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**SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS'
EXPOSITION ON THE CONCEPT OF ETHICS**

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Abstract

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, is a prominent Malay thinker who has promoted Islamization of present-day knowledge as a solution for the dilemma of Muslims. With that, he has also developed his original thought in various fields. His thought in the field of ethics, the content of *adab*, the central concept in his system of thought, and the essential teaching of Islam, is hardly elaborated. Thanks to that, it seems crucial to look into his view on ethical norms – its basis and principles – in such a way that his Islamization of ethics by means of infusing worldview of Islam into universal concept of ethics – a concept whose definition is universal, because its element can be found in any specific definition belonging to any worldview – can be known subsequently. Theory of Islamization of present-day knowledge – isolation and infusion process – is used for analyzing al-Attas' view on ethical norms and theory of transparent worldview is applied also for analyzing his Islamization of ethics. Finally, according to al-Attas, the basis of ethics is religion approved by sound reason, knowledge, and the freedom of the will, whereas its principles are self-perfection, freedom, true faith and knowledge, happiness, and individual contract. As for his Islamized concept of ethics, it is a permanent attitude, action, assertion, and consideration belonging to

spiritual aspect of man in his relation to his self, God, society, and state.

Keywords: Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas; the concept of ethics; ethical norms; Islamization of ethics.

Khulasah

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas adalah seorang pemikir Melayu terkemuka yang telah mempromosikan Islamisasi ilmu pengetahuan masa kini sebagai penyelesaian kepada dilema umat Islam. Dengan itu, beliau juga telah mengembangkan pemikiran asli beliau dalam pelbagai bidang. Pemikiran beliau dalam bidang etika sebagai kandungan adab, konsep utama dalam sistem pemikiran beliau, dan ajaran arus utama dalam Islam belum lagi dihuraikan. Sebab itu, penting kiranya untuk melihat pandangan beliau tentang norma etika - asas dan prinsipnya - sehingga Islamisasi konsep etika beliau yang dilakukan dengan cara memasukkan pandangan alam Islam ke dalam konsep etika yang universal – suatu konsep yang definisinya bersifat universal kerana elemen-elemen di dalamnya dijumpai pada beberapa definisi khas yang merujuk pada pandangan alam tertentu – boleh diketahui. Teori Islamisasi ilmu pengetahuan masa kini – proses pengasingan dan proses penyerapan – akan digunakan untuk menganalisis pandangan al-Attas tentang norma etika. Selain itu, teori pandangan dunia yang telus juga digunakan untuk menganalisis Islamisasi konsep etika beliau. Akhir sekali, menurut al-Attas, asas etika adalah agama yang dibenarkan oleh akal, pengetahuan, dan kebebasan kehendak, sedangkan prinsipnya ialah kesempurnaan diri, kebebasan, keimanan dan pengetahuan yang benar, kebahagiaan, dan kontrak individu. Sedangkan konsep etika dalam Islam menurut beliau adalah sikap, tindakan, penegasan, dan pertimbangan yang bersifat kekal dan berhubung kait dengan aspek

kerohanian manusia dalam hubungannya dengan diri, Tuhan, masyarakat dan negara.

Kata kunci: Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas; konsep etika; norma etika; Islamisasi etika.

Preliminary

To regard Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, known as al-Attas, as a contemporary and architectonic Malay thinker apparently could not be questioned.¹ Even, he is also a contemporary Muslim scholar who has successfully bridged between intellectual tradition of Muslim in the past and the intellectual tradition of Muslim in this contemporary.² In relation to that, not only was he able to identify the dilemma faced by contemporary Muslims and at the same time he is able to provide a solution for it, through his promising agenda, i.e., Islamization of present-day knowledge,³ but he also had successfully developed his original thought conveying the higher level of Muslim intellectual tradition by means of uniting various traditions such as *kalām*, philosophy and mysticism in Islam in order to point out the unique and peculiar tradition of Islamic intellectualism *vis a vis* that of Western secular intellectualism,⁴ as a kind of a

¹ Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, "Al-Attas: A Real Reformer and Thinker," in *Knowledge, Language, Thought and The Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honour of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas*, ed. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud and Muhammad Zainiy Uthman (Skudai: UTM Press, 2010), 13–57.

² Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1998), 21.

³ Jennifer M. Webb, ed., "Powerful Ideas: Perspectives on the Good Society" (Melbourne: The Cranlana Program, 2002), 231–40; Daud, "Al-Attas: A Real Reformer and Thinker," 13–57.

⁴ Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*, 17–18; Adi Setia, "Al-Attas' Philosophy of Science: An Extended Outline," *Islam & Science* 01(02) (2003), 170.

successful manifestation of his concept of Islamization of present-day knowledge.

His original thought encompasses various fields including philosophy, religion, history, and literature.⁵ In the field of literature, he somehow has successfully clarified the peculiarity of Islamic literature by means of establishing his theory of Islamic Malay literature.⁶ In the field of history, he has successfully developed his concept of Islamic history through his meticulous elucidation on the theory of Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago and on the history of the coming of Islam to the Malay world.⁷ In the field of religion, he has brilliantly clarified the true meaning of religion by means of discovering the true meaning of word (*dīn*) using semantic method, and at the same time, clarifying the relation of religion with culture and civilization through establishing the role of religion in building culture and civilization.⁸ In the field of philosophy, he has systematically conceptualized various problems of philosophy encompassing epistemology, psychology, ontology, and

⁵ Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*, 17; Daud, "Al-Attas: A Real Reformer and Thinker," 23–28.

⁶ Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*, 18; Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Origin of the Malay Sha'ir* (Kuala Lumpur: Ta'dib International, 2018).

⁷ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Preliminary Statement on A General Theory of the Islamization of the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1969); *Islam Dalam Sejarah Dan Kebudayaan Melayu* (Kuala Lumpur: Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), 1990); *Historical Fact and Fiction* (Kuala Lumpur: UTM Press, 2011).

⁸ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," in *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995).

axiology.⁹ Besides brilliant and original, his thought interestingly has successfully clarified, elaborated, and connected fundamental and established ideas having been ignored by some and misunderstood by other, with other areas of the intellectual and cultural lives of contemporary Muslims.¹⁰

Owing to the aforementioned above, this seems no wonder why his notions concerning various problems has become an interesting subject to be critically studied. The very clear and elaborative study on his thought has been comprehensively made by Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud.¹¹ Moreover, his concept of Islamization of present-day knowledge has been studied by Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud,¹² Rosnani Hashim & Imron Rossidi¹³ his concept of language by Syamsuddin Arif¹⁴ and Salina Ahmad;¹⁵ his concept of knowledge, science and their related issues

⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995).

¹⁰ Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*, 17–18.

¹¹ Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*.

¹² Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, "Islamization of Contemporary Knowledge: A Brief Comparison between Al-Attas and Fazlur Rahman," *al-Shajarah: Journal of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC)* 2(1) (1997): 1–19; Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *Islamization of Contemporary Knowledge and the Role of the University in the Context of the De-Westernization and Decolonization* (Malaysia: Penerbit UTM Press, 2013).

¹³ Rosnani Hashim and Imron Rossidy, "Islamization of Knowledge : A Comparative Analysis of the Conceptions of Al-Attas and Al-Faruqi," *Intellectual Discourses* 8(1) (2000), 11–44.

¹⁴ Syamsuddin Arif, "Preserving the Semantic Structure of Islamic Key Terms and Concepts: Izutsu, Al-Attas, and Al-Raghib Al-Isfahani," *Islam & Science* 05(02) (2007).

¹⁵ Salina Ahmad, "Al-Attas Conception of Language and His Utilization of Semantic Analysis" Thesis for Doctorate, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 2017.

by Alparslan Acikgenc¹⁶ and Adi Setia;¹⁷ his concept of history, by Tatiana Denisova¹⁸ and Siti Nor Aisyah Ngadiran.¹⁹ Apart from those various studies, it is hardly found deep study on his profound concept of ethics. In fact, this concept by and large is a very pivotal concept in al-Attas' system of thought. In the one hand, it actually becomes a content of his concept of *adab*, the centre concept in his system of thought in which he eventually promotes Islamization of present-day knowledge to overcome the dilemma of contemporary Muslims.²⁰ But in another hand, it becomes the very essence of the teaching of Islam on which al-Attas devotes his elaboration, until he is successfully able to academically argue that religion of Islam is the basis of culture and civilization, especially Islamic culture and civilization.²¹

Interestingly, along with elucidating his view on ethical norms, not only does al-Attas identify *universal concept of ethics* – a concept the definition of which is universal, because its essential elements found in any

¹⁶ Alparslan Acikgenc, *Islamic Science: Toward A Definition* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1996).

¹⁷ Setia, "Al-Attas' Philosophy of Science: An Extended Outline."

¹⁸ Tatiana Denisova, "Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' Concept of History: Methods, Sources, and Contemporary Challenges," in *Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas Symposium: Philosophical and Civilizational Dimensions* (Kuala Lumpur: RZS-CASIS, UTM, 2020).

¹⁹ Siti Nor Aisyah Ngadiran, "Konsep Sejarah Islam Dalam Perspektif Ibn Khaldun Dan Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: Suatu Perbandingan Awal" Persidangan Antarabangsa Islam dalam Masyarakat Malaysia (5-6 Okt 2010: Universiti Malaya, Kuala Lumpur). Prosiding, prakata : Arba'iyah Mohd. Noor (Kuala Lumpur: Jabatan Sejarah, Fakulti Sastera dan Sains Sosial, Universiti Malaya, 2010), 2 (389-402). (Universiti Malaya, 2010).

²⁰ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 14–19; Daud, *The Educational Philosophy*, 69–76.

²¹ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality."

specific definition of ethics belonging to any worldview – by means of isolating key concepts from the Western secular worldview attached to the secular concept of ethics, but he also clarifies the Islamized concept of ethics by means of infusing key concepts from the worldview of Islam into that universal definition of ethics. Thanks to that, it seems important in this regard to look carefully into al-Attas' view on ethical norms including its basis and principles as well as his view on the universal concept of ethics and the Islamized concept of ethics. In order that, theory of Islamization of present-day knowledge consisting of both isolation and infusion process, will be used for elaborating his view on ethical norms. At the same time, theory of "transparent worldview" or "systematic worldview formation" the elements of which are world structure, knowledge structure, and value and human structure, will be used too for critically analyzing his universal concept of ethics and his Islamized concept of ethics. Hence, this article will be commenced with the elaboration on al-Attas' view on the universal concept of ethics and subsequently, it will be continued with the elaboration on al-Attas' view on the basis and principles of ethics before finally inferring his Islamized concept of ethics.

Al-Attas' View on the Universal Concept of Ethics

Since al-Attas holds that all sciences conceived on the basis of secular worldview had caused men confuse and sceptic,²² he endeavors to conceptualize various problems belong to certain sciences including ethics on the basis of worldview of Islam.²³ Aiming at conceptualizing the

²² Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), 1978), 127.

²³ See, al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 41–89; al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin* (Kuala Lumpur: Institut Antarabangsa Pemikiran dan

problem of ethics on the basis of worldview of Islam, he firstly clarifies the universal concept of ethics which is shared by all culture and civilizations including Western culture and civilization that has conceptualized it on the basis of secular worldview, and into which he subsequently infuses worldview of Islam and modifies it, in such a way that Islamized concept of ethics could be obtained. Clarifying that universal concept of ethics which is free from any interpretation and modification made on the basis of various worldviews, he begins with meticulously isolating key concepts of secular worldview having been infused into that universal concept of ethics until it becomes secularized concept of ethics.²⁴ In this regard, on the basis of al-Attas' view, the universal concept of ethics before being secularized will be carefully elaborated. But before that, the secularized concept of ethics including its presuppositions – key concepts of secular worldview- underpinning it and having been isolated from it, will be meticulously elucidated.

Depicting the secularized concept of ethics, al-Attas suggests that not only is the concept considered humanistic in such a way that it has discarded the religious and divine aspect, for it pertains to physical aspect of man which is linked with society and state, but it is also regarded as relative in such a way that it is subject to changing because of the changing of circumstances to which society and state are attached.²⁵ The former leads to the occurrence of the understanding that something is ethical, whenever it is corresponded with the demands of society and state. Whereas the later, it leads to the view

Tamadun Islam (ISTAC), 2001), 81–84; al-Attas, *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu Dan Pandangan Alam* (Pulau Pinang: Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, 2007), 63–68.

²⁴ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 81–82.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 83.

that something is ethical in the present time may be unethical in the future time or something ethical in one place may be unethical in other places.²⁶ Therefore, that secular concept of ethics is that it is a relative attitude, action, assertion, and consideration belonging to physical aspect of man in his relation to his society and state.²⁷ In his *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin* (Message for Muslim Society), he says:

.... and it is an attitude, action, assertion with consideration which has similar relation with only problem physical, societal, and political; and which is subject to changing. (*....dan ia adalah sikap dan perbuatan dan penilaian serta pertimbangan yang juga mirip kepada perkara jasmaniah dan masyarakat dan negara semata-mata, dan yang senantiasa menempuh perubahan.*)²⁸

To interpret and modify that ethics pertains to only physical aspect of man in relation with his society and state, and then it is considered relative due to the relativity of society and state, is the very peculiar aspect of secular concept towards which al-Attas meticulously devote his critique. This is due to the fact that, according to al-Attas, if ethics was understood secularly, it will not lead men to become perfect in their spirituality which is their very essence. Rather, it will only lead men to become perfect in their physicality which is not their very essence. In another word, they will only become a good society or good citizen, despite the fact that they are not a good man who realizes their real origin and destiny as well as his real duty and responsibility or otherwise. In short, they are

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 82–83; al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 82–83, 86.

²⁷ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 83.

²⁸ *Ibid.*.

in the state of identity crisis.²⁹ Moreover, he adds, not only can that secular concept lead to the understanding that life is only in this world and then, there is no life in another world other than this world, the afterlife, but it also leads to the understanding that the essence of man is only his physical entity which always changes its shape from being baby and teenager to becoming gradually adult and old, and hence, is not his spiritual entity that is somehow permanent and becomes the driving force of his physical entity. In short, that secular concept leads to the denial of things metaphysical and to the affirmation only of things physical.³⁰

Having identified how ethics has been unjustly conceived and how that unjust concept of ethics has brought about chaos in man's life, al-Attas devotes his efforts to isolate various key concepts of secular worldview to free the universal concept of ethics from their influences until he is then able to propose an alternative concept of ethics on the basis of worldview of Islam. Those isolated key concepts belonging to secular worldview – whose vision of reality and truth as well as of life as a whole is dualistic in which the physical realm of nature including man himself is separated from its spiritual realm and then stresses the validity of its physical and secular realm, so much so that, its spiritual realm is uncounted or ignored in toto³¹ – are such the concept of

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 84; al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 81–83; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 15–17.

³⁰ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 83–84; al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 86–88; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 15–17.

³¹ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 20, 202–3; Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 128–32; al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1999), 44.

rationalism as the knowledge structure of secular worldview, the concept of naturalism as its world structure, and the concept of individualism as its human and value structure. In this regard, it seems the later concept, individualism, the role of which, he clarifies, is very crucial in term of modifying and interpreting the universal concept of ethics in such a way that it becomes secular theory of ethics.³² This is due to the fact that in the concept of individualism, he adds, there are other various concepts because of which the secular concept of individualism is constituted. Those other concepts include the concept of man, freedom, social contract, and happiness.³³

With regard to rationalism, al-Attas suggests that it is a method of knowledge that tends to depend on reason alone without the aid of sense perception and it is called philosophic rationalism, or that tends to rely more on sense experience while accepting reason and it is called secular rationalism.³⁴ Since it depends very much on reason alone, it then rejects other methods of knowledge such as intuition and revelation. In addition, it then reduces the object of knowledge to only the natural order of events and their relationship perceived by cognitive faculty and sense.³⁵ Viewed from this outlook, the ethics, therefore, can be considered valid when it is based on reason only and not from revelation. Furthermore, since rationalism regards the object of knowledge is only natural world, it is throughout naturalism, al-Attas adds, that the

³² Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 81–82.

³³ *Ibid.*, 81–84; al-Attas, *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu Dan Pandangan Alam*, 63–68.

³⁴ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, "Islam and the Philosophy of Science," in *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), 115.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 115–116.

natural world including the nature of man, is interpreted. From the view of naturalism, this natural world is considered an independent and eternal universe, so that, its existence has been divested of any cosmic significance and severed its symbolical connection with God.³⁶ Also, it is a self-subsistent system evolving according to its own laws, so that, its coming into being is out of each other and its existence is a progression, development, or evolution of what lies in latency in eternal matter.³⁷ Hence, to considered ethics relative due to the relativity of natural world including the nature of man himself, can be regarded as valid and reasonable.

From both rationalism and naturalism, it has been already clear cut how ethics has been conceived merely as thing physical and consequently, relative. However, it will be clearer in the sense that it pertains only to thing physical, societal, and political, when it is viewed from the perspective of individualism which is isolated also by al-Attas from being the basis of interpreting the universal concept of ethics. This is due to the fact that the real nature of man basically is its physical entity rather than its spiritual one. This physical entity, in this regard, consists only of his practical reason (*akal jasmani*) and animality (*tabiat hayawāniyah*).³⁸ This seems the reason why, al-Attas assures, Western culture and civilization since its ancient period, accentuates very much the man's youthfulness (*kebeliaan*) having been manifested basically in its philosophy of education and art. In education, for instance, music, gymnastic and sport has become its

³⁶ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 194–95; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*; al-Attas, "Islam and the Philosophy of Science," 115.

³⁷ Al-Attas, "Islam and the Philosophy of Science," 115; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 35–38.

³⁸ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 83; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 35.

pivotal curriculum, whereas in art, the youth body has become a symbol for human beauty as well as fine art of painting, sculpture, and carving. Hence, it has no place for old man to be a role model in either education or art.³⁹

Since the nature of man has been reduced to only his practical reason and animality, what is called "freedom" in individualism, al-Attas says, pertains to the act of liberating man's physical entity from any moral rules and laws (*undang-undang dan hukum akhlakiah*) determined by religion, for religion in Western culture and civilization, actually is no more than a prison of man's freedom. It has been considered as a hindrance of man to progress, change, and develop.⁴⁰ Similarly, in the case of benefiting natural resources, what is called "freedom" from perspective of individualism, al-Attas continues, connotes the act of controlling natural world (*alam tabī'ī*) or naturally external world (*alam luar semulajadi*) which is considered the basis of anything material or corporeal, for the sake of fulfilling man's physical desires.⁴¹ This is due to the fact that natural world, in Western culture and civilization, by and large is a mere object of utility that has only a functional significance and values for scientific and technical management and for man.⁴²

In addition to that centrality of physical man over natural world including the man himself, individualism, in al-Attas' view, is also constituted by what is called social contract from which ethical standards are measured.⁴³ It is a covenant man has sealed with society or state to share common good or social good. In another word, something is considered good or ethical, if it is in accord with the

³⁹ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 82.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 15–16.

⁴¹ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 82; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 35.

⁴² Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 35.

⁴³ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 84.

demand of society and bad or unethical, if otherwise.⁴⁴ Therefore, duty and responsibility that man has, are directed merely toward social good and harmony in the state.⁴⁵ In this regard, it does not matter whether one is good man or not as long as he is a good society or good citizen.

Furthermore, individualism, in al-Attas' observation, is attached with the notion of happiness understood by Western culture and civilization, as a goal of ethical life towards which man devotes his efforts, beside that of social contract.⁴⁶ That notion has been understood in two ways. The first is what has been understood by Aristotle in the ancient Greece, who maintains that happiness pertains only to this world, that is, an end in itself. Its state undergoes changes and variations in degrees from moment to moment. Its state somehow cannot be consciously experienced from moment to moment, but the attainment of it can be judge when one's worldly life has come to an end. That is if one lived virtuously and attended by good fortune.⁴⁷ The second is what has been understood gradually in modern time by the West through process of secularization and acknowledged by the West today to be prevalent.⁴⁸ Although it is similar with the ancient concept

⁴⁴ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 64.

⁴⁵ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 84; al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 64.

⁴⁶ Al-Attas, *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu Dan Pandangan Alam*, 63–67.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 65; al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam*, 34–35; "The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam," in *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), 94–95.

⁴⁸ Al-Attas, *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu Dan Pandangan Alam*, 65; al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam*, 34–35; al-Attas, "The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam," 94–95.

concerning the fact that it relates only to this world, that is, an end in itself, it is different with the ancient in term of what its end is. The former, in this case, considers that it should be based on standard of proper conduct, whereas the later regards that it should not be, for it is a psychological state of one who is conscious about it and it has its beginning and its end once it is attained.⁴⁹

From the aforementioned elaboration, it is those key concepts of secular worldview basically that have become the basis of secularizing the universal concept of ethics in such a way that it is regarded as something related to physic, society, and state, and being relative or subject to changing. In this case, it can be inferred that when al-Attas isolates all those key concepts of secular worldview, he indirectly attempts to convey that there is actually universal element the existence of which in any specific definition of ethics – either secular or Islamic – is very essential. Thus, it is agreed and shared by all cultures and civilizations and becomes the generic essence in their specific concept of ethics. In another word, it is universal definition of ethics. It means a definition that can be considered secular or Islamic whenever it becomes generic essence and at the same time it is interpreted and modified with another specific element or concept belonging to either secular or Islamic worldview as the specific difference of the secular or Islamic definition of ethics. Hence, the universal definition of ethics, according to him, is "any [man's] attitudes (*sikap*), actions (*perbuatan*), assertions (*penilaian*), and considerations (*pertimbangan*)."⁵⁰ From this universal definition, ethics has not been restricted to only what man as a man, ought to do including action and assertion. Rather, it covers also

⁴⁹ Al-Attas, *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu Dan Pandangan Alam*, 65; al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam*, 35; al-Attas, "The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam," 95.

⁵⁰ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 83.

what man as a man, ought to behave encompassing attitude and consideration. In addition, it has to do with what ought to do practically such as action and attitude or theoretically such as assertion and consideration.

Interestingly, that universal definition of ethics by and large can be found as a universal concept from which any elaboration on the problem of ethics is departed. For instance, introducing his book of ethics, Ibn Miskawayh, the greater Muslim philosopher of ethics, mentions "Our aim in this book is to have for our selves ethics from which the whole of our good actions come..."⁵¹ Mentioning two prerequisites for the attainment of happiness, Imam al-Ghazali, a prominent Muslim thinker, says "it ought to know *a science (al-'ilm)* and the distinction between it and other than it throughout the scale that we have already free from [the explanation about] it, and ought to know *a happy action (al-'amal al-mus'ad)* and the distinction between it and *a misery action (al-'amal al-mushqī)* that needs also to the scale."⁵² In addition, constructing his system of ethics the principle of which is self-preservation for social harmony, Thomas Hobbes, the first modern ethical theorist, formulates what is called "law of nature," that is, "every man *ought to endeavour* to peace and as far as he has hope of obtaining it."⁵³ Differentiating between philosophy of nature and of moral, Emanuel Kant, the greater Western philosopher of ethics, mentions that "the philosophy of nature pertains to everything *that is*; that of morals only to *that which should be*."⁵⁴ Hence, it seems no wonder why in the introduction of the entry concerning "History of Ethics" in *The*

⁵¹ Ibn Miskawayh, *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-Jamāl, 2011), 233.

⁵² Al-Ghazālī, *Mīzān al-'Amal* (Misr: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1964), 179.

⁵³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: The Green Dragon, 1651), 80.

⁵⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 695.

Encyclopedia of Philosophy, it is commenced with the saying:

The central questions of philosophical ethics are: What do we or should we mean by "good" or "bad"? What are the right standards for judging things to be good or bad? How do judgments of good and bad (value judgment) differ from and depend upon judgment of value-neutral fact? But when those questions are answered, it is important to find out the difference between specific types of value judgments that are characterized by such adjectives as *useful, right, moral, and just*.⁵⁵

Al-Attas' View on Ethical Norms

Having isolated key concepts of secular worldview from which secular concept of ethics is conceived and found out the universal concept of ethics, al-Attas continues his endeavour with infusing into that universal concept of ethics certain key concepts of worldview of Islam in order to conceive it Islamically. Among those key concepts from the worldview of Islam infused into that universal concept are such concept of knowledge (*'ilm* and *ma'rifah*), of religion (*dīn*), of man (*insān*), of justice (*'adl*), of right action (*'amal* as *adab*). Those concepts and other concepts related to them are pivotal concepts by and large made up of either knowledge, or world, or human and value structure of worldview of Islam.⁵⁶ By means of that, al-Attas in one hand elaborates his view on ethical norms and in another hand, *he proposes the Islamized concept of ethics*. In this regard, it seems a better time now to look into his view on ethical norms encompassing his

⁵⁵ Raziel Abelson and Kai Neilson, "History of Ethics," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Michigan: Thomson Gale, 2006), 394.

⁵⁶ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 155–57; Alparslan Acikgenc, *Islamic Scientific Tradition in History* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit IKIM, 2014).

view on its basis, and its principles, before subsequently identifying his Islamized concept of ethics.

On the Basis of Ethics

With regard to what the basis of ethics is, al-Attas has a very clear stand, as he maintains that it is religion (*dīn*) and it is not philosophy or speculative reasoning.⁵⁷ In his *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin*, he writes "In fact, the concept of ethics (*akhlak*) and morality (*amalan akhlakiah*) held by Western culture basically is different with what has been understood and practice in Islam. According to them, ethics is derived from philosophy and not from religion."⁵⁸

In his monograph elaborating what Islam is, he explicitly expounds based on what he understood from the Qur'ān, the Tradition of the Prophet, and the consensus understanding of luminaries of Islam in the past that the basis of ethics is religion (*dīn*) and religion he means is Islam, hence, the title of his monograph "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality."⁵⁹ However, what is more interesting, in this case, is that elaborating religion by means of semantic, he explicates key concepts such as the concept of indebtedness (*dana*), submissiveness (*dā'in*), judicious power (*daynunah*), natural inclination or tendency (*idannah*), pointing out how religion has a very close relation with the nature of man, of knowledge, of the freedom of the will, of life, and of duty and responsibility.⁶⁰ From those key concepts, he then

⁵⁷ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 83; Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Surah al-Nisa' (4): 58 and Surah al-Mu'minun (23): 12-14* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2015), 10–11.

⁵⁸ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 83.

⁵⁹ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 41.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 41–42.

elaborates not only the basis of ethics, but also its principles.

Although al-Attas maintains that the basis of ethics is religion, he hardly means that it is not based on man's reason. Or even, it is not based also on man's freedom of will pertaining to his intellectual purpose, pursuing knowledge, and practical purposes, performing activities.⁶¹ Following Imam al-Ghazālī, he in this case, holds that whatever is out of religion is rational and whatever comes from the sound reason is religious. It means that any actions based on religion is accord with those based on sound reason and even man's freedom of will. Hence, it seems clear cut that al-Attas does not conceive ethics in dualistic manner, that is, if ethics is based on religion, it is considered religious ethics and if it is based on reason, it is rational ethics. Rather he conceives it in united (*tawhidic*) manner.⁶² It means that ethics can be understood from the nature of religion, of sound reason, of knowledge, and man's freedom of the will. In another word, something is considered ethical, when it is accepted by religion, sound reason, knowledge, and man's freedom of will. In short, religious ethics is rational ethics and rational ethics is religious ethics.

Understanding that religion is indebtedness or consciousness of being indebted, al-Attas explains that all men basically are indebted to God, his Creator and Provider, for He has brought them into existence and maintaining them in their existence. Let alone, their very self or soul actually has already acknowledged God as his Lord, even before their existence as a man, so that all men recognize their Creator and Cherisher and Sustainer.⁶³

⁶¹ Al-Attas, *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu Dan Pandangan Alam*, 63; al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 82–83.

⁶² Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam*, 3,118.

⁶³ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 45–46.

With that consciousness, all men indirectly recognize to whom their debt is owed, God, and at the same time, they will naturally return their selves to repay their debt by means of doing service (*khidmah*) to God on the basis of His Law.⁶⁴ This natural inclination to serve God inevitably indicates their willing submission to the Law of God. The form in which submission is enacted or expressed is the form of religion. This form includes the manner of institution of belief and faith, the manner of expression of the law, and the manner of religious attitude and ethical and moral conduct.⁶⁵ Hence, it is crystal clear that ethics is inevitable based on religion.

Considering that religion means natural inclination, al-Attas apparently tries to convey how the nature of religion, above mentioned, slightly corresponds with the natural state of men, called *fitrah*, the pattern according to which God has created all things.⁶⁶ It means that the nature of religion along with its forms can be rationally accepted by rational soul of men, their real nature, which is spiritual rather than physical. Moreover, it is actually their rational soul that has recognized their God to Whom they must repay their debt. Let alone, it is their rational soul to which God has thought knowledge.⁶⁷ Owing to that, since men's soul has two aspects namely, the higher, rational soul and the lower, animal soul, it is their rational soul that should become a king whose power and rule should exert over animal soul which is rendered submissive to it. This is due the fact that their animal soul can astray their rational soul from what it has recognized,

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 46–47.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 53–54.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 51–52, 71; al-Attas, "The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul," in *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), 143–44.

that is, God and His Law or religion, if their rational soul does not constantly keep watch over it (*murāqabah*).⁶⁸ Therefore, it can be undoubtedly inferred that whatever is ethical by religion is considered ethical by sound reason and anything regarded as ethical by sound reason will always be in accordance with anything religiously ethical. If that is the case and rational soul consists of active intellect, the principles of movement of human body, called practical reason, and cognitive intellect which is predisposed to the management of universal forms separated from matter,⁶⁹ it is clear cut that ethics is actually based on reason.

Once religion is regarded as judicious power, it somehow points out that al-Attas attempts to suggest that in one aspect, the nature of religion indirectly denoting the existence of God, the King of the Day of Judgment and Requit, Whose Will and Pleasure become the basis of men's service;⁷⁰ and the King Who Governs His Kingdom on earth, as The Supreme Sovereign Whose Will and Law and Ordinances and Commands and Prohibitions hold absolute sway.⁷¹ In another aspect, that nature of religion corresponds with the nature of knowledge. This is due to the fact that knowledge basically is of two kinds. The first is given by God to men in such a way that they, due to God's grace and their own latent spiritual power and capacity, know their selves or soul leading to knowing God. The second is acquired by men through their own effort of rational inquiry based upon experience and

⁶⁸ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 58–59; al-Attas, "The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul," 146–47; al-Attas, "The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam," 97.

⁶⁹ Al-Attas, "The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul," 155–56.

⁷⁰ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 49–50.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

observation.⁷² Hence, like religion, knowledge too denotes the proper place of God in the order of being and existence together with the proper place of things in the order of creation.⁷³ Let alone, knowledge about God and His proper place as well as things and their proper place, by and large has been bestowed by God to the spiritual aspect of men since they have not yet been created as men.⁷⁴ In this regard, having knowledge inevitable leads men to always doing justice due to properly placing things in their own place, and avoiding injustice towards anything generally and their selves particularly.⁷⁵ Even, knowledge is also considered as worship (*ibādah*) in its final and advance stage made by true and loyal servant who gains intimacy with his Lord and Master.⁷⁶ Therefore, it is no wonder that ethics is based on knowledge.

As for conveying religion as submissiveness, it seems likely that al-Attas wants to point out that the nature of religion is not a prison of men's freedom of will or a hindrance of men to progress, change, and develop. Rather, it basically is a form of willing submission towards which spiritual aspect of men constantly heads and directs their physical aspect. This is due to the fact that spiritual aspect of men has Covenant with God and agreed to be His servant whose act of service called *ibadah* is all conscious and willing acts of service for the

⁷² Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality"; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 138.

⁷³ Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 26.

⁷⁴ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 46, 71.

⁷⁵ Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 22; al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 67–68.

⁷⁶ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 60.

sake of God alone and approved by Him.⁷⁷ Since then, the whole ethical life of the whole men basically is one continues *ibadah*. In another word, men's willing act of service, *ibadah*, for the sake of God is an act belonging to men's true nature demands, or men's freedom of will.⁷⁸ In this case, men actually have succeeded in curbing his animal and carnal passions and inconsequent have rendered submissive their animal soul in such a way that their animal soul becomes subject to their rational soul. Men too is regarded as those who have fulfilled the purpose of their creation and existence, have achieved supreme peace and their soul is pacified, being set at liberty, as it were, free from the fetters of inexorable fate and the noisy strife and hell of human vices. This spiritual station of men's rational soul is called as the pacified or tranquil soul (*al-nafs al-muṭma'innah*).⁷⁹ Hence, it is no doubt that ethics is based on men's freedom of will.

From the foregoing elaborations, even though al-Attas explicitly suggests that the basis of ethics is religion, he indirectly suggests that its basis encompasses sound reason, knowledge, and men's freedom of will too. This is because religion and knowledge naturally are interrelated in the nature of man, the original nature in which God has created him (*al-fitrah*). Moreover, when he maintains that the basis of ethics is religion which means Islam, he means that this religion of Islam is a religion which is already perfected and mature, needing no process of growing up to maturity. This is due to the fact that in it, is ascribed the truth of being a truly revealed religion, perfected, needing no historical explanation and evaluation, and the essentials of which is given by Revelation, interpreted and demonstrated by the Holy Prophet in his words and model actions, not from cultural

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 58–59.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

traditions that mush flow in the stream of historicism. Viewed from the nature of both man and religion, which is permanent and stable, it is inevitably crystal clear that ethics inconsequent is permanent, stable, and it is not relative, subject to changing.

On The Principles of Ethics

After understanding al-Attas' view on the basis of ethics in the previous elaboration, it seems a better position now to carefully look into his view on the principles of ethics, i.e., a basic general truth becoming foundation of ethics. In his monograph, it is already crystal clear that he holds that it is religion of Islam that the very foundation of ethics and morality (*akhlāq*).⁸⁰ This is due to the fact that religion of Islam in truth is an actual reality intimately and profoundly live in human experiences.⁸¹ In this regard, he explains:

It emulates the pattern or form according to which God governs His Kingdom and it is an imitation of the cosmic order manifested in here in the worldly life as a social as well as political order.⁸²

With regard to that social order, it pertains, al-Attas clarifies, to a relation between one and another, between one and he himself, and more fundamental, between he himself and his God. This is because aspects of man, he argues, encompass his physical, material, and spiritual existence.⁸³ In addition, since he regards that social order is Kingdom of God on earth and man is mere His vicegerent given trusts of government to rule according to

⁸⁰ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality."

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 41–42; al-Attas, "Islam and the Philosophy of Science," 111.

⁸² Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 55.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

His will and pleasure, man ought to rule the self through his self, for the trust basically refers to responsibility and freedom of the self to do justice to itself. In order to rule properly until the trust can be successfully fulfilled and realized, every man with his latent capacity and power bestowed upon him by God, should strive himself to perfect his service and devotion, *'ibādah*, in the manner approve by God, his Absolute Master.⁸⁴ That this such continuous service and devotion is counted as ethical life of man of Islam by and large leads to man's achievement of his self-perfection, freedom, true faith and knowledge, happiness, and individual contract. What follows will be the elaboration on each one of those four as what al-Attas seemingly considers principles of ethics. In this regard he says:

When we say "rule", we do not simply mean to refer to the socio-political sense of 'ruling', for we mean by it also, indeed far more fundamentally so, the rule of one's self by itself, since the trust refers to responsibility and freedom of the self to do justice to itself. Of this last statement, we shall have recourse to elaborate presently, since what is meant reveals the very principle of Islamic ethics and morality.⁸⁵

As far as self-perfection is concerned, al-Attas suggests that every man basically has a latent power and capacity to become a perfect man.⁸⁶ This perfect man is somewhere called also a good man or man of *adab* who recognizes his proper place in human order arranged hierarchically and legitimately into various degree of excellence on the basis of the Qur'anic criteria of

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

intelligence, knowledge and virtue, and acts accordingly. The role model of this perfect man is Holy Prophet.⁸⁷ Owing to that, man of Islam is presupposed to be a man that emerges in him of the higher type of man capable of lofty aspirations towards self-improvement, actualization of that latent power and capacity man has. This is because man of Islam basically is a city dweller, a cosmopolitan, who lives a civilized life according to clearly defined foundations of social order and codes of conduct. Else, he is a man who obeys Divine Law, endeavours towards realizing true justice, and strives after right knowledge.⁸⁸ Those such conducts man has, are motivated with the hope to gain eternal blessedness, to enter into state of supreme peace which he may perchance foretaste here, God's City on the earth or which shall be vouchsafed to him in hereafter, another God's City on other than this earth, when he becomes a dweller, a citizen of that City wherein his ultimate bliss shall be the beholding of the Glorious Countenance of the King.⁸⁹ Having this such consciousness and attempting to realize it in the whole life, all man's activities could be counted as religious. Since religion is the basis of ethics, those activities consequently can be considered ethical activities.

With regard to freedom, al-Attas maintains that it is an act of choosing between good things for the better and not between good and bad things.⁹⁰ That choice for the better (*ikhtiyār*) is left to a man, for in one hand, God actually has equipped him with the powers and faculties of right vision and apprehension, of real savouring of truth,

⁸⁷ Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 26–27.

⁸⁸ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 57–58.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁹⁰ Al-Attas, *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu Dan Pandangan Alam*, 63; al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam*, 33; al-Attas, "The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam," 93.

of right speech and communication, and in another hand, has indicated to him the right and the wrong with respect to the course of action he should take until he might strive to attain his bright destiny.⁹¹ However, like Islam being kingdom or social order, man is too a kingdom in miniature, where his soul governs his body as God governs the Universe. In addition, like man having dual nature viz., physical and spiritual, man's soul too has dual nature viz., the higher, rational soul and the lower, animal or carnal soul. Rational soul as the real nature of man, should be a king and exert its power and rule over the animal soul which is subject to it and must be rendered submissiveness to it.⁹² This is because in man's rational soul that God has bestowed above equipment and indication and it is man's rational soul that testified his Lord upon itself and agreed to do all conscious and willing acts of service for the sake of God alone and proved by Him.⁹³

Therefore, man who continuously acts of serving God actually is a man who has succeeded in curbing his animal and carnal passions and has thereby rendered submissive his animal soul so that it becomes subject to rational soul.⁹⁴ Also, he is regarded as a man who has attained to freedom, for he has fulfilled the purpose of his creation and existence, has achieved supreme peace, and his soul is pacified, being liberty as it were, free from the fetters of inexorable fate and the noisy strife and hell of human vices.⁹⁵ In this regard, since the effective power

⁹¹ Al-Attas, "The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul," 145.

⁹² Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 55–56.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 59, 71.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59–60; *Tinjauan Ringkas Peri Ilmu Dan Pandangan Alam*, 63–64; *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 82.

and rule continuously exercised by rational soul and having implication to physical acts of man is subjective, personal, individual sense of relationship, or religious life.⁹⁶ That affective power and rule of rational soul including its implication in physical aspect of man, can be counted as ethical life.

Pertaining to true faith (*iman*) and knowledge (*'ilm* and *ma'rifah*), both are, according to al-Attas, different state, despite interconnected. That both are interconnected is due to the fact that both are prerequisite of love of God, for it is knowledge (*ma'rifah*) guided with true faith (*iman*) that causes the heart arrives at the state of peace, security, and tranquillity when it perceived permanent state of consciousness, i.e., certainty.⁹⁷ That both are different is due to the fact that faith is both assent of the heart (*qalb*) and mind (*'aql*) confirmed by the tongue (*lisān*) as well as deed and work (*'amal*).⁹⁸ It becomes the source of principal virtues and their subdivisions. Its origin in man's soul comes from divine guidance in the form of consciousness of certainty of the truth (*yaqīn*).⁹⁹ Having this consciousness in man's soul will lead him to the obedience and loyalty both to God as well as to the Holy Prophet as manifestation of his accepting wholeheartedly the Truth of the Testimony (*kalimah shahādah*) – that there is no God but Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.¹⁰⁰ In this regard, since there will be no real assent of hearth and mind confirmed by tongue without deed and work, there will

⁹⁶ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 58.

⁹⁷ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 36.

⁹⁸ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 61–62; al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam*, 34.

⁹⁹ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam*, 34.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 62.

not be harmonious relationship established between both the soul and the body without true faith.¹⁰¹ It is clear cut that since true faith is part and parcel of religion, any activities on the basis of true faith can be regarded as religious activities. Because religion of the basis of ethics, those activities guided by true faith can be counted ethical.

Whereas knowledge, it is of two kinds. The first is that given by God to man (*ma'rifah*), and the second is acquired by man through his own effort of rational inquiry on the basis of experience and observation (*'ilm*).¹⁰² The first is the highest knowledge, for it pertains to man's self or soul giving insight into knowledge of God.¹⁰³ It is revealed by God to man's rational soul through its organ of spiritual communication and cognition such as the heart (*al-qalb*), which knows Him, the spirit (*al-rūh*), which loves Him, and the secret or inmost ground of the soul (*al-sirr*), which contemplates Him.¹⁰⁴ In addition, since it is depended upon God's grace, it entails prerequisites and conditions. Its prerequisites are knowledge of the essential of Islam (*arkān al-Islām* and *arkān al-Īmān*), their meanings and purpose and correct understanding and implementation in everyday life and practice. Having this knowledge and acting accordingly, man basically has arrived at the initial stage of this first knowledge (*ma'rifah*). For further progress on the pilgrims' part, it is depended upon his own performance and sincerity of purpose. If his acts of service to God progress or develop from being acts as though God sees him to being acts as though he sees Him, he has arrived at the highest virtu

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 68; *Islam and Secularism*, 138.

¹⁰³ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 68–69; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 139.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 71.

(*ihsān*).¹⁰⁵ As for conditions to have the first knowledge, it encompasses firstly, the desire by the one who gives knowledge about himself to be known; secondly, the giving of such knowledge pertains to the level of being; thirdly, to be allowed to approach and know him; fourthly, his giving knowledge about himself is based on trust after a considerable period of testing of the other's sincerity and loyalty and devotion and capacity to receive.¹⁰⁶

The second is discursive and deductive knowledge, for it is related with objects of pragmatical value. It is acquired through reason, experience, and observation.¹⁰⁷ Unlike the first knowledge whose limit is clear cut, the second knowledge has no limit obtained. So that, the second knowledge should be limited only to man's own practical needs and suited to his nature and capacity. In addition, different from the knowledge of the prerequisites of the first which is obligatory for all man (*farḍ 'ayn*), the second is obligatory to some men only (*farḍ kifāyah*), for all knowledge of prerequisites of the first is good for man, whereas not all of the second is good for him. However, when someone deems themselves duty-bound to seek the second category for their self-improvement, it can become the first category.¹⁰⁸ Having only this second knowledge, man will be confused and confounded and enmeshed in labyrinth of endless and purposeless seeking. But, with the guidance of the spirit of the first knowledge, man actually can escape from that confusion.¹⁰⁹ In this regard, both kinds of knowledge have to be acquired through conscious

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 69; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 139–40.

¹⁰⁶ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 71.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 69; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 140.

¹⁰⁸ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 73; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 140–41.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 72–73; al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 140.

action (*'amal*). That is due to the fact that there is no useful knowledge without action resulting from it and there is no worthwhile action without knowledge.¹¹⁰ Therefore, since the second knowledge depends to the first knowledge to make it purposeful and the first knowledge means continuous acts of services and devotion (*'ibādah*), any activities done on the basis of both knowledge or done in order to arrive at both knowledge can be regarded as religious activities. Since religion is the basis of ethics, those activities undoubtedly can be counted as ethical.

Related to happiness, al-Attas maintains that it concerns with permanent condition in the rational soul; knowledge and faith, right conduct and the attainment of a condition known as justice.¹¹¹ It also relates to two dimensions of existence, to the hereafter (*ukhrawiyah*) and to the present world (*dunyāwiyah*). As for the former, it refers to ultimate happiness, which is everlasting felicity and bliss and whose highest condition is the Vision of God, promised to those who in worldly life have lived in willing submission and conscious and knowing obedience of God's commands and prohibitions. In relation with the former, the latter refers to three things such as firstly, to the self (*nafsiyyah*) including knowledge and good character; secondly, to the body (*badaniyyah*) covering good health and security; and thirdly, to things external to the self and the body (*khārijīyyah*) encompassing wealth and other causes that promote the wellbeing of the self, the body, and the external things and circumstances in relation to them. Moreover, the latter pertains not only to the secular life, but it pertains also to life as interpreted and guided by religion whose source is Revelation.¹¹² In

¹¹⁰ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 140.

¹¹¹ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 64–65.

¹¹² Al-Attas, "The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam," 91–92; al-Attas, *Prolegomena to The Metaphysics of Islam*, 35–36.

this regard, when it is said that happiness pertains to the self and it pertains to knowledge and good character, it means that happiness is attained when man's spiritual substance such as heart, soul or self, intellect, and spirit, arrives at knowledge. At the same time, since self has dual nature, body related to animal soul and soul related to rational soul, the attainment of happiness in the present world as well as the hereafter, depends upon which aspect it chooses to align itself with in preponderant way.¹¹³ This is due to the fact that both aspects have faculties such as motive and perceptive belonging to the faculty of animal soul and active and cognitive belonging to rational soul. The active intellect is the principles of movement of the human body, for it directs individual actions in agreement with theoretical faculty of cognitive intellect. In relation with motive power of animal soul, it produces human emotions and with perceptive power, it manages physical objects and produces human skills and arts. Else, when it relates to its faculty of rational imagination, it gives rise to premises and conclusions and when it governs and manages the human body, it induces ethical behaviour in man involving the recognition of vices and virtues.¹¹⁴ Since it is obvious that happiness is man's consciousness, when he is submissive to God and cleaves to His guidance, and an act of submission to God is religious,¹¹⁵ all activities cause man to attain that consciousness is religious activities. Since religion is the basis of ethics, those activities inevitably can be called ethical activities.

As for individual contract, it seems likely that, al-Attas ensures, it is the consequence from the covenant each and every individual soul basically has sealed with

¹¹³ Al-Attas, "The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islam," 92.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109; al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 50-51.

God.¹¹⁶ This covenant is made long before the existence of man. It pertains to rational soul's recognition of God as the Creator, Cherisher, and Sustainer, along with the actions accordingly. It is the very foundation of Islamic political and social organization.¹¹⁷ Although man of Islam lives and works within the bounds of social polity and authority and even contributes his share towards the social good, he is basically not bound by social contract. Rather he is basically bound by his individual contract.¹¹⁸ In this regard, neither the state nor the society are for him real and true objects of his loyalty and obedience until his activities are directed to fulfil the demands of the state and society. But rather, it is God and His messenger that become his true and real objects of his loyalty and obedience. Owing to that, when he lives and strives in Islamic state or society, for the good of the state and the society, it is because the society composed of individual men of Islam as well as the state organized by them, set the same Islamic end and purpose as their goal. But, when the society and the state set non-Islamic end and purpose, he is obliged to oppose them and strive to correct them and remind them of their true aim in life.¹¹⁹ In this regard, it seems the reason why man's duty and responsibility, viewed from individual contract, is not decided by state and society, but it is decided by his own self as it has been created by God and approved by religion. If his rational soul has properly functioned, so that he is able to differentiate between good and bad as well as true and

¹¹⁶ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 64; al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 83-84.

¹¹⁷ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 46-47, 64.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 64; al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 84.

¹¹⁹ Al-Attas, "Islam: The Concept of Religion and The Foundation of Ethics and Morality," 64.

false, man has burdens to fulfil his duty and responsibility.¹²⁰

Concluding Remarks

Concluding the aforementioned elaboration, it is crystal clear that, according to al-Attas, the basis of ethics is religion (*din*) which is approved by sound reason, knowledge, and man's freedom of the will. Since religion in this case is based on revelation which does not change due to the changing of circumstances, ethics, he maintains, is considered as something permanent and not relative. As for the principles of ethics, those are self-perfection, true faith and knowledge, freedom, happiness, and individual contract. Instead of considering ethics as mere physical aspect of man in relation to society and state, it seems likely that he considers it more to spiritual aspect of man in relation to his self, God, society, and state.

On the basis of that, it is also clear cut that al-Attas does not agree that rationalism as the only valid method of knowledge, for he clarifies that ethics can be understood its nature not only from sound reason but also from knowledge and man's freedom of will, even though those are united in the concept of religion which is revealed and whose characteristic therefore is permanent. This is due to the fact that the nature of religion, of sound reason, of knowledge, and of man's freedom of the will, correlate between each other. Moreover, what is considered ethical is not restricted only for something worldly, but it covers also something other than worldly, that is, the hereafter. This seems the reason why happiness which is one of the principles of ethics pertains to both the worldly life and life in the hereafter. Even, the life of hereafter becomes the ultimate aspect of happiness. Another thing is that what man ought to do and to behave does not pertain to physical aspect of man, but more to his spiritual aspect as

¹²⁰ Al-Attas, *Risalah Untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 84.

the driving force of his physical aspect. Because of that, it is the spiritual aspect of man that is crucial rather than his physical. Let alone, it is held that the very essence of man is his spiritual aspect. Hence, that ethics pertains to society and state is secondary, for it primarily pertains to his self and then his God. It is after perfecting his spiritual relation with his self and his God, he continues with perfecting his relationship with society and state.

By means of infusing those elements from the worldview of Islam, the universal concept of ethics, which is identified as any attitudes, actions, assertions, and considerations, becomes Islamized concept of ethics which is understood as permanent attitudes, actions, assertions, and considerations belonging to spiritual aspect of man in his relation to his self, God, society and state.

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