

ISLAMIZATION OF CONTEMPORARY
KNOWLEDGE:
A BRIEF COMPARISON BETWEEN AL-ATTAS AND
FAZLUR RAHMAN *

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It is quite normal that a formal intellectual and systematic formulation of a seminal concept be attempted and elaborated long after the significance and meaning of that concept has been profoundly practiced. In fact the systematic conceptualization and elaboration is made possible and realistic because of the long standing practice, albeit not noticed or taken for granted by most scholars. The systematic formulation of Islamic jurisprudence as a science was done by al-Shāfi'ī, and that of theology by al-Ash'arī, although the practice of Islamic jurisprudence and the correct grasp of Islamic theology had already occurred during the time of the Holy Prophet and the succeeding centuries. In a parallel manner even though the systematic formulation of the concept of islamization of contemporary knowledge is a clear product of the latter half of the 20th century, yet the very first verses revealed to the Holy Prophet, in *al-'Alaq* (96): 1-5, clearly underlined the spirit of the islamization of then contemporary knowledge when God stresses that He is the Source and Origin of human knowledge.

The islamization of knowledge issue undoubtedly is the most promising intellectual agenda of Islamic resurgence and one

* A paper presented at the international conference *Islam and Modernism: The Fazlur Rahman Experiment* organized by The Center for the Organization of Cultural Activities, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 22nd-23rd February 1997. This is a condensed version of a chapter from a bigger work by this author on the educational philosophy and practice of al-Attas, to be released by ISTAC at the end of 1997.

of the most controversial issues that has captured the imagination and elicited strong reaction of Muslim intellectuals and activists across the globe since the late 1970s. This "epistemological revolution" as al-Attas calls it,¹ erupted like a wild fire blazing across the seas from Kuala Lumpur to Plainfield, Indiana. After almost two decades the more popular interpretation of the agenda, the one propounded by Ismail al-Faruqi and the IIIT², is apparently showing signs of not progressing any further. But the earlier and original conceptualization albeit less popular yet clearly more profound is defined, elaborated and exemplified in the life-long academic works of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, and is gradually being recognized and properly acknowledged as having the inner vitality and traditional legitimacy to help Muslims benefit from their rich and living spiritual and intellectual heritage and resources, and to guide not only their own intellectuals and compatriots, but also the large part of serious minded people from other religions in confronting the insidious and morally crippling effects of global secularization as a philosophical program and a way of life.

Fazlur Rahman is a late and indirect participant in this agenda. His interest in Islamization centres mostly in the area of law which began when he was closely associated with the Ayub Khan regime in the 1960s.³ Because of that preoccupation he stresses the need for and outlines his *systematic interpretation*

¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, "The Corruption of Knowledge". Unpublished lecture at Istanbul, 1985. Type-written, p. 6.

² Ismail al-Faruqi, *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan* (Herndon, Virginia: IIIT, 1982).

³ Fazlur Rahman, "Islamic Modernism: Its Scope, Method and Alternatives", *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 1(1970), 332-333. Here, he uses the phrase the "task of the Islamization of secular modernism" to refer to efforts "to Islamize the legal and institutional materials that were simply adopted from outside Islam." See also his, "Some Islamic Issues in the Ayub Khan Era" in D. P. Little, ed., *Essays in Honour of Niyazi Berkes* (Leiden: