

## The Implications of the Clash Between Islamic Worldview and Modernity in the Thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

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### ABSTRACT

*Contemporary Muslims face a crisis that is not merely material or technological but strikes at the very foundations of their worldview. This study aims to examine the concept of the Islamic worldview in the thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, identify the forms of its clash with the Western modern worldview, and analyze the implications of that clash for the epistemological and spiritual condition of contemporary Muslims. The research employs a qualitative method based on a biographical study approach with a library research design, utilizing descriptive-analytical-critical content analysis of al-Attas's primary works, chiefly Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam (1995) and Islam and Secularism (1978). The findings reveal that al-Attas's Islamic worldview, which he terms ru'yat al-Islam li al-wujud, is composed of eight fundamental elements centered on God (Allah) and characterized by theocentrism, a vertical-hierarchical order, an integrative nature, and an eschatological orientation. The clash between the Islamic worldview and Western modernity operates simultaneously on four levels: metaphysical, epistemological, anthropological, and axiological. This clash produces at least three major epistemological implications: confusion of knowledge, the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences as a colonial legacy, and an intellectual identity crisis resulting in the rise of leaders lacking an adequate worldview. On the spiritual level, the clash triggers loss of adab as the root of all crisis, spiritual disorientation, and the desacralization of life, reducing religion to formal ritual disconnected from daily living. As a solution, al-Attas proposes the Islamization of knowledge, which operates at the worldview level rather than merely the methodological one. The study concludes that the crisis of the Muslim community stems from the erosion of the Islamic worldview as the foundation of thought, and its restoration is a prerequisite for any sustained civilizational renewal in Islam.*



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## Introduction

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1931–2026) is among the most significant Muslim thinkers of the twentieth century. Born in Bogor from a lineage combining Arab sayyid and Sundanese aristocracy, he pursued higher education at Universiti Malaya, McGill University in Canada, and earned his doctorate from SOAS, University of London in 1965 (Daud, 2003). In 1987, he established the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in Kuala Lumpur as a center for the development of contemporary Islamic thought (Rahman, 2020).

Within the intellectual framework he built over decades, al-Attas articulates that Islam is not merely a religion confined to ritual and worship, but a complete worldview concerning

the nature of reality, encompassing conceptions of God, the universe, and the human being (Al-Attas, 1995). He refers to this Islamic worldview as *ru'yat al-Islam li al-wujud*, the Islamic vision of reality and truth that encompasses both the visible world (*al-syahadah*) and the unseen (*al-ghayb*) (Al-Attas, 2020).

Contemporary reality shows that the Islamic worldview faces serious pressure from the hegemony of Western modernity, which is grounded in secularism. The process of secularizing knowledge since the Enlightenment in Europe produced a materialistic, positivistic, and anthropocentric worldview that denies the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions in understanding reality. This Westernization of knowledge penetrated the Muslim world, creating epistemological confusion among Muslims (Yana & Hermansyah, 2024).

Al-Attas insists that the greatest challenge Muslims face today is not material poverty or technological backwardness, but an epistemological crisis and the loss of *adab* arising from the penetration of the secular Western worldview into Islamic civilization (Saleh, 2020). This condition produces what he calls a confusion of knowledge, which ultimately obscures Muslim understanding of the essence of Islamic teaching.

Earlier studies on al-Attas's thought have covered aspects of the Islamic worldview, critiques of secularism, Islamization of knowledge, and its application in education ((Amalia et al., 2025; Fahmi & Muharam, 2024; Tumanggor et al., 2024). Yet no study has been found that comprehensively places the implications of the worldview clash as its central framework. This research fills that gap by examining how the clash between the Islamic worldview and Western modernity bears on the epistemological and spiritual condition of Muslims in al-Attas's analysis, and by exploring the solution he proposes.

## Method

This research employs a qualitative approach through biographical study with a library research design. The biographical study approach requires the researcher to understand al-Attas's thought from within his own conceptual framework before proceeding to further analysis, so that the concepts he constructs can be grasped authentically. Primary data sources are al-Attas's own works, principally *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (1995) as the most comprehensive work that systematically constructs the concept of the Islamic worldview, and *Islam and Secularism* (1978) as the work in which al-Attas formulates his critique of the Western worldview. *The Concept of Education in Islam* (1980) is also used as an additional primary source. Secondary sources include books and journal articles on al-Attas's thought, works by other relevant Muslim thinkers, and literature on secularism, modernity, and Western philosophy. Data collection was carried out through documentation in three stages: identifying and selecting literature, reading and recording key concepts, and coding notes into thematic categories according to the research questions. Data analysis uses content analysis with a descriptive-analytical-critical approach: descriptive to reconstruct al-Attas's thought authentically, and analytical-critical to unpack its implications.

## Result and Discussion

### 1. The Concept of the Islamic Worldview in al-Attas's Thought

Al-Attas defines the Islamic worldview as *ru'yat al-Islam li al-wujud*, the Islamic view of existence that encompasses both the visible world (*al-syahadah*) and the unseen (*al-ghayb*). Unlike the Western worldview, which confines reality to the empirical-material, Islam sees reality as a unified whole in which the visible and the unseen are interconnected within a single ontological order centered on God (Al-Attas, 2020).

Al-Attas's Islamic worldview is not merely a set of theological doctrines but a conceptual structure composed of eight fundamental elements hierarchically interrelated: (1) the concept of God as *al-Haqq*, the Absolute Reality and source of all existence; (2) the concept of revelation and creation; (3) the concept of human psychology, distinguishing between *ruh*, *nafs*, and *aql* in one hierarchical unity; (4) the concept of knowledge drawing from *naqli* and

*aqli* channels; (5) the concept of religion as *din*, a comprehensive way of life; (6) the concept of freedom as liberation of the soul from base desire; (7) the concept of objective and transcendent values; and (8) the concept of happiness (*sa'adah*) encompassing both the worldly and the hereafter (P. S. Rohman, 2023).

This worldview carries four defining characteristics. First, it is theocentric, placing God as the center of all reality, in contrast to the anthropocentrism of Western modernity. Second, it is hierarchical-vertical, viewing reality as an order with God at its apex (Purnama et al., 2021). Third, it is integrative, refusing to separate the sacred from the profane. Fourth, it is eschatological, oriented toward the ultimate end (*al-akhirah*) (Rahmawati et al., 2020).

This worldview converges on the concept of *adab*. Al-Attas defines *adab* as the human capacity to recognize the hierarchy of reality and to place oneself and all things in their proper position according to God's order. In his concise formulation, *adab* is "to put things in their right and proper place". It is not mere etiquette but a discipline operating across three dimensions of the self: the soul (*nafs*), the intellect (*aql*), and the body (Setiawan & Inayah, 2024).

## 2. The Forms of Clash Between the Islamic Worldview and Western Modernity

Al-Attas regards the worldview of Western modernity as the product of shifts in European civilizational history, from the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation to the Enlightenment, which placed reason as the sole authority of truth (Kartanegara, 2007)). At its heart is secularization, operating through three processes: the desacralization of nature, the desacralization of politics, and the desacralization of values. Sustained by positivism and materialism, this worldview produces anthropocentrism (Sari et al., 2023).

The clash operates simultaneously on four levels. At the metaphysical level, Islam places God as the Absolute Being and source of all that exists, while Western modernity regards reality as a self-sustaining system understandable without reference to any transcendent dimension. Nature in the Islamic view is a sign pointing toward God; in Western modernity, it is merely an object to be exploited (Rohman et al., 2021).

At the epistemological level, Islam recognizes three complementary channels of knowledge: the senses, reason, and revelation (*al-khabar al-sadiq*). Western modernity through positivism accepts only the first two and rejects revelation as a valid source of knowledge (Muhibuddin, 2022). This clash becomes dangerous when modern sciences built on Western epistemology are taught in Islamic educational institutions without critical filtering (Maman et al., 2022).

At the anthropological level, Islam views the human being as a creature of God fashioned in a state of *fitrah* with a transcendent purpose, while Darwinism regards the human as a product of random biological evolution (Ika et al., 2024). At the axiological level, Islam rests on objective and transcendent values sourced from God, while Western modernity builds on moral relativism. Without an objective foundation of values, what remains is a negotiation of power (Annur & Rijal, 2025).

## 3. Implications for the Epistemological Condition of Muslims

The clash of worldviews produces three major epistemological implications. The first is confusion of knowledge, a condition in which Muslims no longer possess clarity about the legitimate sources of knowledge, the appropriate standard of truth, or the hierarchy of sciences (Al-Attas, 2020). This confusion arises because Muslims simultaneously inherit two epistemological traditions that stand in tension: the Islamic scholarly tradition, which places revelation at the apex of knowledge, and the modern Western tradition, which recognizes only reason and sensory observation (Zarkasyi, 2012).

The result is a phenomenon that might be called "Muslim on the outside, Western on the inside": a Muslim who formally fulfills religious obligations, yet in the way he thinks about knowledge and progress, operates within a secular Western worldview. This confusion of knowledge is reproduced at scale through Islamic educational institutions that adopt Western methodology without critical filtering (Husaini, 2010).

The second is the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences as a colonial legacy. Within this divided educational system, a Muslim student learns mathematics and social sciences through a Western epistemological framework on one side, and studies *fiqh* and theology through an Islamic framework on the other, with no conceptual bridge connecting the two. This divide produces an imbalance: technical and scientific knowledge is regarded as more economically valuable, while religious sciences are seen as less relevant to modern life (Tumanggor et al., 2024).

The third is the intellectual identity crisis that results in the emergence of false leaders. When standards of intellectual competence are unclear, those who rise to leadership are not those with the deepest understanding of the Islamic worldview, but those most fluent in popular rhetoric Al-Attas describes this condition as intellectual madness: speaking about Islamic justice through the analytical framework of liberalism, discussing Islamic economics within the assumptions of capitalism (Saleh, 2020).

#### 4. Implications for the Spiritual Condition of Muslims

At the spiritual level, the clash of worldviews produces four interrelated implications. The first is the loss of *adab* as the root of all crisis. The penetration of the Western worldview gradually erodes the human capacity to recognize the hierarchy of reality and to place all things in their proper position (Ratnasari & Miftahudin, 2025). The loss of *adab* works slowly through the processes of education and the consumption of popular culture, which quietly shift the meanings of Islamic terms away from their original worldview content Al-Attas pays particular attention to this linguistic shift because language is not merely a tool of communication but a vehicle of worldview.

The second is spiritual and intellectual disorientation. When the secular worldview permeates a Muslim's thinking, his identity as God's servant and vicegerent becomes blurred (Rahmania & Bakar, 2023). This disorientation appears in the rising rates of depression and existential emptiness among educated urban Muslims who are materially successful yet spiritually feel a void no material achievement can fill. This is a sign of a wounded *fitrah*: the human nature that naturally yearns for God cannot be satisfied by anything other than God (Nuryanti & Hakim, 2020).

The third is the desacralization of life. When the secular worldview infiltrates Muslim life, the sacred dimension of daily activity erodes. Life splits into two disconnected parts: the "religious" part confined to formal ritual, and the "worldly" part run by secular logic. Religion becomes a shell without substance, ritual without spirit (Sahidin, 2022). The paradox that follows is plain enough: rising numbers of hajj and umrah pilgrims coexist with rising rates of corruption and social injustice.

The fourth is the emergence of false leaders and a leadership crisis. When *adab* disappears from a society, the standards by which leaders are chosen deteriorate. Al-Attas describes false leaders not as explicitly wicked people, but as those who genuinely believe they are leading rightly, yet whose distorted worldview means their decision-making standards are not authentic Islamic standards. The emergence of false leaders creates a difficult cycle: leaders without *adab* produce systems without *adab*, which in turn produce generations without *adab* (Hidayatullah & Arif, 2022).

#### 5. The Islamization of Knowledge as a Solution

In response to these crises, al-Attas proposes the Islamization of present-day knowledge, an effort to liberate the human being from the grip of the secular worldview that dominates his thought and language (Al-Attas, 1996). Technically, this project involves two stages: first, isolating and removing the elements of the secular Western worldview embedded in every modern discipline; and second, infusing the key elements and concepts of Islam into each corresponding branch of knowledge.

It is important to note that the Islamization of knowledge is not simply adding Quranic verses to modern science textbooks mechanically, nor is it merely establishing science laboratories in Islamic boarding schools. What al-Attas means is changing the worldview that

underlies the entire structure of knowledge (Garwan, 2019), so that the assumptions about reality, the human being, the sources of knowledge, and the purposes of science drawn from the Western worldview are replaced by assumptions consistent with the Islamic worldview.

Al-Attas identifies a number of Western worldview elements that must be removed from modern knowledge, including exclusive reliance on reason as a guide for life, the dualistic attitude separating the sacred from the profane, the affirmation of secularism, the defense of anthropocentric humanism, and the elevation of tragedy as a dominant element in understanding human existence (Thohir & Tamam, 2024). In their place, key Islamic concepts such as *din*, *insan*, *ilm* and *ma'rifah*, *hikmah*, *adl*, and *kulliyah jami'ah* must become the foundation of every Islamized discipline (Kosim et al., 2021).

Al-Attas's Islamization project differs fundamentally from the approach of Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, which is more methodological and additive in character (Natsir et al., 2026). For al-Attas, pouring new water into an old bottle will not produce a different kind of water: as long as the worldview underlying modern knowledge remains the secular Western worldview, the knowledge produced will continue to carry Western assumptions even when Islamic terminology is sprinkled over its surface (Kadir, 2021).

## Conclusion

This study yields three main conclusions. First, al-Attas's Islamic worldview, which he terms *ru'yat al-Islam li al-wujud*, is a complete conceptual structure composed of eight fundamental elements with God as its center. This worldview is theocentric, hierarchical-vertical, integrative, and eschatological in character, and converges on the concept of *adab* as the human capacity to place all things in their proper position within God's order.

Second, the clash between the Islamic worldview and Western modernity is not a disagreement at the surface level, but a fundamental conflict operating simultaneously on four planes: metaphysical, epistemological, anthropological, and axiological. This clash cannot be resolved through compromise or one-sided accommodation; it demands a response at an equally fundamental level.

Third, the implications of this clash are tangible in the life of the Muslim community. At the epistemological level, it produces confusion of knowledge, the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences as a colonial legacy, and an intellectual identity crisis culminating in the emergence of false leaders. At the spiritual level, it triggers the loss of *adab* as the root of all crisis, spiritual disorientation, and the desacralization of life that reduces religion to formal ritual disconnected from daily living.

All of these implications share a single root: the erosion of the Islamic worldview as the foundation for Muslim thinking and living. The solution al-Attas proposes through the Islamization of knowledge is therefore not merely an academic agenda, but a civilizational undertaking that touches the most fundamental foundation of the entire edifice of knowledge. This study concludes that the restoration of the Islamic worldview is an indispensable prerequisite for any sustained effort toward civilizational renewal in Islam.

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