

**Summary of the CASIS Saturday Night Lecture by Prof. Dr. Syed  
Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas on 26<sup>th</sup> October 2013**

**On the Nature of the Man in Islam and the West in the Context of World  
History**

Prepared by Muhammad Syafiq Bin Borhannuddin

**I**

On 26<sup>th</sup> October 2013, Professor Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas continued his illuminating exposition on the nature of man.<sup>1</sup>

He began by stating that we have to understand world history or history of man in the world in order to understand properly the context of his discussions. First, when he speaks about world history, we must realize there are only two main civilizations that have influenced a great deal of world history: Christianity and Islam. He noted that other religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism have influence too but remain insulated in their own region and did not have a mission that caused it to spread all over the world as Christianity and Islam did. He points out however that Islam has the idea of spreading throughout the world not just for political reason but for spreading the Truth, for Prophet Muhammad (may God bless and give him peace!) was sent to spread the Truth and to correct the errors of the past.

He stresses that in order to understand a lot of problems we face today, we have to know something about how the ideas of today emerged—which is derived primarily from the experience and consciousness of Western man. For example, today Muslims are confused about the meaning of man. The usage of the term *Homo* referring to the ancient skeletons of the past indicates this. This idea already implies that as far as the West is concerned, the idea of evolution is implied in history from the very beginning, which we can find in the mythology of the Western nations.

The ancient Greeks (represented by the likes of Plato, Aristotle and others) on the otherhand did not think in terms of evolution. They did not conceive their ideas aligned with the state of nature [theory] or transition to human (*Homo sapiens*). This was something the later philosophers and thinkers of the West have developed.

Prof Al-Attas then proceeded to explain what happened in the history of the West stating that from the time of the Greeks, there was a lacuna—nothing seemed to be happening in the West. The Romans emphasized a lot on law, order and administration, whereas the earlier Greeks talked a lot about the soul, education and ethics. This was later adopted by the Romans themselves, but because of their empire, they dealt with more statemanly matters. From that time until the rise of Christianity, nothing very much seemed to be happening except the spread of Christianity. They were occupied with the problems on answering how to define their religion, how to understand the nature of God, of Jesus. They called this period of time as the dark ages because there were no discussions on the soul, on man, etc. They emphasized more on

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<sup>1</sup> To read further on his exposition, see Chapter IV from his *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition on the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*, ISTAC, 1995.

explaining the trinity. Then they established the Council of Nicaea, which is about 350 years after Jesus, where they had to discuss these things and come to a consensus, as there were so many interpretations. This was how Catholicism gradually came to existence.<sup>2</sup>

Hence explains Prof. Al-Attas, there were no great changes happening in the West at that time. It was only in the 7<sup>th</sup> century when the Roman Empire was overcome by the Germanic peoples who came down into their empire and destroyed them. However, the Germans themselves did not have a high culture—they did not bring anything superior to what the Romans had. Thus they themselves converted to the Roman way of life. They brought about their national tradition—the Celtic, Nordic peoples—from their mythology, and so we can see that they have a more or less similar worldview—as in how they understood the world around them.

It was only after the rise of Islam that they became acquainted again with the Greek philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and the others. Because of that, gradually they begin to include into Christianity these ideas from the philosophers i.e. about the soul, education, and governments.

Prof. Al-Attas reiterates what he said two weeks ago that the Bible, Gospels and even the Jewish interpretation of sacred scriptures, did not mention much about the soul and about spiritual matters. There is nothing very much there about the nature of man, discussions about the soul, etc, whereas the Quran talks about this and everything about our life here. The Jewish scriptures did mention something about the creation in the Book of Genesis (which is part of the Bible), but it did not explain many things about God, about the soul, about how creation comes into existence; and who is He. The Quran, on the otherhand, clarifies about matters on the universe, science, knowledge, soul, justice, virtues, ethics, governments, etc.

## II

There was a time when the Muslims were discussing about these matters and the discovery of Greek works was mainly through the Muslims. Some of the Muslims were very much impressed by the intelligence of the Greeks in terms of how they interpreted things, how they employed their minds and intellects to the understanding of this world, life and nature. Citing al-Kindī (d. circa 873), Prof Al-Attas maintains that the early Muslim philosophers acknowledged the Greeks while at the same time recognized there are errors in their views.<sup>3</sup> Prof. Al-Attas holds that the Greeks (i.e. philosophers) must have been influenced by the followers of the Prophet Musa, who some of them lived in Athens, those of the Bani Israel. How then can Aristotle, who was a pagan, yet talked about One God and tried to interpret the nature of that Oneness? This is because these ideas were already floating about in the air due to the followers of Prophet Musa who lived in Athens. However, when these philosophers talked about the One God, they couldn't practice their lives in accordance to this conception, as they were not properly guided by revelation. Thus their idea of ethics is only related to

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<sup>2</sup> There were 500 interpretations of what they call the Gospel. Thus they had to determine a consensus on what they considered to be the real interpretation or what lead to be the orthodox or catholic one.

<sup>3</sup> According to Al-Attas, this statement was from Al-Kindi's letter to the Abbasid Caliph, al-Ma'mūn (d. 833), which is not published and not known very much. I have not been able to locate this text myself.

politics and government i.e. how to behave as citizens, how to behave in a society, etc.

The Revelation comes to the ancient civilisation in the Middle East: Prof. Al-Attas reminded the audience that when he said last year that civilizations seemed to have begun in the Middle East, in Egypt—what they call “Mesopotamia”, where the ancient excavations reveal the way of life of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Assyrians and the Sumerians. As far as the study of archaeology is concerned, the most ancient are these. Other civilizations such as the Chinese, Persian, and others came later. In addition, the Prophets as far as we know—as reported in the Qur’an, Bible—they all seemed to be coming from that region. And since civilisation began in that part of the world, Al-Attas arrived to the conclusion that it is religion that causes the rise of civilisation. He argues further that we cannot relegate religion into the background, as if discovery of agriculture is the cause of civilisation as opposed to religion. Furthermore, the Quran did mention about God created certain animal so that we can domesticate, about the creation of Sun and Moon for our use; the seas, the ships that float on the seas; God speaks to the children of Adam that these are for their use and control with justice.

But gradually, with the introduction of Greek Thought through Islam through Western/Christian world—this has caused great changes. Their great Imam—St. Thomas Aquinas (d.1274) introduced Aristotle into Christianity (hence Aristotelean Christianity): he talked about ethics, the soul, nature of God, etc. following mainly Aristotle.<sup>4</sup>

### III

Then, Prof Al-Attas reminded the audience that in the medieval era, the Muslims defeated the Romans, which was a very vast empire, and went on to conquer North Africa, Spain, Europe, Russia as well as the Malay world—all in the span of 150 years after the rise of Islam. Islam spread very fast which was a big shock for the West. The rise of Islam had challenged their hegemony and sovereignty over the world.<sup>5</sup> The Muslims also tried to correct their intellectual findings and their religion.

These challenges are something very traumatic that has happened to Western man and his consciousness. The idea of Europe was also not something ancient. It has been perceived as if Europe have been all the time existing. At the time of first crusade, the Pope encouraged this crusade; and so Europe emerged. There was no idea of Europe. This came later. It was because of Islam, which made them gradually unite. Many of their leaders tried to create a Europe: there was Napoleon who tried to conquer; Hitler tried to do the same—to try to create a Europa. But looked at how they created the name Europe—they took it from some ancient Goddess—giving us the impression that it existed since ancient times. Even in Arabic, the idea of ‘urubba’ is something new.

In their history, in their case, they talked about the Classical Period in which they mean the Greeks and the Romans. Then there was the Dark Period and then Medieval, and the Modern. Some are now talking about post-modern. Between the Medieval and Modern, they had the Renaissance and Enlightenment. Renaissance in Latin means to be born again—it means in their experience and consciousness, they are now new, they

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<sup>4</sup> See for example his *Summa Theologica*.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the rise and spread of Islam and its influence on the West and world history, see his *Islam and Secularism*, ISTAC (1993)

are born again, they are trying to rediscover the classical. Then the enlightenment—comes the idea, the philosophers of the West—this is where the idea of man today originated. This is not the case with earlier Western scholars like Plato, Aristotle when they discuss on the soul. Later especially in the time of German philosopher Immanuel Kant (d. 1804) started to imply that man is not soul. Because of that, this psychology, which is what the Greeks call “the science of the soul” should be changed to anthropology. Gradually the conception changed and the soul part was suppressed.

After the Enlightenment, the Western scholars began to study man as a man of flesh and blood, as an animal. When they define man as rational, they interpret rational as the mind—how he can understand nature, how he can associate similars, associate and connect the meanings—they try to interpret this idea of rational as use of the mind or reason—for the purpose of understanding, discovering, association of similars by analogy—gradually 200 hundred years earlier, psychologist like William James and Sigmund Freud began to talk about psychoanalysis: the soul is no longer something spiritual—it has something to do with the physical which they call consciousness. Thus for Freud, psychology is the study of the action that has come out of men—how men act, how he understands. And gradually, the discipline of psychology has become secularized. A group of philosophers such represented by the likes of August Comte—long before Darwin, have already been talking about *something like* evolution—it is their experience and consciousness. They are the ones who experience enlightenment and renaissance. It is not what the Muslims and Islam experience. In other words, what Darwin is saying—although he brought a lot of scientific details, this idea of evolution was with them from before minus the scientific interpretations of Darwin.

#### IV

Today, the Western man’s experience have impinged and surreptitiously infused into our experience. As a result, the Muslims today are confused. In Aristotle’s conception of man being a rational animal for example, Prof. Al-Attas clarified that what Aristotle meant by “animal” or “anima” is not in the sense of *binating* (Malay word for an animal. Rather, it means animal as a soul, as far as the Greek is concerned. With regards to the word “rational” in Western history, it gradually suffered what Prof Al-Attas calls “the loss of original integrity”. It gradually refers only to the neuro-biological mind. But if one refers to the early Muslim thinkers, sufis, theologians (mutakallimūn), jurists (fuqaha’), their definition is: *al-insān hayawān al-Nāṭiq*—meaning man is a living being that speaks.

According to Prof. Al-Attas, the representatives of Muslim thought have defined rationality based on a certain idea of a power in man that was given originally by God given to man—the power to communicate, to formulate words in meaningful pattern, to make symbols, and make sounds, which is innate in the power of language. Based on the Quran, the definition of man is the fact that he has language, in contrary to animals. Rationality is the intellect becoming audible by sounds, be seen by symbols. It is this language (the very concept of language: power to formulate meaning) that makes man *different* from animals. This is originally given when the souls were made to witness into themselves who God is, citing the Primordial Covenant verse: “*alastu birabbikum?* *Qālū balā shahidnā*” (*al-A`rāf*, 172). The fact the soul can answer—that is a gift of God. It shows that they understood the meaning and they can answer.

Prof. Al-Attas warned that we are faced with a very great problem today—it is not right for us to relegate religion. Some of the early Malaysian leaders said that peace is the highest value. However, the professor argues that Truth is higher than peace—in fact it is one of Allah’s name. One can’t have peace, if there is no Truth. One can’t compromise the truth in order to achieve peace. What will happen here will depend on the wisdom of the Muslims. And so he appealed to the wisdom of the intellectuals, those in important positions as well as the mass media to ensure that our language is spoken properly and not be corrupted. The key terms related to the must not be curtailed and made vague or restricted in meaning. To make sure that this matter is not compromised, we therefore must understand these issues. And this entails understanding the religion and the Qur’an properly.

This is why Prof. Al-Attas has been emphasizing on education throughout his career—the correct kind of education.<sup>6</sup> In 1966 to begin with, Prof. Al-Attas suggested that ethics should be taught in our education system. But it was not done because the leaders then did not understand what ethics means—it is not just a list of words i.e. trustworthy, etc—one has to explain these things. Even in the list, they put justice last—not realizing that it should come first, for it is one of the names of Allah SWT.

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<sup>6</sup> To read more about his philosophy of education, see his monograph, *The Concept of Education in Islam* (ISTAC). See also Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud’s *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas*, ISTAC (1998)