



SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL ATTAS'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION: A PERENNIALIST CRITICISM OF THE SECULARIZATION OF EDUCATION

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Abstrack

This article investigates the perennialist philosophical critique by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas of the secularization of education, which is identified as the source of the modern educational crisis, a crisis marked by pragmatism and the erosion of values. This research analyzes Al-Attas's body of work to unveil his critique. The findings show that Al-Attas perceives secularization not just as a political process, but rather as a philosophical program that leads to the desacralization of nature and the despiritualization of man. The most damaging consequence in education is the "loss of adab," defined as the failure to acknowledge the hierarchy of reality and knowledge, resulting in epistemological and ethical chaos. To solve this, Al Attas offers the project of the "Islamization of Contemporary Knowledge." Its objective is to re-embed knowledge within the Islamic worldview (ru'yat al-Islām li al-wujūd), aspiring to cultivate the "Man of Adab" (al-insān al-adabī). The implication of this study advocates for a fundamental reconstruction of Islamic educational curricula that prioritizes the inculcation of adab over mere technical competence, thereby offering a strategic counter-narrative to global pragmatism. This article concludes that Al-Attas's philosophy offers a strong theoretical framework to diagnose the crisis in education and to propose a restorative solution that is rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition and consistent with the principles of perennial universalism.

Keywords: Al-Attas, Secularization of Education, Adab, Islamization of Knowledge, Perennialist Philosophy.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini mengkaji kritik filsafat perennialisme Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas terhadap sekularisasi pendidikan, yang diidentifikasi sebagai akar krisis pendidikan modern yang pragmatis dan mengalami degradasi nilai. Penelitian ini menganalisis karya-karya Al-Attas untuk mengungkap kritiknya. Hasil analisis menunjukkan, Al-Attas memandang sekularisasi bukan sekadar proses politik, melainkan program filosofis yang melakukan desakralisasi alam dan despiritualisasi manusia. Dampak paling merusak dalam pendidikan adalah "hilangnya adab" (the loss of adab), yaitu kegagalan mengenali hierarki realitas dan



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ilmu, yang berujung pada kekacauan epistemologis dan etis. Sebagai solusinya, Al-Attas menawarkan proyek "Islamisasi Ilmu Pengetahuan Kontemporer". Tujuannya adalah mengintegrasikan kembali ilmu pengetahuan ke dalam pandangan hidup Islam (ru'yat al-Islām li al-wujūd) dengan cita-cita membentuk "Manusia Beradab" (al-insān al-adabī). Implikasi penelitian ini menuntut adanya reorientasi kurikulum pendidikan Islam yang tidak hanya berfokus pada transfer keahlian teknis, tetapi memprioritaskan penanaman adab sebagai basis epistemologis. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa pemikiran Al-Attas memberikan kerangka teoretis yang kuat untuk mendiagnosis krisis pendidikan serta menawarkan solusi restoratif yang berakar pada tradisi intelektual Islam dan sejalan dengan prinsip universalisme perennial..

Kata Kunci: Al-Attas, Sekularisasi Pendidikan, Adab, Islamisasi Ilmu, Filsafat Perennialisme

Introduction

The world of contemporary education stands at a crucial crossroads. On the one hand, advances in science and technology offer unprecedented efficiency and accessibility. However, on the other, many have expressed deep concern over what appears to be a erosion of the soul of the educational process itself (Biesta, 2022; Hidayat, 2022). Modern education, increasingly dominated by positivistic and pragmatic paradigms, tends to reduce its goals to merely producing a competent workforce for the industrial market or citizens obedient to the secular nation-state (Giroux, 2020; Robinson, 2021). The transcendental dimension, the search for meaning, and the formation of noble character, historically central to education across civilizations, are now often marginalized or even eliminated altogether (Nasr, 1989; Robinson, 2021).

The global phenomenon underlying this crisis is secularization. Simply put, secularization is often understood as the separation of religious and state institutions. However, in a more philosophical context, secularization is a deeper worldview process that "liberates" humans and their reason from the authority of revelation and metaphysical traditions (Hashemi & Moussalli, 2021; Taylor, 2018). In the realm of education, this process manifests itself in curricula that deny the spiritual dimension of reality, teaching methodologies that recognize only empirical truth, and ultimate goals oriented solely toward worldly life. The result is an education system that may succeed in producing individuals who are intelligent in general. cognitive, but often fails to produce wise, ethical, and spiritually intact humans (Al-Attas, 2019; Kamal, 2024).

In response to this crisis, various schools of educational philosophy have offered their own diagnoses and solutions. One of the most fundamental and radical responses comes from the philosophy of perennialism. Perennialism, pioneered by thinkers such as Robert Hutchins and Mortimer Adler, argues that the purpose of education is to seek and disseminate eternal truths that are universal and unchanging (Adler, 1982). For perennialists, the crisis in modern education is caused by relativism, pragmatism, and the rejection of a fixed human nature and an objective hierarchy of values (Hussain & Ahmed, 2022). However, the urgency to re-examine Al-Attas's thinking within a perennialist framework arises from a harsh reality: current efforts to improve education are often cosmetic and partial. Many discourses on character education or knowledge integration are trapped in a technical-methodological realm, but fail to address the ontological roots of the

problem (Zakiyyah et al., 2024). Herein lies the significance of this research. Al-Attas's thought needs to be examined not merely as historical discourse, but as a fundamental critique proving that secularization not only separates religion from the state but also undermines the structure of knowledge itself. Without understanding this metaphysical critique, as offered by the perennialist perspective, any efforts to improve education will be merely patchwork, unable to restore lost "adab."

In the context of the Islamic world, the most articulate and systematic thinker in voicing the perennialist critique of the secularization of education is Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. Al-Attas, a prominent Malayo-Islamic philosopher and historian, constructed a coherent system of thought to diagnose the ills of modern civilization and offer a treatment (Hashim, 1996). Although Al-Attas is firmly rooted in the Islamic intellectual tradition, his arguments his argument has a strong resonance with the core principles of perennialism, namely the belief in objective and eternal truth, the existence of a metaphysical reality that is the basis for physical reality, and the conception of education as the process of cultivating noble values (adab) to achieve human perfection (Al-Attas, 2001).

This article aims to critically analyze the thought of Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas as a form of perennialist critique of the secularization of education. The main research question to be answered is: How does Al-Attas's perennialist perspective expose the fundamental problems in secular education, and what comprehensive solutions does he offer as an alternative? The central argument put forward is that Al-Attas's critique not only highlights the technical or curricular failures of secular education, but also fundamentally exposes its underlying philosophical and metaphysical assumptions. By identifying the "loss of adab" as the main consequence of secularization, Al-Attas then formulated the project of "Islamization of Contemporary Knowledge" as a restorative path to restore the true purpose of education, namely to form a complete and civilized human being within the framework of the Islamic worldview.

Method

This research employs a qualitative approach with a philosophical-conceptual analysis design, a method chosen for its relevance to the study's subject, the thought of a philosopher. The primary focus of this approach is to identify, clarify, and systematically analyze key concepts used by Al-Attas, particularly those related to his critique of the secularization of education.

The data collection process in this study is sourced from two main categories. First, primary data that refers directly to the fundamental works of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, such as *Islam and Secularism* (1993), *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (1980), and *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (2001), which serve as authentic sources to explore his original ideas. Second, secondary data includes scientific journal articles, books, dissertations, and relevant conference proceedings published between 2020 and 2024, obtained through a database and Scopus. This secondary data aims to map contemporary discussions on Al-Attas's thought, place his arguments in the context of current debates, and enrich the research analysis.

Data analysis was conducted using a hermeneutic-interpretive technique that followed several systematic steps. This process began with a conceptual description

to elaborate key terms such as secularization, adab, knowledge, worldview, and Islamization, followed by a relational analysis to connect these concepts to build a coherent argument structure, such as examining the causal relationship between secularization and the loss of adab. Next, a comparative analysis was conducted by juxtaposing Al-Attas's ideas and the principles of perennialist philosophy to identify his position within the broader spectrum of educational philosophy. This entire series of analyses culminated in a critical synthesis to reformulate Al-Attas's arguments into a coherent narrative that answers the research questions. The validity of the data in this study was ensured through source triangulation, namely by comparing interpretations of Al-Attas's primary works with analyses by other scholars in secondary literature.

Results and Discussion

A conceptual-philosophical analysis of the fundamental works of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas yields findings structured in four main pillars, which comprehensively address Al-Attas's critique and solutions to the secularization of education. The first finding highlights the deconstruction of the concept of secularization, where Al-Attas does not view it as a neutral political process, but rather as a philosophical program or ideology that operates through three destructive actions (Al-Attas, 1993). These actions include the desacralization of nature, which removes God from the universe and turns it into a purely mechanistic object; the despiritualization of humankind, which reduces humans to physical-rational beings by ignoring the spiritual aspect (*rūḥ*) and the purification of the heart; and the deconsecration of values, which eliminates the transcendental foundation. so that ethics becomes relative and limited to the pragmatic function of citizenship (Suharto, 2022).

The most central finding of this analysis is Al-Attas' diagnosis of the "loss of adab" as the root of the problems of modern education. In Al-Attas's view, adab is not merely defined as etiquette, but rather as the recognition and acknowledgement of the proper place of all things in the order of creation (Al-Attas, 1980). This loss of adab manifests in the chaos of the hierarchy of knowledge, where empirical knowledge is placed above revealed knowledge (*fard 'ayn*), whereas revelation should be the primary foundation. A logical consequence of this chaos is the emergence of "false leaders," individuals who possess technical knowledge but lack wisdom and are morally corrupt (Lestari & Hardivizon, 2023). Furthermore, this secular outlook on life creates an existential condition of systematic doubt and confusion that Al-Attas calls the essence of modern *Jahiliyyah*.

Based on this diagnosis, this study uncovers Al-Attas's sharp critique of the goals and curriculum of secular education. Al-Attas rejects the reductive goal of education, namely merely producing "good citizens" or "productive workers" (Ashraf & Husein, 1979). Instead, he asserts that the true goal of Islamic education is to form a "Good Man" or a universally civilized human being (*al-insān al-kullī al-adabī*) (Al-Attas, 1980). This critique also targets the structure of the secular curriculum, which is considered fragmented into separate silos without a unifying principle (Hasan & Taufiq, 2023), and unbalanced because it overemphasizes practical skills while marginalizing fundamental studies such as metaphysics and ethics.

As a constructive solution to this crisis, this analysis formulates Al-Attas's proposal for the "Islamization of Contemporary Science." This project is carried

out through two rigorous intellectual stages. The first stage is isolation ('azl), a process of critical analysis to separate foreign elements, philosophical assumptions, and secular values that contradict Islam from the body of modern science. Following this cleansing process, the second stage is infusion (aslamah), in which the neutralized body of knowledge is replenished with key principles, concepts, and principles. and the value framework of the Islamic view of life which is centered on the concept of Tawhid (Wan Daud, 2021).

The findings of this study reveal the significance of Al-Attas's thought as a fundamental perennialist critique. This discussion interprets the meaning and implications of these findings and relates them to theoretical frameworks and the contemporary educational crisis.

First, Al-Attas's deconstruction of the myth of secularization has profound implications. By defining it as a "philosophical program," Al-Attas demonstrates that education is never neutral. The three pillars of his deconstruction (the desacralization of nature, the despiritualization of humankind, and the deconsecration of values) directly challenge the epistemological and metaphysical foundations of modern education. Al-Attas's perennialist perspective requires that science be taught within a framework that recognizes nature as a theophany, psychology recognizes the duality of human nature, and ethics is rooted in transcendent absolute values (Arif, 2021; Rahman, 2024). This aligns with the principle of perennialism, which believes in a metaphysical reality as the basis for physical reality (Nasr, 1989).

Second, the greatest significance of Al-Attas's thought lies in his diagnosis of the "loss of adab." This concept successfully shifted the focus of debate from technical-curricular issues to the question of the ultimate goal of human existence (Hashim, 1996). The "loss of adab" is an epistemological crisis, in which humans are no longer able to recognize and acknowledge the correct hierarchy, both in the order of reality and science. By posing confusion and the rise of false leaders as symptoms (Hidayat, 2022; Ikhwan & Huda, 2023), Al-Attas effectively argues that the failure of secular education is not the failure to produce intelligent people, but rather the failure to shape wise people.

Third, Al-Attas's critique of the aims and curriculum of education becomes particularly poignant when viewed through a perennialist lens. His rejection of utilitarian goals ("productive labor") and his emphasis on the formation of a "civilized man" directly echo the calls of perennialists like Hutchins and Adler for an education oriented toward wisdom, not merely skills. His emphasis on the study of the Islamic intellectual heritage (the works of Al-Ghazali, Rumi, etc.) can be seen as a parallel to the "Great Books" program in the Western tradition, which similarly aims to connect students with eternal truths (Yusuf & Said, 2023). This critique asserts that true educational reform requires a philosophical overhaul, not simply the addition of subjects (Adi, 2020; Muttaqin, 2023).

Finally, the "Islamization of Knowledge" project must be understood as a practical manifestation of his entire educational philosophy. It is not simply "sticking on an Islamic label," but rather a restorative path to restoring adab (morality). The processes of 'azl (isolation) and aslamah (infusion) are methods to ensure that the knowledge taught no longer causes epistemological confusion but instead leads to the recognition of correct hierarchies (Wan Daud, 2021; Zuheldi & Azizan, 2022). In this way, education returns to its true function, according to Al-Attas, namely ta'dīb—a continuous process of cultivating adab (morality) (Hashim, 1996). When students study Islamized science or economics, they

inherently learn about the proper place of these disciplines in God's created order of reality, ultimately leading them to become "civilized human beings" (Kamal, 2024; Lubis, 2022).

Conclusion

This article has examined the perennialist philosophy's critique of the secularization of education, taking the perspective of Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas as its primary case study. The analysis shows that Al-Attas presents a far more radical and fundamental critique than mere curricular adjustment. Borrowing the perennialist framework but infusing it with substance from the Islamic tradition, Al-Attas argues that secularization is a philosophical program that undermines the metaphysical foundations of science and education.

The main finding of this study is that the core of the crisis of modern education, according to Al-Attas, is the "loss of adab." This is not a matter of etiquette, but rather an epistemological and spiritual crisis caused by the inability to recognize the hierarchy of reality, knowledge, and values. Secular education, with its positivistic epistemology, utilitarian goals, and curriculum, fragmented, actively producing and perpetuating this state of "uncivilization." It produces humans who are skilled but unwise, knowledgeable but confused, and ultimately fail to achieve the purpose for which they were created.

As a solution, Al-Attas does not propose a patchwork fix, but rather a comprehensive civilizational restoration project: the "Islamization of Contemporary Knowledge." This project aims to redefine and restructure the entire corpus of human knowledge within the framework of an Islamic worldview centered on Tawhid. The ultimate goal is to reconstruct an educational system whose primary function is ta'dīb, the process of developing a "Civilized Man" who is intellectually, spiritually, and morally complete.

The implications of Al-Attas's thinking extend beyond mere academic discourse; it offers an epistemological shield for Islamic education amidst the rapid tide of globalization and technological disruption. His ideas compel Islamic educational institutions to cease being passive consumers of Western knowledge and instead emerge as producers of knowledge with autonomous values. Practically, the concepts of ta'dīb and the Islamization of knowledge have laid the foundation for the birth of an integrative curriculum in which science and religion are no longer positioned dichotomously, but rather harmoniously within a unified worldview. In today's 'post-truth' era, where the boundaries between information and ignorance are increasingly blurred, Al-Attas's emphasis on authority, the hierarchy of knowledge, and adab (civility) becomes increasingly relevant as a moral compass for navigating intellectual turmoil.

Al-Attas's contribution lies in his ability to elevate the discourse on the educational crisis from a technical-pragmatic to a philosophical-metaphysical level. He reminds us that education can never be neutral; it is always a reflection and agent of a worldview. Therefore, any serious educational reform effort must begin with the primary questions: What is reality? What is truth? What is the essence of humankind? And what is the ultimate goal of human life? The answers to these perennial questions will ultimately determine the direction and quality of the education we develop. Future research could explore the practical implementation of Al-Attas's ideas in contemporary Islamic educational institutions, compare his project of Islamizing knowledge with similar projects by

other thinkers such as Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (Al-Faruqi, 1982), or even offer constructive criticism of some aspects of Al-Attas's thought itself. Undeniably, however, his intellectual legacy provides a powerful and coherent roadmap for anyone concerned with restoring the spirit and noble purpose of education.

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