

Al-Attas, Husserl, and Critique of Modern Science: A Critical Engagement of Ramon Harvey's "Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science"

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Abstract

In July 2023, Ramon Harvey published an article titled "Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science: Naquib al-Attas' 'Metaphysical Critique' and a Husserlian Alternative." He argues that Al-Attas's metaphysical critique of modern science is dialectically inappropriate because it relies on specific, non-publicly verifiable Akbarian metaphysics and interpretations of revelation and spiritual intuition. As an alternative, he promotes Husserlian critique as a solution potentially compatible with the Islamic tradition and more open to public scrutiny at large. This article tries to engage critically with Ramon Harvey's portrayal of al-Attas's ideas and his reasoning as to why Edmund Husserl's critique is suitable to be incorporated into the Islamic tradition. This paper argues that (1) Harvey's portrayal of al-Attas's ideas is incomplete by not capturing his analysis of the crisis of the Muslim world and its solution; (2) while not being convincing for everyone, al-Attas's metaphysics is still a valid reading within the Islamic tradition, supported by ample rational and revelational justifications; (3) the difference between Harvey's and al-Attas's take on the status of intuition is caused by their different interpretation of al-Nasafi's and al-Taftāzānī's texts; and (4) that the Husserlian alternative is not yet a viable alternative for Muslims.

Keywords:

Al-Attas, modern science, metaphysics, intuition, secularism, Islamisation, Husserl.

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Introduction

The discourse of Islam and modernity has always been a perplexing one for Muslims. On the one hand, Muslims adopt a specific worldview in which the fundamental elements are not subjected to historical change.¹ On the other hand, it is as if there is no other viable alternative to the modern secular worldview that penetrates every single aspect of our life.² Modern science is no exception, especially with the tendency to portray itself as an objective, neutral inquiry free from—or worse, at odds with—any religious insight. However, recent decades have shown considerable interest in assessing various aspects of modern science from an Islamic perspective.³ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is an especially important one known for his pioneering works on the cause of the crisis in the Muslim world and the notion of “Islamisation of knowledge” as a solution for the crisis.⁴ He also provides lengthy discussions on the relationship between Islam and modern science in his two monographs *The Positive Aspects of Tasawwuf*⁵ and *Islām and the Philosophy of Science*.⁶

Many works have been written in response to his ideas, either to further elucidate⁷ his points or to criticise⁸ them. It is within this context that Ramon Harvey enters the picture. In July 2023, he published an article titled “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science: Naquib al-Attas’

1. For the exposition of the worldview of Islam and its immunity to the changes triggered by the historical development, see Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islām* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 1–5.
2. For a recent analysis, see Ali A. Allawi, *The Crisis of Islamic Civilization* (London: Yale University Press, 2009).
3. Just to mention several examples: al-Attas, *Prolegomena* (especially chapter 3); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Man and Nature: The Spiritual Crisis of Modern Man* (Chicago: ABC International, 1997); Osman Bakar, *Tawhid and Science: Essays on the History and Philosophy of Islamic Science* (Kuala Lumpur: Secretariat for Islamic Philosophy and Science, 1991); and Muzaffar Iqbal, *The Making of Islamic Science* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2009).
4. See al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 133–67; *The Concept of Education in Islām: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1999), 33–38.
5. Idem, *The Positive Aspects of Tasawwuf: Preliminary Thoughts on an Islamic Philosophy of Science* (Kuala Lumpur: ASASI, 1981).
6. Idem, *Islam and the Philosophy of Science* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1989). The monograph is later incorporated in the *Prolegomena* to become its third chapter.
7. 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, 1998); Adi Setia, “Al-Attas’ Philosophy of Science: An Extended Outline,” *Islam & Science* 1, no. 2 (2003): 165–214; and Adi Setia, “*Kalām Jadīd*, Islamization, and the Worldview of Islam: Applying the Neo-Ghazālīan, Attasian Framework,” *Islam & Science* 10, no. 1 (2012): 25–73.
8. Mohd Faizal Musa, *Naquib al-Attas’ Islamization of Knowledge: Its Impact on Malay Religious Life, Literature, Language and Culture* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2021).

“Metaphysical Critique” and a Husserlian Alternative.”⁹ The article attempts to portray al-Attas’s critique of modern science and argues that his metaphysical critique of modern science is dialectically inappropriate because it relies on specific, non-publicly verifiable Akbarian metaphysics and interpretations of revelation and spiritual intuition. As an alternative, he promotes Husserlian critique as a viable solution potentially compatible with the Islamic tradition and more open to public scrutiny at large.

The present article is an attempt to engage critically with Ramon Harvey’s portrayal of al-Attas’s ideas and his reasoning as to why the critique of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) is suitable to be incorporated into the Islamic tradition. In contrast, the present author argues that (1) Harvey’s portrayal of al-Attas’s ideas is incomplete by not capturing his analysis of the crisis of the Muslim world and its solution; (2) while not being convincing for everyone, al-Attas’s metaphysics is still a valid reading within the Islamic tradition, supported by ample rational and revelational justifications; (3) the difference between Harvey’s and al-Attas’s takes on the status of intuition is caused by their different interpretation of texts by Abū Hafs al-Nasafi (d. 1142) and Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390); and (4) that the Husserlian alternative is not yet a viable alternative for Muslims.

The Problems with Modern Science: al-Attas’s Metaphysical Critique

In his article, Harvey begins by acknowledging the view that there is something wrong with today’s scientific knowledge, and how it has roots in metaphysics—something he calls “metaphysical critique.” He describes it as follows:

Religious assessments of science within the contemporary world commonly develop what I shall call a “metaphysical critique.” Such a critique can be summarized in the following way. The world has a metaphysical dimension that transcends the visible phenomena that science can measure. Because of this inability to access it, modern science denies its existence. Only “traditional metaphysics” can make the world intelligible to us once more. Thus, modern humanity must go back to the teachings of tradition to solve the problems caused by runaway scientism.¹⁰

Such a description, though in my opinion overly simplifying the nuances of the thoughts of people such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933–present), René Guénon (1886–1951), and al-Attas—all of whom are mentioned in Harvey’s article¹¹—still satisfies the objective to get the public to be cognisant of the presence of such critiques.

9. Ramon Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science: Naquib al-Attas’ ‘Metaphysical Critique’ and a Husserlian Alternative,” *Theology and Science* 21, no. 3 (2023): 1–17.

10. *Ibid.*, 1.

11. For instance, al-Attas—unlike Guénon and Nasr—does not subscribe to the ideas of perennial philosophy (Latin: *sophia perennis*) and transcendent unity of religions.

Harvey then proceeds to explain al-Attas's version of metaphysical critique. Below are excerpts of his portrayal of the said critique:

According to al-Attas, modern Western science depends on a deeply problematic world view. It is based on “secularism,” by which he means a philosophical foundation that is grounded in rational appreciation of phenomena without deeper significance that he thinks can only be vouchsafed through revelation and spiritual intuition.¹²

...Additionally, he comments that the secularity of science is grounded in the ancient Greek philosophical idea of one thing emerging out of another in an eternal universe without need for a creator...[it] is too simplistic as an account of the complex developments leading to the secularity of modern science.¹³

Harvey's assessments in these particular passages are arguably inaccurate. First, whereas “rational appreciation of phenomena without deeper significance” is one aspect of secularism, it is not the only aspect. Citing from Harvey Cox's *The Secular City*, al-Attas defines secularisation as “the deliverance of man first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and *his language*.”¹⁴ The mention of language in relation to secularisation is important since al-Attas often makes use of semantic analysis in presenting his arguments—something that Harvey only mentions in passing.¹⁵ This is pertinent because later on Harvey problematises al-Attas's use of semantic analysis on Qur'ānic vocabularies in support of his ontological vision.¹⁶ If one does not understand al-Attas's emphasis on language in the process of secularisation and Islamisation,¹⁷ one may be under the wrong impression that al-Attas is just

12. Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 2. Emphasis in italic is mine.

13. Ibid, 2–3. Emphasis in italic is mine.

14. Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 17. Emphasis in italic is mine.

15. For example, he writes “He argues that knowledge has been corrupted due to influences from the philosophy, science and ideology of Western society changing the *meaning of key terms* of the world view derived from the Qur'ānic revelation.” See Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 3. Emphasis in italic is mine.

16. He says: “A persistent feature of the *Prolegomena* is al-Attas' jump from general Qur'ānic semantics to his specific ontological vision.” See Ibid., 4.

17. Al-Attas places great emphasis on language on his “Islamisation of knowledge” agenda. For example, in *Islām and Secularism*, he says: “Islamization is the liberation of man first from magical, mythological, animistic, national-cultural tradition opposed to Islām, and then from secular control over his reason and *language* (emphasis in italic is mine).” He then mentions: “We have also defined islamization as involving first the *islamization of language*... (emphasis in italic is mine).” See, al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 44 and 45.

misappropriating Qur'ānic key terms. On the contrary, for al-Attas, language is not simply a handmaiden of his ontology, but also a method to derive and preserve the meaning of the key technical terms of the worldview of Islam.¹⁸

Judging al-Attas's analysis of the roots of secularisation in the West (particularly secularisation of modern science) as "simplistic" is also unfair. First, when Harvey says that al-Attas "comments that the secularity of science is grounded in the ancient Greek philosophical idea...", he refers to page 115 of al-Attas's *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islām*. However, even the said page alone already describes so much more than just modern science as having its roots in the Greek conception of an eternal universe. Furthermore, al-Attas also mentions in the *Prolegomena* the key ideas of empiricism and rationalism and how they lead to a secular philosophy of science:

Its methods are chiefly philosophic rationalism, which tends to depend on reason alone without the aid of sense perception or experience; secular rationalism, which while accepting reason tends to rely more on sense experience, and deny authority and intuition and rejects Revelation and religion as sources of true knowledge; and philosophic empiricism or logical empiricism which bases all knowledge on observable facts, logical constructions and linguistic analysis. The vision of reality as seen according to the perspectives of both forms of rationalism and empiricism is based on the restriction of reality to the natural world which is considered as the only level of reality.¹⁹

If anything, al-Attas eloquently summarises the debates and synthesis between rationalism and empiricism and how it leads to today's secular philosophy of science. This is in addition to the first two chapters of *Islām and Secularism* where he analyses the roots and concept of secularisation as it occurs and conceived in and by the West, tracing it all the way back to the crisis in Christian thought.

Therefore, Harvey did not do justice to al-Attas's exposition on the secularisation of the West, haphazardly labelling it as "simplistic." Although maybe this part plays no further role in the rest of his article, there is still the need to explain al-Attas's treatment of the secularisation of the West so that readers can appreciate his train of thought better—and this would be useful for the latter part of the present article.

18. See Syamsuddin Arif, "Preserving the Semantic Structure of Islamic Key Terms and Concepts: Izutsu, al-Attas, and al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī," *Islam & Science* 5, no. 2 (2007): 107–116.

19. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 115.

In a more favourable light, Harvey correctly assesses that al-Attas does not reject modern science as a whole but rejects some of its “problematic effect.”²⁰ In the *Prolegomena*, al-Attas himself already stated what is his problem with modern science:

Our evaluation must entail a critical examination of the methods of modern science; its concepts, presuppositions, and symbols; its empirical and rational aspects, and those impinging upon values and ethics; its interpretation of origins; its theory of knowledge; its presupposition on the existence of an external world, of the uniformity of nature, and of the rationality of natural processes; its theory of the universe; its classification of the sciences; its limitations and inter-relations with one another of the sciences, and its social relations.²¹

Harvey also correctly infers that the *Prolegomena* is mainly written for Muslim audiences rather than non-Muslims,²² a conclusion which Khalina Khalili arrived at in her comparative study of al-Attas’s and Nasr’s respective philosophies of science.²³

A Critique of al-Attas’s Metaphysical Critique

Harvey aimed to show that al-Attas’s metaphysical critique of modern science is dialectically inappropriate. He builds his case by analysing how al-Attas utilises two epistemic sources, i.e., revelation and intuition, to build his metaphysical system. Harvey argues quite correctly that according to al-Attas, the Qur’ānic revelation can serve as a basis for a distinctly Islamic ontological system.²⁴ Harvey observes that al-Attas’s ontological system is reminiscent of that of Ibn ‘Arabi’s (d. 1240).²⁵ He then argues that one problem with al-Attas’s approach is the preconceived reading of Qur’ānic vocabulary to support his specific ontological vision:

A persistent feature of the *Prolegomena* is al-Attas’ jump from general Qur’ānic semantics to his specific ontological vision. Though many of his key interpretations of scriptural vocabulary fall within the established range of exegetic views, and his semantic analyses

20. Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 3.

21. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 114.

22. Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 3.

23. Khalina Normaliza Khalili, “The Philosophy of Science in Islam from the Perspectives of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Seyyed Hossein Nasr,” PhD thesis (Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, 2021), 70. In the thesis, it is written “For al-Attas, his writings are directed to the Muslim population, both Malay speakers and the larger Muslim world.”

24. Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 3.

25. Ibid.

are sometimes brilliant, the metaphysics extracted from them is based on his pre-existing choice to elaborate the Akbarī system as revealed truth.²⁶

Harvey sees two problems with this approach. First, he argues that the Qur’ānic semantics are underdetermined to support al-Attas’s ontological system.²⁷ Second, he argues that building any metaphysical system based on the Qur’ān is “rarely convincing outside of a shared commitment to the authority of a sacred text or its proper hermeneutics.”²⁸ This is because other theological schools could utilise the same Qur’ānic terms and come out with different conclusions.²⁹ The second problem is also the reason why rational and logical arguments are systematically developed in Islamic theology, according to Harvey.³⁰

Harvey then states that if revelation underdetermines al-Attas’s metaphysics, then the justification for his system falls under the scope of spiritual intuition.³¹ Harvey problematises the status of intuition: not in the sense of whether it is theoretically or practically possible—which, it should be mentioned, he has been very clear about—but whether it is valid as a source of publicly binding knowledge such as science. Below are some of the concerns which Harvey expresses about the epistemic status of intuition:

I am not questioning the possibility, or actuality, of such experiences, but whether they are able to play the role of authoritative deliverances for an Islamic philosophy of science.³²

Hence, unlike sense perception, revealed reports, and reason, it is not suitable as source for publicly binding knowledge. My argument in the present context is that not only does al-Nasafi’s rejection of the authority of spiritual intuition in the public domain enjoy a dominant status within the Islamic tradition in the field of theology, but that this rests on the obvious harms that would result in extending it beyond its proper remit in the spiritual life of the individual.³³

Harvey further argues that in today’s world of science which is practised globally, where scientists hail from many religious and philosophical commitments, “such a requirement for religiously particular practices seems ethically and

26. Ibid., 4.

27. He writes: “In other words, the Qur’ānic concepts that al-Attas cites *underdetermine* the philosophical meaning required to support his chosen ontological system as a framework for an Islamic philosophy of science.” See *ibid.* Emphasis in italic is mine.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 5.

32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 7.

practically unfeasible... To imagine that diverse scientists would either embrace Islamic mysticism or hold it as philosophically authoritative seems a particularly forlorn hope.”³⁴ Thus, Harvey concludes that al-Attas’s metaphysical critique encompassing an alternative ontology constructed based on his understanding of revelation and intuition is dialectically inappropriate because it is unlikely to convince those who do not share the latter’s view.

However, before passing a verdict, one must understand al-Attas’s train of thought as to what he regards to be the underlying malaise of the Muslim world. This is because al-Attas’s metaphysical critique is a response to his understanding of the central crisis taking place specifically in the Muslim world. Unfortunately, this part is not addressed properly by Harvey, who only briefly summarises the so-called “metaphysical critique” of figures like Guénon, Nasr, and al-Attas—despite their major differences—without exerting any effort to connect between the problem (i.e., crisis of modern science) and the solution (i.e., metaphysical critique).

In *Islām and Secularism*, al-Attas states that the central problem faced by Muslims today is none other than the problem of knowledge as propagated by the Western civilisation:

I venture to maintain that the greatest challenge that has surreptitiously arisen in our age is the challenge of knowledge, indeed, not as against ignorance; *but knowledge as conceived and disseminated throughout the world by Western civilization*; knowledge whose nature has become problematic because it has lost its true purpose due to being unjustly conceived, and has thus brought about chaos in man’s life instead of, and rather than, peace and justice; knowledge which pretends to be real but which is productive of confusion and scepticism, which has elevated doubt and conjecture to the ‘scientific’ rank in methodology and which regards doubt as an eminently valid epistemological tool in the pursuit of truth; knowledge which has, for the first time in history, brought chaos into the Three Kingdoms of Nature; the animal, vegetal and mineral.³⁵

Moreover, al-Attas argues that “knowledge is *not neutral*, and can indeed be infused with a nature and content which *masquerades as knowledge*.”³⁶ What exactly, then, is this thing masquerading as knowledge which al-Attas regards as dangerously problematic? The answer to that is the Western secular worldview, which “[relies] upon the powers of the human intellect alone to guide man through life,”³⁷ “[adheres to] the dualistic vision of reality and truth,”³⁸ “[espouses]

34. Ibid.

35. Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 133. Emphasis in italic is mine.

36. Ibid. Emphasis in italic is mine.

37. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 88.

38. Ibid.

the doctrine of humanism,”³⁹ and so on. Concerning science, the aspect of “disenchantment of nature” of secularisation “[obliterates] all spiritual meaning in our understanding of nature, and [restricts] our way of knowing to the scientific method as advocated by secular philosophy and science,”⁴⁰ a process which al-Attas calls “secularization as a philosophical program.”⁴¹

Since secularisation or deislamisation of the Muslim minds through the Western secular worldview “masquerading as knowledge”⁴² is the main problem for the Muslim world, the antidote, according to al-Attas, is none other than the Islamisation of contemporary knowledge, which involves both isolating the key elements of the Western worldview and infusing the Islamic ones.⁴³ This is also where language is of paramount importance in the Attasian framework, since both secularisation and Islamisation involve language, and, according to al-Attas, “language reflects ontology.”⁴⁴

The present article contends that this is why al-Attas has chosen to construct an alternative metaphysical system imbued with semantic analyses of the Qur’ānic terms. It makes no sense for al-Attas to look only within the realms of experience and reason alone as Harvey wanted,⁴⁵ for the heart of the malaise is not there. Al-Attas outrightly rejects this approach from the very beginning in the *Prolegomena*, where he states that “from the perspective of Islām, a ‘worldview’ is not merely the mind’s view of the physical world and of man’s historical, social, political and cultural involvement...”⁴⁶ Harvey’s point on the dialectical inappropriateness of al-Attas’s metaphysical critique might be true if it is already agreed that the problem and solution to the crisis of contemporary science somehow lie only in the physical world. This premise, however, is exactly what al-Attas criticises.

Then, there is the question of the underdetermination of Qur’ānic terms of Attasian-Akbarian metaphysics. Harvey claims that the “Qur’ānic terms function for him more as pegs on which to hang his preconceived ontological system, than as proof texts for it.”⁴⁷ Ironically, rather than explaining how a proper metaphysical system can be derived from the Qur’ān, Harvey seems to dismiss its plausibility altogether by claiming that “other theological schools could (and did) use the same revealed concepts for very different metaphysical doctrines”⁴⁸

39. Ibid.

40. Ibid., 113.

41. Ibid., 139.

42. Idem, *Islām and Secularism*, 105.

43. Ibid., 104–5.

44. Idem, *Prolegomena*, 20 and 30.

45. Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 8.

46. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 1. Emphasis in italic is mine.

47. Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 4.

48. Ibid.

and “Muslim scholars have long realized that building any specific metaphysics upon the Qur’ān is rarely convincing outside of a shared commitment to the authority of a sacred text or its proper hermeneutics.”⁴⁹ In contrast, al-Attas shows on numerous occasions how his metaphysics can be traced back to—or at least compatible with—the Qur’ān. For example, take the following verse:

Soon will We show them our Signs [*āyāt*] in the (furthest) regions (of the earth), and in their own souls, until it becomes manifest to them that this is the Truth....⁵⁰

How then does al-Attas’s metaphysics interpret these verses? In *The Positive Aspects of Taṣawwuf*, al-Attas writes:

Now in the Holy Qur’ān, the world of nature is depicted as a Great Open Book; and every detail therein, encompassing the farthest horizons and our very selves, is like a word in that Book that speaks to man about its Author. Now the word as it really is is a sign, a symbol; and to know it as it really is is to know what it stands for, what it symbolizes, what it means.⁵¹

Here, al-Attas expands the concept of “signs” (*āyāt*) to show a metaphysical system where the world of nature in its entirety has a teleological meaning that points to God. Another verse also supports this narrative:

Behold! In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alternation of night and day,—there are indeed Signs [*āyāt*] for men of understanding...⁵²

For the sake of argument, let us argue that al-Attas made an arbitrary jump to interpret the word “*āyāt*” in the verse as things having a divine nature that points to a creator to support his ontological vision. However, even if we concede such an argument, it remains to be seen as to how al-Attas’s metaphysics would contradict the apparent meaning or established interpretation of the verses and the teachings of Islam in general. This is also related to the another point that Harvey raises—that is, that other theological schools can also build different metaphysical systems based on the Qur’ān. Surely, many scholars acknowledge that there are multiple possibilities of validly accepted readings of the Qur’ān, but this is nothing new for Muslims. Therefore, it is a wonder

49. Ibid.

50. *Sūrat Fuṣṣilat* (41):53. All translations of the Qur’ānic verses in this article (except ones that are bracketed with “[],” which are my own additions) are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s translation of the Qur’ān.

51. Al-Attas, *The Positive Aspects of Taṣawwuf*, 6. See also his *Prolegomena*, 133–134.

52. *Sūrat Āli ‘Imrān* (3):190.

how Harvey's concern that "building any specific metaphysics upon the Qur'ān is rarely convincing outside of a shared commitment to the authority of a sacred text or its proper hermeneutics" is a problem, provided that al-Attas's reading is a valid one within Sunnī Islam. Furthermore, as Harvey himself has correctly stated, al-Attas's books mainly speak to Muslim audiences (and from the perspective of Islam, if it may be added). Therefore, there is no need to satisfy the requirements of non-Muslims who neither believe in the Qur'ān nor subscribe to the methods of its interpretation—*tafsīr* and *ta'wīl*.

This is not to mention that even the so-called "rational" arguments—that is, from the *kalām* tradition—that Harvey prioritises over the metaphysical ones⁵³ can also be at odds with one another. For instance, the Mu'tazilite Ibrāhīm al-Nazzām (d. 845) denied the immutability of atoms (sing: *jawhar*; pl: *jawāhīr*) and believed in the infinite divisibility of things—a position contrary to those of the mainstream Sunnī *mutakallimūn*.⁵⁴ Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064) even went further in criticising the atomists on the basis of theological and rational grounds:

As for atomism, Ibn Ḥazm also devoted many pages to criticizing this concept—particularly the notion of a singular *jawhar*—discussing the existence of the *jawhar*, and presenting his arguments against it. First of all, Ibn Ḥazm refuted what Abū al-Hudhayl said about the power of Allah to disintegrate the body until it became indivisible parts. This statement, he found, limited the power of Allah by ending his power to disintegrate at the level of the *jawhar*. Theologically, God is omnipotent, and his power has no limits.⁵⁵

It is not within the scope of this article to assess Ibn Ḥazm's verdict on atomism and the *mutakallimūn* in general. However, what is interesting is that the notion of atomism is *rational* argued by the *mutakallimūn* to explain how an omnipotent God is related to his creation as the only efficient cause.⁵⁶ Yet, it is rejected by Ibn Ḥazm on the *rational* ground of God's omnipotence. Therefore, if Harvey rejects any attempt to derive a metaphysical system from the Qur'ān on the basis that it can lead to different metaphysical doctrines, he should also be worried that rational arguments can also be used to argue for contrasting positions.

53. He says: "Moreover, Muslim scholars have long realized that building any specific metaphysics upon the Qur'ān is rarely convincing outside of a shared commitment to the authority of a sacred text or its proper hermeneutics. *This is one of the factors motivating the development of rational argument within Islamic theology.*" Harvey, "Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science," 4. Emphasis in italic is mine.

54. Basil Altaie, *Islam and Natural Philosophy: Principles of Daqīq al-Kalām* (Oldham: Beacon Books, 2023), 55.

55. Ibid., 57.

56. Mehmet Bulgen, "Continuous Re-Creation: From Kalam Atomism to Contemporary Cosmology," *Kalam Journal* 1 (2018): 59.

Moreover, despite Harvey's portrayal, in reality al-Attas does utilise rational arguments to support his metaphysical system. For instance, below is the excerpt from *Prolegomena* in which he argues for the necessity of a hierarchical order of things:

We said that the relation describes a certain order. If everything in any system were in the same place, then there could be no recognition, there could be no meaning since there would be no relational criteria to judge, discriminate, distinguish and clarify. Indeed, there would be no system. For recognition to be possible there must be *specific difference* in things, there must be *essential relation* between things and moreover, these *must remain as such*; for if the difference and the relation were not abiding but were in a state of constant change specifically and essentially, then recognition of things would be impossible and meaning would perish.⁵⁷

Others have also shown the rational grounds for hierarchy-based metaphysics.⁵⁸ The point of note is that the metaphysical and rational arguments do not have to be seen as two opposing poles.

In addition, the appropriation of *ta'wīl* in al-Attas's interpretation of the Qur'ānic verses and vocabularies⁵⁹ is also overlooked by Harvey, who hastily concludes that his metaphysical critique falls under the proper scope of spiritual intuition. *Ta'wīl*, unlike *tafsīr*, is dedicated to ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*). On top of that, al-Attas also views that the world of sense and experience is generally ambiguous since it can be mistakenly believed to have a self-subsistent reality.⁶⁰ Thus, disagreement in this area is even more inevitable and acceptable as far as the Islamic tradition is concerned. Nevertheless, despite being more fluid than *tafsīr*, *ta'wīl* still has "publicly observable" criteria since it must be based on

57. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 123–4. It is to be noted that the argument for hierarchical order of things supports his definition of meaning as "the recognition of the place of anything in a system."

58. For example, see Hasan Spiker, *Hierarchy and Freedom* (Cambridge: New Andalus Press, 2023); and Karim Lahham, *The Anatomy of Knowledge and the Ontological Necessity of First Principles* (Abu Dhabi: Tabah Foundation, 2021). Harvey seems to think that the writing by Karim Lahham suffers the same problem as al-Attas's metaphysical critique, as he indicates in footnote 47. Unfortunately, he does not elaborate more on this argument.

59. For this matter, see Mohd Zaidi bin Ismail, "The Cosmos as Created Book and Its Implication for the Orientation of Science," *Islam & Science* 6, no. 1 (2008): 47–52.

60. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 136.

and can never contradict the product of *tafsīr*.⁶¹ If Harvey disregards intuition due to it not being a proper source of publicly binding knowledge, maybe he can consider looking at al-Attas's use of *ta'wīl* in constructing his metaphysics.

Lastly, there is still the issue of intuition as a valid source of publicly binding knowledge. Although Harvey does not deny intuition, he seems to relegate it to the realm of private experience. He resorts to *ʿAqāʾid al-Nasafī* (which al-Attas also studied)⁶² to prove his point, quoting that, according to al-Nasafī, “spiritual intuition (*ilhām*) is not from the means of knowledge (*maʿrifā*) for the soundness of something.”⁶³ Referring to the *Sharḥ ʿAqāʾid al-Nasafī*, he states:

Al-Nasafī's creed, especially with its commentary by Saʿd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d. 1390), has long been held as an authoritative expression of Islamic belief... Yet it openly states that spiritual intuition is *not a valid epistemic source*. In al-Taftāzānī's commentary *this is softened* with the following words: “the apparent meaning is that he intends that spiritual intuition (*ilhām*) is not a means by which knowledge is realized for most people nor suitable to enjoin upon another. Otherwise, there is no doubt that knowledge is realized by it.”⁶⁴

What is interesting to note here is that both al-Attas and Harvey read the same *ʿAqāʾid al-Nasafī* and Al-Taftāzānī's commentary of it, but they arrive at varying conclusions. Harvey concludes that both al-Nasafī and al-Taftāzānī reject intuition as a valid source of knowledge (except in the realm of private experience). However, al-Attas's conclusion is different from that of Harvey's. In the original *ʿAqāʾid al-Nasafī*'s text which states intuition as an invalid source for the soundness of something, which al-Attas comments:

This is according to al-Nasafī and some theologians. But al-Taftāzānī explains that *ilhām* is not a cause for cognition of the soundness of something *only for the generality of mankind*, and not for some to whom it is indeed also a cause of knowledge.⁶⁵

61. This is also al-Attas's stance on *ta'wīl*. He says in the *Prolegomena*: “The detecting, discovery, and revealing of the concealed meanings of the ambiguous signs and symbols in the Holy Qurʾān is called allegorical interpretation (*ta'wīl*), and this is *based upon the interpretation of those that are apparent (tafsīr)*. Thus, in the same manner that the interpretation of the obscure and ambiguous texts is to be based upon those that are clear and established, so the interpretation or the study and explanation of the obscure and ambiguous aspects of the things of the empirical world must be grounded upon what is already known and established.” See *ibid.*, 136. Emphasis in italic is mine.

62. Idem, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript: A 16th Century Malay Translation of the ʿAqāʾid al-Nasafī* (Kuala Lumpur: Department of Publications University of Malaya, 1988).

63. *Ibid.*, 66–7; and Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 6.

64. Al-Attas, *The Oldest Known Malay Manuscript*, 6. Emphasis in italic is mine.

65. *Ibid.*, 67. Emphasis in italic is mine.

Presenting an analysis of the position of both al-Nasafī and al-Taftāzānī on intuition, al-Attas explains:

Al-Taftāzānī also pointed out that inspiration or intuition is a *reliable source* of knowledge *only for some*, not for all of mankind. Al-Nasafī's wording on this matter shows that the statement on inspiration is meant to contradict the pseudo-Šūfīs of various sects who made false pretensions on its account. That intuition is a cause of knowledge cannot be denied, as it is firmly based upon the Sacred Text and the Tradition; and it is chiefly through the demonstrations of the genuine Šūfīs and al-Ghazālī that its general acceptance in Islamic epistemology was firmly established.⁶⁶

Two points can be drawn. First, both al-Attas and Harvey agree that according to al-Nasafī intuition is not valid “for the soundness of something,” but Harvey holds the literal meaning of the text and takes it as proof that intuition is not regarded as a source of publicly binding knowledge. Al-Attas instead analyses al-Nasafī's wordings on this matter as intended to reject the pseudo-Šūfīs while not denying intuition, as it is rooted in the Islamic tradition. Second, al-Taftāzānī's testimony that intuition is not suitable for some people is understood by Harvey to be a soft stance in the denial of intuition in public knowledge. Al-Attas, however, interprets al-Taftāzānī's testimony as meaning that intuition is not meant for everyone since it only comes to those who have prepared themselves for it.

A counterpoint may be raised as to why al-Attas addresses intuition in his philosophy of science if science is all about rational and empirical knowledge. According to al-Attas, it is exactly this view—that is, that science is all about rational-empirical knowledge—that is problematic, since it denies intuition, either explicitly or implicitly, by relegating it to the realm of private experience—a higher level of intuition obtained by sagacity or prophethood.⁶⁷ In other words, al-Attas is addressing Islamic epistemology in general and not just “science” in its narrow, modern sense. In any case, it seems that the debate about intuition being the source of publicly binding knowledge boils down to whether intuition can have cognitive contents which can be understood and scrutinised by the public at large. Harvey seems to be dismissive about this case, saying that “[a]ssuming that all mystical practitioners experience the same transcendent truth...*it does not follow that its conversion into language communicable to the non-adept will be uniform.*” There seems to be an inevitable gap between the *private experience* of spiritual truth and its shared transmission in the rational language used by science.”⁶⁸ On the contrary, al-Attas states that:

66. Ibid., 50. Emphasis in italic is mine.

67. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 116 and 124.

68. Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 7. Emphasis in italic is mine.

...the vision of the nature of reality derived from the intuition of existence as experienced by the masters among the men of discernment *can indeed be formulated in rational and theoretical terms* needed as a foundation for an Islamic philosophy of science.⁶⁹

The interpretation of al-Nasafi and al-Taftāzānī's writings aside, does the Islamic tradition truly reject intuition as a source of public knowledge, as argued by Harvey?⁷⁰ This is a vital question in Islamic epistemology and philosophy. The present article is inclined towards al-Attas's view, because it seems that major Muslim metaphysicians such as al-Farābī (d. 950), Ibn Sīnā (d. 1037), and al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) acknowledge intuition as a valid source of knowledge without bracketing it to the realm of private experience, although they agree that every soul's potential to experience intuition is not equal.⁷¹

The Plausibility of Edmund Husserl As a Better Alternative for Muslims

A full treatment of the philosophy of science by Edmund Husserl is outside the scope of the present article, and even Harvey's article only provides a brief treatment of Husserl's ideas. Rather than giving a lengthy treatment of Husserl's ideas, the focus here is to analyse Harvey's appraisal of the ideas of the Austrian-German philosopher and why Harvey regards them as a viable solution compatible with the Islamic tradition.

Harvey sets his own criteria for what constitutes an adequate critique. First, it must "rationally emerge in a compelling way from publicly observable phenomena."⁷² Second, it must be compatible with the Islamic tradition.⁷³ He argues that Husserl's phenomenology satisfies these two requirements, but does not elaborate further on how Husserlian phenomenology would be compatible with theology—claiming that it is still an ongoing debate taking place in French scholarship—and more importantly with Islam.⁷⁴ However, he offers a glimpse of how Husserlian phenomena can be the common ground for a philosophy of science intending to solve the malaise caused by scientific knowledge, stating:

69. Al-Attas, *A Commentary on the Hujjat al-Siddiq of Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī: Being an Exposition of the Salient Points of Distinction between the Positions of the Theologians, the Philosophers, the Sufis and the Pseudo-Sufis on the Ontological Relationship between God and the World and Related Questions* (Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Culture Malaysia, 1986), xv. Emphasis in italic is mine.

70. Harvey, "Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science," 7.

71. See, for example, Osman Bakar, *Classification of Knowledge in Islam* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1988), 75 and 197; Syamsuddin Arif, "Intuition and Its Role in Ibn Sīnā's Epistemology," *Al-Shajarah* 5 (2000): 95–126.

72. Harvey, "Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science," 8.

73. Ibid.

74. Ibid., 11.

I argue that such an expanded Husserlian phenomenology can present a shared philosophical vision that, insofar as it does not seek to answer questions that lie in the invisible world, such as about the divine nature and eschatology, is open to rational humanity as large. This, I contend, is exactly the common platform that a philosophy of science aiming to solve the malaise in contemporary globalized society needs to build... As such, I argue that it is a Husserlian analysis that provides a better platform for the critique of the damaging crisis of scientific knowledge in the contemporary age than an Attasian one.⁷⁵

In his concluding remark, Harvey entertains us with the prospect of adopting Husserlian thought within the Islamic theological framework—something that he promises in his future research.⁷⁶

Several points can be raised in response to Harvey's assessment of Husserl phenomenology and its potential compatibility with Islam. The first—and arguably the weakest—is the seemingly arbitrary selection of Edmund Husserl, a non-Muslim, over all the celebrated and authoritative scholars in the Islamic tradition. But even if we limit ourselves to contemporary critiques of modern science, Husserl is not the only one. Figures like Kuhn,⁷⁷ Lakatos,⁷⁸ and Feyerabend,⁷⁹ among others, have written extensively in criticising the standard account of science. Adi Setia, a direct student of al-Attas whom Harvey also criticises in his article, even incorporates Lakatos's research programme in elaborating his Attasian vision of Islamic science.⁸⁰ If Harvey criticised al-Attas because the latter “thinks he has a decisive reason to prefer his position over potential rivals,”⁸¹ then by not showing a decisive reason why Husserl should be prioritised over others, he too is committing exactly the same mistake he claims al-Attas has made.

But, even if we hold this naïve—and Harvey would probably think, weak—dissatisfaction back, we can still have serious disagreements over the choice of Husserl's phenomenology. Harvey begins with the criteria that a satisfactory solution must: (1) start with the observable phenomena and (2) be compatible with the Islamic tradition. Yet the solution does not “seek to answer questions

75. Ibid., 11.

76. Ibid., 12.

77. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012 [1962]).

78. Imre Lakatos, “Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programme,” in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge: Proceedings of the International Colloquium in the Philosophy of Science, 1965* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 91–196.

79. Paul Feyerabend, *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchistic Theory of Knowledge* (London: Verso Books, 2010).

80. Adi Setia, “Three Meanings of Islamic Science: Toward Operationalizing Islamization of Science,” *Islam & Science* 5, no. 1 (2007): 23–52.

81. Harvey, “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science,” 4.

that lie in the invisible world, such as the divine nature and eschatology.” Does this imply that the Islamic divine nature of things and eschatology must be discounted from this new philosophy of science? If so, how can this philosophy be compatible with the Islamic tradition? The way to see it is that the new Husserlian philosophy of science is not compatible with the Islamic tradition; instead, the Islamic tradition must be discounted to be compatible with Husserl’s philosophy and for it to be “open to rational humanity at large.”

This raises a question as to what kind of “crisis of modern science” Harvey is trying to solve. As mentioned earlier, al-Attas has been very clear that the crisis, as far as the Muslim world is concerned, stems from the Western secular worldview. Therefore, it is not surprising that part of the solution is a restatement of the worldview of Islam and the Islamic key terms. Al-Attas is well aware that his solution might not be “universal” in the sense that it is accepted by everyone, stating that:

It may be argued that what is suggested is but *another, alternative* interpretation of knowledge imbued with other conceptual forms and values aligned to another purpose which reflects another worldview; and that this being so, and by the same token, what is formulated and disseminated as knowledge might not necessarily reflect *true* knowledge. This, however, remains to be seen, for the test of true knowledge is man himself, in that if, through an alternative interpretation of knowledge man knows himself and his ultimate destiny, and in thus knowing he achieves happiness, then that knowledge, in spite of its being imbued with certain elements that determine the characteristic form in which it is conceived and evaluated and interpreted in accordance with the purpose aligned to a particular worldview, is true knowledge; for such knowledge has fulfilled man’s purpose for knowing.⁸²

In our reading, al-Attas is basically saying that Islam, though may be perceived just as another particular worldview (like the Western worldview), can lead to true knowledge in accordance with man’s true nature; for man’s true nature is in accordance with Islam. Al-Attas’s attitude starkly differs from Harvey’s, who seeks refuge in Husserl’s phenomenology because it is more “neutral” to any particular religion or philosophy—even when being “neutral” here means that every other religion or philosophy must submit and discount themselves in order to be in Husserl’s “common platform.” This also means that the crisis in question is not really coming from the viewpoint of Islam, but rather from the vague “shared” viewpoint which may or may not be compatible with the need of the Muslim *ummah*. Most importantly, it remains to be demonstrated how Husserlian phenomenology can account for the many

82. Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 89.

aspects of Islamic tradition and form an Islamic philosophy of science and not just some vague “common platform.” This is still an ongoing project by Harvey, as he indicates in one of his social media platforms.⁸³ But until proven otherwise, an urgency to have Husserl or others to speak for Muslims over our own established scholars—and definitely not as a saviour for the crisis of our time—remains an unnecessary proposition.

Given the lack of clarity on how Husserlian phenomenology can be incorporated into the Islamic tradition—rather than the other way around—it is arguable that it does not present a viable alternative for Muslims. Harvey attempts to do too much by simultaneously portraying the ideas of al-Attas and Husserl, ultimately failing to do justice to either. Harvey could have focused on showing how Husserlian phenomenology can provide a remedy for the crisis of modern science (which he also needs to specify) without caricaturing al-Attas in the process. Alternatively, as Adi Setia did with Lakatos, he could have also critically appropriate Husserl’s ideas to the thoughts of some Muslim scholars. Unfortunately, Harvey entertained neither.

Conclusion

Throughout the present article, an attempt has been made to engage critically with Ramon Harvey’s article titled “Islamic Theology and the Crisis of Contemporary Science: Naquib Al-Attas’ ‘Metaphysical Critique’ and a Husserlian Alternative,” in which Harvey argues that al-Attas’s metaphysical critique is a dialectically inappropriate one since it relies on specific, non-publicly verifiable Akbarian metaphysics and interpretations of revelation and spiritual intuition. Thus, al-Attas’s philosophy of science fails to convince others who do not adhere to the view. On the contrary, Husserlian phenomenology can provide a better common ground for a critique of modern science since it is based on publicly-observable phenomena. Furthermore, he claims that Husserlian philosophy of science has the potential to be incorporated into the Islamic tradition. However, a closer reading of Harvey’s article reveals the following points. First, Harvey’s portrayal of al-Attas’s idea is an incomplete one, because he does not analyse the reason al-Attas resorts to metaphysics in solving the malaise of the *ummah*. Since the problem that al-Attas is trying to solve is deislamisation or secularisation of Muslim minds, it actually makes sense that his solution is a restatement of the worldview of Islam and the Islamic metaphysics.

83. Harvey tweets on the platform X, previously known as Twitter. See Harvey, *Twitter*, <https://x.com/RamonIHarvey/status/1676544581251260417>. Accessed 14th June 2024.

Second, despite claiming that al-Attas's metaphysics is underdetermined by the Qur'ānic verses, Harvey does not show how a proper metaphysics can be derived from the Qur'ān. Instead, he dismisses its very plausibility by arguing that it can lead to different metaphysical doctrines. While the aforesaid may be true, the same can also be claimed for rational arguments as different Muslim theologians could (and did) arrive at different conclusions despite addressing the same issue as in the case of al-Nazzām, Ibn Ḥazm, and the *mutakallimūn* in general. Rather, al-Attas on several occasions show his rational and revelational justifications for his metaphysical system. Furthermore, Harvey overlooks al-Attas's method of *ta'wīl* in building his metaphysical system, immediately passing the verdict that his metaphysics is based on spiritual intuition alone.

Third, the contrast between al-Attas and Harvey on the status of intuition in Islamic epistemology seems to be caused by their different readings of al-Nasafī's and al-Taftāzānī's texts. While Harvey adopts a bold stance claiming that intuition is not a valid source of knowledge in the public domain, al-Attas's stance is a balanced one, stating that intuition is only meant for a selected few without going as far as discrediting its validity in the public domain. It is to be noted that al-Attas addresses the status of intuition in the broader theme of Islamic epistemology, not just science in its modern sense.

Finally, it remains unclear how Husserlian phenomenology can be adapted to the Islamic tradition. Harvey's arguments seem to suggest the opposite: the Islamic tradition becomes one of many other participants in the "common platform" provided by Husserl's philosophy of science. As such, the Husserlian alternative—at least as portrayed in the article—is yet to be convincing as a viable solution for Muslims.

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