

**A Review Of Islam and Secularism, authored by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas.
Published by International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1993,
197 pp.**

By

Reviewer: Abdulkadir Salaudeen
Institution: Federal University Gashua
Department: Political Science
Email: salahuddeenabdulkadir@fugashua.edu.ng
Mobile No: +234 8138391624

Islam and Secularism is a classic book written by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, published in 1993, and aptly dedicated to the Muslim youth. Al-Attas is a renowned Professor of Islamic Thought and Civilization. Reading this book gives readers a relishing aura and gets their minds and eyes glued to its pages. The book, though just 197 pages, is worth an encyclopedia of Islamic thought. Titled “Islam and Secularism,” it is qualified to be called a book of philosophy, knowledge, epistemology, science, history, comparative religion, theology, politics, *adab* (ethics), morality, and what have you. The author’s ability to combine and compress the aforementioned themes in few pages, and so comprehensively, attests to his shrewdness and cerebral quality.

Every page of the book gives knowledge that quenches the thirst of any objective mind who yearns to know, to learn, and to understand. The book is divided into five (5) chapters in a chronological order. The First Chapter discusses “The Contemporary Western Christian Background”, followed by “Secular-Secularization-Secularism” in Chapter Two. He turns to “Islam: The Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality” in Chapter Three which logically leads to his discussion of “The Muslim Dilemma” in Chapter Four. He concludes the book with what qualifies it as a book of knowledge and general epistemology—this is Chapter Five which he presents under the rubric “The Dewesternization of Knowledge.”

To begin with Chapter One, the author traces Western origin of contemporary Christianity and the inability of the Christian theologians to resist secularization. Faced with the crisis of secularization, it was argued that Christianity is evolving, and as such, it needs to adjust to the vicissitudes of time. What they say amounts to saying that God revealed Himself to man when the latter was in

his infantile stage of revolution. The “infantile” man then interpreted the revelation in doctrinal forms while expressing his faith in them. Then now that man is matured after evolving from primitive to the modern stages, he finds the doctrinal conceptions of the “infantile” as no longer adequate for him to express his faith in them. He, therefore, in an attempt to modernize and secularize, gets himself entangled in the process of secularization which neutralized what is left in him of Christianity. It is against this reality that Friedrich Nietzsche, in his sociopathic conception of God, declared that God is dead. This is now mingled with the dirge that ‘Christianity is dead’.

The author in Chapter Two explains that Christianity was not known at the beginning; so is the name ‘Christian’. This is even clearer considering the fact that Christianity neither has a revealed law (Shari’ah) nor does it have teachings, sayings, or model actions (*Sunnah*) of Jesus (PBUH). For lack of Shari’ah and *Sunnah*, Christianity was consumed by the hurricane of secularization. This, explains Al-Attas, is not merely confined to the Western world; it is experienced also in the Islamic world. The difference however is that it has not the potential to affect the Muslims’ faith the way it affected the Christians. Though, admittedly, it has caused much confusion among the Muslims, and sadly, some Muslim scholars whose thinking and judgment have been influenced and over awed by the West scientific and technological achievements.

And because Islam is a religion which transcends the influences of human ‘evolution’ and historicity, the use of tradition in the Islamic context does not refer to the kind of tradition that originated in man’s creative activity which evolves in history and consists of culture. Tradition in Islam is originated by revelation and instruction from God; not created and passed on by man in history. Corollary to this is the deconsecration of all values in Islam. Islam does not consecrate any value except itself. In other words, the gauge for rightness or wrongness of values is Islam.

Likewise, there is no theocracy (the like of Papal Authority) in Islam. This is what the author refers to as desacralization of politics. Sacralization of politics or governance began and ended with the Prophet (PBUH). Thus, the *Ummah* (Islamic community) denies to anyone or any government sacral legitimacy unless the person or government follows the injunctions of the Sacred Law revealed by God and conforms to the practice of the Holy Prophet.

While the author agrees that the Qur’an disenchant nature from the very beginning, it is not in a way comparable to secularization which completely detached man from nature. Disenchantment

means to free self from false belief. Secularization deprived man's respect for nature to the extent that he treats nature which he once held in awe with a ruthless sort of vindictiveness. It destroys the harmony between man and nature. The terrestrialization of man, his materialization, and humanization have caused him to deify himself without real authority or wisdom to play the role of a creator and that makes him unjust to nature.

There is a need for caution, therefore, to think that secularization has its roots in the Qur'an. No! Islam disenchantment from nature is only in the sense of banishing the animalistic and magical superstitions and beliefs in false gods from nature where they do not actually belong. Islam invites man to hold nature in awe as manifestation of the signs of Allah; not as object of worship or object for utter disregard. The evils of secularization are, in the author's words, summed up thus:

“Not only is secularization as a whole the expression of an utterly un-Islamic worldview, it is also set against Islam, and Islam totally rejects the explicit as well as implicit manifestation and ultimate significance of secularization; and Muslims must therefore vigorously repulse it wherever it is found among them and in their minds, for it is a deadly poison to true faith” (Pg. 41).

To avoid these evils of secularization, there is need for the Islamization of knowledge. In Chapter Three where the author discusses religion, morality, and ethics, he emphasize that when knowledge is sincerely sought for the sake of Allah and from the perspective of Islam, it produces good man. This is contrary to seeking knowledge from the Western secularist perspective which makes man good citizen at best but not necessarily good man. This is one of the objectives of knowledge in Islam. It occupies central position in Islam such that in the Qur'an alone, there are more than eight hundred references to knowledge. Even for knowledge to be useful, man has to do justice to it; that is, to know its limit of usefulness and not to exceed or fall short of it.

In his emphasis on the primacy and immutability of the Qur'anic text, Al-Attas beautifully describes the Qur'an as unchanged, unchanging, and unchangeable (Pg. 89). This is because the Qur'an is written in Arabic Language that is not governed by the vicissitude of social changes. In his explanation of the “Muslim Dilemma” in Chapter Four, the author gives a useful definition of knowledge which according to him is to know the cause of the existence of a thing, for knowledge

of the cause leads to knowledge of the nature of the thing caused. Thus, knowledge of the cause(s) of the dilemma in which we find ourselves today is itself a partial solution to the problem (Pg. 97).

We must accept the universality of Islam as a religion of all times and ages. Virtually all religions in the world lack universality. Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Judaism are all nationalistic; not universalistic. Christianity which almost has a universal spread has been declared dead by the dead of god—at least, in the Western world. The universality of Islam enables it to play a dominant role in shaping world history.

The author also bemoans how the success of socialism in the West in recent times blindly encouraged some Muslim modernists to identify socialism with Islam—as a political theory or social order—in what they term as “socialization” of Islam (Pg. 120). Thus, these “modernists” erroneously blame *tasawwuf* (Islamic mysticism) in particular as the cause of the degeneration of Muslims and alien to Islam. He avers that these “modernists” are blind to the fact that *tasawwuf* is an integral part of Islam; an inner dimension to it. Its sincere and correct practice is none other than the intensification of the Shariah upon oneself (Pg. 121).

“Leveling” which the author emphasizes as a dilemma was vehemently condemned. This is a situation whereby everyone is considered equal as if to say the virtuous are on the same pedestal with the masses. This leads to loss of *adab* (ethics and respect), authority, and the position of scholars. It also means loss of the capacity and ability to recognize and acknowledge true leaders (especially the leadership of the Prophet [SAW]). To underline the importance of *adab*, it was defined as the ability “to discipline the mind and soul, it is acquisition of the good qualities and attributes of mind and soul; it is to perform the correct as against the erroneous action, of right as against wrong, it is the preserving from disgrace (Pg. 149-150).

Reader will observe that the author’s high regards for *adab*—and its relation to knowledge—explains his umbrage and chastisement of Prof Ismail, R. al-Faruqi on the issue he raised in the preface to the second printing of this book under review. He claimed some of his ideas were appropriated by al-Faruqi without acknowledgment; an act he regarded as breach of trust (Pg. xii).

The importance of knowledge in Islam cannot be over emphasized. Hence, it is divided into two: spiritual and temporal. When the latter is over emphasized, it leads to corruption and destruction.

Knowledge implies justice and vice versa. Happiness is knowledge that leads to justice because justice implies knowledge. This also means knowledge is prior to justice.

There is also one important concept that should not be left out in this review: the concept of “social contract”. It is correctly explained that in Islam, the contract is actually individual contract which every individual had with his Creator at the point of creation. This is to say, we owe allegiance to Allah to follow His injunctions.

Islam and Secularism is undoubtedly an exceptional book, one of its major drawbacks is non-referencing of some important ahadith and quotes. Instances abound in the book, but allusion to one or two should suffice. On page 69, we read an interesting hadith that says: “Die before you die.” Not only is the reference missing, the author was also silenced about the authenticity of the hadith which leaves curious readers in limbo. On page 140, a beautiful quote “Indeed, man is called *insan* because, having covenanted with Him, he forgot (*nasiya*)”, was attributed to ibn Abbas without a verifiable reference.

On the last note, the problem of knowledge is the recurrent theme in this book. The Muslims dilemma is actually how to go about dewesternization of knowledge and bring about its Islamization along with its *adab* (ethics) and its limits. In conclusion, it is interesting to know that university, as it is called today, was actually derived from the Arabic word *Kulliyah*. This is the name university is called in the Arab world (that is, in Islam). It is a concept conveying the idea of universality of knowledge which reflects what is known as university today.