

ISLAMIC METAPHYSICS: A RESTATEMENT

The Vision of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-' Attas

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The economic backwardness and political weaknesses of the Muslims particularly from the times of their direct or indirect subjugation by the Western colonial powers in the 18th century, have spurred many Muslim political and intellectual leaders to clamor for internal changes to close the humiliating gap between them and the West. Various ideas have been put forward and institutions established causing myriads of changes in the religious views and understanding of the Muslims that have left most of them baffled and weakened. For almost three decades Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas²⁰⁸ has consistently argued that the most fundamental and basic reason for this condition is the problem of education which is rooted in confusion of knowledge concerning, among other important matters, the religion of Islam and its basic key terms and components. He has therefore suggested and demonstrated that the only way to escape from this quagmire is through a process of education, especially at the tertiary or university level. Here we shall discuss the outline of the metaphysics of Islam as understood and espoused by Prof. al-Attas. Fortunately he is one of the very few contemporary Muslim thinkers who have systematically presented a restatement of Islamic metaphysics upon which conception of education and other important matters could be developed. In this regard his contributions are original and comprehensive.

THE METAPHYSICS OF AL-ATTAS

Metaphysics is generally accepted as a branch of philosophy, concerned with the nature of ultimate reality. In the Islamic sense, metaphysics which includes of course its original concern, theology, is the most important

²⁰⁸ For an elaboration of the biographical and educational background of Prof. al-Attas, as well as an analysis of his contributions to contemporary Muslim thinking, see my "Introduction". Commemorative Volume on the Conferment of the al-Ghazali Chair of Islamic Thought (K.L: ISTAC, 1994).

because it influences the Muslim conception of the universe, human psychology, epistemology, epistemology, ethics and even logic.

The metaphysics of Islam as understood and espoused by Prof. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is a synthesis of ideas and theories that have been traditionally upheld by Muslim theologians (mutakallimun), philosophers (hukama' and sufis (sufiyyah or ahl at-tasawwuf).. The elements and elaborations of this metaphysics are found scattered in his definitive commentaries on the two of the greatest scholars of the Malay world, Hamzah Fansuri (fl. circa. 1550-1600)²⁰⁹ and Nur al-Din al Raniri (d. 1658)²¹⁰ and in his *Islam and Secularism*.²¹¹ However he has systematised these ideas and elements in a series of monographs *Islam: the Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality*, *Islam and the Philosophy of Science*, *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul*, *The Intuition of Existence, Quiddity and Essence*, and finally in the forthcoming, *The Degrees of Existence*. The metaphysics of Prof. Al-Attas, in fact all his articulations about Islam, are based on his interpretation of the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH) and the teachings of what Iqbal calls the "more genuine schools of sufism"²¹² or the higher sufis. His interpretation of the former two basic sources of Islam is based on the traditional methods of tafsir and ta' wil. Tafsir of the Qur'an is precise and is not subject to error because it deals with the clear verses (muhkamat) whose interpretations must be based on other clear verses of the Qur'an and the hadith of the Holy Prophet. Many of the Qur'anic commentaries carried out by Muslims in these last two centuries, according to al-Attas, are not really tafasir (pl. of tafsir)

²⁰⁹ *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970); Hereafter cited as MI-1F.

²¹⁰ *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nur al-Din al_Raniri* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, 1986), hereafter cited as Commentary.

²¹¹ (Kuala Lumpur: The Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, 1978). Hereafter will be cited as IS.

²¹² Muhammad Iqbal, *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. 2nd. Edition. Ed. and annotated by M. Saeed Sheikh. (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1986), preface.

precisely because they do not strictly adhere to the stated criterion. Even though ta'wil seeks to interpret the ambiguous (*mutashabihat*) verses, still it must consider the relevant clear ones for support. Furthermore these methods can be effectively applied and relied upon because they are rooted in the scientific nature of the Arabic language, by which he means that Arabic has a system of roots with a set of interrelated basic meanings which protects its words and ideas from subjective interpretations and societal changes. The rise of Islam saw the Islamization of the Arabic language. Even then Islam did not change the basic meanings imbedded in the roots of words but it caused a rearrangement, and in some cases radical transformation, of the semantic field of the key words or concepts to accord with the Islamic world view.²¹³ The new Islamized Arabic is exemplified in the Qur'an and the hadith of the Prophet. It is this Islamized Arabic, which is scientific, for it conveyed an absolute and objective truth.²¹⁴

According to al-Attas the metaphysics of Islam as correctly expounded by the higher sufis has been widely misunderstood. Although he acknowledges Ibn Khaldun's insight into the psychology of the Sufis²¹⁵, al-Attas criticises the latter for not differentiating between the doctrines of the different levels of sufi groups i.e. between the pseudo-Sufis, the ignorant and the higher ones:

"But in spite of that (i.e. his insights into sufi psychology) his(i.e. Ibn Khaldun's) explanation of the philosophical theology and metaphysics doctrines of the Sufis is apparently confused and hence misleading, and apart from his own the confusion was possibly due to that inherent in the source

²¹³ On his extensive use of semantic field analysis, Prof. al-Attas acknowledges his indebtedness to Prof. T. Izutsu. See, MHS, p. 142 note no. 2

²¹⁴ For an elaboration of the scientific nature of the Arabic language, on tafsir and ta'wil, see al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, hereafter cited as CEII. Reprint of 1980 edition (Kuala Lumpur: ISTACE, 1991) pp. 1-12; also his, *Positive Aspects of Tasawwuf Preliminary Thought on an Islamic Philosophy of Science*, hereafter cited as PAT (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Academy of Science, 1981) pp. 7,13.

²¹⁵ Commentary, pp. 344-346, 457; On ibn Khaldun's ideas, see ibn Khaldun, *Muqaddimah*, 3 vols, Trans. Franz Rosenthal. Bollingen Series, XLIII (New York, 1958) 3:83-92

or sources from which he obtained his information regarding these matters....In our estimation, however, this sort of belief applies only to the pseudo-Sufis of various kinds who affirmed either a dualism, or a monism, or a pantheism as their various positions on the relationship between God and the world...."²¹⁶

Al-Attas on the other hand constantly distinguishes between the ideas and teachings of the pseudo-Sufis such as the Sophists (*sufasta' iyyah*) and the deviating *wujudiyah* (*wujudiyah mulhidah*) or ignorant and popular Sufis whose doctrines are grossly erroneous, from the higher Sufis. The ideas and practices of this latter group are firmly rooted in knowledge which is based ultimately on intuitive experience.²¹⁷ The pseudo and the ignorant Sufis uphold, among their major doctrines, that God is one or identical with, or incarnated in His creatures. They also uphold that the external world, including man, is illusory, that the various particular-forms in existence are merely subjective and mental, and that nothing exists except God Himself. They also believe in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls. It follows epistemologically, that they do not believe in the possibility of knowledge of the realities of things, Some of them also reject religious laws, from which they claim that they are exempted. Therefore, they for example, reject prayers and contend -that contemplation is sufficient instead. They likewise emulate laziness as a way of life, encouraging begging and soliciting alms and charity.²¹⁸

The higher sufis are such scholars as al-junayd (d. 1063/4 or 1071/2), Abu'l-Qasim al-Qushayri (d. 1072), al-Ghazali (d.1111), Ibn al-'Arabi (d.1240), Sadr al Din al-Qunyawi (d. 1263), Dawud al-Qaysari (1350), 'Abd al-Karim al-Jili (d. 1403) 'Abd al-Rahman al-Jami (d. 1492), Hamzah Fansuri (d, circa 1600), Mulla Sadra (d. 1640), Nur al-Din al-Raniri (d. 1658) and

²¹⁶ Commentary, p. 344.

²¹⁷ eg, See PAT, p. 2; Commentary, pp. 344-345, 457; see also his *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*. An Unpublished Monograph, 280 pp. Dated May 1973. para. 63, pp. 277-233. Hereafter cited as *Risalah*.

²¹⁸ Commentary, pp. 186-191; 206-208; 213-217; 344-345. For al-Raniri's position, see for example, his *Huijat al-Siddiq*, para XII-XIV, XIX in Commentary, pp.90-91; 97-98.

Sabzawari (d. 1878), In terms of intellectual training they had good understanding of other Islamic disciplines such Qur'anic sciences, law, theology and philosophy prior to embarking upon the study and practice of sufism, therefore, their position and arguments on many matters often reflect' the proper integration of these disciplines. Sufism or tasawwuf, according to al-Attas, is defined as "the practice of Shari'ah at the station (maqam) of ihsan."²¹⁹ By ihsan, he meant the highest stage of religion, above and inclusive of those of Islam and Iman, as conveyed by the famous hadith narrated by 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab and transmitted by Abu Hurayrah and Muslim, in which the Prophet said of ihsan "that you should worship God as if you saw Him.... "²²⁰ In the concluding paragraph of his commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nur al-Din al-Raniri, al-Attas states that Islamic metaphysics, which is for him the philosophical Sufism, is a unified system that discloses the ultimate nature of Reality in positive terms; for it integrates reason and Experience with other higher orders in the suprarational and transempirical level of human consciousness.²²¹ He asserts that "...no formulation of a philosophy of education and a philosophy of science along Islamic lines can be developed by ignoring the great contributions of the Sufi masters on the ultimate nature of reality." Moreover, he added, "intellectual Sufism can effect a reconciliation between Muslim theology and philosophy just as it has achieved a great measure of understanding and unity between Sunnism and Sh' ism."²²²

²¹⁹ IS, p. 155; idem, PAT, p. 1; Commentary, p. 184.

²²⁰ cited in PAT, p. 1; Commentary, p. 184.

²²¹ Commentary, p. 465. See also Toshihiko Izutsu, "The Structure of Metaphysical Thinking in Islam", in M. Mohaghegh and H. Landolt eds. *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism. Wisdom of Persia Sersia* (Tehran: McGill Univ. Institute of Islamic Studies, Tehran Branch, 1971) pp. 46-49, hereafter cited as "Structure"; Fazlur Rahman, Mulla Sadra, pp. 56.

²²² al-Attas, "The Corruption of Knowledge," Unpublished lecture delivered in Istanbul, 17th-22nd. Sept. 1985, p.6. *Being and Existence in Sara and Heidegger: A Comparative Ontology.*

The quest to grasp the true nature of reality has preoccupied serious individuals such as Thales (d. circa 600 B.C.) and the pre-Socratic philosophers from the earliest recorded history, all the way until Martin Heidegger and many others in our present day. The perpetual quest has given rise to many mutually opposing schools of thought in the Western philosophical tradition, such as the idealist, the realist and their various stains. Al-Attas stresses in his Saturday Night Lectures at ISTAC that there are only two schools in Islamic intellectual tradition, namely the Essentialist as represented by all the philosophers and some theologians, and the Existentialists, represented by the higher Sufis.²²³ The fundamental principles of Sufi theology and metaphysics, are rooted in the primary principle of the fundamental reality of existence (wujud) as opposed to that of quiddity (mahiyah), as held by Muslim philosophers and theologians.²²⁴ This fundamental difference, al-Attas notes, is not merely a matter of semantics or logic, but pertains to the true meaning and nature of reality.²²⁵ This certainty of the Sufis is based not merely on rational analysis or discursive reasoning but on their direct intuitive experience. The view of reality based on ordinary sense and rational experience "has undoubtedly led philosophical and scientific speculations to the preoccupation with things and their 'essences' at the expense of existence itself", making thereby the study of nature as an end in itself. Islamic metaphysics admits the real distinction between essence and existence only at the mental sphere; whereas in the extra-mental reality itself, "it is Existence²²⁶ (wujud) that is the real 'essences of things; and what is mentally or conceptually posited as 'essences of things; and what is mentally or conceptually posited as 'essences' or quiddities (mahiyat) are in reality accidents (a'rad) of existence."²²⁷ This reality is Absolute Existence, and it is

²²³ See also Alparslan Acikgenc, (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1994), p. 1

²²⁴ Commentary, p. 34-35, etc; also al-Attas, *On Essence and Quiddity: An Outline of the Basic Structure of Reality in Islamic Metaphysics* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1990) pp. 20-21. Hereafter cited as EQ; Izutsu, "Structure", pp. 43-45; Rahman, Mulla Sadra, chaps. 1 and 2.

²²⁵ EQ, pp. 17-18.

²²⁶ al-Attas *Intuition of Existence: A Fundamental Basis of Islamic Metaphysics* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1990) p. 6 Hereafter cited as IE.

none other than the Truth (al-Haq), an aspect or mode (wajh) of God Almighty.²²⁸ Al-Attas clarifies that:

"When the Sufis say that the Truth, which is one of the Names of God, is the reality of existence, they are speaking in metaphysical terms referring to the Absolute as it manifests itself in all the planes of existence. They are not implying thereby that God has no individuality, or that He is a vast, vague, pervasive and dynamic Being, contrary to the theological God of religion. On the contrary, they affirm individuality of God, for it is not inconsistent for the Absolute to have an individuation as God in the way that He has described Himself according to His Beautiful Names and Sublime Attributes. This individuation is at the plane of the Divine Oneness, whose self-revealing aspect is characterized by names and attributes of divinity."²²⁹

The true school of wahdatu'l-wujud, or unity of existence, to which he clearly belongs, upholds that the Ultimate Reality is God only. However unlike the pseudo-sufis, al-Attas affirms that the various particular phenomena are nevertheless real, not mere imaginary figments of the mind; only that their life-duration does not last two atoms of time because they are constantly perishing (fana'). The reality of particular phenomenon is perceived as enduring because of God's continuous dynamic and constant activity of re-creating not the same but a similar thing after its every annihilation.²³⁰ This characteristic is diametrically opposed to that of the Real Existence Who is eternal (qadim) and everlasting (baqa')

The process of creation or bringing into existence and -annihilation or returning to non-existence, and recreation of similes is a dynamic existential movement. This is articulated in terms of expansion (bast) when creating,

²²⁷ IE, p. 7.

²²⁸ IPS, pp. 20-21, EQ, pp. 2 and 24.

²²⁹ Commentary, p. 43.

²³⁰ Commentary, p. 233, EQ, pp. 26-27, 28 and 31.

and contraction (qabd) when annihilating, in a systematically ambiguous manner (tashkik) producing the various levels and grades of ontological expression from the world of the permanent archetypes ('alam al-a yan al-thabithah), or the world of Divine Ideas ('alam-al-mithal) in the interior of Divine Consciousness, to the world of spirits ('alam al-arwah), down all the way to the world of sense and sensible experience ('alam al-shahadah). It is ambiguous because the all-pervasive nature of existence is such that it is both a principle of unity and diversity in creation.²³¹ He reiterates that:

"The multiplicity of existents that results is not in the one reality of existence, but in the manifold aspects of the recipients of existence in the various degrees, each according to its strength or weakness, perfection or imperfection, and priority or posteriority. Thus the multiplicity of existents does not impair the unity of existence, for ontological status."²³²

The essence (dhat) which is the reality (haqiqah) of God is identical to His Existence.²³³ In its own level of existence, that is as He is in Himself, the essence is absolutely transcendent and is unknown and unknowable, except to Himself.²³⁴ The essence or reality of things, however, which is defined as the being-existent (mawjud) of the entity ('ayn), or the individuality (huwiyah) or quiddity (mahiyyah), the very self (nafs) of the thing consists of a mode existence (wujud) providing its permanent aspect, and quiddity, endowing it with its changing qualities.²³⁵

The Names (asma') of God are infinite and each one of them has a double nature, one identical with the Essence and with each other, and the other distinct from the Essence and from each other. Each Divine Name

²³¹ EQ, pp. 26-29; 32-36; 52-53

²³² EQ, p. 33.

²³³ EQ, p. 26.

²³⁴ Commentary, p. 455, EQ, p. 24-26, also note 36 on p. 25.

²³⁵ EQ, pp. 22-23 ff.

when considered independently of the Divine Essence is an Attribute (sifat) whose number and dual nature resemble those of the Name. From the

Divine Name of the Knower (al-'Alim) for example, considered by itself as an independent reality specifying a mode or particular aspect of the Essence, an attribute of knowing becomes a reality, which possesses a characteristic difference from other attributes deriving from other Names. Notwithstanding this, all Divine Names, when they refer to the Essence (al-Dhat), are in reality identical with It. Because of this dual aspect the Names and attributes are neither being nor non-being, but occupies a there metaphysical category identified by the Sufis as the Realm of the Fixed Archetypes (a'yan thabithah)²³⁶ The archetypal realities are fixed entities capable of receiving Divine diffusion (al fayd al-muqaddas) resulting from the existential movement, containing primordial potentialities or "preparedness" (isti'dadat). These "preparedness" refer to distinct essential properties which will determine the ultimate nature and destiny of each archetype and later forming each and every ontological reality in the external world.²³⁷ Nevertheless, the archetypes themselves never become externalized; they always remain in the interior condition of Divine Consciousness (butun).²³⁸ Like other realities they undergo the process of perpetual creation and annihilation, but unlike the others, they are being recreated the same thereby giving them the important element of unity and identity which they transmit to the consequent realities in the external world.²³⁹

The evolvment and repercussions of the archetypes in the forms of empirical things reflect their sources of origin in the Names and Attributes by manifesting a dual nature i.e. they are both the active and passive principles of existence. On the one hand when considered purely as archetypes (a'yan), the permanent archetypes play the part of active principle in relation to the next stage of ontological 'descent' (tanazzul) of the Absolute

²³⁶ Commentary, p. 45; EQ, pp. 40-41.

²³⁷ EQ, pp. 42-43.

²³⁸ Commentary, p. 37; EQ, p. 39.

²³⁹ EQ, pp. 28-29.

Being to what is 'below' them, or to their exterior aspect, the exterior archetypes which assume the role of passive principle. On the other hand when considered as realities (haqa'iq); the permanent archetypes are the active principle in relation to the realities of the existential principle, that is, the 'holy effusion' (al fayd al-muaqddas).²⁴⁰

As already stated above, the certainty of the higher Sufis vis-a-vis their metaphysics, is not based merely on discursive reason, but on a higher form of reason or spiritual experience in which the whole reality is intuited. The fana'-baqa' experiential structure of the intuition of existence has two stages:

At the first stage, it is characterized by a partial experience at the first separation (al farq al-awwal) and the second and complete experience at the second separation (al farq al-thani). The first stage is when they experience the passing away of their subjective consciousness where they can witness the passing away of the world of multiplicity to a gathering together (jam') into a single unified Reality.- This experience is accompanied by an inner turmoil and if ceases at this stage—due to limitations in spiritual capacity or preparedness—Where they would regain their Phenomenal consciousness, they might then, erroneously believe that the world of multiplicity is a mere figment of human imagination, and that everything is in reality God in the pantheistic or monistic sense. Not all persons who experience such an incomplete vision become involved in error and heresy. While they tend to stress the oneness aspect of reality only, they nevertheless recognize and acknowledge all the teachings of Islam and accept the authority and experience of the higher Sufi as a truer and higher degree than theirs. Their experience of fana' is followed by fana' al fana' _passing away of the passing away—where they experience their own complete annihilation. When they regain their subjective consciousness, they realize their utter dependence on God. These are the 'elect' (khawass) among God's servants and are His saints or 'friends' (awliya').²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ EQ, p. 46.

²⁴¹ Commentary, pp. 134-139.

The second stage is experienced by the highest class in the classification of mankind known as the 'super-elect' (khawass al-Khawass). They are those whose spiritual condition is perfect and mature, and are under God's guidance (hidayah) and recipient of His aid (tawfiq). They would ascend to another stage the final experience of fana' where they witness, even before regaining their normal consciousness, after stage of passing away of the passing away (fana' al fana,) in which they would not even be conscious of their fana'. There they witness the Unity (wandah) individuates Itself into Multiplicity (kathrah) without impairing Its original Unity. At this stage; they realize their true Selfhood and 'subsist' in God (baqa'). Their subsistence in God however does not make them think that man shares divinity with God for even at this stage the distinction between God, the Reality and man, the created reality, still remains. When God grants them to regain their subjective consciousness, they would see the world of multiplicity as it truly is, as Modes or Aspects of Unity of the Absolute Existence. Although their experience of the vision is transitory and fragmentary; yet their knowledge about the reality is permanent, This is the stage of second separation.²⁴² It is clear that the position of the higher Sufis, is not what the supporters of Muslim modernists accused them of, that the former "overlook the essential disparity of God and man taught by the Qur'an".²⁴³ Intuition, thus involves both the psychological and the ontological realms of existence. The true vision of the Ultimate Reality accessible to man is based on the second stage of the intuition of existence, which affirms both God's transcendence and His immanence in relation to them.²⁴⁴

As stated above, the fundamental nature of reality, can be known by a higher level of experience or intuition. Al-Attas affirms that all knowledge of reality and truth, including the intelligible ones, and the projection of a true

²⁴² Ibid, pp. 139-141; For another clear version of the diternet experience of according to various grades of spiritual attainment, see also Izutsu, "Structure", pp. 53-63.

²⁴³ Ismail R. al-Faruqi, "Science and Traditional Values in Islamic Society", in Wared Morehoused, ed. Science and the Human Condition in India and Pakistan (New York: Rockefeller University Press, 1968) p. 21. Hereafter will be cited as "Science and Traditional Values".

²⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 456.

vision of the ultimate nature of things are originally acquired through intuition.²⁴⁵ It is by accepting the possibility and the validity of this experience that many other kinds of knowledge are vouchsafed, such as the knowledge of revelation, of prophethood, of the human soul or self, and the spiritual beings such as the angels and Satan, as well as the creative processes of human intellect.

In al-Attas' metaphysics, the reality and concept of God carries profound implications for the world view of Islam and, ultimately, for the concept, the contents and methods of Islamic education and human²⁴⁶ development. The knowledge about God based on one's intuitive experience and awareness of one's self and of the external world of creation, is therefore not merely propositional or cognitive but also more importantly experiential. It is for this reason that God says in hadith qudsi that "one who knows himself knows God."²⁴⁷ The same intention is also converged when God commands in the Holy Book that "we shall show to you our signs in the horizons and in yourselves..."²⁴⁸ Prof. al-Attas like the true Sufis before him, underlines that that knowledge of God is specifically known as ma'rifah (gnosis or spiritual illumination) and not 'ilm (scientific or knowledge by inference), and that that God who is known is not really Allah as He is in Himself, the highest manifestation of the Essence (dhat) and the sum of all Names (asma') and Attributes (sifat), it is rather Allah conceived as the Lord (Al-Rabb) Who is worshiped (Tuhan in Malay). This is important to be stressed because as evidenced from the teachings of the Prophet, our highest duty and capacity is to know God only as Rabb.²⁴⁹ Since God as the Absolute Existence is the fundamental Reality, Islamic education must, as one of its

²⁴⁵ IE, p. 1; IPS, pp. 10-13; Commentary, p. 130.

²⁴⁶ For an outline of thing, see my work, "An outline of the Educational Philosophy and Methodology of al-Attas. "Islami Arastirmalar. vol 7, no. 1, Winter 1993-1994, pp. 35-72.

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²⁴⁸ See Fussilat 41:53.

²⁴⁹ NHF, pp. 98-99. al-Attas quotes in note 194, ahadith saying: "Glory to Thee! we cannot really know thee".

most important aims and objectives, strive to inculcate the true and proper understanding and awareness of the human self out soul and of God. This will then naturally become the bedrock of all religious and ethical goals and activities.

God then is the basis and the creator of everything there is and that will be Who omnisciently unfolds His Will in a perpetual act of creation, annihilation and re-creation manifesting and individuation the infinite inner possibilities inherent in His Names and Attributes. Because of this nature of God's Being and activity, all aspects of the phenomenal world are endowed with both dimensions of change and permanence. Unfortunately because change is easily perceptible while permanence is an underlying reality the awareness of which is achieved through intuition and intellectual contemplation, permanence as the underlying principle of change is conveniently regarded as merely conceptual, not objectively real. Change then has been erroneously regrade by modern philosophy and science as the ultimate reality, hence the popular remark: "Everything changes except change itself."²⁵⁰ It is a characteristic feature of Western civilization to affirm the evanescent (fana') aspect of reality, and base its values on the secular, material, and physical realities of existence, Because of this it "is constantly changing and 'becoming' without ever achieving 'being', except that its 'being' is and always has been a 'becoming'".²⁵¹ Educationally, for example, many institutions are directing valuable resources to train their personnel and students to be able to adopt to the inevitability of change, to manage change. Reality, according to Islamic metaphysics as espoused by al-Attar is both permanence and change. As indicated in the earlier part of this article, the Primordial Potentialities in World of Fixed Essences in the interior condition of God's knowledge, are realities that provide for the underlying permanent aspect of the external world, which is perpetually undergoing change.

The existence of God and of his Unity can be arrive at through human reason and intellectual effort but, Prof. al-Attas asserts several times in his weekly Saturday Night Lectures at ISTAC, that the proper understanding

²⁵⁰ cf. IPS, p. 32; also Risalah, para. 9, p. 27.

²⁵¹ IS, p. 87.

concerning the attributes of God and His relationship to His creatures and vice versa can only be known through religion. That is why none of the Greek thinkers, despite their profound grasp of other matters could attain the correct and certain knowledge about God and His relationship with His creation.²⁵² Through these metaphysical principles of Divine Unity and the reality of Existence, and the cognitively valid nature of intuitive experience, other principles pertaining to the nature and destiny of man, the nature of the universe, the meaning, purposes and hierarchy of knowledge and the various valid ways of the attainment of knowledge and all the interrelated educational matters, are naturally derived. These matters will be discussed in their proper places. We shall begin with the nature of man and the world external to him.

MAN AND HIS PSYCHOLOGY

Man as human being in his terrestrial existence is endowed with a dual nature, He is both body (*badan*) and soul (*nafs*) and at once a physical and a spiritual being. He is neither pure soul nor pure body but a mysterious composite of these two, a third entity which is his very self.²⁵³ The underlying reality and the unifying principle of what defines man is not his constantly changing physical aspect, but the spiritual one. The human soul is created yet immortal, conscious of itself, the locus of intelligibles and equipped with a faculty variously called the soul (*rub*), self (*nafs*), heart (*qalb*) and intellect (*'aqi*). Each of these terms has two meanings, one that refers to the physical or animal aspect, and another to the spiritual aspect.²⁵⁴ Al-Attas stresses the different modes of this unity:

²⁵² Saturday Night Lecture, 18th July 1992; also from a private discussion in his Office at ISTAC, 20th July 1992. Saturday Night Lectures became an important aspect of ISTAC's extra curricular academic program which started on Nov., 1st. 1991, attended regularly by academics and students as well as professionals from all walks of life. In MI-F, although he accepts the similarity between Plato's permanent and archetypal Ideas and illusory shadows in the cave with the Sufi's conception of the universe in relation to the Fixed Essences (pp. 74-75), he rejects the allegations that the Sufi's conception of divine manifestations (*tajalliyat*) could have been identical to that of the Neo-Platonic system of emanation (pp. 72-73).

²⁵³ Cf. Commentary, pp. 329-330; EQ pp. 10-13.

Thus when it is involved in intellection and apprehension it is called 'intellect'; when it governs the body it is called 'soul'; when it is engaged in receiving intuitive illumination it is called 'heart'; and when it reverts to its own world of abstract entities it is called 'spirit'. Indeed, it is in reality always engaged in manifesting itself in all these states.²⁵⁵

Since the self is intimately interacting with the dual aspects of body and the soul, it is therefore described as the animal soul (*al-nafs al-hayawaniyyah*) on the one hand, and on the other, as the rational soul (*al-nafs al-natiqah*).²⁵⁶ Its destiny in this world and ultimately in the hereafter depends upon which of the two aspects that the self gives leading priority. Because man is created, annihilated and recreated, where his existence does not even last two atoms of time, he, like all creatures, owes his very existence to his Creator. He therefore cannot regrade either his soul, or biological life or body as his own in an unqualified manner, and thereby to dispense it howsoever he wishes. He is given knowledge (*al-'ilm*) primarily of the accidents and attributes of sensible things and intelligible matters, and knowledge about (*ma'rifat*) God. About the knowledge of the essence or the inmost ground of certain objects such as the spirit (*al-ruh*), he is given only a little.²⁵⁷ He is by nature -forgetful which causes him to be disobedient and thereby "inclines him towards injustice (*zulm*) and ignorance (*jahl*)".²⁵⁸

The starting point in the Islamic concept of religion, and the dominant element according to Al-Attas, as in all other related Islamic concepts such as those of freedom and responsibility, of justice, of knowledge, of virtue, of brotherhood and of the role and character of the individual and the society

²⁵⁴ al-Attas, *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul*, hereafter cited as NMPHS (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1990), pp. 7; See also PAT, p.4.

²⁵⁵ NMPHS, p. 8.

²⁵⁶ S.M.N. al-Attas, *The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993) pp. p.5 Hereafter cited as *Happiness*.

²⁵⁷ IS, p. 132; *al-Isra'*, (17):85.

²⁵⁸ IS, p. 133; He refers to *al-Abzab* (33):72.

goes back to the spiritual realm of the Pre-Separation in the Interior Condition of God's Consciousness, before man were created as external creature. All these are profoundly contained in his interpretation of the Qur'anic verse of Covenant: "When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam—from their loins—their descendents, and made them testify concerning themselves (saynig): "AM I not your lord?"—they said: "yea" we do testify!"²⁵⁹ Man's *raison d'être* as God's servant and Khalifah on earth, is thus organically related to this verse. But man's ruling is not merely limited to the socio-political sense but more fundamentally to the rule of one's self by itself, to do justice, and to avoid injustice to itself.²⁶⁰ This is possible because, the reality of man, according to Islam epitomizes the microcosmic (*'alam saghir*) aspects of the larger macrocosmic (*'alam kabir*) Universe.²⁶¹ According to al-Attas, the concept of man as a microcosmic representation of the macrocosm:

"is most important in relation to knowledge—which is his most paramount attribute responsible for the effective establishment of the just order in his elf, his being and existence—and to the organization, instruction, inculcation and dissemination of knowledge in his education, specifically with reference to the university..."²⁶²

Man's existence in the primordial world which makes possible these universal characteristics and his sojourn on Earth as a temporary one, after which he will be returned to God. Prof. al-Attas has taught that the ultimate aim of religion (*din*) is for man to return to that Primordial state which involves the quest for this identity and transcendent destiny through true knowledge and right conduct.²⁶³ This knowledge involves also the

²⁵⁹ Al-A'raf (7):172; IS, pp. 52, 65-90 contains detailed explanation of the meaning of this verse of Covenant; see also PAT, pp. 4-5; and Commentary, pp. 132-133.

²⁶⁰ IS, pp. 62, 71-74; also NMPHS, p. 4.

²⁶¹ IS, p. 64.

²⁶² Ibid, p. 136.

understanding of God's signs and symbols in the phenomenal world by means of sound senses and sound reason. This is what this worldly life is all about: a continuous journey returning to the Lord. The purpose of good character based on true knowledge guided by religion, it to attain lasting happiness (sa'adah) in this world and in the hereafter. Although it recognizes the importance of the changing and ephemeral happiness of the bodily and emotional aspects—attained when ether respective needs, guided again by religion are fulfilled—Islam regards the more abiding is spiritual happiness which is attainable even in this world, that is the -love of God. This is a preparation to the true and everlasting happiness in the hereafter, which is the vision of God.²⁶⁴

The rational aspect of the soul which is also known as the rational soul, is entrusted with the duty of governing its animal aspects to realize its mission is this worldly existence, It is pervasive and intimate not like the analogy given by some scholars comparing it with the rider and the chariot. Rather it is more analogous to the way God governs the Universe.²⁶⁵

The metaphysical vision of Islam regards man not only as subject but also an object of knowledge;²⁶⁶ Education of man involves educating his physical and spiritual faculties, which naturally made man into an object of knowledge. But al-Attas also mentions that, the study of man, of mind and of the self by the modern secular science is restricted to the psychological, biological and anthropological methods which are methodological extensions of the restrictions of reasons to the physical reality.²⁶⁷ In several private discussions al-Attas asserted that since modern psychology no longer is the

²⁶³ Al-Attas has given a very detailed semantic analysis of the concept of religion in Islam (din) in Chap. 3, of IS.

²⁶⁴ Happiness, pp. 2, 6-8; 19-21.

²⁶⁵ IS, pp. 64, 68.

²⁶⁶ al-Attas, *Islam and the Philosophy of Science*, hereafter cited as IPS (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1989), p. 7.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid*, p. 17.

study of the soul, which is manifested in its very nomenclature—*psyche* in Greek means soul—then it should operate under a different name.

Contrary to the positions of some of the Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, and the Medieval Christian scholars, the Islamic emphasis on the spiritual reality of man does not mean that his body—which is the source of animal powers—into important or that it is to be regrade as a hindrance to man's spiritual development.²⁶⁸ Al-Attas has elucidated that, on the contrary, the body has significant contribution for man's spiritual development for it is through the bodily faculties that the soul can acquire particular information and data concerning the world of sense and sensible experience. The soul, through its various faculties will then develop these sense-data into general principles, ideas and beliefs. Further the soul, through its faculties of imagination and estimation, can make distinction between genus and differentia of their various attributes and abstract their general and particular meanings from material connections and relations. In this way it can attain to the knowledge of the individual sensibles and their nonsensible meanings such as love and hate. The soul can also make comparison between single universals by negation and affirmation of relations and ratios. Through analogous and repeated observations and experience, the soul can acquire empirical premises, with which it can verify the veracity or falsity of reports upon which true beliefs are based.²⁶⁹ In short the body and its sound faculties are indispensable for the acquisition and verification of empirical knowledge and experience, the possibility of which is a part of the Islamic creed.

According to al-Attas, based on his interpretation of the Holy Qur'an and on the clear empirical evidences which many modernists conveniently choose to ignore, every man, is not created equal. Indeed each man is different in terms of his intellectual and spiritual abilities as well as ethical capabilities.²⁷⁰ The Qur'an teaches that God does not burden a soul more than what the can bear, and it has asked man to pray so that God will not

²⁶⁸ NMPHS, p. 5.

²⁶⁹ Ibid, pp. 12, 28-29

²⁷⁰ Al An'am (6): 132, 165; al-A 'raf (7): 172; al-Anfal (8): 4; al-Hujurat (49): 13.

burden them with what they cannot bear,²⁷¹ both conveying the meaning that souls have different capacities and responsibilities. It is clear to al-Attas, that the highest moral value is not the struggle to attain equality; but to attain justice which requires knowledge and wisdom. In fact if all things are equal or are at the same place, such a condition will breed only confusion, for recognition of essential relation and specific difference would perish, thereby making meaning and consequently knowledge, truth and justice impossible.²⁷² Justice "a condition of being in right and proper place" is a paramount concept in al-Attas' thinking because it is a value that man should strive to attain not merely in relation to this fellow man and the natural world, but more importantly towards his own self, God, and intellectual realities like knowledge and language, In the same manner, injustice—a condition where things are not in their right and proper places_ is a bete noire in Islam.²⁷³ Al-Attas points out that both justice and injustice in Islam do not operate only within two-person relation or dual-party relation but more fundamentally they both begin and end with the self. One can be just or unjust not only towards others but towards oneself.²⁷⁴ It is quite apparent now that these concepts would exert powerful influence on the purpose, content and methods of education.

HUMAN FREEDOM AND DESTINY

The metaphysics of existence naturally has implications for the problem of freedom, morality and our interpretation of evil. He would accept the credal position of the orthodox Muslims, ahl Sunnah wa 'l-Jama'ah, that:

"Allah...is the Creator of all the actions of His servants
whether of unbelief or of belief, of obedience or of

²⁷¹ al-Baqarah (2): 286

²⁷² CEII, 15-16; PAT, pp. 5-6; IPS, pp. 15-17, 21-22.

²⁷³ Risalah, para. 14, pp. 46, 52; pp. 71-74; IPS, p. 23; cf. Ali ibn Uthman al-Hujwiri, *Kash' al-Mahiub*. Trans by R.A. Nicholson. E.J.W. Gibb Memorial vol. XVII (London & Leiden: Luzac & E.J. Brill, 1911) p. 387.

²⁷⁴ IS, pp. 71-72.

disobedience; all of them are by the desire of Allah...As to His servants they have in them the actions of choice (ikhtiyar) for which they are rewarded or punished. The good in them is by the good pleasure of Allah ...and the evil in them is not by His good pleasure.²⁷⁵

Like some of the higher Sufis before him, Prof. al-Attas holds that a proper understanding of the role of the Primordial Potentialities (isti'dadat asliyyat) in the Fixed Essences where the inner possibilities and destiny of each reality are determined, can explain the problem of determinism and human destiny.²⁷⁶ Similarly he would return the fundamental verse in the world of Pre-Similarly—when mankind collectively testified affirmatively the Lordship of God in surah al-A 'raf(7): 172 cited above—to underline that their collective answer ("yea! We testify!") presupposes that each one of them was already given its respective unique individuality.²⁷⁷ His commentary on Hamzah Fansuri's conception of human destiny may reflect his own position on the subject:

"A man is good or evil according to whether his Primordial Potentiality Proceeds from the Divine Attributes of Beauty (jamal) or Majesty (jalal) respectively. From the point of view of reality, however, there is no such things as absolute evil since the real nature of everything is not distinct from God, and God is good and inclines to goodness. The question of moral responsibility in this world and of future reward and punishment is very closely connected with belief in the possibility of human freedom as faith (iman), and this faith, apart from assuming that man has the capacity to obey or disobey the Divine Command embodied in the religious law (shari'ah), means also faith in the existence of the afterlife as

²⁷⁵ S.M.N. al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the 'Aqa'id of al-Nasal* (Kuala Lumpur: Dept of Publications, Univ. of Malaya, 1988) art. XI, pp. 68-69.

²⁷⁶ Commentary, p. 45.

²⁷⁷ Private discussion at ISTAC 23 Jan 1993.

revealed in the religious law. In spite of knowing that this world and the next possess no real existence in relation to God, man must still have faith in their existence, for this is the basis of morality. "²⁷⁸

Al-Attas would agree with Hamzah that in this matter, since evil and hell are particularizations of the Attributes of Divine Majesty (Jalal), while good and heaven are from the Attributes of Beauty, the returning of evil or good soul to hell or heaven respectively is a matter of returning to one's original place. It is in conformity with justice, for God does not change their respective destiny.²⁷⁹ The Sufis affirm that God's Will is not an unrestricted blind desire. He does not do as He pleases even if He has the Power to do so; rather He acts in cooperation (muwafaqat) with the Primordial Potentialities²⁸⁰ in His Knowledge. This cooperation however does not make His Will and Power meaningless because the things willed are not empty nothing, they are in fact realities variously known as the Primordial Potentialities (isti'dad ash), or Divine Ideas, the Universal Intellect (al-'aqlu'lkulli). It is argued that since existence is the object of universal desire, it is therefore good. Therefore it entails that Absolute Existence is absolutely good. If further follows from his that evil, is never absolute, "but only relative, partial, and negative..."²⁸¹

Notwithstanding the fact that the destiny of each man has already been determined in the Primordial Potentiality, education which presupposes the following two points, is not only integral to Islamic creed but also obligatory for every Muslims. First it is that the latent potentialities naturally endowed, to every human being must be brought forth through effective and creative educational process; secondly that whatever the present individual capacity or incapacity is, again, through effective and creative education, it can be

²⁷⁸ MHF, p. 109.

²⁷⁹ Hamzah Fansuri, *Sharab al-'Ashiqin*. (the Drink of Lovers) Trans. with notes by S.M.N. al-Attas, in MHF. pp. 131-132.

²⁸⁰ MHF, pp. 131-132.

²⁸¹ Rahman, Mulla Sadra, p. 36; also MHF, p. 109.

corrected and perfected. Having faith in the predetermined destiny (taqdir) does not negate the need to educate nor the need to strive to improve one's present spiritual, ethical and material conditions in life, for an individual does not know his destiny until he meets his Lord. Hence the eternal wisdom of the famous commandments of the Prophet: "The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim man and woman"²⁸² and "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave."²⁸³

In relation to the above al-Attas contends man's quest for a true religious life is a returning to his original nature, fitrah. Willing and knowing submission to God is what constitutes real freedom of man.²⁸⁴ He suggests that the proper term for freedom in Islam is best conveyed by the theological term ikhtiyar. The term ikhtiyar as used in Islamic theology does not refer to the modern idea of freedom, for the former, the root meaning of which is khair or good, means "the choice for the better", and that any' different act will not be a choice by the self, but an injustice (zulm) to it. A choice for the better is truly an exercise of freedom which prerequisites knowledge of good and evil. Conversely a choice for the worse is based on ignorance and instigated by blameworthy aspects of the animal soul.²⁸⁵ Following ibn al-Arabi, al-Attas considers that while man is given the capacity to obey or disobey God's Command (amr) as stipulated by religious Laws (Shari'ah), man cannot ever disobey God's Will (rnashi'sh). True freedom is achieved when man has attained spiritual illumination or gnosis (ma'rifah) when he has

²⁸² Yusuf Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Jami Bayan al-'am wa Fadlihi wa Janbaghi fi Rlwayatihi wa Hamlihi*, 2 vols. Ed. by 'Abd al-Hadi Mudir and Mustapha Ibrahim (Cairo: Idara al-Taba'a al-Munira, n.d), 1:7; Wali al-Din al-Tabrizi, *Mishkat al-Masahih*. English trans by A. Hameed Siddiqi (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1979) I: 136.

²⁸³ cited from Ahmad Shalaby, *History Muslim Education* (Beirut: Dar al-Kashshaf, 1954) p. 162.

²⁸⁴ Is, pp. 57-58.

²⁸⁵ 'Aqa'id, Appendix VI, "ikhtiyar", p. 90; NMPHS, note 16, 3-4; also Happiness,, p. 7d. al-Hujwiri, *Kashf* p. 388.

succeeded in effacing his sensual self to gain to a higher selfhood.²⁸⁶ Even at this level he is still bound by servitude to God ('ubudiyah).²⁸⁷

THE UNIVERSE

Islamic worldview affirms that there are many worlds besides the phenomenal universe. As stated in the first section of this chapter they are the world of Permanent Archetypes, the world of Spirits and our phenomenal world of Sense and Sensible Experience.²⁸⁸

It is interesting that modern man has concentrated only upon the sensible world and has spent billions to explore the extra-terrestrial universe hoping thereby to ultimately understand origin and destiny of man and the universe. One influential philosopher writes that "Nature itself constitutes the sum total of reality, that matter-energy...is the foundation-stuff of the universe, and that supernatural entities simply do not exist".²⁸⁹ However the continuous discoveries of modern astronomy have made modern Western secular man more special of his special destiny as problematically defined by Judeo-Christian religious tradition.²⁹⁰ On the contrary Islam seeks the answers to these questions not in the physical but in the spiritual realm. The universe or the phenomenal world including man and external world _ exists in reality, but its reality is perceived and understood differently

²⁸⁶ MHF, p. 109, also note 235 on the same page;

²⁸⁷ Abu Nasr al-Sarraj, *Kitab al-Luma' fi'l-Tasawwuf*. Ed. with critical notes etc, by R.A. Nicholson. E.J. W. Memorial (London: Luzac, 1963) pp. 340-341; also, al-Qushairi, *Principles of Sufism* by al-Qushairi. Trans. by B. R. von Schlegell. Intro. by H. Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1990) pp. 202-205.

²⁸⁸ For a description of their different names, see MHF, p. 156, note 50. Cf. al-Hujwiri, who reports that the term 'alam is understood as "the collective mass of created things." He stresses that the Sufi interpret 'alam as the "collective mass of spirits and souls." Kashf, pp. 385-386.

²⁸⁹ Corlis Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism* (New York: The Wisdom Library, 1957) p. 97.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 89-96, and 122-157; see also IS, chaps. 1 and 2.

according to the perceptor's level of intellectual and spiritual state and preparedness. To the common man ('awamm), the world appears to him as composed of different forms and categories of objects, each appearing as an independent reality r essence. At this level, the world is seen as a multiplicity, and all cognitive processes occur within the framework of subject dichotomy.²⁹¹ This phenomenal world, including the human condition in it, is like the ice, the mirage and the waves in relation to their respective sources viz. the water, -the hot desert, and the sea. The ice, the mirage and the waves are real only when considered in relation to the water, hot desert and the sea respectively; but without them i.e. water, hot desert, or the sea, neither the ice, nor the mirage nor the waves would be possible. The ontological status of the latter group vis-a-vis the former, is analogous to that of the worlds of creation vis-a-vis God.²⁹² If the Qur'an consists of verses referred to as ayat or signs, the entirety of phenomenal creation, is also a book of signs, the purpose of which is to point to God. To al-Attas, the world of nature is another form of the Divine Revelation analogous to the Qur'an itself. The only difference is only that the great open book of nature is something created; it presents itself in multiple and diverse forms that partake the symbolic existence by virtue of being continually articulated by the creative word of God.²⁹³

The realities of the external world are "modes and aspects of a single and dynamic all-encompassing Reality."²⁹⁴ In another place he asserts that the processes of phenomenal world or the laws of nature is nothing but God's "Customary way of acting" (sunnat Allah). Seen from the dynamic nature of existence being an aspect of God who is the Infinite, "these laws are no longer seen as rigid because they are now open to infinite possibilities."²⁹⁵

²⁹¹ Commentary, pp. 131, 133; IE, pp. 2, 5.

²⁹² al-Attas in his discussions, likes' to give this metaphor to underline his points. See also examples in MHF, pp. 70-76; for examples of other metaphors used, see Izutsu, "Structure", pp. 65-68.

²⁹³ IPS, p. 27; see also CEII, p. 7; EQ, pp. 27 ff..

²⁹⁴ CEII, p. 31.

Yet, because of variegated multiplicity, the phenomenal world often became a veil (hijab) covering its underlying unity and purpose.²⁹⁶ Al-, in many of his lectures, characteristically portrays a compelling example to depict how the world distracts man from his true destiny: If a traveller in a dark rainy night sees a simple road sign—a piece of metal board with white paint on a black or green background—pointing clearly the distance and direction, the traveller would proceed ahead to his destination without any trouble. However if there are many sign-posts made of shiny expensive marble equipped with will-decorated hands with many fingers bejewelled with gold and silver rings pointing to many directions, then the traveller will most probably stop his vehicle, and come down to inspect and be captivated by the attractive sign-posts. In this case, the sign-posts no longer serve the traveller but themselves. The traveller will never reach his true destination. Yet certain individuals who have experienced a spiritual transformation such as the prophets and to a lesser degree, men of true knowledge and spiritual discernment are able to transcend the world of multiplicity and witness (shuhud) or taste (dhawq) the unity of existence through the mediacy spiritual unveiling (kashf). At this level of higher experience, the rational has merged with the intellectual, and the empirical with the authentic spiritual experiences, where knowledge is a union (tawhid) between the knower and the meaning of the known.²⁹⁷ But even at this level, the phenomenal world is neither a figment of the human imagination nor even a part of God or God Himself; but actually an aspect of God or Unity:

individuating Itself into Multiplicity without impairing Its original Unity, and yet 'connecting' or 'relating' the Multiplicity with Itself in such wise that although the Unity takes on the forms of Multiplicity, it still distinguishes Itself from the latter and remains always in Its original nature... (A

²⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 21.

²⁹⁶ EQ, pp. 26-27.

²⁹⁷ Commentary, p. 135; PAT, p. 8; IE, pp. 7-9, 28-32

process of inner articulations)... which goes on in a continuous operation.²⁹⁸

Al-Attas, like all the Sufis of higher order before him, such as, al-Raniri have severely repudiated the misguided peoples and religions who adhered to the erroneous and dangerous notion that Nature is either God or a part of God.²⁹⁹ Every aspect of God's creation is endowed with various degrees of spiritual or divine element, depending upon its place in the hierarchy (order of ontological descent, and accordingly is in a state of worshipping Him. In a more restricted sense of the term, for the angels, humankind and the jinn, this is done through prayer (al-salat) consisting of intention (niyyat), standing (al-qiyaam), bending the body from an upright position (al-ruku'), supplication (al-dua'), and glorification (al-tasbih); for birds, reptiles and insects, and the non-living creation, it is through glorifying Him (tasbih).³⁰⁰ In relation to the fact that even the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms are expressions of various degrees of divine self-revelation, it follows that our relation to, and dealing with them should be with justice.

Like the traveller captivated by the sign-post, modern science too is captivated by the phenomenal world as an opaque object of study. Al-Attas thus assails modern science which has reduced the study of the phenomenal world as an end itself, to see things as mere things.³⁰¹ While this endeavour has produced many useful things for the material betterment of man nevertheless its infinitely pragmatic activity has likewise elicited uncontrollable and insatiable propensity to destroy nature itself. The study and utilization of nature without a higher spiritual end "is devoid of real purpose, and the pursuit of knowledge becomes a deviation from the truth, which necessarily puts into question the validity of such knowledge"³⁰² which

²⁹⁸ 1E, pp. 17-18.

²⁹⁹ Commentary, pp. 136-137; PAT, pp. 9-10.

³⁰⁰ Commentary, pp. 365-366.

³⁰¹ IPS, p. 28.

has consequently turned man into thinking that they are gods or His copartners.³⁰³

The study and utility of nature for higher spiritual end, on the other hand, will produce a more responsible attitude. But the interpretation of natural phenomenon is more difficult because its signs are more vague and not easily apprehended. In *Risalah*, al-Attas makes a compelling comparison between interpreting a written document and interpreting Nature as the Open Book of God which is, wherein he underlines that the real purpose for reading both books is to understand the meanings (*makna* in Malay; *ma'na* in Arabic) of the signs symbolized by words in one case, and by natural phenomena in the other. If one's efforts are focussed on the physical aspects of the book such as the ink, individual letters, words and paper forgetting what the words, sentences and the whole book means, then the purpose of reading the-book is lost, for no knowledge can be derived from such activity. Similarly, the natural world is a book containing knowledge; but that knowledge is not evident merely from the physical phenomena; for these are nothing but signs the meaning of which can be understood by those who are equipped with proper knowledge, wisdom and spiritual - discernment.³⁰⁴ Our understanding and interpretation of these signs in the external world must be based, according to al-Attas, on the same method of valid interpretation and understanding of the written words of the Qur'an, i.e. through *tafsir* or direct interpretation and *ta'wil* or deeper and allegorical interpretation based on the clear and direct ones.³⁰⁵ Ultimately, al-Attas considers science as "a kind of *ta'wil* or allegorical interpretation of the empirical things that constitute the world of nature."³⁰⁶ The true sufis also attested that religion is likewise constituted by established (i.e. *shari'ah*) and ambiguous (*haqiqah*) aspects of

³⁰² PAT, p. 6.

³⁰³ IS, p. 36.

³⁰⁴ *Risalah*, para. 48, pp. 158-160; *Commentary*, p. 456.

³⁰⁵ CEII, pp. 17-19; cf. PAT, pp. 5-7, 13,

³⁰⁶ IPS, p. 31.

the same reality and truth, and that the reality of the latter is based upon the established truth of the former.³⁰⁷

The ephemeral nature of the world according to Islam does not, as already alluded to above, denigrate its status as unimportant or evil. It is a sign of God, and a manifestation of His Infinite Wisdom and Power. Al-Attas underlines that "it would be blasphemous to derogate the world and nature knowing them in their true purpose."³⁰⁸ Similarly although the life in this world (hayat al-dunya) is regrade as "nothing but goods and chattels of deception" (ilia mata'u'l-ghurur)³⁰⁹ "a play and amusement" (la'ib wa lahw)³¹⁰ etc, these are intended as warnings of its distractive nature.³¹¹ Prophet Adam was sent to this world not as punishment but as a natural process for the actualization of the purpose of his existence, about which God had earlier on informed the angels: "Behold, thy Lord said to the angles, "I will create a vicegerent on earth."³¹² This life is meant as a period wherein one actualizes one's potentiality as God's servant and vicegerent. Because of the intimate relationship between this world ('alam) and knowledge ('ilm) both of which are positively upheld by Islam, al-Attas does not like the term secularism, a negative value in Islam, to be translated into Arabic as 'almaniyyah.³¹³

Al-Attas's metaphysics, being a synthesis, includes those aspects above, as will as psychology, epistemology and ethics which have implications for

³⁰⁷ Commentary, pp. 183, and 456; for an eg. of Hamzah Fansuri's position see, MHF, pp. 180-182

³⁰⁸ IS, p. 38.

³⁰⁹ Surah al-Imran (3): 185; al-Hadid (57): 20.

³¹⁰ Surah al-'An 'am (6): 32; al- A'raf (7): 51; al- Ankabut (29): 64; Muhammad (47): 36.

³¹¹ Ibid, p. 38. Even another alternative translation for secularism, la diniyyah, expresses one aspect. Analysing its original meaning in Latin, saeculum, denoting a spirit of here and now, al-Attas suggests that secularism should better be translated as al-huna'l-aniyyah.

³¹² Surah al-Baqarah (2): 30.

³¹³ ISTAC Saturday Night Lectures 9th Oct. 1993.

this educational philosophy and methodology, It is clear then, that Islamic metaphysics affirms only one Reality and Truth which determines the worldview of the Muslims. All Islamic values pertain ultimately to it alone, so that to the Muslims, individually and collectively, all endeavour towards change and development and progress and perfection is invariably determined by the world view.³¹⁴ However the One Reality has different modes that cause other diverse and multiple and evanescent realities. He affirmation of existence of and distinction between the One Reality i.e. Being (wujud) or God and external Existence (maujud); between Unity (wahdah) and Multiplicity (kathrah); between Subsistence (baqa') and Evanescence (fana') does not mean a dualistic worldview for the two are not of equal metaphysical and ontological status. Rather, one is independent and subsistent while the other is dependent upon it; the one is absolute and the other relative; the one is real and the other a manifestation of that reality.³¹⁵ Because of this understanding, Prof. al-Attas observes that knowledgeable Muslims have been able to live their lives without suffering any fundamental change that would disrupt the harmony of Islam and of their own selves by the devastating touch of time and the vicissitudes of worldly existence.³¹⁶ Despite great personal or community crises, unlike in the West that produces atheism and agnosticism. Similarly Muslims who are not infected with the diseases of the West are quite sure of the place and function of the spiritual vis-a-vis the natural, this world vis-a- vis the next, of man vis-a-vis woman in religion and society, of individual and collective responsibility. Such Muslims have dealt, and can continue to deal with the issues of permanence and change in religious, personal and societal affairs; with the issues of intellectual, linguistic, cultural and religious pluralism; with real tolerance and justice, while maintaining their values, UN weakened by relativism.

³¹⁴ IS, p. 48.

³¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 81, 84.

³¹⁶ IS, pp. 84-85.