

# Islam, Secularism, and the Muslim Dilemma

## A thematic Review of *Islam and Secularism*

Sayed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

الإسلام والعلمانية ومعضلة المسلم

مراجعة موضوعية للإسلام والعلمانية

سيد محمد نقيب العتاس

Reviewed by: Youssef EL-ASSIJI 

\* ENS, Mohamed V University, Rabat - Morocco

[y.lassiji@gmail.com](mailto:y.lassiji@gmail.com)



مراجعة: يوسف الأسجي

\* جامعة محمد الخامس، الرباط - المغرب

Date received: Sep 11, 2024

Date revised: Oct. 23, 2024

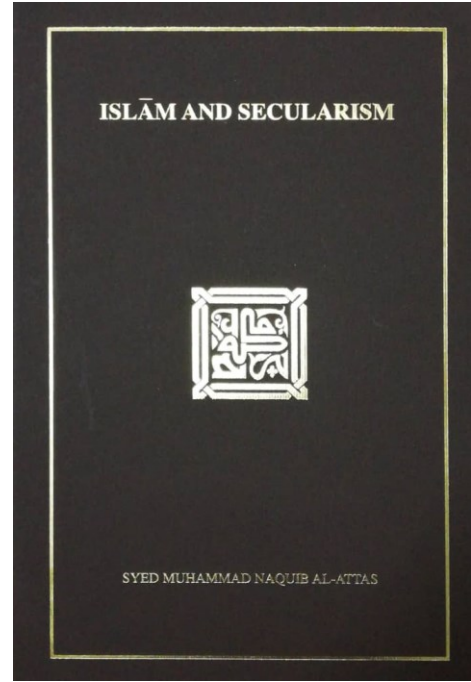
Date accepted: Oct. 28, 2024

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14585108

سيد محمد نقيب العتاس، الإسلام والعلمانية، تأديب العالمية، كوالالمبور، 2019، 214 ص.  
Sayed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, Ta'dib International, Kuala Lumpur, 2019, 214 pp.  
ISBN 978-967-157-0456

## 1. INTRODUCTION <sup>1</sup>

Born in 1931, Sayed Muhammed Naquib al-Attas is a renowned contemporary Malaysian Muslim philosopher. He is the author of 27 works tackling chiefly the provinces of Islamic sciences, theology, philosophy, history, and metaphysics. He is best known for the concept of ‘Islamisation of knowledge’ on which many of his exceptional works revolve. The following text is an introductory review which pertains to his notable book: ‘Islam and Secularism’ written in 1978. This book ignites the debate around secularism and Disenchantment in the Muslim World as a process sheerly adopted from the Christian West. Adhering to a thematic approach, this review seeks to investigate the *Muslim Dilemma* through the lens of Sayed Muhammad Naquib al- Attas’s theory of the *Loss of Adab*, to discern how this lack of ethical education induces scientific backwardness, and to assess the Secularisation of knowledge as a process of alienating the minds of Muslims.



Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas attributes the failure of modern educational regimes to what he entitles: the *Loss of Adab*. By virtue of his profound reflection, al-Attas could address a primordial factor by which a nation can either rise from reaction to bliss or fall the fall of *Eblis* from knowledge and ethical prosperity to the dark abyss of ignorance. Al-Attas’s definition of *Secularisation* as: “the deliverance of man first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language”<sup>2</sup> advocates his postulate that we

### <sup>1</sup> To cite this article:

ELASSIJI, Youssef, *Review of Sayed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Book: Islam, Secularism, and the Muslim Dilemma: A thematic Review of Islam and Secularism*, Ijtihad Journal for Islamic and Arabic Studies, Ijtihad Center for Studies and Training, Belgium, Vol. 1, Issue 2, December 2024, 347- 354.

يوسف الأسجي، مراجعة لكتاب سيد محمد نقيب العتاس: الإسلام والعلمانية ومعضلة المسلم. مجلة اجتهاد للدراسات الإسلامية والعربية، مركز اجتهاد للدراسات والتكوين، بلجيكا، مج. 1، ع. 2، ديسمبر 2024، 347-354.

© This research is published under the (CC BY-NC 4.0) license, which permits anyone to download, read, and use it for free, provided that the original author is credited, any modifications are indicated, and it is not used for commercial purposes.

<sup>2</sup> Islam and Secularism, p. 17.

live in a state of moral *Jahilia*, or rather worse: a state wherein *la ilaha illa Allah* (there is no deity worthy of worship save Allah) has been altered into *la ma'abouda illa al-aql* (there is none worthy of worship save the mind).

## 2. SECULARISATION AND THE LOSS OF ADAB

The word '*adab*' is arduous to define, for it serves multifarious senses. It can be translated as refinement, decorum, good manners, discipline, morals, or decency. This word has descended from the trilateral root word '*a-du-ba*' which in turn is defined in *Taj al-Arous* dictionary (I: 296: 2) as the act of adhering to the 'preservation of the self from life pleasures' and 'the decency of morals and deeds'. Therefore, one of the chief senses of '*ta'dib*' is *education*. Similarly, to attain the state of being an '*adib*' necessitates strict knowledge and courtesy. In Islam, knowledge is insignificant if its possessor is destitute of piosity: the fear of God and the observation of His limits; for corrupt souls are barren of sound knowledge. "Thus, we see that, for Islam, knowledge includes faith and belief (*iman*)"<sup>1</sup>.

The Apostle of Allah, upon whom be peace, said: "By his good character a believer will attain the degree of one who prays during the night and fasts during the day<sup>2</sup>." Islam has placed significant emphasis upon ethics and their essence in every individual life, augmenting in rank he who treats others kindly. The *Koran* also presents a vivid comprehensive paragon of the perfect '*adab*' in the example of *Moses* with *al-Khidr*<sup>3</sup> when the former wanted to be the mentee of the latter. The aforementioned examples are mere specks, modicums, to eschew prolixity, for the *Koran* is beset of parables epitomising '*adab*' in its purest forms. Yet, the issue herein dwells in the extent of adherence to these Islamic teachings of education. Again, knowledge, for us, is inseparable from faith; and by extension every secular knowledge is mere temporary froth. In other words, the people of knowledge (*ilm*) should incarnate the optimum of decency in terms of educational matters; that is: they must not dispute over trivia, but rather "*hold fast to the cable of Allah*"<sup>4</sup> to retain unity and mutual deference.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, p. 85.

<sup>2</sup> Sunnan Abu-Dawud, Book 36, Number 4780.

<sup>3</sup> Surah al-Kahf, 69:

"He said: Allah willing, thou shalt find me patient and I shall not in aught gainsay thee".

<sup>4</sup> Surah Al Imran, 103.

In his extensive work: '*Islam and Secularism*', al-Attas declares that *Disenchantment* and *Secularisation* constitute the locomotives of the *Loss of Adab*. Invoking a Weberian synthesis, al-Attas asserts the function of colonialism in conquering the Muslim identity with the concept of Disenchantment (*Entzauberung*)<sup>1</sup>. This concept, developed by Max Weber and adopted from Schillers' philosophy, is the literal translation of the word *de-magic-ation*; for he beholds the world largely infected by irrationalities and mystic traditions. Disenchantment is a secularising process to de-mystify the world from that which is uncaptured by the senses. In this regard, one should detach the cosmos and the material objects thereof from any theological and supernatural interpretations for a better understanding of the world under the brandished gleaming light of scientific methods and enlightened reason<sup>2</sup>.

Decidedly, al-Attas lays a red carpet and magnifies the conceptual confusion in the West regarding the vague definition of the word religion. He clarifies: "They have found it difficult to define religion....and have accepted instead the definition of their secular authorities who when they speak of religion refer to it as part of culture, of tradition<sup>3</sup>". The issue with this handicapped definition resides in its reduction of the Divine Revelation into a culturally developed praxis; and hence by its nature prone to substitution.

Apparently, we view Islam as a revealed religion; whereas Christianity is "*based on revelation*", yet not revealed in al-Attas's terms. Even in discerning the concept of religion, the Western understanding thereof is reduced into a developing social construct, a cultural phenomenon devoid of any bond with the metaphysical essence. Be that as it may, Muslims conceive that Islam, as Izetbegovic argued, is not a mere religion or '*un style de vie*'; but "the principle of the organisation of the universe<sup>4</sup>". This comprehensive discernment of Islam meets the proper sense of the word '*Deen*' whose function surpasses spirituality to govern each and every single sphere of life.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Islam and Secularisation, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> Islam Between East and West.

### 3. DISENCHANTMENT AND KNOWLEDGE

The loss of sacredness in the Western world is a decisive factor in its deteriorating ethical status and by extension ours. Indeed, when the Prophet Muhammad, upon whom be peace, was asked about *ihsan* (perfection) he concisely replied:” It means that you should worship Allah as though you saw Him, for He sees you though you do not see Him”<sup>1</sup>. Islam prompts every Muslim to invoke Allah’s closeness in every overt and covert deed; for this observation requires diligence and wisdom prior to any action and reaction. Contrary to this, the West exerts itself to abide by Jesus’s advice in the Synoptic Gospels and:” *Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s*”.<sup>2</sup> The adherence of many Muslim ‘*ulama*’ to the so-called ‘modernist’ trend in Islam is part and parcel of the dire process of the secularisation of knowledge and morals in the Muslim world. Albeit publicly committed to Islam, the acolytes of the modernist trends are undeniably enthralled and overawed by the triumphs of the West. Perchance these attempts to exhume and then enliven the Muslim ‘*ummah*’, by means of assimilating the coloniser, are to some extent guiltless and immaculate; because of the pitfalled reasoning of the advocates of this cultural and political imitation.

From literary theories up to the economic and social premises, the Muslim world debuted to fall into direct friction and reckon with these alien concepts so coated in the sacred cover of ‘*tajdid*’ (renewal). Egypt, nearly half a century after the Bonapartean invasion, witnessed for the first time a mixture of Islam and its opposite reasoning with the advent of scholars like *Muhammad Abduh*, who penetrated the Muslim identity by establishing ideological ties with the West<sup>3</sup>. It would be a folly to deny his merits and good intentions; yet, when orientalist clearly declare that:” He wanted to create a dam to protect the Muslim *ummah* from the flood of Secularism; but what decidedly occurred was the transformation of this dam into a bridge upon which Secularism pierced the Muslim World.”<sup>4</sup> Abbas Mahmud al-Aqad constituted as well a primordial disciple of modernity and Disenchantment in the Arab literary and journalist sphere: his *Abqariyyat*, *Geniuses*, studied the Islamic history in so materialistic a fashion,

---

<sup>1</sup> Mishkat al-Masabih, Book 1, Chapter 1a, Hadith 2.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 22:21.

<sup>3</sup> Attarifi, *Al-libiralia fi wasfi al aql wa rasfi annaql*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid with my translation.

sufficient to convince the readership that Prophets had the same luck as that of the *Hardy Boys*!<sup>1</sup> This is also widely observed in his early poetry and literary criticisms. Yet, the advent of technologies and the incessant contact with other nations has induced a more perilous and rapid process of desecration than that subtly transmitted in the prior century. Now that both: the peasant and the prince have the same equal right to opine online, desecrating religious figures and history can be easily attained.

We have hitherto perceived the critical role de-mystification occupies in education, politics, and literature as a Trojan Horse to weed out every sense of reference and reverence to God in Muslims' lives, in sheer conformity with the Western Other. These three provinces, if destitute of sacredness and awe, are adequate to radiate secularism in modern universities. The man of the West is bound by the Social Contract; the man of Islam is not.<sup>2</sup> For Naquib al-Attas, Muslims are by themselves *individual contracts*, for they mirror out the solemn Covenant sealed with God which crowns the man of Islam with an unbreakable perpetual bond. This focus on the individual, rather than the state or society, justifies the extant stance of Islam regarding the purpose and end of ethics: the individual<sup>3</sup>. When this individual is neglected or overwhelmed by egoistic chants, the Muslim dilemma severely betides.

It may occur to the reflective mind that the status of being learned has never been confined to the manacles of any academic or formal degree. The Intelligentsia, as an example, saw learning as an aesthetic ladder to jump into the bandwagon of European modernity<sup>4</sup>. This key notion, albeit general in its essence, makes comprehensible the struggle our universities undergo. Let us perceive the concept of higher education in so rudimentary a fashion to fathom its glaring characteristics. Let us also recall that the concept of 'university' was primarily innovated by Muslims in their Golden Age. Education, in its Eurocentric roots, could not afford itself to the destitute who struggled with earning a daily bread; but rather, it was restrained to the healthy and wealthy 'dandies' whose future lied clearly at hand. On the contrary, the compelling concepts of '*fardu ayn*' and '*fardu kifaya*' have always necessitated seeking knowledge for the man of Islam from the cradle to the grave. Between these two concepts,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Al-Qassas: imalat al-Aqad li al-fikr al gharbi.*

<sup>2</sup> Islam and Secularism p.74.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> The Idea of the Muslim World.

Muslims, young and old, male and female, are both in urgent need to learn so as therefor to know their Creator and themselves. Ergo, the intrinsic distinction in education between the East and the West lies clearly in its purpose and end. For the West, education is a passport for the individual to socially thrive; for Islam, a means of divine recognition. Undoubtedly, this does not allude to the neglect of the social and pecuniary benefits of education; yet, it elevates the centrality of the aforementioned Covenant with God as a preparation for the Hereafter.

If such an approach to education secures, if not glorifies, the ethical facet of the teacher, what could be the ordinary characteristics learners should possess, and whence could an ethical crisis befall? So suspended had these suspicions been, until Muslims themselves swam against their own tide.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Through al-Attas's lens, Secularism and Islam are poles apart, for the origins thereof expressly vary. Secularism, in its very essence, is opposed to *Tawheed* as it does not conform with the Islamic worldview of ruling by that which God has ordained, claiming its backwardness and seeking judgment from others rather than Him. In other words, "*Allah hath not assigned unto any man two hearts within his body*<sup>1</sup>": one Islamic and another secular! This invokes al-Attas's quote: "*Christianity is Christianity and Islam is Islam*<sup>2</sup>". Hence, one can either be a Muslim or a Secular, for both as al-Attas asserts "confuse the two religions"<sup>3</sup>.

*Islam and Secularism* is a book which I encourage every Muslim and non-Muslim to read and re-read; its depth of enquiry, critical viewpoints, and unique synthesis augment its significance as one of the primordial books on the quarrel between Islam and Secularism.

---

<sup>1</sup> Surah al-Ahzab, 4.

<sup>2</sup> Islam and Secularism, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## REFERENCES

- Abu-Dawud, A. (889). *Sunnan Abu-Dawud* (Book 36, Number 4780). Retrieved from <https://shamela.ws/index.php/book/133>
- Al-Attas, S. M. N. (2019). *Islam and Secularism*. Ta'dib International. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- Al-Qassas, S. (2009). *I'malat al-Aqad li al-fikr al-gharbī* (Online Dissertation). Retrieved from <https://www.al-maktabeh.com/vip/book-1347.html>
- Al-Tabrizi, K. (1340). *Mishkat al-Masabih* (Book 1, Chapter 1a, Hadith 2). Retrieved from <https://sunnah.com/mishkat:2>
- Attarifi, M. (2011). *Al-libiralia fi wasfi al-aql wa rasfi al-naql*. Dar al-Hijaz. Egypt.
- Aydin, C. (2017). *The idea of the Muslim world: A global intellectual history*. Harvard University Press.
- Izetbegović, A. (1980). *Islam between East and West*. Ibn-Al Arabi Bookstore.
- Weber, Max. (1958). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by Talcott Parsons, Charles Scribner's Sons.