

A Comparative Analysis of Modernist Islamic Thought on the Decline and Revival of the Muslim World: Rashid Rida, Malik Binnabi, Amir Shakib Arslan, and Abul Hasan Al-Nadwi

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Abstract

This article analyzes and compares the thinking of four prominent modern Islamic intellectuals on the causes of Muslim decline and the pathways to revival: Muhammad Rashid Rida through *Majallah Al-Manar*, Amir Shakib Arslan in *Limadza Ta'akhhara al-Muslimun*, Malik Binnabi in *Shurut al-Nahdha*, and Abul Hasan Ali al-Nadwi in *Madha Khasira al-'Alam bi Inhitat al-Muslimin*. Employing a comparative-analytical method, this study finds that all four thinkers converge on the necessity of fundamental reform and a return to authentic Islamic values, yet diverge in their emphases: Rida stresses theological reform and *ijtihad*; Arslan foregrounds practical political action; Binnabi develops a sociological analysis of civilizational pathology; and al-Nadwi highlights the losses suffered by humanity at large as a consequence of Muslim decline and the abdication of Islam's role as moral leadership for mankind. The convergences and divergences among these four thinkers constitute a rich and uniquely complementary intellectual map of modern Islam.

Keywords: Muslim Decline, Islamic Revival, Rashid Rida, Shakib Arslan, Malik Binnabi, Al-Nadwi, Modern Islamic Thought, Islamic Reform

Abstrak

Artikel ini menganalisis dan membandingkan pemikiran empat tokoh intelektual Islam modern tentang sebab-sebab kemunduran umat Islam serta jalan menuju kebangkitan: Muhammad Rasyid Ridha dalam *Majallah Al-Manar*, Amir Syakib Arslan dalam *Limadza Taakhhara al-Muslimun*, Malik bin Nabi dalam *Syuruth al-Nahdha*, dan Abul Hasan Ali al-Nadwi dalam *Madza Khasira al-'Alam bi Inhithath al-Muslimin*. Dengan metode komparatif analitis, penelitian ini menemukan bahwa keempat tokoh sependapat tentang perlunya reformasi mendasar dan kembali kepada nilai-nilai Islam yang autentik, namun berbeda dalam titik tekan: Ridha menekankan reformasi teologi dan *ijtihad*, Arslan lebih menekankan dimensi praktis politis, Malik bin Nabi mengembangkan analisis sosiologis tentang penyakit peradaban, sedangkan al-Nadwi menyoroti kerugian dunia akibat kemunduran Islam sebagai kepemimpinan moral umat manusia. Persamaan dan perbedaan keempat pemikir ini membentuk peta intelektual Islam modern yang unik, kaya dan saling melengkapi.

Kata kunci: Kemunduran Islam, Kebangkitan Islam, Rasyid Ridha, Syakib Arslan, Malik bin Nabi, Al-Nadwi, Pemikiran Islam Modern, Reformasi Islam

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INTRODUCTION

The question of the causes of the decline of the Islamic world and the paths toward its revival has been among the most pressing intellectual problems confronting Muslim thinkers since the nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. The emergence of European colonial dominance over Muslim lands, the disintegration of the Ottoman Caliphate, and the widening civilizational gap between the West and the Islamic world compelled scholars to undertake a systematic diagnosis of the condition of the Muslim community.

Among the most influential thinkers to engage this challenge are: Muhammad Rashid Rida

(1865–1935), a Syrian reformist scholar who settled in Egypt and founded *Majallah Al-Manar*; Amir Shakib Arslan (1869–1946), a Druze prince from Lebanon who became a prolific journalist, politician, and writer who traversed the Muslim world; Malik Binnabi (1905–1973), an Algerian intellectual who brought an original sociological perspective to the analysis of the crisis of Islamic civilization; and Abul Hasan Ali al-Husayni al-Nadwi (1914–1999), an Indian scholar who offered a perspective on the losses suffered by all of humanity as a result of Muslim decline.

These four thinkers wrote in different historical contexts, from diverse intellectual backgrounds, and with methodologically distinct approaches. Yet all addressed the same fundamental question: why have Muslims fallen behind, and what is the way forward? This article aims to analyze their thought comparatively, identifying points of convergence, divergence, and the unique contribution of each.

The method employed is a library-based study using a comparative-analytical approach, drawing directly from the primary works of all four thinkers: *Majallah Al-Manar* by Rashid Rida, *Limadza Ta'akhhara al-Muslimun* by Arslan, *Shurut al-Nahdha* by Malik Binnabi, and *Madha Khasira al-'Alam bi Inhitat al-Muslimin* by al-Nadwi.

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative approach using a library research design. The research data were collected from written sources related to the ideas of Muhammad Rashid Rida, Amir Shakib Arslan, Malik Binnabi, and Abul Hasan Ali al-Nadwi concerning the decline and revival of the Muslim world. The primary data sources consisted of the major works of these thinkers, namely *Majallah Al-Manar* by Rashid Rida, *Limadza Ta'akhhara al-Muslimun* by Shakib Arslan, *Shurut al-Nahdha* by Malik Binnabi, and *Madha Khasira al-'Alam bi Inhitat al-Muslimin* by Al-Nadwi. Secondary data were obtained from books, scholarly articles, and other relevant academic literature.

The study applied a comparative-analytical method. First, the ideas of each thinker regarding the causes of Muslim decline and the strategies for Islamic revival were identified and described. Subsequently, a comparative analysis was conducted to examine the similarities (convergences) and differences (divergences) among their perspectives. The findings were then interpreted critically to assess each thinker's contribution to the discourse on Islamic reform and civilizational revival. Through this approach, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the intellectual landscape of modern Islamic thought concerning the challenges of decline and the prospects for the revival of the Muslim world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Thought of Each Thinker

The Thought of Muhammad Rashid Rida

1. Diagnosis of Decline

Rida articulated a multidimensional diagnosis of Muslim decline in *Al-Manar*. For him,

decline stemmed from two interrelated root causes: the deterioration of correct religious understanding (*al-ta'ashshub wa al-jumud*) and the weakening of the drive toward material and intellectual progress.

In the introduction to *Limadza Ta'akhhara al-Muslimun*, which he wrote as a preface to Arslan's response, Rida cited Qur'anic verses affirming that a people's condition changes only when they change themselves. He wrote that he forwarded Sheikh Bisyuni's question to Arslan so that "the Amir of Eloquence might write on the matter with his articulate pen, his vast knowledge and mature views, so as to renew its impact on the souls of Muslims in accordance with their present condition."

Rida emphasized that decline was not caused by Islam as a religion, but by the Muslim community's deviation from and ignorance of authentic Islamic teachings. In numerous articles in *Al-Manar*, he vigorously criticized blind *taqlid* (unreflective imitation), innovation (*bid'ah*), superstition (*khurafat*), and closure to modern knowledge.

2. Al-Ta'ashshub (Fanaticism) as the Primary Malady

One of the central themes in *Kitab Al-Manar* is *al-ta'ashshub* (sectarian fanaticism). Rida analyzed fanaticism not merely as an excessive attitude but as a disease that destroys communal cohesion and freezes intellectual development. He wrote that fanaticism is "one's alignment with a school or group out of love for that school or group, rather than out of adherence to truth."

In Rida's view, fanaticism ultimately obstructs the community's capacity to unite, exercise *ijtihad*, and confront shared challenges. He argued that healthy competition (*tanafus*) among segments of the community ought to drive progress rather than produce fragmentation. The ideal condition is one in which every member of society genuinely embodies the pure values of Islam.

3. Reform through Ijtihad

Rida's proposed solution centered on reopening the door of *ijtihad* the process of independent reasoning in Islamic jurisprudence. He argued that much of the Muslim community's decline was caused by blind adherence to jurisprudential schools (*madhabs*) without regard for historical context. Authentic Islamic renewal, in his view, had to be rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah, rather than uncritical adoption of Western modernity.

Rida also stressed the importance of modern education integrated with a firm foundation of faith. He established *Madrasah al-Da'wah wa al-Irshad* in Egypt to train a cadre of preachers who possessed both deep Islamic knowledge and mastery of modern sciences.

The Thought of Amir Shakib Arslan

1. Decline as a Universal Phenomenon

Arslan began his response by affirming that Muslim decline is a universal problem afflicting the entire Islamic world, not confined to Java or the Malay world as Sheikh Bisyuni's question had implicitly assumed. He wrote: "The weakness and backwardness experienced by Muslims is general to them in the East and West, not limited to Java and the Malay Peninsula, nor any other single

place, differing only in degree."

Arslan then offered a sweeping historical analysis: the advancement of Muslims in earlier times derived from Islam itself. Islam had transformed the Arabs from fragmentation to unity, from ignorance to civilization, from idolatry to monotheism. "The Qur'an fashioned the Arabs with a new fashioning, created them with a fresh creation, brought them out of their peninsula with the sword in one hand and the Book in the other, conquering and dominating."

2. Causes of Decline: A Comprehensive Survey

Arslan's analysis of the causes of decline is the most comprehensive and detailed among the four thinkers. Several key points include:

- a. First, the estrangement of the Muslim community from authentic Islamic teachings. Arslan affirmed that decline was not caused by Islam, but by Muslims' abandonment of Islam. He posed a sharp rhetorical question: why do we not call Japan and Europe "conservative" for adhering to their respective traditions? Why are Muslims alone criticized for adhering to their faith?
- b. Second, the weakness of work ethic and education. Arslan placed heavy emphasis on the importance of knowledge and diligence. He sharply criticized those who use religion as a pretext for backwardness, when the Qur'an repeatedly urges the community to think, observe the natural world, and master knowledge.
- c. Third, internal fragmentation and sectarian conflict. For Arslan, sectarian divisions had weakened the political and military power of the Muslim world for centuries. He personally witnessed how Muslim lands fell one by one under European colonialism, largely because they were incapable of uniting.
- d. Fourth, colonial domination. Arslan was a steadfast anti-colonial activist. He acknowledged the destructive role of colonialism in the realms of education, economy, and Muslim identity, while not reducing decline entirely to this external factor.

3. Solution: Religious Unity and Concrete Action

Arslan's proposed solution was practical and political in character. He stressed that Muslims must take immediate concrete action: master modern knowledge and technology, unite politically, and adhere to authentic Islamic teachings. He believed that Islam and modernity are not only compatible but that Islam itself constitutes the most solid foundation for genuine progress.

Arslan also emphasized the importance of emulating the spirit not the material products of Japanese and Western advancement: discipline, diligence, unity, and a scientific ethos. "When resolve is concentrated, results follow" this was the motto he carried through to the close of his book.

The Thought of Malik Bennabi

1. The Sociological Approach: A Theory of Civilization

Binnabi's most original contribution is his systematic sociological approach. Unlike the other three thinkers, who spoke predominantly of religious or political reform, Bennabi developed a

comprehensive theory of civilization (hadarah). He posed the question: what are the conditions for the birth of a civilization? And what causes a civilization to die?

In *Shurut al-Nahdha*, Binnabi introduced the analysis that Muslim decline is not merely a matter of individual laziness or ignorance, but a symptom of a structural "civilizational disease." The Islamic world, in his view, had entered a post-Almohad phase a phase of stagnation that occurs when a civilization's energy has been exhausted and society is no longer capable of generating creative ideas.

2. The Three Elements of Civilization

Binnabi formulated that every civilization requires three essential elements: the human being (insan), land (turab), and time (waqt). These three elements must be bound together by a single unifying force: the religious idea (al-fikra al-diniyya). Without this binding force, the three elements remain as unproductive as raw, unprocessed material.

This is a theoretical formulation that differs substantially from the approaches of both Arslan and Rida. For Binnabi, the problem of the Muslim community is not merely whether they are religiously observant, but whether they are still capable of generating social effectiveness from their religious values.

3. Critique of Reform Movements

Among the most daring aspects of Binnabi's thinking is his critique of earlier reform movements implicitly including the movement pioneered by Rashid Rida and his contemporaries. In *Shurut al-Nahdha*, he assessed that reform movements in Algeria, however zealous in the religious sphere, frequently failed to address the deeper root of the problem: the crisis of the human being (azmat al-insan) itself.

For Binnabi, reform that focuses solely on the purification of creed, without accompanying changes in social mentality, modes of thought, and work ethic, is ultimately futile. He cited Qur'an Surah Ar-Ra'd verse 11 the same verse frequently cited by Rida but interpreted it with a different emphasis: the change intended must be genuinely internal, affecting the mentality and modes of thought of society.

4. The Concept of Qabiliyyah li al-Isti'mar (Colonizability)

One of Binnabi's most innovative concepts is qabiliyyah li al-isti'mar the internal susceptibility that renders a society vulnerable to colonization. For Binnabi, European colonialism cannot be wholly blamed for Muslim decline, because colonialism was able to penetrate and persist precisely because of internal weaknesses that enabled it. A society that is internally healthy possessing shared vision, social cohesion, and a productive ethos is not easily colonized or exploited.

This concept goes beyond Arslan's analysis, which placed greater emphasis on external factors (colonialism), and resonates more closely with the spirit of Rida's critique, but formulated within a more systematic sociological framework.

The Thought of Abul Hasan al-Nadwi

1. The Cosmopolitan Perspective: Losses for All of Humanity

Al-Nadwi began with a question that differs from the other three thinkers. He did not merely ask: "what have Muslims lost through this decline?" but rather: "what has the entire world and humanity lost?" The title of his book *Madha Khasira al-'Alam bi Inhitat al-Muslimin* already embeds this perspective.

For al-Nadwi, Islam is not merely the religion of one community but a universal mission of moral leadership for all of humanity. When Muslims decline, what is vacated is not only their political or military position, but the spiritual and moral leadership that they were charged to offer to all of humanity.

2. The Pre-Islamic Era and the Contribution of Islam

Al-Nadwi constructed his argument through a sweeping historical survey of pre-Islamic civilizations: Persia, Rome, India, and ancient peoples. He depicted the pre-Islamic world as one submerged in injustice, moral decline, and the oppression of human beings. The emergence of Islam then brought the light of justice, the liberation of humanity from servitude to other human beings, and the restoration of human dignity.

Within this framework, the decline of Muslims means that the world again finds itself lacking a genuine source of moral leadership. The Western nations that subsequently assumed global leadership, though they delivered material advancement, were unable to fill this vacuum of moral leadership because they lacked the firm foundation of *tawhid* (monotheism).

3. Critique of Western Civilization as an Alternative

Al-Nadwi is the most consistent among the four thinkers in his critique of Western civilization as an inadequate model. He acknowledged Western material advancement, but rejected the equation of material progress with genuine civilizational progress. For al-Nadwi, a civilization not grounded in divine values will ultimately produce material abundance alongside spiritual emptiness.

He witnessed the two World Wars as evidence of Western civilization's failure to lead the world with justice. In his view, the true source of global crisis is the crisis of spiritual leadership, and only Islam is capable of filling that vacuum if Muslims choose to return to their authentic mission.

4. Solution: Renewal of Faith and the Mission of Da'wah

Al-Nadwi's proposed solution is spiritual and *da'wah*-oriented. He emphasized that the revival of the Muslim community must begin with a profound renewal of faith, not merely with the mastery of technology or political power. Muslims must return to understanding themselves as bearers of a mission, tasked with representing the values of justice, humaneness, and *tawhid* before all of humanity.

Al-Nadwi did not neglect the dimensions of knowledge and material progress, but he

positioned the spiritual foundation as indispensable. Without this foundation, material advancement amounts to no more than a structure built upon sand.

Comparative Analysis: Convergences And Divergences

1. Shared Premises among the Four Thinkers

Despite their different approaches, the four thinkers share a common foundation across several key dimensions:

- a. First, all four agree that Muslim decline is not caused by Islam as a religion, but by the community's abandonment of or misunderstanding of Islam. This is the fundamental premise from which all their analyses proceed. Arslan explicitly stated that Muslim advancement in the past derived precisely from Islamic piety and ethos not despite being Muslim, but because of it.
- b. Second, all four stress the necessity of change from within. Rida emphasizes the importance of theological reform and *ijtihad*; Arslan emphasizes concrete action and unity; Bennabi emphasizes the transformation of social mentality; al-Nadwi emphasizes the renewal of faith. All four cite the same Qur'anic verse: "Indeed, God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves" (Qur'an 13:11).
- c. Third, all four affirm the importance of knowledge and progress. None of them is categorically anti-modernist. All encourage Muslims to master knowledge and technology, though with differing emphases on the foundational values that must accompany such progress.
- d. Fourth, all four regard colonialism as a factor that exacerbated decline, though they differ on the extent to which they treat it as the primary cause. Arslan is the most explicit in his critique of colonialism; Bennabi is the most penetrating in his analysis of the "internal susceptibility" that allowed colonialism to take hold.

2. Differences in Approach and Emphasis

Behind these shared premises, however, lie significant differences:

In terms of methodological approach: Rashid Rida employs a theological-normative method grounded in the Qur'an, Hadith, and jurisprudential *ijtihad*. Arslan employs a historical-political approach informed by direct experience in the politics of the Islamic world. Bennabi employs a sociological-empirical approach influenced by Western social science. Al-Nadwi employs a theological-historical approach with a global civilizational perspective.

In terms of primary diagnosis: Rida foregrounds *al-jumud* (intellectual stagnation) and blind *taqlid* as the primary malady. Arslan emphasizes the weakness of work ethic, knowledge, and political unity. Bennabi emphasizes the human crisis (*azmat al-insan*) the loss of the social vitality capable of translating values into civilizational effectiveness. Al-Nadwi emphasizes the betrayal of the Muslim community's moral-leadership mission: the abandonment of their role as bearers of light for humanity.

In terms of proposed solutions: Rida foregrounds the reform of Islamic thought through a return to the Qur'an and Sunnah accompanied by *ijtihad*. Arslan foregrounds practical political

action, communal unity, and the mastery of knowledge. Binnabi foregrounds the reform of social mentality from the ground up and the construction of a productive culture. Al-Nadwi foregrounds spiritual revival and the restoration of the da'wah mission as global moral leadership.

In terms of analytical scope: Rida focuses primarily on internal religious renewal. Arslan commands a broader scope encompassing history, politics, and geopolitics. Binnabi is the most systematic in his general theory of civilization. Al-Nadwi holds the broadest perspective on the relationship between Muslims and humanity as a whole.

3. Comparative Table

Aspect	Rashid Rido	Shakib Arslan	Malik Binnabi	Al-Nadwi
Approach	Theological-normative; creedal reform	Historical-political; activism	Sociological-empirical; theory of civilization	Theological-historical; humanitarian perspective
Primary Diagnosis	Intellectual stagnation (jumud), blind taqlid, bid'ah	Weak work ethic, knowledge, and unity	Human crisis (azmat al-insan); loss of social vitality	Betrayal of the moral-leadership mission
Role of Colonialism	External factor; not the primary cause	Critically important; explicitly condemned	Symptom of internal weakness	Relevant but not the primary cause
Primary Solution	Ijtihad; theological reform	Knowledge, unity, political action	Reform of social mentality	Revival of faith and da'wah
Reference to Islam	Qur'an & Sunnah as foundation	Islam as driver of work ethic	Islam as civilizational binding force	Islam as a mission of moral leadership
Intellectual Influences	Al-Afghani, Abduh	Diplomatic experience & history	Social philosophy; Algerian experience	Indian scholarly tradition; global outlook

Contemporary Relevance

Although these four thinkers lived and wrote in the twentieth century, their thought remains highly relevant to the contemporary condition of Muslims. The questions of decline and revival remain incompletely answered, and many of their diagnoses remain accurate.

From Rashid Rida, contemporary Muslims inherit the framework that ijihad and the renewal of religious understanding are a necessity, not a luxury. In an era when Muslims confront novel challenges artificial intelligence, bioethics, environmental crises the ijihad framework he proposed becomes ever more pertinent.

From Shakib Arslan, the continuing relevance lies in his insistence that progress requires diligence, discipline, and genuine unity not merely rhetoric. This message remains too frequently disregarded in many Muslim communities that prefer theological disputation to the construction of

productive institutions.

From Malik Binnabi, the concepts of qabiliyyah li al-isti'mar and azmat al-insan carry high relevance in the post-colonial era. Many Muslim societies have achieved formal political independence yet remain trapped in a colonial mindset dependent, reactive, and incapable of generating solutions from within.

From al-Nadwi, the perspective on Islam's role for humanity as a whole becomes increasingly pertinent in a context of global moral crisis, where technological advancement is not matched by ethical and spiritual maturation. The role of Islam as a moral compass and source of direction for human civilization remains an unfinished mission.

Strategic Recommendations for Young Muslims Today

Based on a synthesis of the thought of these four thinkers and a reading of the contemporary challenges of the age, the following tactical recommendations are offered for the renewal of the younger generation:

1. **Historically-Grounded Empowerment and Ideological Independence:** The formation of the current generation must begin with the awareness that history has provided a rich repertoire of experiential solutions. An independent mindset must be cultivated, so that young people possess a confident sense of identity and do not suffer from inferiority or uncritical mimicry of external ideologies.
2. **Intergenerational Harmony and Integration of Knowledge:** It is urgently necessary to build close collaborative space between young and old generations, so that the false dichotomy between religious sciences and worldly sciences is overcome. Shari'ah knowledge must be positioned as a moral compass and ethical regulator, while human reason must be continually stimulated to master modern technology in responding to contemporary advances.
3. **Multisectoral Collaboration and Courage to Innovate:** A collective awareness must be fostered among all stakeholders to support the new generation in developing the courage to act, innovate, and achieve genuine breakthroughs (tajdid) in the social, economic, and technological spheres. Young people must be drawn out of a comfort zone defined by passive admiration and nostalgia for the glories of a past they have not earned.
4. **Realistic Management of Resources:** All stakeholders, especially the younger generation, must be aware of and realistic about the limits of human life, time, and the finite resources human and natural available. Awareness of these limitations is essential so that careful planning can be developed and practical work in the field undertaken, rather than becoming ensnared in empty aspirations.
5. **Synergy between Prayer and Diligent Action:** In conclusion, all the concepts, ideas, and grand intellectual visions articulated above will never be realized without concrete action, diligent labor, and genuine sacrifice (tadhiyah) in daily life. All strategic endeavors and planning must be closed with maximum real work, accompanied by supplication and complete trust (tawakkul) in God.

CONCLUSION

The comparative study of the thought of Rashid Rida, Amir Shakib Arslan, Malik Bennabi, and Abul Hasan al-Nadwi reveals a rich intellectual map of the crisis and revival of modern Islam. These four thinkers complement one another far more than they contradict each other. Rida provides the theological-methodological foundation; Arslan adds the historical dimension and political urgency, Binnabi offers the most systematic sociological framework; and al-Nadwi expands the horizon of analysis to encompass the universal human dimension.

Overall, several conclusions may be drawn. First, the decline of the Muslim community is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be explained by any single factor. Second, renewal and revival must be comprehensive encompassing theological, social, political, mental, and spiritual dimensions. Third, Islam is not an obstacle to progress; on the contrary, it is the deepest source of energy for the most advanced civilization when it is correctly understood and practiced. Fourth, collaboration among the various approaches theological, sociological, political, and spiritual holds far greater promise than the absolutization of any single approach. The intellectual legacy of these four thinkers stands as an open invitation to contemporary Muslim generations to continue an unfinished dialogue with honesty, intellectual courage, and an abiding commitment to the good of humanity as a whole.

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