

Chapter One

Metaphysical Worldview*

The economic backwardness and political weaknesses of the Muslims particularly from the times of their direct or indirect subjugation by the Western colonial powers in the 18th century, have spurred many Muslim leaders to clamour for internal changes to close the humiliating gap between them and the West. Various ideas have been put forward and institutions established causing myriads of changes in the religious views and understanding of the Muslims that have left most of them baffled and weakened. For almost three decades Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas has consistently argued that the most fundamental and basic reason for this condition is the problem of the content of education. This problem is rooted in the confusion concerning the nature and scope of knowledge, and concerning, among other important matters, the meaning of religion in Islam, its basic key terms and components as well as concerning the spirit and sciences and institutions of other civilizational entities, especially those of the West. Al-Attas has therefore suggested and demonstrated that the only way to escape from this quagmire is through a process of education, especially at the tertiary or university level. This chapter will discuss the outline of the metaphysics of Islam as understood and espoused by al-Attas. Fortunately, he is one of the very few contemporary Muslim thinkers who has systematically presented an interpretation of the Islamic metaphysical worldview, upon which he developed his conception of education and other important matters.¹

* This chapter is a corrected and amended version of the author's article, "Islamic Metaphysics—A Restatement: The Vision of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas", *Iqbal Review*, vol. 35, no. 3, October 1994.

¹ See for example Alparslan Açıkgenç, "Towards an Islamic Concept of Philosophy: A Response to the Modernists", in Sharifah Shifa al-Attas, ed., *Islām and the Challenge of Modernity: Proceedings of the Inaugural Symposium on Islām and the Challenge of Modernity—Historical and Contemporary Contexts, August 1–5, 1994* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1996), p. 563.

Metaphysics is generally accepted as a branch of philosophy, which is concerned with the nature of ultimate reality. In the Islamic sense, metaphysics, which includes of course the original meaning of the term, theology, is the most important because it determines the Muslim conception of the universe, human psychology, epistemology, ethics and even logic. We realize that metaphysics is no longer popular in modern educational discourse. This attitude, which is Western, is neither morally honest nor rationally justifiable because the literal meaning of the term does include all the major components of what philosophy of education considers pertinent.

Every textbook on education, particularly the one that deals with the area of educational aims and objectives, curriculum content and teaching methods will emphasise the importance and the need of a general philosophy of education. It will also stress that this philosophy is in turn dependent on the beliefs and convictions or worldview of the person or society involved. Further, it is accepted that, whether explicitly or implicitly, every educational idea, decision or action is imbued with a certain philosophical, religious or scientific view of the nature of man and his physical and non-physical universe.² It is instructive to note that Iqbal himself recognizes the relationship between philosophy and education. In a letter to Saiyidain which is reproduced in the book mentioned above,³ he stresses the educational implications of Leibnitz's monadism. Briefly, the universe according to Leibnitz (d. 1716) is composed of countless conscious centers of spiritual force or energy called the monads, each of which represents an individual microcosm, reflecting the various degrees of perfection

in the Universe. Each monad develops independently from one other. The universe so constituted is the harmonious result of Divine plan, but man's limited ability made him unable to accept certain realities such as evil and death as part of that harmonious plan.⁴ If a general philosophy is needed to provide a framework for establishing the aims and objectives of education, the criteria for the selection of educational contents and experiences and the basis for evaluating their degree of attainment, then metaphysics as understood from the Islamic perspective has direct relevance to the concept and practice of Islamic education.

THE METAPHYSICS OF AL-ATTAS

The metaphysics of Islam as understood and espoused by al-Attas is a synthesis of ideas and theories that have been traditionally upheld by Muslim theologians (*mutakallimūn*), philosophers (*hukamā'*) and Sūfis (*ṣūfiyyah* or *ahl al-taṣawwuf*). The elements and elaborations of this metaphysics are found scattered in his definitive commentaries on the two greatest scholars of the Malay world, Ḥamzah Fansūrī (fl. circa 1550–1600)⁵ and Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānī (d. 1658)⁶ and in his *Islām and Secularism*.⁷ However, he has systematized these ideas and elements in a series of monographs: *Islām: The Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality* (1976),⁸ *Islām and the Philosophy of Science* (1989), *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul* (1990), *The Intuition of Existence* (1990), *On Quidity and Essence* (1990), *The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islām* (1993), and finally *The Degrees of Existence* (1994), which were organized and published as one volume,

² See for example, National Society for the Study of Education, *Modern Philosophies and Education*, Fifty-fourth Yearbook, Part 1 (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1956). Eminent educationist James B. Macdonald has correctly declared that "all curriculum talk and work is value based. Further, examination of much of our curricular talk and work often reveals a failure to identify and relate values to the work in process." J. B. Macdonald, "Values Bases and Issues for Curriculum", in A. Molnar and J. A. Zaborik, eds., *Curriculum Theory* (Washington, D.C.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1977), p. 21. See also James A. Jordan, "Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Curriculum Worker", in John I. Goodlad et al., *Curriculum Inquiry: The Study of Curriculum Practice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), pp. 303–342.

³ Saiyidain, *Iqbal's Educational Philosophy*, p. vii.

⁴ See for example Gottfried W. Leibnitz, *The Monadology and Other Philosophical Writings* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985).

⁵ *The Mysticism of Hamzah Fansūrī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970). Hereafter cited as MHF.

⁶ *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānī* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, 1986), hereafter cited as *Commentary*.

⁷ *Islām and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: The Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), 1978). Hereafter cited as *IS*.

⁸ Published by the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 1976, reprinted by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur in 1992. Incorporated as chapter 3 in *IS* and chapter 1 of *Prolegomena*, as fully cited below.

Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam (1995).⁹ The metaphysics of al-Atlas, in fact all his articulations on Islam, are based on his interpretation of the Qur'ān, the *Sumnah* of the Prophet (pbuh), and the teachings of what Iqbal calls the "more genuine schools of Sūfism"¹⁰ or the higher Sūfis. His interpretation of the former two basic sources of Islam is based on the traditional methods of *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*. *Tafsīr* of the Qur'ān is precise and is not subject to error because it deals with the clear verses (*muhkamāt*) whose meanings must be based on other clear verses of the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* of the Holy Prophet. Many of the Qur'ānic commentaries carried out by Muslims in these last two centuries, according to al-Atlas, are not really *tafsīr* (pl. of *tafsīr*), precisely because they do not strictly adhere to the stated criterion. Even though *ta'wīl* seeks to interpret the ambiguous (*mutashābihāt*) verses, still it must consider the relevant clear ones for support. Furthermore, these methods can be effectively applied and relied upon because they are rooted in the scientific nature of the Arabic language, by which he means that Arabic has a system of roots with a set of interrelated basic meanings which protects its words and ideas from subjective interpretations and societal changes. The rise of Islam saw the Islamization of the Arabic language. Even then Islam did not change the basic meanings imbedded in the roots of words but it caused a rearrangement, and in some cases radical transformation, of the semantic field of the key words or concepts to accord with the Islamic worldview.¹¹ The new Islamized Arabic is exemplified in the Qur'ān and the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet. It is this Islamized Arabic which is scientific, for it conveyed an absolute and objective truth.¹²

According to al-Atlas the metaphysics of Islam as correctly expounded by the higher Sūfis has been widely misunderstood. Although he acknowledges Ibn Khaldūn's insight into the psychology of the Sūfis,¹³ al-Atlas criticises the latter for not differentiating between the doctrines of the different levels of Sūfī groups, i.e., between the pseudo-Sūfis, the ignorant, and the higher ones:

But in spite of that [i.e., his insights into Sūfī psychology] his [i.e., Ibn Khaldūn's] explanation of the philosophical theology and metaphysical doctrines of the Sūfis is apparently confused and hence misleading, and apart from his own the confusion was possibly due to that inherent in the source or sources from which he obtained his information regarding these matters.... In our estimation, however, this sort of belief applies only to the pseudo-Sūfis of various kinds who affirmed either a dualism, or a monism, or a pantheism in their various positions on the relationship between God and the world....¹⁴

Al-Atlas, following al-Rānī and many intellectual Sūfis before him, on the other hand constantly distinguishes between the ideas and teachings of the higher Sūfis from those of the pseudo-Sūfis such as the Sophists (*ṣūfasiyyah*) and the deviating *wujūdīyyah* (*wujūdīyyah mulhīdah*) or ignorant and popular Sūfis whose doctrines are grossly erroneous. The ideas and practices of the former group are firmly rooted in knowledge which is based ultimately on intuitive experience.¹⁵ The pseudo and the ignorant Sūfis uphold, among their

⁹ *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995). Hereafter cited as *Prolegomena*.

¹⁰ Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. Reprint of 1937 (Lahore: Munib Iqbal and Wahid Iqbal, 1977), preface.

¹¹ On his extensive use of semantic field analysis, al-Atlas acknowledges his indebtedness to T. Izutsu. See, MHS, p. 142, note no. 2.

¹² For an elaboration of the scientific nature of the Arabic language, on *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*, see al-Atlas, *The Concept of Education in Islām*, hereafter cited as CEI; reprint of 1980 edition (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1991), pp. 1–12.

also, his *Positive Aspects of Tasawwuf: Preliminary Thoughts on an Islamic Philosophy of Science*, hereafter cited as PAT (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Academy of Science, 1981), pp. 7, 13. This matter is discussed in greater detail in Chap. 7 below.

¹³ *Commentary*, pp. 344–346, 457; on Ibn Khaldūn's ideas, see Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 3 vols., trans. Franz Rosenthal, Bollingen Series, XLIII (New York, 1958), 3: 83–92.

¹⁴ *Commentary*, p. 344.

¹⁵ For example, see PAT, p. 2; *Commentary*, pp. 344–345, 457; see also his *Risalah Unnik Kaum Muslimin*, an unpublished monograph, 280 pp., dated May 1973; para. 63, pp. 227–233. Hereafter cited as *Risalah*.

major doctrines, that God is one or identical with, or incarnated in His Creatures. They also uphold that the external world, including man, is illusory; that the various particular forms in existence are merely subjective and mental, and that nothing exists except God Himself. They also believe in reincarnation and the transmigration of souls. It follows epistemologically, that they do not believe in the possibility of knowledge of the realities of things. Some of them also reject religious laws, from which they claim that they are exempted. Therefore they do things like reject prayers, for example, and contend that contemplation is sufficient instead. They likewise emulate laziness as a way of life, encouraging begging and soliciting alms and charity.¹⁶

The higher Sūfis are such scholars as, among others, al-Junayd (d. 910), Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. circa 988), al-Qushayrī (d. 1072), al-Hujwīrī (d. circa 1074), al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qunawī (d. 1263), Sayyid Ḥaydar ʿAmulī (d. 1320), Dāwūd al-Qaysarī (d. 1350), ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1403), ʿAbd al-Rahmān al-Jāmī (d. 1492), Ḥamzah Fansūrī (d. circa 1600), Mullā Sadā (d. 1640), Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī (d. 1658), and Sabzawāri (d. 1878). It can be safely inferred that due to the pervasive nature of traditional Islamic education during the periods when these scholars flourished, they all received a good grounding in Islamic disciplines such as the Qurʾānic sciences, law, and theology prior to embarking upon the study and practice of Sūfism. Therefore, their position and arguments on many matters often reflect the proper integration of these disciplines. Sūfism or *taṣawwuf*, according to al-ʿAttas, is to be defined as "the practice of *Shari'ah* at the station (*maqām*) of *iḥsān*."¹⁷ His definition is significant because it automatically integrates the spiritual with the legal, two dimensions which are organically linked in Islam. By *iḥsān*, he meant the highest stage of religious life, above though inclusive of *islām* and *imān*, as conveyed by the famous *ḥadīth* narrated by ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and transmitted by Abū Hurayrah, in which the Prophet said of *iḥsān*, "that you should worship God as if you saw Him..."¹⁸ In the concluding paragraph of his commentary on

the *Hujjat al-Siddiq* of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī, al-ʿAttas states that the Islamic metaphysics, which is for him the philosophical Sūfism, is a unified system that discloses the ultimate nature of Reality in positive terms, for it integrates reason and experience with other higher orders in the suprarational and transempirical levels of human consciousness.¹⁹ He asserted that "...no formulation of a philosophy of education and a philosophy of science along Islamic lines can be developed by ignoring the great contributions of the Sūfi masters on the ultimate nature of reality." Moreover, he added, "Intellectual Sūfism can effect a reconciliation between Muslim theology and philosophy just as it has achieved a great measure of understanding and unity between Sunnism and Shi'ism."²⁰

The human quest to grasp the true nature of reality has preoccupied serious individuals such as Thales (d. circa 600 B.C.) and the pre-Socratic philosophers from the earliest recorded history, all the way up to Martin Heidegger and many others in our present day. The perpetual quest has resulted in the philosophical traditions with their many mutually opposing schools of thought such as the idealist, the realist and their various strains. Al-ʿAttas stresses that there are only two schools in Islamic intellectual tradition pertaining to the nature of Reality, namely the Essentialist as represented by all the philosophers and some theologians, and the Existentialist, represented by the higher Sūfis. The fundamental principles of Sūfi theology and metaphysics, are rooted in the primary principle of the fundamental reality of existence (*wujūd*) as opposed to that of quiddity (*māhiyyah*), as held by Muslim philosophers and theologians.²¹ This fundamental

¹⁹ *Commentary*, p. 465. See also Toshitiko Izutsu, "The Structure of Metaphysical Thinking in Islam", in M. Moadhegh and H. Landolt, eds., *Collected Papers on Islamic Philosophy and Mysticism*. Wisdom of Persia Series (Tehran: McGill Univ. Institute of Islamic Studies, Tehran Branch, 1971), pp. 46–49, hereafter cited as "Structure"; Fazlur Rahman, *Mulla Sadra*, pp. 5–6.

²⁰ Al-ʿAttas, "The Corruption of Knowledge," unpublished lecture delivered in Istanbul, 17–22 September 1985, p. 6.

²¹ *Commentary*, pp. 34–35, etc.; also al-ʿAttas, *On Quiddity and Essence: An Outline of the Basic Structure of Reality in Islamic Metaphysics* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1990), pp. 20–21. Hereafter cited as QE which forms chap. 6 of *Prolegomena*; Izutsu, "Structure", pp. 43–45; Fazlur Rahman, *Mulla Sadra*, chaps. 1 and 2.

¹⁶ *Commentary*, pp. 186–191; 206–208; 213–217; 344–345. For al-Rānīrī's position, see for example, his *Hujjat al-Siddiq*, para xiii-xiv, xix in *Commentary*, pp. 90–91, 97–98.

¹⁷ *IS*, p. 155; *idem*, *PAT*, p. 1; *Commentary*, p. 184.

¹⁸ Cited in *PAT*, p. 1; *Commentary*, p. 184.

difference, al-Attas notes, is not merely a matter of semantics or logic, but pertains to the true meaning and nature of reality.²² The certainty that is arrived at on the meaning and nature of reality is based not merely on rational analysis or discursive reasoning but on direct intuitive experience. The view of reality based on ordinary sense and rational experience "has undoubtedly led philosophical and scientific speculations to the preoccupation with *things* and their 'essences' at the expense of existence itself",²³ making thereby the study of nature as an end in itself. Islamic metaphysics admits the real distinction between essence and existence only at the mental sphere; whereas in the extra-mental reality itself, "it is Existence (*wujūd*) that is the real 'essences' of things; and what is mentally or conceptually posited as 'essences' or 'quiddities' (*māhiyyāt*) are in reality accidents (*a'rāḍ*) of existence."²⁴ This reality is Absolute Existence, and it is none other than the Truth (*al-Haqq*), an aspect or mode (*wajh*) of God Almighty.²⁵ Al-Attas clarifies that:

When the Sūfis say that the Truth, which is one of the Names of God, is the reality of existence, they are speaking in metaphysical terms referring to the Absolute as it manifests itself in all the planes of existence. They are not implying thereby that God has no individuality, or that He is a vast, vague, pervasive and dynamic Being, contrary to the theological God of religion. On the contrary, they affirm individuality of God; for it is not inconsistent for the Absolute to have an individuation as God in the way that He has described Himself according to His Beautiful Names and Sublime Attributes. This individuation is at the plane of the Divine Oneness, whose self-revealing aspect is characterized by Names and Attributes of Divinity.²⁶

The true school of *wahdāniyya*, or unity of existence, to which he clearly belongs, upholds that the Ultimate Reality is God only. However, unlike the pseudo-Sūfis, al-Attas affirms that the various particular existences are nevertheless real, not mere imaginary figments of the mind, even though their life-duration does not last two atoms of time because they are constantly perishing (*fanā*). The reality of a particular existent is perceived as enduring because of God's continuous dynamic and constant activity of re-creating, not the same but a similar thing after its every annihilation.²⁷ This characteristic is diametrically opposed to that of the Real Existence Who is eternal (*qadīm*) and everlasting (*baqā*). In fact al-Attas stresses that *qadīm* is really a continuous continuity whereas *baqā* is a discontinuous continuity.²⁸

The process of creation or bringing into existence and annihilation or returning to non-existence, and recreation of similars is a dynamic existential movement. This is articulated in terms of expansion (*basf*) when creating, and contraction (*qabḍ*) when annihilating, in a systematically ambiguous manner (*tashkīk*) producing the various levels and grades of ontological expression from the world of the permanent archetypes ('*ālam al-a'yān al-thābitah*), or the world of Divine Ideas ('*ālam al-mithāl*) in the interior of Divine Consciousness, to the world of spirits ('*ālam al-arwāḥ*), down all the way to the world of sense and sensible experience ('*ālam al-shahādah*). It is ambiguous because the all-pervasive nature of existence is such that it is both a principle of unity and diversity in creation.²⁹ He reiterates that:

The multiplicity of existents that results is not in the one reality of existence, but in the manifold aspects of the recipients of existence in the various degrees, each according to its strength or weakness, perfection or imperfection, and priority or posteriority. Thus the multiplicity of existents does not impair the unity of existence, for each existent is a mode of existence and

²² QE, pp. 17–18.

²³ Al-Attas, *Intuition of Existence: A Fundamental Basis of Islamic Metaphysics* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1990), p. 6. Hereafter cited as IE. This is incorporated as chap. 5 of *Prolegomena*.

²⁴ IE, p. 7.

²⁵ IS, pp. 20–21; QE, pp. 2 and 24.

²⁶ *Commentary*, p. 43.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 233; QE, pp. 26–27, 28 and 31.

²⁸ Private discussion, 23 January 1993.

²⁹ QE, pp. 26–29, 32–36, 52–53.

does not have a separate ontological status.³⁰

The Essence (*dhāt*) which is the reality (*ḥaqīqah*) of God is identical with His Existence.³¹ In its own level of existence, that is as He is in Himself, the Essence is absolutely transcendent and is unknown and unknowable, except to Himself.³² The essence or reality of a thing, however, is defined as the being-existent (*mawjūd*) of the entity (*ayn*), or the individuality (*ḥuwiyyah*) or quiddity (*māhiyyah*), the very self (*nafs*) of the thing. The essence of a thing consists of a mode of existence (*wujūd*) providing the permanent aspect of the thing, and its quiddity, endowing it with its changing qualities.³³

The Names (*asmā'*) of God are infinite; and each one of them has a double nature, one identical with the Essence and with each other, and the other distinct from the Essence and from each other. Each Divine Name, when considered independently of the Divine Essence is an Attribute (*ṣifah*) the number and dual nature of which resemble those of the Name. The Divine Name of the Knower (*al-ʿālim*) for example, considered by itself as an independent reality which specifies a mode or particular aspect of the Essence, the Attribute of knowing becomes a reality, and possesses a characteristic difference from other Attributes deriving from other Names. Notwithstanding this, *all* Divine Names, when they refer to the Essence (*al-Dhāt*), are in reality identical with It. Because of this dual aspect, the Names and Attributes are neither Being nor Non-Being, but occupy a third metaphysical category identified by the Sūfīs as the Realm of the Fixed Archetypes (*al-a'yān al-thābiṭah*).³⁴ The Archetypal Realities are fixed entities capable of receiving Divine Effusion (*al-fayḍ al-muqaddas*) resulting from the existential movement, containing primordial potentialities or "preparednesses" (*isti'dādāt*). These "preparednesses" refer to distinct essential properties which will determine the ultimate nature and destiny of each Archetype and will later form each and every ontological reality

in the external world.³⁵ Nevertheless, the Archetypes themselves never become externalized; they always remain in the interior condition of Divine Consciousness (*baiṭān*).³⁶ Like other realities they undergo the process of perpetual creation and annihilation, but unlike their effects in the external world, they are being recreated the same thereby giving them the important element of permanence or everlastingness (*baqā'*) in themselves and the elements of unity and identity.³⁷

The evolution and repercussions of the archetypes in the forms of empirical things reflect their sources of origin in the Names and Attributes by manifesting a dual nature, i.e., they are both the active and passive principles of existence. On the one hand, when considered purely as archetypes (*a'yān*), the permanent archetypes play the part of active principle in relation to the next stage of ontological 'descent' (*tanazzul*) of the Absolute Being to what is 'below' them, or to their exterior aspect or the exterior archetype, which assume the role of passive principle. On the other hand, when considered as realities (*ḥaqā'iq*), the permanent archetypes are the active principle in relation to the realities of the exterior archetypes (*ḥaqā'iq al-a'yān al-thābiṭah*) which are the recipients of the existential principle, that is, the 'holy effusion' (*al-fayḍ al-muqaddas*).³⁸

As already stated above, the certainty of the higher Sūfīs vis-à-vis their metaphysics, is not based merely on discursive reason, but on a higher form of reason or spiritual experience in which a particular aspect of reality is understood. This supra-rational level of experience is characterized by the *fanā'-baqā'* structure. The *fanā'-baqā'* experiential structure of the intuition of existence has two stages. At the first stage, it is characterized by a partial experience at the first separation (*al-farq al-awwal*) and the second and complete experience at the second separation (*al-farq al-thānī*) which characterizes the second stage. The first stage is when they experience the passing away of their subjective consciousness where they can witness the passing away of the world of multiplicity and its gathering together (*jam'*) into

³⁰ QE, p. 33.

³¹ Ibid., p. 26.

³² Commentary, p. 455; QE, p. 24-26, also note 36 on p. 25.

³³ QE, pp. 22-23 ff.

³⁴ Commentary, p. 45; QE, pp. 40-41.

³⁵ QE, pp. 42-43.

³⁶ Commentary, p. 37; QE, p. 39.

³⁷ QE, pp. 28-29.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 46.

a single unified Reality. This experience is accompanied by an inner turmoil, and if it ceases at this stage—due to limitations in spiritual capacity or preparedness—where they would regain their phenomenal consciousness, they might then, and without God's aid, erroneously believe that the world of multiplicity is a mere figment of human imagination, and that everything is in reality God in the pantheistic or monistic sense. Al-Atlas explains:

Due to his own imperfect spiritual state, and to his incomplete experience of the 'unveiling' (*kashf*), he might then believe that the separate and multiple things are mere figments of the imagination; that these particulars in existence are really what the mind conjures up, and that in reality there is no particularization in existence. He will believe that everything is in reality God in the pantheistic sense or even monistic sense. He thinks that God is the world and the world is God, and his self is God and God is his self. Swayed by his own, subjective vision, he has become one of those who, like him, have slipped from the Right Path and fallen into the abyss of error and heresy. Among such people also are those who are not people of genuine experience, but who derive a semblance of such knowledge from discursive reason, and then misconstrue the matter in their own imagination, without any real experience of *fanā* or *kashf*.³⁹

However, al-Atlas stresses that not all persons who experience such an incomplete vision become involved in error and heresy. While they tend to stress the oneness aspect of Reality only, they nevertheless recognize and acknowledge all the teachings of Islam and abide by all the ethical and legal commandments of the *Shari'ah*. Furthermore, they accept the authority and experience of the higher Sūfis as a truer and higher degree than theirs. Their experience of *fanā* is followed by *fanā al-fanā*—passing away of the passing away—where they experience their own complete annihilation and loss of their subjective

consciousness. When they regain their subjective consciousness, they realize their utter dependence on God. These are the 'elect' (*khawāṣṣ*) among God's servants and are His saints or 'friends' (*awliyā*).⁴⁰

The second stage is experienced by the highest class in the Sūfi classification of mankind known as the 'super-elect' (*khawāṣṣ al-khawāṣṣ*). They are those whose spiritual condition is perfect and mature, and are under God's guidance (*hidāyah*) and are recipients of His aid (*tawfiq*). Their consistent affirmation and practice of religion and the *Shari'ah* are based on right knowledge of the various branches, sincerity of intention, and ethical conduct. They would then ascend to another stage while still being at the stage of passing away of the passing away (*fanā al-fanā*) in which they would not even be conscious of their *fanā*. There they will be resuscitated and will be able to witness the Unity (*wahdah*) individuating. Itself into Multiplicity (*kathrah*) without impairing its original Unity. At this stage, they realize their true Selfhood and 'subsist' in God (*bqa*) even before they regain their normal consciousness. Their subsistence in God, however, does not make them think that man shares Divinity with God, for even at this stage the distinction between God—the Creator and Ultimate Reality—and man, the created and contingent reality, still remains. When God grants them to regain their subjective consciousness, they would see the world of Multiplicity as it truly is, as Modes or Aspects of Unity of the Absolute Existence. Although their experience of the vision is fragmentary, yet their knowledge about the reality is permanent. This is the stage of second separation.⁴¹ Al-Atlas explains the vision of the one who reaches this stage:

We say that his vision of Multiplicity in Unity and Unity in Multiplicity is 'fragmentary' because when God gives him back his subjective consciousness and he regains his individual existence and consciousness of phenomena, he knows that what he has 'witnessed' was a 'fragment'—so to speak, of the continuous series of self-determina-

³⁹ *Commentary*, pp. 134–139.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 139–141. For another clear version of the description of different experience according to various grades of spiritual attainment, see also Izutsu, "Structure", pp. 53–63.

tions and particularizations of the absolute Unity. His remembrance, reflection and contemplation of that vision at this stage constitute that Knowledge in him whose reality and truth is established by the certainty of direct experience (*haqq al-yaqīn*). His experience of *baqā'* or 'subsistence' in God necessarily does not cease, for it would not be a 'subsistence' if it were temporary. We speak of the vision as 'fragmentary', so that it is the 'witnessing' of it (i.e., of the 'gathering of gathering') that is temporary; but the subsequent *knowledge* of it is permanent. He returns to individual existence and phenomenal consciousness is accompanied by a condition of recovery as if from a state of intoxication (*sukr*), or insensibility; a condition of alertness, wakefulness and clarity.⁴²

Al-Attas interprets that this was what the Prophet Mūsā experienced on the Mount.⁴³ It is clear that the position of the higher Ṣūfis is not like what their opponents accused them of, that the former "overlook the essential disparity of God and man taught by the Qur'ān".⁴⁴ The intuition of the Reality of Existence, thus involves both the psychological and the ontological realms. The true vision of the Ultimate Reality accessible to man is based on the second stage of the intuition of Existence, which affirms both God as the Reality as well as realities other than God, and which affirms both God's Transcendence and His Immanence in relation to them.⁴⁵

As stated above, the fundamental nature of reality, can be known by a higher level of experience or intuition. Al-Attas affirms that all knowledge of reality and truth, including the intelligible, is originally acquired through intuition.⁴⁶ It is by accepting the

possibility and the validity of this experience that many other kinds of knowledge are vouchsafed, such as the knowledge of revelation, of prophethood, of the human soul or self, and the spiritual beings such as the angels and Satan, as well as the creative results of the human intellect. The proper role of intuition, as we shall see in the following chapter, will figure quite fundamentally in the educational process.

In al-Attas' metaphysical worldview, the concept and reality of God carry profound implications on the concept, the contents and methods of Islamic education. The knowledge about God based on one's intuitive experience and awareness of one's self and of the external world, is therefore not merely propositional or cognitive but also more importantly experiential. It is for this reason that God says in a *ḥadīth Qudṣī* that "He who knows himself knows his Lord."⁴⁷ The same intention is also conveyed when God commands in the Holy Book that "We shall show them our signs in the horizons and in themselves...."⁴⁸ Al-Attas, following the true Ṣūfis before him, underlines that that knowledge of God is specifically known as *ma'rifaḥ* (gnosis or spiritual illumination) and not *'ilm* (scientific knowledge or knowledge by inference), and that that God Who is thus known is not really Allah as He is in Himself, the highest degree of the Essence (*dhāt*) and the sum of all Names (*asmā'*) and Attributes (*ṣifāt*), it is rather Allah conceived as the *rabb* and the *ilāh*, the God Who is the Lord of the Worlds and Who is Worshipped (*Tuhan* in Malay) or the God of Religion. The realization that there is another level where God cannot be known, i.e., as He is in Himself, is arrived at by inference after the experience of knowing God at the level of *rabb* and *ilāh*. This is important to be stressed, as evidenced from the teachings of the Prophet, that our highest duty and capacity is to know and to acknowledge God both as *rabb* and *ilāh*.⁴⁹ Since God as the Absolute Existence is the fundamental Reality, Islamic education must, as one of its most important aims and objectives, strive to inculcate the true and proper recognition and acknowledgement of God. As will be clearly explained in this work, the proper recognition

⁴² IE, pp. 18–19.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 21–22.

⁴⁴ Ismā'īl R. al-Fārāqī, "Science and Traditional Values in Islamic Society", in Ward Morehouse, ed., *Science and the Human Condition in India and Pakistan* (New York: Rockefeller University Press, 1968), p. 21. Hereafter cited as "Science and Traditional Values".

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 456.

⁴⁶ IE, p. 1; IPS, pp. 10–13; *Commentary*, p. 130.

⁴⁷ This famous *ḥadīth*, "man 'arafa nafsahu fa qad 'arafa rabbahu", is quoted in MHF, p. 98, note 193; IS, p. 65; also IE, pp. 25–26.

⁴⁸ *Fuṣṣilat* (41): 53.

⁴⁹ MHF, pp. 98–99. Al-Attas quotes in note 194, a *ḥadīth* saying: "Glory to Thee! We cannot really know Thee." See also *Prolegomena*, pp. 7–10.

and acknowledgement of God are the central elements in the Islamic conception of religion, knowledge, right action, meaning, education, etc., as understood and espoused by al-Attas.

God then is the basis and the creator of everything, Who is omniscient and omnipotent, unfolding His Will in a perpetual act of creation, annihilation and re-creation through which the infinite inner possibilities inherent in His Names and Attributes are manifested and individuated. Because of this nature of God's Being and activity, all aspects of the phenomenal world are endowed with both dimensions of change and permanence. Unfortunately, because change is easily perceptible in all things while permanence which is the spiritual reality underlying all things is only perceived through intuition, permanence as the underlying principle of change is conveniently regarded as merely conceptual, not objectively real. Change then has been erroneously regarded by modern philosophy and science as the ultimate reality, hence the popular remark: "Everything changes except change itself."⁵⁰ It is a characteristic feature of Western civilization to affirm the evanescent (*fani*) aspect of reality, and to base its values on the secular, material, and physical realities of existence. Because of this, according to al-Attas, Western civilization "is constantly changing and 'becoming' without ever achieving 'being', except that its 'being' is and always has been a 'becoming'".⁵¹ Many nations and institutions which are influenced by this spirit of the Western civilization are directing valuable resources to training their personnel and students to be able to adapt to the so-called inevitability of change, to manage it. Basic developmental and educational aims and objectives are constantly revised and changed following the popular trends and changes coming from the West.⁵² On the contrary, Reality according to Islamic metaphysics as espoused by al-Attas, consists of both permanence and change. As indicated in the earlier part of this chapter, the Primordial Potentialities in the World of Fixed Essences in the interior condition of God's Knowledge, are realities that provide for the underlying permanent aspect of the external world.

⁵⁰ Cf. IPS, p. 32; also *Risalah*, para. 9, p. 27.

⁵¹ *IS*, p. 87.

⁵² Al-Attas has cogently discussed the important issues of progress and change in *IS*, p. 82, and in *Prolegomena*, pp. 76-77.

which is perpetually undergoing change. The realities, because of their being recreated in the same forms are permanent; whereas their potentialities and the actualization of their future states in the external world in the form of renewed similars are perceived as change.

The conception of the existence and the Unity of God can be arrived at through human reason and intellectual effort. However, as al-Attas has asserted several times in his weekly Saturday Night Lectures at ISTAC and in private discussions, unaided human reason is neither able to know even His Name nor to arrive at the proper understanding concerning His relationship to His creatures and vice versa. That is why the Greek thinkers, despite their profound grasp of many intellectual matters, had not attained the correct and certain knowledge about God and His relationship with His creation. Even the coherently articulated ethical ideas of Aristotle, for example, were not institutionalized in practice because they were divorced from religion. Because of this failure, Al-Attas has boldly suggested that even the basic ethical ideas of the Greek philosophers could not have been the result of pure speculation; these ideas were already 'floating' in the air of the ancient world as remnants of the teachings of earlier Prophets.⁵³ Through the metaphysical principles of Divine Unity and of the reality of Existence, and of the cognitively valid nature of intuitive experience, other principles pertaining to the nature and destiny of man, the nature of the universe, the meaning, purposes and hierarchy of knowledge and the various valid ways for the attainment of knowledge and all the interrelated educational matters can be coherently and meaningfully derived. These matters will be discussed in their proper places. We shall begin with the nature of man and the world external to him.

MAN AND HIS PSYCHOLOGY

Man as human being, in his terrestrial existence, is endowed with a dual nature. He is both body (*badan*) and soul (*nafs*) and at once a physical being and spirit. He is neither pure soul nor pure body but a mysterious composite of these two, a third entity which is his very self.⁵⁴ The underlying reality and the unifying principle of what

⁵³ Saturday Night Lecture, 18 July 1992; also from a private discussion in his office at ISTAC, 20 July 1992.

⁵⁴ Cf. *Commentary*, pp. 329-330; EQ, pp. 10-13.

defines man is not his constantly changing physical aspect, but the spiritual one. The human soul is created yet immortal and conscious of itself. It is the locus of intelligibles and equipped with a faculty variously called the spirit (*rūh*), soul or self (*nafs*), heart (*qalb*) and intellect (*ʿaql*). Each of these terms has two meanings, one that refers to the physical or animal aspect, and another to the spiritual aspect.⁵⁵ Al-Attas stresses the different modes of this unity:

Thus when it (i.e., the human soul) is involved in intellection and apprehension it is called 'intellect'; when it governs the body it is called 'soul'; when it is engaged in receiving intuitive illumination it is called 'heart'; and when it reverts to its own world of abstract entities it is called 'spirit'. Indeed, it is in reality always engaged in manifesting itself in all these states.⁵⁶

Since the self is intimately connected to the body and the soul, it is therefore described as the animal soul (*al-nafs al-hayawāniyyah*) on the one hand when it deals with the former aspect, and on the other, as the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nūṭiqah*) when it deals with the latter.⁵⁷ Its destiny in this world and ultimately in the hereafter depends upon which one of the two aspects that the self gives higher priority. Because man is created, annihilated and recreated, his existence therefore does not even last two atoms of time. Like all creatures, man owes his very existence to his Creator. The notion of profound indebtedness to God is one of the fundamental elements of religious understanding and life in Islam.⁵⁸ He therefore cannot regard either his soul, or biological life or body as unqualifiedly his, and hence cannot dispense it howsoever he wishes. He is given knowledge (*al-ʿilm*) primarily of the accidents and attributes of sensible things and intelligible matters, and a knowledge of God (*maʿrifat Allāh*). About

the knowledge of the essence or the inmost ground of certain objects such as the spirit (*al-rūh*), he is given only a little.⁵⁹ He is by nature forgetful, which causes him to be disobedient and thereby "inclines him towards injustice (*ẓulm*) and ignorance (*jahl*)".⁶⁰ The starting point in the Islamic concept of religion, according to al-Attas, goes back to the Time of the Pre-Separation in the Interior Condition of God's Consciousness, before man was created as physical human being. He draws his interpretation from this verse of the Covenant:

When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam—from their loins—their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves (saying): "Am I not your lord?"—they said: "Yea! We do testify!"⁶¹

Perhaps al-Attas is the only one among contemporary Muslim thinkers who has popularised this verse as the starting point of the basic religious sensibility in Man. Not only that, but al-Attas has also derived the origin of at least two other key matters from this verse: the origin of human 'language', and the origin of human brotherhood.⁶²

Man's *raison d'être* as God's servant and *khalīfah* on Earth has been settled in the Time of Pre-Separation when God announced to the angels that He was going to create a vicegerent on earth.⁶³ But man's ruling is not merely limited to the material, socio-political aspects but more fundamentally it refers to the rule of his self by himself, to do justice, and to avoid injustice to his self.⁶⁴ This is possible because the reality of man, according to Islam, epitomizes the microcosmic (*ʿālam ṣāghir*) aspects of the larger macrocosmic (*ʿālam kabīr*) Universe.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ *IS*, p. 132; *al-Isrāʾ* (17): 85.

⁶⁰ *IS*, p. 133; *al-Aḥzāb* (33): 72.

⁶¹ *Al-Aʿrāf* (7): 172.

⁶² *Risālah*, para. 13, pp. 37ff and para. 14, pp. 46ff and *IS*, pp. 52, 65–90 contain detailed explanation of the meaning of this verse of the Covenant; see also PAT, pp. 4–5; *Commentary*, pp. 132–133; and *Prolegomena*, pp. 44–46, 75, 144, 180 and 197.

⁶³ *Al-Baqarah* (2): 30; *al-Anʿām* (6): 165.

⁶⁴ *IS*, pp. 62, 71–74; also NMPHS, p. 4.

⁶⁵ *IS*, p. 64.

⁵⁵ Al-Attas, *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul*, hereafter cited as NMPHS (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1990), pp. 5, 7. NMPHS is incorporated as chap. 4 of *Prolegomena*. See also PAT, p. 4.

⁵⁶ NMPHS, p. 8.

⁵⁷ S. M. N. al-Attas, *The Meaning and Experience of Happiness in Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), p. 5. Hereafter cited as *Happiness*.

⁵⁸ *IS*, chap. 3; *Prolegomena*, chap. 1.

According to al-Attas, the concept of man as a microcosmic representation of the macrocosm is:

most important in relation to knowledge—which is his most paramount attribute responsible for the effective establishment of the just order in his self, his being and existence—and to the organization, instruction, inculcation and dissemination of knowledge in his education, specifically with reference to the university....⁶⁶

Al-Attas has taught that the ultimate aim of religion (*dīn*) is for man to return to that Primordial State or the State of the Pre-Separation, which involves the realization of his identity and spiritual destiny through true knowledge and right conduct.⁶⁷ This is what this worldly life is all about: a process of returning to the Lord, which modern secular man has grudgingly accepted as an integral part of his tragic conception of life.⁶⁸ The attainment of this knowledge and the actualization of right conduct in turn consists in the understanding of God's revelation in the Holy Qur'ān and His signs and symbols in the phenomenal world by means of the various channels of knowledge and its proper implementation following the ethical principles of wisdom, temperance, courage and justice. The purpose of developing and sustaining good character based on true knowledge guided by religion, is to attain lasting happiness (*sa'ādah*) in this world and in the hereafter. Although it recognizes the importance of the changing and terminal happiness of the physical and psychological level—which is attained when the respective needs are fulfilled—Islam regards spiritual happiness as the more enduring and consciously experienced even in this world. Al-Attas defines this enduring happiness in a manner that integrates it with certainty of the ultimate Truth, *imān*,

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 136.

⁶⁷ Al-Attas has given a very detailed semantic analysis of the concept of religion in Islam (*dīn*) in *Risalah*, para. 13, pp. 37ff, and in chap. 3 of *IS*.
⁶⁸ For al-Attas' excellent elaboration of the tragic spirit of modern secular man and of the impossibility of his attaining true happiness, see *Happiness*, pp. 12–22.

and ethical-moral conduct.⁶⁹ This spiritual level of happiness, according to al-Attas, occurs concurrently with the physical-psychological except that wants are lessened and needs are satisfied. Those who have attained to this level will not be swayed to error by good fortune nor defeated in suffering. Happiness in Islam is not an end in itself; rather, it should lead to a higher end, which in this world is the love of God (*mahabbah*). This is a preparation for the true and everlasting happiness in the hereafter, which is the Vision of God (*ru'yatu'l-Lāh*).⁷⁰

The rational aspect of the soul which is also known as the rational soul, is entrusted with the duty of governing its animal aspects to realize its mission in this worldly existence. The relationship between the rational soul and the body is pervasive and intimate not like the analogy given by some scholars who compare it with the rider and the chariot. Rather, it is more analogous to the way God governs the Universe.⁷¹

The metaphysical vision of Islam regards man not only as subject but also as an object of knowledge.⁷² This is because a true education of man involves training his physical being and disciplining his spiritual faculties, which naturally entails that he must be properly informed and educated of his physical and spiritual-moral abilities and limitations as well the matters that may enhance or affect their proper development. But al-Attas also mentions that the study of the various aspects of man by modern secular science is restricted to the methods of psychology, biology and anthropology which basically reduce reason and experience to the physical and psychological levels.⁷³

Contrary to the positions of some of the Greek philosophers such as Socrates and Plato, and the Medieval Christian scholars, the Islamic emphasis on the spiritual reality of man does not mean that his

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 2, 6–8, and 22.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 22–23.

⁷¹ *IS*, pp. 64, 68.

⁷² Al-Attas, *Islam and the Philosophy of Science*, hereafter cited as *IPS* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1989), p. 7. This is incorporated as chap. 3 of *Prolegomena*.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 7. In several private discussions al-Attas asserted that since modern psychology is no longer interested in the study of the soul, the very name of the discipline itself should be changed, for *psyche* in Greek means soul.

body—which is the source of his animal powers—is not important, or that it is to be regarded as a hindrance to his spiritual development.⁷⁴ Al-Attas has elucidated that, on the contrary, the body has significant contributions to man's intellectual and spiritual development, for it is through the bodily faculties that the soul can acquire particular information and data concerning the world of sense and sensible experience. Through its various faculties, the soul will then develop these sense-data into general principles, ideas and beliefs. Further, through the faculties of imagination and estimation, the soul can make a distinction between genus and differentia of their various attributes and abstract their general and particular meanings from material connections and relations. In this way, it can attain to the knowledge of the individual sensibles and their nonsensible meanings, such as love and hate. The soul can also make the comparison between single universals by negation and affirmation of relations and ratios. Through analogous and repeated observations and experience, the soul can acquire empirical premises with which it can verify the veracity or falsity of reports upon which true beliefs are based.⁷⁵ In short, the body and its sound faculties are indispensable for the acquisition and verification of empirical knowledge and experience, the possibility of which is a part of the Islamic creed.

Based on his interpretation of the Holy Qur'an and on the clear empirical evidences which many modernists conveniently choose to ignore, al-Attas strongly adheres to the notion that man is not created equal. Indeed, each man is different in terms of his intellectual and spiritual abilities as well as ethical capabilities. In fact he observes that absolute equality, like absolute freedom, are not philosophical facts but beliefs.⁷⁶ That is why he reasons that the Qur'an teaches that God does not burden a soul more than with what it can bear, and thus it has asked man to pray so that God will not burden him with what he

cannot bear,⁷⁷ both conveying the meaning that souls have different capacities and responsibilities. It is clear to al-Attas that the highest moral value is not the struggle to attain equality; but to attain justice, which requires knowledge and wisdom. In fact if all things are equal or are at the same place, such a condition will only breed confusion, for recognition of essential relation and specific difference would perish, thereby making meaning and consequently knowledge, truth and justice impossible.⁷⁸ Justice, which is "a condition of being in the right and proper place" is of paramount importance in al-Attas' metaphysical worldview because it is a condition that man should strive to attain not merely in relation to his fellowmen and to the natural world, but more importantly towards his own self, God, and other matters including knowledge and language. In the same manner, injustice—a condition whereby things are not in their right and proper places—is a *bête noire* in Islam.⁷⁹ Al-Attas points out that both justice and injustice in Islam do not operate only within the two-person relation or dual-party relation but more fundamentally they both begin and end with the self. One can be just or unjust not only towards others but towards oneself.⁸⁰ It is quite apparent now that these concepts will exert powerful influence on the purpose, content and methods of education.

HUMAN FREEDOM AND DESTINY

The metaphysics of the Unity of Existence (*Wahdati'l-Wujud*) naturally has implications on the problem of human freedom, morality and the doctrine of evil. On these matters, al-Attas holds steadfastly to the Creed of the orthodox Muslims, i.e., the *ahli'l-Sunnah wa'l-Jamā'ah*, that:

Allah...is the Creator of all the actions of His servants whether of unbelief or of belief, of obedience or of disobedience; all of them are by the desire of Allah....As

⁷⁴ NMPHS, p. 5. For an excellent discussion on the various conceptions of man in the Western tradition from Plato to B. F. Skinner, see for example

⁷⁵ Leslie Stevenson, *Seven Theories of Human Nature*. 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 12, 28–29.

⁷⁷ *Al-Ain'am* (6): 132, 165; *al-A'raf* (7): 172; *al-Anfal* (8): 4; *al-Hujurat* (49): 13. Private discussion 23 January 1993.

⁷⁷ *Al-Baqarah* (2): 286.

⁷⁸ CEII, 15–16; PAT, pp. 5–6; IPS, pp. 15–17, 21–22.

⁷⁹ *Risalah*, para. 14, pp. 46, 52; *IS*, pp. 71–74; IPS, p. 23; cf. 'Ali ibn 'Uthman al-Hujwiri, *Kashf al-Mahjub*, trans. R. A. Nicholson, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Vol. XVII (London & Leiden: Luzac & E. J. Brill, 1911), p. 387.

⁸⁰ *IS*, pp. 71–72.

to His servants they have in them the actions of choice (*ikhtiyār*) for which they are rewarded or punished. The good in them is by the good pleasure of Allah...and the evil in them is not by His good pleasure.⁸¹

He asserts that these matters are correctly and properly part of faith (*imān*) because they cannot be definitively resolved through human speculation.⁸² However following some of the higher Ṣūfis before him, al-Attas holds that a proper understanding of the role of the Primordial Potentials (*isrī'adāt aṣilyyā*) in the Fixed Essences where the inner possibilities and destiny of each reality are determined, can best explain the problem of determinism and human destiny.⁸³ Similarly he would return to the verse of the Covenant already cited above in which mankind collectively affirmed the Lordship of God. Their collective answer *Balā shahidā* ("Yea! We do testify!") presupposes that each one of us had already known and accepted all the implications of that affirmation. Another relevant verse is that from *sūrat al-Aḥzāb* (33): 72-73, concerning the Trust that was refused by other creatures. When man chose to accept it, it meant that each soul had the freedom to choose otherwise. Similarly, each one of us was aware of all the implications that follow from that choice. In fact, al-Attas stresses that freedom had been exercised at the time.⁸⁴ His commentary on Ḥamzah Faṣṣūf's conception of human destiny may reflect his own position on the subject:

A man is good or evil according to whether his Primordial Potentiality proceeds from the Divine Attributes of Beauty (*jamāl*) or Majesty (*jalāl*) respectively. From the point of view of reality, however, there is no such thing as absolute evil since the real nature of everything is not distinct from God, and God is good and inclines to goodness. The question of moral

responsibility in this world and of future reward and punishment is very closely connected with belief in the possibility of human freedom as faith (*imān*), and this faith, apart from assuming that man has the capacity to obey or disobey the Divine Command embodied in the religious law (*Shari'ah*), means also faith in the existence of the afterlife as revealed in the religious law. In spite of knowing that this world and the next possess no real existence in relation to God, man must still have faith in their existence, for this is the basis of morality.⁸⁵

Al-Attas would agree with Ḥamzah that in this matter, since evil and hell are particularizations of the Attribute of Divine Majesty (*jalāl*), while good and heaven are derived from the Attribute of Beauty (*jamāl*), the returning of an evil or good soul to hell or heaven respectively is a matter of returning to one's original place. This is in conformity with justice, for God does not change a soul's respective destiny.⁸⁶ The Ṣūfis affirm that God's Will is not an unrestricted blind desire. He does not do as He pleases even if He has the Power to do so; rather, He acts in cooperation (*muwāfaqah*) with the Primordial Potentials in His Knowledge. This cooperation, however, does not make His Will and Power meaningless because the things willed are in fact realities variously known as the Primordial Potentials (*al-isrī'adāt al-aṣilyyā*), the Fixed Essences (*al-a'yānu l-lhābiḥah*), the Cognitive Forms (*al-sūwaru l-'ilmiyyah*), or Divine Ideas, the Universal Intellect (*al-'aqlu l-kullī*).⁸⁷ It is argued that since existence is the object of universal desire, it is therefore good. It entails that Absolute Existence is absolutely good. It further follows from this that evil is never absolute, "but only relative, partial, and negative...."⁸⁸

Notwithstanding the fact that the destiny of each man has already been determined in the Primordial Potentiality, education, which presupposes two points, is not only integral to the Islamic creed but also obligatory for every Muslim. First, it is that the latent

⁸¹ S. M. N. al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the 'Aqā'id of al-Nasafī* (Kuala Lumpur: Dept. of Publications, Univ. of Malaya, 1988), art. XI, pp. 68-69;

⁸² Private discussion, 23 January 1993.

⁸³ *Commentary*, p. 45.

⁸⁴ Private discussion at ISTAC, 23 January 1993.

⁸⁵ MHE, p. 109.

⁸⁶ Ḥamzah Faṣṣūf, *Sharāb al-'āshiqin* (The Drink of Lovers), trans. with notes by S. M. N. al-Attas, in MHE, pp. 441-443.

⁸⁷ MHE, pp. 131-132.

⁸⁸ Rahman, *Mulla Sadra*, p. 36; also MHE, p. 109.

potentialities naturally endowed in every human being must be brought forth through an effective and creative educational process; second, that whatever the present individual capacity or incapacity is, again, through effective and creative education, it can be corrected and perfected. Having faith in predetermined destiny (*taqdir*) does not negate the need to educate nor the need to strive to improve one's present spiritual, ethical and material conditions in life, for an individual does not know his destiny until he meets his Lord. Hence the eternal wisdom of the famous commandments of the Prophet: "The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim man and woman"⁸⁹ and "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave."⁹⁰

In relation to the above, al-Attas contends that man's quest for a true religious life is a returning to his original nature, *fīṭrah*. Willing and knowing submission to God is what constitutes real freedom for man.⁹¹ He suggests that the proper term for freedom in Islam is best conveyed by the theological term *ikhtiyār*. The term *ikhtiyār* as used in Islamic theology does not refer to the modern idea of freedom, for the former, the root meaning of which is *khaṣr* or good, means "the choice for the better". Thus, any other choice will not be a real choice by the self, but an injustice (*ẓulm*) to it. A choice for the better is truly an exercise of freedom which prerequires knowledge of good and evil. Conversely, a choice for the worse is based on ignorance and instigated by the blameworthy aspects of the animal soul.⁹² Following Ibn al-'Arabī, al-Attas considers that while man is given the capacity to obey or disobey God's Command (*amr*) as stipulated by religious Laws (*Sharī'ah*), man cannot ever disobey God's Will (*mashī'ah*). True freedom is achieved when man has attained spiritual illumination or gnosis (*ma'rifaḥ*) when he has succeeded in effacing his sensual

self to gain his higher Selfhood.⁹³ Even at this level he is still bound by servitude to God (*'ubūdiyyah*).⁹⁴

The notion of freedom as briefly described above stands in stark contrast to that of the Muslim modernists. The ideas of Luṭfī al-Sayyid, one of the disciples of Muḥammad 'Abduh, on freedom are admittedly inspired and influenced by those of the 19th century European humanists reflecting the clear absence of spiritual reality of man and simultaneously the socialization of his identity. Hourani, who is an acknowledged authority on the subject of early Arab modernists, summarizes al-Sayyid's concept of freedom thus:

Freedom means, essentially, absence of necessary control by the State. The functions of the State are limited: it must maintain security and justice and defend the community from attack; for these purposes it can interfere with the rights of the individual, but any other interferences is wrong. Some kinds are more dangerous than others: in particular, tampering with the freedom of the law courts, or with freedom to write, talk, publish, and associate with those of like opinions.... At the heart of his image of society is a vision of what the really free man would be and what the good life is: the free man is he who, spontaneously and without external impediments, fulfils his function in society, and in so doing fulfils his human capabilities....⁹⁵

THE UNIVERSE

The Islamic worldview affirms that there are many worlds besides the phenomenal universe. As stated in the first section of this chapter, they are the world of Permanent Archetypes, the world of Spirits, and our

⁸⁹ Yūsuf Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi' Bayān al-'Ilm wa Fadlilhi wa Yanbaghi fi Riwayatihi wa Hamilihi*, 2 vols. Ed. by 'Abd al-Hadi Mudir and Mustapha Ibrahim (Cairo: Idara al-Taba'a al-Munira, n.d.), I: 7; Wali al-Din al-Tabrizi, *Mishkāt al-Masābiḥ*, English trans. by A. Hameed Siddiqi (Lahore: Islamic Publications, 1979), I: 136.

⁹⁰ Cited from Ahmad Shalaby, *History of Muslim Education* (Beirut: Dar al-Kashshaf, 1954), p. 162.

⁹¹ *Id.*, pp. 57-58.

⁹² 'Aqā'id, Appendix VI, "ikhtiyār", p. 90; NMPHS, note 16, pp. 3-4; also *Happiness*, p. 7. Cf. al-Hujwiri, *Kashf*, p. 388.

⁹³ MHE, p. 109, also note 235 on the same page.

⁹⁴ Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-Luma' fi'l-Tasawwuf*. Ed. with critical notes, by R. A. Nicholson, E. J. W. Gibb Memorial (London: Luzac, 1963), pp. 340-341; also, al-Qushairī, *Principles of Sufism by al-Qushairī*. Trans. by B. R. von Schlegell. Intro. by H. Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1990), pp. 202-205.

⁹⁵ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age 1798-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 173-174.

phenomenal world of Sense and Sensible Experience.⁹⁶

It is interesting that modern man has concentrated his attention only on the last world and has spent billions to explore the extra-terrestrial universe, hoping thereby to ultimately understand the origin and destiny of man and the universe. One influential philosopher writes that "Nature itself constitutes the sum total of reality, that matter-energy...is the foundation-stuff of the universe, and that supernatural entities simply do not exist."⁹⁷ However, the continuous discoveries of modern astronomy have made modern Western secular man more sceptical of his special destiny as problematically defined by Judeo-Christian religious tradition.⁹⁸ On the contrary, Islam seeks the answers to these questions not in the physical but in the spiritual realm. The universe or the phenomenal world—including man and the external world—exists in reality, but its reality is perceived and understood differently according to the perceptor's level of intellectual and spiritual state and preparedness. To the common man (*'awāmm*), the world appears to him as composed of different forms and categories of objects, each appearing as an independent reality or essence. At this level, the world is seen as a multiplicity, and all cognitive processes occur within the framework of subject-object dichotomy.⁹⁹ This phenomenal world, including the human condition in it, is like the ice, the mirage and the waves in relation to their respective sources, viz., the water, the hot desert, and the sea. The ice, the mirage and the waves are real only when considered in relation to the water, hot desert and the sea respectively; but without them i.e., the water, hot desert, or the sea, neither the ice, nor the mirage nor the waves would be possible. The ontological status of the latter group *vis-à-vis* the former, is analogous to that of the worlds of creation *vis-à-vis* God.¹⁰⁰ If the Qur'ān consists of verses referred to as *dā'ir* or

signs, the entirety of phenomenal creation is also a book of signs, the purpose of which is to point to God. For al-Atlas, the world of nature is another form of the Divine-Revelation analogous to the Qur'ān itself. The only difference is that the great open book of nature is something created; it presents itself in multiple and diverse forms that partake of the symbolic existence by virtue of being continually articulated by the creative word of God.¹⁰¹

The realities of the external world are "modes and aspects of a single and dynamic all-encompassing Reality."¹⁰² In another place al-Atlas asserts that the processes of the phenomenal world or the laws of Nature are nothing but God's "customary way of acting" (*sunnat Allāh*). Seen from the dynamic nature of existence as an Aspect of God Who is Infinite, these laws are no longer rigid because they are now open to infinite possibilities.¹⁰³ Yet, because of its multiplicity, the phenomenal world often becomes a veil (*hijāb*) which covers its underlying unity, purpose and meaning.¹⁰⁴ Al-Atlas, in his many lectures, characteristically gives a compelling analogy to depict how the world distracts man from his true destiny:

Supposing we are travelling in a car on a dark and stormy night heading for a place we have heard of but have never been to. Then we arrive at a main junction with many different roads leading to different places. At the centre of the junction there is a signpost with many arms of varying lengths pointing to the various directions signifying the way to the different places. The signpost and its arms are simply made and painted white, and along the pointed planks which serve as arms are engraved in bold, black letters the place names and their relative distances from that spot. As our car approaches and its headlights illumine the signposts and

⁹⁶ For a description of their different names, see MHF, p. 156, note 50. Cf. al-Hujwiri, who reports that the term '*alam*' is understood as "the collective mass of created things." He stresses that the Sūfis interpret '*alam*' as the "collective mass of spirits and souls." *Kashf*, pp. 385-386.

⁹⁷ Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism* (New York: The Wisdom Library, 1957), p. 97.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 89-96, and 122-157; see also JS, chaps. 1 and 2.

⁹⁹ *Commentary*, pp. 131, 133; IE, pp. 2, 5.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Atlas, in his discussions, likes to give these metaphors to underline his

points. See also examples in MHF, pp. 70-76; for examples of other metaphors used, see Izutsu, "Structure", pp. 65-68.

¹⁰¹ IPS, p. 27; see also CEIL, p. 7; EQ, pp. 27 ff; *Prolegomena*, pp. 135-138, and private discussion, 23 January 1993.

¹⁰² CEIL, p. 31.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁰⁴ EQ, pp. 26-27.

its many arms, we soon notice one of the arms bearing the name of the place of our destination. What we do next, if we are to pursue the object of our destination, would surely be to turn away from the signpost without much hesitation, and follow the road towards which the sign is pointing. We would be doing this because the sign is clear. But now supposing the signpost were made of marble finely wrought, and the pointing arms were sculptured into forms wondrous and beautiful, the place names and their relative distances from the spot chiselled into letters of pure gold and embellished with rare gems—would we then be able to seek out, without much hesitation and tarrying, the pointing arm that would show us the way to our destination; and would we then simply turn away from the signpost to follow the road directed? Indeed, what would most certainly happen in this case would be that we stop the car and even get out into the rain with a torchlight to get a closer look at the marvellous sight before us. And we might even spend the night in the car to await the day for a more satisfying look. The sign in this case is not clear; it is ambiguous, and it points to itself more than it points to the object on which its very existence depends.¹⁰⁵

In many ways this phenomenal world is like the latter case of the signpost. It contains many signs that are ambiguous and distracting to those who do not possess the proper intellectual, ethical and spiritual discipline, or to be more precise, the right and proper *adab*, which is a very fundamental concept in al-Attas' philosophy, as will be explained in a later chapter. Human knowledge of the phenomenal world at the level of ordinary experience, is really the union between the knower and the meaning of things and not with the things themselves.¹⁰⁶

However, certain individuals who possess the right *adab* and experience a spiritual transformation are able to transcend the world of

multiplicity and witness (*shuhūd*) or taste (*dhawq*) the unity of existence through the mediacy of spiritual unveiling (*kashf*). But even at this level, the phenomenal world is neither a figment of the human imagination nor even a part of God or God Himself, but actually an Aspect of God

individuating Itself into Multiplicity without impairing its original Unity, and yet 'connecting' or 'relating' the Multiplicity with Itself in such wise that although the Unity takes on the forms of Multiplicity, It still distinguishes Itself from the latter and remains always in its original nature... (a process of inner articulations)... which goes on in a continuous operation.¹⁰⁷

At this level of higher experience, the rational has merged with the intellectual, and the empirical with the authentic spiritual experiences, where knowledge is a direct experience of the union (*rawḥiyyah*) between the knower and the known. It is at this level of experience that knowledge is the identity of thought and an aspect of existence. Al-Attas carefully explains this potentially problematic position of the higher Sūfis that the union meant in this context is not with God as He is in Himself, which is impossible, but with the Truth (*al-Haqq*), which is an Aspect of Himself as He manifests Himself in the form of His Names and Attributes.¹⁰⁸

Al-Attas, like all the Sūfis of higher order before him, such as al-Rānirī, has severely repudiated the misguided peoples and religions who adhered to the erroneous and dangerous notion that Nature is either God or a part of God.¹⁰⁹ Every aspect of God's creation is endowed with various degrees of spiritual or divine element, depending upon its place in the hierarchical order of ontological descent, and accordingly is in a state of worshipping Him. In a more restricted sense of the term, for the angels, humankind and the *jinn*, this is done through prayer (*al-salāh*) consisting of intention (*niyyah*),

¹⁰⁷ IE, pp. 17–18.

¹⁰⁸ Commentary, p. 135; PAT, p. 8; IE, pp. 7–9, 28–32; Prolegomena, pp. 183–184, note 193.

¹⁰⁹ Commentary, pp. 136–137; PAT, pp. 9–10.

¹⁰⁵ Prolegomena, pp. 136–137.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 183.

standing (*al-qiyām*), bending the body from an upright position (*al-rukūʿ*), prostration (*al-sujūd*), supplication (*al-duʿāʾ*), and glorification (*al-tasbīḥ*); for birds, reptiles and insects, and the non-living creation, it is through glorifying Him (*tasbīḥ*).¹¹⁰ In relation to the fact that even the animal, plant and mineral kingdoms are expressions of various degrees of divine self-revelation, it follows that our relation to, and dealings with them, should be with justice.

Like the traveller captivated by the signpost, modern science and too is captivated by the phenomenal world as the object of study. Al-Atlas thus assails modern science for reducing the study of the phenomenal world as an end in itself, for seeing things as mere things.¹¹¹ While this endeavour has produced many useful things for the material betterment of man, nevertheless its infinitely pragmatic activity has likewise elicited an uncontrollable and insatiable propensity to destroy nature itself. The study and utilization of nature without a higher spiritual end "is devoid of real purpose, and the pursuit of knowledge becomes a deviation from the truth, which necessarily puts into question the validity of such knowledge"¹¹² which has consequently turned man into thinking that man are gods or His co-partners.¹¹³

The study and utility of nature for higher spiritual ends, on the other hand, will produce a more responsible attitude. But the interpretation of natural phenomenon is more difficult because its signs are more vague and not easily apprehended. In *Risalah*, al-Atlas makes a compelling comparison between interpreting a written document and interpreting Nature as the Open Book of God, wherein he underlines that the real purpose for reading both books is to understand the meanings (*maʿna* in Malay; *maʿnā* in Arabic) of the signs symbolized by words on the one hand, and by natural phenomena on the other. If one's efforts are focussed on the physical aspects of the book such as the ink, individual letters, words and paper forgetting what the words, sentences and the whole book means, then the purpose of reading the book is lost, for no true knowledge can be

derived from such activity.^{*} Similarly, the natural world is a book containing knowledge; but that knowledge is not evident merely from the physical phenomena; for these are nothing but signs, the meaning of which can be understood by those who are equipped with proper knowledge, wisdom and spiritual discernment.¹¹⁴ Al-Atlas often mentions that some natural objects are obvious as to their meaning, just like the clear verses (*muhkamāt*) of the Holy Qurʾān, while other natural phenomena are like the ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*). Our understanding and interpretation of these signs in the external world must be based, according to al-Atlas, on the same method of valid interpretation and understanding of the written words of the Qurʾān, i.e., through *tafsīr* or direct interpretation, and *taʾwīl* or deeper and allegorical interpretation based on the clear and direct ones.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, al-Atlas considers science as "a kind of *taʾwīl* or allegorical interpretation of the empirical things that constitute the world of nature."¹¹⁶ The true Sūfīs also attested that religion is likewise constituted by established (i.e., *Sharʿi*) and ambiguous (*Ḥaqīqī*) aspects of the same reality and truth, and that the reality of the latter is based upon the established truth of the former.¹¹⁷

The ephemeral nature of the world according to Islam does not, as already alluded to above, denigrate its status as unimportant or evil. It is a sign of God, and a manifestation of His Infinite Wisdom and Power. Al-Atlas underlines that "it would be blasphemous to derogate the world and nature knowing them in their true purpose."¹¹⁸ Similarly, although the life in this world (*ḥayāt al-dunyā*) is regarded as "nothing but goods and chattels of deception" (*illā maʿāʾ u l-ghurūr*),¹¹⁹ "a play and amusement" (*laʾib wa laḥw*)¹²⁰ etc., these are intended as warnings of its distractive nature.¹²¹ The Prophet Adam

¹¹⁴ *Risalah*, para. 48, pp. 158–160; *Commentary*, p. 456.

¹¹⁵ CEIL, pp. 17–19; cf. PAT, pp. 5–7, 13.

¹¹⁶ IPS, p. 31.

¹¹⁷ *Commentary*, pp. 183, and 456; for an example of Ḥanzah Fansūrī's position, see MHF, pp. 180–182.

¹¹⁸ IS, p. 38.

¹¹⁹ *Ālī-ʾImrān* (3): 185; *al-Ḥadīd* (57): 20.

¹²⁰ *Al-Anʿām* (6): 32; *al-Aʿraf* (7): 51; *al-ʿAnkabūt* (29): 64; *Muḥammad* (47): 36.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38. Even another alternative translation for secularism, *la dīniyyah*,^{*}

¹¹⁰ *Commentary*, pp. 365–366.

¹¹¹ IPS, p. 28.

¹¹² PAT, p. 6.

¹¹³ IS, p. 36.

was sent to this world not as a punishment but as a natural process for the actualization of the purpose of his existence, about which God had earlier informed the angels: "Behold, thy Lord said to the angels, 'I will create a vicegerent on earth.'"¹²² This life is meant as a period wherein one actualizes one's potentiality as God's servant and vicegerent. Because of the intimate relationship between this world ('*alam*) and knowledge ('*ilm*), both of which are positively upheld by Islam, al-Attas does not like the term secularism, a negative value in Islam, to be translated into Arabic as '*al-manāyiyah*'. He would not accept the term '*lādiniyah*' as an alternative because secularism, as a philosophical program does not necessarily reject religion but removes spiritual contents and meanings from nature, ethics, politics and religion. He would prefer not to arabicise the concept, which is foreign, but merely to arabicise the term as '*sikulariyah*', which would clearly indicate its foreign origin and ideological significance.¹²³ Such a practice was already exemplified by earlier Muslims with regard to philosophical terms such as '*falsafah*', '*hayūla*', and many others.¹²⁴

Al-Attas' metaphysics, being a synthesis, includes those aspects above, as well as psychology, epistemology and ethics which have implications upon his educational philosophy and methodology. It is clear then, that Islamic metaphysics affirms only one Reality and Truth which determines the worldview of the Muslims. All Islamic values pertain ultimately to it alone, so that to the Muslim, individually and collectively, all endeavour towards change and development and progress and perfection is invariably determined by the worldview.¹²⁵ However, the One Reality has different modes that cause other diverse and multiple and evanescent realities. The affirmation of the existence of and distinction between the One Reality, i.e., Being (*wujūd*) or God and external Existence (*mawjūd*);

only expresses one aspect. Analysing its original meaning in Latin, *saeculum*, denoting a spirit of here and now, al-Attas suggests that secularism should better be translated as *al-huna l-anīyah*.

¹²² *Al-Baqarah* (2): 30.

¹²³ Al-Attas rejects the argument that this alternative term may not be suitable to the so-called 'Arabic tongue' because it can be pronounced without any difficulty.

¹²⁴ ISTAC Saturday Night Lecture, 9 October 1993.

¹²⁵ *JS*, p. 84.

between Unity (*wahdān*) and Multiplicity (*kathrah*); between Subsistence (*baqā'*) and Evanescence (*fanā'*) does not mean a dualistic worldview, for the two are not of equal metaphysical and ontological status. Rather, one is independent and subsistent while the other is dependent upon it; the one is absolute and the other relative; the one is real and the other a manifestation of that reality.¹²⁶ Because of this understanding, al-Attas observes that knowledgeable Muslims have been able to live their lives without suffering any fundamental change that would disrupt the harmony of Islam and of their own selves by the devastating touch of time and the vicissitudes of worldly existence.¹²⁷ Despite great personal or community crises, there has not arisen a general tendency in the Muslim community, as has arisen in the West, that produces atheism and agnosticism. Similarly, Muslims who are not infected with the diseases of the West are quite sure of the place and function of the spiritual *vis-à-vis* the material, this world *vis-à-vis* the next, of man *vis-à-vis* woman in religion and society, and individual and collective responsibility. Such Muslims have dealt, and can continue to deal with, the issues of permanence and change in religious, personal and societal affairs; with the issues of intellectual, linguistic, cultural and religious pluralism; with real tolerance and justice, while maintaining their values, unweakened by relativism.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 81, 84.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 84-85.