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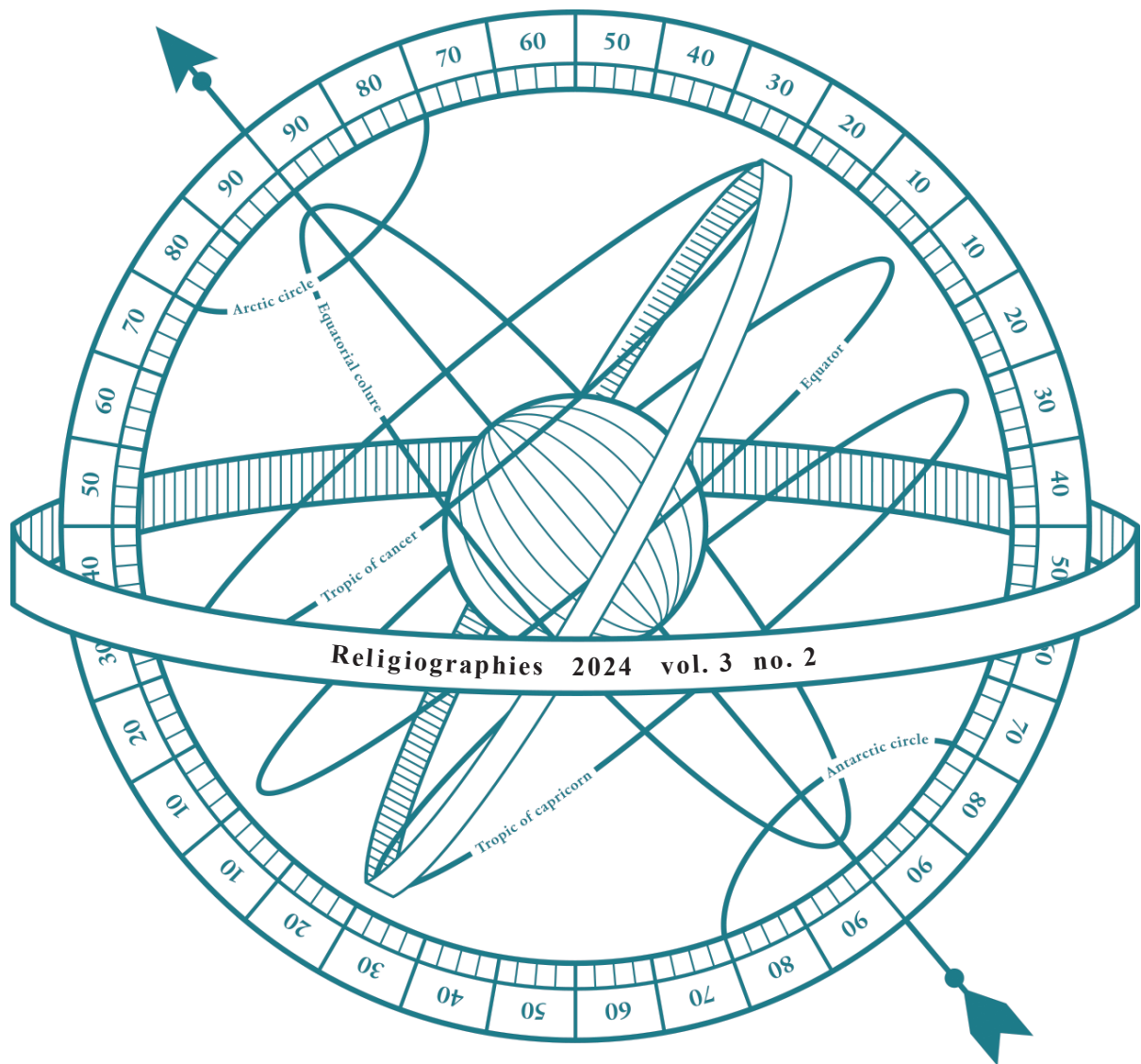
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Sufi Metaphysics of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: Highlighting the Relevance of al-Shaykh al-Akbar for Our Times
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Abstract

In the contemporary landscape of Islamic studies, the contribution of the Malay scholar Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (born 1931) advances a worldview that challenges contemporary perspectives and their attendant ontological models. Yet his presentation of Islamic metaphysics, which arguably adopts an Akbarian "onto-cosmology," has remained somewhat marginal when compared to some of his peers. The main aim of this paper is to analyse how al-Attas demonstrates the continued relevance of Ibn ʿArabi today as well as how Sufi metaphysics serve as a lens through which it is possible to critique "modern secular Western civilization." We examine two problematic notions for al-Attas and the Akbarian alternatives he proposes instead. The first is the "correspondence theory of truth." The second involves the various definitions of the concept of "change," which al-Attas disagrees with. For the former, he proposes Akbarian understandings of *ḥaqq* and *ḥaqīqa* as better definitions of truth, while for the latter, the concept of fixed essences (*aʿyān thābita*) is used to explain changes that occur in the phenomenal world without absolutising change.

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Introduction

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is a contemporary Malay Sufi scholar and philosopher born in 1931 in West Java, Indonesia. According to his biography, his "genealogical tree can be authentically traced over a thousand years through the Baʿalawī sayyids of Hadramaut."[1] The Ba ʿAlawi (or Bani ʿAlawi) is a clan hailing from the region of Hadramaut, located in the southernmost part of the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Attas's ancestry traces back to Prophet Muhammad through Ahmed b. ʿIsa of Basra (?–956) who emigrated to Hadramaut between the early tenth and mid-tenth century.[2] The Ba ʿAlawi clan was named after one of Ahmed b. ʿIsa's grandsons, and the tariqa ʿAlawiyya is an inextricable part of it. According to A. Bang, "Since early in their history, the main social glue of the Ḥaḍramī ʿAlawīs has been the tariqa ʿAlawiyya, a Sufi order perpetuated by the Ḥaḍramī sāda until the present."[3] The order shares many commonalities with the tariqa Shadhiliyya since one of the two chains of transmission (isnād) of the ʿAlawiyya goes back to the Andalusian Sufi master Abu Madyan (1115/6–1198), to whom the Shadhiliyya also traces back its origin.[4] The kinship between the two orders is most apparent in their emphasis on Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111), especially his *Ihyaʾ ʿUlum al-Din*, but also the works of Abu Hafs ʿUmar al-Suhrawardi (1145–1234). Bang notes, however, that "The works of Ibn al-ʿArabi seem to have been known [to the ʿAlawis] but controversial,"[5] which makes the case of al-Attas all the more interesting. It can be said that the Ba ʿAlawi do not diverge on any major doctrinal point from Ibn ʿArabi and, in fact, have profound respect and reverence for him. It seems, however, as is quite common among many orders, that they are wary of his thought being misinterpreted, leading to the deformation of orthodox belief and pantheism, a point which we will examine in our study of al-Attas.

Al-Attas is an atypical Ba ʿAlawi in the sense that Ibn ʿArabi overtly constitutes a key figure for any in-depth understanding of his thought, and because al-Attas repurposes some of the core metaphysical ideas of the Shaykh al-Akbar to formulate a powerful foundational critique of "modern Western thought" or the "modern Western worldview" (*Weltanschauung*), as he calls it. Several authors have dealt with al-Attas's thought but have done so, for the most part, either from a sociological perspective or by examining aspects of his work without delving deeply into its underpinning principles. For example, there is abundant literature dealing with al-Attas's concept of "islamisation of present-day knowledge."[6] Also, authors writing about al-Attas often focus on the politics of Malaysia and al-Attas's treatment of ideas, such as secularism and secularisation.[7] This has unfortunately resulted in a somewhat superficial examination of his writings.[8] While there is much to learn from scholarly analyses of, and conclusions about, al-Attas's thought, we must contend with the fact that claiming they offer a critical reading of it is somewhat of an overstatement.

I would like to argue in this article that any serious engagement with al-Attas's works cannot dispense with a thorough examination of his Sufi metaphysics. It is also necessary to treat his works holistically, as a coherent system, but not immune to criticism, of course. Several concepts undergird his philosophical system. The purpose of this ar-

[1] Wan Mohd Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998), 1.

[2] Ismail Fajrie Alatas, "Ḥabāʾib in Southeast Asia," in *Encyclopedia of Islam Three*, ed. Kate Fleet et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 56–59. According to the *Encyclopedia of Islam Three* (henceforth *EI3*), Ahmed b. ʿIsa of Baṣra emigrated in 929, while for Anne K. Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea: Family Networks in East Africa, 1860–1925* (London: Routledge, 2005), 12, this happened "around 950 AD."

[3] Bang, *Sufis and Scholars of the Sea*, 13.

[4] Bang, 14.

[5] Bang, 15.

[6] On the topic of *Islamisation* applied to social sciences, see Syed Farid Alatas, "The Sacralization of the Social Sciences: A Critique of an Emerging Theme in Academic Discourse," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 91 (1995): 89–111; for a general typology of scholars who have written on Islam and sciences in the second half of the twentieth century (including al-Attas), see Nidhal Guessoum, "Issues and Agendas of Islam and Science," *Zygon* 47, no. 2 (June 2012): 367–87; Ali H. Zaidi, "Muslim Reconstructions of Knowledge and the Re-enchantment of Modernity," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 5 (2006): 69–91; Hasan Dzilo, "The concept of 'Islamization of knowledge' and its philosophical implications," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 23, no. 3 (2012): 247–56; Ibrahim Kalin, "Islam and Science: Notes On An Ongoing Debate," in *Science, Religion and Society: An Encyclopedia of History, Culture, and Controversy,* vol. 1, ed. A. Eisen and G. Laderman (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), 112–18. For a comparison between the epistemological approach of al-Attas and the Palestinian-American scholar Ismaʿil Raji al-Faruqi (1921–1986) see R. Hashim and I. Rossidy, "Islamization of Knowledge: A Comparative Analysis of the Conceptions of Al-Attas and Al-Fārūqī," *Intellectual Discourse* 8, no. 1 (2000): 19–44. In this chapter, Noor writes about al-Attas's Islamisation of knowledge in the context of Malaysian politics: Farish Noor, "The Localization of Islamist Discourse in the *Tafsir* of Tuan Guru Nik Aziz Nik Mat, *Murshid'ul Am* of PAS," in *Malaysia: Islam, Society and Politics*, ed. V. Hooker and N. Othman (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 195–235.

[7] For a recent critical reading of al-Attas's concept of secularism, see K. Aljunied, "Deformations of the Secular: Naquib Al-Attas's Conception and Critique of Secularism," *Journal of the Histo-*

ticle is not to challenge those concepts, nor evaluate the validity of his use of such expressions as "modern secular Western civilization."[9] For example, what does al-Attas really mean by the adjective "modern" or by "civilization" or the "West"? While these are legitimate questions, they represent the "particulars" of larger questions. Instead, what we wish to offer in this article is a bird's eye view of his system. We would like to qualify al-Attas's approach as "metaphilosophical" following the definition of that term given by the Japanese philosopher and scholar Toshihiko Izutsu (1914–1993). Izutsu's metaphilosophy consisted in identifying key concepts within "the major philosophical traditions, both of East and West."[10] His purpose was to subsequently integrate these major philosophical systems as structural elements within a larger structure or metaphilosophy. This approach within comparative religion would allow him to then see the common ground and differences between these various systems. Al-Attas cannot be classified as a structuralist thinker even though he knew Izutsu personally. However, his writings do bear some resemblances with those of Izutsu given that al-Attas is often comparing various systems. As we will see, al-Attas's comparative approach is also inspired by the Persian poet and Sufi Nur al-Din ʿAbd al-Rahman Jami (1414–1492). In any case, we wish to depart from the usual approaches of al-Attas's works, which treat his ideas in a fragmented way, instead of looking at the broader structures he is discussing. By narrowing their analyses, these authors miss the "bigger picture," so to speak, and al-Attas's ideas do not make much sense within the narrow confines they have imposed on his texts.

For example, the concept of "change" that we deal with in this article is used by al-Attas to deconstruct a whole cluster of concepts such as religion, secularisation, and the Hegelian dialectic, which are, according to him, partially built on a common understanding of change. One may disagree with how he groups those concepts together, but that would require a separate analysis, one that would examine how he deals with each one of these items. It could also be argued that how one interprets al-Attas's system may radically change depending on the level at which one positions oneself. Some of his remarks may appear as sweeping generalisations, but if they are meant to apply to entire civilisations or larger systems, then some details are inevitably bound to "get lost" in the process. This article is therefore intended as a preliminary study whose point of departure (for a change) is "general," with the hope that future studies will allow us to tie the general to the particular. Al-Attas subjects the metaphysics of Ibn ʿArabi to the same kind of treatment as those other systems. Since Akbarian (in reference to Ibn ʿArabi) metaphysics constitutes the best ontological model for al-Attas, it is within that system[11] that he searches for other key concepts that can serve as alternatives to those concepts he attempts to deconstruct.

In addition to the above points, al-Attas's works highlight the continued relevance of Sufism not only as a living tradition but also as a subversive and alternative discourse which questions current hegemonic epistemic models and practices. Through al-Attas's lens, Ibn ʿArabi's metaphysical ideas are transformed and actualised by being confronted with contemporary modes of thinking and inhabiting the modern world. This is a departure from previous tendencies to study

ry of Ideas 80, no. 4 (2019): 643–63. A partisan (and favorable) reading of al-Attas's conception of secularism can be found in A. F. Abdul Hamid, "Religion, secularism and the state in Southeast Asia," in Thinking International Relations Differently, ed. A. Tickner and D. L. Blaney (New York: Routledge, 2012). Whereas Aljunied classifies al-Attas amongst "rejectionists" of secularism, it seems that Abdul Hamid's position (with which we agree) is that al-Attas accepts secularism with qualifications. This article compares several twentieth-century Muslim thinkers (including al-Attas) who have written on secularism. M. K. Masud, "The Construction and Deconstruction of Secularism as an Ideology in Contemporary Muslim Thought," Asian Journal of Social Science 33, no. 3 (2005): 363–83.

8
We refer here to those authors who examine al-Attas's works from an "outsider perspective." Some examples of "outsider" authors include: Mona Abaza, Debates on Islam and Knowledge in Malaysia and Egypt: Shifting Worlds (London: Routledge, 2006); Farah Ahmed, "An Exploration of Naquib Al-Attas' Theory of Islamic Education as Taʾdīb as an 'Indigenous' Educational Philosophy," Educational Philosophy and Theory 50, no. 8 (July 3, 2018): 786–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/0013185 7.2016.1247685. For an "insider's perspective" see ʿAdi Setia, "Three Meanings of Islamic Science: Toward Operationalizing Islamization of Science," Islam & Science 5, no. 1 (Summer 2007): 23–52, or Daud cited above (note 2).

9
Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Islām and Secularism (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), xvi.

10
Toshihiko Izutsu, The Concept and Reality of Existence (Tokyo: The Keio Institute of Cultural and Language Studies, 1971), 36.

11
By system (in the context of the writings of Ibn ʿArabi), we do not mean something like Aristotle's systematic approach but a comprehensive, coherent, cohesive, and well-integrated structure whose purpose, approach, and outcome differed from that of the Peripatetics.

Ibn ʿArabi's works either as an historical—and obsolete–object of curiosity, or as a body of ideas that is only relevant to his contemporary followers.

This article is divided into four main parts. Part I provides a general overview of al-Attas's background; Part II offers a general framework for understanding his approach and objectives; and Parts III and IV illustrate how he mobilises Ibn ʿArabi's metaphysics by focusing on two concepts he deems problematic: "the correspondence theory of truth" and particular definitions of "change." He contrasts the former with the concepts of *ḥaqq* (true and real) and *ḥaqiqa* (truth and reality), as found in Akbarian thought, while using the notion of the "fixed essences" (*aʿyān thābita*) to formulate a theory of change which he deems more adequate.

Al-Attas's Life and Works

As mentioned above, al-Ghazali is a central figure for the tariqa ʿAlawiyya. In his description of this order, the seventeenth-century Yemeni Sufi ʿAbd Allah b. ʿAlawi al-Haddad tells us that "the tenets of this tariqa were laid down by Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996) in his 'The Nourishment for the Hearts' (*Qūt al-qulūb*), and by ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) in his 'Epistle on Sufism' (*ar-Risāla fī at-taṣawwuf*), then detailed and refined by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in his 'The Revival of the Religious Sciences' (*Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn*)."[12] Pious observance of the Qurʾan and the Sunna are also an integral part of this order which follows the Shafiʿi *madhhab* (school of thought in Islamic jurisprudence) and which is characterised by its emphasis on scholarly study or the "pursui[t] of religious sciences."[13] This could explain some of al-Attas's choices, namely his interest in higher-order metaphysical questions and the importance accorded to al-Ghazali in his works, which have often been dubbed neo-Ghazalian.[14] Of course, we should be careful not to reduce al-Attas's relationship to Sufism to the discursive or textual realms, nor to extrapolate too much from those observations about the order he is affiliated with—still, our analysis will essentially be focused on his writings. However, a few biographical elements can help us clarify some of his stances and choices of interpretation and allow us to situate him in the contemporary academic landscape.

From the maternal side of his family, al-Attas received a solid grounding in the classical Islamic tradition while also attending *madrasas* (traditional Islamic schools) in his youth, in parallel to receiving English schooling.[15] Al-Attas obtained his master's degree from McGill University and his PhD from SOAS. Upon returning to his native country in 1965, he was named Head of the Division of Literature at the University of Malaya,[16] before becoming the University's Dean of the Faculty of Arts between 1968 and 1970.[17] In 1991, he founded the International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC).[18]

Over several decades, al-Attas has published numerous works dealing with a variety of topics ranging from the education of Muslims (a chief concern for him) to the history of the spread of Islam in the Malay Archipelago. Al-Attas also coined the expression "Islamization of present-day knowledge"—though it has taken on a life of its

12 Muhammad Ali Aziz, *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam: Theology and Sufism in Yemen* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 196–97.

13 Muhammad Ali Aziz, *Religion and Mysticism in Early Islam*, 197.

14 See al-Akiti and Hellyer, "The Negotiation of Modernity through tradition in contemporary Muslim intellectual discourse: The Neo-Ghazālian, Attasian Perspective," in *Knowledge, Language, Thought and the Civilization of Islam*, ed. Wan Mohd Daud and Muhammad Zaiyniy Uthman (Skudai: UTM Press, 2010), 119–34; ʿAdi Setia, "Kalām Jadīd, Islamization, and the Worldview of Islam: Applying the neo-ghazālian, Attasian Vision," *Islam and Science* 10, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 25–73.

15 Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of SMN al-Attas*, 2–3.

16 Daud, 6.

17 Daud, 6.

18 Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, xiii.

own since—in addition to writing *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fanṣuri* (1970), which deals with the mystical poems of the sixteenth-century Sumatran Sufi Hamza Fansuri (fl. sixteenth c.), who was greatly influenced by Ibn ʿArabi.[19] From 1975 to 1994, al-Attas published a series of short monographs where he presented his psychology, ontology, philosophy of science, etc. These thematically organised monographs were later incorporated as individual chapters in his *magnum opus*, the *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*.[20] The *Prolegomena*, in which he expounds the "fundamental worldview of Islam," remains his most systematic work to date wherein he fuses together elements of Sufism, philosophy and *kalām* (speculative theology). His most extensive treatment of Ibn ʿArabi's thought is found in its last three chapters, which deal with such concepts as essence, quiddity, and existence.

In the secondary literature, al-Attas is most frequently compared to Seyyed Hossein Nasr (born 1933).[21] According to Damien Howard, despite certain affinities between al-Attas and Nasr, namely the central place occupied by metaphysics and Sufism in their respective works, "Nasr takes Ibn ʿArabi as his great inspiration" whereas "al-Attas is more influenced by al-Ghazali."[22] While it is true that al-Ghazali is also another key figure for understanding al-Attas's intellectual project (to be examined shortly), al-Attas can be said to have adopted an Akbarian onto-cosmology. A fundamental difference between al-Attas and Nasr is that the former is not a Perennialist—even though his doctorate was supervised by Martin Lings (1909–2005). In fact, al-Attas dedicates a few pages in the *Prolegomena* to dismantling the concept of Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998) around the "transcendent unity of religions."[23] These profound differences aside, al-Attas's writings, like those of Nasr, include a staunch critique of modernity and "Western thought." This critique is most evident in *Islām and Secularism,*[24] though we could argue that it is an inherent feature of his works in general. Al-Attas was quite influential amongst Muslim youth movements in the 1970s, and *Islām and Secularism*, first published in 1978 and dedicated to Muslim youth, is probably his most accessible work to date.

In *Islām and Secularism*, the Malay scholar describes the need to *Dewesternise* and *Islamise* knowledge. The definition of "Islamisation" falls outside the scope of this article. At a basic level, however, it can be defined as "a historical and cultural process" that the Malay-Indonesian Archipelago—and, more generally, those unchartered territories where Islam has progressed—underwent in its gradual integration of the "Islamic worldview."[25] It is important to note that "Islamic worldview" is another way of referring to Islamic ontology (or more specifically *ruʾyat al-islām li-l-wujūd*[26]) from al-Attas's perspective, and not a mere contingent perspective that is reflective of the cultural relativism that the term "worldview" usually conveys. In the preface of the second printing of *Islām and Secularism* (1993), al-Attas denounces the accelerating rate of secularisation. That development can largely be imputed to what he calls Muslim "modernists and reformers"[27] who have blindly emulated the West and projected onto Islam some of those problems he considers to be extrinsic to the religion. By "modernists and reformers," al-Attas means nineteenth-century Islamic scholars such as the Egyptian Muhammad ʿAbduh (1849–1905) and India's

19 Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Mysticism of Ḥamzah Fanṣūrī* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1970).

20 Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), 358.

21 See Hasan Dzilo, "The concept of 'Islamization of knowledge' and its philosophical implications" and Ali H. Zaidi, "Muslim Reconstructions of Knowledge and the Re-enchantment of Modernity."

22 Damien Howard, *Being Human in Islam: The Impact of the Evolutionary Worldview* (London: Routledge, 2001), 121.

23 See *Prolegomena*, 7–12 and al-Attas's most recent work: *Islam the Covenants Fulfilled* (Kuala Lumpur: Ta'dib International, 2023).

24 See note 14.

25 Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 169.

26 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 2. Translated literally, this expression means "Islam's vision of existence."

27 Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 113.

Syed Ahmed Khan (1817–1898). These scholars saw the need for Muslims to reinterpret their tradition in light of the onslaught of Western ideals on Muslim societies during colonial times. Often conciliatory in their stances, they advocated a reading of Islam that was accepting of many of those ideals (such as democracy, humanism, freedom, etc.). Al-Attas contends that secularisation constitutes an imported problem, or an external imposition, one which stems from a misunderstanding of the "Islamic worldview." Much of al-Attas's *oeuvre* has therefore been dedicated to dispelling those misunderstandings and highlighting those aspects of Western thought that he deems to be problematic because they cannot be *Islamised*. It is worthwhile to note that *Islām and Secularism* was first published in 1978, the same year as Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Though al-Attas's critique of the West shares some commonalities with similar critiques in postcolonial studies, the basis for his critique is fundamentally different. We must therefore turn to al-Ghazali, Ibn ʿArabi, as well as Jami to understand the methodology and principles underpinning al-Attas's project.

Al-Attas's Framework Following al-Ghazali, Ibn ʿArabi, and Jami

Al-Attas's *oeuvre* has been described as neo-Ghazalian, particularly because it draws inspiration from the way al-Ghazali responded to the challenge and threat posed by the attitude of certain philosophers to the Islamic tradition in his *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers). In this work, al-Ghazali, motivated by the need to defend the faith against those philosophers who were scorning revelation and religious rituals, set out to dismantle some twenty *masʾala* (pl. *masāʾil*) or philosophical problems as proposed by the philosophers— their most eminent representative being Avicenna. Rather than being an attack on *falsafa per se*, this work was intended to naturalise and neutralise it, removing those elements that were deemed to be incompatible with Islam while including those (such as logic) that were considered useful. Al-Ghazali is therefore not seen as an enemy of *falsafa* by al-Attas, quite the contrary. Al-Attas draws a parallel between that important moment, when al-Ghazali was confronted with those ideas deemed unorthodox and foreign to Islam, and the challenge that besets the *umma* (Muslim community) nowadays. Writing about reformers and modernists, he says:

> Their conception of the past has been influenced by Western ideas on human evolution and historical development and secular science. These ideas are the second serious instance— the first being those of the Falasifah whom al-Ghazālī vanquished—of the smuggling of Western concepts alien to Islam into the Muslim mind . . . and although these Modernists and Reformers were cautious in attempting to islamize the ideas they brought in, their ideas pose a great danger to the Muslim's loyalty to Islam because they were not ideas that could be truly islamized.[28]

To Al-Attas, it is incumbent upon Muslims to dismantle that alien

28
Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 113.

worldview that threatens their own, and this can only be done with a solid understanding of Islam and Islamic ontology. In the same vein as al-Ghazali, and in the style of the more philosophical type of *kalām* he inaugurated, al-Attas proceeds methodically. He does so by relying on the works of eminent Western theologians and philosophers (often quoting them to indicate how they understand their own culture, tradition, and history) before deconstructing some of their ideas and highlighting the various underpinning ideologies. Al-Attas also supplements their theories with his own when he disagrees with their analyses. Though he does not deal with a set of philosophical problems that pertain to metaphysics for the most part, as was the case in the *Tahafut*, al-Attas chooses to focus on metaphysics in his works precisely because the dismantling of metaphysical foundations has the most far-reaching consequences. Though al-Attas's central preoccupation lies in Sufism, it is "Sufi metaphysics" that is of particular interest to him.

In his work, *Some Aspects of Sufism as Understood and Practiced Among the Malays*,[29] al-Attas explains that Abu-l-Qasim al-Junayd (830–910) and the Baghdadian school he inaugurated, with its more sober form of Sufism, "taught that knowledge of God could be attained by demonstrative reasoning."[30] According to al-Attas, "successful attempts had been thought out to reconcile Ṣūfī doctrines with 'orthodoxy,' but the most brilliant of these successes was that of Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazzālī (505/1111) . . . for he not only reconciled the Ṣūfī doctrines with 'orthodoxy,' but also elevated Ṣūfism to an exalted position within the fold of 'orthodoxy.' "[31] Sufism, however, reaches its culmination with Ibn ʿArabi, whose lofty metaphysics remain unsurpassed.[32]

Akbarian metaphysics is the basis upon which al-Attas builds his critique of Western thought. If certain ideas or concepts pose a problem for al-Attas because they are un-Islamic, then one must determine what metaphysical foundations these ideas are rooted in. Akbarian metaphysics serves him both as the basis upon which he builds that critique and as an alternative to the "Western worldview." Al-Attas must therefore engage in a careful balancing act: on one hand, he needs to uphold orthodoxy as formulated in the Ashʿari creed (the most prominent school of Sunni theology); on the other, the philosophical system he develops must be apodictically robust. To Al-Attas, the members of the Akbarian school—which he also refers to as the "higher Sufis" or "higher metaphysicians"—have developed the most sophisticated understanding of reality and existence, one that is rooted in the concept of the Oneness of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*). For example, as we will see at the end of this part, the theologians' definition of existence is considered unsatisfactory for al-Attas. What is it, then, that makes Akbarian metaphysics so exalted for him? And what concepts and ideas of that "Western worldview" are problematic for him? The case of Jami allows us to answer the first question and complete this framework, while the second question will be answered in parts III and IV of this article.

In the *Prolegomena*, al-Attas mainly refers to Ibn ʿArabi's *Fusus al-Hikam* and his *al-Futuhat al-Makkiyya* as well as the works of some of his famous commentators, such as the Persian poet and Sufi Jami (1414–1492). In a treatise titled *al-Durra al-Fakhira* (The Pre-

29
Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism as Understood and Practiced Among the Malays*, ed. Shirle Gordon (Singapore: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 1963).

30
Al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism*, 9.

31
Al-Attas, 9.

32
Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Some Aspects of Sufism*, 10–11.

cious Pearl), Jami wrote at the request of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II (1432–1481) a comparison of the positions of the *falāsifa* (philosophers), the *mutakallimūn* (theologians), and the Sufis, concerning God's existence and His attributes as well as other metaphysical questions.[33] *Falāsifa* here refers to the Muslim Peripatetics and, in particular, Avicenna. From this arbitration (*muḥākama*), the Sufi metaphysicians emerge victorious.

According to Nicholas L. Heer, Jami proceeds by first presenting the position of the theologians and the philosophers concerning a given doctrinal issue and then provides the answer given to that problem by the Akbarian Sufis. Importantly, a *muḥākama* (arbitration) of this sort sometimes sought to reconcile the opposing views of different schools of thought regarding a specific doctrinal point. It was therefore not exclusively dedicated to determining which group fared better on a given issue, but also contained a unifying dimension. The Qunawi-Tusi correspondence exemplifies this tendency towards a rapprochement, which has characterised post-classical Islamic thought. Sadr al-Din al-Qunawi (1207–1274) was an Akbarian while Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201–1274) was an Avicennian. These two contemporaries were the foremost representatives of their respective schools. In that correspondence, the two scholars discussed several doctrinal points on which the Sufis and the *falāsifa* (philosophers) disagreed, such as whether the natural Universal (*al-kullī al-ṭabīʿī*) has an extramental (i.e., outside the mind) existence or not. In fact, parts of that correspondence served as a source for Jami and demonstrate the mutual reverence Qunawi and Tusi had for each other as well as the deep knowledge both displayed of their opponent's (or rather interlocutor's) approach. Still, in Jami's *Durra*, Sufi metaphysics is considered superior because it resolves some of those doctrinal problems using apodictically stronger arguments, and because it "reconciles the opposing views of the theologians and philosophers on a particular question."[34]

For example, on the question of existence (which we explain in Part III), Jami considers that theologians and philosophers both understood existence as a mere concept, as something accidental to quiddity (although they did so in different ways). From their perspective, quiddity is then something existent to which existence is mentally superadded. This leads to the absurd conclusion that quiddity must exist before its existence. The definition of existence given by the Akbarians—which we examine below in our discussion of the *aṣalat al-wujūd* (primacy of existence) versus the *aṣalat al-māhiyya* (primacy of quiddity) debate—offers a solution to this problem. At the same time, that solution is meant to subsume rather than reject the position of the philosophers and the theologians within a larger framework. The view of the philosophers and theologians according to which existence is seen as accidental to quiddity is considered by the Akbarians to occur at the level of what al-Attas calls "everyday," "ordinary" existence. This "normal" level of spiritual experience is one in which the phenomenal world appears constituted of a multiplicity of things or existents, each having a separate existence or reality. The world is then seen as consisting of different, multiple quiddities, while existences are superadded to each of these quiddities.

For the Sufis however, there are higher levels of experience in

33
Nicholas L. Heer, *The Precious Pearl: Al-Jāmī's al-Durrah al-Fakhirah Together with His Glosses and the Commentary of ʿAbd al-Ghafūr al-Lārī* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979).

34
Heer, *The Precious Pearl*, 7.

which the multiplicity of the phenomenal world disappears and allows the Sufi to witness the Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), where Being is a philosophical term the Akbarians use to designate God.[35] In fact, to say that the Sufi "bears witness to" that Unity of Being is paradoxical, as it would imply that the observer and the observed (or a certain "subject-object" relation, according to al-Attas) still subsist. Instead, this is a state of annihilation (*fanāʾ*) where Sufis experience directly, through spiritual tasting (*dhawq*), the reality of existence. In that state they can discover that the things of the phenomenal world are determinations and particularisations of Being, that is, the Being of God, but only in so far as He has a relation to creation, not God nor His Essence.

Sufism therefore involves an emphasis on unveiling (*kashf*) as a mode of knowledge of suprarational realities, and in that regard, philosophical Sufism is viewed as superior because it manages to combine rational arguments with that approach. Also, Ibn ʿArabi often borrows philosophical terminology to explain his teachings, but also resorts to rational arguments to perhaps "overwhelm the intellect by the sheer plethora of rational and supra-rational teachings he received through unveiling."[36] All of this is done while maintaining orthodoxy as expounded in Revelation, since for Qunawi, for example, any element received through unveiling "must be disregarded if it contradicts the text of the Koran."[37]

We can say that what al-Attas is doing with the "Western worldview" is exactly what Jami did with *kalām* and *falsafa*: integrating it in a larger framework while arguing for the superiority of Akbarian metaphysics, as an ontological model, and highlighting points of convergence and those aspects that are irreconcilable with what al-Attas considers Islamic metaphysics.

Al-Attas draws on Jami's works for the above-stated reasons, but his local context might shed some light on why Jami occupies such a central place in his works. As previously stated, some of al-Attas's earliest writings deal with major figures of Malay Sufi history, such as Hamza Fansuri, whose works attest to the profound and lasting influence Ibn ʿArabi had on the region—Ibn ʿArabi's ideas circulated in the area mainly through the writings of Jami.[38] While Akbarian metaphysics made its entry into the archipelago by becoming "the most popular school . . . followed by a majority of Malay scholars from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth century,"[39] it was in seventeenth-century Aceh that Jami's influence reached its height.[40]

Now that we have laid out the general framework for understanding al-Attas's project, we can examine in more detail some of his foundational critiques of the "Western worldview" and the way Akbarian thought serves as an alternative and superior ontological model of those systems. I will explain some of those Akbarian concepts using al-Attas's own words because of the concise and clear manner of his exposition, while occasionally referring to other authors to clarify some details.

Truth-Reality contra "the Correspondence Theory of Truth"
In *Islām and the Philosophy of Science*, al-Attas states that: "One of the fundamental differences between our position and that of modern

35
This doctrine will be dealt with in more detail in Part III of this article.

36
William Chittick, "Mysticism versus Philosophy in Earlier Islamic History: The Al-Ṭūsī, al-Qūnawī Correspondence," in *Religious Studies* 17, no. 1 (1981): 96.

37
Chittick, "Mysticism versus Philosophy in Earlier Islamic History," 90.

38
Paul Wormser, "The Recreation of Jāmī's Lavāʾiḥ by Ḥamza Fanṣūrī" in *Jāmī in Regional Contexts: The Reception of ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Jāmī's Works in the Islamicate World, ca. 9th/15th-14th/20th Century*, ed. Thibaut d'Hubert and Alexandre Papas (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 376.

39
Wormser, "The Recreation of Jāmī's Lavāʾiḥ by Ḥamza Fanṣūrī," 197.

40
Wormser, 220.

philosophy and science impinging upon the problem of formulating a philosophy of science revolves around the understanding of the meaning of *reality* and *truth* and their relation to *fact*."[41] Al-Attas goes on to explain how the term *ḥaqīqa* cannot simply be rendered by the word "truth" as *ḥaqīqa* denotes both truth and reality: it pertains both to propositional statements relating to factual occurrences and to what is real in that it refers to a "state of existence and encompasses everything."[42] Earlier, al-Attas had already questioned the validity of "correspondence theories of truth," where truth is defined by verifying an empirical fact to which it merely corresponds or to which it conforms:[43]

> Moreover, in order to verify hypotheses and theories science, according to them [i.e., "modern scientists and philosophers"], requires correspondence with observable fact, and yet since hypotheses and theories that contradict one another can correspond with observable fact, and since the preference for one as against the other of them is not dictated by any criterion of objective truth—because truth itself is made to conform with fact—such preference is then dictated simply by subjective and arbitrary considerations dependent upon convention . . .[44]

This passage contains many elements that merit our attention. First, al-Attas is saying that the correspondence of a given proposition to a fact or occurrence is a necessary though not sufficient condition for the verification of the truth of that proposition. It is insufficient not only because it eliminates the possibility of positing as truthful any statement pertaining to abstract objects, given that it restricts verification to the empirical realm or "observable fact," but also because meaning seems to involve a relational element for al-Attas. In the definition of any given word or in the evaluation of any given proposition, it is not enough for it to be taken as a self-enclosed, isolated unit of meaning. Since for al-Attas, "words reflect ontology," they cannot be taken "as such" without reference to a superstructure or a "super system." To understand that perspective we can pose the question differently: if we examine each statement in relation to a given fact and their potential correspondence, and if that is the criterion for judging truths, then how can we ensure that these truths are *true*? What is the guarantor of objectivity (if any)? Second, what do we make of moral injunctions or propositions that are prescriptive? How do we verify their *truthfulness*? For al-Attas, the concept of *ḥaqīqa* already implied a moral order so that the fact-value split (or the "is-ought problem," to use Hume's formula) cannot obtain. Therefore, the claim that "facts are neutral as far as truth and falsehood are concerned—they just *are*"[45] is untenable for him because there is an interpretative effort already involved when dealing with facts.[46] This putative neutrality of facts, therefore, leads to an unacceptable moral relativism for our Malay scholar: "We do not agree with those who take the position that reality and truth, and values derived from them, are separate, and that they articulate their meanings within the paradigms of relativity and plurality having equal validity."[47] Third, there is not only an axiological order but also an ontological order according to which things are organised, and order and hierarchy should be reflected in the way we classify things and events,

41 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 125.

42 Al-Attas, 126.

43 See preface and chapter 1 (*passim*) of Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*.

44 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 116–17.

45 Al-Attas, 115.

46 Al-Attas, 113.

47 Al-Attas, ix.

according to al-Attas.

In al-Attas's metaphysics of Islam, reality is not restricted to the world of "sense and sensible experience"[48] (*ʿālam al-shahāda*), nor to facts, which only represent but one level of that reality—we examine this in more detail later. If correspondence to facts is the way to verify truths, then a truncated reality does not constitute the whole truth. "A factual occurrence is only one aspect in many of *ḥaqīqah*, whose ambit encompasses *all* of reality. Moreover, a factual occurrence may be an actualisation of something false (*i.e., bāṭil*); whereas reality is the actualisation always of something true (*i.e., ḥaqq*)."[49] By "false" (*bāṭil*) or "falsity," al-Attas invokes a moral order. Truth in the sense of *ḥaqīqa* therefore encompasses the logical, ethical, and ontological dimensions. To qualify something as a *ḥaqīqa* does not mean it is "true" or "real" in the sense given to these terms by the correspondence theory of truth: it is not mere conformity with fact.

For example, the Ptolemaic geocentric planetary model ensured better conformity with astrological observation and was an improvement on previous models. The Alexandrian astronomer Ptolemy (c. 100–170) added a set of epicycles (small circular orbits) on the trajectory of planets to ensure that his model corresponded well with observed reality. With the Copernican Revolution, Ptolemy's system was replaced with a heliocentric model of the world. Even if physical theories may appear to describe reality, for al-Attas they constitute a *choice* for its interpretation.[50] They may constitute a truth, but they are not *the truth* in the sense that *ḥaqīqa* is. Another example relating to the ethical order posited by al-Attas could perhaps be found in the social sciences. Various theories in moral psychology may be based on empirical data. Based on those findings, statements (and prescriptions) about human nature and happiness may be made. For al-Attas, conformity with data would not guarantee that these statements are true in the axiological sense (that is, in conformity to an objective moral standard).

Al-Attas therefore chooses to translate *ḥaqq* as "both reality and truth."[51] *Ṣidq,* for example, as distinguished from *ḥaqīqa* (and as opposed to *kidhb*), is a term that pertains to the truth of "statements or uttered words."[52] It seems that the definitions of these terms were taken from the commentary written by the Ashʿari scholar Saʿd al-Din al-Taftazani (1322–1390) on the credal work of Najm al-Din ʿUmar al-Nasafi (1067–1142), *al-ʿAqaʾid al-Nasafiyya* (Creed of al-Nasafi), where the meaning of "*ṣidq al-ḥukm*" (the truth of a judgment) is given as "*mutābaqatuhu al-wāqiʿ*" (that it, i.e., the judgment, would conform to reality).[53] *Ṣidq* therefore seems to be closer in meaning to the word "truth" than *ḥaqq* is.

The term *ḥaqq*, on the other hand, already implies conformity with "wisdom, justice, rightness, truth, reality, propriety . . . It is a state, quality or property of being wise, just, right, true, real, proper; it is a state of being necessary, unavoidable, obligatory, due; it is a state of existence and encompasses everything."[54] Al-Ḥaqq is also one of the names of God, of course, and, in that respect, the term is no longer about one given truth, or a plurality or multiplicity of truths, but about "*the* Truth," to use al-Attas's expression: "God in His aspect as the Absolute Being in all the forms of manifestation is 'the Truth.' "[55]

48
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 124.

49
Al-Attas, 1–2.

50
Al-Attas is mainly taking issue with positivist and empiricist conceptions of knowledge and truth. It would perhaps be interesting to compare his critique of positivism with the ideas of French physicist and historian of philosophy, Pierre Duhem (1861–1916), in his book *Sōzein ta phainomena, essai sur la notion de théorie physique de Platon à Galilée* (Paris: Hermann, 1908). Duhem influenced the members of the Vienna Circle whom al-Attas criticises in his writings. The Vienna Circle was a group of philosophers from the early twentieth century whose intellectual programme advocated a radical rejection of metaphysics, upholding empiricist approaches to knowledge, and logical positivism. Pierre Duhem certainly did not espouse that radical view of science, nor did he denigrate metaphysics, quite the contrary. In fact, his philosophy of science, though anti-Thomistic in some respects (in reference to the Catholic scholastic philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas, ca. 1225–1274), nonetheless included elements of neo-Thomism. On Duhem's views on the relationship between physics and metaphysics, see "Théorie physique et explication métaphysique," in *La théorie physique, son objet et sa structure* (Paris: Chevalier et Rivière, 1906).

51
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 125–26.

52
Al-Attas, 126.

53
Saʿd al-Din al-Taftazani, *Sharh al-ʿAqaʾid al-Nasafiyya* (Damascus: Dar al-Taqwa, 2020), 106–07. Those definitions may also have been taken from the *Kitab al-Taʿrifat* (Book of definitions) by the Persian theologian al-Sharif al-Jurjani (1339–1413) who was also familiar with the *Creed of al-Nasafi*.

54
Saʿd al-Din al-Taftazani, *Sharh al-ʿAqaʾid al-Nasafiyya*, 106–07.

55
Saʿd al-Din al-Taftazani, 186.

In Akbarian thought, there is a hierarchy characterising the Names of God since some of them are more general than others; they thus vary in breadth or scope.[56] In the same manner that some terms can be predicated of more things than others, divine names can have more important effects (*āthār*) in the world than others. The term *ḥaqq* is also sometimes used by Ibn ʿArabi to denote existence (*wujūd*), not simply Being. Absolute Being (*al-wujūd al-muṭlaq*) is Being beyond human conception, the ineffable, which cannot even be characterised negatively by saying what it is *not*.

Truth therefore becomes a relative value coloured by the multifarious facts it is predicated of. This translates a vision according to which Reality is composed of multiple, separate essences, that subsist independently or that each constitutes a separate existence.[57] The correspondence theory of truth is problematic for al-Attas because in it, truth becomes predicated of things and events or facts instead of the opposite: "Truth itself is made to conform with fact."[58] Whereas with the concept of *ḥaqq*, the truth as one of the manifestations of Absolute Being becomes tied to the very nature of existence and the meaning of truth becomes "a property of the nature of reality."[59]

For al-Attas, it is Revelation (by which he means the Quran and not the *process* of revelation) that is considered the *ultimate* source of knowledge. It is the guarantor of truth because it provides man with "extra-mental knowledge," i.e., knowledge that is mind-independent and not the sole product of man's reasoning and sensible experience.

Summarising the main points he made in the chapter titled "Islām and the Philosophy of Science,"[60] al-Attas adds: "We referred to the Quranic system of conceptual interrelations and its methods of interpretation, saying that Islamic science must interpret the facts of existence in correspondence with that system and not interpret that system in correspondence with the facts."[61] Islamic science is probably used to indicate the Islamic conception of science and not religious sciences. For al-Attas, the world is first and foremost of a symbolic nature. His approach can be qualified as semiotic in some respects because, for him, as meaning-making creatures, humans are meant to appropriate and interpret the world around them. This world is constituted of God's *ayāt*, a word that means both verses and signs. For al-Attas, "nature is like a great, open Book."[62] Just as the Quran (the "Book of God") requires an exegetical effort, so does the "Book of Nature" (or phenomenal world). Ultimate meaning, or *al-ḥaqīqa*, therefore relates to the ultimate meaning of any given symbol. Al-Attas is advocating that we "read" the world by deploying the same exegetical effort reserved to the Quranic text, "for nature is like a book that tells us about the Creator; it 'speaks' to man as a revelation of God."[63] In another work, al-Attas further specifies: "The world of nature, as depicted in the Glorious Qurʾān, is like a Great Open Book; and every detail therein, encompassing the farthest horizons and our very selves, is like a word in that Great Book that speaks to man about its Author."[64] Al-Attas is referring here to the verse "We will show them (*sanurīhim*) Our signs (*āyātinā*) in the horizons (*fī al-afāq*) and within themselves (*wa-fī anfusihim*) . . ." (41:53). This verse indicates a continuity between man and the Universe.[65] For Muslim scholars, the world is defined negatively, with respect to God, as being "everything other than God" (*mā siwa*

56
William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-ʿArabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 48.

57
Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 127.

58
Chittick, 116–117.

59
Chittick, 125–26.

60
Chittick, 111–142.

61
Chittick, 141.

62
Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 39.

63
Al-Attas, 38.

64
Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute for Islamic Thought and Civilization ISTAC, 1999), 17.

65
There is much to unpack here about Akbarian cosmology but, for reasons of space, we must limit ourselves to al-Attas's epistemological and exegetical approaches. For a discussion on the relationship between man, the Cosmos, and God, see William Chittick, "Microcosm, Macrocosm, and Perfect Man in the View of Ibn al-ʿArabī," *Islamic Culture* 63, no. 1/2 (Jan.–April 1989): 1–11. For a general overview of the relationship between the microcosm (*al-ʿālam al-saghīr*) and macrocosm (*al-ʿalām al-kabīr*) in Islam (including Sufi perspectives and those of Ibn ʿArabi), refer to Pierre Lory, "Macrocosm and Microcosm in Sufi Thought," in *Sufi Cosmology* (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 234–49.

Allah). Through knowledge of the world, and of his own self, man thus gains knowledge about God, his Lord and Creator.

For al-Attas, in his study of himself and of nature, man should thus study God's signs in as much as they "point to" or indicate God. Taken *in themselves*, as isolated units, they are divested of any meaning. One may argue in favour of such an approach for all Muslims, whether they be philosophers, Sufis, or theologians, since all these groups took revelation seriously, each in their own way. This semiotic approach gains new significance, however, when combined with the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (mentioned earlier). This is an expression that Ibn ʿArabi did not use but that was adopted by posterity to describe his ontological system. Below, we examine that doctrine in more detail and see how al-Attas uses it to criticise, from a philosophical perspective, the "essentialist" view described above.[66]

Waḥdat al-Wujūd and the Degrees of Reality

We can take al-Attas's conception of history as a starting point that illustrates why this "fragmented" vision of reality does not suit him and the alternative he proposes instead. During a lecture delivered in January 1972,[67] al-Attas spoke of the need to look at history comprehensively, by operating a synthesis of the events of history. Giving the analogy of Jonathan Swift's eighteenth-century novel *Gulliver's Travels*, where the eponymous protagonist travels through a land inhabited by giants, al-Attas explains how, seen from a distance, the women of that land seemed beautiful, but upon getting closer to them, Gulliver could see the details of their skin, rendering them unattractive.[68] Such an exact replica of facts is therefore not necessarily an exact rendering of history in its totality. In gathering historical data, the historian must restitute each event according to its proper place, in that not all facts are of equal importance nor equally significant. Likewise, taken in isolation, historical events amount to an infinity; the historian's task is therefore to sift through these numerous events and select the ones that are relevant for her analysis, producing both meaning and an accurate picture.[69] Al-Attas does not mean that the historian must superimpose a specific narrative on history; however, he considers that underlying any depiction of history is a specific worldview and its attendant assumptions about its object of study. This critique of a form of scientism when dealing with the events of history echoes similar critiques al-Attas makes elsewhere against the "scientific conception of the world" of the Vienna Circle,[70] whose influence, according to him, extended to the whole of the social sciences as well as "many branches of formal and empirical sciences extending beyond philosophy, such as arithmetic, physics, geometry."[71]

Underlying this way of doing history are several assumptions about the nature of things and existence which al-Attas wishes to deconstruct. This view of the events of history, and more generally of the phenomenal world, supposes it to be undifferentiated, as opposed to a hierarchically organised world where everything occupies a "proper place," to use al-Attas's expression. As we have stated earlier, the conception of existence as constituted of separate, independent essences, to which existence is only accidental, is also an idea whose limits

[66] The meaning of "essentialist" is explained in the next sub-section.

[67] Denys Lombard (1938–1998) partially translated this lecture from Malay to French: Muhammad Naguib Al-Attas Syed, "L'Islam et la culture malaise," *Archipel* 4 (1972): 132–150.

[68] Al-Attas, "L'Islam et la culture malaise," 134.

[69] Al-Attas, 134.

[70] On scientism and the Vienna Circle, see note 50.

[71] Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 8n13.

al-Attas would like to qualify. Al-Attas does not reject that view outright but rather wishes to demonstrate how this represents a certain level of reality, instead of Reality as a whole:

> The view of man at the physical, or everyday, ordinary level of reason and sense experience, in which things that make up the world of multiplicity take their concrete, separate forms and identities, is the view of the generality of the people (ʿawāmm) . . . However, among people adhering to this common view of reality are those who attained a higher degree of perception of truth.[72]

To understand the difference between these two points of view, we can refer to Izutsu, who gives a most elegant analogy to explain the difference between the "existentialist" and "essentialist" positions. To use al-Attas's own words: "This basic matter of ontological outlook may be raised by posing the question: Is it *quiddity* or is it *existence* that is fundamentally real? By 'fundamentally real' is meant 'having a corresponding reality in the external world.' "[73] The essentialist view corresponds to what al-Attas describes above as the "physical, or everyday, ordinary level of reason and sense experience."[74]

According to Izutsu, in a proposition such as "the flower is white," where "flower" is the subject, "is" the copulative, and "white" the predicate, "white" is an attribute that is accidental to the flower both propositionally and ontologically. "Whiteness" is not something essential to the flower in that a flower can be white, blue, or some other colour. Therefore, there is a homology between the structure of the proposition itself (subject/predicate) and the reality it describes (substance/accident). When dealing with existence, the matter is altogether different. When we make statements such as "the flower exists," "exists" comes in the position of a predicate which seems to suggest that the flower's existence is superadded to the flower, as if its existence were accidental to its quiddity. However this would lead to the absurd conclusion that before existing, the flower had to *exist* since for existence to be predicated of "the flower," the latter should in fact *be*. Or in other terms, to quote al-Attas, according to this view: "The existence of an object is seen as a quality or property of its quiddity, as if its quiddity could subsist by itself prior to its existence."[75] Though linguistically and logically, the predicate "exists" is superadded or accidental to the flower; this does not hold ontologically as existence must come first.

For Izutsu, Avicenna "gave a decisive impetus to the later philosophical elaboration of the concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd* by his explicit statement that 'existence' is an accident or attribute of *māhiyya* or 'quiddity.' To this statement, however, he added another statement, namely that the accident called 'existence' is not an ordinary accident, but that it . . . is a very peculiar kind of accident."[76] Before Ibn ʿArabi, Izutsu tells us that Muslim philosophers following in the footsteps of the Greeks were mostly concerned with the problem of "existents" (*mawjūdāt*, sing. *mawjūd*, or *ens*), while the very act of existence (*wujūd*, *actus essendi*) was of secondary importance.[77] *Wujūd* was of interest to them only in so far as it served to understand those multiple "existents." Consequently, for al-Attas: "The view of reality based on

72
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 180–81.

73
Al-Attas, *Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq*, 33–34.

74
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 180.

75
Al-Attas, 180–82.

76
Toshihiko Izutsu, "The Concept and Reality of Existence," *Studies in the Humanities and Social Relations*, vol. 13, ed. Shinji Maejima (Tokyo: Kokusai Printing Co., 1971), 38.

77
Izutsu, "The Concept and Reality of Existence," 38.

the ordinary level of reason and sense experience, and the philosophical and scientific developments that evolve from it, has undoubtedly led philosophical and scientific speculations to the preoccupation with *things* and their 'essences' at the expense of *existence* itself."[78]

With Ibn ʿArabi, on the other hand, this dynamic is reversed and *wujūd* is what takes precedence over the *mawjūd*, whereas according to the "ordinary level of experience" al-Attas describes, existence is taken as a "basic and universal concept"[79] that is subsequently attributed or "apportioned" to multiple things or quiddities through an intellectual operation of abstraction of "the conceptual entity, 'existence,' from the things."[80]

Very succinctly, we can summarise what al-Attas means by "the essentialist view" as follows: Al-Attas distinguishes between the "concept" of existence and the "reality" of existence. According to him, what philosophers and theologians consider to be existence amounts to a secondary intelligible, that is, a concept that refers to another concept (the latter being called a primary intelligible). While the primary intelligible refers to an extramental object, the secondary intelligible does not relate to any extramental reality. That position is described as essentialistic because in it, existence is treated the same way quiddity is: From a given extramental sensible object or quiddity, we extract a concept of that quiddity (a primary intelligible) to which we mentally superadd an existence (a secondary intelligible, a concept with no extramental referent) so that existence is taken as having no extramental referent and appears as if it were accidental to essence. The existentialist position of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, on the other hand, affirms the primacy of existence (*aṣālat al-wujūd*) and considers that "it is existence, and not quiddity (*māhiyya*), that is the reality that is being qualified by a conceptual entity called quiddity."[81] According to that perspective, it is quiddity that is "accidental" to existence.

The debate of the "essentialists" *versus* the "existentialists" is therefore about determining what constitutes extra-mental reality in a primary sense (is it existence or quiddity?). It is quiddity that is real while existence is something merely conceptual (*iʿtibārī*), posited by the mind as accidental to quiddity, or is it existence that is real, quiddity being an accident of existence?[82] In the last chapter of the *Prolegomena* titled "The Degrees of Existence," al-Attas draws from Jami's *Durra* to compare the positions of the (early and late) *mutakallimūn* (theologians), philosophers, and Sufis regarding existence. According to al-Attas, beyond the "conceptual entity" called existence, there is the reality of existence:

> Unlike its conceptual counterpart, the reality of existence is active; it is a conscious, dynamic and creative entity, articulating from within itself infinite possibilities of self expression in analogical gradations at different ontological levels in particular and individual modes that appear as separate things in the visible world as well as the invisible world.[83]

We will explain the full meaning of this passage in due time. For now, we would like to highlight that this "reality of existence" is what corresponds to Absolute Being, or what al-Attas calls "Ultimate Reality,"[84]

78
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 181.

79
Al-Attas, 267.

80
Al-Attas, 267.

81
Al-Attas, 234.

82
This question of the primacy of existence *versus* quiddity has divided Islamic philosophers. The Illuminationist (*ishraqi*) school upheld the primacy of quiddity. The Persian philosophers Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi (1154–1191)—the founder of that school—and Mir Damad (ca. 1631/2) are some of the main representatives of *aṣalat al-māhiyya*. It appears that Sadr al-Din Shirazi, known as Mulla Sadra (c. 1572–1640), upheld the primacy of quiddity in his early years but abandoned it in favor of the primacy of existence. On Mulla Sadra see Megawati Morris, *Mullā Ṣadrā's Doctrine of the Primacy of Existence* (*aṣālat al-wujūd*) (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 2003). For a clear and concise summary of the debate, see this collection of articles by Toshihiko Izutsu, "The Fundamental Structure of Sabzawari's Metaphysics," in *The Concept and Reality of Existence*, 57–149. In particular, see chapter 5 of this article called "The Primacy of Existence over Quiddity," 99–118. Seyyed Hosein Nasr has also given an informative overview of the problem in "The Question of Existence and Quiddity and Ontology in Islamic Philosophy" in *Islamic Philosophy from its Origins to the Present: Philosophy in the Land of Prophecy* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006), 63–84.

83
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 268.

84
Al-Attas, 268–69.

which is the very Essence (*dhāt*) of God. As mentioned earlier, *al-ḥaqq* can be used in opposition to *al-bāṭil* when referring to propositions. Ibn ʿArabi also sometimes uses *al-ḥaqq* in opposition to *al-khalq* (creation): God, as al-Ḥaqq is what confers existence (*wujūd*) to all creation. The term designates God in His creative aspect since it is by Him and through Him that all beings acquire their reality. That is why for Ibn ʿArabi the created world is "He/Not He";[85] from the perspective of created beings, who are the many determinations (*taʿayyunāt*) of Being, the world is a manifestation of Absolute Being, without implying any multiplicity in Him since God's incomparability (*tanzīh*) is also upheld. At the same time, the world (including man) is a manifestation of God and is created in God's image. Despite man's special place in the cosmological hierarchy, a continuity is established between man and the cosmos as both are manifestations of the divine, albeit in different ways.[86] This ambivalence as to God's relation to the world explains why Ibn ʿArabi's thought has often been assimilated to several forms of pantheism. Absolute Being can mean two things in this context. The term "absolute" is sometimes used in opposition to the "relative"—the same way *al-ḥaqq* is used in opposition to *al-khalq*—while at other times it refers to Pure Being (*al-wujūd al-maḥḍ*).[87] We refer to this second meaning when speaking of God's unknowable Essence. In the *Prolegomena*, al-Attas provides a detailed description of "the ontological descent of Absolute Being."[88] Absolute Being in this movement of descent goes from the purely indeterminate to the most determinate, all the way down to the level of the world of empirical things or "sense and sensible experience." According to the "essentialist" view (as defined by al-Attas), there are multiple realities (existences), each corresponding to the things that constitute our phenomenal world.

Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence played a pivotal role in both the history of Western and Islamic philosophy. According to al-Attas, "The philosophical controversy pertaining to the problem of essence and existence, which has been brought to the fore in the West in contemporary times by the upholders of essentialism and existentialism respectively, derives its origin from this basically common view of the nature of reality."[89] The "common view" al-Attas refers to is probably the "ordinary," "everyday" experience referred to earlier. By "existentialism" in this context, of course al-Attas is not referring to the school of Ibn ʿArabi (which he elsewhere characterises as *existentialist*). In the case of Ibn ʿArabi's understanding of *wujūd*, for example, there is a distinction between the "concept" (*mafhūm*) and the "reality" of existence, whereas the Latin Scholastics' understanding of existence—as well as that of some Muslim philosophers such as Ibn Rushd, for example—followed a different course whose consequences have survived in Western thought up till our present times, from al-Attas's perspective. To al-Attas, the Scholastics interpreted Avicenna's distinction between essence and existence as real and not just conceptual. Ibn ʿArabi's doctrine of Unity of Being proclaims the primacy of existence.

One could compare his definition of Being to a plain, white sheet of paper that is folded, like an origami,[90] into a specific shape, a bird, for example. The bird has a wing, a beak, and several other parts that have different shapes but are nonetheless all made of the same sheet of

85
Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 113.

86
Both man and the cosmos are manifestations of the Names of God. For more details on the divine Names, see Part IV of this article.

87
Abdul Haq Ansari, "Ibn ʿArabi: the Doctrine of Waḥdat al-Wujūd," *Islamic Studies* 38, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 152.

88
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 260, provides a schema summarising this "ontological descent of Absolute Being."

89
Al-Attas, 181.

90
I should specify here that origami indicates the Japanese art of folding paper into specific shapes as well as (by metonymy) the byproduct or resulting shapes of that art. This is also interesting for our analogy since the process and the result (or the cause and effect) are indistinguishable from one another.

paper. Like that origami, in the phenomenal world, that chair or that person appears as having separate existences but according to the Sufis they do not. Of course, a person's existence is not the same as the chair's existence (there is a hierarchy between the chair and the person but it is an intensive relation[91]). Also, the origami analogy is limited because a two-dimensional paper becomes three-dimensional, so it involves other elements than a simple sheet (space, for example).

One could also add that "something external" must have shaped and folded that origami in such a way, an external cause. This does not hold in the doctrine of the Unity of Being as only God is, and that God is the cause of all things. But according to this doctrine, the Unity of Being can only be explained by way of analogy precisely because it is supra-rational and meant to be experienced (and therefore understood) at higher spiritual states. We could also see how that doctrine can easily be confused with all sorts of pantheistic ideas.[92] The point is not to say that God is this or that existent, nor that a given existent is Being, but rather that, all perspectives considered, only God *is*, and the existent (or creation in general) is only existent in so far as God is. In its essence, every existent is non-existent. It is only said to "exist" in as much as it is a determination or manifestation of Being in a restricted form.

To push the analogy further, we can now imagine a set of origamis, organised or graded based on their level of intricacy. The more details and folds an origami has, the lower it is in the hierarchy of being, and the farther away it is from the plain sheet of paper which represents the Pure, Absolute Being. Here again, the analogy is limited since in the doctrine of Unity of Being, we are not dealing with distinct sheets of paper nor with different origamis. The existents are all different manifestations of the same substance.

As indicated earlier, in the Akbarian system, the whole of creation is a manifestation of God, and the world of empirical things constitutes the last level in the degrees of existence. In his interpretation of God's signs (*āyāt*) as found in the great Book of Nature, man deals with many objects which vary in their clarity. Just as there are *āyāt muḥkamāt* (clear verses of the Quran) and *āyāt mutashābihāt* (ambiguous verses), so the objects that make up our world constitute clear signs or ambiguous and obscure signs.[93] This analogy is derived from the parallel established by al-Attas between the Book of God and the Book of Nature, as mentioned earlier. According to that perspective, the things or existents that sciences take as their objects of study, for example (as illustrated with the geocentric *versus* heliocentric models), become part of that graded hierarchy. The laws of physics would then represent but an aspect or a level of the reality of those objects. They may express a truth about them, but they do not represent their ultimate *truth* in the sense of *ḥaqīqa*. Additionally, as the verses of the Quran are united by being written in the same book, so are the existents that constitute the whole cosmos, including the world of sense and sensible experience. Al-Attas specifies that:

> The word as it is is a sign, a symbol; and to know it as it really is means knowing what it stands for, what it symbolises, what it means. To study the word as word, regarding it as if it had an

[91]
Also, man holds an exalted station amongst creation, but it is by virtue of the breadth of his being which can likewise cause him to be amongst the lowest of creation as indicated by verses (95:4–5): "*Laqad khalaqnā al-insāna fī aḥsani taqwīm, thumma radadnāhu asfala sāfilīn*" (Verily, We have created man in the best of moulds, Then, We returned him to the lowest of the low).

[92]
On accusations of pantheism, see Alexander Knysh, *Ibn ʿArabi in the Later Islamic Tradition: The Making of a Polemical Image in Medieval Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999).

[93]
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 135–36.

independent reality of its own, is to miss the real point of studying it; for regarded as such it is no longer a sign or a symbol, as it is being made to point to itself, which is not what it really is.[94]

The words he is discussing here are the words of the Quran (the *āyāt*). In his view, the essentialist view of existence, where things are considered in their "alleged independence" and self-subsistence, leads to the same conclusion as to the meaning of the object considered. Objects (including man) are made to point to themselves, which can lead to deviation.[95]

Now one may ask the very legitimate question of how the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* can respond to the "correspondence theory of truth." After all, the former deals with ontology and the latter with epistemology. What is more, the metaphysics of Ibn ʿArabi are far from being universally endorsed by Muslims: what then should we make of the metaphysics of *kalām* (and *falsafa*) that are also classified as essentialistic?

The answer to the first question is that in the "ordinary" level of everyday experience, there is a subject-object relation that still holds (as mentioned earlier). As there are different levels of existence, correspondingly, there are different levels of knowledge. Knowledge of objects at the level of ordinary experience consists in "the soul's intussusception of the *meanings* of such objects and not of the objects *themselves*."[96] By intussusception, al-Attas most probably means that the soul somehow "absorbs" the intelligible forms of the object of knowledge. At the higher spiritual states, where there is direct tasting (*dhawq*) and inner witnessing (*shuhūd*) as well "other interrelated states of trans-empirical awareness (*aḥwāl*),"[97] the subject-object (or the knower and the known) dichotomy no longer holds. There is a unification of the knower and the known, or a " 'unification' (*tawḥīd*) of the soul with the very Truth that underlies all meaning." Al-Attas makes sure to specify that the Truth or al-Ḥaqq does not mean God's Essence, or the divine mystery, which is unknowable to man. The Truth here is Absolute Being in its relative sense. At those higher levels of experience and knowledge, there is "identity of thought and being or existence."[98]

As to the second question (on the role of the "essentialistic" *kalām* and *falsafa*), we will deal with it in the conclusion to this article, since it ties in with the general question of the role Sufi metaphysics can play in a world where Ibn ʿArabi remains a controversial figure. For now, we can say that though "essentialistic" *kalām* and *falsafa* seem to be classified alongside the modern philosophical systems al-Attas is challenging, the matter is not as simple as it appears. By retracing the common origins of that history of existence (and essence), al-Attas is then able to put in place his comparative approach, following Jami, as well as delineate the consequences of that divergence through to the world of sense and sensible experience. One of those major points of divergence for al-Attas, which is also rooted in a different understanding of being, has to do with certain definitions of the concept of "change," which we examine in the next and final part of this article.

94
Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 17.

95
Al-Attas, 17.

96
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 183.

97
Al-Attas, 183.

98
Al-Attas, 183n193.

Progress, Change, and the Fixed Essences

Al-Attas views the inexorable march of secularisation as problematic because it threatens the very existence of religion, which in turn starts to align with the programme of secularisation conceived as an ideology instead of a simple process. Additionally, he criticises evolutionary views of religion whereby man is considered as undergoing a process of maturation, one which religious doctrine is supposed to keep up with. From that perspective, which al-Attas considers to be problematic, revelation is considered as something which must allow for this development, this passage from the simple to the complex, from "infancy" to "maturity."[99] Secularisation ceases to be a process for al-Attas, and becomes an ideology, when it presupposes that history develops along teleological lines and is a goal-oriented process. Furthermore, he considers that secularisation is largely conceived "not merely as a historical process in which man is passively immersed, but that man himself is ever engaged actively in creating the process."[100] Secularisation conceived as such also involves a specific understanding or re-interpretation of religion which is likewise understood to move along evolutionary lines. This echoes critiques directed against positivism and the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) in particular, whose ideas about the concept of progress al-Attas discusses early on in *Islām and Secularism*: "Already in the earlier half of the 19th century the French philosopher-sociologist, Auguste Comte, envisaged the rise of science and the overthrow of religion, and believed . . . that society was 'evolving' and 'developing' from the primitive to the modern stages."[101]

Similarly, in the *Prolegomena*, he alludes to the Hegelian dialectic whereby ideas emerge in succession and in opposition to one another continually. According to al-Attas's interpretation of Hegel, ideas or even systems of thought follow and even supplant one another, leading to often radical and profound shifts in worldviews. For al-Attas, the Islamic worldview does not undergo these transformations:

> It is not a worldview that undergoes a dialectical process of transformation repeated through the ages, from thesis to antithesis then synthesis, with elements of each of these stages in the process being assimilated into the other, such as a worldview based upon a system of thought that was originally god-world centered, and is now world centered and perhaps shifting again to form a new thesis in the dialectical process.[102]

It seems that when al-Attas writes about these transformations, he is not merely describing how Western thought evolved but, more importantly, how this dialectical process becomes an issue when it becomes an imposition. When the distinction between "secularism" and "secularisation" is abolished—the former describing an ideology and the latter a process—that is, when secularisation turns into an "*inevitable* process,"[103] it becomes an ideology, one whose effects must necessarily be actualised according to al-Attas. In the same manner, these dialectical shifts taken as an imperative or a philosophical programme become problematic for him. The common basis that he posits for these various ways of conceiving religion and the evolution of ideas is that *change*

99 Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 24–25.

100 Al-Attas, 47.

101 Al-Attas, 2.

102 Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 2.

103 Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 5.

is taken as an absolute, an inevitability. While for him, "change" is an inalienable component of reality, he likewise considers that "permanence" is an equally essential component of that same reality. Here again, his Akbarian metaphysics allows us to understand more clearly what he means by that.

Secularisation as a "philosophical programme" poses change not only as an inevitability, according to al-Attas but furthermore, "in its attempt to correspond with the reality that is considered as absolute change, advocates change in all aspects of life, denies finality in worldview and propagates the belief in an open future."[104] This most probably refers to "process philosophy"[105] which takes change as the substratum of all things. Still, al-Attas also draws a parallel between that position and more ancient ones: "Contemporary science has evolved and developed out of a philosophy that since its earliest periods affirmed the coming into being of things out of each other. Everything existent is a progression, a development or evolution of what lies in latency in eternal matter."[106] Al-Attas here refers to the natural philosophy of the Presocratics as well as Aristotle, for whom "the coming into being of things out of each other" invokes a necessary causality between things, which can be contrasted with Ibn ʿArabi's notion of ontological descent of Absolute Being. On the other hand, by "everything existent is a progression," al-Attas most probably means the world of generation and corruption, given that Aristotle's Prime Mover is pure actuality. This understanding of being as pure actuality, however, does not encompass being as a dynamic reality undergoing graded manifestation, as is the case with Ibn ʿArabi. These various definitions of change are therefore insufficient for al-Attas, for whom "reality is at once both permanence and change, not in the sense that change is permanent, but in the sense that there is something permanent whereby change occurs."[107] The understanding of secularisation described above is but one of the consequences of this reification of change for al-Attas. We should clarify that he is not positing change as the *only* nor *main* component of secularisation, or the Hegelian dialectic (or other notions such as progress and development). Change seems to be a core element of the ontology of process philosophy for him. And since, in his view, process philosophy dominates modern ways of thinking, its conception of reality is therefore bound to affect those concepts that are part of this "super-structure." As previously shown, this conception of change impinges on various disciplines such as history, science, etc. The dual aspect of reality as "both permanence and change" is explained by al-Attas through the concept of *aʿyān thābita* as examined below.

Aʿyān thābita or Fixed Essences

God, in his Essence, is only known and knowable to Himself. He also has knowledge of all things, and all things subsist in God's knowledge. In Akbarian ontology, the multiple beings that constitute the created world—that is, both "the visible world as well as the invisible world";[108] that is, everything save God—are the many determinations (*taʿayyunāt*), and individuations (*tashakhkhuṣāt*)[109] of Being without Being undergoing any division, multiplication, nor change: "It remains

104
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 139–40.

105
Al-Attas, 127.

106
Al-Attas, 115.

107
Al-Attas, 139–40.

108
Al-Attas, 268.

109
Al-Attas, 273.

One as ever."[110] The beings of the world subsist as objects of God's knowledge or "intelligibles in the Divine knowledge." These objects which dwell therein "in a state of pure possibility"[111] are called the "*aʿyān thābita*" which can be translated as "*fixed* essences or *permanent* archetypes."[112] Though the term "archetype" may suggest something akin to the Platonic Forms, this is not the case here, for the *aʿyān* do not represent a model that sensible things seek to mirror or emulate. Without getting into the labyrinthian details in which questions of quiddity could lead us, we can say that though we are using the term "essences" (or *aʿyān*) here, in reality, we are referring to quiddity (*māhiyya*) as a reality (assimilated to *wujūd*) and not simply to quiddity as a concept that is a mode of existence.[113] This is why al-Attas describes Ibn ʿArabi's position as "existentialist" and not "essentialist." The *aʿyān thābita* in fact represent the essence or reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of things. It is by the mediation of the Divine Names (*al-asmāʾ*) that these realities become manifest:

> What is it that brings beings out of this Cloud, from this state of possibility into a state of manifestation? It is the Divine Word calling things into existence. According to Ibn ʿArabī, it is through the agency of what he calls the "Divine Names" that manifested beings are organised and arranged. "Names" here should not be taken to mean the specific terms (e.g., the "Merciful" or the "Almighty") which we utter in human language. Rather, they are the "names of these names" (asmāʾ al-asmāʾ), the various modalities through which God impels and organises existence in the universe.[114]

As stated, the Divine Names in this context do not refer to "specific terms"; additionally, they are innumerable.[115] When considered in their distinctness—and not with respect to the Divine Essence—"each Divine Name is an Attribute."[116] The concept of *aʿyān thābita* was mainly used by Ibn ʿArabi to solve the problem of the relation between divine unity and the multiplicity of the phenomenal world. The *aʿyān* are therefore the many manifestations and aspects of the Divine Names. As mentioned in a previously cited passage whose meaning was not fully elucidated, in contrast to the concept of existence, "the reality of existence is active; it is a conscious, dynamic, and creative entity, articulating from within itself infinite possibilities of self expression."[117] The Absolute Being, in His first manifestation of Himself *to* Himself, becomes cognizant of those essences or Realities which are none other than the "forms of the Names and Attributes."[118] The *ʿayn thābit* can therefore be succinctly defined as "a form of a Divine Name naming a special aspect of the Essence, which form is manifested in the Divine consciousness."[119] Because the *aʿyān thābita* remain in the Divine consciousness, not even getting so much as a whiff of "external existence," they are considered non-existent.[120] External existence means here their outward manifestation as concrete realities, given that the *aʿyān* remain present in the divine consciousness (*al-ḥaḍrat al-ʿilmiyya*)[121] or in the interior condition of Being. From that perspective they are non-existent (that is, to outward reality): "What is actualized or externalized are the forces or controlling powers conforming to the nature of the archetype

110
Abdul Haq Ansari, "Ibn ʿArabi: the Doctrine of Waḥdat al-Wujūd," 153.

111
Pierre Lory, "The Symbolism of Letters and Language in the Work of Ibn ʿArabi," *Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society* (March 31, 2021) https://ibnarabisociety.org/symbolism-of-letters-and-language-pierre-lory/. "Possibility" here is "*istiʿdādāt*," a term that literally means "preparednesses" and that al-Attas translates as "potentialities."

112
Al-Attas, *Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq*, 38.

113
Cf. diagrams p. 247 and p. 250 of *Prolegomena.*

114
Lory, "The Symbolism of Letters and Language in the Work of Ibn ʿArabi."

115
Al-Attas, *Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq*, 37.

116
Al-Attas, 37.

117
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 268.

118
Al-Attas, 277.

119
Al-Attas, 253.

120
Al-Attas, 248.

121
Al-Attas, 250.

(*aḥkām*), its concomitants and effects (*lawāzim* and *āthār*) inherent in the potentialities (*istiʿdādāt*) in the archetype."[122] On the other hand, since the archetypes subsist as intelligibles in God's knowledge, their being is more "real" than the being of concrete existents, which are part of the phenomenal world and derived from the fixed archetypes: "In relation to the world that they project they [i.e., the fixed essences] are more real than the world."[123] Al-Attas therefore describes them as a "third metaphysical category between existence and nonexistence."[124] The *aʿyān* allow al-Attas to offer what he considers an adequate alternative to these other understandings of change, which are problematic for him, since if the things of the phenomenal world are changing all the time, this implies their continued subsistence as they undergo that change: "The implication underlying the concept of change is that the diverse things that constitute the world of phenomena somehow persist in existence and undergo movement or transformation."[125] This contradicts his position according to which things are in a constant state of renewal or perpetually undergoing new creation (*khalq jadīd*). According to the Qurʾan (55:26–27), everything is ever-perishing or in a state of *fanāʾ* save "God's *wajh*" which remains in perpetual existence. The word *wajh* means both face and aspect (or facet). For al-Attas, "the Reality-Truth is the Aspect (*wajh*) of God which remains (*yabqa*, i.e., *baqāʾ*) after the perishing (*fanāʾ*) of created things."[126] Created things are therefore in a constant state of annihilation (*fanāʾ*) and renewal: "We maintain that phenomenal things do not persist in existence, but perish upon coming into existence, being continually replaced by new similars in a perpetual process."[127] This discontinuance is inherent in the phenomenal world. Change, on the other hand, is to be located at the level of the *aʿyān* since they contain all the possible "future states"[128] of the realities that manifest them. As the potentialities within the fixed essences are actualised or unfold, this translates as change in those essences because the phenomenal things which actualise them are continually ever-perishing.[129] At the same time, however, "the realities [i.e., the *aʿyān*] are ever-regaining continuance in existence."[130] This continuance in existence is identified with this "aspect (*wajh*) of God" characterised by *baqāʾ*. As to Absolute Existence Himself, even though we speak of His Reality as being dynamic—as expressed a couple of verses later in *sura* al-Rahman (55:29), "*kull yawm huwa fī shaʾn*," which al-Attas translates as "He is always in act"[131]—al-Attas explains how "He is far too exalted to be conceived as being immersed in a process descriptive of becoming or transformation."[132]

It is interesting to note how al-Attas utilises the categories of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ* not merely as spiritual states (*aḥwāl*) that man undergoes, but as actual ontological states, therefore linking these various states of the soul to the realities ever-present in God's consciousness. The *aʿyān thābita* as a "third metaphysical category between existence and non-existence" therefore also possesses a "dual aspect"[133] involving both permanence and change. This metaphysics of permanence and change is, according to al-Attas, a superior alternative to an ontological system that only posits change and *a priori* excludes permanence as a feature of reality. We can see the logic behind such reasoning for it corresponds to the traditional view of metaphysics as the highest science, which contains the principles of all lower sciences. From that

122
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 248.

123
Al-Attas, *Ḥujjat al-Ṣiddiq*, 38.

124
Al-Attas, 38.

125
Al-Attas, *Prolegomena*, 139.

126
Al-Attas, 237.

127
Al-Attas, 139.

128
Al-Attas, 140.

129
Al-Attas, 140.

130
Al-Attas, 140.

131
Al-Attas, 239.

132
Al-Attas, 140.

133
Al-Attas, 140.

perspective, metaphysical concepts are bound to "trickle down" into other sciences and affect the way other concepts will be formulated. This approach, however, is not without challenges.

Conclusion

Despite al-Attas not being a structuralist thinker, he does adopt a somewhat structuralist approach. One may therefore criticise him for using the same arguments which are usually directed at structuralists. Isn't it somewhat reductive to tie several concepts to one given *overarching* concept (such as how progress, secularisation, development, etc., are all tied to change)? Yet, al-Attas never really reduces them to change *only* (to the exclusion of other elements).

Another more important challenge to his philosophical programme may perhaps lie in the question of method. Al-Attas considers that one may borrow methods from modern sciences and philosophy so long as they do not contradict Islamic orthodoxy and his Sufi metaphysics. Just as al-Ghazali introduced logic into *kalām*, other approaches from other systems can thus be used. The question here is whether a given method is separable from the science within which it developed. Richard Frank, for example—and Sunni theologian Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) before him—has raised the question of the compatibility of Aristotelian logic with Ashʿarism in the context of al-Ghazali's writings.[134] Likewise, is the structuralist approach separable from the ontological system that underpins it?

The question of the role of *kalām* especially (and to a lesser extent *falsafa*) posed earlier is also one that merits attention. If the metaphysics of *kalām* are just as essentialistic as modern philosophical systems (albeit in a different way) according to al-Attas, then why does *kalām* not lead to the same "deviations" in meaning as those other systems do? An obvious answer would be that even though al-Attas thinks that *kalām* "essentialism" is not the correct system to adopt, Muslim theologians still refer to the Quran as the veritable standard and source of knowledge. *Kalām* as a dialectic science is meant to protect the religion and preserve orthodoxy. Its essentialism would therefore be of little consequence. Also, the *mutakallimūn* uphold God's incomparability and their definition of the world as *everything other than God* which would still allow for an interpretation of the objects of the world along the lines suggested by al-Attas: as signs pointing to their Creator.

In which case, we may then ask what the purpose of Sufi metaphysics is. The answer to this question is perhaps less obvious. First, we should note that for al-Attas, Sufi metaphysics is the correct model of interpretation of reality. This is not mere rhetoric, but a model he actually adheres to based on his own spiritual experiences. The idea here is not to put forward a model that "corresponds" to phenomena (the same way the "correspondence theory of truth" operates), but one that is actually *true* in the sense of *ḥaqīqa*.

Still, we may ask, regardless of whether Sufi metaphysics constitutes the "truth" or not, isn't *kalām* as a dialectic science sufficient to respond to the "correspondence theory of truth" or the threat of secularisation? Here the example given above of Jami's *Durra* becomes useful: as explained earlier, Sufi metaphysics is deemed superior to

134
Richard Frank, *Al-Ghazālī and the Ashʿarite School* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 17.

kalām and *falsafa*, due to its simultaneous conformity to orthodoxy, reliance on unveiling, and (most importantly) because its logical proofs are considered superior. It may be posited that Sufi metaphysics, by providing solutions that are superior to some doctrinal problems, has supplanted *kalām* in its function of a dialectic science which in turn has rendered Sufi metaphysics perhaps just as necessary for the preservation of religion. But al-Attas's Sufi metaphysics is meant to *subsume* rather than *replace kalām*. He views their relationship as intensive rather than purely hierarchical (although some hierarchy remains). In other words, Sufi metaphysics should both align with *kalām* and provide a deeper interpretation of reality. In keeping with his rejection of the notion of change or progress when applied to religion, al-Attas does not see Sufi metaphysics as a more complex form of previous, more "primitive" "versions of Islam." Therefore, *kalām* remains just as essential to the preservation of the religion as Sufism is. Also, the relationship of Akbarian metaphysics to older Sufi concepts and ideas may be viewed as a clarification of what already lay in latency, an ontology that was formulated in a more "basic" form but whose contents were just as rich and complex. This, at least, is how I interpret al-Attas's system, although there remain many questions and challenges to be addressed.

I wish to conclude that understanding Ibn ʿArabi is essential to appreciate the works of al-Attas in their full depth. Conversely, al-Attas's works constitute an invaluable contribution for a better understanding of al-Shaykh al-Akbar's thought. This article represents but a modest analysis of some aspects of his interpretation of Ibn ʿArabi. To give just one example: al-Attas has extensively written on education and developed his own philosophy of education. In *Islām and Secularism*, he utilises the concepts of "*al-insān al-kāmil*" and "*al-insān al-kullī*" (universal man) to develop his idea of the university (*kullīya*).[135]

Al-Attas does not limit himself to an explanation of Ibn ʿArabi's ideas, however. He also puts forward his own theories and builds upon that Akbarian heritage through contemporary questions. Furthermore, Ibn ʿArabi's thought constitutes but one aspect of the Malay philosopher's works, which are difficult to classify for various reasons. Indeed, al-Attas draws from a wide variety of sources (both pre- and post-Akbarian) that belong to both the Islamic and Western intellectual traditions, displaying profound mastery of both.

Though al-Attas has been compared to many contemporary scholars, and indeed parallels can be drawn between his ideas and those of postcolonial and postmodern theorists who seek to question classical epistemic models, this comparison can only be made at the surface. His work is rooted in an altogether different conception of the world, reality, and the objects that constitute them. Most importantly, his *oeuvre* highlights that *the reason* one adopts an idea is perhaps just as important as the idea itself, and the full depth and breadth of his works can truly be appreciated as one follows that ontological descent and explores the various levels of his writings that seek to address those different degrees of existence.

[135] Al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism*, 154.