

Majid and Aljunied's Criticism of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' Islamization of Knowledge

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Abstract

The Islamization of Knowledge (IoK) pioneered by Al-Attas since 1977 remains debated among Muslim intellectuals. Majid and Aljunied argue that IoK rests on unfounded assumptions of civilizational difference and produces only secularism-in-reverse. However, this critique targets the IoK movement collectively, not Al-Attas' philosophical construction specifically. This article analyzes the validity of Majid-Aljunied's critique against Al-Attas' IoK concept. Using qualitative library research and content analysis of Al-Attas' primary works and the Majid-Aljunied article, three findings emerge. First, Al-Attas' IoK holds that knowledge is never value-free, requiring worldview reorientation through de-Westernization and Islamization, with adab and ta'dib at its core. Second, of four Majid-Aljunied criticisms, only the first targets Al-Attas; the remaining three address the IoK movement broadly. Third, the critique is conceptually limited, strong in historiographical correction but failing to engage Al-Attas' core framework, which rejects the veneer approach and claims no civilizational purification. This article offers a more balanced reading of Majid-Aljunied's critique of Al-Attas' Islamization of Knowledge.

Keywords: Islamization of knowledge, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Arfah Abdul Majid, Khairudin Aljunied.



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Abstrak

Islamisasi Ilmu sebagai proyek epistemologis yang digagas Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas sejak 1977 terus menjadi perdebatan di kalangan intelektual Muslim. Kritik terkini dari Majid dan Aljunied berargumen bahwa proyek ini dibangun di atas asumsi perbedaan peradaban yang keliru dan hanya menghasilkan sekularisme terbalik. Namun kritik tersebut ditujukan kepada gerakan Islamisasi Ilmu secara kolektif dan belum diuji terhadap konstruksi filosofis Al-Attas secara spesifik. Artikel ini bertujuan menganalisis validitas kritik Majid-Aljunied terhadap konsep Islamisasi Ilmu Al-Attas. Dengan metode kualitatif berbasis studi kepustakaan dan analisis konten terhadap karya primer Al-Attas dan artikel Majid-Aljunied, artikel ini menghasilkan tiga temuan. Pertama, konsep Islamisasi Ilmu Al-Attas bertumpu pada tesis bahwa ilmu tidak pernah bebas nilai, sehingga dibutuhkan reorientasi worldview melalui *dewesternisasi* dan islamisasi, dengan adab dan ta'dib sebagai intinya. Kedua, dari empat kritik Majid-Aljunied, hanya kritik pertama yang ditujukan kepada Al-Attas, sedangkan tiga lainnya bersifat kolektif. Ketiga, validitas kritik bersifat terbatas, kuat pada koreksi historiografis dan kritik implementasi dangkal, namun tidak menyentuh inti konsep Al-Attas yang menolak pendekatan *veneer* dan tidak mengklaim pemurnian peradaban. Artikel ini menawarkan pembacaan yang lebih berimbang atas kritik Majid-Aljunied terhadap Islamisasi Ilmu Al-Attas.

Kata Kunci: Islamisasi ilmu pengetahuan, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Arfah Abdul Majid, Khairudin Aljunied.

Introduction

The Islamization of Knowledge is one of the most influential intellectual projects in contemporary Islamic thought. This idea is one of the responses of Muslim intellectuals to the dominance of secular Western epistemology. The figure who first initiated the systematic Islamization of Knowledge was Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas since the late 1970s, precisely in 1977.¹ This departs from the belief that the fundamental problem of Muslims is not in the lack of technology or resources, but in the deep-rooted crisis of worldview, Al-Attas offers the project of de-westernization and reorientation of knowledge, or

¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1993: 44).

the reconstruction of the Islamic worldview as the foundation of scientific activities.²

Despite its wide influence, the Islamization of Knowledge has not escaped various criticisms. A number of scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, question both the philosophical assumptions and the practical results produced by the project. One of the latest and quite comprehensive criticisms was put forward by Arfah Abdul Majid and Khairudin Aljunied in their article entitled *Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge* published in 2023.³ Majid and Aljunied's article is interesting because it not only criticizes the practice of Islamization of Knowledge, but also questions a number of conceptual assumptions that have been the foundation of the movement. Nevertheless, since their criticism is directed at the Islamization movement of Knowledge in general, a more specific analysis is needed to assess the extent to which it is really relevant to the philosophical construction of Al-Attas who is often considered one of the most systematic formulators of the project of Islamization of Knowledge.

The study of al-Attas has been carried out a lot. Among them, such as, Mardiaty et al., examine the Islamization of knowledge as a response to the secularization of the aspect of general ideas, but without the operationalization of the specific Al-Attas framework.⁴ Dalmeri et al., discuss secularism as a challenge to Islamic education from the socio-philosophical dimension without using the analysis knife of certain figures.⁵ Fitri et al., examine the integration of knowledge from the aspect of school curriculum implementation without touching its epistemological roots.⁶ Faruk et al., examine the dichotomy of knowledge from a philosophical but descriptive aspect without offering a systematic critique framework.⁷ Studies that use the framework of Al-Attas more specifically, such as Devi Elsi Susanti et al., are more focused on comparing Al-Attas with Al-Faruqi and have not aimed at the secularization of

² Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas: An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1998: 3).

³ Arfah Abdul Majid and Khairudin Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge," *Al-Shajarah: ISTAC Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 28, no. 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.31436/shajarah.v28i2.1721>.

⁴ M Mardiaty et al., "Islamisasi Ilmu Sebagai Jawaban Atas Sekularisasi Pendidikan Di Indonesia," *Journal of Humanities, Social Sciences, And Education (JHUSE) Vol. 1*, no. 10 (2025): 110–20.

⁵ Dalmeri Dalmeri et al., "Sekularisme Sebagai Tantangan Pendidikan Islam Kontemporer," *Ta'dibuna: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 11, no. 2 (2022): 222–39, <https://doi.org/10.32832/tadibuna.v11i2.7193>.

⁶ Annisa Fitri, Dian Fitriani, and Gita Sundava Putri, "Integrasi Ilmu Pengetahuan Dan Agama Sebagai Islamisasi Ilmu Pengetahuan Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Di Sekolah," *Jurnal Basicedu* 8, no. 2 (2024): 1224–34, <https://jbasic.org/index.php/basicedu>.

⁷ Majida Faruk, Radjiman Ismail, and H.Moh.Natsir Mahmud, "Dikotomi Ilmu Dalam Pendidikan Islam," *Jurnal Ilmiah Wahana Pendidikan* 9, no. 4 (2023): 310–20, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7680716>.

Indonesian Islamic education as a specific object of analysis.⁸ Arroisi, Zarkasyi, and Roini analyze the relevance of Al-Attas' epistemology to the modern scientific worldview, but without responding to criticisms of al-Attas' Islamization.⁹

However, so far the academic studies have mostly focused on the presentation of the concept of Islamization of knowledge, Islamic worldview, and the idea of *ta'dib*. Existing literature tends to conflate critiques of the implementation of Islamic education with critiques of Al-Attas' foundational philosophical framework. This conflation obscures an important analytical distinction between the practical enactment of his educational vision and the philosophical premises upon which that vision is constructed. The present study addresses this gap by examining Al-Attas' framework at the foundational level, thereby clarifying its philosophical coherence independently of the limitations or inconsistencies associated with its implementation. As a result, there has not been much research that systematically distinguishes between criticism of the implementation of the Islamization of Knowledge and criticism of the philosophical foundations built by Al-Attas.

In addition, Majid and Aljunied in the journal *Al-Shajarah*, an official journal published by ISTAC, the institution that Al-Attas himself founded, argue that the Islamization of Knowledge is built on the assumption that the differences in civilization between Islam and the West are ahistorical and in practice this project only results in what they call "*Islamic veneers*", namely the addition of Qur'anic verses and hadith to disciplines that do not change epistemologically. Their conclusion is strong, that the Islamization of Knowledge is an "*Secularism in reverse*" that replicates the dualism that is to be overcome.¹⁰ This criticism is important because it touches the heart of Al-Attas' argument.

By using a qualitative method with the type of library research,¹¹ the focus of the research will be directed to three objects that are analyzed gradually and interrelated: first, the framework of Islamization of Knowledge as formulated by Al-Attas in his primary works, namely *Islam and Secularism*¹² and

⁸ Devi Elsi Susanti, Muhammad Zalnur, and Fauza Masyhudi, "Islamisasi Ilmu Pengetahuan Menurut Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi Dan Syad Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas," *Jurnal Ilmiah Pendidikan Kebudayaan Dan Agama* 3, no. 1 (2025), <https://doi.org/10.58578/ajisd.v2i2.2705>.

⁹ Jarman Arroisi, Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi, and Winda Roini, "The Relevance of Contemporary Epistemology on Existing Knowledge: A Critical Analysis of Western Scientific Worldview According to Al-Attas Perspective," *Afkar* 25, no. 2 (2023): 225–56, <https://doi.org/10.22452/afkar.vol25no2.7>.

¹⁰ Majid and Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge."

¹¹ Rifa'i Abubakar, *Pengantar Metodologi Penelitian*, 1st ed. (Yogyakarta: SUKA-Press UIN Sunan Kalijaga, 2021: 4).

¹² Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 1993.

*The Concept of Education in Islam*¹³; second, the criticism of Majid and Aljunied in an article entitled *Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge* in the journal *Al-Shajarah*¹⁴ as the main object to which it responds; and third, consider the extent of the validity of the criticism against the Islamization of knowledge.

The data analysis was conducted in two consecutive stages using a structured qualitative content-analysis and comparative framework. In the first stage, the texts of Al-Attas and Majid-Aljunied were coded according to four analytical dimensions: (1) conceptual claim, referring to the central philosophical or theoretical proposition advanced in the text; (2) underlying assumption, referring to the epistemological, ontological, or civilizational premise supporting the claim; (3) argumentative basis, referring to the reasoning or textual evidence used to substantiate the claim; and (4) critical implication, referring to the consequences of the argument for Islamic education and the Islamic intellectual tradition. This coding procedure was used to systematically map Majid-Aljunied's four principal criticisms namely, the assumption of civilizational differences, the dualism of knowledge, secularism-in-reverse, and Islamic veneers and to identify the corresponding arguments in Al-Attas' philosophical framework.

In the second stage, a comparative matrix was constructed to place Al-Attas' arguments alongside Majid-Aljunied's criticisms. Each criticism was examined against the relevant Al-Attasian proposition in terms of conceptual correspondence, interpretive divergence, and argumentative tension. This comparison was intended to distinguish between criticisms directed at the implementation or practical articulation of Al-Attas' ideas and criticisms that directly challenge their foundational philosophical premises. Finally, each identified point of tension was subjected to a validity assessment by returning to the primary texts and evaluating whether the interpretation was supported by the authors' explicit arguments, conceptual definitions, and broader argumentative context. This sequential coding, comparison, and textual verification process was employed to enhance analytical consistency and methodological reliability. With the above analysis method, this article aims to: first, discuss the concept of Islamization of knowledge by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas; second, exposing the main arguments of Majid-Aljunied's criticism of the al-Attas' Islamization of Knowledge; and third, to test the validity of Majid-Aljunied's criticism. Thus, this article is expected to provide a more proportionate reading of the debate on the Islamization of Knowledge in contemporary Islamic thought.

¹³ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1999).

¹⁴ Majid and Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge."

Result and Discussion

The Concept of Islamization of Knowledge by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas formulated the idea of Islamization of Knowledge in 1977 at the first international Islamic education conference in Makkah. This idea was later strengthened through several of his works, such as *Islam and Secularism* written in 1978.¹⁵ Al-Attas stated Islamization as a fundamental epistemological project, namely an effort to liberate human beings from the domination of the secular worldview. The Islamization of Knowledge in the framework of Al-Attas cannot be understood only as the addition of religious postulates to modern scientific disciplines. In his work *Islam and Secularism*, Al-Attas defines Islamization as the liberation of man from magical, mythological, animistic, national cultural traditions that are contrary to Islam, and then from secular control over his intellect and language.¹⁶ This definition reveals that the target of Islamization is not the partial branches of knowledge, but the paradigm and worldview that underpins the entire building of knowledge. Islamization is not a matter of changing the name or adding Islamic content to a curriculum that remains secular in structure, but it demands a much deeper transformation.¹⁷

What distinguishes al-Attas' thought from the Islamized versions of knowledge does not lie in the affirmation of monotheism alone, because monotheism is the starting point that is also held by almost all thinkers in this movement, including Al-Faruqi and Nasr.¹⁸ The hallmark of Al-Attas' thought lies precisely in his thesis that knowledge is never neutral and value-free. Each discipline carries assumptions about reality, people, and goals. For him, modern knowledge inherited from the Western tradition has been infiltrated by a certain disposition and content that disguises itself as objective knowledge, when in fact it carries with it metaphysical and ideological assumptions that its users are not aware of.¹⁹ From this premise, Al-Attas emphasizes the importance of a correct worldview as a prerequisite for valid knowledge, namely the Islamic way of looking at reality (*ru'yat al-Islam li al-wujud*), a way of looking at reality as a whole, in which Allah is the center of the entire building of knowledge, not just one of the variables in it.²⁰ When the Islamic worldview is distorted by Western secularism, knowledge loses its transcendence dimension and is reduced to a mere instrument of power or economic productivity. This is the root of what Al-Attas calls the crisis of contemporary Islamic education, not a technical crisis

¹⁵ Muslem, "Konsep Islamisasi Ilmu Pengetahuan Dan Penerapannya Dalam Pendidikan Islam," *Tazkiya: Jurnal Pendidikan Islam* 8, no. 2 (2019): 43–66.

¹⁶ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*: 44.

¹⁷ Al-Attas: 45.

¹⁸ Majid and Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge: 410."

¹⁹ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 1993: 44.

²⁰ M. Kholid Muslih, *Worldview Islam* (Ponorogo: Direktorat Islamisasi Ilmu UNIDA Gontor, 2018: 8).

that can be solved by curriculum reform, but a worldview crisis that demands a comprehensive reconstruction.²¹

When these assumptions originate from the secular Western worldview, this is where the mechanism of Islamization of Knowledge works through two successive stages, namely de-westernization and Islamization itself.²² The stage of de-westernization identifies and releases elements of Western worldview that are incompatible with Islam from within the body of modern knowledge, namely Cartesian mind-matter dualism, positivism, materialism, and the separation of fact from value. After de-westernization, the infusion of key Islamic concepts into each discipline so that knowledge is oriented to the Islamic worldview. What needs to be emphasized is that Al-Attas does not claim the existence of a "purely Islamic" knowledge that is totally separate from other scientific traditions; What he proposed was a fundamental reorientation to the worldview that underpins scientific activities.²³

It is through the mechanism of de-westernization that the concept of *adab* works as an order. *Adab* in the sense of Al-Attas is not just manners or social ethics, but the ability to put everything, including knowledge, in the right position in the hierarchy of Islamic values.²⁴ When *adab* is present in the educational process, knowledge is not pursued for the sake of social status or capital accumulation, but as a way to know Allah and understand the position of man in the order of creation. The ultimate goal is *insan kamil*, namely human beings who integrate knowledge, charity, and morals in their entirety.²⁵ However, when this mechanism fails, that is, when the worldview that underpins education is allowed to shift towards secularism while the content is only labeled Islamic, then what happens is a *loss of adab*. Loss of *adab* is a condition when humans lose the ability to put everything in its proper place in the hierarchy of Islamic values.²⁶ Its manifestation can be seen when academic degrees are pursued solely for the sake of social status, knowledge is used to accumulate capital, or Islamic higher education loses its spiritual orientation in order to meet the demands of global university rankings. The solution, according to Al-Attas, is *ta'dib*, which is an education that instills *adab* as the core, not just a side output.²⁷ This concept of *ta'dib* is what distinguishes Al-Attas from just advocating for the "Islamization of content", he talks about the

²¹ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*: 1-3.

²² Arroisi, Zarkasyi, and Roini, "The Relevance of Contemporary Epistemology on Existing Knowledge: A Critical Analysis of Western Scientific Worldview According to Al-Attas Perspective: 231."

²³ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*: 22-27.

²⁴ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: 27-30.

²⁵ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas: 19-22.

²⁶ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*: 120-127.

²⁷ Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education*: 22-24.

reconstruction of human beings as knowledgeable and civilized subjects. The following is a flow chart of the mechanism of al-Attas' Islamization of Knowledge:

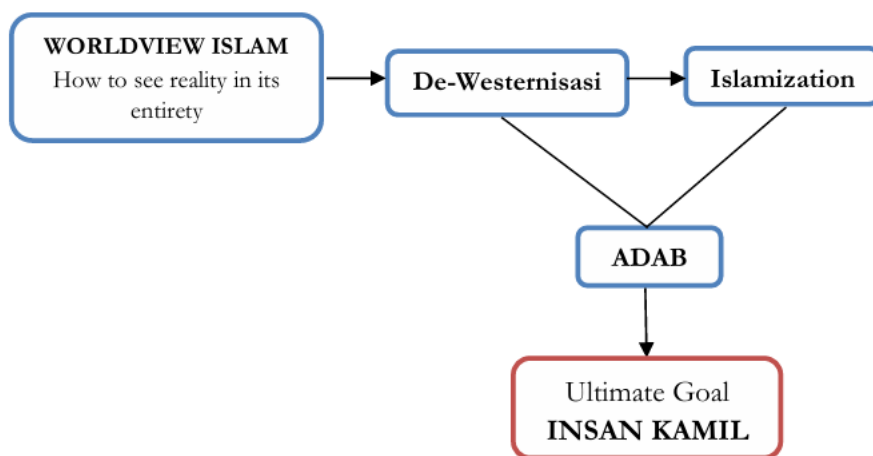


Image 1, The Mechanism of Al-Attas' Islamization of Knowledge

Data Source: Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *"Islam and Secularism"*

The image above shows that the al-Attas' Islamization of Knowledge is not the process of adding religious elements into modern disciplines, but the reconstruction of the worldview that underlies scientific activities. In this framework, de-westernization and Islamization are two interrelated stages to return knowledge to the orientation of monotheism through the formation of adab and ta'dib so as to give birth to kamil people as the ultimate goal of Islamic education.

Arfah Abdul Majid and Khairudin Aljunied's Criticism of the Islamization of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

Before discussing the substance of the criticism, it is important to look at the academic backgrounds of the two authors. Arfah Abdul Majid is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Government and Civilization Studies, Faculty of Human Ecology, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). His fields of study include Islam and politics, interfaith dialogue, and issues of civilization in contemporary Muslim society.²⁸ Khairudin Aljunied is an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore (NUS). He completed his undergraduate and master's degree in history at NUS before obtaining a doctorate from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. In addition to being active as an academic, Aljunied has also been the Malaysia Chair of Islam in Southeast Asia at Georgetown University and a Senior Fellow at the Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-

²⁸ Arfah Abdul Majid, "Staff Profile," Universiti Putra Malaysia, 2026.

Christian Understanding. Aljunied's expertise in the intellectual history of the Malay world, networks of scholars, religious cosmopolitanism, and the development of modern Islamic ideas explains why the criticism he and Majid built on a large number of historical and genealogical approaches to knowledge.

²⁹ In contrast to Al-Attas, who departed from metaphysical and epistemological analysis, Majid and Aljunied emphasized the historical reading of cross-civilizational interactions in the development of science. This scientific background is important to note because it affects the way both of them read the Islamization of Knowledge project. In the articles of Majid and Aljunied, they introduce al-Attas as one of the most systematic pioneers in the Islamization of science, along with Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. It is this position of al-Attas as a pioneer that makes him included in the personal and collective criticisms he put forward.³⁰

The criticism of Majid and Aljunied on the Islamization of Knowledge project is built on four main arguments that support each other and are fundamental. The first argument is that the Islamization of Knowledge (IoK) project, including the one carried out by Al-Attas, is built on the assumption of essential and ahistorical differences of civilization. The entire IoK movement, according to them, departs from the view that the Islamic worldview and the Western worldview are two radically separate and irreconcilable entities. So that knowledge born from the modern Western tradition needs to be "cleaned" before it can be accepted by Muslims.³¹ This view, according to Majid and Aljunied, is historically wrong. A survey of the history of the formation of knowledge shows that the entire great scientific tradition of the world, including classical Islamic knowledge, grew precisely through the exchange of civilizations that could not be separated cleanly. Arabic mathematics developed through interaction with Indian traditions; Islamic medicine grew out of exchanges with Greek and Persian traditions; even the European Renaissance itself would not have been possible without the contribution of Muslim scholars.³² Thus, according to Majid and Aljunied by sharpening the boundaries between "Islamic knowledge" and "Western knowledge", the IoK project actually denies the inter-civilizational character that has become the foundation of the glory of classical Islamic knowledge itself.

Majid and Aljunied's second argument is that the attempt to separate knowledge into "Islamic" and "secular" categories is ontologically problematic. They refer to Talal Asad's argument that the "religious" and "secular" categories are not fixed essential categories, but are historically constructed and inter-form

²⁹ Georgetown University, "Khairudin Aljunied," Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding (ACMCU), 2026, <https://acmcu.georgetown.edu/profiles/khairudin-aljunied/>.

³⁰ Majid and Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge: 407."

³¹ Majid and Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge: 408."

³² Majid and Aljunied: 413-416.

with each other.³³ The dualism, according to Majid and Aljunied, does not lie in knowledge itself, but in the thoughts and practices of the producers of knowledge. Even Western Enlightenment figures such as Descartes built their scientific arguments on metaphysical foundations, meaning that the "secular Western knowledge" that was to be de-westernized itself was never historically completely secular. Consequently, the effort to re-secularize knowledge through Islamization is a project that starts from the wrong premise, because the knowledge that is to be "Islamized" has never been purely secular from the beginning.³⁴

From these two arguments, Majid and Aljunied then drew the conclusion that became the third criticism argument: the IoK project is "*secularism-in-reverse*". By adopting the ultra-secular's reductive approach that strictly separates the domain of knowledge, proponents of IoK are actually replicating the mistakes they seek to correct.³⁵ Then, the fourth critical argument, Majid and Aljunied say that in practice, what results in the Islamization of knowledge is what they call "Islamic veneers", i.e. sociology becomes "Islamic sociology", physics becomes "Islamic physics", without any truly radical epistemological changes, without the birth of new theories, new concepts, or world-class universities. This criticism is not entirely original in the history of the IoK debate: Fazlur Rahman has been arguing since 1988 that knowledge cannot be "Islamized" because the problem is not the knowledge but the way humans use it.³⁶ What sets Majid-Aljunied apart is the systematization of these criticisms with a richer historical framework, and his audacity to publish the article precisely in the journal ISTAC, Al-Attas' own institution, that gives this criticism its own symbolic weight. To make it easier, here is a summary table of Majid and Aljunied's criticisms:

Table 1: The Structure of Majid-Aljunied's Criticism Argumentation

Argument	Main Claims	Evidence Submitted by Majid and Aljunied	Conclusion
Historis-Epistemologis	IoK is built on the assumption of ahistorical civilization differences	Cross-civilizational exchanges in the history of classical Islamic knowledge	De-westernization ignores the inter-civilizational nature of knowledge

³³ Talal Asad, *FORMATIONS OF THE SECULAR: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (California: Stanford University Press, 2003: 25), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-15250-5_62.

³⁴ Majid and Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge: 417-420."

³⁵ Majid and Aljunied: 421-422.

³⁶ Fazlur Rahman, "Islamization of Knowledge: A Response," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Science* 5, no. 1 (1988): 3-11.

Ontological	The separation of "Islamic" and "secular" knowledge is impossible in principle	The sacred and the secular form each other (Talal Asad); Modern knowledge still contains metaphysical assumptions	Re-enrolling knowledge from the wrong premise
Conceptual-Critical	IoK is <i>"Secularism in reverse"</i>	IoK still maintains the logic of separating the domain of knowledge used by secularism, only in the opposite direction.	IoK reproduces the thinking structure it actually wants to criticize
Empirical-Practical	IoK only produce <i>"Islamic veneers"</i>	There are no new theories or world-class universities from the IoK project	IoK fails to produce a substantive epistemological transformation

Data Source: Majid and Aljunied, *"Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge"*.

Critical Analysis of Majid and Aljunied's Critique of Al-Attas' Islamization of Knowledge

Most of Majid and Aljunied's criticism is actually directed at the movement for the Islamization of Knowledge collectively, not just at Al-Attas' philosophical construction. Therefore, the validity of these criticisms of Al-Attas and collectives needs to be evaluated carefully so that there is no generalization of criticism of certain figures' movements. The first criticism is collective but contains an explicit mention of the total rejection of Western philosophy. Meanwhile, the second, third, and fourth criticisms are directed collectively at the Islamization of knowledge.

Examining the First Criticism: Is Al-Attas' Different Civilization Assumptions Wrong?

This criticism is specifically directed at al-Attas. Majid and Aljunied argue that the Islamization of Knowledge is built on the assumption that there is a fundamental difference between Islamic and Western civilization. According to them, this assumption is ahistorical because the history of scientific development actually shows an intense exchange across civilizations.³⁷ The classical Islamic intellectual tradition developed through interaction with Greek philosophy, Persian knowledge, and Indian mathematics. Therefore, attempts to make a clear distinction between Islamic knowledge and Western knowledge are

³⁷ Majid and Aljunied, *"Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge."*

seen as incompatible with the historical facts of the development of knowledge.³⁸

This criticism has a strong historical basis. History does show that Islamic civilization did not develop exclusively, but through the process of accepting, selection, and transformation of various previous intellectual traditions. In this context, Majid and Aljunied succeeded in showing weakness if the Islamization of Knowledge is understood as a project of separation of civilizations or rejection of the entire intellectual heritage of the West.

However, the criticism does not seem to be entirely on target when directed at Al-Attas. In his various major works, Al-Attas never rejected knowledge because of its geographical or civilizational origins. Al-Attas' main concern is the worldview that underpins this knowledge. When Al-Attas speaks of de-westernization, he does not mean a rejection of Western knowledge as a whole, but an identification of the elements of secularism, dualism, and materialism that he believes have influenced the orientation of modern knowledge.³⁹ He said it was for the identification and correction of secular ontological assumptions that had infiltrated the way knowledge was understood and oriented. Mathematics remains mathematics, sociology remains sociology, what changes is the question: for what and with what worldview are the knowledges taught?⁴⁰

Thus, the author argues that Majid and Aljunied's first criticism is only partially valid. This criticism is correct when directed at the reading of the Islamization of Knowledge that understands the relationship between Islam and the West in a dichotomous manner. However, these criticisms have been less successful in refuting Al-Attas' philosophical foundations because Al-Attas' main focus is not on the separation of civilizations, but on the reconstruction of the worldview that underlies scientific activity.

Examining the Second Criticism: The Attempt to Separate Knowledge into "Islamic" and "Secular" Categories Is Ontological Problematic

Both Majid and Aljunied's criticism stems from the argument that the separation between Islamic and secular knowledge has no solid ontological basis. Referring to Talal Asad, they argue that the categories of "religious" and "secular" are not two completely separate entities, but rather historical constructions that form each other.⁴¹ From this point of view, the attempt to

³⁸ Arroisi, Zarkasyi, and Roini, "The Relevance of Contemporary Epistemology on Existing Knowledge: A Critical Analysis of Western Scientific Worldview According to Al-Attas Perspective: 231."

³⁹ Fitri, Fitriani, and Putri, "Integrasi Ilmu Pengetahuan Dan Agama Sebagai Islamisasi Ilmu Pengetahuan Dalam Sistem Pendidikan Di Sekolah."

⁴⁰ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, "The Concept of Education in Islam," *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC), 1999: 22-27), [https://ia801808.us.archive.org/23/items/islam-and-secularism-al-attas/Islam-and-Secularism al attas.pdf](https://ia801808.us.archive.org/23/items/islam-and-secularism-al-attas/Islam-and-Secularism%20al%20attas.pdf).

⁴¹ Majid and Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge: 408."

distinguish knowledge into Islamic and secular categories was seen as problematic from the beginning.

The argument is quite interesting because it shows that even the modern Western intellectual tradition has never been completely free of the metaphysical dimension. Figures such as Rene Descartes, for example, built their thinking on certain metaphysical assumptions.⁴² Thus, the claim of the existence of a completely secular knowledge becomes difficult to defend historically or philosophically.

However, the author sees that Majid and Aljunied seem to have put Al-Attas in a position that he did not actually take. Al-Attas never stated that there are two types of ontologically different knowledges, namely Islamic knowledge and secular knowledge. Instead, he repeatedly asserts that knowledge is inherently derived from God and has ontological unity. What Al-Attas is at issue is not the substance of knowledge, but the epistemological and metaphysical orientation that underlies its use. Al-Attas never claimed that there was a "purely secular" knowledge that needed to be "purified"; What he claims is that the worldview that supports scientific activities needs to be reoriented based on the Islamic perspective (Islamic Worldview) or *tawhid*.⁴³

Therefore, the ontological criticism of Majid and Aljunied becomes less on target when directed at Al-Attas. This criticism is more relevant to the forms of Islamization of knowledge that do establish a rigid classification between religious knowledge and general knowledge. Meanwhile, in the framework of Al-Attas, what is differentiated is not the knowledge itself, but the worldview that shapes the way humans understand and use the knowledge.

Examining the Third Criticism: the IoK project is "secularism-in-reverse"

Majid and Aljunied further conclude that the Islamization of Knowledge project ultimately results only in what they call secularism-in-reverse. According to them, the supporters of the Islamization of Knowledge still maintain the structure of secularism that separates the domain of knowledge, only the direction of separation is reversed. If secularism separates religion from knowledge, then the Islamization of Knowledge is considered to separate Islamic knowledge from secular knowledge.⁴⁴

This criticism is one of the sharpest criticisms in Majid and Aljunied's article because it touches on the conceptual foundation of the Islamization of Knowledge movement. They seek to show that the project intended to address secularism is precisely unconsciously adopting the same logic as secularism itself.

However, the author argues that this criticism is not entirely appropriate when applied to the concept of al-Attas Islamization of Knowledge. The main

⁴² Majid and Aljunied: 420.

⁴³ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1993: 44).

⁴⁴ Majid and Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge: 421."

goal of Al-Attas is not to create two separate areas of knowledge, but to restore the unity of knowledge under the Islamic worldview. In the framework of Al-Attas, secularism is seen as the cause of the fragmentation of knowledge because it separates reality from its transcendent dimension. The Islamization of Knowledge is intended to overcome this fragmentation through the reintegration of knowledge, humans, and God in a unified worldview.⁴⁵

On that basis, the criticism of secularism-in-reverse is more appropriately understood as a warning against possible deviations in the practice of Islamization of Knowledge, rather than as a successful rebuttal to Al-Attas' philosophical construction. In many parts, the criticism departs from the assumption that Al-Attas built a new dualism, even though Al-Attas' main goal is to erase the dualism inherited by modern secularism.

Examining the Fourth Criticism: The Islamization of knowledge is only "Islamic veneers"

Majid-Aljunied's final criticism is that IoK in practice only produces "Islamic veneers" without any real epistemological change. The term is used to describe the tendency to add religious symbols, terms, or legitimacy to modern disciplines without making substantial epistemological changes. In such conditions, terms such as "Islamic sociology", "Islamic economics", or "Islamic psychology" are only additional labels that do not produce new theories, methodologies, or paradigms.⁴⁶ One example is evidenced by a study conducted by Toisuta et al., on three IAINs/UINs in Indonesia that found that the institutional transformation from IAIN to UIN, instead of strengthening the epistemological peculiarities of Islamic knowledge, is still dominated by administrative approaches and has not yet touched the actual epistemological reconstruction.⁴⁷

This is not a much different picture from the "Islamic veneers" that Majid-Aljunied criticizes: the integration of knowledge is practiced on the surface through the addition of Islamic courses to the general curriculum, while the epistemological assumptions that underpin the curriculum remain unchanged. Sociology is taught with a positivist approach and then "Islamic perspective" is added as the last chapter; economics is taught with a neoclassical framework and "Islamic economics" is added as a complement. The study by Hasbollah et al., on three IAINs/UIN in Indonesia also confirms that the efforts to integrate knowledge are still dominated by administrative approaches and have not touched the actual epistemological reconstruction.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*, 1993: 44-45.

⁴⁶ Majid and Aljunied, "Some Reflection on the Islamization of Knowledge: 422."

⁴⁷ Hasbollah Toisuta, Saidin Ernas, and Sri Ratna Dewi Lampong, "Knowledge Integration in Indonesian State Islamic Institutes and Universities: A Review," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 25 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.25.2024.283>.

⁴⁸ Hasbollah Toisuta, Saidin Ernas, and Sri Ratna Dewi Lampong, "Knowledge Integration in Indonesian State Islamic Institutes and Universities: A Review," *International Journal of Islamic Thought* 25 (2024: 28-30), <https://doi.org/10.24035/ijit.25.2024.283>.

However, the author considers that this criticism is more appropriately directed to the implementation of the Islamization of Knowledge than to the concept of Al-Attas itself. Al-Attas is precisely the harshest critic of this kind of practice. In *The Concept of Education in Islam*, Al-Attas explicitly rejects what he calls the "addition of Islamic labels" to content that is not epistemologically changed. This position is consistent with his broader conception of Islamization, which requires a critical examination of the secular assumptions, concepts, and interpretations embedded in modern knowledge, followed by the integration of Islamic key concepts into the relevant fields of knowledge.⁴⁹ Thus, for Al-Attas, Islamization is not a matter of placing an Islamic veneer over existing knowledge, but of transforming the underlying conceptual and epistemological framework through which knowledge is understood. This is one of the reasons why he is at odds with Al-Faruqi whose approach is more procedural and more at risk of falling into "Islamic veneers", because Al-Faruqi focuses on the Islamization of the discipline as an object, while Al-Attas focuses on reconstructing the worldview of the human being who studies the knowledge.⁵⁰

Therefore, the criticism of Islamic veneers can be accepted as a valid criticism of the many practices of Islamization of Knowledge that have developed over the years. However, these criticisms were not strong enough to reject the entire conceptual building of Al-Attas. On the contrary, this criticism shows that there is a gap between the philosophical ideals formulated by Al-Attas and the various forms of its implementation that often fail to realize the epistemological demands he proposes

Conclusion

This article offers a more balanced and contextual reading of Majid and Aljunied's criticism by distinguishing critiques of the IoK movement and its implementation from critiques of Al-Attas' foundational philosophy. The main limitation is its conceptual-philosophical nature and the absence of empirical verification. Further research should therefore examine how Al-Attas' concept of the Islamization of Knowledge is concretely operationalized in educational settings, particularly through ethnographic studies of educational institutions and in-depth analyses of curricula and educational practices.

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⁴⁹ Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1995): 114.

⁵⁰ Susanti, Zalnur, and Masyhudi, "Islamisasi Ilmu Pengetahuan Menurut Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi Dan Syad Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas."

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