

Summary of the CASIS Saturday Night Lecture by Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas on 9th March 2013

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Two weeks ago marked the first session of Tan Sri Prof Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's Saturday Night Lecture Second Series for 2013. The first series of the Saturday Night Lecture conducted in 2012 over a period of six months have by CASIS has piqued the interests of participants from all walks of life to think deeply about the importance of language, of education, of truly and sincerely knowing your own self, of understanding the concept of happiness, the meaning of religion, of knowing the distinction between values and virtues and many more. Therefore, CASIS felt obliged to resume the fortnightly discourse so that a wider range of audience may attend, learn and benefit from Professor al-Attas's knowledge, experience and wisdom, besides continuing to support the inculcation of the knowledge culture amongst the Malaysian community.

The first lecture was a full house with participants coming from various backgrounds and institutions overflowing the corridors of Dewan Jumaah at UTM International Campus, Kuala Lumpur. Tan Sri Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas started his first lecture by touching on the concept of Justice ('adl). The concept of justice is embedded into religion since one of the purpose of religion is to discover things in their proper places. The act of placing a thing in its place is what we call doing justice to the thing itself. He expressed his concern that Muslims today have not been paying much attention in looking into the reality of justice in Islam. Instead, the ethical reality that we live in today are made up of two distinctive concept of justice, political justice and natural justice. Both are products of years of endless theorizing and speculation by the West.

Political justice views the State as the standing authority that determines what is right and what is wrong and created a justification for itself by producing the notion of a 'social contract.' It believes that justice arises concurrently with the birth of the State. If political justice indicates that there is no justice prior to to the existence of the State, proponents of natural justice says otherwise. Natural justice is a concept that conceives nature as something eternal, self-subsisting and upon which every other thing depends. They have elevated nature to the same level as God.

The conception of justice that results from the juxtaposition of these two extremes is nowhere near in meaning to the concept of justice in Islam. Justice in Islam is a discipline of acting upon something in accordance with its own rights. Justice should not be confused with 'equality'. For how can the act of equalizing be an act of justice when one brings down something of higher worth or value or place to be at the same level as something of lesser worth? "The main problem arises when people ceased to recognize the proper places of things and these people cannot claim to know all the right places," says al-Attas, "but at least we have to know our own place; that is enough that we can know. After that, knowledge of others will be made clear."

Note: Extra seats will be provided outside the hall tomorrow evening, where a live video feed of the proceedings will be projected onto the screen for the benefit of those unable to secure a seat inside the hall.