

Summary of the CASIS Saturday Night Lecture by Prof. Dr. Syed
Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas on 10th Nov 2012

The Concept of Happiness

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Prof al-Attas continues with the commentary of his monograph *The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islām*. He begins with a comment on the Western meaning of happiness in their usage of the word ‘happy’ which comes from ‘hap’ meaning ‘chance’ or ‘fortune’. In contrast to that, the word ‘hapless’ is an adjective that means ‘helpless’.

On the other hand, Islam carries with it its own meaning of happiness that is *sa’ādah*. The opposite of it is *shaqāwah* (great misfortune and misery) and this is similar to the Sanskrit word *samsara*, which Malay has adopted as *sengsara*. *Shaqāwah* can also be understood as Sanskrit *sarbadukka* and Malay *serba duka*.

Pagans in the ancient world and also pre-Christian Europe have vague idea about the hereafter. On the other hand, happiness in Islam has something to do with the Hereafter (*Ākhirah*). Only the revealed religion talks about the hereafter, its punishment and reward. Secularized religions no longer dwell the concept of the Hereafter because their focus now is only this world. For example, in Judaism, the Jewish people not only say ‘Amen’ for their prayers but also “Next year in Jerusalem”.

Therefore, happiness in Islam also concerns the Hereafter. It refers to the soul’s experience and this is related to knowledge because it is food for the soul; deprived of this food the soul becomes lifeless (*ghariban*). Man is composed of both spiritual and animal constituents. Man’s animal aspect performs the functions of growth, nutritive, movement and perception so wealth and security are external influences on both the body and the soul. We utilize these influences in order to come to certain state called being ‘happy’.

Yet, happiness is not just the state of mind or bodily pleasure-true happiness does not change once it is attained. If *imān* is absent then we cannot grasp the meaning of happiness because it is ever changing. Therefore, in the religion of Islam, part of happiness is the Muslim being aware that he is here for certain purpose and not for chaos, nor to produce order from chaos. Furthermore, God is not the one who is causing chaos. This also brings us back to the understanding of religion as *dīn* and the debt (*dāna*) that man owes to God for having created him- this debt is to be repaid by returning the self to God; how the debt is to be repaid is taught by the Prophets.

On the matter of returning the self to God, the verse in the Qur’ān “*Inna Allah ishtara min al-Mu’minīn anfusahum*” refers to barter trade; that is the exchange of the self with something better.

There is no such thing as *imān* without *islām*; a person who has not submitted cannot know if he possesses *imān*. Rather, because *imān* cannot be seen it can only be seen through a person’s actions.

According to Ibn 'Abbas, Man is called *al-Nas* because he is composed of forgetfulness (*nasiya*). This forgetfulness is caused by the distractions of this world (*dunya*) that is brought near to our senses and consciousness. This distraction is what causes confusion and forgetfulness to what is beyond this world. The purpose of the world bring brought near is so that we are able to recognize our Lord whom we have known before while we are still in the world of spirits.