

## **A Study of the Thought of Selected Muslim Intellectuals in Malaysia on Islam and Modernity**

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**Abstract:** Nothing harassed the people of the Islamic world at the beginning of the 21st century as much as the ghost of modernity did. It had occupied a central place in the cultural and socio-political agendas of intellectual, social movements and state actors in the Islamic world and Southeast Asian region since the 19th century. This study is to examine the responses of the contemporary Southeast Asian movement especially the Malaysian Muslim intellectuals' encounter with the Islamic science, modern science and technology, against the best of Islamic intellectual and cultural tradition. This country has produced many Muslim intellectuals. They have provided one of the finest approaches to the Islamic science and Modernity. The purpose of this study is to survey three contemporary Malaysian Muslim intellectuals' approach to modernity in general as well as modern science and technology in particular. They comprise respectable educators, namely Muhammad Naqib Al-Attas, Mohd Hazim Shah and Osman Bakar. They represent the contemporary Muslim intellectual in the Malaysia. I have choose them for my studies as I hope that through this study, the significance of Malaysian Muslim intellectual and the influence of their ideas on the Islamic world can be clarified. I truly believe that this perspective would contribute further in the current discussion on Islamic science and technology. This study is part of an accumulated attempt towards the rise of an Islamic world view. It is hoped to bring greater result in the progress of science and technology in the Muslim world and this would be an impactful return to its past glory.

**Key word:** Intellectual, Islamic science, modernity, technology, Muslim world

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### **INTRODUCTION**

One thing that is crucial in the development process of the Islamic nations is reaching to prosperity and success for which the Islamic nations have tried a lot. One important obstacle in the meanwhile however is to understand the relationship between science and religion as it will set the compatibility level between science and development clear whether to say that it's conflicting or not. It does play a role in religious perspective as well as scientific view, whether this relationship is a conflicting or a compatible one.

The serious discussions of the matter make the question even more crucial. First of all, Islamic texts have always put emphasis on the matter of learning and development; therefore we can see the compatibility of Islamic shariah with science. Islamic scholars have proved this by their contribution to the world of science. They have told their followers to pursue knowledge wherever they find it. The other thing about Islamic science is that it is based upon the revelation from the side of God, rather than on the human understanding of the truth. Thus, it has been said that there is a full compatibility between the science and religion.

The main motive behind the success of the Muslim scientists in the medieval times is the emphasis that religion puts on the learners and teachers. The emphasis is on learning in every aspect of living. Many scientists believe that there is no conflict between what is said in Quran and the conventional knowledge. As one of them Maurice Bucaille puts it:

Without any prejudices, I have started a study of the Quran and so far I have found no conflict between what I can find there and the conventional science (Bucaille, 1989)

In the Islamic ideology there are several ways of approaching the relationship between science and religion. Undoubtedly, one of the most developed Islamic nations is Malaysia. In this country, the discussion of the relationship between science and religion has always been a matter of interest and at the height of its economical and scientific development, Malaysia has emphasized on clarifying the relationship between the conventional knowledge and religion.

At the same time, we can see that the process of Islamization of science has always played a role in the thoughts and the ideology of many of contemporary Malaysian scholars. In this study, we will see the life time endeavors and ideas of the three prominent Malaysian scholars: Prof. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Prof. Mohd Hazim Shah and Prof. Osman Bakar as well as their views on the relationship between Islamic thought and science.

### **SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS**

Al-Attas was born in 1931 with a passion in classical Malay Islamic texts. An expert in metaphysics, philosophy, literature, history and linguistics he has authored many books in the fields of Islamic tradition and culture, Malay literature and language, Sufism and also philosophy. During the period of 1952-1955 he was studying at Sandhurst Military College of London and it was during this time that he found the writings of Nur ad-Din Abd ar-Rahman Jami (August 18, 1414-November 19, 1492) and was very much affected by this Persian poet. After this encounter, he traveled to Africa, Middle East and other hubs of Islamic civilization and felt very much indebted to study the culture. Then he quit his job as a military officer continued his studies at the University of Malaya in Singapore during 1957-1959. To pursue his MSc he travelled to Canada and finally graduated with a doctorate degree from the University of London. He then returned to Malaysia was a professor of Malay studies of university Kebangsaan Malaysia and later of The International Institute of Islamic thought and civilization which is a research and postgraduate institution of the International Islamic University Malaysia.

All his effort is to awaken the souls of students about Islam. In 1972 he established the centre for Islamic students in the North American continent in Canada and in 1977 held an international meeting on Islamic culture in Mecca.

**Attas's views on science and religion:** He is an expert in the Islamic culture and civilization with an emphasis on Islamization of knowledge. His science on knowledge is very rural influenced by Islam. He believes that knowledge is obtained from God by means of praising him, observation and feeling. He believes that this science is originated from heart which is a sacred place and at the same time non-material and eternal (Al-Attas, 1978). He believes that there is a distinction between science in Islam and the conventional science in the West:

The science in the West is not what we know to be science... Islamic science is not math or physics or philosophy... that is not science (Al-Attas, 1979)

He then explains that Islamic scholars should not recognize the Western science since it has the elements of the Western society and culture and materialistic concepts.

He believes in the Islamic science which does not exist yet. Thus he has suggested a path to it. He believes in a purification of the science in the Islamic nations so that the real Islamic science can be revealed. In answer to the question of whether a real Islamic science exists he suggests:

Every belief has its own way of looking at things this does matter to the Islamic World view since it is different from that of the secular world view" (Al-Attas, 1979)

He believes that knowledge in its ultimate meaning is eternal and the best way of approaching it is through revelation. The cultural pluralism in the liberal science can be thought of as the search for an identity in the Islamic context. The only and the best way to approach this problem is not pure scientism but rather providing humanity with identity (Al-Attas, 1979).

Al-Attas is a critic and an opponent to secularism as he has authored a book on the subject called Islam and Secularism. He has said in an interview with the Jam-e-Jam News paper in Teheran:

Secularism tries to disconnect and even reject the salvation. The science has no aim, though in Islamic context science has an aim for humanity and interprets salvation in a different way" (Al-Attas, 1979)

He believes that the difference between Islam and the west on the subjects such as human rights, women rights, freedom, ethics and equality is due to difference in description not in the sense (Hazim, 2001). Al-Attas writes:

Western man is always inclined to regard his culture and civilization as man's cultural vanguard and his own experience and consciousness as those representative of the most 'evolved' of the species so that we are all in the process of lagging behind them as it were and will come to realize the same experience and consciousness in due course sometime (Al-Attas, 1979)

He believes the greatest drawback of the western civilization is in rejection of existence of God (Iqbal, 2007). He believes in the Islamic view, nature is full of signs of God. According to Al-Attas:

The Holy Qur'an's description of nature and man-both in their outward manifestation and their inward hiddenness-as ayat (words, sentences, signs, symbols) is self-explanatory in that respect. Nature has cosmic meaning and must, because of its symbolical connection with God, be respected... He (man) must treat nature justly; there must be harmony between him and nature. Since, he has been entrusted with the stewardship of the Kingdom of Nature which belongs to God, he must look after it and make legitimate use of it and not ruin and spread chaos over it. If nature is like a great, open Book then we must learn the meaning of the Words in order to discern their tentative and final purposes and enact their biddings and invitations and instructions to beneficial use in such wise [sic] that we may come to know and acknowledge in grateful appreciation the overwhelming generosity and wisdom of the incomparable author (Al-Attas,1979)

He believes the main critique of modern science is its denial of the existence of God and it is the source of all problems for modern science.

### OMAN BAKAR

He was born in 1946 in Malaysia. He became a teacher after his school ended but started his education again in the Woolwich Polytechnic in London in 1967. After graduating in 1970 he returned to Malaysia but then again left for Bedford University and after becoming interested in philosophy he went to Temple University and did a PhD under instructions of Prof Nasr. He was as a full time professor in Islamic history and philosophy of science in the University Malaya and was a visiting professor at the Georgetown University (Mehdi Golshani, 2007). He is author of thirteen books and about 200 articles.

**Osman bakar views on science and religion:** He believes that Islam has a complete plan for humanity's salvation in both the universes. He believes that in Islamic science, the base is on deity of God and this is a power-point of the Islamic science (Bakar, 2008).

He believes that the conflict between the western and the Islamic views on the creation and the destiny of humanity is indeed because of two factors:

- Scientists do not want to profit from the Islamic teachings for their reasons
- Scientists do not have enough empirical data and they base upon the theoretical ideas about it

They emphasize on one aspect of science and reject the rest all together which includes the revelation and the holy books.

The other aspect of science which is under critique is the moralities and ethics. Religion is the best resource of ethics and it can guide us in how to utilize science in the best way. In the western view of science it is secularized and empty of ethics.

This is why he emphasizes on Islamization of science. He explains the controversy between science and religion based on the ill conception and ideology of the west toward religion during the fast development eras (ibidn:41).

He accepts that there are a number of believers who reject Islamic science and they have in his view two reasons for that: they believe science is pure and thus impartial there is for example no such thing as Islamic or Christian science, and There has never been such a thing as Islamic science in the past according to Bakar:

Among Muslims there are still many who either oppose the expression 'Islamic science' or are indifferent toward it. Included in this group are the Muslim scientists who have been trained within the philosophical ambience of secularism reductionism and scientism even though, intellectually, they may not be aware of such an ambience. Muslim opposition to the Islamic science thesis is justified on two grounds. First, science is value-free or culturally neutral. Science is science. There is no such thing as 'Islamic science' or 'Christian science' or 'Hindu science' or for that matter any science to which we can add an adjective with a religious connotation. Second, Muslims in the past had never used the term 'Islamic science.' This shows there is no necessity for characterizing science as Islamic". (Bakar, 2008)

He criticizes both views. He believes that the reason behind the second excuse is that there has never been a competition for Islamic science and the conventional science which was produced by the Muslims themselves.

Things are different nowadays there is a clear line between secular and Islamic science and Muslims can choose. Some thinkers even believe that there are good

clues on conventional science in the holy book of Islam. Though there are still disagreements on the subject but in any case the scholars have one thing in common: their tenancy to Islamic science. Thus, they have only one concern which is the transition of the Islamic science to the future generations. He suggests Islamization of science which will have good effects on the ethics and on the conceptions of Islamic faith itself. Therefore Islam will be able again to reveal as a good competitor of the conventional knowledge and suggest its own view to solve today's global issues based on its own materials. At the same time he believes that this aim is impossible without the helping of all the Islamic scholars. According to Bakar:

Both justifications presented have been criticized. The myth of a culturally and philosophically neutral or value-free science has been shattered by so many scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim. As to why Muslim men of learning in the pre-modern past did not use the word 'Islamic science' when referring to science in their own civilization, the reason for this that the need for it did not then arise. The definitive term 'Islamic' is needed when we have to precisely distinguish between things considered as 'Islamic' and those deemed as 'un-Islamic.' In the past, Muslim scientists did not encounter challenges from 'un-Islamic' sources of such a nature and to such an extent that compelled them to make the distinction in question. There was no challenge and rivalry to their science. In their times they were the intellectual leaders and producers of science. They knew very well that their 'Islamic science' was the universal and global science of the time. But today, the need for the definitive term 'Islamic' seems too obvious to anyone sufficiently acquainted with both 'Islamic science' and modern western science. The two sciences are not of the same nature and philosophical character although similarities between them also abound (Bakar, 2008)

He believes that Islamic science has a direct role in the structure of modern science such as the adoption of science, experimental methods and rational thinking. Otherwise, between Islamic and modern science there are some different case such as in philosophical principles while exemplify the metaphysical and cosmological basis of both sciences (Hazim and Hasbullah, 2010).

## **LIFE AND ACTIVITIES OF PROF. MOHD HAZIM SHAH**

Mohd Hazim Shah is one of the prominent Malaysian thinkers. After finishing high school he enrolled to the United World College of the Atlantic in Glamorgan, United Kingdom and in 1977 he graduated in Liberal Studies in Science in the Manchester University. He then continued for a Master Degree in Logic and Scientific Method in the London School of Economics and graduated in 1979. He graduated from Pittsburg University in 1990 and obtained a PhD in history and philosophy of science. He is now the president, of the Malaysian Social Science Association and Professor of History and Philosophy of Science the Department of Science and Technology Studies, Faculty of Science, University of Malaya.

**Mohd Hazim Shah views on science and religion:** Prof. Mohd Hazim Shah has discussed two topics in this article: first, the meaning, extent and implications of the difference between "Islamic perspective" on science and non-Islamic perspective on the subject and the second, the answer to the question of whether the scientific perspective and the religious perspective with regard to knowledge of the natural world, especially with regard to the question of the "symbolic" and the "functional," be reconciled or resolved? (Hazim, 2001).

In approaching the answer he has divided approaches to scientific theories in two different ways:

- Functional aspect: a theory's functional aspect refers to its usefulness or utilitarian value-for example in solving engineering problems
- Symbolic aspect: its symbolic aspect refers to the picture of nature it evokes. In Thomas Kuhn's terminology, the symbolic aspect would be represented by the metaphysical component of paradigms-the component that gives rise to a certain worldview

This distinction will help us to avoid any confusion regarding the nature of our critique of science. In his view two major points of difference can be discerned while comparing Islamic and modern perspectives on science.

The first concerns the place, role and meaning of reason in human life. Descartes made a clear and neat distinction between mind and body or between "res cogitans" which means "corporeal substance" by Descartes and "res extensa" meaning "extended thing". In summary the mind-body distinction resulted in the separation of nature, matter and body from God, mind and

spirit which had the significant effect of leaving the “inanimate” world free for human to act as he wishes thus paving the way for modern science. Such separation would not be permitted in Islam. In the Islamic view of the word, nature remains ‘enchanted’ because it is a constant remainder of the Divine, nature as a ‘sign’ of Divinity.

The second difference between Islamic and Western perspectives on science pertains to the status and role of matter or body. Some Muslim thinkers insist that the “non-secularization” of reason in Islam brings the Islamic perspective on reason closer to some medieval conceptions of reason such as that found in St. Augustine and distances it from the post-Cartesian accounts of reason in the West, starting with Descartes’ separation of mind from body (Hazim, 2001).

He has on the other hand, emphasised on clarifying the nature and the aim of scientific knowledge and its relationship with the religious knowledge, especially when religion makes certain claims about the natural world that appear to be in a conflict with scientific observations. We must also distinguish between the symbolic and the functional aspects in attempting to formulate a correct approach to science, even from a religious perspective.

The confusion that often arises in making a response to science including a religious response is thus in his view due to our inability to make a distinction between the symbolic and the functional.

It is important to consider the contemporary philosophers’ insights concerning scientific realism. It is important to note that while some philosophers of science subscribe to a realist philosophy of science, others reject realism in favour of a non-realist philosophy. He believes that the distinction has some relevance for an Islamic philosophy of science inasmuch as a non-realist philosophy of science would seem to offer the advantages of granting the legitimacy of scientific practice and scientific theorizing without necessarily making any commitment to the worldview or world picture offered by or on account of science.

To get back to the question of how to deal with the distinction between religious and scientific world view he suggests that this would be possible if we went beyond a literal reading of the relationship on the one hand, between scientific statements and the world and on the other hand, between religious statements and the world.

How to approach this strategy? He suggests that we can draw on the analytical tools provided by the Western as well as by the Islamic philosophy. On the Western side, we can study with benefit the theories of Wittgenstein, Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty in the philosophy of language; on the Islamic side, we can consider the distinction between the two concepts of

truth, namely, those of *sidq* and *haqq*. While *sidq* refers to the linguistic property of truth-claims, *haqq* functions more like Kant’s noumenon or thing-in-itself that is truth as reality in and of itself, which is inaccessible to the ordinary human faculties (Hazim, 2001).

Therefore in this context, scientific theories, especially in physics are viewed not as literal descriptions of the world but as conceptual configurations that in the best case accommodate the existing scientific data.

As an example, the question of whether light is “actually” a wave or a particle is regarded meaningless if the question is understood in the same sense in which we understand an apparently or allegedly similar question such as Is the table round or rectangular? Or is the ball hard or soft? While questions like the latter type are properly framed within the linguistic context of macro objects in the ordinary world, scientific questions such as the former type cannot be similarly understood.

Similarly, coming to Islam, we find that the Qur’an contains two types of statements, *muhkamat* (those which are clear in meaning) and *mutashabihat* (those whose meanings are ambiguous) (Hazim, 2001).

The very fact that Islam recognizes the linguistic category of *mutashabihat* implies that it endorses the view that language and reality can be connected in more ways than one that is there can be more than one way of describing the truth. Thus, Prof. Mohd Hazim Shah proposes that the problem in the so-called conflict between science and religion arises at least in part from our narrow construal of the relationship of language and reality which leads us to make questionable comparisons between statements. Also such a theory of the relationship of language and reality allows both for the religiously symbolic construal of nature-as found in Nasr and for the more functional and pragmatic construal of scientific theories-as found in Hoodbhoy. He emphasises that this is possible because we have moved beyond a narrowly literal correspondence theory of truth and language and have adopted a somewhat flexible, though not relativistic, view of language and reality.

Knowledge is deeply ethical-and more so in Islam-and not even epistemology can be treated independently of ethics as was explained above (Hazim, 2001). We can see that as science and technology occupy a centre-stage in contemporary society and culture, no one can afford to ignore it. Contemporary Muslims must take a bold approach toward modern science and technology and this approach must include an interpretation of how best to respond to the challenges of modern science and technology. In this respect, the guidance of medieval Muslim thinkers and scholars can

take us only so far, our contemporary challenges requiring contemporary modes of thinking and problem solving. He thus emphasises that he is by no means advising the abandoning of the age-old practices of Islam as Islam has not proved to be directly oppressive of the scientific establishment. The medieval position on science has to be understood as one among several positions taken by Muslims on science. He then alleges that he is confident that Islam can accommodate modern science and technology within its normative system and social framework. That confidence will start to disappear only if we accept the Muslim medievalist position on science as the only legitimate Islamic position (Hazim, 2001).

### CONCLUSION

In facing the modern science and technological world, Muslims like many other nations have been trying to define science and development in a local way and of course quit compatible with their moral and religious standard. For doing this, the Islamic thinkers have come up with different theories and behavioral models to define and compare the modern phenomenon with the Islamic principles. In this study, we studied and observed the ideas and theological challenges offered by two of the most prominent Malaysian thinkers in the intellectual society of the country: Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Osman Bakar and Mohd Hazim Shah.

As a firm opponent to secularism, Al-Attas uses “disenchantment of nature” to explain the reason behind secularism in the West. Then, he comes up with this idea that “the science in the west is not what we know to be science... Islamic science is not math or physics or philosophy... that is not science.” As a remedy to this problem he proposes Islamization of science on one hand and believes that the ultimate knowledge is revelation and the only way to obtain it is through the sayings of the religion.

On the other hand we see Osman Bakar who believes that religion is indeed a good recourse of scientific ideas and theories and it is our mistaken will or even pride which makes us not accepting the truth. Thus, he also proposes a phase of Islamization in the thoughts and ideas of the thinkers in the Islamic world.

In the follow up in ideas of Hazim Shah, the question of how to deal with the content of scientific knowledge is approached from within the framework of discourse in contemporary (Western) history and philosophy, especially from the point of view of scientific realism. Although Shah does not start out from an explicitly Islamic framework, he would not want an outcome from his avowed analysis that would conflict with the Islamic

spirit and perspective. Here he has several options, but most of them would preclude a realist view of science, in which scientific theories are regarded as literal descriptions of the world and the way it works. Shah draws from the resources of both history and philosophy of science in this regard. From philosophy of science, he adopts anti-realist arguments against scientific theories, and from the history of science he draws on the distinction made by Peter Dear between science as natural philosophy and science as instrumentality. In fact Shah made a similar distinction in an article published in 2006, between what he calls ‘science as episteme’ and ‘science as techne’. For him, contemporary science is more of ‘techne’ and science has relinquished its position as ‘natural philosophy’ or ‘episteme’ like dear he believes that the efficacy or instrumentality of science has no intrinsic connection with its ontological claims, though he falls short of endorsing Dear’s description of the relationship between the two is ‘ideological’, perpetrated by historical figures such as Francis Bacon. By so doing, Shah avoids conflating between two separate issues in connection with scientific theories; namely its ‘symbolic’ and ‘functional’ aspects. In Hazim (2001) he dwells on the distinction between what he calls the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘functional’ aspects of scientific theories, identifying it with Frege’s ‘sense-reference’ distinction, and relating it to Holton’s idea of ‘themata’ and Kuhn’s notion of ‘paradigm’. For him the contestation by Muslim thinkers such as Nasr and Naguib Al-Attas on the epistemological status of scientific theories, concern the symbolic aspect but not the functional. By making such a separation and distinction he is able to accept science as the basis for modern technology but not as a literal description of the world or its symbolic signifier (e.g., the world as a mechanical clock). Thus, enchantment of the world through religion is still possible under this construal because like Good man’s ‘ways of world making’ we are free to construct a world of symbols and meaning which is not constrained by ‘scientific truth’. For him the ‘sense’ and ‘symbolic’ aspects of theories are cultural concerns and not strictly epistemological ones.

Muslim thinkers such as Nasr, Naguib Al-Attas and Osman Bakar (a student of Nasr), not having delved into (western) history and philosophy of science are devoid of the kind of moves made by Shah, and implicitly attack the symbolic construal of scientific theories and its suggested replacement by Islamic metaphysics. For Shah this could give rise to the mistaken impression that ‘Islamic metaphysics’ can be operation aliased in scientific practice, a mistake made by a young contemporary Muslim thinker such as Adi Setia. Both Nasr and Naguib for instance privileges Islamic metaphysics and

regard scientific knowledge as giving us knowledge about 'lower level realities', whilst the higher realities are revealed through religious knowledge. Shah's construal however has the advantage of not having to specify the exact relationship between the so-called 'higher' and 'lower'-order realities, partly because for him, the metaphysical occupies a separate domain from the rational-empirical and cannot be adequately dealt with by conceptual means.

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