

## **Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' Critical Thinking Towards The Structure Of Western Scientific Epistemology**

**Tohedi**

Universitas dr. Soebandi Jember, Indonesia

Correspondence Email: [tauhediasad@gmail.com](mailto:tauhediasad@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** The dominance of secular Western epistemology and its uncritical adoption by some Muslim scholars have created a dichotomy of knowledge that challenges the integration of Islamic metaphysical values into contemporary educational and intellectual discourse. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is part of the group of critical Islamic thinkers and proposed the discourse of the Islamization of knowledge, which was first carried out at a conference in Mecca in 1977. The emergence of the Islamization of knowledge was a response to the disappointment of some Islamic thinkers towards Western dominance, which tended to be secularistic-materialistic, causing Muslims to experience both internal and external pressures in terms of thought as well as arrogant attitudes. Then they initiated and held a collective meeting to discuss the Islamization of knowledge, attended by the Muslim world in Mecca. This Islamization of knowledge also provided space to bring together religious sciences and natural sciences, or to reconcile religion with knowledge based on religion. Thus, it was an intellectual response to the negative impact of Western modern science, which was increasingly apparent and felt by the people of the world as a consequence of the crisis in the capabilities of modern science. Thus, this writing uses the discourse analysis method with a descriptive-critical approach. However, in addition to that, the author also reveals Naquib al-Attas's way of thinking in discussing the domination of Western epistemology over Islam, namely the historical fusion of secular Western thought from the Greek, Modern, and contemporary eras, which is not in accordance with Islamic epistemology.

**Keyword:** *Islamization of Knowledge, Epistemology of Western Science*

### **Introduction**

The proposal for the Islamization of knowledge was initiated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas at the First World Conference on Muslim Education held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, from March 31 to April 8, 1977 (Baharuddin, 2020). The idea of the concept of Islamization of knowledge has been widely discussed by some contemporary Islamic thinkers, especially among Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Muslims, and even in European countries. The discourse on the Islamization of knowledge emerged because, so far, the concept of education has been dominated by Western thought since the rise of secular

European society, which gave birth to a dichotomy of knowledge, namely religious knowledge and general knowledge.

The rise of modern Western thought began with critiques of ideas that emerged to separate from the teachings of religion and philosophy, enabling Western thought to systematically formulate rationalism (Abdullah, 2006). In its development, Western thought tends more towards an objective empirical-positivistic understanding, and then many Muslim thinkers adopted it, even using Western methodologies in Islamic thought without critique. As a result, some Islamic thinkers, particularly those who promote the discourse of the Islamization of knowledge, also critique both secular Western thought and even some of the Muslim intellectuals themselves.

According to Syed Husein Nasr, the discourse of the Islamization of knowledge is an effort to translate modern knowledge into a language that can be understood by the Muslim communities where they live. In other words, the Islamization of knowledge is more an endeavor to reconcile the ways of thinking and acting (epistemology and axiology) of Western and Muslim societies. Meanwhile, according to Naquib al-Attas, the Islamization of knowledge is an effort to liberate knowledge from secular meanings, ideologies, and principles, thereby forming new knowledge that aligns with the nature of Islam (Sholihah, Afifuddin, Salik, & others, 2026). Unlike Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, Islamization of knowledge is the process of Islamizing modern disciplines within the Islamic perspective, after conducting a critical study of both Islamic and Western knowledge systems. This understanding is clearer than the previous one, in addition to providing operational steps for the implementation of the Islamization of knowledge program (Soleh, 2004).

Epistemological issues arise because the Islamization of knowledge is Islamized with a theological perspective that is theocentric in nature, and even the concept of the Islamization of knowledge will be incorporated into the overall idea of Islamic thought (Nizar, 2005). With the above issues, there is a need for a conceptual discourse on the Islamization of knowledge, particularly regarding the metaphysical discourse used in knowledge that impacts Islamic education. The discourse on the Islamization of knowledge by al-Attas can be seen from an epistemological aspect to reveal what is explicit in philosophical thought, especially the concept of Islamic thought. Naquib al-Attas has two views: the concept of the idea of

Islamizing knowledge and the concept of developing Islamic educational thought, so that the concepts of both are integrated into a unity that cannot be separated. Naquib al-Attas's idea of Islamizing knowledge into Islamic education is an integral conception based on the understanding of Islamic metaphysics.

On that basis, what needs to be considered is the possibility of a theoretical idea about ideology hidden in Naquib al-Attas's thought philosophically through the concept of Islamization of knowledge. This concern is quite reasonable considering there are several expressions in his book that reflect rational thinking. There are expressions that are epistemological and axiological in nature that should appear in his thought. Expressions with an epistemological tone, for example, are found in the discourse on the Islamization of Knowledge: the use of the terms *tarbiyah*, *ta'lim*, and *ta'dib*, as proper terms for translating Islamic education is the concept of *ta'dib*, because the essence of Islamic education is the formation of character, virtuous morals. Meanwhile, those with an axiological tone are the unity of ideas of metaphysical values in the Islamic world and systemic views of reality, whether concerning God, the universe, humans, or knowledge, which must be based on the perspective of *tawhid*.

## **Method**

This research uses a qualitative approach with the type of library research(Andan, Christina Bagenda, hasnawati, & Fauzana Annova, 2022; Mann, 2015). This method was chosen because the object of study of the research is the thoughts of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas regarding his critique of the epistemological structure of Western knowledge. Research data were obtained from various library sources consisting of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include Al-Attas's works discussing Islamic epistemology, Islamic worldview, secularism, and the Islamization of knowledge, while secondary sources consist of books, journal articles, proceedings, theses, and dissertations relevant to the research theme.

Data collection was carried out through documentation techniques by identifying, classifying, and reviewing various literature related to the research focus(Aspers & Corte, 2019; Nurfajriani, Ilhami, Mahendra, Afgani, & Sirodj, 2024). This method and approach are used to facilitate the analysis of texts that are the main character of literature research.

Therefore, this study does not focus on field data collection, but rather on the exploration and in-depth study of Al-Attas's ideas as contained in his works.

Data analysis using the descriptive-critical method, which involves systematically describing Al-Attas's ideas regarding the characteristics and weaknesses of Western epistemology, and then critically analyzing them to understand the arguments, relevance, and contributions to the development of Islamic epistemology. In addition, this study also utilizes critical discourse analysis to examine the concepts, language, and thought constructions employed by Al-Attas in building his critique of the Western scientific tradition.

## **Result and Discussion**

### **A. Historical Traces and Intellectuality**

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas was born in Bogor, West Java on September 5, 1931. Naquib al-Attas moved to Malaysia due to the condition of the Indonesian nation experiencing a transitional period under colonialism by the Dutch. If viewed from his lineage, he comes from blue blood, meaning nobility, originating from the al-Attas family both on his father's and mother's side. His father, Syed Ali bin Abdullah al-Attas, was still considered nobility, originating from the Johor aristocracy, and even held the title Sayyed, in Islamic tradition, a direct descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), while on his mother's side, Syarifah Raguan al-Idrus was originally from the indigenous Bogor, a descendant of Sundanese nobility.

Looking at the lineage of Naquib al-Attas above, it can be assumed that al-Attas greatly influenced the way of thinking and acting in his life, so that Naquib al-Attas' intellectualism became popular both in Indonesia and Malaysia. It is this internal family influence of Naquib al-Attas that subsequently shaped the basic character within him, which serves as the instillation of fundamental traits for the continuation of his life later. Meanwhile, his parents, being very religious, provided a strong foundational Islamic education (Nizar, 2005). Even Naquib al-Attas was very enthusiastic about understanding religious rituals deeply and thoroughly.

Later, at the age of 5, Naquib al-Attas was taken by his parents to migrate to Malaysia to enroll in primary education at Ngee Heng Primary School until the age of 10. However, during his time in Malaysia, Naquib al-Attas's development was not favorable

when Japan took control of Malaysia, and eventually Naquib al-Attas and his family returned to Indonesia. Here, Naquib al-Attas continued his education at the Arwah al-Wusta Islamic boarding school, deeply studying Arabic and Islamic Religion in Sukabumi for 5 years. In this place, Naquib al-Attas also began to learn and understand a strong Islamic tradition, namely the tarekat. This can be understood because at that time in Sukabumi, the Naqsyabandiyah tarekat association had developed(Nizar, 2005).

In his development, Naquib al-Attas felt compelled by his spirit to apply the knowledge he had acquired in Sukabumi when he returned to Malaysia to register as a soldier for the Malaysian government in an effort to drive out the Japanese occupiers. In the military field, Naquib al-Attas had demonstrated his class and was among the participants of higher military education, allowing him to study at various military schools in England. In fact, Naquib al-Attas even had the experience of attending one of the more prestigious military academies in England from 1957 to 1959, which made him more interested in military academics, and he left the military service with the final rank of Lieutenant(Soleh, 2004).

His academic career after leaving the military service was entering the University of Malaysia, Singapore, 1957-1959. Then he continued at McGill University, Canada for Islamic Studies until obtaining a master's degree in 1963. Subsequently, he pursued a doctoral program at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, which is considered by many as a center of Orientalists. It was here that he delved into theology and metaphysics and wrote a dissertation entitled The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri. Eventually, Naquib al-Attas became a lecturer at his alma mater, University of Malay, Singapore, which was not long, then was appointed as Dean of the Faculty of Malay Literature in the same institution. On January 24, 1972, he was inaugurated as a Professor of Malay language and literature(Baharuddin, 2020).

Naquib Al-Attas also came to Indonesia in mid-January 1987 and was involved in an open debate with Nurcholis Madjid, which raised issues of secularization, God and gods, re-actualization of Islamic teachings, the concept of an Islamic state, Islamic educational sciences, and others. The ideas presented at that time were later renewed during his second visit in October 1988. The following year, in February 1989, Naquib al-

Attas returned to Jakarta to speak about science at an Asia-Pacific conference(Soleh, 2004). Meanwhile, his most important works are Naquib al-Attas's Islam the Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality, Kuala Lumpur, ABIM, 1976; Islam and Secularism, Kuala Lumpur, ABIM, 1978; and The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework to an Islamic Philosophy of Education, Kuala Lumpur, ABIM, 1980(Soleh, 2004).

The concept of the Islamization of knowledge proposed by Islamic thinkers aligns with each one's respective discipline and expertise. The figures who provide an understanding of the Islamization of knowledge itself, according to the terms used by Syed Hussein Nasr, state that the Islamization of knowledge, including the Islamization of culture, is an effort to translate modern knowledge into a language that can be understood by Muslim communities wherever they live(Soleh, 2004). It means that the Islamization of knowledge seeks to dialogue and bring together both thinking epistemologically and acting axiologically towards Islamic society with the West.

The emergence of the term Islamization of knowledge is a response to the disappointment of some Islamic thinkers towards Western domination, which tends to be secularistic-materialistic, causing Muslims to experience internal and external pressures both in terms of thought and attitude that are arrogant. Subsequently, they proposed and held collective meetings to discuss the Islamization of knowledge attended by the Muslim world in Mecca. This Islamization of knowledge also provides a space to reconcile religious sciences and natural sciences or to harmonize religion with knowledge based on God's verses(Toshihiko Izutsu, 1978).

According to Naquib al-Attas, the Islamization of knowledge is the liberation of knowledge from secular meanings, ideology, and principles, thereby forming new knowledge that aligns with Islamic nature(Naquib al-Attas, 1978). Unlike Nasr, who views the Islamization of knowledge as concerning ontological and epistemological changes, related to changes in the way of seeing the world which form the basis for the emergence of knowledge and the methodologies used, so that they align with Islamic concepts. Meanwhile, according to al-Faruqi, the Islamization of knowledge is about making the disciplines of knowledge Islamic, or more precisely, producing textbooks for



universities by reinterpreting modern knowledge disciplines within an Islamic perspective(Raji al-Faruqi, 1984).

It turns out that the idea of Islamizing science was well received by Muslim intellectuals around the world. Therefore, in 1977, an international meeting was also held in Switzerland to further discuss and elaborate on the concept of Islamizing science. The conference was attended by 30 participants who sought to address the crisis of the Muslim community by tracing the occurrence of Western dominance and finding ways to overcome it. The solution reached by common consensus was to propose the appropriate methodology and approach to build an Islamic system of scientific thought based on the basic concepts of Islam.

#### **B. Critique of Epistemological Structures: Western Domination Over Islam**

Naquib al-Attas' critical thinking on current issues, that for Western scholars and Muslim scientists working within the Western science system, means essentially developing the values and inner tensions of Western culture and civilization. Such a vessel of scholarship and knowledge will not truly be able to meet the needs of Muslim society, nor will it be able to address the root causes of social problems in the Muslim world. Al-Faruqi stated that the ailments of the ummah can only be treated with a dose of epistemology. The task facing the ummah in solving educational problems is that the revival of the ummah cannot be expected if the education system is not changed and its errors are not corrected(Sardar, 1998).

The effort of the Islamic thought model developed by Naquib al-Attas stems from concern over the secular Western thought that dominates Islamic thought, causing Islamic thought to experience stagnation and decline, especially concerning issues of philosophy and Islamic science (knowledge). That worldview serves as a basis for formulation into the form of Islamization of knowledge, which is the concept of the secularism of science, metaphysics, and Islamic epistemology. In his work on Islam and the philosophy of science, Naquib al-Attas states:

Philosophical and secular rationalism and empiricism tend to deny authority and intuition as legitimate sources and methods of knowledge. Rationalism and empiricism do not deny the existence of authority and intuition, but reduce

authority and intuition to reason and sensory experience. It is true that initially, in terms of authority and intuition, reasoning and experience always come from someone who reasons and experiences, but this does not mean that authority and intuition can be reduced merely to reason and sensory experience (Naquib al-Attas, 1995).

In the above quotation, Naquib al-Attas experiences anxiety towards Western philosophical thought, which is highly dominant in rationalism and empiricism, tending to deny authority and intuition, and ultimately will lead to a reduction to narrow reason and senses. Although initially rationalism and empiricism philosophically justify truth scientifically, such understanding will lead to skepticism or doubt. Naquib al-Attas traces the methodology of the development of modern science philosophy that rejects the truth of God's revelation, namely with the assumption that everything arises from something else (Naquib al-Attas, 1995).

With that philosophical foundation, the main method used by Western philosophy. According to Naquib al-Attas, there are three model methods. First, philosophical rationalism, which tends to rely on reason without the aid of experience or sensory perception. Second, secular rationalism, which temporarily accepts reason, but tends to rely more on sensory experience and denies authority and intuition, as well as rejects revelation and religion as sources of true knowledge. Third, philosophical empiricism or logical empiricism, which bases all knowledge on observable facts, logical structures, and language analysis (Naquib al-Attas, 1995). It is this method model that is used by secular Western thinkers to reduce the understanding of transcendental realities that differ from the sciences in Islam.

Naquib Al-Attas views the concept of the method model in the ideas of Western philosophical thought related to the philosophy of science and secularism as having implications for Islamic thought, namely being contrary to Islamic epistemology. Therefore, the approach used by Naquib al-Attas is to position the concept of Islamic metaphysics through the Islamization of knowledge in order not to get trapped in the constraints of Western thought from the emergence of early philosophy to modern philosophy. Based on this concept, Naquib al-Attas began to develop theories of interpreting knowledge according to its original sources, namely the Qur'an and Sunnah.



According to Naquib al-Attas, the Quran as a holy book, states that Islam has been revealed completely and perfectly for mankind, and the statement of this completeness and perfection has been proven since the beginning of its history. The name Islam is given to the religion, just as the name Muslim is given to indicate the followers of this religion from the very beginning(Naquib al-Attas, 1978). Unlike Western society, it does not fall into the category of revealed religions in the narrow sense, for example Islam. The majority of Western societies consist of a manufactured cultural religion that can be characterized by its recognition in possessing a revealed scripture.

The tradition of Islamic thought always refers to its original source, namely the revelation sent down to Prophet Muhammad, including his thoughts, words, and actions. Even his companions and contemporaries acted and behaved under Divine inspiration, so that it could be used as a standard and criterion for future generations. Naquib al-Attas rejects the relativization of non-Islamic values, meaning values that are contrary to Islam and parts of the truth found in other world religions and human and societal traditions. However, Islamic and Western societies rely on knowledge itself in achieving truth in an objective-scientific manner, which has implications for the development of secular science, ultimately leading to an understanding of secularization(Tafsir, 1995).

In line with what Naquib al-Attas said, the greatest challenge quietly faced by Muslims in this era is the challenge of knowledge, not in the form of ignorance, but the knowledge that is understood and spread throughout the world by Western civilization(Naquib al-Attas, 1978). According to al-Faruqi, the Islamic education system has been framed into a Western caricature, so it is viewed as the core of the malaise or suffering experienced by the community(Naquib al-Attas, 1978). The dominance of modern Western science over Muslims today will endanger them, not only because its application is dangerous but also because its epistemology is fundamentally at odds with Islamic views(Hoodbhoy, 1996).

The efforts of readers and discourse recipients are not only applicable to Muslims or Western societies, but they are required to undertake integration efforts with two principles. The first principle is that qualified Muslim researchers must design social studies from an Islamic perspective and highlight the relationship of Islam with the issues

discussed by these social sciences. The second principle is that Islamic studies as a discipline must be integrated with social issues to solve the problems of the secularization of education(Bagader, 1991). The process of Islamization of that knowledge was carried out by Muslim researchers in various ways. Some of the main ways to understand the Islamization process, according to Abubaker A. Bagader, are as follows:

*First*, there are researchers who understand the process of Islamization by relying on the philosophy of science. Muslim researchers start from a certain philosophical perspective in their study of all phenomena. Second, some researchers emphasize morality and attachment to certain values or traditions in the study of social phenomena and base it on established evaluations. Third, other researchers feel that its significance lies in the way social issues and problems are treated. Fourth, yet other researchers argue that the process of Islamization means that the fundamental concern of these Muslim social researchers is to study social reality without considering the sociological schools or methodologies they follow, and to compare it with the ideal and normative Islamic social image as demonstrated in the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his companions(Bagader, 1991).

The reason for the above concept, in general, is widely discussed in studies of modernity, especially from Western circles that disregard spirituality-metaphysics and tend toward secularism, thus considering knowledge to be authentic. Naquib al-Attas states that the Islamization of knowledge means the liberation of knowledge from interpretations based on secular ideology, and from the meanings and expressions of secular humans(Naquib al-Attas, 1978). Many understandings of knowledge that have been secularized can be shifted and replaced with understandings that refer to Islamic messages, as long as the project of Islamizing knowledge is truly pursued seriously and maximally(Qomar, 2005).

Thus, Islam and the West are understood antagonistically, differing in both revealed teachings, ideology, and the epistemology used by each. This understanding, for Muslims, should enable them to avoid secular thinking that separates them from metaphysics-spirituality, so that morality continues to exist to escape the traps of modernity(Rosenfeldt, 2024). Moreover, Muslims are able to compete in the field of Islamic knowledge, especially in science based on Islamic teachings. Contemporary

knowledge that needs to be developed should not only synthesize what is called religious science with secular science, physical and metaphysical, but must place aspirations and intuition at the core of knowledge.

The spirit of spirituality developed by Naquib al-Attas greatly influences the categorization or mapping of knowledge for readers to understand the factuality of both Islamic and Western societies, as well as to engage with discourses on different patterns of thought from an epistemological perspective (Ismatulloh & Roqib, 2025). According to Naquib al-Attas, in Muslim society, the epistemology of knowledge is truly based on the concept of God's revelation, as a means of metaphysical knowledge, making its truth absolute. In contrast, in Western society, truth and reality are not formulated based on revealed knowledge or religious belief, but on cultural traditions reinforced by philosophical-rational foundations (Naquib al-Attas, 1978).

Then Naquib al-Attas criticized Western ideas about knowledge and rational sciences, intellectual and philosophical sciences due to, first, their concept of dualism which includes a view about reality on one hand, and truth on the other. Second, their dualism regarding soul and body, the separation between intellect and reason, as well as their emphasis on the validity of reason, and the methodological division concerning rationalism and empiricism. Third, their doctrine regarding humanism as a secular ideology. Fourth, their concept of tragedy, especially in literature. Nevertheless, when describing the Islamic concept of knowledge, Naquib al-Attas followed the views that had been developed by classical Islamic scholars such as Ibn Sina, al-Kindi, al-Farabi, and al-Ghazali (Naquib al-Attas, 1985).

The modern Western epistemological method, which is seen by Naquib al-Attas as a secular perspective, therefore requires further development to correct Western knowledge based on empirical experience. In line with the strategy of Islamization of knowledge, Naquib al-Attas does not simply discard the core assumptions of Western epistemology. Naquib al-Attas appears to use this approach as a stepping stone to correct modern disciplines and purify Islamic sciences that have been immersed in secular ideologies. This is the model of reading and accepting discourse for Muslim intellectuals

to re-understand Western secular thought, particularly the development of modern science.

With the philosophical foundation above, Naquib al-Attas views the methods used by Western secular thinkers, then the main methods developed are not separate from three types of methods, namely first philosophical nationalism which tends toward or sensory perception. Second, secular rationalism which tends to rely more on sensory experience and denies authority and intuition, and rejects revelation with religion as a source of true knowledge. Third, philosophical empiricism or logical empiricism which bases all knowledge on observable facts, the structure of language analysis logic. Naquib al-Attas positions himself as a fundamental Islamic renewal who rejects Western secular thought, and requires conducting a critique of science or knowledge that affects Muslim intellectuals.

## Conclusion

The concept of Islamization of knowledge proposed by Naquib al-Attas emerged as a response to the dominance of secular Western thought, which separates knowledge from religious and moral values. Al-Attas argues that Western epistemology, which is largely based on rationalism and empiricism, has contributed to the dichotomy of knowledge and the marginalization of divine revelation as a legitimate source of truth. According to him, this perspective has generated skepticism, weakened spiritual awareness, and encouraged a value-free understanding of science. Therefore, Al-Attas advocates the Islamization of knowledge as an effort to reintegrate Islamic metaphysical principles into scientific and educational discourse. This process aims to purify knowledge from secular elements and reconstruct it based on the worldview of tawhid, thereby creating a harmonious relationship between reason, revelation, and human values.

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