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## The Thoughts of Syeid Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas; Adab as a Foundation

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the perspectives of Muslim thinkers outside Southeast Asia on the concept of education, its implementation within educational systems, and its strengths and limitations in contemporary contexts. The thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is used as the main focus due to his significant contribution to the discourse on Islamic education and the Islamization of knowledge. The research aims to explore the philosophical foundations of Al-Attas's educational ideas and evaluate their relevance to modern educational challenges. This research employs a literature study using a descriptive qualitative approach by analyzing primary works of Al-Attas and related scholarly discussions. The findings show that Al-Attas emphasizes adab as the central goal of education, which refers to the cultivation of proper moral conduct and the correct placement of knowledge and human beings within the order of existence. His concept of education also stresses the integration of knowledge within the framework of Tawhid, rejecting the dichotomy between religious and secular sciences and criticizing the secularization of knowledge. However, his ideas have also been criticized, particularly by secular-liberal scholars who consider the Islamization of knowledge difficult to implement in the modern academic environment. Despite these debates, Al-Attas's thought offers an important philosophical foundation for the development of contemporary Islamic education.

## 1. Introduction

Education, according to the Islamic perspective, is an integral, comprehensive process that cannot be separated from the purpose of human creation. Islam views education not merely as a means of acquiring knowledge for worldly needs, but also as an instrument for achieving true happiness. This differs from the modern educational paradigm, which tends to emphasize cognitive aspects and technical skills alone, without regard for spiritual and moral dimensions (Sucipto, 2020). As

a result, even though modern education is capable of producing intellectually intelligent and professionally skilled individuals, it often fails to shape individuals with noble character and high moral integrity. The phenomena of moral decadence, spiritual crisis, and the loss of humanity in modern life are clear evidence of a void in educational values. Therefore, Muslim thinkers strive to present a comprehensive Islamic educational paradigm based on the principles of tawhid, adab, and balance between reason, heart, and human actions.

Islamic education is not only understood as an effort to impart knowledge, but also as a means of shaping the character, spirituality, and civilization of the people. Since the Middle Ages, Muslim thinkers have contributed great ideas on how education should be carried out in order to be in harmony with Islamic values and at the same time be able to respond to the challenges of the times (Siregar, 2020). Therefore, Islamic education must be directed towards shaping well-rounded individuals who are able to harmonize their worldly lives with their spiritual goals. Thus, Islamic education essentially plays an important role in building a civilized, scientific, and noble society (Shania et al., 2024).

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is one of several important figures who offer concepts of Islamic education with an emphasis on manners and the Islamization of knowledge. According to al-Attas, the main crisis facing Muslims today is not merely a political, economic, or social crisis, but rather a crisis of knowledge that has led to a loss of manners. He refers to this condition as confusion of knowledge, which is chaos in knowledge that occurs due to a misunderstanding of the nature of knowledge, the function of knowledge, and the purpose of education (Makhfira & Hakim, 2020). Within this framework, Islamic education should be directed not only towards producing intelligent individuals, but also civilized individuals, namely individuals who are capable of placing things in their proper place according to their correct position. Thus, the Islamic education offered by al-Attas does not merely emphasize the transfer of knowledge, but also the transformation of personality that makes humans servants of Allah as well as caliphs on earth.

Al-Attas' thoughts on education are highly relevant to the contemporary state of education, especially in an era of globalization characterized by the rapid flow of information, the penetration of foreign cultures, and the development of a secular paradigm in the education system. Education that tends to be pragmatic, materialistic, and oriented toward the job market has produced a generation that is skilled, but often lacking in spiritual and moral values (Ahmad & Sumiati, 2017). In this context, al-Attas' idea of Islamizing science becomes very important, as it offers a new paradigm that seeks to integrate modern science with the Islamic worldview. Moreover, the concept of adab that he offers can be a solution to overcome the character crisis that plagues the younger generation. Thus, studying Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas' educational philosophy is very urgent, both theoretically and practically, because it can provide a new direction in the development of an Islamic education system based on monotheism, manners, and the integration of knowledge.

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Based on the background description above, this study attempts to examine in depth the perspectives of Muslim thinkers around the world on education, namely the thoughts of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas. This study focuses on three main questions: first, what are the perspectives of each thinker on Islamic education; second, how are these ideas applied in the education system; and third, what are the strengths and weaknesses of each of these ideas. By discussing these issues, it is hoped that a more comprehensive picture of the contributions of Muslim thinkers around the world in formulating Islamic education can be obtained, while also offering reflections for the development of Islamic education that is more relevant to the challenges of the modern era.

## **2. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research method through a literature review using a descriptive qualitative approach. The research aims to explore and analyze the ideas and contributions of Muslim thinkers from various parts of the world in the field of Islamic education. Data for this research were obtained from secondary sources, including books, peer-reviewed journal articles, dissertations, and other relevant academic publications that discuss educational thought within the Islamic intellectual tradition. These sources were selected based on their relevance to the research focus and their contribution to the discourse on Islamic educational philosophy.

The data collection process was conducted through documentation techniques, which involved systematically searching for, recording, and classifying various forms of literature related to the study. This process ensured that the collected data represented diverse scholarly perspectives and provided a solid theoretical foundation for the analysis. Furthermore, the data analysis employed a descriptive-analytical approach aimed at presenting a clear and systematic explanation of the educational ideas proposed by the selected Muslim thinkers.

Through this approach, the study describes, compares, and critically evaluates their thoughts in terms of conceptual relevance, strengths, and limitations within contemporary educational contexts. As a result, this method enables the research to generate a comprehensive understanding of the intellectual contributions of Muslim scholars worldwide and their significance for the development and reform of Islamic education in the modern era.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas was born on September 5, 1931, in Bogor, West Java, Indonesia. He came from a prominent family with a lineage of nobility and scholars. His father was a descendant of the Ba'Alawi, an Arab family that produced many great scholars, while his mother came from a Sundanese family with noble blood from Cirebon. From an early age, al-Attas received a strong religious education from his family, particularly in the traditions of Islam and Malay

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customs that were deeply ingrained in his environment. At a young age, al-Attas attended Madrasah al-Urwatul Wutsqa in Sukabumi. When Japan occupied Indonesia, his family moved to Malaysia. He continued his education at Bukit Zahrah School in Johor Bahru and then at English College in Johor Bahru. After that, he entered the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, England (1952–1955) to study military science. However, his interests lay more in science, language, and philosophy, so he continued his education at the University of Malaya in 1957–1959 (Yudril, 2024).

After graduating, he had the opportunity to continue his postgraduate studies at McGill University, Montreal, Canada (1960–1962) with a focus on classical Islamic studies, particularly theology, philosophy, and Sufism. He obtained his doctoral degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London (1962–1965) with a dissertation on the great Sufi figure, Hamzah Fansuri, which later became one of the monumental works in Malay Sufism studies. After returning to Malaysia, al-Attas became a lecturer at the University of Malaya. His career progressed rapidly, leading to his appointment as Dean of the Faculty of Arts and later the establishment of the Institute of Malay Language, Literature, and Culture. The pinnacle of his career came when he became one of the key figures in the establishment of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in Kuala Lumpur in 1987, an institution renowned for its contributions to the development of Islamic knowledge and the philosophy of civilization.

Al-Attas is widely known as a contemporary Muslim thinker who emphasizes the importance of Islamizing science. For him, the crisis facing modern Muslims is not only a political and economic crisis, but primarily a crisis of knowledge. He criticizes Western secularism and emphasizes the need for Muslims to develop science based on an Islamic worldview founded on tawhid. Al-Attas is known as a multidisciplinary scholar who is well-versed in philosophy, theology, history, literature, and Sufism. He founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in Kuala Lumpur, which has become a center for the development of modern Islamic studies based on Islamic epistemology (Zikri & Binti, 2017). His important works include:

- Islam and Secularism (1978)
- The Concept of Education in Islam (1980/1991)
- Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam (1995)

Al-Attas's thinking was greatly influenced by classical Islamic intellectual tradition, especially al-Ghazali, while also offering a critical response to the dominance of secular Western epistemology.

### ***Basic Concepts of Educatio Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas***

For al-Attas, Islamic education is not merely the transfer of knowledge (ta'lim) or guidance (tarbiyah), but rather ta'dīb the cultivation of manners. Manners are understood as the recognition and acknowledgment of the true nature of something in its proper place, whether it relates to humans, knowledge, or God. Thus, the main goal of education is to shape civilized individuals (al-insān al-ṣāliḥ), not just intelligent people. Civilized individuals are those who know and acknowledge their

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God, understand the essence of themselves and their position as servants and caliphs, and use knowledge for good, not for destruction (Muwahidah et al., 2025). Adab in al-Attas's thinking has a profound meaning, not limited to politeness. The loss of adab will give rise to confusion of knowledge, a state in which humans are no longer able to put things in their proper place. For example, when science is viewed as neutral and value-free, it can be used for destructive purposes. According to al-Attas, Islamic education must restore manners as its foundation. The learning process should not only equip students with skills, but also instill manners towards teachers, knowledge, society, and especially towards Allah.

Al-Attas developed the idea of Islamization of Knowledge long before it became a global discourse. For him, modern science, which originated in the West, contains a secular worldview that is contrary to Islam. Therefore, Islamization of science does not mean rejecting modern science, but rather filtering concepts that are contrary to tawhid, integrating science with Islamic values, and returning science to its function as a means of knowing Allah. This Islamization of knowledge became the basis for the development of an integrative Islamic education curriculum, no longer dualistic (separating religious and general knowledge).

In al-Attas' view, humans are spiritual-intellectual beings who have spiritual and physical dimensions. Islamic education must shape good people who understand themselves as servants of Allah and caliphs on earth. The goal of education is not merely to produce workers, but to shape individuals who have a balance between reason, soul, and morals.

### ***The Application of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Thought in Education***

The concept of adab formulated by al-Attas can be applied in the Islamic education curriculum through the integration of moral, spiritual, and intellectual values in every field of learning. The curriculum is not only directed at cognitive achievement, but also emphasizes the formation of civilized character. For example, in science learning, teachers not only teach the laws of nature, but also instill the awareness that this knowledge is Allah's verses that direct humans to be more submissive to Him. Thus, an adab-based curriculum promotes a harmonious relationship between reason, heart, and revelation. This application requires teachers who understand the philosophy of Islamic education and are able to be moral role models for students, so that the educational process is holistic and transformative.

According to al-Attas, the Islamization of knowledge can be applied in practice in Islamic universities through curriculum design that combines religious knowledge and modern science (Firman, 2023). For example, economics students not only study Western theories, but also understand the principles of Sharia law that govern economic activities. Similarly, psychology students study modern psychological theories while critiquing them from an Islamic perspective on the soul and morals. In this context, universities serve as centers for the reconstruction of knowledge, ensuring that they do not merely import Western theories but reinterpret them in accordance with the Islamic worldview. This application also involves

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interdisciplinary research that combines scientific approaches with the perspective of tawhid, thereby producing knowledge that is not detached from divine values.

In addition to formal curricula, al-Attas's ideas can also be applied in non-formal education and social life. For example, through character building programs in schools, Islamic boarding schools, and communities that emphasize the importance of manners in social interactions. Values such as honesty, responsibility, and respect for teachers, parents, and peers can be used as the main pillars of character education. In the modern era, which is fraught with moral crises, the concept of manners is a solution to restore the orientation of education to its main objective, namely to produce civilized individuals. Teacher training programs, Islamic education seminars, and Muslim family development are also important means of actualizing al-Attas's thinking. Thus, the application of his thinking is not only limited to the classroom, but also includes the formation of a civilized society.

### ***The Strengths and Weaknesses of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Thought***

One of the main strengths of al-Attas' thinking is its philosophical depth in interpreting Islamic education. He does not only discuss education from technical aspects, such as learning methods or curriculum strategies, but also from the epistemological, ontological, and axiological roots of science. This gives his thinking high academic weight and makes it a reference for Muslim scholars in various countries. In addition, al-Attas emphasizes the importance of adab as the core of education, which is relevant to overcoming the moral crisis of the modern generation. This concept of adab fills a void that has been neglected in secular education. Furthermore, the idea of Islamizing science plays a major role in developing the foundations of Islamic scientific thought that is capable of dialoguing with modern science without losing its identity. Thus, the strengths of al-Attas's thinking lie in its philosophical depth, conceptual power, and relevance to the contemporary education crisis (Mustakim, 2021).

However, al-Attas's thinking is not without its weaknesses. The most common criticism is the difficulty of implementing his ideas in everyday educational practice. Concepts such as the Islamization of knowledge or ta'dīb are ideal in theory, but require clear curriculum instruments, methods, and learning strategies in order to be applied. Many education practitioners find it difficult because al-Attas's thinking tends to be abstract and philosophical, making it difficult to operationalize in the classroom context. In addition, some people consider al-Attas to be too critical of Western knowledge, to the point of being considered exclusive. In practice, however, Muslims also need modern knowledge to face global challenges.

Another criticism is that his thinking is considered elitist, because it is aimed more at academics and philosophers than at teachers or practical educators who need concrete guidance. Criticism of Al-Attas comes from secular Western scientists they believe that science is neutral and universal. This means that science can be used by anyone without having to be labeled as religious. Therefore, the Islamization of science is considered contrary to the principles of scientific

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objectivity. Modernist Muslim scholars for example, Harun Nasution in Indonesia. He places greater emphasis on the rationalization of Islam so that it can engage in dialogue with modernity. Harun considers Al-Attas' concept to be unrealistic, because it is more normative and does not show technical ways of combining religious knowledge with modern science (Nasution & Fahmi, 2017).

Liberal Muslim groups such as those often found in the Liberal Islam Network (JIL). They consider the Islamization of science to be ideological, rather than purely academic. According to them, this approach could limit freedom of thought and academic freedom, and make science exclusive to an Islamic perspective. Contemporary Muslim academics especially those working at secular or international universities feel that the Islamization of science is difficult to implement in campus curricula, because modern education systems are bound by Western-based international standards.

### ***Discussion***

Another important aspect that emerges from the discussion of Al-Attas's educational philosophy is its relevance to the contemporary crisis of values in modern education. In many modern educational systems, learning is often oriented toward economic productivity, technological advancement, and market competitiveness, while moral and spiritual dimensions receive less attention. Al-Attas's emphasis on *adab* provides an alternative paradigm that seeks to restore ethical and spiritual orientation within educational practice. By placing *adab* as the central objective of education, knowledge is no longer viewed merely as an instrument for material progress, but as a means to cultivate responsible individuals who recognize the proper relationship between humans, knowledge, and the Creator. This perspective aligns with the broader discourse on the integration of knowledge in Islamic education, which argues that education should produce balanced individuals who combine intellectual competence with moral responsibility (Halstead, 2004; Wan Daud, 1998).

Furthermore, the concept of the Islamization of knowledge proposed by Al-Attas can also be interpreted as an effort to develop an epistemological framework that bridges the gap between modern scientific knowledge and the Islamic worldview. Rather than rejecting modern science, Al-Attas advocates for a critical engagement with it by filtering concepts that contradict Islamic metaphysical principles and reinterpreting them within the framework of *tawhid*. This approach encourages Muslim scholars and educational institutions to actively participate in knowledge production while maintaining their intellectual and spiritual identity. In the context of higher education, such an approach can inspire the development of interdisciplinary curricula that integrate modern disciplines with ethical and metaphysical insights derived from Islamic tradition. Consequently, Al-Attas's ideas not only contribute to philosophical discussions on Islamic education but also offer a potential framework for reforming contemporary Muslim educational institutions (Al-Attas, 1991; Hashim & Langgulung, 2008).

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#### 4. Conclusion

Overall, al-Attas's thinking has the advantages of philosophical depth, conceptual strength, and relevance in responding to the moral crisis and secularization of education. However, its shortcomings lie in practical aspects that are difficult to implement directly in the classroom without adjustments. The implication of these advantages and shortcomings is the need for collaboration between philosophers, scholars, and education practitioners to actualize his thinking. In this way, al-Attas' intellectual legacy does not stop at academic discourse, but becomes a real educational movement capable of producing a civilized, knowledgeable, and dignified Muslim generation. This conclusion confirms that the Islamic education conceived by al-Attas remains relevant today, and is even more important in the era of globalization, because it is able to provide direction for Muslims in building a civilization based on knowledge, civility, and monotheism.

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