

Summary of the 7th CASIS Saturday Night Lecture Series by Tan Sri
Prof. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas on 13 October 2012:
Knowledge and Covenant

by
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It is downright impossible to do justice to the breadth and depth of what the Professor illuminated during the night. What could be attempted here is to present some of the gems that we managed to pick up with our feeble hands, perhaps many others could glimpse a foretaste of that illumination. The professor began by bringing our mind's attention all the way back to the day of the Covenant (*al-Mithāq*), "*perjanjian yang dibuat oleh semua anak Adam*", that this is what life in this world is all about. That this is the basis of religion, to return to that state before we appear in this world.

"Reality comes about because of *difference*", he reminded us. That there are so many things in this world, it is because of they being *different* from one another, that forms reality. So we, being in this world of many things have to read and interpret their *meanings*. That is what knowledge is about, units of meaning organised in a pattern arriving from outside, at the same time the soul is active in trying to attain meaning, akin to the biological process of *intussusception*. This is the sense we understand knowledge as "the arrival of meaning in the soul as well as the arrival of soul towards meaning". The word *ma'nā* also means reality.

"*Ilmu* is higher than *ma'rifah*, ... because it is an attribute of Him", he continued further as one of Beautiful Names of God is *al-'Alīm*, the All-Knowing. He elaborated further, "...but when He discloses something to someone, then in this sense *ma'rifah* is higher." "In every branch of knowledge, there is *ma'rifah* also." The professor has already elaborated in the previous lecture, and he repeated again that '*ilm* is knowing a thing in relation to other things, while *ma'rifah* is knowing a thing as it is in itself, and that the root word '*urf* means limit. That is why the word *ta'rīf* means *definition*, to fine tune it such that what we mean precisely includes those within the limits of *what it is* and excludes *what it is not*. But he explains also that "...when He discloses something to someone, then in this sense, *ma'rifah* is higher."

"All '*ilm* and *ma'rifah* is *ḥikmah*"... If we understand the classification of the attributes, '*ilm* is the main attribute, *ḥikmah* is part of '*ilm*... His Will is dependent on His Knowledge...", a point he deliberated further in the 10th lecture by basing himself on the second last verse from *Sūrah Yāsīn*, by pointing to the term *emphlahu*. He denounced the understanding of things as if God simply creates things haphazardly like some kind of magic show, *kun, kun, kun* and things just appear. "No!", he said. He created based on Knowledge!

"If you try to attain what is unattainable, there will be no end.", "Do we have to go to the depths of the sea to sail to another land?". Towards the end of the lecture, he brings us back to the *mīthāq* now calling our attention to another covenant, the one made by prophets and messengers, *mīthāq al-Nabiy*. The prophets themselves, as stated in the Qur'an made a covenant to affirm the prophets that has come before them and to pledge allegiance to the final prophet and messenger who will appear towards the end times, our beloved prophet and messenger of God, Nabi Muhammad, *ṣallallahu 'alaihi wasallam*.