

## Summary of the CASIS Saturday Night Lecture by Prof. Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas on 9<sup>th</sup> June-22<sup>nd</sup> Dec 2012

Prepared by the graduate students of CASIS

June 9, 2012 was not an average Saturday night. After a decade-long hiatus, Tan Sri Professor Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas continues his life-long mission of spreading true knowledge to the masses at the Dewan Jumuah of the University Technology of Malaysia (UTM) that night. As part of UTM's Centre for Advanced Studies in Islam, Science and Technology (CASIS)'s intellectual contribution to the university, the Saturday Night Lecture Series feature discourses by Tan Sri Al-Attas every fortnight, with cross-generational audience in attendance. The Vice-Chancellor of UTM, Datuk Ir. Dr. Zaini Ujang and Datuk Dr. Mohd. Ghazali b. Mohd Nor from the Board of Trustees of Yayasan Iqra along with other notable academicians, students and members of the public are fortunate to be part of this ongoing discourse.

Tan Sri Al-Attas began his Saturday Night Lecture series probing the origin of civilizations. He stressed the fundamental role of religion in the establishment of civilization. Fittingly, the audience were transported back in time, at least in their intellectual imagination, to sample a kind of snapshots in history about the great flood of Gilgamesh which in all likelihood, is the same epic as that of the Prophet Nuh. Tan Sri Al-Attas boldly challenged contemporary scientists' assumptions about pre-modern man, lumping them all and referring to them as "homo" when in fact, they lacked key attributes of the thinking human - the homo sapiens. The human intellect gave rise to a systemic order - what we call "law" and consequentially forming "*madāni*" or cities that are run efficiently, the highlight of a civilization. This Arabic term originated from the word "*dīn*" meaning religion, signifying the important role that religion plays in a civilization.

In his second lecture, Professor al-Attas discussed the importance of language in the human life in relation to the religion of Islām. A definition of human as *ḥayawān nāṭiq* or speaking animal given by past scholars such as theologians, philosophers, and *sūfīs* (high metaphysicians) has indicated that language is dealing with a way of how to express as to the meaning of *nuṭq* itself. From this very root the word *manṭiq* (logic) is derived which means to make a systematic logical thinking. However, on the contrary, western scholars especially sociologists disagree to use the word speaking rather it is a political or social animal, concerning chiefly with external aspects. Therefore, sociologists have classified religion with the external aspects only namely culture and tradition which imitates the external aspects to make it looks like a religion. For Islām, since God Himself reveals to the Prophet through language, His *ayat(s)* and *kalimat(s)* are His words and signs as well. This means that this world is like a book which its *ayat* and *kalimat* are given by God. Hence, a language projects a worldview with its description to the external world. By and large, in this occasion Prof. al-Attas seems to have underlined that the crux of the religion of Islām rests on the revelation which takes the form of language. In other words, the reality of Islamic civilisation lies in its language by which it successfully transforms the worldview of its adherents, not in physical aspects. The Qur'ān has *Islamized* the Arabic language, when Islām came it changes the worldview of the language. For instance, the word *karama-kaīm*, in the *jāhiliyyah* period it was meant for honourable people with many sons, but when Islām came it applies to the quality of *taqwā*. Yet, through the very language, secularisation takes place in changing a meaning and putting it within the material perspectives.

Tan Sri Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas explained that the word Islam; referring to religion is new in al-Quran, and had never appeared before. *Dīn* (religion) conveys the meaning being indebted. Being in debt, one is in submission and is under obligation (*dayn*), hence naturally involves judgement (*daynūnah*) and conviction (*icdānah*). All of these significance as well as their contraries involved in *dāna* are practicable possibilities only in organized societies involved in commercial life in towns and cities denoted by *mudūn* or *madā'in* which in it exist a judge, ruler, or governor - *dayyān*. Thus the verb *dāna* pictures a civilized living; of societal life of law and order and justice and authority, conceptually connected with another verb *maddana* which means to build cities, to civilize, to refine, and to humanize, from which is derived from another term: *tamaddun* meaning a civilisation and refinement in social culture. Tan Sri al-Attas then explained that one pays his debt by returning to Allah s.w.t. One learns to pay debt (returning) by following the *sunnah* (words and actions that are the yardstick of the correct way of living as a believer and viceroy of Allah s.w.t) of the Prophet s.a.w. The best returning or surrender is those who surrender whole self to Allah s.w.t. Audiences were reminded that one should not generalize certain culture or religion based on the common people, instead it should be based on its scholars and religious people. The audiences were also enlightened by a beautiful verse of wisdom:

*“We are like earth. Without dīn, we are like dead earth without water”*

*- Y.M Tan Sri Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*

In the fourth lecture, Tan Sri Al-Attas then put the question of language into practice and begins with a discussion on the word Allah. He informs the audience that there are some who claim that this word was already used among the pagan (*jahili*) Arabs. If this claim can be verified then it is a fact which maybe misused by the confused or those with ill intentions. It maybe that they could use it to support their existing theory which claims that the term Allah went through a development, that the Prophet (*peace be upon him*) appropriated it for the new religion. Tan Sri asks whether if it has indeed been used by the *Jahili Arabs*, was it a term whose meaning the pagans understood? Quoting the Qur'an, it was said that had they been asked who created the heavens and the earth, they would say 'Allah'. However we can still ask, is it a word where the full semantic field is understood? Apparently not, for inspecting the Quran we find numerous verses suggesting the pagan Arabs held erroneous beliefs which were challenged and corrected by the Quran. At the same time, if it was granted that they knew the word, it is not something that they constructed, and to prove this, he cites the evidence of the existence of the past prophets, one of whom was Ismail the son of Ibrahim, the ancestor of the Bani Hashim. According to the Quran, the term Allah is a proper name that Allah had revealed to the prophets. Prof. Naquib further argued, quoting Hamzah Fansuri that it is the name encompassing all names and attributes. If Allah is a proper name which He (exalted be He) ascribes to Himself, then there is no question about the term being derived from the term 'Ilah' which is added to the definite article 'Al' suppressing the i sound as some of the grammarians had claimed.

This discussion serves as a preface to his exposition of other concepts pertaining to the meaning of the religion of Islam. In particular, he discussed the meaning of submission, which is of two kinds, that which is done willingly, and that which is done grudgingly. Further only the religion of Islam is named after its very act of submission, and this is the very meaning of

religion; Submission to God. Other religions are either named after their founders, or the valley which it first sprang. If truth regarding beliefs is affirmed, the logical consequence would be to say that some other beliefs are wrong, including other institutionalised religions. Tan Sri Al-Attas recounted how there is a rising number of people who wants to equate Islam with all religions, that these groups, quoting some sufi master say that all such beliefs are lights pointing to the one true reality. But He replies, although it maybe that all are lights, not all are equal, some are dim like the stars which illumine the night of ignorance, but when the sun rises, the stars disappears. Unlike the other religions which admit of errors in their belief, Islam does not admit of error in its central beliefs, and in contrast to other revealed religions only Islam does not tamper its understanding of Tauhid(divine unity) with Shirik(polytheism).

The 6<sup>th</sup> lecture deals with man as a form a state to be governed by his self. He said that *“Man is like a Kingdom i.e a state. He governs his soul, heart and his intellect acts as an agent. The senses are their departments. But if the soul is perverse, the government is corrupt”*. Same goes to the turmoils and chaos in life happens due to our perverseness towards our *‘selves’*. He relates these turmoils to the political chaos caused by the desacralization of politics from human affairs. But this doesn’t mean that we should create revolutions towards our corrupted government. In this regard *Syeikhul Islam* , Al-Ghazzali stated that it is better to live in inequality from the power of this tyrant than to take over power and then imitate his actions. This is because no one could guarantee that the new power will not do harm equally as the tyrant before. Socrates has even claimed that *‘it is better to live in justice than to do justice’*. Most of the problems that arose in human life caused by men’s unconsciousness towards his origins, where he comes from, where he is now and where he’s heading. In spite of this ,our Prophet Muhammad once said that we should treat this world as a nomad stopping over for a moment and then went on his way.

In the 7th lecture, he began by bringing our mind's attention all the way back to the day of the Covenant (*al-Mīthāq*) *“perjanjian yang dibuat oleh semua anak Adam”* that this is what life in this world is all about and this is the basis of religion, to return to that state before we appear in this world. *“Reality comes about because of difference”* he reminded us. That there are so many things in this world, it is because of them being *different* from one another, that forms reality. So we, being in this world of many things have to read and interpret their *meanings*. That is what knowledge is about, units of meaning organised in a pattern arriving from outside, at the same time the soul is active in trying to attain meaning, akin to the biological process of *intussusception*. This is the sense we understand knowledge as *“the arrival of meaning in the soul as well as the arrival of soul towards meaning”*. The word *ma`nā* also means reality. *“Ilmu is higher than ma`rifah .. because it is an attribute of Him”*, he continued further as one of Beautiful Names of God is *al-‘Alīm*, the All-Knowing. He elaborated further...but when He discloses something to someone, then in this sense ma`rifah is higher." In every branch of knowledge, there is ma`rifah also." The professor has already elaborated in the previous lecture, and he repeated again that *‘ilm* is knowing a thing in relation to other things, while ma`rifah is knowing a thing as it is in itself, and that the root word *‘urf* means limit. That is why the word *ta`rif* means *definition*, to fine tune it such that what we mean precisely includes those within the limits of what it is and excludes what it is not. But he explains also that when He discloses something to someone, then in this sense, ma`rifah is higher." *Al-‘ilm* and *ma`rifah* is *hikmah*". If we understand the classification of the attributes, *‘ilm* is the main attribute; *hikmah* is part of *‘ilm*. His Will is dependent on His Knowledge...", a point he deliberated further in the 10th lecture by basing himself on the second last verse from *Surah Yasin*, by pointing to the term *emphlahu*. He denounced the understanding of things as if God simply creates things haphazardly like some kind of magic show, *“kun, kun, kun* and things just appear. No!", he said. *“He created based on Knowledge! If you try to attain what is unattainable, there will be no end.”*, Do we have to go to the depths of the sea to sail to

another land?". Towards the end of the lecture, he brings us back to the *mithaq* now calling our attention to another covenant, the one made by prophets and messengers, *mithaq al-Nabiy*. The prophets themselves, as stated in the Qur'an made a covenant to affirm the prophets that has come before them and to pledge allegiance to the final prophet and messenger who will appear towards the end times, our beloved prophet and messenger of God, Nabi Muhammad

Tan Sri Al-Attas started his 8<sup>th</sup> lecture introducing us then to the last question that we ultimately need to ask ourselves; "*What is happiness?*". With that he gave a commentary of his monograph *The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islām*. Happiness according to him is not defined as *tadribah*, instead the more accurate term referencing to it would be *sa'ādah*. *Tadribah* is something that we could calculate and you cannot add scale to happiness. The reality of happiness (*Haqiqah al-sa'adah*) relates to two dimensions of existence, and that is the hereafter (*ukhrawiyyah*) and the present world (*dunyawīyyah*). The contrary to *sa'adah* is *syaqawah* which means great misfortune and misery in general (*genus*). The two dimensional existence is elaborated further, where he reads a passage from his book

*" With respect to the hereafter sa'ādah refers to ultimate happiness, which is everlasting felicity and bliss , the highest being the Vision of God , promised to those who in worldly life have lived in willing submission and conscious and knowing obedience of God's commands and prohibitions"*

Submission and conscious here is what he means by *islam* as a verb with the small 'i'. The requirement of having a certain level of consciousness when submitting to God is what we mean by having *niyyah* (intention) before performing any sorts of action. Analogous to that, submission to God must also be done willingly. For even *Iblis* submits to God and acknowledges Him, but unwillingly. However, Islam with capital 'I' constitutes the whole reality of submission. Islam is not an ideal, it is reality. It is not something we hope to be, it is what we are. Religion is what we must discover now, know now and practice now. The ultimate aim of religion is for man to return to their state when we were making our covenant to God. To return, we have to know who we are and whatever we seek must be relevance to our current state. He further clarifies the significant difference between *Iman* and *Islam*. *Iman* is verification in accordance to what is known to be the truth (*tahqiq*) and that you have to be true to the truth and confident in it. A person who has *Iman* must have *Islam*, but a person who has *Islam* does not mean he has *Iman*. By recognizing and acknowledging the truth, a person will come to reach *Iman*. The act of recognizing is clear in itself by the intuitive faculty, the heart (*qalb*) and in it is guidance. The intuitive faculty is one of the faculty of the self which is divided into four, namely *qalb* (receiving intuitive knowledge), *'aql* (intellect) , *ruh* (spirit) and *nafs* (soul) . These are not names of different objects, instead they're considered as attributes of the soul due to its accidental modes of states (they are all the time acted upon). The *self* is indeed the reality of man when he says 'I'. It is important to be conscious of our-*self* and knowing our-*self* despite everything that is changing in us. Allah is always creating and annihilating. Objects, especially the molecules in us are always anew and similar at the same time. He continues "*There must be a coordinating principle that makes you, you*". The possibility of our intuitive faculty to recognize truth is only when in it there is guidance. This guidance is only available through God. Without guidance, it is impossible for one to acquire true knowledge. Because *true knowledge* is knowledge that knows its limits. This limitation is not limiting by definition in the Western sense. Infinitesimal is not something that is in the worldview of Islam. We are created with limited ability to use our senses so we can see things as they are. If say we were given the ability to see as far as the eagle could see, and can hear as sharp as the cats ear, how will we be able to discern the actual thing as it is? If our touch has infinite capacity to touch a single atom, wouldn't touching a table be no more than touching sand? We have two groups of sense, one is

internal (soul) and another is external (body). Our internal senses comprises of common sense, perceptions, imaginations and estimation. Whereas the external ones are the five senses, namely our eyes, hands, nose, ears and mouth. By using all senses, both internal and external, than only we can see things as it is. This is how knowledge is perceived, both in an objective and subjective way. The objective way to see things will describe reality as it is. At the same time, when the soul participates what is outside itself, it is called subjective knowledge. Both objective and subjective are interconnected like this, hence not a dualism.

Tan Sri al-Attas, in his 9<sup>th</sup> lecture, continues with the commentary of his monograph and he begins with a comment on the Western meaning of happiness in their usage of the word 'happy' which comes from 'hap' meaning 'chance' or 'fortune'. In contrast to that, the word 'hapless' is an adjective that means 'helpless'. On the other hand, Islam carries with it its own meaning of happiness that is *sa'ādah*. The opposite of it is *shaqāwah* (great misfortune and misery) and this is similar to the Sanskrit word *samsara*, which Malay has adopted as *sengsara*. *Shaqāwah* can also be understood as Sanskrit *sarbadukka* and Malay *serba duka*. Pagans in the ancient world and also pre-Christian Europe have vague idea about the hereafter. On the other hand, happiness in Islam has something to do with the Hereafter (*Ākhirah*). Only the revealed religion talks about the hereafter, its punishment and reward. Secularized religions no longer dwell the concept of the Hereafter because their focus now is only this world. For example, in Judaism, the Jewish people not only say 'Amen' for their prayers but also "Next year in Jerusalem". Therefore, happiness in Islam also concerns the Hereafter. It refers to the soul's experience and this is related to knowledge because it is food for the soul; deprived of this food the soul becomes lifeless (*ghariban*). Man is composed of both spiritual and animal constituents. Man's animal aspect performs the functions of growth, nutritive, movement and perception so wealth and security are external influences on both the body and the soul. We utilize these influences in order to come to certain state called being 'happy'. Yet, happiness is not just the state of mind or bodily pleasure-true happiness does not change once it is attained. If *imān* is absent then we cannot grasp the meaning of happiness because it is ever changing. Therefore, in the religion of Islam, part of happiness is the Muslim being aware that he is here for certain purpose and not for chaos, nor to produce order from chaos. Furthermore, God is not the one who is causing chaos. On the matter of returning the self to God, the verse in the Qur'ān "*Inna Allah ishtara min al-Mu'minīn anfusahum*" refers to barter trade; that is the exchange of the self with something better. There is no such thing as *imān* without *islām*; a person who has not submitted cannot know if he possesses *imān*. Rather, because *imān* cannot be seen it can only be seen through a person's actions.

The climax of the series was when in the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> lecture, Tan Sri Al-Attas alluded the fact that nowadays, values has taken over virtues. Both are not the same as value is speculative and we put its worth. On the other hand, virtue is a certain quality that was given by God and that you must put to practice. Virtue consists of ethics and *akhaq*. 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? Virtue is correctly translated as *fadhilah*

in Islam and it refers to an excellence of mind (which is correctly translated as '*zihin*' in Malay and is one aspect of the '*aqal*') 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 (collectively known as the 'mother of virtues'): (1)Wisdom (to know where to put things at its right places) consists of both practical (*hikmah al-amaliyyah*) and theoretical (*hikmah al-nazariyyah*) aspects 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; (2)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. ;(3)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; (4) 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

He then adds on the concept of freedom. Freedom (*ikhhtiyar*) 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. 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.

He closed all the 12 sessions with a deep and clear meaning of what it means for us to be free a man, our capability of using language, having practice religion with *adab* to ultimately achieve a state of happiness. The lecture series was highly practical as oppose to mere theoretical as it deals with our understanding of the very nature of man and our purpose of existence. All this encompasses of a worldview that one should have in order to achieve certainty. Ending this article with an analogy Tans Sri Al-Attas recited regarding the seeker of knowledge :

*"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."*

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