

# Summary of the CASIS Saturday Night Lecture by Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas on 24<sup>th</sup> Nov 2012

## Introduction to Virtue

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### On Knowledge (*'ilm*)

The forging of a steel weapon or of a keris as an allegory for the proper education of man:

*"Supposing you are going to make a keris or some weapon made of steel. What do you do? You put it in the fire, you have to take it out, you have to beat it, turn it, beat it again, put it back into the forge and many times before finally it becomes sharp. So sometimes what I'm saying also is like that. I have to repeat again, and again and again... even for years. But then, by the time it is understood, it will become like that keris. Then it becomes a weapon. Then it becomes sharp. Then it becomes ready to face enemies."<sup>1</sup>*

One gets from this the understanding that knowledge is power, not in the narrow secular-utilitarian-techno-scientific sense, but in the sense of ultimately guiding man to attain certainty and true happiness in this world and the next. That the world of created things (i.e. the cosmos) is made for the benefit of man; it follows therefore that:

- (i) the natural world is not hostile to man, his survival and well-being; or that the life of man in this world involves him in relentless battles with the untamed and wild 'forces of nature' that ultimately ends in tragedy;
- (ii) the natural world has been made to 'submit' (*tashkir*<sup>2</sup>) so that man may discharge his duties and fulfill his destiny as intended by Allah S.W.T.; that it is not created for sport or in vain;
- (iii) the calamities and disasters that occur in the natural world should not be attributed to it being hostile or to be the result of chance occurrences or an "accidental collocations of atoms"<sup>3</sup>, but is ultimately the result of man's ignorance and arrogance in mistreating and misusing in a reckless fashion the natural world that has been placed in his care.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to record my sincere gratitude to my friend, Syafiq Burhanuddin for kindly permitting me to use this quotation that first appeared on his Facebook profile.

<sup>2</sup> For a succinct and highly creative exposition of this concept, refer to Adi Setia, "Tashkir, Fine-Tuning, Intelligent Design and the Scientific Appreciation of Nature", *Islam and Science*, Vol. 2 (Summer 2004) No. 1, pages 7-31.

<sup>3</sup> A phrase often attributed to the British mathematician and philosopher, Bertrand Russell, who wrote in his essay *A Free Man's Worship*:

*"That Man is the product of causes which had not prevision of the end they were achieving; are but the outcome of accidental collocation of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labours of the age, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins - all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand."*

## The Meaning of *Secular*

Two meanings of the word secular:

1. The first refers to being concerned with the affairs of this world, a sense of 'this-worldliness' which is not necessarily in opposition to religion, for Islam enjoins its followers to care for and benefit from the prosperity abundant in this world i.e. not to shun the world for it is not the world per se that is profane and tragic, but the *life* in the world.
2. The second refers to secularization as a philosophical program, the main features of which include the necessity of leaving worldviews open-ended, the affirmation of change as the true nature of reality, the absolute dualism between the objectivity and subjectivity as epistemological tools, the reduction of religion merely as one of the many cultural values that guide human affairs.

## Ethics

Ethics in Islam is based on revealed religion, whereas ethics in the Western civilization is based on rational speculation. It follows therefore that ethics in the West is purely speculative in nature and is not followed up by a practical requirements that confirms and actualizes the truth and validity of those ethical principles. In Islam, *akhlaq* is the practical manifestation or 'acting-out' of its ethical principles; a way or a path that has been prescribed by religion in order for a person to be good and virtuous.

In addition, the speculative nature of ethics in the West gave rise to further questions (or complications) such as: Whether values in Western ethics are descriptive (noun) or prescriptive (verb)? Whether these values are inherent in the object being evaluated or these values are given by an external evaluator? Whether these values are then objective - independent of time, place and person - or subjective?

## Knowledge vs Information

The distinction between knowledge (*ilm*) and information or objects of knowledge (*ma'lumat*): the former is that which inheres spiritually in man, whether the latter is something attributed to external things or objects. An object of knowledge, if interpreted correctly and properly, yields knowledge; if incorrect and improperly interpreted, then it is productive of error.

The Islamization of contemporary knowledge aims at producing a good man (a man with *adab*), not 'Islamic' objects for it operates upon the minds of Muslims and not something to be done to things and objects in the physical world.

## The Concept of Virtue

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The essay can be read in full at: <http://www.philosophicalsociety.com/archives/a%20free%20man's%20worship.htm>, last accessed November 25, 2012.

Virtue<sup>4</sup> is correctly translated as *fadhilah* in Islam and it refers to an excellence of mind (which is correctly translated as '*zihin*' in Malay<sup>5</sup> and is one aspect of the '*aqil*') and of possessing discernment, which means not only knowing what a particular thing or action is in itself, but what it implies, its consequences and ensuing ramifications. Virtue is not merely speculative, but is a quality that must be put into practice and that is ultimately based on religion.

Four core virtues<sup>6</sup> (collectively known as the 'mother of virtues'):

- i. Wisdom – consists of both practical (*hikmah al-amaliyyah*) and theoretical (*hikmal al-nazariyyah*) aspects<sup>7</sup> and both must play their respective roles in conformity with each other; the theoretical wisdom pertains to cognition and knowledge and must be continually trained so that it can 'guide' the practical wisdom.
- ii. Courage – the Malay word 'berani' does not fully capture the virtue of courage as understood in Islam, for courage also includes patience, magnanimity and forbearance, and does not simply mean being brave in battle.
- iii. Temperance – means to behave in accordance with the recommendations of intelligence and religion; incorrectly translated into 'kesederhanaan' in Malay when the more correct translation is 'timbang-rasa' for it implies an act of determining the correct measure or balance of a particular deed using the intellect and based on religious precepts.
- iv. Justice – means to put things in their proper places and when it pertains to ethics, justice means submitting or subordinating animal soul to the dictates of the practical wisdom, which must function in conformity with the theoretical wisdom<sup>8</sup>.

### The difference between '*ilm* and *ma'rifah*

The distinction between '*ilm* and *ma'rifah*: the former is knowledge of a thing in relation to other things within a system, whereas the latter is knowledge of the thing, as it is known in itself. Definition involves paring an idea or a thing down to its very essence until it can no longer be pared i.e. down to the level of its smallest constituent part.

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<sup>4</sup> Aristotle defined virtue as "that which makes both a person and what he does good." Refer to Fr. William Saunders, "Prudence: Mother of All Virtues," *Catholic Education Resource Center*, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/religion/re0530.html>, last accessed on November 25, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Nowadays, the word mind is lazily translated into Malay as 'minda', thus giving the impression that the mind is something distinct and separate from the previous formulation and understanding of '*aqil*' in Islamic psychology. For a good exposition on the meaning and implication of the translation of this particular word as such, refer to Wan Ahmad Fayhsal, "Ungku Aziz, minda dan sekularisasi," *Rausyanfikir.com*, last accessed on November 25, 2012. <http://rausyanfikir.com/2011/06/ungku-aziz-agen-sekularisasi.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, translated by R.G. Bury (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1968), Vols. 10 & 11, Book I, page 631. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0166%3Abook%3D1%3Apage%3D631>, last accessed on November 25, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> For an exposition of the various aspects of the soul mentioned here, refer to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Nature of Man and The Psychology of the Human Soul* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1990), pages 24 and 40. Compare with the classification of knowledge by al-Ghazali as described in Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2006), page 204.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

## The Concept of Creation

Creation as understood in Islam is correctly translated as *khalq*, which emphasizes the role of God's knowledge in creating, ordering and maintaining the world of created things in a just and precise measure. On the other hand, creation as understood in the West emphasizes the role of God's power in the creation and maintenance of the cosmos.

Islam rejects the concept of creation ex nihilo for that presupposes that a thing that was brought into existence was previously beyond the ken of God's knowledge, whereas God's knowledge encompasses everything, including actualities and potentialities. A thing previously existing in the 'mind of God' is called forth into existence in the physical world when God says to it, 'Be!' and this 'summoning' is done with purpose and deliberation according to His Absolute Will i.e. Allah S.W.T. does not create because He is compelled by His Own Nature to create; rather, He creates because He wills it.

## The Concept of Freedom

Freedom (*ikhtiyar*) as understood in Islam is defined as the exercise of choice by a person for the better. This definition of freedom - which submits freedom to the criterion of good and bad - has several important implications: first, that ultimately a person is confronted with two kinds of choice: to opt for the better or the worse, the good or the bad, which gives lie to the supposition that a person is bombarded with countless choices throughout his waking life for all of these choices is ultimately reducible to whether it is for the good or for the bad, for the better or for the worse; second, this understanding of freedom presupposes that the person exercising choice possesses the sound knowledge (*ilm*) of good and bad, and is able to weigh and discriminate between the various options presented to him based on that knowledge; third, freedom conceived in this manner is profoundly linked to a person's capacity to act in accordance to the right choice and to one's accountability for that choice and subsequent action; in other words, with freedom comes responsibilities and most importantly, freedom is never absolute in the sense of freedom to follow one's desire and caprice to the detriment of oneself and other people, but represents a fulfillment of one's duties and obligations (*amanah*) to oneself, to others and to God<sup>9</sup>.

It is often argued that the alternatives must be made known and tried for there to be a true freedom of choice; hence the argument that one must have the freedom to sin in order for one's religious convictions or repentance to be truly meaningful. We disagree with such an argument because in our way of thinking, man has already been informed of the alternatives through Revelation. It follows therefore that man does not need to deliberately involve himself in sinful acts in order to better appreciate the depth and meaning of his religious convictions, just like one does not need to commit a murder in order to better appreciate the value of life. Ultimately, true freedom means being liberated from the control and caprice of the lower animal self.

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<sup>9</sup> Refer to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Nature of Man and The Psychology of the Human Soul* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1990), pages 2-4.