

## Summary of the CASIS Saturday Night Lecture by Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas on 6<sup>th</sup> April 2013

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It was that rainy evening. I was reminded of the Qur'anic verse, “*wa al-samā' dhāt al-raj'ī*”, one of the verses mentioned by Professor al-Attas in many of his writings, especially in *Islām: the Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality*.<sup>1</sup> The returning rain becomes a metaphor which refers to Islām.<sup>2</sup> Just as “the returning rain”, Islām is a *rahmah* from Allāh that will give life to man. The night was peaceful. Shortly after the rain, the air became fresh. What a good condition for learning!

This 4<sup>th</sup> CASIS Saturday Night Lecture was a bit different than the previous ones. A short video about CASIS was presented. The philosophy of CASIS, the profiles of the lecturers and excerpts of previous events brought some basic understandings about CASIS as a centre that seeks to promote post-graduate scholarship and learning for the advancement of knowledge in the fields of study relating to Islam, Science, and Civilisation and their allied sciences under the ambit of the worldview of Islam and to train young scholars for the future intellectual and civilisational challenges, home and the world at large.

The audience in Dewan Utama seem to hold their breath when the Professor came in. After a short welcoming and introduction from Professor Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, I opened my note book and tried not to miss anything that night.

Professor al-Attas began his talk by mentioning again about the worldview of Islām. He said the term *worldview*, though it was originated from the German in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, according to Islām, is the view of reality, not just the *dunya*, but also ultimately of the *akhirah*. This view should be in the Muslim minds, not necessarily possessed by Muslims in general, but especially for the learned. It is the learned who must understand the worldview of Islām. He said that the learned must be certain about it, as if the worldview exist in front of them. The understanding of the learned concerning the worldview of Islam will then also be clear for Muslims in general.

The understanding about worldview of Islam is not an easy grasp. One of the things that should be included in the worldview of Islam is of the concept of *tawḥīd*. The Professor said that *tawḥīd* means unity of God's Essence, Attributes, and Action. This unity is not created by the human mind. From the understanding of *tawḥīd*, the notion of a *transcendent unity of religions* can be rejected properly.

The critique was continued by saying that it is not sufficient to recognize God only as *Rabb* (the One that rules), we must also recognize Him at the level of *Ilāh* (the One True and Real God that is worshipped) of revealed religion, the level that usually confuses people, including the transcendentalist. For example, disobedience began at the level of transcendence when Iblīs defies Him. This clearly rejects the claim of the transcendentalists of the idea that there will be peace at the level of transcendence by just recognizing *Rabb* and not *Ilāh*. At the level of *ālam al-arwah*, the souls already recognizes God, and also between themselves. It means that one soul is not the product of others souls.

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<sup>1</sup> S. M. Naquib al-Attas. *Islām: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality*. Kuala Lumpur, IBFIM, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Then from the understanding that many people are confused concerning names, especially God's Names, Professor al-Attas gave a definite statement that Allāh has a name. This name was the same that was given to Prophet Musa which is different from the one stated in the New Testament. He said that every name has a reality. It is not something which goes by convention. A name is symbolic in nature and hence explains the fact that we knew the difference between one thing and another; if a wood is called a stone, it doesn't change the fact that the wood is still a wood.

A religion also has its own specific name and all religion are not the same. Professor al-Attas cautious us against using what say about Ibn 'Arabi's poetry to claim that all religion are the same, and the analogy of the sun and the star as basis for their arguments on religious pluralism. Plurality of religions does not means that all religion are the same. The fact that the word *adyan* exists in Arabic, according to Ibn Manẓur, it is something peculiar and very strange indeed. Even the understanding of the verse "*lakum dīnukum waliyadīn*" only means in a metaphorical way concerning other religions.

Our understanding of God is very important, whose attributes are derived. *Wahy* or Revelation is not something that the poets or apostolic writers. It refers to secret communication about God, His creature, and finally about man's ultimate destiny. Revelation is a secret communication between God and His Prophet. From this, Professor al-Attas emphasized the importance of names and words. He said that we should be careful in using the word "Revelation". It must be used in a proper way.

With that explanation, Professor al-Attas opens the discussion on the emergence of Islamic languages. Indeed, that worldview is projected by keywords which will open the door to the bigger picture of what it is all about.

Professor al-Attas raised this topic because there are some confusion regarding equality of man and the human soul. He said that the human soul has different abilities. It is said that God burden with which we can bear. But, our *nafs al-ammarah* sometimes burdened us with something that we cannot bear. It is very important to measure our ability and the responsibility being offered to us, so we do not commit injustice to ourselves and unto others. In order to do justice, we must possess knowledge. There are three types of knowledge: First, *ma'rifah* as the knowledge of things in itself; Second, *'ilm* as the knowledge of things in relation with others; and third, *hikmah* as the knowledge of the proper places of things.

The discussion on justice is related to the concept of *amanah*. This *amanah* or trust must be given to its *ahl*, i.e. the rightful people. The *just* action of giving trust to the rightful people is a proof that we are created with the inclination to justice. From this inclination, society and state came into being. Then Professor al-Attas discussed some verses that talked about amanah and injustice in the Qur'ān, especially concerning the *ulul 'amr*, the people of command and that injustice came about due to ignorance compounded with arrogance, and obstinacy; not wanting to be corrected. If it is just simple ignorance, learning and instruction can cure it.

The Professor explained more on language. He said that we must have *adab* to words. *Adab* according to him is universal in nature. It comes from the Prophets and was handed down from generation to generation, from family to family. The *adab* in language, according to him, must be abided in relation with the basic vocabulary from the Qur'ān. These basic vocabularies are in all the Muslim languages spread all over the world not just haphazardly, but purposely. It is this spread of basic vocabularies that defines Islamic Languages. The act of redefining things to correspond with Islam is an act of *Islamization*. Indeed, the word *to Islamize* is the right word for this process, not *to Islamicize*.

The Professor introduced the importance of knowing, understanding and possessing the *fundamental vocabularies* of Islam in projecting a worldview. One of the fundamental is *Wahy* (Revelation). It cannot be defined by *hadd*, but by *rasm*. It is directly given like the case of Prophet Musa *'alayhisalam*. At other instances it was revealed from behind the veil, and other times with the sending of the Messenger (Jibril) to the Prophets.

*Wahy* is something that is very powerful. It is so powerful that the person that received a *wahy* must first undergo great difficulties in the process of transformation, like our Prophets. It is analogously understood by the analogy of forging steel. The Professor continued saying that the 'Ulama' who are the inheritors of the Prophets will also experience difficulties in their lives. They will inherit the knowledge from the Prophets and also the problems of the Prophets.

Professor al-Attas said that though the West has many positive things, we must at the same time realize what we have. Our *īmān* is not only with the will to believe, but also with knowledge and reason. He said that we must know what we have. Then, The Professor clarifies the meaning of *īmān*. In terms of language, the meaning of *īmān* is not simply to have faith. *īmān* implies that action should follow. There are firmness and intelligence in it.

The challenges of today are not just from the past. One of the challenges is the corruption of knowledge. It is the condition of mixing of conceptions which resulted from the overlapping between worldviews. In this condition, it is important to have *'ilmu al-bayān*. It is the knowledge of discernment concerning true and false even in there are two things that get so similar so that they are mistaken to be one. That, in modern terms, is what being *critical* is all about. The night ended with another overwhelming experience of bliss.