

Book Review:

THE EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE OF SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS: AN EXPOSITION OF THE ORIGINAL CONCEPT OF ISLAMIZATION. By Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud. International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 1998. Pp. 507 ISBN 983-9379-09-7 (PB).
Reviewed By: 'Aamir Bashir

Islamization is a phenomenon which is as old as Islam itself. It started with the first revelation of the Qur'an and subsequently wherever Muslims went and whatever they encountered they moulded people, ideas and practices in such a way that these became Islamic. From Senegal in West Africa to Mindanao in the Philippines and from Tataristan in Siberia to Mozambique in Southern Africa, Muslims have left a permanent mark upon societies and cultures. Language, culture, philosophy, in fact all aspects of human existence were Islamized.

However, the modern day encounter with the Western intellectual tradition has been different. This time, Muslims are not conquerors but colonial subjects; and the loss of confidence that comes with it has also shaped their reactions to the Western intellectual tradition. On one end of the spectrum are those, who reject this tradition outrightly and on the other end are those who accept it wholeheartedly without thinking about the negative aspects of it. In the middle are those who want to approach the Western intellectual tradition with confidence acting upon the old Arab adage *خُذْ مَا صَفَا وَ دَعْ مَا كَدَرَ* (Take that which is good and leave that which is bad). The responses to western intellectual onslaught can also be categorized based upon the background of scholars. Here, we have two broad categories. On one side are the traditional *'ulama* and on the other side are the modern educated (but not necessarily modernist) scholars. There is occasional overlapping between the two but generally the dichotomy holds.

Many amongst the traditional *'ulama*, of course, have been engaged in the process of Islamization without even being aware of the term. The scholars of old did not have a well laid out strategy for Islamization; the process was a natural one for them. Whenever, they interacted with anything, they left their mark on it. This was Islamization then and many traditional *'ulama* still practice it that way. But since, many of them are not interacting with the Western intellectual tradition directly; therefore, we find that their effect upon contemporary knowledge has been minimal except perhaps in the realm of Sufism.

Prof. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, a modern educated scholar but with a strong background in traditional Islamic sciences straddles the divide. We find him articulating, in modern Western terms, the idea of Islamization. Along with him, there is the late Prof. Isma'il al-Faruqi who popularized the idea through his famous work "Islamization of Knowledge" (which came out in 1982) and hence is considered by some to be the original conceptualizer of the term.

The author, Prof Dr. Wan Mohd. Nor Wan Daud, has been associated with Syed Al-Attas for a very long time. He argues that Attas is the original conceptualizer of the term. The very

choice of the book's subtitle is meant to drive home that point. Wan considers it very important to uphold authenticity. In fact, the book's purpose as stated by the author is twofold. Firstly, 'to uphold authenticity and clarity in conceptual thinking on issues that are fundamentally important to Muslims' (p 21). Secondly, he seeks to emphasize the importance of education in the face of Muslim activists' continued obsession with politics and economics.

Thus, we find him bringing together in the pages of this book all the various aspects of Attas's educational philosophy. One would have thought that reading this one detailed book would have left the reader tired. Yet we find Wan succeeding in igniting enough interest in the reader to compel him to delve deeper into the topic and read further from Attas's own writings.

Wan begins the book by introducing the reader to Attas's life and his intellectual growth and achievements. He provides a list of Attas's works and includes other scholar's opinions of him. Coming from an aristocratic background, from the beginning, Attas displayed original thinking coupled with the will-power to put his thoughts into action. He attended the prestigious Sandhurst Military Academy in the UK and got commissioned in the Royal Malay Regiment. Yet, his strong desire for learning and scholarship led him to resign from service and dedicate himself to the pursuit of knowledge. This life-long commitment culminated in the setting up of ISTAC in 1987.

The book moves in an orderly fashion; each succeeding chapter building upon the preceding one. Thus, the introduction is followed by a detailed exposition of Attas's metaphysical world view. Again, Wan has brought together Attas's ideas that were scattered in the pages of his different books and tracts. Wan has the advantage of personal relationship with Attas which he uses as a means to enhance his understanding of his concepts. Attas's worldview is not different from the traditional viewpoint held by Muslim *'ulama* through the ages. But perhaps Attas is unique in the sense that he is one of the few living Muslim philosophers today who are able to articulate this worldview in English.

He correctly analyzes Western Civilization as a constant endeavor at change. Thus, the values of this civilization are constantly shifting which has led today to this state of extreme moral relativism. This is in complete contrast to the Islamic Civilization whose worldview provides a firm anchor where change and permanence are given their proper places. For Attas, Islamic metaphysics is a unified system that discloses the ultimate nature of Reality in positive terms, integrating reason and experience with other higher orders in the supra-rational and trans-empirical levels of human consciousness.

Wan continues the discussion in the next chapter by exploring the concept of knowledge based upon such a worldview. The centrality of knowledge and its *hadd* (definition) to the Islamic intellectual tradition is stressed. For Attas, the loss of knowledge is the main ailment which plagues Muslims. He outlines how confusion and error in knowledge leads to loss of *adab* which gives rise to false leaders. And this in turn leads to more confusion and error in knowledge. It is from this vicious cycle that Muslims find themselves unable to get out.

The third chapter deals with the purpose and meaning of education. Attas finds Western concepts of education at complete odds with the Islamic worldview. Hence, his frustration with

those who insist on translating English terms into Arabic without thinking about the underlying philosophical assumptions. He has been consistently advocating that the term “education” should not be translated as *ta’lim*. In the First world conference on education at Makkah in 1977, he put forward *ta’dib* as a more holistic term for education. However, due to the novelty of his ideas, this was not easily accepted. Wan explains his concept in detail with suitable references.

He has devoted the whole of chapter four to an in-depth analysis of what an Islamic university should be like. Attas rightly considers adult level education to have been the primary target of all prophets’ missions. And therefore any attempt at rejuvenating Islamic education will have to begin from the university level. Only then can we hope to prepare enough individuals to carry out the reform at the lower levels. However, one problem needs to be pointed out. Wan has given a lot of space to the semantics of the English term “university” vis-à-vis its possible Arabic equivalents *jami’ah* and *kulliyah*; yet he only clearly states Al-Attas’s equivalent term for university as *jami’ah-kulliyah* on the last page of the book!

After a discussion of the Islamic concept of a university, Wan moves to a discussion of the curriculum content and educational methods. Attas declares *fard ‘ayn* as well as *fard kifayah* to be dynamic. This is something which the traditional *‘ulama* have always known but Attas takes this concept to another level. He explains that every level of education should have its own corresponding set of *fard ‘ayn* knowledge. And he has outlined what he considers *fard ‘ayn* at the higher education level. This includes quite an in-depth study of all the major Islamic sciences. The only problem is that he seems to have used the term *fard ‘ayn* somewhat liberally. It would be quite burdensome to expect every adult Muslim to study all of these sciences. And if he does not intend it for every Muslim university student but only those in the Islamic studies area, as its implementation at ISTAC would suggest; then of course, the use of the term *fard ‘ayn* is inappropriate. One is reminded of the Hadith: *يَسِّرُوا وَلَا تُعَسِّرُوا* (Make [religion] easy and do not make it difficult.)

The emphasis in Attas’s philosophy upon the central role of the teacher is also very much in line with the traditional methodology. Attas also prefers that a few good books be read multiple times rather than reading many not-so-good books. This is something which has been practiced for centuries in the traditional *madrasa-pondok* system. Thus, Attas is echoing traditional concepts but in a fresh manner.

The last two chapters are devoted to the theoretical, as well as contemporary issues concerning the Islamization of contemporary knowledge, as well as to the various responses to this idea. Here, the author tries to set the record straight by establishing that Attas is the one who first came up with the concept of Islamization of contemporary knowledge. One’s instinctive reaction would have been: Couldn’t we avoid wasting time engaging in such debates? However, Wan has a point when he underscores the need to uphold authenticity in order to keep things in their proper places.

Throughout the book, Wan cites practical examples of Attas’s ideas being put into practice at ISTAC. While writing the book, he had the benefit of being able to discuss with Attas

his ideas on a face to face basis. This helps to assure the reader that the probability of error in conveying Attas's philosophy is quite less. Wan is keen to emphasize that Attas considers Islamization to be a long term process. One which can not be accomplished in a few years time; rather, it has to be pursued with dedication and perseverance until the whole body of contemporary knowledge is Islamized.

On the whole, we can say that this book goes a long way in presenting a comprehensive and in-depth outline of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's philosophy of education. The book is written in a serious academic manner and is not hagiographical. Attas's philosophy is mainly a fresh vision of a reality that has been there for centuries. The only suggestion would be that perhaps in future editions a detailed table of contents could be added. That would help the general reader in getting a better grasp of the main ideas.

A correction. On page 201, the author states that the original *Dars-e-Nizami* (the traditional Islamic studies syllabus in South Asia) was devoid of any philosophical content. This is incorrect. In fact, it was heavily biased towards philosophy and the rational sciences. It was the founders of Deoband who actually tried to balance it out by increasing the share of '*ulum naqliyyah* (transmitted sciences), especially *Hadith*. This was done while the rational component remained largely intact. It is only in the recent years that the rational element is gradually being phased out. Although, even then, the course content with respect to logic remains formidable.