

**ADDRESS BY  
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS  
SULTAN NAZRIN MUIZZUDDIN SHAH  
AT THE  
BOOK LAUNCH OF  
PROFESSOR SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS'  
*ON JUSTICE AND THE NATURE OF MAN***

**DATE: WEDNESDAY, 16 DECEMBER 2015 TIME: 2.30PM**

**VENUE: SASANA KIJANG, BANK NEGARA MALAYSIA**

**“THE KEEPERS OF JUSTICE”**

*Bismillahi Rahmani Rahim*

*Assalamualaikum Warahmatullahi Wabarakatuh.*

Professor Syed Naquib al-Attas, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen:

1. Alhamdulillah, I am most grateful that Allah *Subhanahu wata'ala* has given me yet another opportunity to be in the company of Professor al-Attas. Our last occasion was five years ago when I came to launch his *Festschrift*, a book written by others—mostly international scholars—

in honour of this great teacher, entitled *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam*.<sup>1</sup>

2. This time around, however, it is even more humbling for me, as I am here this afternoon to launch Professor al-Attas' own book entitled *On Justice and the Nature of Man*. Although slim, it is by no means lightweight. Having finished reading it in a relatively short time, I realize that it is not only weighty in substance, but that it will take many more years for me to digest the philosophical insights he has expounded in this small volume.

3. In fact, I do not at all see myself as qualified to launch this book, on two counts.<sup>2</sup> First, as I said five years ago, I consider myself a “child” compared to the venerable professor, whose age of 84 years makes him contemporary with my late father. And secondly, I am still a novice learner at the foot of the mountain—a *musāfir* on my *riḥlah*, my own journey in seeking knowledge and wisdom—compared to the wise old man who already sits comfortably on the mountaintop. I only hope that

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<sup>1</sup> W.M.N. Wan Daud and M.Z. Uthman (eds.), *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas* (Kuala Lumpur: UTM Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Raja Nazrin Shah, “Majlis Pelancaran Buku *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*” (23 February 2010).

now, in his presence, my few remarks today will do justice to this important work.

Ladies and gentlemen:

4. As an inheritor of the legacy of Imam al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), Professor al-Attas' lifelong project has been to look at the philosophy of modern times, explore it, understand it, and then subject it to the tradition of Islam. In so doing, he has built upon two premisses. Firstly, that the Islamic tradition has the ability to relate to the contemporary world. And secondly, that in order for it to do that, the contemporary world must be thoroughly understood.

5. One might assume that those premisses are obvious and self-evident. Yet, more obvious still is that the level of sophistication in Professor al-Attas' writings, particularly in his two works, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* and *Islam and Secularism*, is not at all common. Firmly rooted within the tradition of Islam, and having gained a thorough understanding of the varied environment of the contemporary world, like the great Imam al-Ghazālī, Professor al-Attas intends his works to be nothing less than a fulfilment of his obligation to the *Ummah*, his *fardu kifayah*, which scholars today such as Dato' Dr Afifi al-Akiti, from Oxford University, who happens to be the Orang Kaya Kaya Imam

Paduka Tuan of Perak,<sup>3</sup> have characterised as a “Neo-Ghazālian, Aṭṭāsian project”.<sup>4</sup>

6. In this respect, Professor al-Attas is rare among many modern Muslim thinkers in that he does not regard modernity as being in itself a necessarily positive thing: the philosophy of modernity itself has to be subjected to the eternal principles of the Islamic worldview, in order to assess its worth properly. In his own evaluation, modernity is deeply problematic. Unlike many of his peers who deride certain aspects of the modern world but not the philosophy of modernisation itself, Professor al-Attas considers that philosophy to be based on premisses that require profound examination. In a world that barely allows for any counterbalance to the intellectual preponderance of the West, such an unpopular position is hardly without challenge; and indeed this duty must often be accomplished through hardships.

7. There are very many examples to show that this is a continual theme in his corpus, and several bear mention today. In his work, *The*

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<sup>3</sup> The ‘Orang Kaya Kaya Imam Paduka Tuan’ is an Orang Besar 8 of Perak, a permanent member of the Privy Council of the state, the Dewan Negara, who is constitutionally elected as a Life Peer.

<sup>4</sup> M. Afifi al-Akiti, “The Negotiation of Modernity through Tradition in Contemporary Muslim Intellectual Discourse: The Neo-Ghazālian Attasian Perspective,” in W.M.N. Wan Daud and M.Z. Uthman (eds.), *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam: Essays in Honor of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas* (Kuala Lumpur: UTM Press, 2010), pp. 119-134.

*Positive Aspects of Taṣawwuf*, Professor al-Attas inimitably draws on the great spiritual tradition of Islam, Sufism, to form the basis of an Islamic philosophy of science. It is rare indeed that any alternative to the modern understanding of science is posited; that it can be drawn from the depths of Sufi symbolism is particularly unique. Later on, he chose to develop those ideas in another work, *Islam and the Philosophy of Science*: this, while the rest of the Muslim world was persistently and stubbornly absorbing all that Western science had to offer without considering how it might conflict with the ethics of Islam. It was only rarely the case until now, when the ravages upon the environment can clearly be seen, that the West paused to reflect on the excesses of its Industrial Revolution—and yet, the Muslim world continues to pursue technological advancement unreflectively and at all cost.

8. In his work, *The Nature of Man and the Psychology of the Human Soul*, al-Attas draws on the philosophical writings of Imam al-Ghazālī and Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 1240) to develop a framework for an Islamic psychology and epistemology. In yet another work, *The Intuition of Existence*, he contrasts a deeply metaphysical and intellectual basis for the Islamic worldview with that of modern philosophy: again, using classical scholars of Muslim thought. Around the same time as those works, in a book entitled *On Quiddity and Essence*, al-Attas uses the writings of classical Sunni Ash‘arī theologians such as Imam al-

Taftazānī (d. 1390) to express the Islamic worldview in our contemporary idiom, relating it to contemporary notions of metaphysics. Once again, in a world where Western metaphysics has achieved an intellectual prominence that most in the world today readily accept without question, how distinctive it is that a Muslim philosopher not only sets out an alternative, but does so using the terminology that modern metaphysics understands and appreciates.

Ladies and gentlemen:

9. Building on his earlier writings, Professor al-Attas in this new book provides us with his *Tafsīr*, his explication and commentary, of the verses in two *Sūrahs* of the Qur'an: *Sūrah al-Nisā'* and *Sūrah al-Mu'minūn*. He shares with us his philosophical insights, which reveal his nearly unique perception, the singular crucial point of this work: that there is an intimate connection between justice, on the one hand, and the nature of man as an individual person, on the other.

10. On the nature of man, he asserts that the Qur'an, through *Sūrah al-Mu'minūn*, reveals that man is not merely a genus or a species within Creation, but a new and a special creation: mankind is not only God's new creation, but we are also a special creation, a creation *unique*, unlike any other. What makes us unique and special is the instinctive

and natural sense of justice that we—all of us, Muslims and non-Muslims alike—are born with as human beings.

11. When he comes to the other *Sūrah*, the *Sūrah al-Nisā'*, I am particularly attracted to his philosophical deliberations on the concept of justice that arises there. Relying on the foundations provided by our classical philosophers and theologians, Professor al-Attas gives new meaning to some of the premisses that we now take for granted from our great tradition. Here, I must quote him extensively. He contends that:

“Justice is a state of being, a condition of things being in their proper places. It is also a quality of human act, a quality that springs from moral excellence whose source is wisdom. This human act of justice is the act of putting things in their proper places...

Justice is therefore a reflection of wisdom[;] and right action, which is an act of justice, is also a reflection of wisdom. This right action is *adab* in the complete and universal sense. *Adab* is the discipline of body, mind and soul; the discipline that assures the recognition to one’s physical, intellectual and spiritual capacities and potentials...The condition that results from *adab* in the sense meant, whether in one’s self or in society, is the condition of justice.

Justice [therefore] is the condition of being in the proper place; *adab* is [therefore] the purposeful act by which that condition is actualized.”<sup>5</sup>

12. It is the loss of this *adab*, impeccably described by Professor al-Attas in his teachings, which best describes the current problems faced by the Muslim world. And I’m afraid that this “crisis of *adab*” will continue to be with us for quite some time, until we are able truly to transcend it by reconnecting with our true natures.

13. I, for one, am persuaded by Professor al-Attas’ sophisticated philosophical arguments that he derives from *Sūrah al-Nisā’* and *Sūrah al-Mu’minūn* to demonstrate the close nexus between our human nature and the concept of justice.

14. Indeed, the pursuit of justice has to be inextricably linked to the very nature of man, because, I believe, God has created humankind in a state of liberty, free to choose to do good rather than evil or vice versa—whether individually in our own private lives or, for some of us,

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<sup>5</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *On Justice and the Nature of Man: A Commentary on Sūrah Al-Nisā’ (4):58 and Sūrah Al-Mu’minūn (23):12-14* (Kuala Lumpur: IBFIM, 2015), pp. 13-14.



collectively in our society at large. That is why all men are created equal in the sight of God, as the Qur'an famously reminds us:

“In God’s eyes, the most honoured among you are the ones with *taqwā*, those most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware.”<sup>6</sup>

And in another verse, Allah *subhanahu wa-ta’ala* says:

“Anyone, male or female, who does good, while believing, We shall grant them a happy life (in this life), and We shall reward them accordingly (in the next life) for their good works.”<sup>7</sup>

صَدَقَ اللَّهُ الْعَظِيمُ

15. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, we are all equal, inasmuch as we all have that freedom as human beings, underpinned by our own *fiṭrah*, our innate and natural sense of justice, to choose happiness, *sa’ādah*, over unhappiness, *shaqāwah*, in our daily lives, whether acting justly for the public or for our own selves. Our true inequality is only known by God, the degree of which will only be revealed to us in the next life, by the measure of the justices or injustices we chose to pursue in this life.

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<sup>6</sup> Surah al-Hujurāt, 49:13.

<sup>7</sup> Surah al-Naḥl, 16:97.

16. This is why I believe that it is not coincidental but natural, that in almost all of the assertions of any nations' struggle for free will, freedom and independence we witness that sense of justice linked to the core of our being and to our very human nature, the nature of mankind to pursue freely a good life in this world.

17. The oldest such collective assertion for a nation is, of course, the words of Thomas Jefferson (d. 1826) in the American Declaration of Independence written in the eighteenth century:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>8</sup>

18. A more recent one, an assertion made in the last century, one that most of us had the privilege to know in our own lifetime, is the Inaugural Address made by Nelson Mandela (d. 2013) as the President of a new, freed nation of South Africa. He said:

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<sup>8</sup> *United States Declaration of Independence* (4 July 1776), sentence 2 (preamble).

“Let there be justice for all. Let there be peace for all. Let there be work, bread, water and salt for all. Let each know that for each the body, the mind and the soul have been freed to fulfil themselves.”<sup>9</sup>

19. In fact, however, the one that speaks most to my heart and makes my spine tingle and I hope does so for others’, too, especially persons in positions of authority—or to use the term adopted by Professor al-Attas, “the Keepers of Trusts”—is the assertion made by the father of our nation, Yang Teramat Mulia Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Hajj Al-Marhum (d. 1990). In the Proclamation of Independence of our own country, he declared that our beloved country (*quote*)

“is and with God’s blessings shall be forever a sovereign democratic and independent State founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of its people and the maintenance of a just peace among all nations.”<sup>10</sup>

20. So let me say, ladies and gentlemen, that justice is what allows us all as human beings to pursue the good life and happiness that we all equally yearn for and indeed have a right to. So long as we are true to

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<sup>9</sup> Nelson Mandela, “Address to the People of Cape Town, Grand Parade, on the Occasion of His Inauguration as State President” (9 May 1994).

<sup>10</sup> *Malayan Proclamation of Independence* (31 August 1957), sentence 9 (conclusion).

ourselves and are guided by the sense of justice that God has created through our human nature—that unique and special creation of God that is in fact mankind—the pursuit of happiness will not only be realized as one of our unalienable rights as individual human beings, but also that we will be able to achieve a just and happy society.

21. As a *khalīfah*, a steward and representative of God in this life, but especially as someone entrusted with public office as one of the Possessors of Command, the *Ūlū l-Amri*, and the Keepers of Trusts, the *Ahli l-Amānāt*, I pray always that I can be faithful to this command of Allah *Subhanahu wata‘ala* in *Surah al-Nisā’*:

“O’ you who believe, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if it is against yourselves, your parents, or your close relatives! Whether the person is rich or poor, God can best take care of both. Refrain from following your own desire, so that you can act justly— if you distort or neglect justice, God is fully aware of what you do!”<sup>11</sup>

صَدَقَ اللَّهُ الْعَظِيمُ

22. This divine Qur’anic principle of upholding justice reminds me of my late father’s moving *Amanat* and message to the Keepers of Trust, in

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<sup>11</sup> *Surah al-Nisā’*, 4:135.

his context, that of judges, asserting the need for them to maintain their freedom and independence. In 1979, Raja Azlan Shah, as he then was, fittingly said:

“Untuk memastikan supaya tanggungjawab itu dijalankan secara adil dan saksama, tanpa mengenal bulu dan roma, tanpa mengenal asal keturunan, bangsa dan agama, tanpa menyebelahi mana-mana pihak, maka orang yang menjawat jawatan hakim mestilah terdiri dari orang yang *bebas*—*bebas* dari tekanan politik, *bebas* dari desakan Parlimen, *bebas* dari pengaruh kawan; dan keputusan yang dibuat adalah keputusan yang berlandaskan undang-undang...Dengan adanya jaminan itu, maka dapatlah Mahkamah menjalankan tanggungjawabnya secara licin, jujur dan berani demi kepentingan keadilan dan bukannya untuk kepentingan mana-mana parti pemerintah.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Raja Azlan Shah, “Ucapan Konvokesyen Sempena Penganugerahan Doktor Kesusasteraan”, Universiti Malaya (30 June 1979). In another comparable address: “The judges are independent of all—the Executive, Parliament and from within themselves—and are free to act in an independent and unbiased manner. No member of the Government, no Member of Parliament, and no official of any Government department has any right whatever to direct or influence the decision of any of the judges. It is the sure knowledge of this that gives the public confidence in the judges. The judges are not beholden politically to any government.” Sultan Azlan Shah, “The Right to Know”, Universiti Sains Malaysia (1986) in *Constitutional Monarchy, Rule of Law and Good Governance: Selected Essays and Speeches by HRH Sultan Azlan Shah*, edited by Visu Sinnadurai (Kuala Lumpur: Thomson Sweet and Maxwell Asia, 2004), p. 59.

23. That essential Qur’anic principle of upholding justice should also remind us all of the principle of natural justice expressed in the oft-quoted aphorism of the British Lord Chief Justice Hewart, in 1924:

“Not only must justice be done, it must *also be seen to be done*.”<sup>13</sup>

Ladies and gentlemen:

24. Those are stirring words—the heaven-derived ones and the ones deriving from our own human nature. But how is that principle to be actualized and, just as crucially, why?

25. On this, I cannot but help end with the thoughts of our first Prime Minister at the birth of our nation. In my estimation he perfectly sums up the natural consequences of our actions when we, the Keepers of Trusts, uphold justice in all aspects of our lives, including the way we run our nation. For only then can we truly be what I would call the “Keepers of Justice,” only when we ourselves are able in turn to bequeath our nation to our sons and daughters in the original—if not in an even better—state in which we inherited from our Founding Fathers. In the presence of all of Their Royal Highnesses the Nine Malay Rulers on that

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<sup>13</sup> *R v Sussex Justices, Ex parte McCarthy* ([1924] 1 KB 256). The aphorism is paraphrased from the original words of the judgement: “It is not merely of some importance, but of fundamental importance that justice should not only be done, but should be manifestly and undoubtedly seen to be done.”

much-hallowed Merdeka Day, our Tunku described this inheritance as follows:

“Justice before the law;  
the legacy of an efficient public service;  
and the highest standard of living in Asia.”<sup>14</sup>

26. With this timely reminder given by Tunku Abdul Rahman to us, the inheritors and children of Malayan, and later, Malaysian liberty, it now gives me great pleasure to launch this profound and useful guide for us all: *On Justice and the Nature of Man* by Professor Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas.

*Bismillahi Allahu Akbar!*

Thank you.

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<sup>14</sup> *Malayan Proclamation of Independence* (31 August 1957), preamble.