

Modernizing Islamic Education: Overcoming the Secular-Religious Divide and Embracing the Legacy of Naquib al-Attas in Malaysia's Intellectual Evolution

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Abstract

This article explores the modernization and challenges of Islamic education in the context of overcoming the long-standing duality between secular and religious education. The impact of colonization has significantly affected the core of Muslim identity, creating a divide between religious and secular knowledge systems. However, scholars and thought leaders in Malaysia, particularly Naquib al-Attas, have played a pivotal role in addressing these challenges. Naquib al-Attas not only provided a solid intellectual foundation for the integration of Islamic thought with modern educational practices but also contributed to the development of Islamic education in distinct phases. This article examines the historical background, philosophical foundations, and intellectual contributions of al-Attas in shaping the modern landscape of Islamic education in Malaysia, aiming to bridge the gap between traditional religious teachings and contemporary knowledge. Additionally, the article sheds light on the overall challenges of the 21st-century world, where the rapidly changing needs earners, especially the need for Islamic identity, are addressed through effective curriculum and pedagogical skills.

Keywords: *Islamic education, secularism, religious education, colonization, Muslim identity, Naquib al-Attas, modernization, educational philosophy,*

Introduction

Islamic education holds a pivotal role in shaping the moral, intellectual, and spiritual development of individuals and societies. Historically, Islamic educational systems have produced some of the world's most renowned scholars, scientists, and thinkers, reflecting a harmonious integration of religious and secular knowledge. However, in the modern era, the divide between secular and religious education has emerged as a significant challenge, particularly in predominantly Muslim societies like Malaysia. Malaysia, with its rich cultural and religious heritage, stands at the crossroads of tradition and modernity. The need for a balanced and integrated Islamic education system is more pressing than ever. While traditional Islamic institutions have preserved religious sciences, they often lack the incorporation of

modern scientific advancements. Conversely, secular institutions excel in technical and professional education but frequently neglect the ethical and spiritual dimensions integral to holistic human development. The intellectual contributions of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, a leading Malaysian scholar, offer valuable insights into addressing this divide. His emphasis on the "Islamization of knowledge" and the integration of spiritual and intellectual growth provides a comprehensive framework for reforming Islamic education. Al-Attas' legacy emphasizes the importance of synthesizing classical Islamic knowledge with contemporary disciplines to create well-rounded individuals capable of addressing modern challenges. This study aims to explore the potential of modernizing Islamic education in Malaysia by bridging the secular-religious divide, embracing the intellectual legacy of Naquib al-Attas, and providing practical recommendations for creating an education system that is both relevant and rooted in Islamic principles.

Research Objectives

1. **Modernizing Islamic Education:** To explore strategies for modernizing Islamic education while maintaining its core principles and values.
2. **Bridging the Secular-Religious Divide:** To examine the factors contributing to the secular-religious divide and propose actionable solutions for integration within educational frameworks.
3. **Legacy of Naquib al-Attas:** To analyze the intellectual contributions of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and their relevance in shaping Malaysia's modern Islamic education system.
4. **Comparative Analysis:** To compare traditional and modern approaches in Islamic education and assess the benefits of synthesizing the two.
5. **Policy Recommendations:** To develop practical policy recommendations for enhancing the quality and scope of Islamic education in contemporary Malaysia.

Modernizing and Challenges in Islamic Education:

There are three main trends of innovation in Islamic education.

The first trend focuses on modernizing Islamic education, incorporating the thinking of thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh, Fazlur Rehman, and Hassan Al-

Banna. However, this innovation is only conceptual and has not been widely implemented in digital formats.

The second trend is on addressing current global issues such as Islamophobia and extremism, but it ignores intellectual property and interdisciplinary approaches.

The third group uses interdisciplinary approaches, such as linking the teachings of the Quran with child development and emotional intelligence

Key Trends in Modernization of Islamic Education:

Islamic education is undergoing modernization, driven by three major trends:

Focus on Conceptual Modernization:

This trend emphasizes modernizing Islamic education through the thoughts of scholars like Muhammad Abduh, Fazlur Rahman, and Hassan al-Banna. However, these innovations remain largely conceptual and have not been widely implemented in digital formats.

Addressing Global Issues:

This trend tackles contemporary challenges such as Islamophobia and extremism. However, it often neglects interdisciplinary approaches and intellectual property considerations.

Interdisciplinary Integration:

The third group employs interdisciplinary methods, such as connecting Quranic teachings with children's development and emotional intelligence.

The Role of Neuroscience in Islamic Education:

Traditional Islamic education has lacked a scientific foundation for critical and creative thinking, except for its emphasis on logic, which is primarily philosophical. Integrating neuroscience into Islamic education can promote critical thinking, creativity, and innovation. The Quran encourages profound reflection through terms like *dhikr* (remembrance), *tafakkur* (pondering), and *tafaqquh* (understanding). Neuroscience can provide a scientific basis for these modes of thought and support Islamic education in adopting more innovative approaches.

Digital Transformation in Islamic Higher Education:

Digital transformation is essential for Islamic higher education to keep pace with rapid technological advancements and global competition. Institutional leaders must focus on visionary leadership, skilled faculty, adaptable curricula, and suitable infrastructure to guide their institutions forward. Islamic educational institutions face political, economic, and cultural shifts globally. To remain competitive, they need to enhance human resources, improve financial management, and bolster their

institutional reputation. Success hinges on preparing institutions for future transformations and adopting sustainability principles to meet global standards.

Comparative Analysis of Curricula:

This article will analyze how neuroscience and digital transformation have been integrated into the curricula of educational institutions in Malaysia. The study will examine:

- The process of adopting these changes.
- The different levels of implementation.
- Teachers' responses.
- Aspects considered in teacher training programs.
- Challenges in persuading parents and education departments about these transformations.
- Renewing Islamic Curriculum and Methods in Malaysia in the 21st Century:

Historical Context:

Islamic education in Malaysia traces its origins to the Malacca Sultanate (1414–1511), where pondok (traditional religious schools) emerged. By the 1920s, Malaysian students began studying at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, introducing Middle Eastern influences upon their return. These graduates transformed the traditional pondok schools into modern madrasahs, integrating Islamic principles with Western teaching methods and technology.

After gaining independence, Malaysia's Ministry of Education centralized school administration and curricula, merging Islamic and secular sciences in universities. In 1973, the Religious Education Department was established to enhance Islamic education. Globally, Malaysian Islamic education has been influenced by the works of philosopher Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, who founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) in 1987. Al-Attas promoted the "Islamization of Knowledge," aiming to harmonize Islamic and Western sciences.

Educational Philosophy by Syed Naquib al-Attas:

On a global level, discussions on Islamic education have been greatly influenced by the ideas and writings of the renowned Malaysian philosopher, Syed Naquib al-Attas (1931). In 1987, Syed Naquib al-Attas founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), a research institution affiliated with the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). Al-Attas's writings promoted the concept of the "Islamization of knowledge," which aimed to align the vast corpus of Islamic knowledge with Western social sciences and natural sciences.

Al-Attas defined the concept of education as "Tadib" (the training of manners), which represents the process of nurturing the human soul and mind. The goal of Islamic education, according to him, is to prepare good individuals who fulfill their duties in accordance with the will of Allah. From this perspective, education is a comprehensive process that equips students with Islamic knowledge on spiritual, intellectual, and material levels, enabling them to fulfill their divine responsibilities.

In Malaysia, the Islamic education system continues to make persistent efforts to bridge the gap between Islamic and secular knowledge, while providing students with opportunities for modern education.

The Challenge of Teaching Generation Z in 2014: Teachers today, most of whom belong to Generation X, born in the 1970s, have the responsibility of educating students from Generation Z, who were born in the 2000s. Unfortunately, these teachers largely adhere to traditional, old-fashioned, and colonial-era methods. In this context, religion is often considered an irrelevant topic from the past. For example, many teachers of Islamic education deem the internet, gadgets, and smartphones as haram (forbidden), considering them more harmful than beneficial. This creates a conflict of interest among students, and as a result, many from Generation Z do not perceive religion as something relevant to their modern lives. Consequently, they may become intellectually sharp but spiritually weak. Furthermore, this generation generally learns about religion through online media, which itself is problematic, as the internet is also influenced by extremism, terrorism, secularism, and liberalism.

The Ministry of Education's efforts in the field of Islamic education aim to implement the philosophy of Islamic education in practice. To achieve this, a curriculum has been developed that aligns with the goals of Islamic educational philosophy. The Ministry's continuous effort is to bridge the gap between secular and religious education, as demonstrated by the integration of Islamic and secular sciences in the higher education curriculum.

Despite Malaysia's geographical location within the Islamic world, it has had a significant global influence in the field of Islamic education. Historically, Malaysia has been a crossroads of Eastern and Western trade routes, which exposed it to Arab, Persian, Chinese, Indian, and European cultural influences. Islam arrived in Malaysia at the end of the 13th century, and over time, due to trade and missionary

efforts between the local Malays and foreign Muslims, Islam took strong root in the region.

Global Influence of Islamic Education

The philosopher of Malaysia, Syed Naqeeb al-Attas (1931), had a profound global impact on Islamic education. In 1987, he established the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), which was affiliated with the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM).

Philosophy of Education

Syed Naqeeb al-Attas redefined education as “**Ta’dib**”, emphasizing the cultivation of adab (manners and ethics) within individuals to enhance their spiritual and intellectual growth while seeking the pleasure of Allah. The concept of *Ta’dib* prioritizes the spiritual and intellectual dimensions of education, distinguishing it from other frameworks such as *Tarbiyah* and *Ta’lim*, which are broader and more general.

Syed Naqeeb al-Attas, a distinguished Malaysian philosopher, scholar, and thinker, made profound contributions to Islamic education and the broader realm of knowledge. His work is particularly significant in the domains of Islamic philosophy, education, and the “Islamization of Knowledge.” Through deep study of Islamic teachings, al-Attas established a theoretical foundation that proposed a balanced and holistic approach to address the educational needs of modern Muslim societies.

According to Syed Naqeeb al-Attas, Islamic education is not merely a process of intellectual advancement but also one of moral and spiritual development. He identified *Ta’dib* (Adab) as the cornerstone of education, highlighting the importance of nurturing an individual’s spiritual, ethical, and intellectual dimensions. His philosophy holds that the ultimate purpose of education is to elevate a person to their natural state of excellence so that they may strive to seek the pleasure of Allah.

His renowned theory of the “**Islamization of Knowledge**” seeks to harmonize Islamic knowledge with the Western education system, bridging the gap between the two realms. Al-Attas believed that Muslim societies must address their challenges by rooting solutions in the principles of Islamic knowledge.

Books and Research by Syed Naqeeb al-Attas

Books by Syed Naqeeb al-Attas

1. “Islam and Secularism” (1975)

This seminal work by Syed Naqeeb al-Attas explores the distinctions between secularism and Islamic principles. It proposes an alternative educational model tailored to the needs of Islamic societies, challenging the dominance of secular paradigms.

2. "The Concept of Education in Islam" (1991)

In this book, al-Attas elaborates on the Islamic perspective of education, emphasizing its spiritual, moral, and practical dimensions. He provides a detailed explanation of the concept of *Ta'dib* and highlights its central role in Islamic education.

3. "A Philosophy of Education: A Muslim Perspective"

This book delves deeply into the philosophy of Islamic education, presenting principles that align with the needs of the modern world while remaining rooted in Islamic values.

Books About Syed Naqeeb al-Attas

1. "Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: Islam, Education, and Philosophy"

This work examines the intellectual legacy of Syed Naqeeb al-Attas, shedding light on his educational philosophy and significant contributions to Islamic thought. It provides a comprehensive review of his key writings and ideas.

2. "Islamic Philosophy and the Problem of Western Influence: A Study of the Thought of Syed Naqeeb al-Attas"

This book analyzes al-Attas's views on the challenges posed by Western influences and underscores the importance of his theory of the Islamization of Knowledge.

Impact of Syed Naqeeb al-Attas's Writings

The writings and ideas of Syed Naqeeb al-Attas have had a profound global impact on Islamic education and philosophy. His teachings remain highly significant for Muslim societies, offering insights that bridge traditional Islamic knowledge with contemporary challenges.¹

The Educational Philosophy of Syed Naqeeb al-Attas: A Paradigm Shift in Islamic Education

The educational theories proposed by Syed Naqeeb al-Attas hold profound significance not only for the social and spiritual development of Islamic societies but also for addressing the educational needs of the modern era. His training model introduced a paradigm shift distinct from Western educational systems. According to al-Attas, education is not merely the transmission of knowledge but also the moral, spiritual, and intellectual development of the individual. He endeavored to harmonize Islamic education with modern neuroscience and contemporary teaching methodologies, emphasizing the interplay between human spirituality and mental states².

¹ Al-Attas, Syed Muhammad Naquib. (1975). **Islam and Secularism**. Qadeem Press.

² Al-Attas, & Wan Daud, (2007), *The CLIF leadership ...* Pp.83-102.

An article published in the *Riphah University Journal*³ delves into the details of al-Attas's educational model, describing it as a transformative paradigm in the field of modern education. Al-Attas viewed education not just as the dissemination of knowledge but as a means to foster intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth. He asserted that the purpose of education is to enhance an individual's natural disposition, enabling them to fulfill their responsibilities as servants of Allah.

A unique aspect of al-Attas's educational philosophy was his integration of neuroscience. He highlighted the interconnectedness of mental states and spirituality, providing a framework that aligned Islamic education with contemporary scientific principles. His model aimed to balance intellectual and spiritual development, ensuring that students grow not only in knowledge but also in character and ethical consciousness.

The article further elaborates that al-Attas's educational model, incorporating the principles of neuroscience, added a new dimension to Islamic education. By combining mental and spiritual aspects, his approach ensures that students are not only intellectually capable but also morally and spiritually cultivated. This methodology ensures that education transcends the intellectual realm, fostering comprehensive human development that contributes to building an ethical and successful society.

Al-Attas's vision redefined education as a holistic process, making a vital contribution to modern Islamic education and offering a balanced approach to meet the challenges of the 21st century. His emphasis on integrating knowledge, morality, and spirituality serves as a guiding principle for Islamic societies striving to establish education systems that nurture both intellectual prowess and ethical values.⁴

Efforts by the Ministry of Education, Malaysia Integrated Educational Curriculum

The Malaysian Ministry of Education has designed an Islamic education curriculum inspired by the principles of Syed Naqeeb al-Attas. This curriculum aims to foster the intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth of students while equipping them with proficiency in worldly sciences. By integrating Islamic values with contemporary knowledge, the curriculum ensures that students not only gain an understanding of Islamic teachings but are also prepared to face modern scientific and economic challenges.

³ Ogunbado, Ahamad Faosiy. (2024, January 19). Concept of Islamic leadership in Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas's philosophy. *RJITC*, 1(2).

⁴ file:///C:/Users/24989/Downloads/1932-Article%20Text-10i503-2-10-20240110.pdf

Integration of Islamic Studies and Neuroscience

Syed Naqeeb al-Attas emphasized the fusion of Islamic teachings and neuroscience for effective education. The Ministry of Education has adopted this perspective by incorporating neuroscience and contemporary educational theories into the Islamic education curriculum. This approach seeks to balance students' intellectual and moral development by addressing both their cognitive and spiritual needs, helping them grow as well-rounded individuals physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Moral Training in Educational Institutions

Recognizing the importance of moral training, the Ministry of Education has prioritized character development in Malaysia's educational institutions. Following the teachings of Syed Naqeeb al-Attas, Islamic education is not limited to the dissemination of knowledge but also strives to cultivate students' ethical and moral standards. The Ministry has organized various programs and workshops to instill moral values and Islamic principles in students, ensuring they emerge as socially responsible and ethical citizens.

Student Welfare Programs

Implementing Syed Naqeeb al-Attas's philosophy, the Ministry has introduced welfare programs to address students' spiritual and material needs. These initiatives ensure a conducive educational environment where students can thrive. Efforts have been made to provide not only academic resources but also focus on moral and spiritual enrichment in schools and madrasas.⁵

Islamic Education as a Comprehensive System

The effectiveness of Malaysia's Islamic education system has been enhanced through the practical implementation of Syed Naqeeb al-Attas's educational ideas. His philosophy, combining spirituality, moral training, and worldly knowledge, ensures that students develop holistically. By fostering intellectual strength and spiritual growth, the system prepares students to fulfill their roles as vicegerents of Allah. These efforts reflect Malaysia's commitment to offering a modern, integrated Islamic education system that supports students' overall development.

Digitization in Education: A Transformative Approach

Malaysia has revolutionized its education sector through digitization, aiming to improve educational quality, integrate modern technology, and provide a cohesive system for students and teachers. The *Smart School Initiative*, launched in 1999, laid the foundation for integrating technology into education. This initiative introduced digital classrooms, online learning resources, and ICT training for teachers. Later, the *Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013-2025)* incorporated digital education as a key aspect of educational reform. The blueprint provided schools with high-speed internet, online courses, and advanced digital platforms such as Frog VLE and EduWebTV, ensuring widespread access to digital content for students. During the

^{5 5} Rauf, M. A. (1964). *A brief history of Islam with special reference to Malaya*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

COVID-19 pandemic, hybrid learning models enabled students to participate in online assignments, lectures, and exams.

Challenges in Teacher Training

Despite the advantages of digitization, teacher training remains a significant challenge. Many teachers, especially in rural areas, lack proficiency in using digital tools. Limited access to quality training programs and insufficient resources often hinder effective implementation. Additionally, teachers accustomed to traditional methods may hesitate to adopt digital systems, and the lack of follow-up in training programs further reduces their efficacy.

Benefits and Future Directions

Despite these challenges, digitization has introduced flexibility into the educational system. Students can access online content anytime, and data analytics has enabled the effective evaluation of institutional performance. Addressing challenges such as inadequate internet access and digital resources requires investment in infrastructure and long-term teacher training programs. Through digitization, Malaysia has taken significant steps toward aligning its education system with modern requirements, ensuring educational progress and adaptability in the face of global challenges.⁶

Recommendations and Suggestions

1. **Integration of Knowledge:** Implement a curriculum that integrates religious and secular sciences to produce holistic individuals equipped for contemporary challenges.
2. **Reviving Al-Attas' Philosophy:** Encourage academic institutions to incorporate the philosophies of Naquib al-Attas, especially his emphasis on the Islamization of knowledge.
3. **Teacher Training Programs:** Design specialized programs to train educators in combining traditional Islamic teachings with modern pedagogical techniques.
4. **Technological Integration:** Utilize modern technology to make Islamic education accessible, engaging, and relevant in the digital age.
5. **Government and Institutional Support:** Advocate for collaborative efforts between governments, religious scholars, and educational institutions to promote a unified vision of Islamic education reform.
6. **Interfaith and Cross-Disciplinary Dialogues:** Foster discussions between various religious and intellectual traditions to promote mutual understanding and broaden the scope of Islamic education.
7. **Cultural Relevance:** Tailor Islamic educational reforms to align with Malaysia's unique cultural and societal context while preserving universal Islamic principles.

^{6 6} Portal Rasmi Kementerian Ekonomi. (n.d.-a). Retrieved from <https://ekonomi.gov.my/ms>

Conclusion

The challenges faced by Pakistan in Islamic education bear striking similarities to those experienced in Malaysia. Both nations grapple with integrating traditional Islamic education with contemporary sciences and modern pedagogical techniques, bridging the gap between spiritual and worldly knowledge. Like Malaysia, Pakistan's educational landscape struggles with the overreliance on outdated teaching methodologies, a lack of incorporation of digital tools, and resistance to change among educators and institutions. Malaysia's success in modernizing its Islamic education system offers valuable lessons for Pakistan. By drawing inspiration from Malaysia's integrated curriculum, which harmonizes Islamic values with modern sciences, Pakistan can develop a similar approach to nurture well-rounded students capable of meeting the demands of the 21st-century global environment. Incorporating neuroscience and digital tools into the curriculum, as Malaysia has done, can enhance intellectual, moral, and spiritual growth while making education relevant to the challenges of modern times. Moreover, the Malaysian experience underscores the importance of teacher training and institutional support in embracing technology and contemporary educational practices. Pakistan could emulate Malaysia's efforts in digitization through structured training programs, infrastructure development, and innovative digital platforms to provide access to quality education across urban and rural regions. By following Malaysia's example, Pakistan's secondary education system could transform its Islamic education into a dynamic and forward-looking framework, equipping students with the skills and values necessary to thrive in a rapidly changing world while staying grounded in their spiritual and cultural identity. This alignment with modern educational paradigms would enable Pakistan to address longstanding challenges and prepare its youth for a balanced and prosperous future.