

## The problematic of identity and belonging in the thought of Al-Messiri: A socio-intellectual study

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**Abstract---** This study aims to examine the issue of identity and belonging in the intellectual project of Abdelwahab Al-Messiri, by analyzing his vision of Islamic civilizational identity and his critique of the Western civilizational model. Al-Messiri argues that despite the technical advancement of this model, it reproduces a vacuum of values, a loss of belonging, and a decline in ethical standards in favor of radical individualism and material gain. Thus, Al-Messiri raises a fundamental question: Can Western modernity serve as a comprehensive universal model, or does it carry structural limitations that render it incapable of encompassing profound human meaning? Al-Messiri's comparison between the Islamic and Western models reveals a conflict between different approaches to constructing the self and social reality: a conflict between a unifying vision that anchors the human being in a transcendent value system, and a materialist vision that dissolves meaning into pragmatism and instrumentality. This conflict fundamentally reflects the crisis of modernity itself and underscores the necessity of seeking alternative models of belonging that balance technological progress with ethical dimensions, reason with values, and freedom with responsibility. Accordingly, this study seeks to address one of the most pressing issues in contemporary social sciences: the crisis of identity resulting from the cultural and value transformations imposed by Western modernity and globalization. It does so by analyzing Al-Messiri's concept of identity as an epistemological and value-based framework that transcends narrow affiliations and forms an integrated civilizational model, founded on a balance between spiritual and material dimensions. The study also examines his critique of Western modernity, which he views as responsible for the erosion of belonging, the reification of the human being, and the disintegration of social bonds due to the dominance of materialist and instrumental tendencies. This is achieved through presenting his original texts, deconstructing the central concepts within them, elucidating the general structure of his intellectual vision, and revealing how he employs his Unitarian perspective to

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propose a civilizational alternative capable of restoring meaning and harmony in individual and social life.

**Keywords**---Identity, Belonging, Modernity, Arab-Islamic Identity, Western Modernity.

## Introduction

The question of identity and belonging constitutes one of the central pillars of Abdelwahab El-Messiri's intellectual project. Throughout the various stages of his scholarly journey, he remained deeply engaged in exploring the roots of human consciousness and the standards that govern the individual's relationship with the self, society, and the world. This preoccupation stems from a profound intellectual and existential experience that El-Messiri underwent, having lived for a period within the Western materialist paradigm before—through extensive critical re-evaluations—arriving at a rediscovery of the centrality of Islamic civilizational identity. He came to view it as a coherent moral and epistemological framework that grants human life meaning and purpose, and one that transcends the materialist reductions that have dominated the modern world.

El-Messiri's conception of identity rests on the understanding that it is a complex sociological construct composed of linguistic, cultural, ethical, symbolic, and historical elements, and cannot be reduced to racial or geographical determinants. For him, identity is not a fixed given but rather an ongoing process of formation in which the individual interacts with their heritage, lived reality, and future horizons within a dialectical relationship between the self and the community. Within the Arab-Islamic context, El-Messiri argues that Islamic civilizational identity is founded upon several structural components, the most important of which are: the centrality of **tawḥīd** as a reference that shapes the human worldview; the ethical values that reaffirm human dignity; the historical memory that provides a unifying symbolic reservoir; and the Arabic language as a carrier of meaning and cultural signification.

From this perspective, belonging according to El-Messiri becomes a conscious act that expresses one's adherence to the civilizational and symbolic structure of the Islamic community, in contrast to the processes promoted by the project of Westernization, which carries deconstructive tendencies aimed at severing the individual from their cultural roots and integrating them into a materialist global model grounded in individualism and consumerism.

El-Messiri argues that Westernization is not merely the adoption of sciences or forms of knowledge; rather, it is an "attempt to reshape the human being" according to a materialist conception that severs ties with metaphysical values and transforms the human into a functional entity within the market system—devoid of spiritual horizons and stripped of any meaningful sense of belonging. He grounds this analysis in a profound critique of modern Western civilization, viewing it as a civilization founded, at its philosophical core, on a reductive materialist paradigm that renders the human being a malleable object and reduces existence to a single dimension: utility.

El-Messiri criticizes this paradigm because, despite its technological achievements, it has generated various forms of existential alienation, disrupted the relationship between humans and their inner worlds, and subordinated culture and ethics to the logic of the market. In contrast, he proposes a "humanist, **tawḥīd**-centered civilizational model" grounded in a holistic vision of the human being as a creature endowed with spirit, values, and purpose capable of building a civilization that restores balance between matter and meaning, between knowledge and ethics, and between the individual and the community.

Thus, in Al-Messiri's perspective, identity and belonging are not merely cultural topics; they constitute a liberatory project aimed at fostering a critical consciousness capable of confronting Westernization and

reshaping the Arab-Islamic self within an independent civilizational framework—one that can engage with the contemporary era without losing its foundational ethical and cultural principles.

Through this approach, Al-Messiri offers a socio-philosophical perspective that emphasizes the importance of reconstructing civilizational identity on epistemological and ethical grounds, preserving the unity of the *Islamic community*, and enabling the individual to achieve existential balance in a rapidly changing world

### 1- Civilizational and Islamic Identity

Abdelwahab Al-Messiri's contributions represent one of the most significant contemporary Arab intellectual efforts to reconstruct the concept of civilizational and Islamic identity in response to dominant Western models. Al-Messiri does not view identity as a fixed given or a static cultural inheritance; rather, he conceives it as a historical and epistemological process shaped through what he describes as "seeds, roots, and fruits," according to the methodology he presents in his intellectual journey. Through his profound critique of Western modernity and comprehensive secularism, Al-Messiri reveals the crisis of the contemporary human being when identity is reduced to its material dimension.

He states in his book *My Intellectual Journey: Seeds, Roots, and Fruits*:

"The phenomenon of generational conflict stems from a combination of factors, including the erosion of the family as a social institution, the decline of a shared national identity, the rise of individualism accompanied by utilitarianism, and the increasing prevalence of a pragmatic mindset." (Al-Messiri, p. 24)

In contrast, he proposes a *tawhīd*-centered model that grants the human being a central ethical and spiritual position. Al-Messiri summarizes his existential and intellectual experience of having been dominated for a period by the materialist paradigm, and how this experience eventually transformed his perception and critical stance toward the superficial materialism in its analysis of the human phenomenon, leading him to an understanding of humanity guided by the Creator–creature duality within a *tawhīd*-based framework.

Al-Messiri expressed this as follows:

*"Perhaps the pivotal existential and intellectual experience in my life was the period during which the philosophical materialist paradigm dominated me, followed by my gradual realization of the inadequacy of materialist analytical models in capturing the complex human phenomenon. This inadequacy stems from the simplicity, naivety, and reductiveness of these models, along with my growing sense of the necessity to adopt multi-dimensional and multi-level analytical frameworks if one wishes to apprehend human humanity rather than mere materiality or the human's physical nature, and to perceive the human being in the entirety of their composition."* (Al-Messiri, p. 183).

What Al-Messiri experienced reflects a cognitive transformation, marked by his transition from a simplistic model to a complex one. This shift involved abandoning the philosophical materialist paradigm, which had dominated his thought for a period, in favor of adopting a multidimensional humanistic perspective. In his early years, Al-Messiri was influenced by the prevailing intellectual structures in universities and research centers, a reflection of the epistemic dominance of materialist thought as an ostensibly objective scientific model. Despite his deep engagement with this paradigm—even to the point of practical immersion—he continuously questioned and critically examined it in pursuit of certainty. He ultimately concluded that materialist analytical models are inadequate for capturing the complexity of the human phenomenon, as they reduce the human being to a purely biological dimension and interpret human phenomena primarily as outcomes of instinctive economic structures, neglecting the ethical and symbolic dimensions.

Consequently, Al-Messiri called for the adoption of a multi-dimensional model. This proposal aligns with the critique offered by sociologists of the reductive discourse that strips human beings of their

humanity under the pretext of scientific objectivity. Notable among these critiques are Anthony Giddens' structuration theory, which integrates both structure and agency, and Edgar Morin's theory of cognitive complexity.

Similarly, Searle, in his discussion of the complexity of social reality, emphasizes that this reality is constructed in a way that implicitly frames all actions and events. For each action, according to Searle, there exist metaphysical "burdens" that may be simple or complex, forming what Austin's student calls the background or the hidden structure of reality. Intentionality constitutes one of the fundamental pillars of this constructivism, through which Searle challenged the positivist thought dominating the interpretation of social phenomena. He dedicated an entire book to the concept of intentionality, titled *Intentionality: An Essay in the Philosophy of Mind*, to demonstrate that human knowledge expressed through language is not only linked to the representation of something in reality, but also to other epistemic states such as anxiety, conjecture, belief, and opinion. These phenomena remain within the domain of consciousness, despite lacking ontological existence in the external world. (Noureddine Hamissi, p. 235) Al-Messiri's cognitive transformation occurred within sociological contexts in which he engaged with prevailing intellectual structures and drew upon personal experience as a catalyst to reconstruct meaning according to symbolic, ethical, and cultural dimensions. This process transformed his thinking from an instrumental-rational mindset to a complex human-centered rationality.

**The *tawhīd*-centered model** advocated by Al-Messiri focuses on the foundational components of Arab-Islamic heritage, including the Qur'an, Hadith, the Arabic language, and Arab architecture. He returns to the Islamic system with all its religious, ethical, and civilizational values, attempting to distill a cognitive model capable of generating answers to the challenges posed by Western modernity, as well as to any other contemporary issues. At the same time, he does not reject the possibility of benefiting from the achievements of shared human experiences. It is essential to respect our civilizational particularities and to draw upon our religious references when formulating this epistemological approach, delving into the philosophy of *tawhīd* and the concept of common human nature, as these provide the most effective means for producing open, interpretive insights and more comprehensive knowledge models. This approach reflects the new contours of a reformist intellectual project rooted in Islamic heritage. (Abdel Halim Bin Hujbah, pp. 114–115)

By "epistemological," Al-Messiri refers to everything that aspires to the ultimate and comprehensive truth underlying a phenomenon or text. The epistemological dimension underlying a model indicates that behind every model—and behind the processes of inclusion, exclusion, synthesis, and amplification—there exist internal standards composed of beliefs, assumptions, axioms, and answers to ultimate and comprehensive questions. These constitute the model's latent roots and deep foundation, providing it with its teleological dimension. (Lahcen Abdelmalek, p. 632)

Thus, Islamic identity, according to Al-Messiri, becomes a dynamic civilizational project that transcends closure and mere imitation, grounded in a human-centered vision that restores balance among values, meaning, and existence. Identity occupies a central position in Abdelwahab Al-Messiri's thought, as clearly demonstrated in his intellectual autobiography *My Intellectual Journey: Seeds, Roots, and Fruits*. For him, identity is neither a static hereditary condition nor an automatic reflection of the social environment; rather, it is a long formative process in which memory, experience, and existential attitude interact.

Al-Messiri describes this formation as a "continuous transformation," stating at a significant point in his autobiography: "I kept rediscovering myself as my vision expanded." This reveals that, for him, identity is a process of critical openness rather than cultural closure.

Al-Messiri states: *«Identity, in reality, constitutes a fundamental form of resistance, provided that it does not become a ghetto into which the human being retreats and entrenches. This does not mean that our adherence to our Arab-Islamic identity will isolate us from others or grant us absolute rights, as was the case in Nazi Germany or in Western colonial*

*formations. The Arab-Islamic identity is a collection of diverse human characteristics that may include other human groups, yet it exists in a specific form and arrangement that grants the Arab identity its distinctiveness.*" (Al-Messiri, *Questions of Identity*, 2011, p. 53)

Similarly, Malek Bennabi's cognitive formation was deeply rooted in his civilization and beliefs. He states: "In this new environment, and in a family steeped in poverty, I became acquainted with my maternal grandmother and listened to many of her tales, whose central themes were righteous deeds and their rewards, and sinful deeds and their punishments. These stories of piety shaped my formation without my realizing it. Thirty years later, while I was a student in Paris, I and several of my college companions engaged in a process of introspection. Each of us had to answer the following question: What is the most important event in your life and to whom do you attribute it? This question revived old memories within me." (Makhloufi Raouf, p. 11)

What is most significant in Bennabi's account is how the Arab-Islamic spirit, conveyed through these symbolic stories, helped shape the trajectory of his reflective life, influencing the formation of his thought and the questions he would later pose.

Al-Messiri allowed his mind fully engaged with the materialist Marxist experience, encompassing its ideas, behaviors, and struggles. He adopted Marxist thought both inside and outside the university, motivated by his revolt against social injustice despite coming from a bourgeois background. This did not prevent him from defending workers' rights, organizing a successful strike at a factory, and holding positions within the Communist Party, continuing his activism even in the face of imprisonment. However, due to his constant observation and analysis of the experiences he underwent, he realized that many of his Marxist comrades were detached from an ethical framework grounded in justice. Consequently, he resigned from the party and moved beyond the materialist perspective toward a deeper and more complex understanding of reality, transcending the purely material dimension.

Al-Messiri explains this process of transcending as: "*surpassing something to reach what is higher than it.*" In his journey of transcendence, he writes: "*I was oscillating between two models: one, an abstract, materialist, and simultaneously negating the idea of humanity, ethics, and values, as well as any form of permanence or universality; the other, a concrete ethical model based on faith in an ethical system rooted in a realm beyond the material. I believe that this duality deepened over time and crystallized until I had to resolve it, eliminate the duality, and enter the world of faith, synthesis, and interacting dualities.*" (Al-Messiri, p. 137)

Ahmed Thabet states: "*Abdelwabab Al-Messiri highlights his intellectual and existential concerns and the journey of his life—a journey intertwined with the development of Arab and Islamic thought systems as well as the full spectrum of Western Marxist thought. He presents to Arab youth an intellectual experience in which he exercises his mind in a continuous pursuit of the highest degree of certainty: a certainty of reflection that is not satisfied with comforting explanations, but a certainty achieved through the attempt to formulate an analytical intellectual framework that affirms human humanity and its always-creative capacity for transcendence. This entails rejecting flat, materialist Western epistemic models and building or establishing a structure with high interpretive efficacy.*" (Izzeddine Maamish, p. 115). Al-Messiri acknowledged the dominance of the Western civilizational model in his consciousness and in the frameworks, he initially adopted, yet he describes how he began to question it. He observes that many Arab renaissance projects regarded the West as a model to be imitated in a literal sense, without recognizing that this approach could result in importing a civilization devoid of identity.

Consequently, Al-Messiri sought alternative interpretive models. When he mastered the "Essence" model—a framework capable of explaining the issues of all modern ideologies and their outcomes, including capitalism, Marxism, communism, social nationalism, and even Zionism—he positioned the Essence model in contrast to Islam, which he regarded as the expression of the purest and highest forms of *tawḥīd* and transcendence in its critique of modernity. Al-Messiri juxtaposed the "cognitively defined existence" of the Western worldview after the Renaissance with the "existentially defined knowledge" of Islamic principles of *tawḥīd* and enlightenment. In other words, the Islamic *tawḥīd*-based framework grounds epistemology in ontology, whereas the secularization of knowledge renders

ontology dependent on epistemology, ultimately producing a context dominated by “ontological relativity” and “relativity of ontological transcendence.” (Hajjaj Ali, p. 74).

The personal experience and intellectual confrontation undertaken by Al-Messiri laid the foundation for an identity that crystallized through a systematic temporal deconstruction rather than mere affiliation. This identity was not isolationist; rather, it engaged and dialogued with different worlds, accompanied by a critical capacity to assimilate and reinterpret what he learned. In doing so, he relied on an interpretive methodology that was not merely an analytical tool but a reflective component of his complex intellectual identity, which went beyond simple emotional attachment or cultural imitation.

Al-Messiri wrote: *“My Marxist experience had many positive effects. Once, a journalist asked me, ‘What remains of Marxism for you?’ I replied: ‘Nothing, and everything.’ I absorbed much from it, yet what I absorbed completely merged into my Islamic-humanistic vision. Marxism allowed me to encounter some noble and Nietzschean human models up close, and I internalized certain Marxist concepts, such as the role of history and the historical moment in determining individuals’ positions and orientations. ... When structuralist philosophy emerged in the 1960s and began sweeping Western intellectual circles, I studied it intensively, believing it might solve the fundamental problem that Marxism, in my view, had failed to resolve—that is, the relationship between the superstructure, the realm of ideas, and the infrastructure, the realm of means, forces, and relations of production. Yet I discovered it was ultimately futile, as structuralism culminated in a world of lifeless mathematical equations.”* (Al-Messiri, p. 141)

The formation of Al-Messiri’s Islamic civilizational identity was not merely the product of inherited faith; it was a cognitive exploration of theoretical approaches aimed at explaining human and social phenomena, including their shortcomings. Despite his full immersion in materialist Marxism—both as an idea and as a practice motivated by his rejection of injustice and exploitation and his pursuit of justice on earth—and despite his deep engagement with its concepts, he did not submit to it nor succumb to rigidity and conservatism. Instead, he allowed himself critically examined this reductive Western model, which confines humanity to a marginalized, purely functional dimension while neglecting its ethical and spiritual aspects. From this critique, he constructed a cognitive framework that delineates the individual’s ethical and social role. (Al-Messiri, p. 185)

The development of Western Europe pushed thought away from philosophical reflection and directed it toward material objects. Consequently, modern scientific methodology produced a new, materialist human being, shaped by the determinants and characteristics of material science and gradually aligned with its outcomes. Within this detachment from value, modern Western science sought to fulfill the broader ambitions of the Western intellect by constructing and consolidating the natural environment to ensure a Western-oriented reality, dominated by material science and governed by utilitarian criteria, while the human-centered focus receded, giving way to materialist human centrality. As Al-Messiri notes, *“Western science achieved its enormous successes due to its remarkable neutrality and objectivity, and its detachment from values, which in reality constitutes a disregard for humans, their purposes, values, ideals, and absolutes, adopting instead a form of Darwinian utilitarianism.”* (Maryam Chokrani, p. 186)

Al-Messiri, in his book *Zionism, Nazism, and the End of History*, also discussed an ideological system within which processes of material rationalization take place. He wrote: *“Material rationalization occurs in two steps: the first is the removal of things from the human realm and their placement in an independent world called the world of material objects economics, commodities, politics that is, the rationalization of the material and social structure. However, it does not stop there; humans themselves are removed from the human realm and placed in the world of objects. Then, the logic of things governs both objects and humans alike, and a single material natural law applies to humans and nature. This is the reification that some Western literature refers to when discussing modernization; it is also, however, comprehensive secularism.”* (Al-Messiri, p. 248).

Al-Messiri further explains that the rationalization of society within a purely material framework, stripped of value, entails a complete reconfiguration of society by deconstructing and excluding all

complex elements resistant to measurement—namely, human and divine components—and reconstructing it according to uniform, material, rational, and scientific standards. Consequently, social reality aligns with strict scientific laws and becomes subject to quantitative measurement procedures and tests, erasing all dualities that presuppose the existence of multiple essences or laws, rejecting any absolutes that transcend the singular material law, and denying all fixed ethical standards.

Al-Messiri sought to construct a *tawḥīd*-based model incorporating a complex of dualities and grounded in practical concepts derived from civilizational particularities. Among these, he emphasized the concept of bias, which he considered inherent to the cognitive model, as a framework possessing an ultimate and comprehensive dimension.

The process of establishing cognitive bias begins as a mechanism for freeing the mind from epistemic dependency, starting with the recognition of the inevitability of bias as the first methodological step in constructing an alternative project. This recognition depends on a comprehensive critique of Western civilization and its epistemic model, which is fundamentally anti-human and imperial in its objectives. Epistemic dependency, according to Al-Messiri, entails submission to the imperialisms of propositions dictated by Western cognitive models. These imperialisms occur when a dominant force defines core cognitive models and analytical propositions in a way that reflects its perception of reality, serves its interests, excludes the perceptions of others, and neglects their interests. Such propositions are internalized consciously or unconsciously. In essence, this constitutes a conquest and appropriation of the cognitive map. This phenomenon has occurred in the social and human sciences, where Western social theories were imposed upon Islamic social reality. (Arif Sakinah & Daris Shahrzad, p. 476)

According to Al-Messiri, Islamic identity is not merely a religious affiliation; rather, it constitutes a cognitive and ethical framework that grants the human being a central position in the universe, in contrast to the Western materialist model, which “reduces humans to their function.” Elsewhere in his autobiography, he states: “I felt that the human being is greater than a singular explanation,” reflecting his vision of *tawḥīd*-based identity as a perspective that transcends materialist and utilitarian reductionism.

Susan wrote in her dialogues with Al-Messiri: “Dr. Abdelvhab Al-Messiri’s serious efforts to deconstruct and interpret phenomena did not cease over the course of four decades and only evolved as his vision crystallized which deepened his perspective and placed events within a clearly defined context that is easy to read and interpret. Al-Messiri did not stop there, as many others might have; rather, he sought to construct models through which alternatives could be generated to overcome disorientation and achieve human realization.” (Susan Harfi, p. 10)

Susan continues her reading of Al-Messiri’s works, stating: “It is notable that Al-Messiri’s perspectives preserve human balance, which is otherwise lost under the weight of rapidly unfolding events and developments in the surrounding reality, by subjecting them to interpretive analysis. For Al-Messiri, interpretation constitutes the most important stage of understanding; hence, he adopted an interpretive methodology based on analysis and critique, which positions the individual before others rather than rendering them unknown or neglected. From this stems his constant emphasis on the value and role of identity—not only in protecting the nation but also in advancing it. Identity formed a central element of the model that Al-Messiri sought to construct for building and development, a model inspired by the Arab-Islamic environment and undefeated before others.”

Al-Messiri presents a unique model of Islamic identity, grounded in individual experience, critical analysis, and civilizational interaction. It serves as an important reference for anyone seeking to understand the relationship between humans, culture, religion, and knowledge in the modern era. This pursuit constitutes a civilizational responsibility incumbent upon both the individual and society to develop an ethical and cognitive awareness that contributes to the civilizational renaissance of the nation.

## 2. Critique of Western Modernity:

Susan Harfi asked Dr. Abdelwahab Al-Messiri in an interview: “Your discourse is a critical one against the framework of Western modernity, yet modernity possesses an undeniable appeal. How does this appeal relate to your discourse?”

He replied: “Modernity has a strong appeal, much like the materialist philosophical discourse, which is comforting because it addresses immediate and tangible issues—through the five senses, desires, material needs, and how to satisfy them—and provides easy answers and quick explanations, albeit superficial ones. This model avoids engaging with profound human issues, such as questions of meaning, identity, and purpose. As I jokingly say, materialist philosophy turns a person into an intellectual capable of giving rapid opinions on any subject. Everything human can be interpreted as an expression of economic or physical (nervous or sexual) motives. Materialist philosophy treats humans according to a law of gravity, and it is easier for a person to fall into the mud than to ascend to the stars or aspire to them. Falling into the mud is the easiest thing because the law of gravity facilitates it, and materialist philosophy simplifies matters both intellectually and practically.” (Susan Harfi, p. 205)

Al-Messiri describes modernity as having “a strong appeal” because it addresses the immediate and tangible aspects of human life senses, desires, material needs, and quick explanations. This view intersects with Max Weber’s analysis of the rise of *instrumental rationality*, which led modern humans to prioritize efficiency and effectiveness over meaning and spirit. According to Weber, modernity has confined humans within an “iron cage,” reducing life to value-free calculative processes. Al-Messiri employs symbolic language to convey a similar idea: modernity is comfortable because it provides “easy answers” that do not require depth, while the fundamental questions identity, meaning, and purpose remain civilizational questions that cannot be reduced to material concerns.

Al-Messiri discusses Weber in his book *Zionism and Nazism* by stating: “Max Weber sees that there are unique elements within Western civilization that have driven it toward increasing rationalization, which he identifies as the defining feature that distinguishes it from other civilizations. Weber defines the process of continuous material rationalization as a standardization that imposes quantitative and bureaucratic models on both material and human reality for the purpose of control. This process accelerates until rationalization reaches its comprehensive, imperial peak, enabling domination over all aspects of life and exerting control over humans themselves. Society thus transforms into a massive human machine.” (Al-Messiri, *Zionism*, p. 252)

When this machine forces individuals to occupy predetermined positions and perform assigned roles, it undoubtedly increases the social and economic efficiency of society significantly. However, it simultaneously threatens individual freedom and transforms society into an *iron cage*, especially as the modern individual lacks a sense of meaning. Consequently, such a person becomes internally fragile, feeling neither security nor the capacity for transcendence, as they do not stand on solid ground of meaning. (Al-Messiri, *Zionism*, p. 252)

Al-Messiri also raises the idea of reducing humans to economic and physical motives due to materialist philosophy. This notion aligns closely with Pierre Bourdieu’s critique of reductionist schools, which regard the individual merely as a direct product of material or instinctual interests, while ignoring the *symbolic structures* that shape social action. Al-Messiri’s perspective also resonates with Karl Mannheim, who rejected explaining human thought solely in terms of economic conditions, emphasizing instead the role of cognitive, cultural, and symbolic structures. Accordingly, Al-Messiri’s critique is not merely ethical but constitutes a sociological and epistemological critique of a reductionist approach that transforms humans into one-dimensional beings.

Al-Messiri attempted to provide a foundational conceptual formulation of modernity as it emerged in Western discourse, presenting it as a new vision of the world, the other, and the self. He observes that by the mid-nineteenth century, a materialist worldview had manifested, in which the world became

subject to the laws of material motion. Al-Messiri argues that the most distinctive feature of Western civilization is its adoption of the materialist model, which is fundamentally based on empirical sensory reality. Consequently, materialist philosophies formed the epistemological foundation and cognitive model for the modernity project, serving as the mechanism through which Western humans pursued their civilizational ambitions. As a result, modernity became associated in many minds with rationality, progress, and freedom, as well as with its dominance over cultural and intellectual elites. (Fatiha Mehdi, *Critique of Modernity*, pp. 1266–1267)

Al-Messiri's remark that materialist philosophy "*turns a person into an intellectual capable of giving rapid opinions on any subject*" reflects phenomena that have become amenable to simple explanations. This perspective connects with modern sociology of knowledge, particularly Alvin Gouldner's concept of the "*new organizational intellectual*," who operates within a market system and delivers knowledge that is quick and consumable rather than deep and critical. Gouldner advocated for a critical sociology in which the sociologist is conscious of their own biases and avoids the illusion of value-free neutrality, aligning him with the critical traditions of the Frankfurt School. Similarly, this resonates with Zygmunt Bauman's critique of liquid modernity, where knowledge becomes light and rapid, transforming humans into consumers of information rather than producers of meaning.

Al-Messiri observed the non-ethical consumerist models governing the so-called civilized world. The contemporary image of humans in the United States, he noted, is a mixture of the economic and the physical body. This cognitive image has largely dominated the ordinary American, despite some resistance from intellectuals. Yet, this stereotypical human is highly individualistic, immersed in constant competition with those around them. They constitute an independent self, with their own internal rules, unable to defer the pursuit of self-actualization. Consequently, their expectations are always extremely high, and their patience runs out quickly. (Ezzedine Maamiche, p. 122)

Accordingly, the social system appears to be governed by a contractual logic that prioritizes individual utility, making it the guiding standard for social relations at the expense of the common good and collective bonds of belonging. The centralization of value around material gain leads to the exclusion of spiritual and ethical dimensions, resulting in the dominance of reification and utilitarian patterns. Interpersonal relationships thus become purely instrumental, eroding the foundations of compassion and solidarity that constitute the essence of humanity, and giving way to a fragmented social life characteristic of modern materialist societies.

From this perspective, Al-Messiri contrasts the *compassionate society* with the *contractual society*, while acknowledging that they may share some common features. He emphasizes that a compassionate society is characterized by interactions and relationships grounded in empathy, compassion, solidarity, cooperation, and positive interconnection among its members. This reflects the elevation of human relations within communities, governed by ethical, cultural, and historical values rather than considerations of material gain and utility. Accordingly, Al-Messiri advocates for an *alternative human-centered modernity* based on achieving a balance between contractual arrangements and compassion, stating: "*We should establish a society founded on contracts without forgetting compassion; to build a society with a material foundation that does not neglect the spirit, respects nature without forgetting humanity thus, the essence of modernity is compassionate, balanced with nature and the self.*" (Fatiha Mehdi & Farida Olmo, *The Islamic Foundation of Modernity*, p. 161)

A critical reading of modernist transformations reveals that contemporary social systems are increasingly governed by a contractual logic that elevates individual interests over collective bonds. Al-Messiri highlighted this when discussing the dominance of the materialist model and its reduction of humans to instrumental dimensions. This shift resonates with Zygmunt Bauman's analysis, who argues that "*liquid modernity*" has produced fragile social relations that can quickly dissolve, turning individuals into consumer units whose value is measured by their utility. Similarly, Anthony Giddens explains that

late modernity reshapes patterns of social interaction by dismantling traditional solidarity structures and reinforcing rationally organized individualism, making relationships contractual and less rooted in systems of meaning and values. As a result, reification and pragmatism permeate the social fabric at the expense of spiritual and human considerations, eroding the foundations of empathy and affection, and giving way to fragmented forms of coexistence characteristic of increasingly materialist modern societies.

What occurred within the modern Western civilizational structure represents a new configuration unprecedented in the course of human civilization. It is fundamentally linked to the structural emergence and the civilizational harnessing that characterized the modern West, which developed within a secular framework expanding gradually from partiality to comprehensiveness. This framework created the space for the expansion and advancement of science, allowing it to exceed its desirable limits, particularly in relation to the human being, after detaching from the religious and moral constraints that had previously regulated its course. Science began to govern its own trajectory, resulting in the predominance of material scientific control—not only over humans but over the world as a whole—and the unleashing of innovations and scientific revolutions without regard to their consequences or underlying references. Consequently, the relationship between human beings and science fractured, as the moral conditions and constraints that could have guided science were removed. (Maryam Chokrani, p. 187)

Al-Messiri states in his book *Secularism, Modernity, and Globalization* that the use of science, technology, and reason detached from value and purpose constitutes the essence of modernity and its epistemological dimension, which ultimately led to a Darwinian form of modernity. Therefore, he emphasizes the necessity of returning to the centrality of the human being as a human. (Al-Messiri, *Secularism, Modernity, and Globalization*, p. 45)

Darwinian philosophy constitutes the foundational pillar of the modern Western worldview. This materialist philosophy has shaped the epistemological framework of what Al-Messiri terms the *secular imperial epistemic vision*. To clarify the dimensions of this vision, he defines *comprehensive imperialism*, also referred to as material or nihilistic secularism. It is an all-encompassing, materially rational worldview that operates within an immanent frame of reference, seeing the center of the universe as inherent rather than transcendent. According to this vision, the entire world is fundamentally composed of a single material substance, devoid of sanctity and mystery, in constant motion without ultimate purpose or goal, and indifferent to particularities, uniqueness, absolutes, or constants. In this sense, comprehensive secularism entails the separation of all religious, ethical, and human values that transcend the laws of motion and the senses from the world that is, from both humanity and nature. As a materialist philosophy, it reduces reality—humanity and nature alike to a single plane, rendering everything mere utilitarian, relative matter devoid of sanctity. (Al-Messiri, *Materialist Philosophy and the Deconstruction of Man*, p. 105)

A careful examination of the history of Western policies reveals that the ideology of neutralization constitutes the very creed of secularism and its essential foundation, since secularism is grounded in everything sensory and material while rejecting all that is metaphysical. As a result, scholars limit their concern to observing material facts and general laws without reference to the human being as a source of value. As Constantine Rezik notes, “Perhaps the most dangerous of these negative outcomes, as they appear on the horizon, is the extension of scientific and technological power from the realm of material nature to the realm of the human being himself.” This development marginalizes the human and removes him from the center of the universe, giving rise to irrational materialist philosophies, nihilistic currents, and anti-human worldviews—expressions of the failure of the secular project. (Wafa Bertima, p. 484)

Al-Messiri argues that the model of immanence and comprehensive secularism he proposes provides the essential keys for understanding. This model entails the removal of the boundary between the sacred and the profane, and the sacralization of entities that are not sacred—such as the universe and energy. Comprehensive secularism, he contends, has led to the deconstruction of the human being, reducing him to something lower than himself—namely, nature—and transforming him into a utilitarian object. This, according to Al-Messiri, represents a form of imperialism that has turned the world into usable material, exploited by the stronger Western human for his own benefit. It regimented European internal life strictly, rationalized the Western human, mobilized armies, and launched imperialist conquests across the world. (Adwan Nimer Messouad Adwan, p. 519)

Al-Messiri sought to develop an alternative project to Western modernity, grounded in Islamic principles that elevate the common human interest and aim to consolidate an Arab identity capable of achieving integration between sciences and knowledge on the one hand, and ethical and religious systems on the other. His project is based on reconnecting what has been severed and rebuilding the relationship between knowledge and value, in contrast to the Western modernization model, which, as Al-Messiri points out, is founded upon a sharp separation between scientific and rational achievements and ethical and religious dimensions.

In reconstructing the relationship between knowledge and value, Al-Messiri sought to “Islamize” knowledge through a theory grounded in a clear ontological foundation centered on the human being. He does not view the human as a mere passive recipient of reality, but rather as an active subject capable of transcendence and agency. This is expressed in Al-Messiri’s concept of the “effective human”, who participates in the formation of meaning and the construction of concepts—not merely by receiving the givens of reality as they are, but through interpreting and reconfiguring them. Here, the cognitive model emerges in which Al-Messiri critiques what he calls the *objective/photographic recipient model*, a model based on a passive collective mind that merely gathers information and collects particulars uncritically. Such a model reduces the human being to a consumer of facts rather than an active participant. Consequently, Al-Messiri moves from criticizing this reductive model toward formulating a foundationally human cognitive model that integrates human action and the dimension of value in understanding the world. He emphasizes that knowledge is not a mechanical reflection of reality but a complex process in which experience, imagination, values, and purpose are intricately intertwined.

He expressed this by stating: *«When materialism was lifted from my thought, three fundamental and interrelated themes emerged in my life, so closely intertwined that I can almost say they are three faces of the same coin, reflecting my transition from the materialist model to the model that separates the human being from nature. These themes are: the shift from the photographic, receptive, documentary, materialist objectivity detached from value to a jurisprudential objectivity; the rejection of passive reason and the adoption of a generative vision of the mind; and, finally, the rejection of direct observation in favor of adopting the model as a methodological approach in analysis.»* (Al-Messiri, *My Intellectual Journey*, pp. 317–318)

After analyzing the nature of the Western epistemic model, elucidating its general characteristics, uncovering its deep structure, and exposing its biases, Al-Messiri proceeded to conduct a methodological and epistemological critique aimed at demonstrating the fragility of this model, the erosion of its interpretive foundations, the limitations of its outcomes, the narrowness of its perspective, and its inconsistency with human nature. However, directly analyzing the assumptions and foundational premises of the Western model does not imply a complete rejection of it or a denial of its merits. Rather, Al-Messiri regards critique as a necessary step toward liberation from absolute dependence on Western models, enabling the interrogation of their philosophical and cultural underpinnings and a thorough reevaluation of them. Consequently, the endeavor to displace this model from its centrality and to offer alternative epistemologies that reflect the civilizational vision of the nation becomes an integral part of the project of constructing independent knowledge.

*"If we want the national renaissance to fulfill its conditions and bear fruit, we cannot do without three principal steps that we must undertake with determination and vigor, the first is to build the intellectual foundation upon which this national renaissance rests, by studying its goals and means, defining the meaning of the nation and nationalism, establishing the characteristics and distinctiveness of the Arab nation, and highlighting its unique status among nations and the share it had in the past and is hoped to have in the future in the advancement of civilization and human progress—that is, the creation of a comprehensive, clear, and organized national philosophy." (Constantine Rezik, p. 8)*

*"The human being within nature has become the sign of stability in the world of moving matter, the sign in the world of interconnected matter, and the sign of composition in the world of material reductionism. That is, the human transcends the laws of material nature, with a distance separating him from nature. Here emerges a fundamental duality that requires explanation, the duality of matter and what is not matter, of nature and what is not nature, of the non-human and the human. To account for this duality, it was necessary to posit another duality: the duality of the world of becoming and a point that lies outside it—a fixed, transcendent, and exalted point that guarantees the stability of the human being and his separation from nature. This point is God." (Al-Messiri, *My Intellectual Journey*, p. 307)*

Al-Messiri rejects reducing the project of renaissance to merely imitating the Western model, arguing that the fundamental question is not only *"Why does the West progress?"* but also *"What is the meaning of progress?"* and *"How can an Islamic humanistic modernity be developed that achieves a balance between the material and the spiritual?"* He emphasizes that identity is not limited to an emotional sense of belonging or symbolic sanctity, but is constructed on a cognitive and methodological awareness of the world, the human being, and the course of history. From this perspective, Al-Messiri argues that re-establishing Islamic identity on solid epistemological foundations can open the way to formulating a civilizational model alternative to materialist Western modernity not merely as a cultural identity, but as a comprehensive value-based and meaningful vision of life.

## Conclusion

The issue of identity and belonging in the thought of Abdelwahab Al-Messiri constitutes an important analytical entry point for understanding the profound transformations experienced by contemporary human beings, particularly under the increasing pressure of the materialist and comprehensively secular Western civilizational model. By tracing his intellectual trajectory and his interpretive model of the human and existence, it becomes evident that Al-Messiri offers a complex sociological reading of identity, one that transcends rigid essentialist notions and conceives it as a social and historical construct shaped through the interaction between the individual and their civilizational context, between the self and the other, and between values and reality. From Al-Messiri's perspective, Islamic civilizational identity is not merely a cultural affiliation; it is an epistemological and value-based framework that regulates the human relationship with the world and reproduces meaning within social life. It is a dynamic, cumulative identity, continually retrieved through daily experience and ethical practice, rather than through recalling an imagined past or closing in on the self. On this basis, identity becomes a renewed civilizational project, founded on the centrality of the human being as an agent capable of action and choice, and on achieving a balance between the material and spiritual dimensions of existence—far from reductive tendencies that perceive the human merely as an economic entity or a social function.

In contrast to this conception, Al-Messiri presents a profound critique of modern Western civilization, focusing on the consequences of comprehensive secularization and the dominance of the instrumental model. Sociologically, this has led to the reification of the human being, the disintegration of social bonds, and the erosion of the symbolic meaning that grants cohesion to social life. Thus, Al-Messiri's contribution to the issue of identity and belonging is not limited to his critique of the West or his defense of Islamic identity; it is also evident in his deconstruction of the social and epistemological conditions that shape perceptions, attachments, and affiliations, and in his call to re-establish a humanistic civilizational project capable of restoring the balance lost in the modern world.

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