

**Primordial Covenant as
the Basis of Religion: The Qur’ānic
Mithāq of *Alastu* According to
Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas**

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Abstract

In the philosophy of religion, apart from a cogent conception of God, a strong spiritual relation that binds human beings with God is another important element that supplies the *raison d’être* to a particular religious tradition. This article evaluates one of the manifestations of this spiritual bondage in Islam through an examination of the primordial spiritual covenant between God and all human beings known as “the Covenant of *Alastu*.” It analyses how this idea of covenant, originally taken from the Qur’ānic verse and particularly refined in the Sufi tradition, was further developed and became continuous reference to the archetypal origin of man in Islam. Based mainly on the works of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, this article proves that the Primordial Covenant has left great impacts on some other aspects of religiosity such as the spiritual bondage between individuals that transcends gender, family, and ethnicity. Irrespective of the disputes over how the covenant had actually taken place, this notion of

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spiritual covenant, as this article further explicates, has become a pertinent theological concept that defines one's religiosity in Islam.

Keywords

Primordial covenant, *mīthāq*, *alastu*, *dīn*, *fiṭrah*

The theological basis of Islam as a religion is strengthened among others by a strong bond between God and human beings in the form of covenant. The Qurān recorded various kinds of covenants God has taken from various groups; the covenant with mankind,¹ the covenant with the Prophets,² and the covenant with the Children of Israel.³ While most of the covenants were sealed in this world, the Qur'ān also recorded one covenant that was taken before the coming of human beings to this world. It is the Primordial Covenant, known especially among the Sufis as the “*Mīthāq of Alastu*.” It is regarded as a universal agreement that God has sealed with all human beings and binds them to God throughout their religious life in this world. This article attempts to analyse the significance of this pertinent Primordial Covenant which has played a fundamental role especially in providing deeper spiritual meaning to the understanding of religion in Islam. Apart from referring to the commentaries of the Qur'ān and the works of some early Sufi scholars, this article shall make special reference to the works of a renowned Muslim scholar, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas,⁴ who has contributed in a significant manner toward explaining the relationship between the covenant of *Alastu* and the philosophy of religion.

1. *Al-Aḥzāb* (7): 172, *al-Mā'idah* (5): 13, *al-Ra'd* (13): 20.

2. *Āli Imrān* (3): 81.

3. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 40.

4. A brief profile of al-Attas is available on this website: <https://www.merdekaaward.my/the-award/past-recipients/outstanding-scholastic-achievement/tan-sri-professor-dr-syed-muhammad-naquib-al-attas> (accessed on 1 June 2022).

Covenant in the Qur'ān

Among the important terms that signify covenant in the Qur'ān are *mīthāq* and *'ahd*. The word *mīthāq* occurs in the Qur'ān 25 times, while the word *'ahd* 29 times. There are occurrences in the Qur'ān where the two words are used interchangeably, for example in *al-Baqarah* (2): 27 and *al-Ra'd* (13): 20 and 25, but there are also instances where their significations differ.⁵ In terms of meaning, the word, *mīthāq*, according to Ibn Manzūr, means treaty.⁶ Literally, it means a rope (*ḥabl*) or *qayd* that is used to tighten a prisoner (*aṣīr*) or an animal (*dābbah*). Within the spiritual circles, the word, *mīthāq*, gained popularity due to its deep spiritual meaning connected with *mīthāq* of *Alastu* mentioned by the Qur'ān.⁷ Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī (1636–1641AD), a renowned scholar and Sufi of the 17th century Aceh, called the Companion of the Prophet by the term, *ahl al-wathīq* (people with firm and strong belief) due to their firmness in belief, especially in the message brought by the Prophet.⁸ As to the word *'ahd*, it is used with the meaning of entrusting something, a promise and an order, as in the verse, “They also said; Allah took our promises (*ahida ilaynā*) not to believe in a messenger unless he showed us a sacrifice consumed by fire,”⁹ and also in the verse, “We ordered (*wa 'ahidnā*) Ibrāhīm and Ismā'īl that they should sanctify My House for those who compass it round, or use it as retreat, or bow, or prostrate themselves.”¹⁰ By way of comparison, the meaning of *'ahd* is more generic than that of *mīthāq*, due to a

5. Wesley M. Grubb, *A Religion of the Covenant Theology to the Islamic Faith*, paper submitted to Dr. James N. Anderson for the course, ST540: “Christian Encounter with Islam” (Spring 2018), 6. See also an extensive survey on covenant in the Quran and hadith in Sahibe Alam, “The Meaning of Covenant in the Qur'an and the Sunnah,” *The Indian Journal of Arabic and Islamic Studies* 3, Issue 01 (January–March 2018).
6. Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān al-Arab*, vol.10 (Beirut: Dar al-Šādir, 1990), 370.
7. *Al-Aṣṣaf* (7): 172.
8. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddīq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī*, (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture, 1986), 198.
9. *Alī Imrān* (3): 183.
10. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 125.

wider range of meanings implied by the former term, which includes delegation, period of time, and acquaintance.¹¹ The latter, on the other hand, has more specific connotations related to covenant, agreement, and contract¹² as reflected in the verse, “And remember We took your covenant and We raised above you Mount Sinai.”¹³

The Qurʾān, in more than 700 verses, recorded various kinds of covenants that took place between God and all human beings,¹⁴ the Prophets,¹⁵ the People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) especially the People of Israel (*Banī Isrāʾīl*).¹⁶ As to the covenant with all human beings, it is implied in the creation of Adam whose duty is described by the Qurʾān as a vicegerent in this world.¹⁷ This vicegerency comes with two important kinds of accountability (*amānah*); to worship God in the true sense and to govern the world and ensure its peaceful existence.¹⁸ In regard to the covenant with the prophets, God concluded a contract with them known as the Covenant of the Prophets (*Mīthāq al-Nabiyyīn*) in which all the Prophets pledged to spread the divine message to their own people. This contract of the Prophets, as commented by al-Qurtūbī, in his *tafsīr*, *al-Jāmiʿ li Ahkām al-Qurʾān*, stipulates that all the Prophets affirm one another’s message and they continue the missions of other earlier Prophets and prepare the ground for the arrival of the future prophets particularly the message of the final Prophet, Muhammad.¹⁹

11. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* (Reprint, Beirut: Librarie Du Liban, 1980), s.v. “ahida,” 651.

12. Ibid., s.v. “mīthāq,” 1048.

13. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 63. Also in *Āli Imrān* (3): 81.

14. See extensive analysis on this topic in Robert Carter Darnell, *The Idea of Divine Covenant in the Qurʾān*, Ph.D. Dissertation (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1970). See also Nasir Sulaiman Umar, *al-ʿAhd wa al-Mīthāq fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm* (Riyad: Dar al-ʿAsimah, 1992)

15. *Āli Imrān* (3): 81, *al-Aḥzāb* (33): 7.

16. *Āli Imrān* (3): 187, *al-Baqarah* (2): 67, *al-Mutaffifīn* (83): 87, 93, 154-5, *al-Māidah* (5): 7, 12–13, 70.

17. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 30, *al-Aḥzāb* (33): 72.

18. *Al-Dhāriyat* (51): 56; *al-Aḥzāb* (33): 72.

19. Al-Qurtūbī, *al-Jāmiʿ li Ahkām al-Qurʾān*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1996), 80–81, in his commentary of the verse (3): 81.

The Qur'ān also elucidates that the People of Israel had a series of covenants with God particularly to affirm their allegiance in following the divine teachings brought to them by Moses. When Moses and the People of Israel camped on the foot of Mount Sinai following their exodus from the land of Egypt, God sealed a covenant with them by raising them as God's chosen people, but with some provisions and set of laws that they had to obey. Nevertheless, the People of Israel, as maintained by the Qur'ān, continuously broke the laws and went against the commands of Moses.²⁰ The Qur'ān describes them as “those with whom when you did make a covenant, they break their covenant and they have not the fear (of God).”²¹ Meanwhile, the Christians were also given a new covenant by God though it is seen from a slightly different perspective compared to the covenant of the Jews. The new covenant of the Christians is described as a Law of Love rather than the Law of Fear of the Jews. From the Christians' point of view, this is in line with the role of Jesus who sacrificed himself to redeem the sins of all humanity.²²

The occurrence of the idea of covenant in the Qur'ān, as analysed by R.C. Darnell, is aimed at four important objectives: First, to describe the religious situation of the Jews in Medina based on the interpretation of the Sinai covenant. Second, to provide a system of allegiance to Prophet Muhammad and alliance with his followers. Third, to state the relationship between God and the Prophet, and fourth, to identify the main virtues of the believers in contrast to the hypocrites.²³

20. *Al-Baqarah* (2): 55–56, 63–64; *Taha* (20): 83–84, 85–98; *al-A'raf* (7) 142–145, 149, 151, 154–155.

21. *Al-Anfāl* (8): 55–6.

22. F. E. Peters, *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: The Classical Texts and Their Interpretation*, Volume I: From Covenant to Community (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 2756.

23. R. C. Darnell, *Idea of Divine Covenant*, i.

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We will further analyse one of the covenants reported by the Qurʾān which is primordial in nature and has a strong foundational relationship with the meaning of religion in Islam. Despite its centrality, especially in relation to the concept of humanity and religious history within the worldview of Islam, the topics concerning primordial covenant is still understudied and has not received sufficient coverage by contemporary scholars.²⁴ According to Tariq Jaffer, although Muslim scholars acknowledge the foundational nature of the covenant to the Worldview of Islam, they do not think that the idea needs lengthy elaboration.²⁵ This is in contrast with the relatively rich discussions among traditional Muslim scholars on the subject, especially among commentators of the Qurʾān, such as al-Qurtubī, Zamakhsharī, al-Bayḍāwī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī and al-Alūsī, as well as the Sufis such as Sahl al-Tustarī and Junayd al-Baghdādī. Among the contemporary Muslim scholars who have elaborated the idea of primordial covenant in an extensive manner, particularly in deliberating the meaning of religion in Islam is Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.²⁶ According to Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, al-Attas is the only one among contemporary Muslim thinkers who has elaborated profoundly and promoted the concept of *mīthāq* of *Alastu*, mentioned in the verse *al-Aʿrāf* (7): 172, as the starting point of the basic religious sensibility in man.²⁷ Some

24. Joseph E. B. Lumbard, “Covenant and Covenants in the Qurʾan,” *Journal of Quranic Studies* 17, no. 2 (2015): 1.

25. Tariq Jaffer, “Is there Covenant Theology in Islam?” in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, ed. Majd Daneshgar and Walid A. Saleh (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 121.

26. See Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Surah al-Nisaʾ* (4): 58 and *Surah al-Muʾminun* (23): 12–14 (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2015); *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993); *Islam: The Concept of Religion and the Foundation of Ethics and Morality* (Fourth impression, Kuala Lumpur: Taʿdib International, 2018).

27. Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1989), 51.

of al-Attas' works will therefore be the main references for the following discussion.

The main Qur'ānic reference to the primordial covenant is the 172nd verse of *Surah al-A'raf* as follows:

And when your Lord took from the backs of the Children of Adam their descendants and called them to witness against themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Indeed we testified."²⁸ (This), lest you should say on the Day of Judgement: "Of this we were never mindful."

Well-known among the Sufis as the *Covenant of Alastu*,²⁹ it was an event where God sought the pledge of all human beings regarding His Lordship (*rubūbiyyah*) by putting forward a definitive question to all of the Children of Adam, "Am I not your Lord?" (*alastu bi Rabbikum*) to which the reply from them was affirmative, "Indeed, we testify (*balā shahidnā*)." The verse continues with a reminder that the covenant will also be God's clear proof in the Hereafter of the agreement made by humans on the true worship towards Him and there should be no excuse for mankind to be heedless from the responsibility of obedience to Him.

Commentators of the Qur'ān and scholars have given various explanations regarding the verse partly due to their different epistemological inclinations in understanding it. Wadad Kadi identifies four major trends among scholars in explicating the meaning of the verse: the traditional Sunnis, the rational Mu'tazilis-Shi'is, the Sufis, and the popular storytellers, *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*.³⁰ The difference between the trends can be discerned

28. *Al-A'raf*(7): 172.

29. *Alastu* literally means "Am I not" which is taken from the first word of God's question to all human beings, "*Alastu bi rabbikum*" (Am I not your Lord?).

30. Wadad Kadi, "The Primordial Covenant and Human History in the Qur'an," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 147, no. 4 (December 2003): 333.

among others on how they approach the event of the *mīthāq*, as real or metaphorical. While the Mu‘tazilite and Shi‘ite scholars regard it as metaphorical, reflecting the human *fiṭrah* which naturally accepts the Lordship of God once one is born to this world, the traditional Sunni commentators accept the event as something real and further furnish the details of the event based on various explanations in Prophetic hadiths. The Sufis, while affirming the real occurrence of the event, connect it with other transcendent, spiritual realities such as the Light of Muhammad, Divine Knowledge, and various levels of Divine Manifestation.³¹ Despite plurality among scholars in explaining the details of the covenant, they nevertheless agree on a few fundamental matters: that human kind have made a strong promise to Allah that they will worship only Him alone as God; that man might forget his promise; that God would send Prophets to mankind; and that men will be judged in the Hereafter based on their obedience to God.³²

The Occurrence of the Primordial Covenant

As indicated earlier, the primordial covenant is unique in the sense that when compared with other covenants mentioned in the Qur’ān, it is the only covenant that was sealed before the coming of human beings to this world. It happened in the purely spiritual realm and was attended, as implied by the verse, by the spirits of all the children of Adam. Various covenants that took place in this world, looking from this perspective, are indeed continuations and extensions of this primordial covenant. Although further explanation regarding the details of this trans-historical covenant is not given in the Qur’ān, it is nevertheless elaborated in a few hadiths provided by Qur’ānic commentators

31. See, for example, the commentaries of the 9th century sufi, Sahl al-Tustari, on the primordial covenant in Gerhard Bowering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam: The Quranic Hermeneutics of the Sufi Sahl al-Tustari* (283/896) (Berlin: Gruyter, 1979), 145–175.

32. Ibid.

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in explaining the verse. Al-Qurṭubī, for example, mentions a few hadiths which elaborate further on the details of the event. One of them is a hadith which states that,

...when God created Adam, He rubbed Adam's back and withdrew from it all his descendants and said: "I have created them for the Paradise and with the deeds of the people of Paradise." Another group of descendants were withdrawn afterward to whom God said, "I have created them for the Hell, with the deeds of the People of the Hell."³³

Another hadith explains that the condition of all these human beings gathered in front of God varies—strong, weak, rich, poor, and others. It is also reported that the souls of the Prophets were brighter than the others. Prophet Adam asked the reason for these various conditions, to which God replied, "This is for them to be grateful."³⁴ These hadiths, apart from explaining the context of the occurrence of the event, and due to their pre-deterministic implication on human destiny, sparked a lengthy theological debate, especially among Muslim theologians regarding God's Justice and human free will, on the one hand, and Divine Power and predestination of human action, on the other. Following that, disagreements persist between Muslim theologians and commentators of the Qur'ān on the factuality of the covenant, whether it actually happened or it must be construed metaphorically. Such a problem arises basically due to the ambiguity of the verse which literally states that, "God has withdrawn from their back (Children of Adam) their descendants." While the Sunni theologians, who were more loyal to the literal meaning of the verse and the supporting hadiths, affirmed that the event actually took place in the spiritual world, the Mu'tazilites rejected the actual occurrence of the covenant

33. Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, 201.

34. Ibid. See also Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Azīm*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Ihyā' al-Turāth al-Arabī, 2000), 263–5.

and regarded it as only metaphorical.³⁵ To them, the covenant refers to the human natural acceptance of God's Lordship once they are born to this world which is in accordance with their true nature of submitting themselves to God. Zamakhshari, one of the Qur'ānic commentators with a rational inclination, notes:

This verse is an analogy that implies that God has demonstrated to all human beings the proofs of His Lordship and His Unity and their reason and heart witnessed this fact and are able to distinguish between the truth and falsity. It (the witnessing of the reason and the heart) is as if all human beings have pledged on the Lordship and the unity of God...³⁶

Despite the debate regarding the occurrence of the mode of the covenant, Muslim scholars generally agree on one pivotal point underlying the issue, that the covenant reflects the true acceptance of human beings of the Lordship of Allah, not only as the Creator of all other existence, but also as the true object of worship.³⁷ It also represents the acceptance of human beings of the responsibility to worship the only One God and the rejection of any form of polytheism. The affirmative reply of human beings through the term *balā* which is linguistically more emphatic than the term *na'ām*, demonstrates the high level of certainty as well as the clarity of the subject (the Lordship of Allah) of the question.

35. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, vol. 15 (Beirut: Dār Ihyā' Turāth al-'Arabī, 1997), 398–9. Al-Razi enumerates 12 rational arguments of the Mu'tazilites in opposing this covenant having taken place in actuality. Among others, if the event had actually happened, human beings should have been able to recall it since that conversation implied the existence of reason and the faculty of recollection. The Mu'tazilites also argued that body is a pre-condition of the existence of reason and understanding. Therefore, it is impossible that all the bodies can be withdrawn at once during the covenant.

36. Zamakhshari, *Tafsīr al-Kashshāf* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1971), vol. 2, 103.

37. Ibn Kathīr, 226.

The Significance of the Primordial Covenant to the Understanding of Religion

As emphasised earlier, the key significance of the Primordial covenant lies in its strong relationship with the way religion is understood in Islam. Since religion implies submission, obedience, and acceptance of all the laws and norms revealed by God, the primordial covenant serves as the strongest basis of these religious significations mainly due to the fact that it is the earliest proof of the human assent and submission to God. In other words, obedience and submission of human beings is the direct implication of the *mīthāq* of *Alastu* where all religious obligations are nothing but the fulfilment of the “terms and conditions” of the covenant. It is the highest level of obedience upon which all other forms of obedience in this world are based. This line of explanation can be discerned, for example, in the interpretation and explanation of the Sufis and Muslim metaphysicians in explaining the importance of the *Mithāq* of *Alastu*. We shall further examine a few religious dimensions that are strongly influenced by the idea of the primordial covenant referring mainly to elaborations by Muslim scholars such as in the works of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas.

The Religious Nature of Human Being

The primordial covenant reflects the religious nature of human beings since the beginning of their existence, as they have already testified therefrom to the Lordship of Allah and agreed to submit themselves to Him. According to a prominent tenth century Sufi, Junayd al-Baghdādī, who strongly propounded the idea of covenant in his theological and spiritual framework, the existence of human beings during the covenant is the highest, the best and the most perfect.

In this verse (7: 172), God tells you that He spoke to them at a time when they did not exist, except

so far as they existed in Him. This existence is not the same type of existence which only God knows their existence; embracing them he sees them in the beginning when they are non-existence (sic) and unaware of their future existence in this world. The existence of these is timeless.³⁸

As a matter of fact, at this level, human beings do not exist in their individual form since they have not yet been physically created. They, in fact, exist in the knowledge of God.³⁹ Hence, the aim of human religious life in this world, adds Junayd, is to return to their experience on the Day of *Alastu* which is their real ontological stage prior to their coming to this world.⁴⁰ According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the covenant explains the true nature of human beings and their origin. Since the primordial covenant is the earliest proof of human existence recorded in the Qur'ān, it reflects the original nature of human being. In addition, the nature of human being during their meeting with the Divine is purely spiritual since it happens before their coming to this world and each and every human being then is represented by his individual soul which is also known as the articulate soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*). Not only are they submissive to God, the human soul at that early stage of existence has already been endowed by God with the capacity of thinking and articulating in order for them to know their Lord:

We infer from the *ayah* (7: 172) that God gave the soul the power of speech, the *nutq* with reference to the *qawl* in the sacred text, to respond to His call. This means that the soul knows God as its Lord; that it knows itself as His creature that it knows other souls as distinct from itself; and that it knows how to discriminate and make distinctions. It possesses

38. Ali Hassan Abdel Kader, *The Life, Personality and Writings of al-Junayd* (London: Luzac & Company, 1976), 76.

39. *Ibid.*, 77.

40. *Ibid.*, 81.

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power to apprehend what knowledge communicates and to communicate what it apprehends. For this reason, that is the soul's possession of a cognitive power enabling it to identify its Lord and Creator, itself and other selves like itself, and to articulate and to discriminate and make distinction as well as to formulate and communicate meaningful symbols by means of this power of speech that is called the *nulq*, the soul is called *al-nafs al-nāṭiqah*, the articulate soul.⁴¹

During the covenant, the soul is given the knowledge of his Lord in a clearer form compared to the time when it comes to this world:

The soul knows God as its Lord, and has some form of knowledge of the spiritual world before its association with the body. With its attachment to the body, the soul is provided with the means to know God also, this time through the Veils of His Creation, the physical world of sense and sensible experience.⁴²

Having known his Lord and testified His Lordship and Oneness, this religious experience of human souls in the primordial covenant is regarded as the origin of human nature in Islam. It is in line with the idea of purity implied by a hadith, "Every child is born in the form of purity (*fiṭrah*). It is the parents which (sic) made him a Jew, a Christian or a Zoroastrian."⁴³ In another hadith, God, according to the Prophet, has said that, "I have created my servants pure which is to uphold the principle of *tawḥīd*, but later on, the Satan came to them and prohibit (sic) what I have made lawful to them."⁴⁴ Purity (*fiṭrah*) also implies the true submission to the one God which is also another

41. Al-Attas, *On Justice*, 31.

42. *Ibid.*, 37.

43. *Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī*, from Abu Hurayrah.

44. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, from 'Iyad Ibn Himar.

meaning of the term *Islam* and the term *dīn*. In his analysis on the meaning of *dīn*, al-Attas identifies one of its important meanings as natural inclination (*al-ʿādah wa al-shaʿn*) referring to the natural disposition, habit and natural tendency that God has created man with.⁴⁵ This meaning ultimately refers to the state of submission during the primordial covenant. “One of the meanings of *fiṭrah* as *dīn*,” al-Attas asserts, “refers to the realization of this covenant by man.”⁴⁶ As a religion of *fiṭrah*, the mission of the Prophets in spreading Islam, viewed from this covenantal perspective, is therefore, to call people back to their original nature namely to submit themselves to God as they have demonstrated during the covenant. While to take heed of the Prophet’s reminder is to regain man’s consciousness about his own original nature. On the contrary, to be heedless (*ghāfilīn*) to the covenant not only implies forgetfulness in the sense that they were unable to recall this covenant, but also heedless of what the Prophets have reminded them regarding the covenant.

Indebtedness and Submission

The primordial covenant, according to al-Attas, is the “essential character of Islam and this essential character is the cause of our religious life in Islam.”⁴⁷ For, having made a covenant with God, men have accepted the Lordship of Allah and have witnessed for themselves the fact that Allah is the Creator and the Ruler of the universe. The religious life in Islam begins with a strong psychological feeling of indebtedness of human beings to God as a direct implication of this covenant. This is because, having concluded the covenant, human beings have agreed to accept the responsibility of becoming the slaves of God and for that matter, they are then given all kinds of bounties from God including their very existence. All these gifts are a kind of debt

45. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 61.

46. *Ibid.*, 62.

47. *Ibid.*, 73.

from God that has caused human beings to be in the state of utter loss from the very beginning of their existence:

The rightly-guided man realizes that his very self, his soul, has already acknowledged God as his Lord, even before his existence as a man, so that such a man recognizes his Creator and Cherisher and Sustainer. The nature of the debt of creation and existence is so tremendously total that man the moment he is created and given existence, is already in a state of utter loss, for he possesses really nothing himself, seeing that everything about him is what the creator owns. Who owns everything.⁴⁸

The state of indebtedness in man serves as a strong basis and justification for a total devotion to God (*'ibādah*), namely, to worship and give up himself to God. Since man is indebted to God following his covenant with Him, what logically follows is for him to return or pay back his debt to God. And since it is his own self and his very existence that becomes the substance of his debt, there is no way that the “repayment” can be accomplished except by giving up his own self to Him, who owns him in an absolute manner.⁴⁹ Giving oneself up to God is to submit, enslave, and serve Him, all of which are reflective of the main characteristics of religion in Islam. In other words, religion is the process of man’s returning back to his original state during the covenant where he has declared to God his total submission to Him. Hence, man is position during the primordial covenant, from this perspective, is regarded as the highest state of obedience that must be sought by him in this world. This supplies the reason behind the Qur’ānic verse which asserts that submission is the only objective of the creation of

48. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 56. This is in line with the verse in the Qur’an, “By time. Verily man is in loss. Except such as have Faith and do righteous deeds, and join together in the mutual teaching of Truth and of patience and constancy,” *Al-Aṣr* (103): 1–3.

49. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 57.

man,⁵⁰ “We have only created the Jinn and Man that they may worship (Me).”⁵¹

Human submission (*ʿibādah*) in the sense of *aslama* and *Islām* can be seen in two forms: macrocosmic and microcosmic. From the macrocosmic point of view, it refers to the submission of all human beings to God, while from the microcosmic point of view, it refers to the submission that takes place within human very self where the animal self submits to the commands of the rational self—the *al-naʿs al-nāṭiqah*—which has testified before God on the Day of *Alastu*. This explains the reason why the Sufis, when deliberating on the submission, highlight the fact that the heart is the ruler of the body. Parallelism between these two dimensions, microcosmic and macrocosmic, truly reflects the true nature of religion in Islam. Al-Attas also stresses the fact that this submission of human beings following the covenant is a willing submission since it is done in his consciousness. It does not mean that human beings have lost their freedom when they give up themselves to God; for, freedom of man in its true sense means “to act as his true nature demands.”⁵²

The Sensible World as a Test to the Covenant

The real test of the covenant is when the soul, having sealed the covenant with God, appears in this world and combined with a body that belongs to the sensible world. The world, furnished by God with various forms of trials and adornments, becomes the testing ground for the soul, especially regarding his loyalty to the covenant.

The souls of mankind are already reminded by God not to make excuses on the Day of Judgement of being unaware of the obligations of the

50. Semantically, one of the meanings of religion which derived from the term *dīn*, the Arabic word for religion, is submission (*istaʿbada*).

51. *Al-Dhāriyāt* (51): 56.

52. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 62.

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Covenant, this implies that the loyalty of the souls to the Covenant and its obligations will presently undergo a testing whether their loyalty is genuine or counterfeit as the souls are about to be associated with their bodies in the world of sense and sensible experience.⁵³

Such trials become all the greater since human beings nature-wise are created by God with forgetfulness. Even in Paradise, Prophet Adam fell into the abyss of forgetfulness and disobedience to God after making a covenant with Him:

According to what is revealed in the Qur'ān, God has already taken the Covenant from the articulate soul of *insān*, i.e. of Adam as an individual person and Father of Mankind, from before the Covenant taken from the souls of Adam's posterity. But having taken the Covenant, Adam forgot, i.e. *nasiya*. In this connection the Holy Prophet is reported to have said that *insān* is set on forgetfulness, i.e. *nisyān*, meaning that forgetfulness is part of the essential character of man.⁵⁴

The Role of the Prophet as a Reminder of the Covenant

Since the primordial covenant took place before human beings' appearance in the physical world, human recollection of the covenant cannot be simplistically compared with their recollection of other things in this world. Instead, it needs direct reminder from God through His Prophets who were therefore sent by God to remind human beings about the covenant. This Prophetic reminder, as affirmed by a commentator of the Qur'ān, al-Alūsī, anticipates as well two excuses which will be given by human beings before God in the Hereafter in rejecting this covenant: first, that they have forgotten the event; and, second, that they have blindly imitated their forefathers in belief (to worship other

53. Al-Attas, *On Justice*, 37.

54. *Ibid.*, 43.

than Allah as their God).⁵⁵ The Prophet’s role is therefore to call on human beings to their true nature of being submissive and obedient to God, in line with the Qur’ānic thrust, “So keep on reminding. You are surely a reminder.”⁵⁶

The Prophet’s role primarily being as the aforementioned, with his reminder either making human beings able to recall naturally the covenant, or being accepted based on their strong faith in him as God’s Messenger who reported to them about the covenant, they thus have no room for excuses in the Hereafter for not obeying God. Their acceptance of the Prophetic message can be seen as a renewal of their earlier acceptance of the primordial covenant with God. It is their second *shahādah*, affirming the earlier one, stronger and more affirmative, which they have sealed with God. The assertion of faith, being the first pillar of Islam and mandatory for any individual who intends to embrace the religion of Islam in this world, is therefore the formal acceptance of the Lordship of Allah, which man had spiritually accepted and professed on the Day of *Alastu*.

Brotherhood Based on Faith

Apart from implying submission, the spiritual covenant also reflects the origin of religious brotherhood in Islam. Since the reply given by human beings is in the plural form “Indeed we testify,” it implies that the souls have already recognised the relationship amongst them as brothers worshipping and acknowledging one God. According to al-Attas, it is on this occasion, not in this world, that the true and lasting relationship of Muslims began:

They were brothers involved in the same destiny
long before they appeared as earthly brothers, and
they were true kith and kin before they were born

55. Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1994), 93.

56. *Al-A‘lā* (88): 21. Also *Tāha* (20): 2–3.

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in the earthly kinship. So, here we see that the same Covenant is the very basis of Islamic brotherhood (*ukhuwwah*). It is this real feeling of brotherhood among Muslims based upon such firm spiritual foundations which no earthly power can rend asunder that unite the individual to the society in Islam without the individual having to suffer loss of individuality and personality, nor the society its polity and authority.⁵⁷

Just as the covenant marks the origin of man's affirmation of God's Oneness, true submission, and obedience long before their appearance in this world, so does it the beginning of human spiritual brotherhood. Irrespective of where they live in this world, they are all brothers who have affirmed the Oneness of God and the Lordship of Allah. The covenant serves as a strong bond that unites individuals and societies together, and denying any dualism between individuality and society in regard to the spirit of togetherness and brotherhood. As al-Attas asserts:

This real feeling of brotherhood among Muslims based upon such firm spiritual foundations which no earthly power can rend asunder that unite the individual to the society in Islam without the individual having to suffer the loss of individuality and personality, nor the society its polity and authority.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Despite the fact that out of 700 Qur'ānic verses relating to covenant, only one pertains to the spiritual covenant before the creation of mankind, does not render the latter less significant. In fact, it is the origin of the other covenants, serving as the foundation of religion as well as the source of man's religious

57. Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 74.

58. *Ibid.*

consciousness. When all human beings in their spiritual form reply affirmatively to the divine question regarding God's Lordship, such a reply of theirs does not only indicate the beginning of true submission and testimony to the Lordship of God, but also serves as the archetype of all other forms of submission in this world, underpinning the theological meaning of religion in Islam. The aforementioned relation between the spiritual covenant of *Alastu* and the worldly religious life, as explicated in the Sufi tradition of Islam, becomes even more pertinent in the present religious context at least for the following reasons: first, it truly marks the spiritual origin of one's religious life; second, it serves as a balance to the present over-emphasis on the legal and ritual aspects of religion at the expense of the spiritual aspect; and third, it widens the spectrum of meanings of religion available in the Islamic tradition. To conclude, Annemarie Schimmel, a prominent scholar of Sufism, has the following to remark regarding the significance of this primordial covenant:

The idea of this primordial covenant between God and humanity has impressed the religious conscience of the Muslims, and especially the Muslim Mystics, more than any other idea. Here is the starting point for their understanding of free will and predestination, of election and acceptance of God's eternal power and man's loving, response and promise.⁵⁹

59. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 24.

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