Islamization of Knowledge and the Educational Philosophy of Al-Attas – A Brief Exposition

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K E Y W O R D S

Adab
Education
Educational philosophy
Islamization   of
Knowledge
Ta'dib

A B S T R A C T

This article is an effort to bring to the fore the prominent philosophy of education in Islam of Syed Naquib Al-Attas. It traces the need for the Islamization of Knowledge movement as the answer to the woes of the Ummah and outlines the importance of the right education from the Islamic viewpoint. It highlights the need for the Muslim to return to Islam and his fitrah and brings into focus the need for education and the correct approach to it. It goes on to delineate the educational philosophy of Islam given by Al-Attas, and its prominent features, including the Islamization of language, the concepts of adab and ta'dib with the latter denoting education and the former being the inculcation of ta'dib in man. The educational philosophy presented also includes the hierarchy of knowledge, where fard 'ayn sciences take precedence in status over fard kifayah sciences. It also includes Al-Attas' emphasis on content over method with respect to education. The article concludes by emphasizing the salience of a sound philosophy of education from the Islamic worldview and propagates the educational philosophy of Al-Attas as such a philosophy and suggests its application in the field of education being the need of the hour.

Introduction

Knowledge divorced from faith is not only partial knowledge; it can even be described as a kind of new ignorance" (Husain & Ashraf, 1979).

It is unfortunate to note that we are living in times of widespread ignorance. It is believed by some that the knowledge we have today is mostly neutral, suggesting that it is the individuals who share this knowledge that need to align it with Islamic principles. However, others disagree, positing that knowledge is significantly modelled by the goals for which it is pursued, the value systems underlying its development, the sources which inspire it, the methods used to formulate it etc. Now, given that much of the existing knowledge across various fields has been created outside the Islamic framework, this leads to the conclusion that a substantial portion of it is fundamentally flawed, especially from the Islamic lens. It is well-known, for instance, that positivism comprises a great deal of philosophical base of many disciplines as we know them today.

Therefore, it is important to define here what positivism means, so we can understand the foundations of a great deal of modern knowledge and disciplines. "Positivism is the view that the only way to obtain knowledge of the world is by means of sense perception and introspection and the methods of the empirical sciences" (Acton 1951).

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Therefore, positivism is viewing the world and the knowledge of it through the lens of sensory perception and empirically testable hypotheses. "Thus, they regard metaphysics, in so far as it is the effort to find out about the world by methods other than those employed in the empirical sciences, as a hopelessly misdirected activity." (Ibid) In other words, there no place for God or religion in their worldview. The construction of knowledge as we know it today on such philosophical grounds is a cause for worry for the Muslim world in particular.

Thus, it comes as no surprise when Syed Naquib Al-Attas (1978/1993) deconstructs knowledge as we know it today and its issues by boldly stating that the Western civilization was the harbinger and the disseminator of intrinsically problematic knowledge. It is "problematic knowledge because it has lost its true purpose due to being unjustly conceived" and because it is "knowledge which pretends to be real, but which is productive of confusion and skepticism, which has elevated doubt and conjecture to the scientific rank in methodology…" (Al-Attas 1978/1993).

As far as education is concerned, it should not remain doubtful that its disintegration was both due to the internal decline of the Ummah and due to external attacks on it as well. Perhaps one of the greatest of the early attacks took place during colonial times, when European powers controlled a great deal of the Muslim world. They had already realized that the link of their colonial subjects to their religion of Islam was a threat to their prosperity and to their rule, and so this link had to be severed. The prime area which could be used to sever this link was in the education dispensed to their populations. "A

deliberate and systematic change in the educational system was also adopted as a weapon to propagate the ideas of nationalism and secularism. From the middle of the 18th century onwards, schools and colleges on modern Western lines were opened in large numbers in British colonies" (Ali, 2010).

If we investigate the history of the Islamic civilization, we realize that Islamic education as an independent discipline did not exist (Halstead, 2004). However, this can be attributed to the overall nature of education dispensed being more or less Islamic in nature, at least in early Islamic times. The gradual decline of traditional Islamic education which had already started centuries ago, and the relatively recent bifurcation of educational system into two duals, opposing systems of traditional Islamic education system and the modern secular education system threw into sharp relief the need to conceptualize the Islamic vision of education in line with its overall worldview. This became important especially important due to the nature of secularization, the onslaught of which was a major contributor in the bifurcation of education systems, and the secularization of knowledge.

It was indeed this onslaught of secularization and the manifestation of its adverse effects on numerous facets of Muslim life – with the most essential of them being education – that Muslim scholar around the world felt the urge to act in order to alleviate the deplorable state the Ummah had fallen into. These sentiments resulted in the First World Conference on Muslim Education in Mecca in 1977, where renowned scholars came together to address the secularization of knowledge and the troubling evolution of education and

educational systems in the Muslim world. Many more World Conferences were organized in later years. Dhaou (2005b) rightly points out that these conferences "make more sense as a response to the internal educational problems that began to surface in the Muslim countries.

Although these conferences were a welcome sight in the context of the circumstances of the Ummah, they did not yield the intended practical benefit and the recommendations of the conferences were not implemented in full by any Muslim country. However, the mere fact that they were organized is a testament to the pressing need of rethinking knowledge and education from the Islamic worldview. Around the same time as the initial conferences took place, the concept of Islamization of knowledge came to the forefront. Understanding this concept is essential as it is the forerunner to Islamization of education as we know it.

Islamization of Knowledge

As a precursor to outlining its concept, Islamization of knowledge can be introduced as an ""epistemological revolution", as al-Attas calls it, which erupted like a wildfire blazing across the seas from Kuala Lumpur to Plainfield, Indian, to many centers of learning across the globe" (Daud, 1998).

Taha Jabir Al-Alwani (1995) gives the following definition of Islamization of knowledge: "The Islamization of knowledge undertaking seeks to develop an Islamic paradigm of knowledge that will serve as an alternative to the secular positivist paradigm that presently dominates the arts and sciences. Such an alternative combines Islamic and universalistic perspectives; addresses the intellectual and conceptual

problems of all humanity, not just of Muslims; and includes a tawhid-based reconstruction of the concepts of life, humanity and the universe."

Ismail Al-Faruqi, another prominent proponent of Islamization of knowledge, defines Islamization of knowledge as "to recast knowledge as Islam relates to it… to redefine, and re-order the data, to rethink the reasoning and relating of the data, to reevaluate the conclusions, to re-project the goals – and to do so in such a way as to make the disciplines enrich the vision and serve the cause of Islam" (Al-Faruqi, 1982)

Al-Attas (1980/1999) lays out his understanding of Islamization in the following words: "Islamization is the liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition, and then from secular control over his reason and his language. The Islamization of language brings about the Islamization of thought and reason." After man is liberated from these influences can his soul find peace and be in harmony with man and the outside world (Ibid). The comprehensive nature of Attas' conception and its solid grounding in the Islamic worldview becomes more apparent when he formulates his idea that the process of Islamization at the individual level is in fact a "devolution" to the individual's fitrah (Al-Attas 1978/1993). This well-known hadith of the Prophet (PBUH) is relevant here:

"No child is born except on Al-Fitra (Islam) and then his parents make him Jewish, Christian or Magian…" (Sahih al-Bukhari 4775)"

This gives legitimacy to Attas' claim that Islamization is the process where man returns to the fitrah he was born on, or in other words, returns to Islam. Given the

widespread impact of secularization in its various manifestations, the need for Muslims to return to their fitrah/Islam is ever-present. With this need being established, it can be agreed that the practical approach to fulfilling this need effectively is through education. That is where the Islamization of knowledge and education comes into play. A thorough understanding of the Islamic philosophy and concept of education is a prerequisite for this, as this is what will give the education to be dispensed a solid foundation in Islamic principles.

Islamization of Language

In explaining the concept of education from the Islamic lens, one of the most renowned contemporary scholars is Syed Naquib al-Attas. If we deconstruct his aforementioned definition of Islamization, we find the phrase used by Attas that "Islamization of language brings about the Islamization of thought and reason" (Al-Attas, 1980/1999). This is not only an essential part of Attas' philosophy but also a salient concept in its own right as far as the concept of Islamic education is concerned. Before discussing this in detail, the need for Islamization of language must be put forth. This need is the "deislamization of language" (Al-Attas, 1980/1999). The deislamization of language is the loss of proper meanings of essential Islamic terminology. Given that language and thought, and by extension, worldview, are intertwined, this deislamization of language caused a "regression towards non-Islamic worldviews" (Al-Attas, 1980/1999).

Therefore, in order for the Islamic worldview to regain its footing and place in the minds of Muslims, the Islamization of language is essential. It is thus the first step which leads to the Islamization of knowledge and education. Given the above,

Islamization of language can be understood as the reversion of the key Islamic terms to their original and proper meanings, though it can be argued that its scope can go beyond that and extend to terms of non-Arabic origin which need to be understood from the Islamic worldview. In any case, the first example of Islamization of a language, Arabic, came with the advent of Islam and the Quran. Al-Attas states that the "Islamization of Arabic, then, consisted in the Quranic reorganization and reformation of the conceptual structures, semantic fields, vocabulary and basic vocabulary that once served the Jahili vision of the world and of life and human existence" (Attas, 1980/1999).

Islamization as a Process

Having established the importance of and the need for the Islamization of language, we can proceed to give Al-Attas' definition of Islamization of knowledge as a process. "With respect to the rational, intellectual and philosophical sciences, each branch must be imbued with Islamic elements and key concept after the foreign elements and key concepts have been isolated from its every branch. This process constitutes Islamization" (Al-Attas, 1980/1999). It must be made clear here that a rudimentary understanding of Islamization can do more harm than good. It is not enough, posits Al-Attas, that we "accept present-day knowledge as it is, and then hope to 'Islamize' it merely by 'granting' or 'transplanting' into it Islamic sciences and principles" (Attas, 1978/1993) as the results of this would not reflect the overall aim of Islamization of knowledge. Therefore, it is important that the first step of Islamization of knowledge is to detach ideas alien to the Islamic worldview from knowledge, and the

second step would be the infusion of Islamic concepts and worldview into knowledge.

Having understood Al-Attas' conception of Islamization of knowledge, we can now better understand his overall educational philosophy. We have already discussed a major portion of his philosophy, especially the Islamization of language, which makes his educational philosophy stand out in this era of mass confusion of Muslims in language. Another essential element of his educational philosophy is its solid foundations on Islamic concepts and weltanschauung. This is demonstrated when he defines the concept of adab, and the concept of education peculiar to Islam as ta'dib, instead of the terms more recently being used to denote education from an Islamic perspective i.e. tarbiyah, or ta'lim.

Adab and Ta'dib

The word adab, Attas laments, also lost its original meaning. He gives the meaning of adab in the following words: "Adab is recognition and acknowledgment of the reality that knowledge and being are ordered hierarchically according to their various grades and degrees of rank, and of one's proper place in relation to that reality and to one's physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials" (Attas, 1980/1999). He also states that "adab identifies itself as knowledge of the purpose of seeking knowledge" (Ibid). Since the term adab is very broad, it is explained from different angles at different places. For example, Wan Daud (1998), a prominent disciple of Al-Attas, states that adab is "knowledge and right methods of knowing which should preserve man from errors of judgment and disgrace, and by which the condition of being in the right and proper place is actualized." Attas (1978/1993) himself states that "adab also means to

discipline the mind and soul; it is the 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."

In light of the above definitions of adab, the definition of ta'dib or education is given by Attas in the following words: "recognition and acknowledgement, progressively instilled into man, of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgment of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence" (Al-Attas, 1980/1999). Thus, it makes sense when Al-Attas also defines ta'dib as the infusion of adab in man (Al-Attas, 1978/1993).

The coherence and robustness of Al-Attas' ideas can be seen through their alignment with the ideas of Imam Al-Ghazali in multiple places. As relevant to ta'dib as education, Al-Ghazali states: "Indeed the most perfect and highest conduct, the best and the most beautiful deeds are adab in religion through which the man of faith follows the deeds of the Lord of the universe and the conduct of Prophets and messengers. God has taught us (addabani) with what He has shown and explained in the Quran. He also has taught us (addabani) with his Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, through his sunnah which is incumbent upon us, and blessing is for him. Similarly, we have to follow the Companions (al-sahabah) and the Followers (al-tabiun), as well as the people of high character (ahl al-adab) among the believers (Al-Ghazali, 1987).

Another essential element in the philosophy of education of Al-Attas is his focus on the individual. The goal of

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education in Islam, as given by Al-Attas (1980/1999) is to produce people who resemble the Perfect Man (the Prophet peace be upon him) as closely as possible. The fact that it is a basic principle of Islam that Muslims see the Prophet (PBUH) as their role model and follow his example demonstrates the consistency of the goal of education put forth by Al-Attas.

The Hierarchy of Knowledge

One other element of Al-Attas' educational philosophy is his categorization of knowledge into revealed knowledge and acquired knowledge. He further delineates their respective value and gives the Islamic concept of hierarchy of knowledge where fard 'ayn (compulsory on every individual) sciences are deemed higher in status than fard kifayah (compulsory upon few in society who suffice for that society) sciences. Al-Attas supports the Islamic concept of hierarchy of knowledge by stating that "all the knowledge of the prerequisites of the first knowledge (fard ayn) is good for man, whereas not all of the knowledge of the second kind is good for him…" (Al-Attas, 2001)

This resonates with Al-Ghazali's understanding of the hierarchy of knowledge as well as put forth in Ihya Ulum al-din. Both Attas and Imam Ghazali believe that "the nobility of a science is determined by its fruit (thamarah) and the authenticity of its principles (wathaqat al-dalil wa quawwatihi), and the former is more important than the latter" (Wan Daud, 1998).

In Al-Attas' view, the religious sciences comprise of six parts: the Quran; the Sunnah and hadith as well as the histories and messages of the earlier prophets; the Shariah; theology; Islamic

metaphysics; linguistic sciences. In another place, Al-Attas describes fard 'ayn sciences as comprising of "The Holy Quran-Exegesis, Commentary-Tawhid. Principles of Islam-Islam-iman-ihsan, Life of the Prophet, Sunnah. Hadith and the Religious Sciences. Ethics. Arabic" (Al-Attas, 1978/1993). The rational, intellectual and philosophical sciences contain the human sciences, natural sciences, applied sciences and technological sciences, though Al-Attas (1980/1999) also posits that new disciplines should be added to these sciences, which include comparative religion, western culture and civilization, linguistic sciences which includes Islamic languages, and Islamic history. Yet, he does not limit fard kifayah and believes more sciences could be added with time if the need arises (Ibid). Thus, he portrays fard kifayah as dynamic in nature.

Other Aspects of Al-Attas' Educational Philosophy

Among other notable aspects of his philosophy of education include his emphasis on content over methodology. It can be considered a very sound approach to education because the improper content of education from the Islamic viewpoint constitutes a major cause of the "malaise of the Ummah" highlighted by many besides Al-Attas, including Ismail Faruqi (1982). The very call for the Islamization of knowledge echoed in the last few decades following the original conception of the term is itself testament to the need to place a greater emphasis on the content of education. This does not mean that Al-Attas undermines the importance of method and pedagogy, only that he posits content as being more important in relative terms.

Also, part of Al-Attas' educational philosophy is his comparison of the Islamic

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educational philosophy and the western philosophy of education. He deconstructs both admirably, and establishes the superior nature of the former, as it is a holistic approach which deals with the development of the individual, and by extension, society, in a wholesome way, taking into account spiritual, moral and ethical questions. He vehemently critiques western educational philosophy, especially with regards to its overall aim of developing individuals who are good citizen in an obvious emphasis on their "utilitarian sense" of their "usefulness to state and society and the world" (Al-Attas, 2001).

Conclusion

This article has been a small effort in delineating the concept of Islamization of knowledge and its urgent need, and the educational philosophy from the views of the prominent Muslim scholar and the pioneer of the Islamization movement as we know it today, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. In the 21st century, combatting the effects of secularization, colonialism and its successor, neocolonialism, is an extremely arduous task. However, it is the need of the hour.

The broader movement of Islamization, and Islamization of knowledge may have not received the continuous effort it deserved. However, this does not undermine its importance or its relevance in the 21st century. It must be worked on with the same vigour that defined the early years of its conception. "Despite its current stagnation, the Islamization of Knowledge as envisaged by its main proponents, is

nevertheless still a necessity for the Muslim Ummah. The rationale of the Islamization of Knowledge is still valid, probably even more important now when the "clash of civilizations" thesis of Huntington is being realized by its proponents under the various contemporary agenda of the post 9-11 world" (Haneef, 2005).

As part of the Islamization movement, education of the Muslims is of prime importance. Only when Muslims are educated about the state and nature of their plight can they get the awareness and the urge to combat it. In order to be well-equipped to combat it, they will need the right education as well. We have all seen the impacts of improper education, which reduces man to a godless and confused state, far away from his natural state of fitrah.

To dispense proper education in light of Islamic worldview and value system, a proper understanding of the Islamic worldview and value system, and a truly Islamic philosophy of education in line with these is required. The educational philosophy of Syed Al-Attas can be portrayed as this sound philosophy, as it is a philosophy well-grounded on Islamic values and worldview. His conception of adab alone demonstrates his ability to formulate a robust explanation of the concept of education in Islam. The application of Al-Attas' philosophy of education into educational systems across the Muslim world must be taken up by all those who wish to make an effort to change the deplorable conditions this Ummah has fallen into.

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