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Review Essays

SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS AND THE DIALOGIC OF OCCIDENTAL KNOWLEDGE

A Passing Glance to the Study of Society in the Malay Archipelago

Ahmad Murad Merican¹

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas' writings have developed a framework and theoretical perspective in responding to the Western worldview and scholarship. This is another layer in the trajectory of his works which has mainly gone unnoticed from the beginning. His systematic corpus on the Anglo-Saxon West encompasses, among others, the philosophical and the metaphysical, axiological, moral-cultural, aesthetics and the linguistic dimensions. The dynamics is more often seen in light of Islamic philosophy and metaphysics, as well as Malay-Muslim attitudes and worldview. Al-Attas' arguments are strongly critical of Western epistemology, European history and society. This essay revisits and rereads two of his works, namely *Islam and Secularism*,² and a journal article, "Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction."³ In both works, al-Attas resonates the image of the West in challenging its scholarship.

Al-Attas sees methods and systems in Western historiography, history, psychology, linguistics, literature, and other fields and disciplines as having a bearing on knowledge and aspects of Islam. Western standards and rules of interpretation were imposed. He saw knowledge and Islam being disenchanting and desecralized.⁴ Al-Attas

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² Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), 1978).

³ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, "Islamic Philosophy: An Introduction," *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 1, issue 1 (2005): 11-43.

⁴ See Ali Alawi, "Re-Islamizing the World," in Wan Mod Nor Wan Daud and Muhammad Zainiy Uthman, eds., *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the*

sought to internally transform the worldview of the Muslims and close the gap between Islam and the West. In so doing, he provides us with a perspective and a methodology in constructing a discourse, and thereby an image of the West, coming from where Islam has been least narrated – the Malay world, specifically the Malay Archipelago.

Unaware to others, in his writings, he observes and narrates on the Occident. The direct and indirect subjugation of the non-Western world by Western colonial powers in the eighteenth century has spurred reformist and anti-colonial movements. In the Malay-Muslim world, the population was seen as ignorant objects, whose worldview is determined by the dominant worldview. The Eurocentric world inundating the Malays create a prism where views on life, religion and self were determined by the crucible of the Christian West. Al-Attas was extremely concerned, and had consistently argued that the most fundamental and basic reason for this condition is the problem of knowledge. The problem is rooted in the confusion concerning the nature and scope of knowledge, and concerning, among other important matters, the meaning of religion in Islam, its basic key terms and components as well as concerning the spirit and sciences and institutions of other civilizational entities, especially those of the West. In his corpus, beginning with the metaphysics of Islam, al-Attas is epistemologically mindful of the necessity to counter and negotiate through the Occidental corpus.

To al-Attas, the worldview of Islam is not based upon philosophical speculation formulated mainly from the data of sensible experience; nor it is restricted to *kawn*, which is the world of created things. He argues that if such Arabic expression is now used in contemporary Muslim thought, it only demonstrates that we are already being unduly influenced by the modern, secular Western scientific conception of the world that is restricted to the world of sense and sensible experience.⁵

The ‘Attasian’ conception of worldview as such can be traced

Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honour of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (Skudai: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2010), 59-81.

⁵ Al-Attas, “Islamic Philosophy.”

to the absence of the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, the latter signifying the character of the Occident. Reality to al-Attas is not *waqi'iyah* but *ḥaqīqah*, whose ambit encompasses all of Reality, and not only to factual occurrences:

Moreover, a factual occurrence may be an actualization of something false (i.e. *bātil*); whereas reality is the actualization always of something true (i.e. *ḥaqiq*). What is meant by 'worldview' according to the perspective of Islam, is then the *vision of reality and truth* that appears before our mind's eye revealing what existence is all about; for it is the world of existence in its totality that Islam is projecting. Thus, by worldview we must mean *ru'yyat al-islām li al-wujūd*.⁶

It is pertinent to note that al-Attas' view of Reality and Existence is established based on engaging with the corpus in European history and epistemology. If in the Western world Reality and Existence is formed by the gathering together of various cultural objects, values and phenomena into artificial coherence, the Islamic vision (of reality and truth) is a metaphysical survey of the visible as well as the invisible worlds including the perspective of life as a whole:

Nor is it one that is formed gradually through a historical and developmental process of philosophical speculation and scientific discovery, which must of necessity be left vague and open-ended for future change and alteration in line with paradigms that change in correspondence with changing circumstances. It is not a worldview which undergoes a dialectical process of transformation repeated through the ages, from thesis to antithesis then synthesis, with elements of each of these stages in the process being assimilated into the other, such as a worldview based upon a system of thought that was originally God-centred, then gradually became God-world-centred, and is now world-centred and perhaps shifting away to form a new thesis in the

⁶ Al-Attas, "Islamic Philosophy."

dialectical process.⁷

Changes in worldviews are dependent on ideology characterized by a predominance of the influence of particular and opposing systems of thought advocating different interpretations of worldview and value systems like that which have occurred and will continue to occur in the history of the cultural, religious and intellectual traditions of the West. Al-Attas makes the distinction with the Islamic perspective by arguing that there are no distinct ages in Islam. Indeed, there have not been in the history of the cultural, religious and intellectual tradition of Islam distinct ages characterized by a preponderance of a system of thought based on materialism or idealism, supported by attendant methodological approaches and positions like empiricism, rationalism, realism, nominalism, pragmatism, positivism, logical positivism, criticism, oscillating between centuries and emerging one after another to the present. He further elucidates:

The representatives of Islamic thought – theologians, philosophers, metaphysicians – have all and individually applied various methods in their investigations without preponderating on any one particular method. They combined in their investigations, and at the same time in their persons, the empirical and the rational, the deductive and the inductive methods and affirmed no dichotomy between the subjective and the objective, so that they all affected what I would call the *tawhīd* method of knowledge.⁸

This resonates the inherent problem with periodization, with regards to historiography, history and epistemology; and applicable to the study of Malay history and philosophy. One must not frame it in the image of the European experience. If so, we would encounter an epistemological blind spot. A profound response to the West seen in al-Attas is the existence of periodization. In Islam (and the history and geography of the Malay world), historical periods cannot be characterized as ‘classical,’ then ‘medieval,’ then ‘modern’ and now

⁷ Al-Attas, “Islamic Philosophy.”

⁸ Al-Attas, “Islamic Philosophy.”

to the ‘post-modern.’ Nor are events to be characterized as ‘medieval’ and the modern experience as a ‘renaissance and an ‘enlightenment.’ Approaches to the study of Malay society must not be configured and structured by the likes of rationalism and periodization as per the experience of Europe. By explaining Islam and its worldview, al-Attas inadvertently illuminates on Western thought and worldview, thereby dialogically transmitting alertness and criticality in our beliefs and assumptions, thus liberating scholarship of our history and society from the inhibitions of colonial knowledge.

In Europe, there are proponents of shifts in systems of thought involving changes in the fundamental elements of the worldview and value systems who believe that all forms of culture must experience such shifts, otherwise in the process of interaction with changing circumstances they exhaust themselves and become uncreative and petrified. This is especially so in our study of sociology, viz change, modernization and conflict in society. It is for example ‘conflict’ as in what has been categorized in European knowledge and imparted to us to be true in our society. As much as what we can say is that such studies on ‘conflict’ in Malay society, especially in the social science scholarship of the 1970s can be argued as arriving at false conclusions because they began under false assumptions. Such situations are only true in the experience and consciousness of civilizations whose systems of thought and values have been derived from cultural and philosophical elements aided by the science of their times. Islam is not a form of culture. Its original source is the Revelation, confirmed by religion, affirmed by intellectual and intuitive principles.⁹

The above framework and assessment from within which the ‘Attasian’ thought and worldview operate are found in the many commentaries and systematization of ideas in his monographs and books. These include al-Attas’ studies on two greatest scholars of the Malay-Muslim world, Hamzah Fansuri¹⁰ and Nur al-Din al-Raniri.¹¹

⁹ Al-Attas, “Islamic Philosophy.”

¹⁰ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970).

¹¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nur*

The other work, profound and a definitive book on the worldview of Islam is the previously cited *Islam and Secularism*, which sets the background to theoretical, metaphysical and epistemological assumptions on the Occident. In the book, al-Attas begins with the crisis faced by Christianity and the Western world. His views of Europe are pertinent in tracing the predicament of modern man, including that of the modern Malay.

Since the European Enlightenment, stretching from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, and with a concomitant rise of reason and empiricism and scientific and technological advances in the West, English, Dutch, French and German philosophers have indeed foreshadowed in their writings the crisis that was described by Jacques Maritain in his *Le Paysan de la Garonne*. Al-Attas further pertinently and profoundly asserts that the crisis in modern man is called *secularization*.¹² He traces this process to some Christian theologians in the earlier half of the last century. Already in the earlier half of the nineteenth century, the French philosopher-sociologist, Auguste Comte, envisaged the rise of science and the overthrow of religion, and believed, according to the secular logic in the development of Western philosophy and science that society was ‘evolving’ and ‘developing’ from the primitive to the modern stages, and observed that taken in its developmental aspect, metaphysics is a transition from theology to science.¹³

Al-Attas paints a pertinent structure on European thought and worldview. His articulation is critical to our understanding of the problems of knowledge in society and to a more empirical focus on the Malay self and society against the background of colonialism and the colonial condition. He sourced from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and the French Jesuit, paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, as well as the American Paul Tillich. Al-Attas identifies the signposts that characterize the Europe that was far removed from the moorings of a sacred centre. He traces the root of secularization to the “biblical faith” which is the “fruit of the

al-Din al-Raniri (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, 1986).

¹² Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 1.

¹³ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 1-2.

Gospel.”¹⁴ He identifies a number of European and American theologians and theorists as having found cause to call for radical changes in the interpretation of the Gospel and in the nature and role of the Church that would merge them logically and naturally into the picture of contemporary Western man and his world as envisaged in the secular panorama of life.¹⁵ The crisis in Western history and society, having its origins in the self-evolved doubt about God, is augmented by the early conception in the development of the Christian dogma which al-Attas argues, was formulated on the basis of a highly improbably conceptual amalgam consisting of the *theos* of Greek philosophy, the *Yahweh* of the Hebrews, the *deus* of Western metaphysics, and a host of other traditional gods of the pre-Christian Germanic traditions. These are fused together, and at the same time coming apart, “thus creating the heightening crisis in their belief in a God which has already been confused from the very beginning.”¹⁶

Apart from providing a summary on the contemporary situation in the Western Christian world, al-Attas, perhaps the only Muslim thus far and coming from the Malay Archipelago, has managed to capture the essence of the meaning of secularization and secularism. It is instructive to revisit and re-understand by what he means by both concepts. According to al-Attas,¹⁷ the term *secular*, from the Latin *saeculum*, conveys a meaning with a marked dual connotation of *time* and *location*; the time referring to the ‘now’ or ‘present’ sense of it, and the location to the ‘world’ or ‘worldly’ sense of it. Thus, *saeculum* means ‘this age’ or ‘the present time,’ and this age or the present time refers to events in this world, and it also then means ‘contemporary events.’ He explains that the emphasis of meaning set on a particular time or period in the world is viewed as a *historical process*. The concept secular refers to the condition of the world at this particular time or period or age. The germ of meaning is noted where things develop naturally and

¹⁴ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 3.

¹⁵ These are figures like Karl Bath, Paul van Buren and Harvey Cox. See al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 3.

¹⁶ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 11.

¹⁷ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 14.

logically into the existential context of an ever-changing world in which there occurs the notion of relativity of human values.

Al-Attas traces the spatio-temporal connotation conveyed in the concept secular to the experience and consciousness born of the fusion of the Graeco-Roman and Judaic traditions in Western Christianity:

It is this 'fusion' of the mutually conflicting elements of the Hellenic and Hebrew worldviews which have deliberately been incorporated into Christianity that modern Christian theologians and intellectuals recognize as problematic, in that the former views existence as basically spatial and the latter as basically temporal in such wise that the arising confusion of worldviews becomes the root of their epistemological and hence also theological problems. Since the world has only in modern times been more and more understood and recognized by them as historical, the emphasis on the temporal aspect of it has become more meaningful and has conveyed a special significance to them. For this reason, they exert themselves in efforts emphasizing their conception of the Hebrew vision of existence, which they think is more congenial with the spirit of 'the times.' and denouncing the Hellenic as a grave and basic mistake.¹⁸

Having defined the secular, al-Attas proceeds to define secularization. He defines *secularization*:

as the deliverance of man 'first from religion and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language.'¹⁹ It is the loosing of the world from religious and quasi-religious understandings of itself, the dispelling of old close worldviews, the breaking of all

¹⁸ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 14-15.

¹⁹ The definition is cited by Harvard theologian Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York, 1965), 2. It is contained in a report on a conference held at the Ecumenical Institute of Bossey, Switzerland, September 1959.

supernatural myths and sacred symbols... the ‘defatalization of history’, the discovery of man that he has been left with the world on his hands, that he can no longer blame fortune or the furies for what he does with...; [it is] man turning his attention away from worlds beyond and toward this world and this time.²⁰

He clarifies that secularization encompasses not only the political and social aspects of life, but also inevitably the cultural, for it denotes “the disappearance of religious determination of the symbols of cultural integration. Relying on Cox, al-Attas describes secularization as implying “a historical process, almost certainly irreversible, in which society and culture are delivered from tutelage to religious control and closed metaphysical world views. Accordingly, it is a “liberating development,” and the end product of secularization is historical relativism. According to al-Attas, Europe sees history as a process of secularization.²¹

Western civilization embraces several integral components in the dimensions of secularization. To al-Attas, these are the disenchantment of nature, the desacralization of politics, and the deconsecration of values. The West was disenchanted with nature. The ‘disenchantment’ of nature, a term borrowed from German sociologist Max Weber, deriving from the phrase ‘disenchantment of the world’ used by Freiderich Schiller, means the freeing of nature from its religious overtones:

This involves the dispelling of animistic spirits and gods and magic from the natural world, separating it from God and distinguishing man from it, so that man may no longer regard nature as a divine entity, which thus allows him to act freely upon nature, to make use of it according to his needs and plans, and hence create historical change and ‘development.’²²

Al-Attas observes that politics in the West has lost its sacred origins.

²⁰ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 15.

²¹ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 15.

²² Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 15-16.

To him:

‘desacralization’ of politics mean the abolition of sacral legitimation of political power and authority, which is the prerequisite of political change and hence also social change allowing for the emergence of the historical process.²³

And he understands ‘deconsecration’ of values to mean:

the rendering transient and relative of all cultural creations and every value system which for them includes religion and worldviews having ultimate and final significance, so that this way history, the future, is open to change, and man is free to create the change and immerse himself in the ‘evolutionary’ process.²⁴

With penetrating insight, al-Attas was critical of the Western attitude towards values. He says that it demands an awareness on the part of secular man of the relativity of his own views and beliefs whereby the Western man must live with the realization that the rules and ethical codes of conduct which guide his own life will change with the times and generations. Al-Attas uses the term ‘evolution’ to describe the consciousness of man from the ‘infantile’ to the ‘mature’ states.²⁵ He makes a distinction between secularization and secularism – the former implies a continuing and open-ended process in which values and world views are continually revised in accordance with ‘evolutionary’ change in history; the latter, like religion, projects a closed worldview and an absolute set of values in line with an ultimate historical purpose having a final significance for man. Secularism then, denotes an ideology.

Al-Attas further qualifies the character that is the West, saying that secularism and secularization have never quite deconsecrate values since:

It sets up its own system of values intending it to be

²³ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 16.

²⁴ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 16.

²⁵ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 16.

regarded as absolute and final, unlike secularization which relativizes all values and produces the openness and freedom necessary for human action and for history.²⁶

For that reason, according to al-Attas, the West regards secularism as a menace to secularization, and urged that it must be vigilantly watched and checked and prevented from becoming the ideology of the state. To the West, secularization describes the inner workings of man's 'evolution.' The context in which secularization occurs is the urban civilization. Sociology, according to the West, refers to the structure of common life, 'evolved' from the primitive to the tribal to the village to the town to the city by stages. He describes the Occidental concept of development from the simple social groupings to the complex mass society; and in the state of human life, or the stage of man's 'evolution,' corresponding to the 'development' of man from the 'infantile' to the 'mature' states. Early modern and modern Western society then is the state of 'maturing, the urban context forming its pattern.

Islam and Secularism brings us an image of the West, metaphysically and historically. Al-Attas asserts that Western man is always inclined to regard his culture and what he categorized as civilization as man's cultural vanguard; and his own experience and consciousness as the representative of the most 'evolved' of the species. To the Occident, we are all in the process of lagging behind, as it were, and will come to realize the same experience and consciousness in due course sometime:

It is with this attitude that they, believing in their own absurd theories of human evolution, view human history and development and religion and religious experience and consciousness.²⁷

Al-Attas rejects the validity of the truth of the assertion of the West, with regard to secularization and their theories and interpretation of knowledge based on their experience and consciousness of belief.

²⁶ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 17.

²⁷ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 23.

Seen as a fundamental response is his concept of the 'Dewesternization of Knowledge.' Here he states categorically that knowledge is not neutral, and can indeed be infused with a nature and content which masquerades as knowledge:

Yet it is in fact, taken as a whole, not true knowledge, but its interpretation through the prism, as it were, the worldview, the intellectual vision and psychological perception of the civilization that now plays the key role in its formulation and dissemination. What is formulated and disseminated is knowledge infused with the character and personality of that civilization – knowledge presented and conveyed as knowledge in that guise so subtly fused together with the real so that other take it unawares *in toto* to be the real knowledge *per se*.²⁸

The description on knowledge and non-knowledge is a significant one. Al-Attas reaffirms the epistemology and calls for its transformation. Such a condition in the state of knowledge has evolved out of historical fusion of cultures, philosophies, values and aspirations of ancient Greece and Rome; their amalgamation with Judaism and Christianity, and their further development and formation by the Latin, Germanic, Celtic and Nordic peoples. From a politico-epistemological dimension, al-Attas identifies the character and influence of the major European cultures:

From the ancient Greece is derived the philosophical and epistemological elements; from Rome the elements of law and statecraft and government; from Judaism and Christianity the elements of religious faith; and from the Latin, Germanic, Celtic and Nordic peoples their independence and national spirit and traditional values, and the development and advancement of the natural and physical science and technology which they, together with the Slavic peoples, have pushed to such

²⁸ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 127-128.

pinnacles of power.²⁹

Finally, al-Attas³⁰ describes the West as captive of dualism. The fusion and amalgamation that has evolved have produced a characteristic dualism in the worldview and values of Western culture and civilization; a dualism that cannot be resolved into a harmonious unity. This is because it was issued forth under conditions of conflicting ideas, values, cultures, beliefs, philosophies, dogmas, doctrines and theologies. This altogether forged an all-pervasive dualistic vision of reality and truth “locked in despairing combat.” That dualism abides in all aspects of Western life and philosophy: the speculative, the social, the political, the cultural – just as it pervades with equal inexorableness the Western religion.

ALBERT CAMUS, THE ABSURD AND MARTYRDOM

*Arief S. Arman*³¹

Albert Camus (1913-1960) was an Algerian-French thinker who is heralded for his extensive work on the human experience of 'the now'. The question of existence, of whether there is meaning to life or otherwise is explained with great enthusiasm in his works, *The Plague*, *The Stranger*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, and *Letters to a German Friend*, among others. This essay seeks to reconcile the incessant search for meaning in human beings with the motivations of martyrs who carry out suicide attacks across the globe, thus arguably justified in their actions. By means of this text, it is with sincere hope that the

²⁹ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 128.

³⁰ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 128.

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TRANSLITERATION TABLE

CONSONANTS

Ar=Arabic, Pr=Persian, OT=Ottoman Turkish, Ur=Urdu

Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	Ar	Pr	OT	UR	
ء	ب	پ	پ	ز	ز	ز	ز	گ	—	g	g	g
ب	ب	ب	ب	ژ	—	—	ř	ل	l	l	l	l
پ	پ	پ	پ	ژ	—	zh	j	م	m	m	m	m
ت	ت	ت	ت	س	s	s	s	ن	n	n	n	n
ث	—	—	ṭ	ش	sh	sh	ş	ه	h	h	h ¹	h ¹
ث	th	th	th	ص	ş	ş	ş	و	w	v/u	v	v/u
ج	j	j	c	ض	ḍ	ḍ	ž	ی	y	y	y	y
چ	—	ch	çh	ط	ṭ	ṭ	ṭ	ة	-ah	—	—	-a ²
ح	ḥ	ḥ	ḥ	ظ	ẓ	ẓ	ẓ	ال	al ³	—	—	—
خ	kh	kh	kh	ع	‘	‘	‘	—	—	—	—	—
د	d	d	d	غ	gh	gh	ğh	—	—	—	—	—
ڈ	—	—	d	ف	f	f	f	—	—	—	—	—
ذ	dh	dh	dh	ق	q	q	k	—	—	—	—	—
ر	r	r	r	ك	k	k/g	k/ñ	—	—	—	—	—

¹ – when not final
² – at in construct state
³ – (article) al - or l-

VOWELS

	Arabic and Persian	Urdu	Ottoman Turkish
Long	ا	ā	ā
	آ	Ā	—
	و	ū	ū
	ي	ī	ī
Doubled	ي	iy (final form ī)	iy (final form ī)
	و	uww (final form ū)	uvv
	و	uvv (for Persian)	uvv
Diphthongs	و	au or aw	ev
	ی	ai or ay	ey
Short	ا	a	a or e
	ا	u	u or ū
	ا	i	o or ö
	ا	i	i

URDU ASPIRATED SOUNDS

For aspirated sounds not used in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish add h after the letter and underline both the letters e.g. جھ jh گھ gh

For Ottoman Turkish, modern Turkish orthography may be used.

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