

THE QUR'ANIC CONCEPT OF *MĪTHĀQ* IN THE CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF AL-ATTAS AND TAHA ABDURRAHMAN

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Abstract

Modernity is a fundamental issue in contemporary Islamic thought, particularly due to its secular and rationalist nature that stands in contrast to the metaphysical foundations of Islam. Originating from Western post-Renaissance civilisation, modernity introduces a worldview that marginalises transcendent values and promotes the separation between religion and public life. This article aims to comparatively analyse the critical responses of two prominent Muslim thinkers, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Taha Abdurrahman, to Western modernity, with particular emphasis on the concept of *mīthāq* (primordial covenant) as an ontological and ethical foundation for Islamic civilisation. Employing a qualitative method and discourse analysis of their primary texts, this study finds that although both

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scholars agree on the metaphysical disorientation of modernity and its consequences for moral and epistemological crises, they differ in their approaches. Abdurrahman proposes an ethical paradigm rooted in *qalb*, while al-Attas advocates for the Islamisation of knowledge based on revelation. Both thinkers ground their critiques in the awareness of *mīthāq* as a spiritual bond between human beings and God, which forms the basis for ethics, knowledge, and social order in Islam. Thus, their critiques of modernity are not merely socio-political but constitute a metaphysical reconstruction that reorients human responsibility toward the divine order.

Keywords: Modernity; *mīthāq*; Islamic ethics; Taha Abdurrahman; Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.

Khulasah

Moderniti merupakan isu asas dalam wacana pemikiran Islam kontemporari, terutamanya disebabkan sifatnya yang sekular dan rasionalis yang bertentangan dengan asas metafizik Islam. Berasal daripada peradaban Barat pasca-Renaissance, moderniti memperkenalkan pandangan alam yang meminggirkan nilai-nilai transenden serta menggalakkan pemisahan antara agama dan kehidupan awam. Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis secara perbandingan respons kritikal dua pemikir Islam terkemuka, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas dan Taha Abdurrahman, terhadap moderniti Barat, dengan penekanan khusus terhadap konsep *mīthāq* (perjanjian primordial) sebagai asas ontologi dan etika dalam tamadun Islam. Menggunakan kaedah kualitatif dan analisis wacana terhadap teks primer kedua-dua tokoh, kajian ini mendapati bahawa walaupun kedua-duanya sepakat mengenai kegoyahan metafizik moderniti serta implikasinya terhadap krisis moral dan epistemologi, pendekatan mereka berbeza. Abdurrahman mengusulkan paradigma etika yang berakar pada konsep *qalb*, manakala al-Attas mengutarakan pengislaman ilmu yang berteraskan

wahyu. Kritikan mereka berpaksikan kesedaran terhadap *mīthāq* sebagai ikatan rohani antara manusia dan Tuhan yang menjadi dasar etika, ilmu dan tatanan sosial Islam. Justeru, kritikan terhadap moderniti ini bukan sekadar bersifat sosio-politik, tetapi merupakan satu rekonstruksi metafizik yang mengorientasikan semula tanggungjawab manusia terhadap tertib Ilahi.

Kata kunci: Moderniti; *mīthāq*; etika Islam; Taha Abdurrahman; Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.

Introduction

Scholars around the world have widely discussed the topic of modernity, as it reflects the transformation from traditional to rational modes of thought and societal organisation. The Renaissance era marked a significant shift towards modernity, characterised by the development of art, diplomacy, and politics.¹ Hence, modernity is often regarded as a liberation from traditional ways of thinking, acting and believing, as well as from tradition itself.² The process of modernisation involves applying contemporary scientific knowledge to everyday life, to advance various spheres of human existence, initially within Western civilisation, and subsequently expanding to non-Western societies.³

The idea of modernity is frequently used to describe the present global condition, including phenomena such as industrialisation, secularisation, rationalisation, and other ideological and institutional features that distinguish

¹ Bahattin Karagözoğlu, "Brief History of Western Modernization," in *Science and Technology from Global and Historical Perspectives* (n.p.: Springer, 2017), 188, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52890-8_7.

² Eugene Halton, *Meaning and Modernity: Social Theory in the Pragmatic Attitude* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), viii.

³ Syed Hussein Alatas, *Modernization and Social Change: Studies in Modernization, Religion, Social Change and Development in South-East Asia* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1972), 22.

Western society from so-called primaeval civilisations.⁴ If these characteristics are considered modern, then modernism can be understood as an ideology, attitude, and mentality that facilitates the transition from traditional to modern modes of life.⁵ Modernity has significantly influenced human lifestyles through advancements in technology, media, and the infrastructural developments introduced by the Industrial Revolution. Initiatives such as the United States-led Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are also seen as products of modernity aimed at global industrialisation. In contrast, Islamic history follows a different trajectory from that of the West. Islamic modernity may be traced back to the era of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who conveyed the divine message of Allah and initiated a transformative change in human life. In the centuries that followed, Islam evolved into a powerful civilisation that shaped the Arab world and extended its influence globally.⁶

However, the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the late 19th century is widely regarded as marking the decline of Islamic civilisation, primarily due to the forces of secularisation. Since then, Western modernity has continued to influence many parts of the world through the process of modernisation. This intellectual movement advocates the notion that human progress is attainable only through rationality, particularly in the fields of science and technology. Consequently, this often results in a systematic rejection of tradition, including religion, which is perceived

⁴ Ole Jacob Madsen, "Modernity," in *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* (n.p.: Springer, 2014), 1199, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-5583-7_190.

⁵ Syed Farid Alatas, "Islam and Modernization," *SSRN Electronic Journal* (2005), 209, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2650504>.

⁶ Muhammad Hifdil Islam, "Islam and Civilization (Analysis Study on The History of Civilization in Islam)," *Al-Insiyroh: Jurnal Studi Keislaman* 5(1) (2019), 27, <https://doi.org/10.35309/alinsiyroh.v5i1.3395>.

as being based on faith and dogma rather than reason. This condition has prompted Muslim scholars to advocate for a paradigm rooted in truth-based knowledge, grounded in the Quran through the Islamisation of science.⁷

For this reason, Muslim scholars play a crucial role in responding to the challenges posed by modernity, which continues to dominate the contemporary world. Two prominent figures in this discourse, Taha Abdurrahman and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, approach the issue through a Sufi framework, emphasising the importance of realising the divine covenant (*mīthāq*) in confronting modern challenges. This paper, therefore, aims to examine and compare the ideas of these two scholars, whose thoughts are uniquely interconnected. It employs a comparative analysis with the goal of guiding Muslim communities in responding wisely to contemporary issues resulting from Western modernity. The data for this study were gathered through library research, utilising both English and Arabic sources. Primary data consist of original works authored by scholars, while secondary data include books, journal articles, and other academic publications related to the topic. This article explores their perspectives on religion, human nature, ethical reasoning, and responses to modernity in order to assess the potential for human transformation grounded in Islamic ethical values, as articulated by Abdurrahman and al-Attas.

⁷ Muhammad Mumtaz Ali & Md Maruf Hasan, "New Age in Contemporary Globalism: An Islamic Response," *Law, Policy and Social Science* 1(1) (2022), 55, <https://doi.org/10.55265/lpsjournal.v1i1.8>.

The Concept of Religion and the Divine Covenant (*Mīthāq*)

Taha Abdurrahman⁸ and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas⁹ are prominent contemporary Muslim scholars whose intellectual contributions have had a significant impact on the Muslim world. In 2023, both were recognised among the 500 most influential Muslims globally, reflecting the widespread influence of their thought.¹⁰ Abdurrahman, in particular, has advanced a distinctive ethical theory since the early 2000s, which later expanded into a broader project in the philosophy of religion. His work addresses contemporary challenges by focusing on the spirit of

⁸ Taha Abdurrahman is a Moroccan scholar born in 1944, with expertise in language, logic, and philosophy. He mastered a variety of languages, including French, Greek, German, Arabic, and English, to advance his studies in philosophy. See Mohammed Hashas, "The Trusteeship Paradigm: The Formation and Reception of a Philosophy," in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abdurrahman's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Mutaz al-Khatib (Leiden: BRILL, 2021), 37. Despite being influenced by recognised Muslim scholars such as al-Ghazālī, his thought is also influenced by the Sūfī order (Budshīshiah). Hence, his works focused more on ethical theories to criticise Western modernity. As a contribution to the Muslim world, he wrote numerous books on religion, philosophy, and modernity.

⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is a prominent Malay scholar who was born in 1931 and raised within a religious family who are outstanding in scholarship and Sufism. See Wan Mohd, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: International Inst. of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1998), 45. Al-Attas mastered literature, Malay culture, and philosophy. He authored numerous works in philosophy, ethics, and education, and has influenced many scholars, particularly in the Malay world. He is known as the first contemporary Muslim scholar to initiate the comprehensive concept of the Islamic university. See Fiqih Risallah & Tatiana Denisova, "Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas on Human Origin," *Tsaqafah* 15(2) (2019), 348, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tsaqafah.v15i2.3382>.

¹⁰ *The Muslim 500: The World's 500 Most Influential Muslims, 2023* (Amman: The Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre, 2022).

religion (*rūḥ al-dīn*), religious practice, and the renewal of reason (*ʿamal al-dīnī wa tajdīd al-ʿaql*). He employs a philosophical framework to redefine religion in a modern context, asserting that a proper understanding of religion requires both spiritual vitality and intellectual renewal.¹¹

For Abdurrahman, *īmān* (faith) is the foundational source of ethics. *īmān* entails wholehearted belief in the existence of God, while ethics constitutes the path toward attaining a good life.¹² Without *īmān*, ethical behaviour loses its grounding, as true religion cannot be realised by ethics alone. Divine guidance, according to Abdurrahman, leads the believer toward human flourishing through God's mercy. Faith (*īmān*) is dynamic, continuously growing in the hearts of believers, with its highest stage being divine love (*maḥabbah al-ilāh*). The believer's love for others is thus a reflection of their love for God, guiding them toward moral excellence. Moreover, understanding God's attributes, especially His divine will (*irādah*), is essential, as it reflects the expectation that humans follow divine guidance by fulfilling obligations and avoiding prohibitions. This theological insight affirms the idea that ethics is inseparable from faith. Consequently, Abdurrahman concludes that religion is the ultimate source of ethics; there can be no true humanity without ethics and no ethics without religion.¹³

Taha Abdurrahman articulates a dual conception of human existence, consisting of the metaphysical (*al-ʿālam al-ghaybī*) and the physical (*al-ʿālam al-marʿī*) dimensions. The metaphysical realm is where the primordial covenant (*mīthāq*) occurs, in which every soul testifies to God's

¹¹ Mohammed Hashas & Mutaz al-Khatib, eds., *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm: Taha Abdurrahman's Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives* (n.p.: BRILL, 2021), 17.

¹² Taha Abdurrahman, *Suʿāl al-Akhlāq: Musāhamah fī al-Naqd al-Akhlāqī li al-Ḥadāthah al-Gharbiyyah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2000), 31.

¹³ Abdurrahman, *Suʿāl al-Akhlāq*, 47.

Lordship, while the physical dimension is the temporal world where human beings are born and live their lives. Abdurrahman refers to the Quranic verse in Sūrah al-Aʿrāf verse 172:

Translation: "And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam - from their loins-their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we have testified." [This] - lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware."

In the metaphysical dimension, three essential testimonies were made: first, the testimony to God's perfection in His attributes and actions (*al-shahādah al-ilāhiyyah*); second, the affirmation of divine oneness (*al-shahādah bi al-wahdāniyyah*), acknowledging that none can be compared to Him; and third, the pledge of servitude (*al-shahādah bi al-taʿabbud li al-ilāh al-wāhid*), committing to worship the One God. Religion, therefore, serves to translate these metaphysical commitments into ethical conduct in the physical world.

In his book *Bu's al-Dahrāniyyah: al-Naqd al-I'timānī li Faṣl al-Akhlāq 'an al-Dīn*, Abdurrahman builds his theory of trusteeship (*al-i'timāniyyah*) based on three pillars: testimony (*shahādah*), trust (*amānah*), and self-purification (*tazkiyah*). These pillars form the foundation for a strong interconnection between religion and ethics.¹⁴ Human beings are entrusted with freedom of choice (*ikhtiyār*), which is essential to moral accountability.¹⁵ God's commands presume this freedom, granting humans

¹⁴ Taha Abdurrahman, *Bu's al-Dahrāniyyah: Al-Naqd al-I'timānī li Faṣl al-Akhlāq 'an al-Dīn* (Beirut: al-Shabakah al-ʿArabiyyah li al-Abḥāth wa al-Nashr, 2014), 19.

¹⁵ Taha Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn min Ḍayq al-ʿIlmāniyyah ilā Saʿat al-I'timāniyyah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 2012), 450.

the ability to choose between right and wrong. The term *ikhtiyār* is derived from the root *khayr*, meaning "good," signifying that ethical choice aims toward the good in both metaphysical and physical dimensions.¹⁶

Moreover, Abdurrahman stresses that a sense of responsibility must accompany ethical choice, as this preserves the trust granted by God. Self-purification (*tazkiyah*) initiates the soul's ascension (*'urūj al-rūh*) toward the metaphysical realm.¹⁷ This spiritual process entails the internalisation of divine ethics and the realisation of the soul's purpose in serving God.¹⁸ It is not merely a personal or individual endeavour but also a communal one, whereby purified individuals contribute to societal moral development. Without pursuing this ethical and spiritual journey, human beings risk reducing life to material pursuits and losing the essence of meaningful change and improvement.

The concept of trusteeship (*al-i'timāniyyah*) proposed by Taha Abdurrahman finds a significant parallel in Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas's conception of religion, particularly in relation to the divine covenant (*mīthāq*). However, the two scholars employ distinct methodologies in articulating the nature of religion. Whereas Abdurrahman frames religion primarily through the lens of ethical responsibility rooted in divine testimony, al-Attas focuses on recovering the original semantic and ontological meaning of *dīn*, grounded in the language of the Quran and Sunnah.¹⁹

¹⁶ Abdurrahman, *Rūh al-Dīn*, 451.

¹⁷ Taha Abdurrahman, *Min al-Insān al-Abtar ilā al-Insān al-Kawthar* (n.p.: The Arabian Establishment for Thought and Innovation, 2016), 90.

¹⁸ Abdurrahman, *Bu's al-Dahrāniyyah*, 16.

¹⁹ Mesut Idriz, "Expounding the Concept of Religion in Islam as Understood by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas," *Poligrafi* 25(99/100) (2020), 102, <https://doi.org/10.35469/poligrafi.2020.233>.

According to al-Attas, modern conceptions of religion have been distorted due to linguistic corruption; therefore, a return to the original Arabic terms is essential for restoring their true meaning. Al-Attas asserts that the term *dīn* originates from the Arabic root *dāna*, which conveys the meaning of being indebted. In this framework, human beings, having testified to God's Lordship in the metaphysical realm, are considered to be in a state of spiritual indebtedness. Upon entering the physical world, this debt is to be repaid through submission and obedience to God. Al-Attas further delineates four principal meanings inherent in the term *dīn*: indebtedness (*dayn*), submissiveness (*dhillah*), judicious power or authority (*ḥukm*), and natural inclination or tendency (*fiṭrah*). These meanings highlight the dynamic interplay between divine authority and human moral obligation.²⁰

In addition, al-Attas explores the semantic associations between *dīn* and a series of related terms such as *mudun* (cities),²¹ *maddā'in* (refinement or civilisational centres), and *tamaddun* (civilisation), thereby uncovering the deep civilizational implications embedded within the Islamic concept of religion. These terms reflect not only linguistic affinity but also a conceptual framework in which religion shapes both individual comportment and the collective moral order. Al-Attas places particular emphasis on the connection between *dīn* and *madīnah* (city), arguing that the city as a civilizational space is a direct extension of the moral and metaphysical order established by religion. In his words:

"As I think extremely important to discern both the intimate and profoundly significant connection between the concept of *dīn* and that

²⁰ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam: The Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2013), 2.

²¹ Al-Attas, *Islam: The Concept of Religion*, 3.

of *madīnah*, which derives from it, and the role of the believers individually in relation to the former and collectively in relation to the latter."²²

This connection implies that religion (*dīn*) not only governs individual ethical behaviour but also shapes the collective moral and civilizational ethos of the community. Thus, for al-Attas, the essence of religion is not confined to personal belief but extends to the realisation of a just and refined society based on divine guidance.

According to al-Attas, the profound connection between *dīn* and *Madīnah* is historically and conceptually significant. The city of Yathrib was renamed *Madīnah* following the establishment of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) migration, reflecting a transformation rooted in the comprehensive application of *dīn* within the social order.²³ This renaming symbolises the realisation of religion not merely as belief, but as a lived civilizational principle, where the inhabitants fully embodied *dīn* by submitting themselves to God, thereby actualising the primordial covenant (*mīthāq*). In al-Attas's view, the notion of indebtedness lies at the heart of *dīn*. Humanity is indebted not to their parents, nor to any

²² Al-Attas, *Islam: The Concept of Religion*, 4.

²³ Islam with all its essentials such as the name, teachings, creed, belief system, and rituals is revealed directly by Allah through the prophet Muhammad PBUH by his words and action. It does not follow any culture or tradition; Islam is already matured since the time is being revealed. See Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, "Islam and the Challenge of Modernity: Divergence of Worldviews," in *Technology and Cultural Values*, ed. Marietta Stepaniants and Roger T. Ames (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 70–98, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780824844967-006>.

worldly entity, but solely to God, who alone brought them into and sustains their existence.²⁴

As such, humans are inherently obligated to repay this divine debt through servitude. This servitude (*'ubūdiyyah*) is not akin to service offered by a free individual (*khādim*), but rather that of a devoted servant (*'ābid*), whose submission arises from ontological dependence upon the Creator. The act of service in this context is termed *'ibādah*, denoting conscious and sincere devotion rendered exclusively for God's sake. Hence, worship is not only a religious duty but also the existential fulfilment of human purpose, as affirmed in the Quranic verse: "And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me" (QS. 51:56).²⁵

Furthermore, the individual who internalises this purpose and recognises worship as the natural expression of human existence operates within the realm of *fiṭrah*, the innate disposition toward divine submission.²⁶ In this sense, *fiṭrah* and *dīn* are inherently interconnected, as both represent the realisation of the metaphysical covenant within the material world. Importantly, this submission does not negate human freedom (*ikhtiyār*); rather, true freedom is defined as acting in accordance with one's essential nature. Therefore, human autonomy, when rightly guided, leads to ethical responsibility and alignment with divine intent.

The concept of trusteeship (*al-i'timāniyyah*) proposed by Taha Abdurrahman closely parallels al-Attas's

²⁴ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 2001), 30.

²⁵ "I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me." See the Quran sūrah al-Dhāriyāt, 56.

²⁶ "*Fiṭrah* is the pattern according to which God has created all things. It is God's manner and everything fits each into its pattern created for it and set in its proper place." See Al-Attas, *Islam: The Concept of Religion*, 12.

understanding of *dīn* as indebted submission to God. Both scholars place ethical values at the centre of religiosity, viewing them as the means through which humans fulfil the divine covenant made in the pre-temporal realm. The highest expression of religion is found in sincere, conscious submission to God, an act aligned with human nature and manifest in both individual conduct and the structure of society.

The Nature of Man: Critics of Modern Human

As previously noted, there is an inseparable relationship between humanity, ethics, and religion. There is no humanity without ethics, no ethics without religion, and no human being without a sense of religion. Taha Abdurrahman identifies the human being as *insān*, a term derived from *nisyān*, meaning forgetfulness. This etymology reflects the existential challenge of human life, humans forget their origin, their responsibilities, their divine gifts, and ultimately, their Creator. Forgetfulness, therefore, becomes the first and most persistent trial faced by human beings in the worldly realm.²⁷ The Quran in sūrah al-Aḥzāb, 72 states:

Translation: "Indeed, we offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, and they declined to bear it and feared it; but man [undertook to] bear it. Indeed, he was unjust and ignorant."

To address this inherent forgetfulness, Abdurrahman advocates for a spiritual approach. He argues that while the body may forget, the soul never forgets its origin.²⁸ In this framework, secular ideologies, which attempt to separate religion from ethics are manifestations of living solely within the physical dimension (*al-‘ālam al-marṭī*) while neglecting the metaphysical (*al-‘ālam al-ghaybī*). Yet

²⁷ Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 13.

²⁸ Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 17.

humans, by nature, simultaneously belong to both realms. Their material pursuits pertain to the physical world, whereas the quest for meaning and ethical fulfilment resides in the metaphysical dimension.²⁹

Accordingly, Abdurrahman emphasises that the metaphysical world is not static but comprises multiple stages toward perfection (*al-kamāl*). One who consciously detaches from material preoccupations (*al-istighnā' bi al-'ālam al-mar'i*) may ascend toward spiritual maturity. In contrast, one who disregards the metaphysical (*al-istighnā' bi al-'ālam al-ghaybī*) inevitably falls into the trap of worldly reductionism. This vision redefines the nature of man not only as a rational agent but as a spiritual being whose ethical awakening depends on reuniting with the transcendent source of his existence.³⁰

As animals are capable of acting and responding without comprehending ethical values, Abdurrahman emphasised that the essential distinction between human beings and animals lies not only in the faculty of intellect (*'aql*) but also in the capacity for ethical awareness. For him, ethics and action (*'amal*) are inseparable; only when ethical consciousness guides human behaviour can individuals return to their true nature.³¹ Specifically, the ethical traits that distinguish humans are shyness, modesty, and self-respect, qualities deeply embedded in Islamic moral teachings.³² As stated in the hadith:

Ibn 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with them)
reported: Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) passed by a

²⁹ Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 25.

³⁰ Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 48–49.

³¹ Miloud Amine Tais, *Between Revivalism and Reconstructionism: Islam, Reform, and Secularism in the Works of Taha Abdurrahman and Mohammed Arkoun* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2018), 92.

³² Taha Abdurrahman, *Dīn al-Ḥayā': Min al-Fiqh al-I'timārī ilā al-Fiqh al-I'timārī* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasah al-'Arabiyyah li al-Fikr wa al-Ibdā', 2017), 1: 195.

man of the Ansar who was admonishing his brother regarding shyness. Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "Leave him alone, for modesty is a part of *iman*."³³

‘Imran bin Husayn (may Allah be pleased with them) reported: Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said, "Shyness does not bring anything except good."³⁴

These narrations highlight that such virtues are not merely social manners but fundamental expressions of faith (*īmān*). In this ethical framework, shyness refers to a moral restraint in disobeying God's law (*sharī'ah*), arising from profound love for God and a deep fear of losing His favour. This internal disposition cultivates humility and fosters respect for all creation. Those who lack this ethical orientation, Abdurrahman argues, fail to fulfil the criteria of true humanity. Thus, the process of self-purification (*tazkiyah*) becomes essential for attaining inner peace and aligning the soul with its primordial purpose.

In parallel, al-Attas offers a complementary yet distinct vision of human nature in his seminal work *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*.³⁵ While Abdurrahman centres his anthropology on ethical responsibility, al-Attas conceptualises man as possessing a dual nature, comprising body (*jasad*) and soul (*rūḥ*), with religion and knowledge being divinely imparted to fulfil human potential. Referring to the Quranic narrative, al-Attas underscores the ontological status of knowledge as

³³ Al-Nawawī, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣālihīn min Kalām Sayyid al-Mursalīn* (Damman: Dār Ibn Kathīr, 2007), 219.

³⁴ Al-Nawawī, *Riyāḍ al-Ṣālihīn*, 219.

³⁵ This idea is also mentioned by al-Ghazālī that humans have two parts, body and soul in which the body is a kingdom and the soul is the king. See Claude Field, *Al-Ghazali Kimiya-e Saadat: The Alchemy of Happiness* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2007), 9.

integral to man's nature as mentioned in sūrah al-Baqarah, 31:

Translation: "And He taught Adam the names - all of them. Then He showed them to the angels and said, "Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful."³⁶

Human beings are endowed with the capacity to discern and recognise the realities around them. For al-Attas, the ultimate purpose of this knowledge is to lead humans toward the recognition of God and submission to Him through *‘ibādah*. However, human knowledge is inherently limited due to its dependence on sensory perception and intellectual reasoning, both of which are subject to imperfection. In contrast, God possesses absolute knowledge. Despite these limitations, God has granted human beings the faculty of choice (*ikhtiyār*) and provided divine guidance through the Quran and Sunnah, delivered via the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, to help them navigate the moral and existential path of life.

Al-Attas also underscores that forgetfulness is an innate characteristic of the human condition, and this forgetfulness often leads to disobedience. It reflects a lapse in remembering the primordial covenant (*mīthāq*), the testimony that affirms belief in God and submission to His will. In response to this condition, God entrusted humans with the role of *khalīfah* (vicegerent) on earth, as stated in sūrah al-Baqarah, 30:

³⁶ The names mentioned in the verse refer to something that is sensible and intelligible to know the similarity and differences between them and therefore, humans can understand the meaning, purpose, and specifications of things. See Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1995), 143.

Translation: "And [mention, O Muhammad], when your Lord said to the angels, "Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority." They said, "Will You place upon it one who causes corruption therein and sheds blood, while we declare Your praise and sanctify You?" Allah said, "Indeed, I know that which you do not know."

In sūrah al-A‘rāf, 30:

Translation: "And cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation. And invoke Him in fear and aspiration. Indeed, the mercy of Allah is near to the doers of good."

This divine mandate is not without responsibility; it is a trust (*amānah*) that must be upheld with full ethical and spiritual commitment. Al-Attas further explains that humans possess a dual soul: the higher soul (*al-naḥs al-nāṭiqah*), associated with rationality and spirituality, and the lower soul (*al-naḥs al-ḥayawāniyyah*), linked to base desires and material inclinations.³⁷ The higher soul must govern the lower in order to actualise wisdom (*ḥikmah*) and fulfil the metaphysical covenant.³⁸

This prioritisation affirms human nobility, grounded in the capacity to understand, reflect, and communicate, traits that distinguish humans from other beings.³⁹ A righteous individual in Islam is one who first establishes

³⁷ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: The International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1993), 141.

³⁸ "A soul which allows its lower faculties to dominate the higher is as one who should hand over an angel to the power of a dog or a Mussalman to the tyranny of an unbeliever." See Field, *Al-Ghazali Kimiya-e Saadat*, 9.

³⁹ Fiqih & Tatiana, "Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas on Human Origin," 350.

justice within the self and then extends it to society.⁴⁰ Al-Attas's classification of the human being into *nafsān* (the twofold nature of the soul) presents a dualistic framework in which the human exists simultaneously within two realms: the spiritual or rational domain (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*) and the physical or instinctual domain (*al-nafs al-ḥayawīyyah*).⁴¹

This perspective closely aligns with Abdurrahman's division of human existence into the unseen metaphysical world (*‘ālam al-ghayb*) and the observable physical world (*‘ālam al-mar’ī*). Both thinkers propose that the essence of human nature is not merely rooted in material existence but is fundamentally shaped by metaphysical awareness. In Abdurrahman's conceptualisation, human development within the metaphysical realm progresses vertically (*‘amūdī*), indicating spiritual ascent and moral refinement. In contrast, engagement in the physical realm unfolds horizontally (*ufuqī*), reflecting material actions and sensory experiences.⁴² This vertical movement is considered more essential, as it leads to an elevated state of self-realisation and ethical clarity. These outcomes are unattainable through physical activity alone without inner awareness.

Likewise, al-Attas employs the categories of *bashariyyah* (bodily or corporeal human aspect) and *insāniyyah* (spiritual-rational human essence) to illustrate a similar distinction.⁴³ The *insāniyyah* dimension is understood as the source of intention, moral discernment, and metaphysical insight, which in turn directs and influences the bashariyya aspect. In this framework, all actions, whether virtuous or immoral, carried out by the *bashariyyah* originate from the inclinations and

⁴⁰ Al-Attas, *Islam: The Concept of Religion*, 4.

⁴¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam: The Covenants Fulfilled* (Kuala Lumpur: Ta'dib International, 2023), 10.

⁴² Abdurrahman, *Dīn al-Hayā'*, 1:38.

⁴³ Al-Attas, *Islām: The Covenants Fulfilled*, 11.

consciousness of the *insāniyyah*. Thus, the ethical and spiritual orientation of the self determines the character and consequences of human conduct, underscoring the primacy of the metaphysical over the physical in defining human nature.

However, al-Attas emphasises that despite the biological similarities between *bashar* (the human in its physical form) and animals, humans are categorically distinct due to the intrinsic integration of *bashariyyah* and *insāniyyah*. These two dimensions (bodily and spiritual) are inseparable and mutually reinforcing.⁴⁴ In a parallel argument, Abdurrahman underlines the uniqueness of human beings based on their simultaneous presence in two realms: the physical (*munwajid*) and the metaphysical (*mutawājjid*).⁴⁵ This dual existence grants humans a distinctive status. Yet, it also presents a central challenge: the tendency toward forgetfulness (*nisyān*), which leads to the neglect of divine responsibilities, particularly the role of humans as *khalīfah* (vicegerents of God on Earth).⁴⁶

This spiritual amnesia often manifests in a distorted perception of the divine, wherein God is seen as unjust due to human failure in fulfilling the obligations entrusted to them. Such a condition is especially evident in the modern human condition, as identified by Abdurrahman, where ideological currents and materialist tendencies foster alienation from one's spiritual essence and divine purpose. In response to this crisis, both al-Attas and Abdurrahman seek to restore the awareness of human nature and responsibility. Their emphasis on the concept of man serves as a critical intervention, urging contemporary individuals, particularly those influenced by modernist ideologies, to reorient themselves toward their original function and purpose as conscious, ethical, and accountable beings.

⁴⁴ Al-Attas, *Islam: The Covenants Fulfilled*, 11.

⁴⁵ Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 36.

⁴⁶ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 144–45; Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Dīn*, 36.

Ethical Reasoning: An Epistemic Exploration

The concept of ethics has been interpreted through diverse philosophical and cultural lenses. From an Islamic perspective, however, the ethical crisis confronting contemporary humanity is both evident and urgent. Islamic ethics, while rooted in revelation, are not limited to Muslim communities; their universal scope and integrative nature render them relevant to all of humanity. This universality stems from the understanding that religion is intrinsically bound to human nature (*fiṭrah*), and thus, ethics in Islam are not merely a set of social regulations but are expressions of a divine covenant (*mīthāq*) between humans and God, encompassing moral responsibility and spiritual orientation.

Abdurrahman challenges the commonly held assumption that intellect alone differentiates humans from animals. He argues that both possess cognitive faculties to a certain extent. Animals, for example, learn through trial and error, and while humans may possess more sophisticated cognitive abilities, the mere presence of intellect is not exclusive to humanity. What truly distinguishes humans, according to Abdurrahman, is their capacity for ethical reasoning, an ability to transcend instinctual cognition and engage in moral deliberation. This notion is central to his work *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa Tajdīd al-ʿAql*, where he outlines a tripartite classification of reason: abstract reason (*al-ʿaql al-mujarrad*), guided reason (*al-ʿaql al-musaddad*), and supported reason (*al-ʿaql al-muʾayyad*).⁴⁷

The first type, abstract reason, refers to basic cognitive functioning that remains confined to instrumental or utilitarian purposes. While it serves a necessary function, it is insufficient for defining the full scope of human distinctiveness. The second type, guided reason, represents

⁴⁷ Taha Abdurrahman, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī wa Tajdīd al-ʿAql* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1997).

the intellect aligned with divine guidance, particularly through adherence to religious law in the pursuit of *maṣlahah* (benefit or welfare). This type of reason assumes moral and spiritual discipline, as it is informed by *akhlāq* (virtue ethics), and thus marks the minimum threshold for what it means to be fully human. As Abdurrahman notes, this reason is not autonomous but is shaped by an ethical orientation toward the good. In this regard, Taha Abdurrahman asserts:

“If rationality is no longer the dividing line between humanity and animality, then this dividing line must be found in something that does not turn into harm for humans when seeking good in the present and success in the future, and there should be no doubt about its benefit once it is adopted, nor about the harm when it is abandoned. This thing is nothing other than the principle of seeking good itself, which we call morality (*akhlāqiyyah*).”⁴⁸

Thus, ethical reasoning, in this framework, becomes the defining human faculty, one that connects the intellect with the moral imperative. It is through this capacity that humans fulfil their ontological role as moral agents and bearers of divine trust (*amānah*), capable of distinguishing not only right from wrong but also aligning themselves with the ultimate good as defined by divine law.

If the first type of reason includes both humans and animals, then the second type marks a distinction between them, as it is reflected in thought and action.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the supported reason represents the highest level, where individuals translate religious teachings into practice for the sake of God and simultaneously extend their benefits to the broader world. This third level involves practising Islamic

⁴⁸ Abdurrahman, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq*, 14.

⁴⁹ Abdurrahman, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq*, 14–15.

teachings in all aspects of life, guiding human beings toward the true *maqāṣid* of life.⁵⁰ Thus, only pious individuals (*wara'*) can attain this stage of reasoning. In this context, ethics, reason, and revelation are inherently interconnected and cannot be separated. Therefore, according to Abdurrahman, ethics is not only the essence of being human but also the core driver of humanity's transformation into civilisation. In this view, religion serves as the ethical framework that directs rationality toward becoming a virtuous human being.⁵¹

Furthermore, al-Attas presents a nuanced approach to ethics (*adab*) that emphasises the interplay between reason and revelation. He argues that while humans possess the freedom of choice (*ikhtiyār*), this freedom must be guided by divine revelation to enable individuals to make ethical decisions.⁵² Al-Attas criticises the Western concept of ethics, which prioritises human reason while neglecting religious values. He contends that such an approach leads to the dominance of the lower soul (*al-nafs al-hayawāniyyah*).⁵³ In contrast, ethics grounded in revelation fosters a strong relationship with God and, by extension, with the community, thereby countering the individualism promoted in Western thought. This implies that ethical behaviour is determined by the harmonious integration of religion, reason, and knowledge.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Abdurrahman, *Su'āl al-Akhlāq*, 70.

⁵¹ Michael L. Bevers, "Taha Abdurrahman's Ethics for a Secular Age," *Journal of Islamic Ethics* 1(1-2) (2017), 198, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24685542-12340008>.

⁵² Dinar Dewi Kania, "Konsep Virtue Ethics dalam Pemikiran Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas dan Tantangan Postmodernisme," *Tasfiyah* 1(2) (2017), 162-63, <https://doi.org/10.21111/tasfiyah.v1i2.1850>.

⁵³ Al-Attas, *Risalah untuk Kaum Muslimin*, 83.

⁵⁴ Elit Ave Hidayatullah & Syamsuddin Arif, "Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' Exposition on the Concept of Ethics," *AFKAR: Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam* 24(1) (2022), 427, <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol24no1.12>.

Al-Attas also highlighted the role of justice and wisdom as foundational to ethics, as they reflect the Divine Names of God (*al-Asmā' al-Ḥusnā*).⁵⁵ He argued that ethical reasoning can only be fully realised through an understanding of revelation. This perspective links revelation, knowledge (*'ilm*), and action (*'amal*) through reason (*al-naṭiqah*). In this regard, al-Attas distinguishes between two types of knowledge: divine knowledge, granted by God, and knowledge derived from human experiences and observation. The former is a divine gift bestowed upon those who adhere to God's laws through acts of worship (*'ibādah*). This type of knowledge encompasses the essentials of Islam, including the six pillars of faith (*arkān al-īmān*), the five pillars of Islam (*arkān al-Islām*), and the highest ethical virtue (*iḥsān*), where individuals worship God as though they see Him, or as though He sees them.⁵⁶

In this context, al-Attas asserted that Muslims cannot achieve true knowledge solely by relying on human experiences and observation, as these are limited to empirical matters. Instead, they must comprehend the divine knowledge granted by God, which serves as a guiding light toward the right path. Consequently, both Abdurrahman and al-Attas emphasised that ethical reasoning is rooted in the understanding of revelation, as it resonates with a deeper comprehension of human nature and its divine purpose. This approach is thus essential to ensuring that all actions align with the moral and spiritual order based on revelation.

⁵⁵ Kania, "Konsep Virtue Ethics," 167.

⁵⁶ Al-Attas, *Islam: The Concept of Religion*, 29–30.

The Response to Modernity: A Comparative Analysis of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Taha Abdurrahman

The hegemony of Western modernity dominates the contemporary world and poses a significant challenge to the Muslim community, particularly in terms of its impact on the Islamic worldview. Muslim scholars have proposed various approaches to respond to modernity, recognising that society is continuously evolving toward what is commonly labelled as the modern. Historically, Muslim communities have actively responded to change across different eras. This adaptability is evident in how the message of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) continues to be studied and applied by Muslims across generations, taking into account changing circumstances and contexts.⁵⁷ Muslim scholars, therefore, function as inheritors of the prophetic legacy, transmitting Islamic knowledge to subsequent generations to guide communities through evolving societal conditions.

Taha Abdurrahman, in particular, authored several works critically examining modernity. In his book *Rūḥ al-Hadāthah* (The Spirit of Modernity), he noted that many scholars define modernity in various ways, such as by historical periods, sociopolitical backgrounds, specific characteristics, or cultural products. However, Abdurrahman argued that such definitions fail to provide a comprehensive understanding of the concept. For him,

⁵⁷ M. Afifi Al-Akiti & H.A Hellyer, "The Negotiation of Modernity Through Tradition in Contemporary Muslim Intellectual Discourse: The Neo-Ghazālian, Attasian Perspective," in *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, ed. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud & Muhammad Zainiy Uthman (Johor Bahru: Penerbit Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), 2010), 119.

modernity is ultimately a historical phase decreed by God.⁵⁸ Accordingly, he proposed a more profound and integrated concept, distinguishing between the spirit of modernity (*rūḥ al-ḥadāthah*) and the manifestation of modernity (*wāqi‘ al-ḥadāthah*).

Abdurrahman maintained that human beings are inherently oriented toward improvement and advancement. Therefore, he did not entirely reject modernity but sought to extract and clarify its core meaning. The essence of modernity, as articulated in his concept, lies in the spirit of modernity, an ethical and metaphysical orientation. At the same time, its manifestation refers to the external and material form of modernity, as promoted by Western civilisation. In this context, he critiqued Western modernity for its separation of religion from ethics. He specifically criticised the archetype of the contemporary man (*al-insān al-mu‘āṣir*), whom he associated with Western societies, as the producers of a contemporary civilisation that has lost the virtue of modesty (*ḥayā’*). With the rapid development of technology, this moral and spiritual deficiency has spread globally, posing serious threats to human dignity. Such a condition, according to Abdurrahman, is in direct contradiction with human nature (*fiṭrah*). The loss of *fiṭrah* ultimately results in the death of the heart (*qalb*), which in turn jeopardises the essence of life itself.⁵⁹

Moreover, Abdurrahman attempted to reform Islamic tradition through ethics based on a Quranic approach. Consequently, he offered a strict critique of Western modernity.⁶⁰ He categorised the spirit of modernity (*rūḥ al-*

⁵⁸ Taha Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah al-Madkhal ilā Ta’sīs al-Hadāthah al-Islāmiyyah* (Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 2006), 23.

⁵⁹ *Fiṭrah*, according to Abdurrahman, is defined as an assembly of ethical religious values. See Abdurrahman, *Dīn al-Ḥayā’*.

⁶⁰ Ramon Harvey, "Quranic Values and Modernity in Contemporary Islamic Ethics," in *Islamic Ethics and the Trusteeship Paradigm*:

ḥadāthah) into three foundational principles: the principle of majority (*mabda' al-rushd*), the principle of criticism (*mabda' al-naqd*), and the principle of universality (*mabda' al-shumūl*).⁶¹ The first, the principle of majority (*mabda' al-rushd*), emphasises intellectual independence (*al-istiqlāl*), wherein individuals are free to develop their thoughts and implement them through creativity and innovation. The second, the principle of criticism (*mabda' al-naqd*), is grounded in rationalisation (*al-ta'qīl*), which facilitates the advancement of political and economic systems. It also involves differentiation (*al-tafṣīl*), or the classification of various fields of knowledge, which, however, remain inseparable from religion.

Lastly, the principle of universality (*mabda' al-shumūl*) includes extensibility (*al-tawassu'*), referring to the applicability of ideas across all aspects of life, and generalisability (*al-'awlamah*), which enables ideas to be relevant to all of humanity, transcending race, religion, language, and other boundaries. Thus, Abdurrahman's concept of the spirit of modernity is universal, comprehensive, and transhistorical. This conception challenges the notion of multiple modernities by asserting that ethics cannot be separated from religion. It offers a corrective to Western modernity and proposes a more spiritually grounded and ethically coherent model for human civilisation.⁶²

On the other hand, al-Attas extended his critique of Western modernity by asserting that Islam offers the ultimate form of happiness (*sa'ādah*), which is attained through complete submission to God and adherence to His

Taha Abdurrahman's *Philosophy in Comparative Perspectives*, ed. Mutaz al-Khatib (n.p.: BRILL, 2021), 52.

⁶¹ Abdurrahman, *Rūḥ al-Ḥadāthah*, 24.

⁶² Wael Hallaq, *Reforming Modernity: Ethics and the New Human in the Philosophy of Abdurrahman Taha* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2019), 31–32.

commands.⁶³ He identified at least three essential levels of *sa'ādah*: the physiological, the spiritual, and the beatific vision of God. The first, the physiological level, is temporal and manifests as emotional satisfaction when one fulfils needs and desires through virtuous choices. The second, the spiritual level, is enduring; while it resembles the first in experience, it is marked by a diminished focus on worldly desires and a deeper fulfilment of essential needs. This stage serves as a bridge to the third and highest level, the vision of God in the hereafter, which represents ultimate and eternal happiness.⁶⁴ This worldview remains constant regardless of circumstances, as the meaning of life is rooted in drawing nearer to God.

According to al-Attas, any pursuit of happiness outside this framework inevitably leads to misery (*shaqāwah*), suggesting that Western modernity, characterised by cultural uncertainty, scepticism, and confusion, fails to offer genuine fulfilment.⁶⁵ However, al-Attas does not entirely reject modernity; instead, he critiques its excessive reliance on rationalism, which, in his view, contributes to ongoing societal disorientation. The core tenets of Western modernity (secularism, rationalism, empiricism, humanism, and dichotomous thinking) lack a coherent and permanent ethical foundation, instead relying on mutable socio-cultural and empirical constructs.⁶⁶ As a result, this model, which prioritises materialistic and

⁶³ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 91.

⁶⁴ Al-Attas, "Islam and the Challenge of Modernity," 95.

⁶⁵ Jarman Arroisi, Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi & Winda Roini, "The Relevance of Contemporary Epistemology on Existing Knowledge: A Critical Analysis of Western Scientific Worldview According to al-Attas Perspective," *Afkar: Jurnal Akidah & Pemikiran Islam* 25(2) (2023), 237, <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol25no2.7>.

⁶⁶ Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, *Liberalisasi Pemikiran Islam (Gerakan Bersama Orientalis dan Kolonialis)* (Siman: Centre for Islamic and Occidental Studies (CIOS), 2008), 7–11.

temporal concerns, stands in fundamental contradiction to the Islamic conception of life.

In contrast, Islam offers a comprehensive worldview that transcends material existence by providing enduring ethical principles rooted in divine guidance. According to al-Attas, the Muslim community must adopt a distinct epistemological and ontological framework grounded in the Islamic worldview. This worldview serves as a foundation for confronting change, development, and progress, anchored in the recognition of the One Absolute Reality (God) as the central orientation of life. By doing so, Muslims are able to maintain spiritual integrity and consistency in their beliefs without being destabilised by dynamic societal transformations.⁶⁷

Al-Attas acknowledged that Western modernity, particularly through rapid technological advancements, has had a significant influence on Muslim societies. However, he cautioned against uncritical adoption of its values and frameworks. While not all aspects of modernity are inherently incompatible with Islam, any engagement must be measured against Islamic epistemology and ethical standards. Islam, in his view, possesses its own autonomous sources of truth that do not require validation through modern scientific theories. Like Abdurrahman, al-Attas believed that Western claims of progress and development are ultimately hollow due to the absence of a metaphysical and spiritual foundation in the Western scientific worldview. In response, he developed the concept of the Islamisation of knowledge, rooted in the Quran and Islamic tradition. This process involves de-Westernising knowledge by removing secular influences and reestablishing an epistemological framework based on

⁶⁷ Al-Attas, *Islam: The Concept of Religion*, 39.

Islamic concepts, values, and worldview.⁶⁸ The Islamisation of knowledge aims to transform all spheres of life, including education, politics, and economics, by integrating them with Islamic principles.

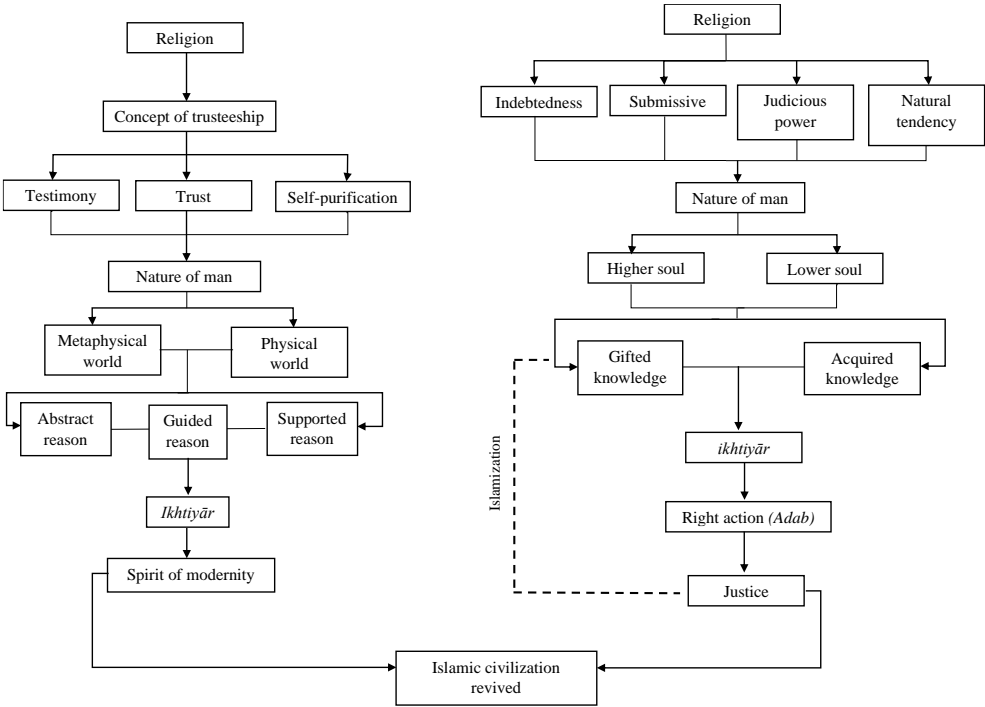
Although their solutions to modernity differ, Abdurrahman, through his conception of the spirit of modernity (*rūḥ al-ḥadāthah*) and al-Attas, through the Islamisation of knowledge, both share a fundamental concern with the metaphysical foundation of human existence. Their critiques converge on the notion of the divine covenant (*mīthāq*) between humanity and God. Both argue that modernity must be reoriented to place all aspects of life in accordance with their divinely ordained purposes, governed by wisdom and justice. This approach is understood as fulfilling the primordial covenant, in which human beings testified to uphold God's commands and abstain from His prohibitions.

Consequently, both Abdurrahman and al-Attas viewed the crisis of modernity not merely as a socio-cultural issue, but as a metaphysical rupture, a failure to honour the sacred covenant. Their respective backgrounds deeply influence this shared perspective in Sufism.⁶⁹ Hence, they argued that modernity cannot be adequately addressed through intellectual or socio-political solutions alone. Instead, it requires a profound return to the divine order, in which wisdom, justice, and the nature of a human being are recognised as primordial responsibilities bestowed upon humankind by God.

⁶⁸ Mohd Faizal Musa, *Naquib al-Attas' Islamization of Knowledge: Its Impact on Malay Religious Life, Literature, Language and Culture* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2021), 3.

⁶⁹ Taha Abdurrahman, *al-ʿAmal al-Dīnī*, 90; Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Ṣūfism: As Understood and Practised among the Malays*, Second impression with improvements by Taʿdīb International (Kuala Lumpur: Taʿdīb International Sdn Bhd, 2020), 4.

Figure 1: An illustration of their respective frameworks



Conclusion

Taha Abdurrahman and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas are two influential Muslim thinkers whose intellectual contributions have significantly shaped contemporary Islamic thought. While their approaches to modernity differ in methodology and emphasis, their underlying philosophical and metaphysical frameworks exhibit notable similarities, particularly in their conception of religion, human nature, and ethics as interconnected elements. Both scholars aim to develop a distinctive Islamic response to modernity, rooted in spiritual principles and ethical values.

Abdurrahman's ethical framework is rooted in his paradigm of trusteeship (*amānah*), which is structured around three core elements: testimony (*shahādah*), trust (*amānah*), and purification (*tazkiyah*). This paradigm aligns with al-Attas's metaphysical view, which likewise locates the source of man's ethical responsibility in the act of testimony. For both thinkers, the *shahādah* signifies a foundational covenant that grants human beings' moral agency, expressed through *ikhtiyār* (moral choice), and directs them toward ethical development.

Despite their shared foundations, their approaches to the source of ethical knowledge differ. Abdurrahman emphasises the role of the *qalb* (heart) as the locus of ethical awareness, which guides human reason in accordance with innate disposition (*fiṭrah*). In contrast, al-Attas prioritises *al-naṭiqah* (intellect) as the source of ethical discernment, grounded in revealed knowledge, namely, the Quran and Sunnah. This distinction reflects their respective philosophical orientations: Abdurrahman's leaning toward spiritual intuition and al-Attas's commitment to epistemological clarity and metaphysical order.

Importantly, these differences are not contradictory but rather complementary, enriching the broader discourse on Islamic responses to modernity. Both scholars critique the dominance of Western modernity through a spiritually grounded yet intellectually rigorous lens. They reject the secular epistemology and moral relativism characteristic of modern Western thought, instead advocating for an Islamic modernity rooted in divine guidance, ethical responsibility, and metaphysical coherence.

Thus, Abdurrahman and al-Attas offer profound and complementary frameworks for confronting the challenges of modernity, reaffirming the centrality of Islam as a comprehensive worldview capable of engaging with contemporary issues without compromising its foundational principles.

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