

REVIEW

of the One-Day Colloquium on

ISLAM & SECULARISM

(www.wia.my)

MAS Academy, Kelana Jaya, Malaysia, July 24 2010,

organized by

HIMPUNAN KEILMUAN MUDA

(HAKIM, Intellectual Youth Alliance, www.hakim.org.my)

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CURIOSITY INSTITUTE (CI)

Reviewed by

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The seminar began with a presentation by Professor Dr. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) on: “The Recovery of Adab: Islamic Education in Action.” He noted the view of the eminent scholar Professor Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas regarding ‘*adab*’ (good behavior and the striving for perfection in knowledge and virtue). Education should not be limited to instruction (*ta’lim*) or good breeding (*tarbiyah*). It should rise to the level of *ta’dib* (which includes knowledge, spiritual growth, and consciousness of your responsibility toward God and creation). A great deal of Western education is based on the Greek notion of ‘*paideia*’ (cultural education) which lacks the element of spirituality. When education in Muslim countries lacks ‘*adab*’ the result is injustice, stupidity, and madness and the cultivation of pseudo-sciences.

The second speaker, Assistant Professor Dr. Adi Setia (International Islamic University Malaysia) gave a presentation on: “Dewesternizing and Islamizing the Sciences: Operationalizing the Neo-Ghazalian, Attasian Vision.” He argued that knowledge is not neutral but rather it is value-laden, and so Muslims must be careful about the kind of values that are infused in any disciplines of the modern academia, whether these values are in accord or in discord with the Worldview of Islam. He criticized the field of economics for its emphasis on the scarcity of resources and unlimited human desires. Rather than working for the common good, modern economics seems to put greater focus on self-interested, utility satisfaction. In contrast, Muslims believe that God can provide unlimited resources if God chooses, and so there is no need for greed and competition, but rather an emphasis on temperance and spiritual growth through self-limiting, sustainable and responsible use of God’s bounties in nature. He also criticized the field of medicine for its willingness to conduct experiments on animals for testing drugs. Practices such as vivisection (cutting animals alive) are unethical and even unscientific in Dr. Adi’s view. He advocated his view of Islamic Medicine, which avoid any harm done to animals by focusing on natural therapies. In the area of agriculture, he opposed large-scale industrial farming that destroys the soil and the natural and cultural environment, and advocated a return to traditional Andalusian agriculture (*‘ilm al-filahah*), which avoids the use of toxic pesticides and chemical fertilizers that harm the earth and poison the food. He concluded by announcing several initiatives by HAKIM for reviving Islam Science by helping scholars with expertise and authority to establish the Worldview of Islam Academy (www.wia.my), the International Islamic Institute for Sustainability (www.iii4s.wordpress.com), the Hakim Islamic Medicine Institute & Academy (HIMIA) and the Mu’amalah Research Group (MRG).

Assistant Professor Dr. Syamsuddin Arif (International Islamic University Malaysia) spoke on “The Concept and Experience of Religion in Islam: Bringing Modernity into the Ambit of Tradition.” He noted that Islam advocates attaining freedom through submission to God, as opposed to those who advocate a freedom ‘from’ religion. By enslaving yourself to God, you are preventing the enslavement of man by man

and man by his own ego. He also preferred to refer to the Islamic concept of freedom in Arabic as *'ikhtiyar'* (to choose the good between alternatives) rather than merely *'hurriyyah'* (non-enslavement). He argued that the Islamic concept of happiness entails inward peace and satisfaction. A happy Muslim is one who is not scared of the unknown, has no dread of ultimately dying, and has no irrational fear of impending calamity, because he is in certainty of his ultimate goal in life.

Associate Professor Dr. Muhammad Zainiy Uthman (International Islamic University Malaysia) gave an address on "Islamization in History: the Case of the Malay Archipelago." He pointed out the valuable studies of al-Attas on how the Malay Archipelago began to be Islamized during the very first century of Islam. The Malay language, also, was enriched by a large number of Arabic and Persian loan words, and Malay literature became an important component of Islamic literature in general. The Islamization of Malaysia and Indonesia involved a continuous removal of magical, mythological, and animistic traditions from Malay culture.

Shaykh Hassan Henning Pederson (International Islamic Institute for Sustainability, www.iii4s.wordpress.com) gave a presentation on "Building Sustainable Muslim Communities in a Secular World." He noted that Muslims and non-Muslims are destroying large numbers of species of animals and plants at an alarming rate. This is due to the practice of reckless consumerism, which involves buying unneeded products that were made at the expense of the environment and even the lives of people. In fact, consumerism is secularism in action. People prefer to buy cheaper food full of toxic chemicals rather than organic food that is maybe more expensive but wholesome. People want their governments to subsidize mass production of sugar and bread rather than use natural sweeteners such as honey and to practise moderation. Water supplies around the world are being contaminated, and people are buying drugs made by pharmaceutical companies that contain poisons which cause more pain in the future than the immediate pain that justifies the drug in the first place. It is a vicious cycle, where people eat unhealthy food, and then get sick, and then take unnatural medicines, which then lead to more diseases and increasing poverty and helplessness. Every time someone buys a plastic product, harm is being done to the environment, directly or indirectly. Some of the suggestions for helping the environment and for promoting sustainable living include the following: Stop watching television; buy less machines and less cell-phones; and reduce war by conserving resources through the practise of sustainable living. Do not rely on the government to solve any of these problems because the government is either part of the problem or it is unwilling to solve them. He concluded by asking the audience to support the work and mission of the International Islamic Institute for Sustainability, of which he is the founding director.

The culminating key-note speech in the evening was delivered by Professor Dr. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the founder and first director of the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), who spoke on the "Dewesternization of Knowledge." He lamented the fact that the proposals he made forty years ago in his book, *Islam and Secularism*, involving the reform of Islamic education have not been adequately and properly implemented. He noted that he is not against Western societies and people as such; what he is criticizing is the Western worldview which excludes God, ignores values, and dominates and destroys the natural world rather than living in harmony with it. He pointed out that the civilizational dilemma of Muslims today is that they prefer to imitate when they should be innovating, and they prefer to import ideas without engaging in critical analysis and judgement. The challenges of today's world, where governments are corrupt and religious leaders are lazy, can only be solved if our education systems are reformed and returned to the mission of inculcating *adab* and the Worldview of Islam.

In conclusion, it can be said that the colloquium was very well organized and the venue (Malaysian Airlines Academy) was quite suitable. More than seventy people attended the five lectures during the morning and afternoon sessions, and over a hundred and fifty attended the culminating keynote speech in the evening. More seminars like this need to be conducted in order to expose the community to the ideas and insights of Professor al-Attas. Future generations can prosper by reading his many works in English and Malay, especially his universally recognised pioneering work *Islam and Secularism*. Additional information about the seminar and future programs can be obtained through the HAKIM websites, www.hakim.org.my and www.wia.my.