

# Knowledge and Knowing in Islam A Comparative Study between

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**Submission date:** 04-Mar-2020 09:27PM (UTC+0530)

**Submission ID:** 1269176247

**File name:** .\_Knowledge\_and\_Knowing\_in\_Islam\_A\_Comparative\_Study\_between.pdf (335.78K)

**Word count:** 6507

**Character count:** 34443

## Knowledge and Knowing in Islam: A Comparative Study between Nursi and al-Attas

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### Abstract:

This article compares Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's conception of knowledge and knowing with Syed Mohammad Naquib al-Attas' epistemology and philosophy of science. These two prominent Muslim thinkers are worth our attention, given the impact that their thought have had on contemporary Muslim discourse and social movement in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and beyond. It is found that both Nursi and al-Attas share a common conviction that modern science is neither neutral nor value-free; it is dominated by theories and principles derived from secularistic and atheistic-naturalistic worldview. It comes to the conclusion that although Nursi and al-Attas both have the same concern, their thought do exhibit some differences with regard to the nature of knowledge and knowing, the meaning and object of knowledge as well as the process of knowing.

**Keywords:** Nursi, al-Attas, Islamic epistemology, contemporary Islam

### Introduction

One of the most fundamental aspects of Islamic civilization has to do with knowledge. The problem of knowledge is not only confined to the external factors that include the spread of the doctrine of secularism that desacralize Islamic knowledge, but also the complex internal factors that dwindled knowledge pursuance and development. The impact of these two problems has pervasively influenced social, economic, cultural and political field in the Muslim world. Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and Syed

Mohammad Naquib al-Attas are two prominent Muslim thinkers in the contemporary world who are concerned in explaining, explicating and formulating the process of knowing in sciences according to Islamic perspective. The two thinkers embark upon the conviction that modern science has been dominated by theories and principles derived from Western secularism or by atheistic-naturalism of philosophers. This comparative study aims to show that although they have the same concern they exhibit some differences and similarities with regard to the nature of knowledge and knowing, the meaning and object of knowledge as well as the process of knowing.

### The Meaning of Knowledge (*'Ilm*)

In the Islamic intellectual tradition, there have been numerous attempts to define knowledge by scholars of various fields. Theologians, Sufis, philosophers, philologists and others produced diverse definitions of knowledge. However, it was in the field of speculative theology that the definition of knowledge (*'ilm*) is passionately sought. No work of speculative theology could avoid dwelling on a discussion of the definition of *'Ilm* (Rosenthal, 1970). The term *'ilm* is obviously of Qur'anic origin, and this is the major impetus that pervades the Muslim mind to seek its definition and structure or pattern (Acikgenc, 1996; S. M. N. Al-Attas, 1996) and develop it into various branches projecting, in turn, the worldview of Islam. In fact, the Muslim's attempt to explain, "what knowledge really means" and to find out an acceptable definition for it is part of their endeavor to grasp the knowledge of God in relation to world, life, man, faith, reason, ethic and the

like. In addition, the *raison d'être* to define knowledge is due to nefarious attempts made by anti-religious individuals, usually known as the sophists, and this is to confuse the idea that was already clear in the Muslim mind (Al-Taftāzānī, 1335; Elder, 1950; Al-Ghazālī, 1970). Consequently, a variety of definitions that resulted from those endeavors exhibit various perspectives. Franz Rosenthal has listed more than a hundred definitions of *'ilm* in the Islamic intellectual tradition and classified them into twelve categories (Rosenthal, 1970).

The controversy on the problem of the definition of knowledge is also reflected in al-Ghazālī's early work *al-Mankhūl*, wherein he devoted a chapter to discuss what knowledge really is (*al-Kalām fī Ḥaqā'iq al-'Ulūm*), a problem that he later on reiterates in *al-Munqidh*. His first concern in this work is to prove that knowledge in Islam is possible and this is opposite to the Sophists (*Sufasṭā'iyyah*) who denies "the possibility of knowing things in themselves." Here he listed six definitions given by prominent scholars and undermined them all, and then stated his stance that "*'ilm* cannot be defined" (*inna al-'ilma lā ḥadda lah*) (Al-Ghazālī, 1970), while in *al-Mankhūl*, he denies the defineability of knowledge. In the *Mihakk* and *Mustasfā* al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) believes that defining knowledge in its real sense (*'alā wajh al-ḥaqīqī*) in a written expression, in which the genus and the difference are combined, is an arduous task. The reason of the above difficulty is that most of the objects perceived (*al-mudrakāt*) are hard to be defined, let alone to define the sense perception (*al-idrākāt*). In the same tone al-Attas argues that "knowledge is limitless because the object of knowledge are without limit. But there is a limit of truth in every object of knowledge, so that the pursuit of true knowledge is an endless search," (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1995). Another reason is that knowledge is a homonymous term (*lafz mushtarak*) sometimes applied to insight (*al-ibṣār*) and sensation (*iḥsās*), at other times it designates imagination (*al-takhayyul*) and also related to assumptions (*al-Ḍannī*). Since

the term *'ilm* is homonymous, it can hardly be described by the rules of definition. The object defined is homonymous between genus (*jins*) and difference (*faṣl*), like the definition that "knowledge is what is known (*al-'ilm mā yu'lamu bihi*)" (Al-Ghazālī, 1997). Sometimes it also denotes, in another sense, "the knowledge about God" which is higher and nobler, not in a general sense but in essence and reality. Knowledge also signifies rational cognition, and it means explanation, each of which has its definition accordingly. So it is difficult to find a conclusive definition for knowledge. Although one may not be able to define knowledge, says al-Ghazālī, this does not mean that he is ignorant of its nature. One may not be able to define the scent of musk, for example, but he can recognize and identify it (Al-Ghazālī, 1970).

In fact, in Islamic intellectual tradition, definition is of two kind, namely, *hadd* (definition) and *rasm* (description). Since knowledge is from Allah and it is as wide as reality, and thus limitless, it is undefineable. It might be possible that due to the prevailing discourse regarding the defineability of knowledge and al-Ghazzali's stand point (Al-Ghazali, 2003), both Nursi and al-Attas prefer to support the notion that knowledge is undefineable, yet it can be depicted by way of *rasm* or description.

Nursi described one definition of knowledge while al-Attas proposed two definitions, both of who employ the way of *rasm* or description. According to Nursi knowledge is description of thing obtained in the mind, either in the form of conception (*taṣawwūr*) or judgment (*taṣdiq*) (Nursi, 2004c). Similar definition was declared by Athir al-Din al-Abhari (d. 663/1264), that knowledge is the arrival of form (*ṣūrah*) of thing (*shay'*) in the mind (*al-'ilm huṣūlu ṣūrat al-shay' fī al-'aql*) (Rosenthal, 1970). In addition, Nursi's definition corresponds with that of al-Ghazzali which categorizes knowledge into two: conception (*taṣawwūr*) or judgment (*taṣdiq*). The former is knowledge about essences through understandable and confirmed expression, such as knowledge about

the meaning of words *shajarah*. The latter is the correlation of conceptions (*taṣawwurāt*) that form new meaning, such as knowledge that the world is novel (Al-Ghazālī, 2000).

The two descriptions of knowledge by al-Attas are as follows. *First*, knowledge is of God and interpreted by the self through the faculties of body and soul, and thus knowledge is the arrival of meaning (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1997) of thing or object on the soul of knowledge seeker. *Second*, knowledge is the arrival of the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge in the soul; and the arrival of the soul at the meaning of a thing or an object of knowledge (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1981; 1986; 1991; 1997 & 2007). This definition, according to Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud is parallel to the definition expressed by Suhrawardi Al-Maqtul and other philosophers, except in employment of the “*ṣūrah*” in the place of *ma’nā* (Daud, 1998). However, the second definition corresponds to that of Al-Sharif al-Jurjani (d. 816/1413), ‘Ali Celebi Qinalizadeh (d. 1572), Daud (1998), Rosenthal, (1970), Al-Jurjani (1985), Al-Ghazali (1999) and Al-Raghib al-Isfahani (d. 443/1060; Al-Isfahāni, 1992). It seems that al-Attas synthesized the ideas of Muslim scholars in the past, but the al-Ghazzali’s idea is considerably dominant, especially when he does not define ‘ilm based on the theory of *ḥadd*.

The above delineation of Nursi’s and al-Attas’ definitions of knowledge reveals that the former besides defining knowledge by *rasm* (*description*) emphasizes on the place and category of knowledge, while the latter more comprehensively involves the place of knowledge, its process of attainment and its category. Those aspects of knowledge according to al-Attas are pivotal, since they could determine one’s vision of reality and truth and their method of research.

## The Object of Knowledge

It has been stated earlier that knowledge is limitless. It is because of the fact that in Islam the object of knowledge is related not only to empirical world, but also non-empirical world. Therefore, in order to have comprehensive understanding of the empirical world both Nursi and al-Attas affirm that the empirical world is the sign of Allah or reality that is very pivotal for human being to prove the existence and the unity of God (Nursi, 2003b). Al-Attas explicitly regards this universe as “Great Book” which is also the Book of Creation, (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1978) while Nursi similarly regard the universe as *Al-Kitāb Al-Kabīr*, which is simply the creation, legal codification, object, set of regulation, sketch and number of concept (Nursi, 2003b).

This implies that the empirical world or the universe is the sign of Allah that show the existence and the Oneness of God. In this regard Nursi asserts that the universe with its all elements witnesses that there is no god but Allah. It also symbolizes the declaration of the witness that the existence of eternal Creator is necessary (Nursi, 2003b). This way of understanding the object of knowledge is the most fundamental element of various dimensions of reality and man that is belief (*īmān*) and God Unity (*tawhīd*). In other words, in order to have the ability of looking at the universe in such a way, both sense perception and reason must be guided by the values of *tawhīd*. The values of *tawhīd* will place the universe proportionately as the created and not the creator, as an object and not as a subject (Nursi, 2010). As a result, man in his attempt to understand the universe cannot be stucked in this universe, but finds and believes the Real Creator behind the visible and conceivable thing (Nursi, 2003c). This process would bring us to see the unity of truth originated from the Real Existence, i.e. Allah.

In addition to the values of *tawhīd*, Nursi emphasizes that understanding the universe



must be based on the guidance and explanation of the Qur'an, for it contain something about it. To him the Qur'an, the universe and the human being are three manifestation of one truth. The Qur'an is the materialization of God's speech which is written or well organized, while the universe which is originated from the Will and Power of God represent the Qur'an. (Nursi, 1994; 1992; 2003a; Ozdemir, 2001). Therefore, it is easy to understand the universe through the Qur'an. However, one may search the truth about the universe through direct observation without referring to the guidance and explanation of the Qur'an, but it will not guarantee that one can achieve the true knowledge, yet the Qur'an is not scientific book that discuss cosmology in detail (Nursi, 2003a; 2003c, p. 53). What is discussed in the Qur'an is about the creature not as pure and only creature, but to show the reality, the attributes and the name of Allah.

In rather different perspective al-Attas looks at the term 'ilm, world and the Qur'an as interrelated entity. The term 'ilm is linguistically

constituted of the roots ع - ل - م which are derived from علامة meaning "a mark, sign, or token", by which a thing or person is known; a cognizance, or a badge; a characteristic; an indication; a symptom". Hence, معلم (plural:

معالم) which means "sign of the way" or "that by which one guides oneself or by which oneself

is guided". Similarly, عالم also signifies "a way mark for guidance" (Wan Daud, 1989). This etymological root is quite significant with the Qur'an that uses the term ayah (plural: ayat), which literally means "a sign", denoting both the verses of the Holy Qur'an and the phenomena of Divine creation. Therefore, it is interesting that throughout the history of Islamic thought Muslim regarded 'ilm to mean the Holy Qur'an; the Revealed Law (Shari'ah); the Sunnah; Islam; Faith (iman); Spiritual Knowledge ('ilm al-ladunniyy), Wisdom (Hikmah), and Gnosis (ma'rifah), also generally referred to as Light

(nur); Thought (fikrah); Science (specifically 'ilm, to which the plural 'ulum is applied) and Education – all of which collectively encompass the nature of knowledge (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 2001). Al-Attas, in rather different way of using tawhidic approach from Nursi, has clearly integrated knowledge, the world and the Qur'an. Al-Attas seems to be saying that the three components namely the world, the Qur'an and human being have signs (āyāt), each one is related to another.

Exactly in the same position, Nursi holds that the Qur'an, the universe and the human being are three manifestation of one truth. The Qur'an is the manifestation of God's words which is written and structured systemically, while the universe is of the Will and the Power of God is the portray of the created Qur'an (Nursi, 1992, pp. 376–378, 1994, p. 22, 2003a, pp. 267–269, 2003c, p. 21, 42 & 578; Ozdemir, 2001, p. 9).

To understand the reality of the universe as the empirical world Nursi proposed another approach or paradigm called *Al-Ma'na Al-Harfi* and *Al-Ma'na Al-Isma* (Nursi, 2003b, 2004a). According to Nursi, in Arabic grammar, the alphabet (*al-Harf*) refers to something that denotes meaning other than itself. In other words it cannot mark for itself, but for the other (Nursi, 2003b, p. 105, 2004a, p. 172, 2003c, p. 91). In comparison to those alphabets, the alphabet of the universe denotes the Maker or the Creator manifested in various thing individually or collectively in the form of words or sentence (Nursi, 2003c, p. 8). The universe is, thus, signs (*ayat*) that refer to its Creator and Sustainer (Nursi, 2003b, p. 108). So the paradigm of *al-ma'na al-Harfi* assumes that everything other than Allah does not come from itself, but from Allah, and thus the universe is the mirror of God's power that reflect His name and attributes (Murata, 2004, pp. 47–66; Nasr, 1991, p. 58; Nursi, 2003c, p. 9; Schimmel, 2003, pp. 340–341).

On the other hand *Al-Ma'na Al-Isma* which comprises of the word *ism* or nomina is

something that refer to the meaning attached in itself (Nursi, 2003b, p. 105, 2004a, p. 172, 2003c, p. 91). It is like a words that denote and symbolized to itself (Nursi, 2000, 2003c, pp. 215–216). In scientific sense the paradigm of *al-ma'na al-ismi* consist of three understanding; *first* everything exists due to causes; *second*, everything is formed by itself; and *third* everything exist due to natural disposition or by nature (Nursi, 2004a, pp. 168–282). This is the thought and the belief of the Western philosophers and modern scientists who were influenced by the doctrine of materialism and naturalism. In short, the paradigm of *al-ma'na al-ḥarfi* is in line with prophecy and religion and represented by prophets, messengers, saints, while the paradigm of *al-ma'na al-ismi* is linked with philosophy and wisdom that produce materialism, naturalism and atheism. The former is true, while the latter is false (Nursi, 1992, pp. 561–565, 2004a, p. 172, 2004b, pp. 24–31).

The foregoing explication imply Nursi's paradigm of *al-ma'na al-ḥarfi* that place the universe as the sign of God, in the sense that everything has two aspect, one refer to the Creator and other refer to the creature and thus all created being should be seen as the sign of the All Powerful Creator (Nursi, 2003b, pp. 105–140, 2003c, p. 92). It is because, says Nursi, the Qur'an sees the universe as a group of alphabet that explicates or shows the meaning of other than itself and that meaning are the manifestation of His Names and Attributes (Nursi, 2004a, p. 172).

Similarly, al-Attas explains that the world of nature as depicted in the Holy Qur'an is composed of symbolic form (*āyāt*) like words in a book. In other words the world of nature is another form of Divine Revelation analogous to the Qur'an itself, but the difference according to al-Attas is that the Great Book was created, whereas the Qur'an is not. "The world of nature", says al-Attas, "presents itself in multiple and divers forms that partake of symbolic existence by virtue of being continually articulated by the creative words

of God," (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1997, p. 58; al-Attas, 2013, p. 133). Here al-Attas almost has the same notion as Nursi regarding the world as symbol of meaning. Al-Attas says:

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*Now a word as it really is is a symbol, and to know it as it really is is to know what it stand for, what is symbolizes, what is means. If we were to regard a word as if it has an independent reality of its own, the it would no longer be a sign or a symbol as it is being made to point to itself, which is not what it really is. (al-Attas, 2013, p. 133)*

Nursi and al-Attas' viewpoints regarding the universe as the sign of Allah have a strong basis in the Qur'an, for it is affirmed in al-Mulk 3; in *Yūnus* (10): 5-6; *Al-Hijr* (15): 16, 19-23, 85; *Al-Naḥl* (16): 3, and 5-8; and *Fuṣṣilat*: 53.

In spite of similarity in some points al-Attas differs from Nursi in portraying the universe. Al-Attas uses metaphysical approach in delineating the universe. In his *Islam and the Philosophy of Sciences* al-Attas discusses the universe or the world under the subject of reality and existence. Human existence may be considered as having different levels corresponding to the various sphere of operation of the external dan internal sense. There are six levels of existence: *first* real existence (*ḥaqīqī*) which is existence at the level of objective reality such as the external world; *second*, sensible existence (*ḥissi*), which is confined to the faculties of sense and sensible experience including dream, visions and illusions; *third*, imaginary existence (*khayālī*) which is the existence of object of sensible existence in the imagination when they are absent from human perception; *fourth* intellectual existence (*'aqlī*), which consist of abstract concept in the human mind; *fifth*, analogous existence (*shibhī*), which is constituted by things which do not exist in any of the level above, but which do exist as something else resembling the things in a certain respect, or analogous to them.

The last one is the holy existence, which is existence of another level than rational truth, i.e. a suprarational or transcendental level of existence experience by prophet and saints of God and men of discernment who are deeply rooted in knowledge (*Ulil albāb, al-rasikhun fi-l-‘ilm*) (al-Attas, 2013, pp. 124–125).

Al-Attas emphasize the notion of existence is not without reason. For him existence can truly describe the fundamental nature phenomena and existence alone both understood as a concept as well as a reality is the most basic and universal entity known to us. However, al-Attas underlines that existence is not merely a concept, it is also a reality which is not only posited in the mind, but also a real and actual entity independent of the mind (al-Attas, 2013, p. 128). It seems this is what the Muslim scholars in the past called it *al-wujud al-khariji* (external existence).

Another important point in relation to the employment of the term reality and existence is the understanding the meaning of reality and truth and their relation to fact. It is because understanding of this term determine our understanding of the meaning of knowledge and the epistemological process and of values and ultimately upon the understanding of the nature of man himself (al-Attas, 2013, p. 125).

### Process of Knowing

Looking at the empirical world in the way delineated above according to both Nursi and al-Attas is relevant for the present days. It is because, says Nursi, in the era, the sciences in the Muslim world are predominated by the concept of Western scientists who based their research on natural and material philosophy, as well as the vision of atheist-secular-existentialists, who believe that the universe is material that has nothing to do with God (Nursi, 2004a, pp. 176–184, 2004b, pp. 24–32, 2003c, pp. 273–274). The result of such vision is a form science which is against religion and the lost of humanity (Nursi, 2003c, pp. 334–338). In the same tone al-Attas argues that due to the

doctrine of secularism, Western sciences are corrupted (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1984; 2007). Modern scientists, according to al-Attas do not involve the values of tawhid in their research. The problem, according to al-Attas, is that if the object of science is regarded as independent reality essentially or existentially, as if it ends up in itself, it can hardly be source of any truth. Such kind of research has lost its real objective and deviate from the truth (Al-Attas, 1985; 1997, pp. 59–60; 2013, pp. 133–134). For, if the object perceived is only the visible object, then the invisible object will never be known. This contradicts the meaning of sign (*āyat*) (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1997, p. 60; 2013, p. 134) for, in fact, the natural object is guidance of the external to show the invisible. This implies that human vision should not only be directed towards the visible (Al-Isfahāni, 1997). From the above explication it is clear that Nursi dan al-Attas has the same viewpoint that scientific activities, especially in looking at the universe should be based on tawhid.

Before discussing further on the process of knowledge attainment, it is worth noting that there is difference between Nursi and al-Attas concerning the channel of attaining knowledge. For Nursi external and internal sense of human being are not limited to five senses. Man has another channel that link to supernatural invisible world, but these channels, according to Nursi are unknown (Nursi, 2003b, p. 430). However, unlike Nursi, in the viewpoint of al-Attas knowledge is one and has two realities that explain its characteristics and objectives. The *first* is knowledge of recognition (*ma'rifah*) that can be attained based on revelation and prophetic tradition; it is acquired through the channel heart (*qalb*); intuition (*ilhām*), illuminated knowledge (*ma'rifah*), spiritual vision (*kashshāf*), empirical vision (*mushāhadah*) and rational power. The *second* is knowledge (*‘ilm*) attained through rational power and is acquired by channel of sound sense, true report based on authority, sound reason, intuition, experience and actual vision (*mushāhadah*) (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 2001, p. 19; 2013, p. 118).



Concerning the process of knowing the reality in the world there are great differences between Nursi and al-Attas. Nursi urges that the universe cannot be understood at glance, it must be seen, observed, researched, studied and thought of continuously involving reason (*'aql*) and heart (*qalb*). This refers to the Qur'an that commands the human being to see the creation twice again. What is meant by "vision twice again" is to see it so minutely or to know it precisely that one can see the sign of God (Nursi, 2003c, pp. 582–585). Here Nursi explains that the process of knowing begins by observation of sense perception, which is subsequently received by internal sense and forwarded to reason. Furthermore, the reason clarifies the detail and associates them with the external reality. The process is carried out by reason in such a way in order to avoid misunderstanding the object or to prevent the incompatibility with the real object (Nursi, 2004c, p. 259). Certainly, this is carried out after proper understanding of reason towards the universe. This is what Nursi called the true reason that subservient to the principle of *tawhīd*.

Having the same concept as Nursi but different in its detail explanation, al-Attas explicates not only the process of knowing but also the power of human perception. To him, the perceptive power in human being comprises the five external senses (*al-ḥawās*): touch, smell, taste sight, and hearing respectively. These perform the function of perception of particulars in the external world. In addition to these five external senses there are other five internal senses which [1] perceive internally the sensual images and their meaning, [2] combine or separate them, [3] conceive notions of them, [4] preserve the conception thus conceived and [5] perform intellection of them (al-Attas, 2013, pp. 149–150). Furthermore, al-Attas classifies the power of perception into three: *first* perception that does not retain their objects; *second*, perception that retains objects but do not act upon them; *third*, perception that perceive their objects and act upon them (al-Attas, 2013, p. 50).

Now, describing the process of knowing from the internal sense al-Attas explains: the *first* of the internal senses receive the information brought in by the external senses and combines and separate internal images or representation of the external sensible objects. Those internal sense common to all the five external senses is called common sense (*al-ḥiss al-mushtarak*). The common sense directly receives the data of the five external senses in the form of individual sensible particular and not their intelligible universal.

Next, the common senses gather together the sensed forms, combining and separating similar and dissimilar form so as to make perception possible, but it does not retain what it receives. It is the power of the second internal sense that records and retains the images or form of the external objects received by common sense in the form of individual and collective meaning. The form retain by the second internal sense is presented to the third internal sense, that is estimative faculty (*al-wahmiyyah*). This faculty will judged and form opinion, yet it could commit mistake unless it is governed by the intellect and the imaginative power related to it. This estimative faculty presides over judgment not in the analytical way, but in the imaginative way determined by memory image through process of association from past experience or by an instinctive interpretation of the image perceived by soul. The fourth internal sense is called retentive and recollective faculty (*al-ḥāfiẓah* and *al-dhākirah*). The retentive faculty retains particular meanings and memorizes them. The collective faculty recalls the form that is absent from retention, when the perceiver wishes to recall them. The fifth internal sense is imaginative faculty (*al-mutakhayyilah*). This faculty perceives forms, combines and separates them in an act of classification.

In short, we recall that the perceiver of forms is the common sense, and the conserver is imaginative and representative faculty. The perceiver of meanings is the estimation faculty and the conserver of meaning is the retentive and



recollective faculty. The faculty that perceives and acts upon its objects is the imaginative faculty.

The other issue in the process of knowing in Islamic perspective is on the involvement of God in the process of intellection. Nursi, in this regard posited that the assumption and the orientation of the researcher who believe in the unity and power of God through His sign (ayat) will see the truth behind the universe and lead him to the Real Creator, Allah (Nursi, 2003c, pp. 576–577). This can be supported by one understanding on universal principle in the natural world and the coherence structure of phenomenon (Nursi, 2003c, p. 580). Having understood the universal principle one will comprehend that macro-cosmos is as coherence as micro-cosmos (reality of *anā*). In fact, all created being affirm the Unity of God Allah and declare collectively that there is no God but Allah (Nursi, 2003c). This corresponds to the stance of a contemporary Muslim scientist, Seyyed Hossein Nasr that the objective of Islamic science is to show the unitary of all existing being, so that by contemplating that unity, one will proceed to the direction of basic unity of God reflected in the unity of universe (Nasr, 2001, p. 21).

In al-Attas' view, it is through the theory of intellect that God is involved in the process of knowing or perception. The human intellect, in al-Attas' theory, requires external intelligence or the Active Intelligence (*al-'aql al-fa'āl*) identified as the Holy Spirit (*Rūh al-Quds*) and ultimately as God. This Active Intelligence has the power to transform the acquired intellect (*al-'aql al-mustafād*) into higher form by way of illumination (al-Attas, 2013, p. 161).

The concept of divine illumination is also upheld by Nursi. Instead of using the theory of intellect Nursi use the term *anā* (I am) as the human aspect that fulfilled the task and understand the reality of existing universe. *Anā* also justifies variety of knowledge from visible reality. What is conceived by *anā* here is engrossed in the soul

as illuminated knowledge and true wisdom (Nursi, 2004b, pp. 21–22). Without further explication Nursi believe that the human heart and intelligent will find peace through belief that everything is originated from the Necessary Existence (Nursi, 2003c, p. 105).

It seems that al-Attas agrees with al-Ghazzali's point of view that reason, soul and heart are one identical substance that could be characterized as something delicate, divine and spiritual (*latifatun rabbāniyyatun rūhāniyyatun*) as human self (Al-Ghazālī, 1873, p. 116; 1997, p. 26; 1999, pp. 3–4; Ismail, 1995; Tritton, 1959) Therefore, following al-Ghazzali, al-Attas emphasizes that acquiring knowledge involves God as the source of knowledge. This means that process of knowing is spiritual activities, in the sense that the arrival of meaning in the soul occurs whenever God pleases to happen (Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1997, p. 16). What is meant by meaning here is “the recognition of the place of anything in a system, in various level of human existence corresponding to the various sphere of operation of the external and internal sense”. In addition, knowledge consist not only of one or two meaning occur in the human soul, but many “units of meaning coherently related to other such unit thereby forming ideas, concepts, conception and judgments,” (al-Attas, 2013, p. 124). Those units of meanings are constructed by the soul from objects conceived by sense perception when the soul receives illumination of Allah. This kind of understanding enables one to possess knowledge of something both observable and abstract including belief (Daud, 1998, p. 106).

## Conclusion

The foregoing explication on the concept of knowledge and the process of knowing proposed by Badiuzzaman Said Nursi and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas represent the Islamic perspective in the sense that it has successfully exposed scientific process involving both the rational and spiritual aspects simultaneously. They also have connected the

process of pursuing knowledge based on the primordial covenant between man and God. They have successfully shown the relation between intellectual and spiritual preparation in that process. However, al-Attas employs the approach of Muslim philosophers and hence believes that spiritual preparation will lead one to higher position (*maqām*) that is *al-naḥs al-muṭmainnah*. This highest achievement is the arrival of self to the level of acquired intellect (*'aql al-mustafād*), which is nothing else than the Holy Spirit (*al-'aql al-quḍsi*). From this spiritual attempt, man could achieve the level of *al-naḥs al-muṭmainnah* and from intellect perspective it achieves acquired intellect *al-'aql al-mustafād*. However, Al-Attas reminds us that all will go back to Allah.

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