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In Memoriam of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (1931–2026)

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The passing of Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib bin Syed Ali bin Syed Abdullah bin Syed Muhsin Al-Attas, popularly known as Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (5 September 1931 – 8 March 2026) marks the departure of one of the most influential Muslim intellectuals of the contemporary era. For more than six decades, al-Attas played a pivotal role in shaping modern discussions on Islamic philosophy, education, civilizational studies, and the epistemological foundations of knowledge in Islam. His writings, intellectual vision, and institutional initiatives significantly influenced scholarly discourse not only in Southeast Asia but also across the broader Muslim world. Through his profound intellectual contributions, al-Attas articulated a coherent framework for understanding Islamic knowledge, culture, and civilization in the context of modernity.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas was born on 5 September 1931 in Bogor, Indonesia, into a distinguished family whose lineage combined Arab scholarly heritage with Malay aristocratic tradition. Growing up within a culturally refined environment, he was exposed from an early age to Islamic scholarship, Malay literary traditions, and classical intellectual culture. These early influences played a crucial role in shaping his intellectual character and later scholarly pursuits. The intellectual atmosphere of his upbringing cultivated in him a deep appreciation for language, literature, and the philosophical heritage of Islam.

His formal education began at the age of five in Johor, Malaya (now Malaysia). During the Japanese occupation of the Malay Peninsula, however, he continued his schooling in Java, where he studied at Madrasah al-'Urwatu'l-Wuthqa, receiving instruction in Arabic and Islamic subjects. This early exposure to Arabic language and Islamic learning provided him with a strong foundation in classical Islamic intellectual traditions and nurtured a familiarity with the textual and linguistic dimensions of Islamic scholarship.

Following the end of the Second World War, al-Attas returned to Johor in 1946 to complete his secondary education. During these formative years, he was exposed to a wide intellectual environment that included Malay literature, history, religious studies, and Western classical works in English. This cultivated social and intellectual atmosphere nurtured in him a refined aesthetic sensibility and a deep appreciation for language and literature. These qualities later became evident in the distinctive style and conceptual precision of his writings, particularly in the Malay language, which are widely recognized for their clarity, elegance, and intellectual depth. His prose reflected not merely literary refinement but also philosophical discipline, revealing a scholar deeply conscious of the relationship between language and meaning.

After completing his secondary education in 1951, al-Attas joined the Malay Regiment (Rejimen Askar Melayu) as Cadet Officer No. 6675. His military training instilled in him a strong sense

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of discipline, leadership, and intellectual independence. During this period, he was selected for further training in the United Kingdom, first at Eaton Hall, Chester, and later at the prestigious Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst (1952–1955). Although he initially pursued a military career, his intellectual inclinations ultimately led him to dedicate his life to academic scholarship and intellectual inquiry.

His transition into academia was marked by his pursuit of higher education in Islamic studies and philosophy. Al-Attas was awarded the Canada Council Fellowship, which enabled him to undertake advanced studies at the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University in Montreal. At McGill, he studied under prominent scholars of Islamic studies and philosophy. In 1962, he completed his Master of Arts degree with distinction in Islamic philosophy, with a thesis entitled *Raniri and the Wujudiyah of Seventeenth-Century Aceh*. This pioneering work reflected his early interest in the intellectual history of the Malay world and its engagement with Islamic metaphysical thought.

Following his studies at McGill University, al-Attas continued his academic training at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. During this period, he worked with distinguished scholars such as Professor A. J. Arberry of Cambridge University and Dr. Martin Lings, both of whom were internationally recognized authorities in Islamic studies and Sufism. His doctoral research, completed in 1962, consisted of a two-volume scholarly study on the mysticism of Hamzah Fansuri, one of the most significant figures in the intellectual history of the Malay Islamic tradition. This work later became one of the foundational studies on Malay Islamic intellectual history and contributed significantly to understanding the role of Sufism in shaping the intellectual and spiritual landscape of the Malay world.

After completing his postgraduate studies, al-Attas returned to Malaysia and began his academic career at the University of Malaya. In 1965, he was appointed Head of the Division of Literature in the Department of Malay Studies, marking the beginning of his influential role in the development of humanities scholarship in Malaysia. His leadership abilities soon became evident, and between 1968 and 1970 he served as Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of Malaya, where he contributed significantly to strengthening academic programs in literature, culture, and intellectual history.

Al-Attas later became closely associated with the establishment and development of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). As one of its founding intellectual figures, he played an important role in shaping the university's early academic direction. At UKM, he served as Head of the Department of Malay Language and Literature and later as Dean of the Faculty of Arts. One of his most notable achievements during this period was the establishment of the Institute of Malay Language, Literature and Culture (IBKKM) in 1973, which later became known as the Institute of the Malay World and Civilization (ATMA). The institute was dedicated to the study and preservation of Malay intellectual and cultural heritage and remains a major center for research on Malay civilization. It is also noteworthy that the first logo of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia used between 1970 and 1972 was designed by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, reflecting his aesthetic sensibilities and symbolic understanding of cultural identity.

Perhaps the most significant institutional contribution of al-Attas was the establishment of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC). As the founding director of ISTAC, he envisioned the institute as a premier center for advanced scholarship in Islamic civilization, philosophy, and intellectual history. Under his leadership, ISTAC achieved international recognition for its rigorous academic environment and interdisciplinary approach to the study of Islamic thought.

The intellectual atmosphere of ISTAC reflected al-Attas's broader philosophical vision. The institute was designed not merely as a university faculty but as an intellectual environment that embodied the ideals of scholarly excellence, intellectual discipline, and aesthetic refinement. Its extensive library collection of more than 140,000 volumes made ISTAC one of the most important repositories of Islamic scholarship in the region. Scholars from across the Muslim world and beyond

were drawn to ISTAC, making it one of the most influential centers for Islamic studies during the late twentieth century.

In recognition of his continuing scholarly influence, al-Attas was appointed Distinguished Visiting Professor at the Centre for Advanced Studies on Islam, Science and Civilisation (CASIS), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), in 2012. This appointment reflected the enduring relevance of his intellectual contributions and his continued influence on contemporary Islamic scholarship. He was also the second Malaysian to be awarded the title of Royal Professor (Profesor Diraja) in 2024 after the late Ungku Abdul Aziz, an honor that recognized his exceptional scholarly achievements and contributions to intellectual life in Malaysia.

Beyond his academic and institutional achievements, al-Attas maintained a deep commitment to family life. He was married to Latifah Abdullah, and together they were blessed with four children: Sharifah Faizah Al-Attas, Datuk Dr. Syed Ali Tawfik Al-Attas, Sharifah Shifa Al-Attas, and Syed Haidar Al-Attas. Throughout his life, he balanced his scholarly responsibilities with a dedication to nurturing intellectual and cultural values within his family.

One of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's most influential intellectual critiques concerns the concept of secularism and its impact on modern knowledge and civilization. In his seminal work *Islam and Secularism* (1978), al-Attas argued that secularism is not merely a political arrangement separating religion from the state but rather a comprehensive worldview that gradually removes religion from the intellectual and moral foundations of society. According to him, secularization represents "the liberation of man first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language" (al-Attas 1978).

Al-Attas emphasized that secularism emerged from specific historical developments in Western Europe, particularly the conflict between ecclesiastical authority and the rise of modern scientific rationalism. However, when secular ideas are adopted uncritically by Muslim societies, they create conceptual confusion in understanding the relationship between knowledge, religion, and culture. In this regard, he warned that secularism leads to the desacralization of knowledge, ultimately fragmenting intellectual life and weakening ethical responsibility.

Closely related to this critique is al-Attas's formulation of the concept of the Islamization of knowledge, one of his most influential contributions to contemporary Islamic thought. In *Islam and Secularism*, he defined Islamization as "the liberation of knowledge from secular interpretations and from meanings and expressions of the secular" (al-Attas 1978). This intellectual project seeks to critically examine modern disciplines and reconstruct them in accordance with the Islamic worldview (*ru'yat al-Islam li al-wujud*).

Al-Attas further elaborated this concept in *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, where he famously explained that "knowledge refers to the arrival of meaning in the soul and the arrival of the soul at the meaning" (al-Attas 1995). This definition reflects his view that knowledge is not merely the accumulation of information but a process that integrates intellectual understanding with spiritual awareness.

Perhaps the most profound concept in al-Attas's philosophy is the notion of adab, which he regarded as the central objective of Islamic education. In *The Concept of Education in Islam* (1980), he defined adab as "the recognition and acknowledgement of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various grades and degrees of rank" (al-Attas 1980). According to al-Attas, the most serious crisis facing the Muslim world is fundamentally a loss of adab. When adab disappears, confusion arises regarding the nature of knowledge and the role of intellectual authority. As he observed in *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, the loss of adab results in "the rise of false leaders in every field" (al-Attas 1995). This condition leads to intellectual disorder and moral decline within society. To address this crisis, al-Attas introduced the concept of ta'dib, the educational process through which adab is cultivated. The ultimate aim of education, he argued, is to produce a morally responsible and intellectually balanced human being, or insan adabi.

Another central philosophical contribution of al-Attas is his articulation of the concept of Islamic worldview. In his writings, particularly *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, he explains that the Islamic worldview is derived from revelation and provides the metaphysical structure through which Muslims understand reality and knowledge (al-Attas 1995, p. 2). Al-Attas presents Islam not merely as a religion confined to ritual observances or personal belief, but as a comprehensive worldview that encompasses the totality of reality, knowledge, ethics, and civilisation. For al-Attas, the Islamic worldview represents a coherent vision of reality grounded in divine revelation and articulated through the intellectual tradition of Islam. This worldview provides the metaphysical and epistemological foundations upon which Islamic civilisation historically developed and continues to derive its intellectual coherence (Al-Attas, 1995).

At the core of this worldview lies the principle of *tawhid*, the affirmation of the absolute unity and sovereignty of God. In al-Attas's philosophical framework, *tawhid* extends beyond its theological meaning to function as the organising principle of existence itself. It establishes a unified and meaningful order within the cosmos in which every entity occupies a specific and purposeful place within the hierarchy of creation. Human beings, endowed with intellect and moral consciousness, are entrusted with the responsibility of recognising this divinely ordained order and aligning their actions with it. Consequently, the Islamic worldview reflects a hierarchical structure of reality in which God represents the ultimate source of truth and existence, while all other forms of being derive their meaning and purpose through their relationship with the Divine (Al-Attas, 1995; Al-Attas, 2001).

Al-Attas emphasises that within the Islamic worldview, knowledge is inseparable from ethics and spiritual responsibility. Unlike modern secular epistemology, which often regards knowledge as value-neutral, Islamic tradition understands knowledge as morally guided and directed toward truth and justice. The pursuit of knowledge is therefore not merely for intellectual achievement or material progress, but for fulfilling humanity's role as servants of God and vicegerents (khulafa') on earth. Humans are viewed as possessing both physical and spiritual dimensions, with the soul endowed with intellect ('aql) capable of recognising truth. However, this intellect must be guided by revelation and moral discipline to prevent deviation and ensure the proper ordering of knowledge and society.

Through his scholarship, institutional leadership, and intellectual vision, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas left an enduring legacy in the study of Islamic thought and civilization. His life represents a remarkable synthesis of intellectual rigor, cultural refinement, and unwavering dedication to the pursuit of knowledge. His contributions continue to inspire scholars across disciplines and serve as a lasting testament to the enduring vitality of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

May Allah reward him with *Jannah al-Na'im*. *Al-Fatihah*.

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