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FACTORS OF CIVILISATIONAL ADVANCEMENT IN THE QUR'ĀN: INSIGHTS FROM AL-BŪṬĪ

Muhammed Rashid AT¹

Abstract:

This study investigates the factors underlying civilizational advancement as outlined in the Qur'ān, focusing on the interpretations of Shaykh Muhammad Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī. Recognized as a leading Islamic scholar; al-Būṭī emphasizes the Qur'ān's comprehensive framework that guides humanity toward moral, intellectual, and social progress. Through a detailed analysis of al-Būṭī's works, this research identifies key Qur'ānic principles—such as the centrality of ethical conduct, the pursuit of knowledge and the cultivation of spiritual awareness—as foundational to building a flourishing civilization. The study also examines al-Būṭī's methodology, which harmonizes traditional Qur'ānic exegesis with contemporary issues, providing a balanced approach to understanding and applying Islamic teachings in modern contexts. Al-Būṭī's perspective highlights the interplay between individual responsibility and collective well-being, demonstrating how Qur'ānic principles address both personal development and societal advancement. The findings reveal that al-Būṭī's insights present a holistic and practical blueprint for sustainable growth, emphasizing the integration of material prosperity with spiritual and ethical dimensions. This research concludes that the Qur'ānic model, as interpreted by al-Būṭī, offers timeless guidance for any society seeking to align progress with moral integrity and divine purpose.

Keywords:

Civilizational advancement, Qur'ān and Civilisation, Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī, Ethical Conduct, Spiritual Awareness, Sustainable Growth.

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Civilisational Factors of Advancement

Muhammad Sa'īd Ramadan al-Būṭī stands as a towering figure of Islamic scholarship, yet his profound contributions remain largely unexplored by Western academics. In an article by Andreas Christmann,¹ the author delves deeply into the life, intellectual journey, and influence of this eminent scholar. Christmann highlights how Imam al-Būṭī's works have received minimal recognition among Western scholars, leading to a lack of substantial engagement with his writings in academic circles. Underscoring Būṭī's unparalleled stature, Christmann recounts in one of his footnotes an encounter in Damascus where, upon seeking guidance on the relationship between Syria and Islam, he was advised: "Go to Būṭī; if you meet him, you will need no one else."

The lessons of Būṭī were never mere intellectual indulgences or forms of entertainment. Instead, they served as responses to urgent needs, remedies for challenges, corrections of flawed perceptions, and awakenings for hearts gripped by heedlessness or hardness. Marked by scientific precision, an eloquent literary style, persuasive reasoning, profound spirituality, and emotional depth, his teachings were delivered with remarkable clarity, effectively guiding readers and listeners toward their intended purpose.

One of Būṭī's most prominent qualities was his unwavering stance against deviant ideas originating from the West, which he confronted with precision in logic and strength of argument. In describing Western skeptics, Būṭī remarked: "The amusing aspect of all this is that they only extend their tongues to criticize it within closed walls, far from any observer. They are like those wrestling with the air around them or arguing with the reflections of their own shadows in the mirror before them."

According to Būṭī, two fundamental factors are essential for the advancement of any nation: knowledge and the adoption of virtuous morals. Knowledge enables humanity to utilize universal resources purposefully, while morality eliminates the destructive seeds of arrogance and tyranny, bringing solidarity and cooperation within the society. One of his greatest assertions is that no empire in the history of the world has ever advanced without the combination of

¹ Andreas Christmann is a scholar of Islamic Studies, known for his work on modern Islamic thought and figures like Shaykh Muhammad Sa'īd Ramadān al-Būṭī, exploring tradition and modernity in Islamic scholarship.

these two factors. Similarly, no empire has ever declined after achieving progress unless one or both of these two factors were lost.

The fall of civilizations throughout history often highlights the pivotal role of morality and knowledge in their rise and decline. For example, the Roman civilization² collapsed due to moral decay, rooted in tyranny. Similarly, the Indian, Chinese, and Greek civilizations faced stagnation once they lost these factors. It is noteworthy that the combination of knowledge and moral virtues is essential for the progression of any society. If one of these factors was lost, a civilisation begins to fade away. For ex, the Umayyad Caliphate flourished under pioneers like Abd al-Rahman al-Dakhil³, for the reason that they upheld on the knowledge and moral qualities through the pathway of Islam. However, the later kings of Granada⁴, despite their vast resources and wealth, they faced collapse as faith weakened among them, leading to the loss of knowledge and values.

We can deduce the importance of knowledge in Islam from the fact that Qur'ān demands from Anti Islamists to argue with knowledge. There are many who argue against the Qur'ān, yet the Qur'ān responds: If you argue, then argue with knowledge. Thus, debate is not to be rejected, as it is human nature to critique. The Qur'ān challenges its opponents, saying: “Do you have any knowledge that you can produce for us?”⁵

The verse “And do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge”⁶ emphasises the importance of knowledge in forming beliefs. Imam al-Būṭī explains that the particle Mā conveys generality, instructing that nothing, including Islam itself, should be accepted without knowledge and understanding. Islam does not call for blind faith; instead, it calls for belief in Allah, His Messenger ﷺ, and its principles through profound conviction and deep knowledge.

² In 476 CE, the Western Roman Empire fell when the last emperor, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed by the Germanic chieftain Odoacer, who declared himself King of Italy, marking the end of Roman rule in the West.

³ Abd al-Rahman Dakhil, a surviving member of the Umayyad dynasty, founded the Umayyad Emirate of Córdoba in 756 CE after escaping the Abbasid purge, marking the beginning of Muslim rule in Spain and laying the foundations for the flourishing civilization of Al-Andalus.

⁴ The last ruler of Granada, Muhammad XII (Boabdil), surrendered to Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492, marking the end of Muslim rule in Spain and the completion of the Christian Reconquista.

⁵ Qur'ān. 6:148. Saheeh International.

⁶ Qur'ān. 17:36. Saheeh International.

The significance of moral values in Islam is well-established. Who are the righteous people in Islam? Some might assume that righteousness is limited to those who pray at night or engage in visible acts of piety, but this is not the case. The Qur'ān presents a broader and deeper concept of righteousness. The verse, “And hasten to forgiveness from your Lord and a garden as wide as the heavens and earth, prepared for the righteous. Who spend [in the cause of Allah] during ease and hardship and who restrain anger and who pardon the people – and Allah loves the doers of good; And those who, when they commit an immorality or wrong themselves [by transgression], remember Allah and seek forgiveness for their sins – and who can forgive sins except Allah? – and [who] do not persist in what they have done while they know.”⁷, outlines the qualities of the righteous.

Signs of Civilisational Decay in West

Imam al-Būṭī observes that the erosion of ethics in Western societies has marked the beginning of their civilization's decline. In today's world, those who underestimate the importance of ethics fail to recognize a crucial truth: without a foundation of moral values, no civilization can truly thrive. While ethics may appear nearly absent in the West, they excel in the art of industrial dealings and technological innovation. However, the value of a nation is not determined by its advancements in science, technology, or creativity unless these are guided by a framework of human ethics. For example, no matter how sophisticated your weapons or technology are, if they are wielded by someone lacking ethics and character, they will ultimately harm their own society first. In Islam, the principles of faith and acts of worship are designed to nurture ethics. Material tools and advancements are merely servants in the hands of morality. What is the worth of devices and infrastructure if ethics are corrupted?

He says that this decline is not something visible to the naked eye but is evident in the observations of social scientists. Imam al-Būṭī offers a profound analogy to illustrate the subtle decline of Western civilization. He compares it to a massive ship sailing far out at sea; the larger the ship, the less its movement is perceived from a distance. In contrast, a small figure walking westward on the deck of the ship is much easier to spot. Similarly, the rapid but imperceptible

⁷ Qur'ān. 3:133–135. Saheeh International.

decline of a great entity can often go unnoticed, while smaller, slower movements are more visible. This serves as a reminder not to be dazzled by the towering structures and remarkable innovations of the West. Many are mistaken in glorifying the West merely by witnessing its extraordinary achievements, failing to recognize the deeper ethical and societal decay beneath the surface.

The West's production capabilities are undeniably brilliant, but their ethical foundations are fragile and weak. The progress of a nation, while seemingly slow, is ultimately determined by its moral compass. Some Western sociologists predict that their civilization may only endure for another fifty years, as their current generation is one of indulgence and submission to desires. Knowledge alone, devoid of ethics, breeds arrogance and tyranny.

The book named *The Decay of Western Civilisation and Resurgence of Russia* by Glenn Diesen⁸ explores the decline of Western civilization as a consequence of the erosion of traditional communal bonds (*Gemeinschaft*) and the overemphasis on individualism and modern societal structures (*Gesellschaft*). Diesen posits that these shifts have weakened social cohesion and undermined the cultural and political foundations of the West

The Qur'an provides a striking example of this:

“أَوَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ كَانُوا أَشَدَّ مِنْهُمْ قُوَّةً وَأَثَارُوا الْأَرْضَ وَعَمَرُوهَا أَكْثَرَ مِمَّا عَمَرُوهَا فَلَمَّا جَاءَتْهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَرِحُوا بِمَا عِنْدَهُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ وَحَاقَ بِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ.”

“Have they not traveled through the land and observed how was the end of those before them? They were greater than them in power and in impression on the land, but Allah seized them for their sins. And they had not from Allah any protector.”⁹

This verse highlights the difference between a society enriched by ethics and one devoid of them. The West, despite its knowledge, lacks the moral foundation that once propelled great civilizations. World's growing admiration for Islam stems from the harmonious blend of knowledge and ethics found within it. As this combination becomes

⁸ Glenn Diesen is a Norwegian political scientist and professor at the University of Southeastern Norway, specializing in Russian foreign policy, geopolitics, and global power dynamics.

⁹ Qur'an. 40:82. Saheeh International.

more prevalent, a return to Islam as a guiding force for humanity may yet be witnessed.

The Role of Religion in Civilizational Advancement

The rise of Islamic civilization played a pivotal role in the intellectual and scientific advancement of the West. During the Middle Ages, the Arab-Islamic world was a center of knowledge and culture, contributing greatly to fields such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and philosophy. These contributions, which were initially based on Islamic scholarly traditions, laid the foundation for much of the Western Renaissance. For instance, Arabic translations and innovations in Greek philosophical and scientific works directly influenced European scholars during the 12th and 13th centuries¹⁰. This intellectual exchange not only preserved ancient knowledge but also advanced it, creating a bridge of knowledge between the East and the West that would shape the future of Western civilisation.

What is the Need for Religion in Civilizational Advancement?. As power and knowledge increase, ethics often begin to erode, and autocracy can take root. In such scenarios, religion serves as a crucial safeguard. For instance, if a man were to suddenly acquire a great amount of wealth, he would need a secure box to protect it from thieves. Similarly, religion functions as this protective box, shielding humanity from the corrupting forces of unchecked power and preserving ethical conduct. It ensures that knowledge and power are used responsibly, fostering civilizational advancement rooted in moral integrity.

Imam al-Būṭī emphasizes that as long as our Muslim community remains faithful to the Islam that served as the foundation of its advancement, its progress will not falter. However, if it turns away from this faith, its progress will inevitably decline. Umar ibn al-Khattab (RA)¹¹ famously said, “We are a people whom Allah has honored through Islam, and if we seek honor through anything else, Allah will humiliate us.” These words have resonated throughout history, leaving a profound imprint on the minds of people.

¹⁰ Avicenna’s *The Canon of Medicine* and Averroes’ commentaries on Aristotle, along with Al-Khwarizmi’s work on algebra, were translated into Latin and significantly influenced European scholarship, contributing to the intellectual foundations of the Western Renaissance.

¹¹ ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (584–644 CE), the second Caliph of Islam, is known for his just leadership, administrative reforms, and overseeing the rapid expansion of the Islamic empire, including Persia and Egypt.

In *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldun¹² discusses the civilizational advancement of Muslims by emphasizing the crucial role of *asabiyyah* (social cohesion) in the development of a strong society. He explains that the early Islamic civilizations, particularly during the rise of the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates, flourished due to a strong sense of unity and group solidarity among the Arabs. This cohesion enabled Muslims to establish a powerful and expansive empire that fostered intellectual and cultural advancements. As the Islamic civilization grew, it became a center for learning, science, and philosophy, attracting scholars from diverse backgrounds. However, Ibn Khaldun also argues that as the empire expanded, the original *asabiyyah* weakened, leading to political instability and eventual decline. Nonetheless, during its peak, Muslim civilization made significant strides in various fields such as mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and literature, making lasting contributions to global knowledge.

There are many verses in Qur'ān which emphasise that when moral values are lost, it leads to destructive consequences, both for individuals and societies. The Qur'ān warns of the dangers that arise when people, whether individuals or nations, stray from the path of ethics and righteousness due to excessive pride, arrogance.

The verse:

كَلَّا إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِرَبِّهِ لَكَنُفٍ (6) أَنْ رَأَاهُ اسْتَفْتَى

“No! [But] indeed, man transgresses. Because he sees himself self-sufficient.”

This shows that when a person, or a society, begins to feel self-sufficient and forgets its reliance on God and moral values, it leads to transgression and corruption.

The example of Qarun serves as a profound warning in the Qur'ān about the consequences of pride, arrogance, and the erosion of moral values. The verses highlight how immense wealth, acquired through tyranny, ultimately leads to societal harm.

إِنَّ قَارُونَ كَانَ مِنْ قَوْمِ مُوسَى فَبَغَى عَلَيْهِمْ وَآتَيْنَاهُ مِنَ الْكُنُوزِ مَا إِنَّ مَفَاتِحَهُ لَتَنُوءُ بِالْعُصْبَةِ أُولَى الْقُوَّةِ

¹² Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), a pioneer in historiography and sociology, is best known for *Muqaddimah*, where he analyzed the rise and fall of civilizations and introduced concepts like *asabiyyah* (social cohesion).

“Indeed, Qarun was from the people of Moses, but he tyrannized them, and We gave him of the treasures such that their keys would have burdened a band of strong men.”(28:76)

This verse emphasizes that Qarun possessed great amounts of wealth and resources, yet he was arrogant and haughty, lacking any moral capital. His wealth, instead of being used responsibly, fueled his pride and tyranny. The Qur’ān then reveals the tragic aftermath of Qarun’s arrogance:

فَخَسَفْنَا بِهِ - وَبِدَارِهِ الْأَرْضَ فَمَا كَانَ لَهُ مِنْ فِئَةٍ يَنْصُرُونَهُ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُنتَصِرِينَ

Translation:

“And We caused the earth to swallow him and his home. And there was for him no company to aid him other than Allah, nor could he defend himself.” (The Qur’ān. (n.d.). 28:81. Saheeh International).

The Qur’ān underscores that Qarun’s arrogance, driven by his material wealth and lack of ethical grounding, led to his ultimate downfall. This serves as a timeless lesson: without the foundation of moral values, even the greatest material success is doomed to lead to ruin.

The Hereafter is a reality, and thus religion becomes a necessity. This statement underscores the essential connection between the belief in the Hereafter and the need for religion. Without the framework of faith, humanity risks losing its moral compass, leaving actions without accountability and life without purpose. Religion does not merely serve our worldly needs; instead, it gives us purpose and direction in life. As the Qur’ān states,

“ وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ ”

“And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me.”

The world is meant to be a servant to our faith, not the other way around. Consider the analogy of a king who sends an envoy to deliver a letter. Along the way, the envoy may eat, rest, or make other arrangements—all necessary for completing the mission. However, the food and rest are not the goal; the ultimate purpose is delivering the letter. Similarly, the dunya (this world) is like the mount that carries us; it is necessary but not the ultimate goal. The akhirah (Hereafter) is the destination we must strive for.

Practicing religion solely for worldly benefits is a great flaw. Consider the example of a man who rents a house for ten years while

owning another dilapidated house. During this period, his focus should be on repairing and preparing his own house for the future. However, if he becomes infatuated with the rented house and its furnishings, neglecting his own property, he has clearly lost sight of his priorities. Is there any difference between this example and our approach to worldly life? This world is merely a temporary abode, while the Hereafter is our true and permanent home. Let us not become so engrossed in the temporary that we forget to prepare for eternity.

Imam Buti emphasizes that the insights he shares are not merely his personal opinions but are profound extractions from the Qur'ān itself. By reciting its verses and delving into their meanings, he derives these points, grounding his arguments in the divine wisdom and guidance of the Qur'ānic message.

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