

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN THE FRAMEWORK OF SECULARISM: A PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHARLES TAYLOR AND SYED M. NAQUIB AL-ATTAS

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the relationship between religion and politics through a comparative examination of the thoughts of Charles Taylor and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas in their respective responses to secularism. Employing a qualitative method and a library research approach, the study draws on the primary works of both thinkers as well as relevant academic references. This study is motivated by the absence of a deep philosophical dialogue between Western political philosophy and Islamic thought in redefining the ethical foundations of the modern pluralistic state. This article argues that Taylor's approach is relevant for promoting equality in pluralistic societies such as Indonesia, whereas al-Attas emphasizes a substantive reconstruction of values through the integration of science and religion.

Keywords: *secularism, religion and politics, Charles Taylor, Syed M. Naquib al-Attas*

INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of religion in contemporary public life challenges the classical thesis of secularization, which predicted the decline of religion's role alongside the advance of modernity. As noted by Daniel Philpott, the past two decades have instead witnessed a "resurgence of religion in global politics"

(Philpott, 2009). This indicates that secularization is not a linear or universal process but rather a complex and contextual phenomenon open to critical examination. In this context, the relationship between religion and politics has re-emerged as a crucial philosophical domain that demands renewed conceptual and historical engagement, particularly as the boundaries between the sacred and the profane have become increasingly blurred.

As Talal Asad has shown, the relationship between religion and politics within the framework of modern secularism is not a neutral separation but a configuration of power that confines religion to the realm of private beliefs. According to Asad, secularism not only separates but also reconstitutes religion in accordance with the norms of liberal rationality recognized by the state. In this sense, any discourse on the relationship between religion and politics cannot be detached from an epistemological critique of secular categories themselves, which have been historically shaped by the hegemonic trajectory of Western modernity (Asad, 2003).

In the modern paradigm, secularism does not merely operate as a mechanism for institutional separation between religion and the state but also as an epistemological framework that determines which forms of knowledge are deemed legitimate in the public sphere. It assumes that only reason and rational argumentation are valid foundations for shared public policy, while transcendent values are regarded as subjective. This perspective, critiqued by numerous thinkers, including Charles Taylor and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, has resulted in the reduction of religion to the private sphere and the marginalization of spiritual dimensions in sociopolitical governance.

In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor argues that modern secularization is not merely about the retreat of religion from public life but a profound transformation in human consciousness (Taylor, 2007). He refers to this condition as *secularity 3*, in which religious belief is no longer the dominant horizon but simply one among many possible ways of life. Modern individuals, Taylor asserts,

live within an *immanent frame*, a worldview grounded in worldly meanings that no longer automatically point to transcendent reality. Within this framework, religious experience loses its privileged position in the structure of public meaning. Taylor also critiques the so-called “*subtraction stories*,” the narrative that modernity progresses only by gradually shedding religious elements. For Taylor, this narrative is ideological, as it simplifies historical complexities and tends to marginalize spiritual values in public life. Secularism, therefore, is not neutral but a historically constructed framework that carries specific epistemological and normative claims.

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is one of the most systematic critics of modern secularism in contemporary Islamic thought. According to him, secularism is not merely a separation of religion from politics but a form of desacralization of reality rooted in the post-Enlightenment project of modernity (al-Attas, 1993). The transcendent worldview is replaced by an empirical-rational paradigm, resulting in an epistemological shift from the value of *adab* to the idea of absolute human freedom. Consequently, the structure of knowledge becomes materialistic and relativistic, marginalizing the spiritual dimension. Al-Attas also critiques the separation between divine authority and human autonomy in secular systems, which he sees as a source of moral and ethical crisis in modern societies. In response, he offers the concept of the *Islamization of knowledge* as a framework for reconstructing knowledge and sociopolitical life based on divine and transcendent values (Fadillah et al., 2023).

For al-Attas, this issue is not only theological, but also deeply epistemological. When nature and politics are emptied of transcendent values, what remains is a purely materialistic and profane worldview. As a result, human beings lose their moral compass and sense of existential meaning, since all aspects of life are measured merely by instrumental rationality and worldly calculation. Hence, al-Attas advocates for the *Islamization of knowledge* (*Islamiyatul*

Ma'rifah) as a solution to the failure of the secular world to uphold a religious value framework (al-Attas, 1981).

Secularism did not emerge in a historical vacuum; rather, it was the product of Western history, shaped by conflicts between religious authority and state power. Therefore, treating it as a universal principle applicable across all cultural contexts is problematic. Secularism is embedded with epistemological and historical assumptions rooted in a particular Western experience, and is not automatically relevant to societies with different spiritual inheritances. One of the fundamental principles underlying the rise of secularism is the idea of individual equality. Through this principle, all individuals are treated equally, without domination or hierarchical differentiation (Copson, 2019).

This discourse is particularly relevant in the Indonesian context, where tensions between religious values and the secular political system remain an unresolved philosophical issue. For instance, data from 2020 indicate that 57 countries imposed strict limitations on religion, including Indonesia, which was categorized as imposing high restrictions on religious expression (Resa, 2024). The question of how transcendental values are positioned within a pluralistic national framework remains a site of ongoing contestation and opens up space for critical reflection on the limits of secularism in contemporary Muslim societies.

Within this context, it becomes imperative to critically examine the philosophical roots of modern secularism, particularly how its epistemological and ontological constructions have constrained the expression of transcendent values in collective life. This article focuses on the critiques developed by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Charles Taylor against secularism, by addressing the following research questions: *First*, how do Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Charles Taylor conceptualize the relationship between religion and politics in the context of modernity and secularism? *Second*, what forms of philosophical critique do they offer of secularism as a modern ideology?

Third, to what extent can their thoughts provide alternative frameworks for the relationship between religion and politics in pluralistic societies?

Accordingly, this article seeks to critically examine the epistemological and ontological foundations of secularist thought by analyzing the ideas of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Charles Taylor. It aims to identify and analyze the conceptual weaknesses in the way modern secularism understands and regulates the relationship between religion and politics. Furthermore, the article seeks to explore the forms of philosophical critique posed by al-Attas and Taylor, both from the perspective of Islamic thought and Western philosophy. Through this critical comparison, the author aims to develop a comprehensive understanding of how both thinkers conceptualize secularism and its implications.

A review of the literature reveals that scholarly works directly comparing the thoughts of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Charles Taylor in the context of secularism remain significantly limited. To date, no study has specifically compared these two figures' critiques of secularism and the relationship between religion and politics. Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad (2017) has briefly mentioned the similarity of their efforts in questioning the idea of secularization, Taylor through his Catholic perspective, and al-Attas through the Islamic response to the crisis of modern thought.

However, Kamaruzzaman's study does not focus on a comparative analysis of al-Attas and Taylor. Instead, it emphasizes their contributions in shaping metaphysical foundations, without addressing their respective critiques of secularism. Most existing research discusses each thinker individually without engaging in comparative dialogue. For instance, in 2015, Muntarina explained that al-Attas entirely rejected Western secularism within the framework of Islam. However, this discussion remains purely descriptive.

As for Taylor, Martin Surajaya, in his 2022 study titled *"The Origins of Secularist Thought in the Middle Ages,"* traced the intellectual genealogy of secularism during the medieval period without referencing Taylor as a major

theoretical source. Several other theses and academic articles do use Taylor's conceptual framework as a tool to understand contemporary religious dynamics, particularly in modern societies experiencing a shift from religiously dominated structures toward fragmented pluralism of values.

For example, Mbeo's (2024) research explores the historical emergence of Western secularization using Taylor's concepts to demonstrate that secularism does not necessarily entail the disappearance of religion but rather signifies a transformation in modes of believing in the modern world. Unfortunately, these studies use Taylor primarily as a phenomenological mapping tool, not as a foundational philosophical critic of secularism as a modern ideology.

The only work that briefly mentions both thinkers together is an article by Kamaruzzaman Bustamam-Ahmad (2023), which merely illustrates that both Taylor and al-Attas question the modern condition that severs humanity from its spiritual roots. This work, however, does not explore their philosophical arguments in depth, let alone in a dialogical or critical comparative format. Thus, no academic research in Indonesia to date has explicitly placed Taylor and al-Attas in a philosophical dialogue as two major figures in the critique of secularism, especially concerning the interplay between religion and politics.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a significant gap in the current body of research. Studies on al-Attas remain largely confined to internal Islamic discourse and tend to adopt a normative tone, while engagements with Taylor's work remain theoretical and have yet to be developed into a philosophically evaluative framework. There is a lack of research that directly compares the epistemological, historical, and normative foundations of their respective critiques of secularism as an ideology shaping modern public order.

This study seeks to fill that gap. Its originality lies in the attempt to bring together the thoughts of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Charles Taylor within a critical-comparative framework. The novelty of the research rests in the formulation of a cross-traditional philosophical dialogue between a Southeast

Asian Muslim philosopher and a liberal Catholic thinker from Canada who both offer profound critiques of secularism, albeit from distinct historical and epistemological standpoints. By juxtaposing these two thinkers, this study aims not only to contribute theoretically to the fields of philosophy of religion and political philosophy, but also to provide an alternative framework for understanding the religion-politics relationship in a more just and transcendent way, particularly in facing the spiritual crisis of modernity, both in the West and in Muslim societies such as Indonesia.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a library research method, which focuses on the collection, examination, and analysis of various literature related to the topic under investigation (Zed, 2008). This approach is chosen because it aligns with the research objective, which is conceptual and philosophical in nature, rather than empirical or experimental. The primary sources utilized in this study are the works of Syed M. Naquib al-Attas and Charles Taylor, particularly *Islam and Secularism* (1993) and *A Secular Age* (2007). In addition, relevant secondary literature is consulted, especially those that discuss critical perspectives on secularism from the standpoint of the philosophy of religion and political philosophy.

The research model applied is comparative, using the thoughts of both figures to analyze a central concept. The views of each thinker are interpreted in accordance with their respective conceptual uniqueness (Bakker & Zubair, 1990). The available data are then processed philosophically and theoretically (Kaelan, 2005).

This approach also draws on the comparative-qualitative model proposed by Glaser and Strauss in *Grounded Theory* (as cited in Bungin, 2001). The method proceeds in three main steps:

1. Grouping and comparing the arguments of the two thinkers based on major themes such as conceptions of reality (ontology) and sources of knowledge (epistemology).
2. Contextualizing the findings within each thinker's intellectual tradition, whether Western or Islamic.
3. Synthesizing and formulating a critical conclusion about how their views respond to contemporary issues concerning the relationship between religion and politics. This synthesis includes evaluating the practical and conceptual implications of each thinker's position in order to propose an alternative model of religion-politics relations that integrates transcendent values while accommodating social pluralism.

In selecting literature, the researcher classified the references into two main groups: primary sources, which include the original writings of Charles Taylor and Syed M. Naquib al-Attas; and secondary sources, consisting of books, journal articles, and previous research deemed relevant. The selection was conducted rigorously based on several criteria: academic credibility, relevance to the issue of secularism, and contribution to the conceptual framework under scrutiny.

Throughout the reading and writing process, the researcher employed not only a neutral understanding but also a critical-interpretive approach. This means that the researcher engaged with the ideas of both thinkers actively and reflectively, seeking not only to comprehend but also to evaluate how their ideas contribute meaningfully to understanding the challenges of religion-politics relations in the modern world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Historical Origins of Secular Thought

The origins of secularism are often traced to the pivotal moment of modern humanism. Anthony Pinn explains that secularism actually emerges from within the logic of religiosity itself, namely when humans position themselves above nature (Pinn, 2021). From this perspective, secularism is not merely a detachment from religion but rather an ironic continuation of a religious mode of thinking that places humanity at the center of all things. This view opens a critical space for questioning the claim of neutrality often attributed to secularism as a historical project. Charles Taylor, through the concept of “*subtraction stories*,” critiques the assumption that modernity simply arises from the erosion of faith. Meanwhile, Syed M. Naquib al-Attas interprets secularism as the result of the West’s epistemological disorientation, which has divorced knowledge from revelation. Both thinkers demonstrate that secularism is not value-neutral but a historical product carrying its own metaphysical legacy.

Religious teachings that emphasize human superiority over nature have given rise to anthropocentric consciousness, which later evolves into a belief in human autonomy from transcendent authority. Pinn refers to this as a historical paradox: secularism is not born out of the rejection of religion, but rather from an excessive affirmation of human agency. In this framework, secularism is not a neutral condition but a historical and epistemological construction that excludes the transcendent dimension from the structure of knowledge and social life.

Taylor elaborates on this dynamic through his concept of “*subtraction stories*,” the idea that modernity becomes more rational simply because religious elements are subtracted. For Taylor, this is a reductive reading of human experience within the so-called “*immanent frame*” (Dolezal, 2024). Al-Attas, on the other hand, refers to this as “*epistemological disenchantment*,” a crisis of meaning that arises when knowledge is severed from revelation and sacred order.

Both critiques challenge the assumption that secularism represents a universal condition.

The term *secular* originates from the Latin *saeculum*, which in Augustinian thought distinguishes the temporal domain (City of Man) from the divine (City of God) (Abbink, 2023). As modernity progressed, especially since the Enlightenment, this meaning shifted toward a rational-empirical framework that systematically excludes transcendent narratives (Krzysztof, 2022). Charles Taylor describes this transformation as the emergence of the *immanent frame*, a structure of thinking in which God is rendered merely one possible hypothesis among others. Meanwhile, Al-Attas interprets this shift as an “*epistemological disenchantment*,” a loss of *adab* (discipline of knowledge and being) when knowledge is detached from revelation. Thus, the transformation of *saeculum* is not merely linguistic but reflects a deeper ontological and epistemological shift toward secularism.

William Ockham played a pivotal role in the early history of secularism. He did not only advocate for the separation of religious and political powers but also developed the doctrine of “nominalism.” According to this view, universals such as “truth” or “goodness” do not exist independently of the human mind; they are merely names we assign to particular things (McGrade, 2002). This perspective displaced the metaphysical foundation of knowledge and replaced it with the constructs of language. Taylor regards this shift as the beginning of the psychologization of faith, whereby belief becomes a subjective matter rather than one anchored in objective reality (Halverson D, 2017). Al-Attas contends that nominalism disrupted the harmony between knowledge and revelation and severed its connection to the principle of *tawhid* (Khalili, 2024). In this sense, Ockham was not only a political figure but also an intellectual precursor to a way of thinking that epistemologically distanced itself from the sacred.

The ambiguity in William Ockham’s thought opens the way for what Taylor calls *subtraction stories*: the narrative that religious elements in modern life are

gradually eroded, leaving only a worldly framework. For Taylor, this marks a secularization of consciousness where faith becomes an option rather than an ontological presumption. Meanwhile, al-Attas interprets this transition as an epistemological dislocation in which philosophy is uprooted from *tawhid* as the foundation of knowledge. Here we see that secularism is not merely a political movement or a social-historical phenomenon but an epistemic project that fundamentally transforms how reality is understood (Taylor, 2007).

For Taylor, the Protestant Reformation marked a formative moment in the emergence of modern consciousness, wherein faith became a personal and internalized matter. When Martin Luther emphasized the direct relationship between the individual and God, a new pattern of religiosity emerged, that was no longer dependent on institutional mediation but grounded in subjective experience (Krzysztof, 2022). This was the beginning of what Taylor terms the “*immanent frame*,” a structure of meaning in which transcendent reality is no longer a shared assumption but rather a private choice. Syed M. Naquib al-Attas viewed this shift as the early sign of epistemological disorientation: religion ceased to be the foundation of public knowledge and was instead relegated to the domains of psychology and personal ethics (al-Attas, 1993).

The conflicts of the Wars of Religion, such as the Thirty Years’ War, culminated in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), a decisive transition in which transnational religious authority was transferred to sovereign states, and religious disputes began to be resolved through secular civil law (Straumann, 2008). Taylor interprets this moment as the initial formation of the secular public sphere, where legitimacy no longer relies on revelation or religious authority but on rational consensus within a worldly framework (Taylor, 2007). In contrast, Al-Attas views the epistemological structure that emerged from Westphalia as the triumph of the Western paradigm that separates religion from the public domain. He considers this separation not as neutral but as a form of epistemic hegemony, a displacement

of religion from its ontological foundation to a sphere of private ethics (al-Attas, 1993).

John Locke, in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689), clearly separated the realm of religious salvation, which he designated to religion, from that of civil rights, which he attributed to the state. Locke insisted that the state held no authority to regulate or impose any particular religion upon its citizens. For Locke, questions of salvation and religious belief were matters of individual conscience, while the role of the state was limited to civil rights, security, and public order (Perry, 2005). According to Taylor, this perspective paved the way for liberal-modern secularism, where religious belief is positioned as a private choice.

Syed M. Naquib al-Attas viewed the consequences of such a paradigm as a form of desacralization, in which knowledge and moral authority are based on individual liberty. Beyond England, French Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire and Diderot reinforced this tendency by rejecting the absolute claims of the Church and promoting freedom of conscience as a political principle (Abbink, 2023).

The Enlightenment era marked a profound paradigm shift in Western history, wherein religious authority ceased to be the primary reference point for interpreting reality. Rationality, science, and freedom of conscience emerged as alternative frameworks, deemed more universal and neutral. Taylor reads this phase as the emergence of autonomous spirituality, where individuals define their own orientation of meaning. Conversely, Al-Attas interprets it as a crisis of *adab*, an epistemological dislocation that detaches knowledge from God and reduces the human being to a merely rational, rather than spiritual, creature. This interpretive divergence is crucial for understanding both thinkers' critiques of the relationship between religion and politics in contemporary secular societies.

The Relationship between Religion and Politics in Charles Taylor's Thought

Taylor asserts that secularism as a concept of postmodern human life does not manifest in a single uniform form. In the United States, it is interpreted as the limitation of the state's role in matters of individual faith in order to safeguard religious freedom, a form of formal neutrality toward all beliefs. In contrast, in France, secularism is realized through strict restrictions on the presence of religious symbols in public spaces. All forms of religious expression are prohibited from being openly displayed in the public realm (Barras, 2017).

In Taylor's view, this difference has profound philosophical implications, namely, regarding who is granted space to appear in the public sphere and on what value basis that space is constituted. He argues that the French model of secularism implicitly establishes a specific epistemic standard—namely, that only “rational-secular” expressions are deemed legitimate—thereby marginalizing more symbolic and expressive forms of spirituality (Taylor, 2007).

Taylor argues that the state should not silence certain convictions to promote a supposedly ideologically neutral form of life. On the contrary, the state must ensure an inclusive public sphere for all “spiritual families,” both religious and secular, without discrimination against the forms of expression or reasoning they employ (Taylor, 2007). Thus, the various forms of secularism found in different countries are not the products of administrative neutrality but rather ideological choices about who is considered worthy of speaking in a democracy.

Charles Taylor contends that humanity is currently living in a “secular age.” He categorizes secularism into three distinct types: Secularity 1, which refers to the separation between religion and politics; Secularity 2, which refers to the decline of religious practice in society; and Secularity 3, a condition in which belief in God becomes merely one option among many (Taylor, 2007). These three typologies, at their core, reflect the diminishing influence of religion in human life.

Taylor describes pre-modern societies as worlds in which faith was integrated with the entire order of life. In this context, belief in God was nearly inescapable. Taylor refers to this as *naïve belief*, that is, a form of faith not yet subjected to critical questioning. However, since the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the rise of science, belief has become fragile and is positioned as merely one choice among many alternatives. Taylor calls this a *fragilized belief*. This marks a crisis of meaning that, in his view, has been overlooked by classical secularization narratives, which assume that religion simply fades away automatically (Taylor, 2007).

Taylor does not believe that events such as the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the development of science automatically lead to the disappearance of faith. He criticizes such a narrative as a *subtraction story*, that is, a flawed account that assumes belief is merely “subtracted” to make room for modern rationality (Maclure et al., 2011). For him, secularity is an active cultural construction, not merely what remains after religion has been removed. This historical transition produced a new worldview that shifted authority from revelation to human reason, shaping a pluralistic society in which religion is no longer the sole horizon of meaning.

For Taylor, modern pluralism transforms social structures and alters the condition of belief itself. Faith is no longer certain; it has become one of many options within a landscape that is both dialogical and competitive. In this context, every belief system—including religiosity—is vulnerable to delegitimization due to the dominance of immanent frameworks. The relationship between religion and politics is no longer grounded in transcendent authority but rather in agreements among citizens within a worldly horizon (Taylor, 2007).

Taylor rejects the reductionist version of the secularization narrative that sees modernity as the inevitable result of religion’s decline. For him, such a narrative is far from neutral, as it conceals a new form of epistemic hegemony, only what is rational and empirical is considered legitimate, while faith is reduced to a

private and “immature” option (Taylor, 2007). This critique is highly significant in pluralistic societies, as it reveals that secularity is not an automatic release from religion but a socially constructed ideology regarding what is deemed appropriate and legitimate in the public sphere.

In his seminal work *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor introduces two key concepts that illuminate the spiritual landscape of modern society: *subtraction stories* and *the immanent frame*. *Subtraction stories* refer to the erroneous narrative that secularism emerges as a result of “removing” religion, as if the modern world is merely a neutral residue left after traditional beliefs have been discarded. In contrast, the immanent frame denotes a modern epistemological framework that confines reality to the worldly realm, excluding any reference to the transcendent. According to Taylor, these two concepts help explain why public discourse on religion frequently encounters dislocation: the space of discourse has already been framed by a secular worldview that denies the validity of spiritual insight as a source of knowledge or moral authority (Taylor, 2007).

Taylor describes the immanent frame as a shared cognitive structure that shapes how modern society understands meaning and existence. Within this frame, both religious and non-religious individuals alike live and think within the same boundaries that determine what is considered rational, credible, and real. Consequently, debates concerning religion and politics in secular societies often reach an impasse: both sides speak within the same conceptual frame but interpret it differently (Taylor, 2007).

Taylor challenges the notion that the immanent frame is inherently neutral or purely rational. Instead, he argues that it is a historically constructed artifact shaped by sociocultural processes that have unconsciously marginalized transcendence and redirected thought towards a purely immanent orientation.

Building on this critique of secularism, Taylor offers an alternative conception of religion–politics relations, one that envisions a neutral state that guarantees an inclusive public sphere for all belief systems. In his essay *Why We*

Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism (2007) and in the book *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (2011), co-authored with Jocelyn Maclure, Taylor asserts that “all spiritual families must be heard” in determining the collective destiny of society (Maclure et al., 2011). This statement reflects Taylor's normative stance: substantive justice can only be achieved when the state fosters a deliberative space that is inclusive, rather than a public arena that neutralizes meaning.

Accordingly, the ideal democratic state should maintain neutrality not by excluding religion but by ensuring the equal treatment of all comprehensive worldviews—religious or secular—held by its citizens. Taylor contends that only through such principled neutrality can the state avoid discrimination and prevent the emergence of second-class citizens marginalized for their convictions (Maclure et al., 2011). For Taylor, secularism does not entail banishing religion from the public sphere but rather ensuring that all individuals are equally free to practice their beliefs and contribute to public discourse, provided they do not infringe upon basic rights or justice.

Taylor thus frames secularism not as a project of confining religion to the private sphere, but as an ethical-political framework that protects the spiritual dignity of all citizens. In increasingly plural societies—which ironically often produce symbolic exclusions—Taylor rejects rigid forms of secularism such as *laïcité* (as practiced in France), which impose a single standard of what counts as “rational” in public discourse.

Instead, he advocates for a model of secularism in which spiritual diversity—including expressions of faith—is welcomed in public dialogue, as long as it respects the principles of justice and equal rights. Hence, Taylor's proposal is not merely a technical revision of church–state relations but a paradigm shift from secularism as a system of neutralization to secularism as an ethical space for the coexistence of values within the horizon of pluralistic democracy.

The Relationship Between Religion and Politics in Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas' Thought

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is by no means a foreign name in the study of Islamic thought in Southeast Asia. Born in Bogor on September 3, 1931, into a Sayyid family, al-Attas received his formal education in the Malay Peninsula. He earned his master's degree in 1962 from the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University, then under the leadership of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. He later completed his doctoral studies in 1965 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, under the supervision of Prof. A. J. Arberry and Dr. Martin Lings. During his academic journey, al-Attas had the opportunity to directly engage with prominent thinkers such as Hamilton Gibb in London, Fazlur Rahman from Pakistan, Toshihiko Izutsu from Japan, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr from Iran (Daud W.M, 2003).

In al-Attas's view, secularization is the result of the West's failure to understand the relationship between reason, revelation, and language, a failure rooted in the early assimilation of Greek concepts into Christian theology (Al-Attas, 1993). Having studied the problem of secularism for over four decades, al-Attas consistently underscored the urgency of reconstructing Islamic civilization through a critique of secularism, the concept of *adab* (ethical conduct), and the Islamization of knowledge (Hidayatullah, 2023). For al-Attas, secularism is not merely a Western historical phenomenon but a global epistemological crisis that has permeated Muslim thought. He criticized the fact that many Muslim intellectuals—often unconsciously—had adopted a Western worldview that separates knowledge from revelation and spirituality. As a result, there emerged a disorientation in the understanding of knowledge, ethics, and politics. His critique is not merely normative; he firmly rejects the claim of secularism's neutrality and instead views it as a form of ideological hegemony that undermines the authority of divine values in the public life.

Al-Attas emphasized that secularism, which emerged from the Christian-European historical context, cannot be indiscriminately applied to Islam. The

fundamental theological and historical differences between Islam and Christianity render the secularization approach alien and ultimately destructive to the latter. As al-Attas argued, secularism not only marginalizes religion from the public and political sphere but also allows the Western worldview to dictate the direction of reform within the Muslim ummah (al-Attas, 1981).

His central thesis posits secularism as an ideological project aimed at the desacralization of the world, including politics. He pointed out that secularization began with the stripping away of religious and metaphysical meaning in perceiving reality, including power and governance (al-Attas, 1981). Within this framework, politics divorced from the principle of *tawhīd* (divine unity) risks producing a disorientation of values and a crisis of *adab*. Therefore, al-Attas proposed that political order must submit to divine authority and be conducted within the framework of *adab*, an ethical system born from cosmic awareness and the divine responsibility of humans as *khalīfah* (vicegerents).

To fully grasp al-Attas's critique of secularism and his proposed alternative, three key aspects must be considered: (1) the ontological and epistemological dimensions of politics in al-Attas's thought, namely the idea of God as the source of authority and the concept of *adab* in governance; (2) al-Attas's critique of secularism seen as a process of desacralizing reality, fragmenting knowledge, and disorienting the Muslim community; and (3) the alternative he offers through his project of Islamization of knowledge and the reconstruction of an Islamic value order (Sutrisno, 2021).

In al-Attas's ontological framework, political power does not belong to humans absolutely, but is instead a trust (*amanah*) granted by God. Human beings are merely vicegerents (*khulafā'*) entrusted with the duty of executing divine commands in organizing society (Ogunbado, 2023). Consequently, true sovereignty belongs to God, and the legitimacy of political authority originates not from the will of the majority or social contracts, but from revelation. This view explicitly rejects the secular state model, which separates political authority from

its transcendent source. Al-Attas offers a political system framed by the principles of *tawhīd* (Divine Unity) and *adab* (ethico-cosmic discipline), not merely as human-constructed public ethics, but as divine norms embedded within the fabric of law and society.

Al-Attas further critiques modern secularism as a worldview that uproots religion from the public and political realms, thereby liberating humans from the authority of revelation and metaphysical truths that traditionally guided both reason and language. This process, he argues, leads to the desacralization of politics where power is no longer grounded in divine values but determined by instrumental rationality and mere human will (Muntarina, 2017). A concrete example of this is how political authority in the secular West is entirely detached from religious legitimacy and values, regarded instead as purely worldly and profane matters (Huringiin & Nabila, 2022). For al-Attas, this is not a form of neutrality but a subtle domination that obscures the principle of justice within the social and political order.

Moreover, he argues that the Western worldview's detachment from God results in a fragmented and profane understanding of reality: nature is reduced to mere physical matter devoid of any connection to spiritual truth (Kam Weng, 2025). As a consequence, al-Attas observes a state of “confusion and error in knowledge” caused by the dominance of the secular worldview, which, compounded by the erosion of *adab*, has brought serious problems upon the Muslim ummah (Ogunbado, 2023). This condition has political consequences as well: the modern state is constructed upon systems of knowledge that eliminate God’s role as the ultimate source of authority. The relationship between religion and the state is thus reduced to an administrative contract, no longer rooted in the ethical horizon of *tawhīd*.

The concept of Islamization of knowledge, as conceived by al-Attas, is not merely an intellectual movement but a comprehensive epistemological and political strategy to challenge the dominance of the secular worldview in modern

knowledge and society. He rejects the idea that knowledge is neutral; instead, he asserts that all knowledge is value-laden (Naquib Al Attas, 1993). Within the Islamic context, the dominance of Western science—which is often presumed to be neutral—has served to further marginalize religion from public and political life. Therefore, Islamization becomes an effort to restore revelation as the foundation of knowledge and to reconstruct Islamic political ethics (Sholeh, 2017).

Thus, al-Attas insists that knowledge is never value-free: it is always shaped by the worldview that underlies a society. The dominance of Western secular epistemology—founded upon scepticism, relativism, and normlessness—has displaced ethical and spiritual values from the structure of knowledge. At the level of the nation-state, this has led to the creation of legal and policy frameworks that are procedural and pragmatic, with no reference to transcendent sources of value. This signifies a crisis in the relationship between religion and the state, not because religion is too dominant, but because politics has lost its ethical horizon.

For al-Attas, the Islamization of knowledge is not merely about filtering foreign influences from science, but a profound effort to reformulate the way humans think and act in collective life. He rejects secular values such as materialism, narrow nationalism, and moral relativism, as they contradict the Islamic vision of the purpose of life. Through Islamization, al-Attas seeks to re-establish a social and political order that is subordinate to God and that upholds the moral and spiritual integrity of the human soul (Daud W.M, 2003).

With his concept of Islamization of knowledge, al-Attas is not only proposing a reform within the realm of scientific inquiry but also constructing a socio-political framework grounded in the integrity of revelation and the ethics of *adab*. In the context of secular modernity, where politics has been severed from spiritual values, Islamization of knowledge becomes a path to rearticulate the relationship between religion and the state in an integrated manner, while

simultaneously dismantling the epistemological dichotomy that has fractured the Islamic intellectual tradition.

A Critical Comparison of Charles Taylor's and Syed Naquib al-Attas's Thoughts

Charles Taylor and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas are two theologians rooted in different philosophical traditions, yet both offer profound critiques of the dilemmas posed by modern secularism. Taylor, emerging from the Western philosophical tradition and Roman Catholic background, broadly interprets secularism as the diminishing influence of religion in human life. In contrast, al-Attas—drawing from the Islamic tradition and the epistemology of revelation—understands secularism as both an ontological and epistemological crisis rooted in the removal of divine values from the socio-political order, which results in a mode of thinking estranged from the light of tradition (al-Attas, 1993). This study highlights both the convergences and divergences in their interpretations of secularism and the models of religion–politics relations they respectively propose.

This comparison is significant because Taylor and al-Attas both critique modern secularism as the cause of spiritual alienation from human existence, particularly in social and political life. However, beyond critique, they propose distinct responses: Taylor offers a cultural classification of secularism, while al-Attas fundamentally rejects secularism and calls for a reconstruction of the system of knowledge and statehood based on the principles of *tawhid* (divine unity) and revelation.

Both Charles Taylor and Syed Naquib al-Attas critique modern secularism for excluding and separating religion from the public sphere, yet their critiques arise from different philosophical foundations. For Taylor, exclusive secularism fails to grasp the existential human need for meaning, purpose, and transcendence. He argues that modernity's suppression of religious expression has created a spiritual void. Thus, he proposes a model of "inclusive secularism," where the

state remains neutral but does not hinder religious contributions in public discourse (Maclure et al., 2011).

Conversely, al-Attas rejects secularism outright, as he sees it as a Western ideology that excludes divine authority from both epistemological and political structures. He views secularism as a force that fragments knowledge and strips the socio-political order of *adab* (spiritual courtesy) and *tawhid* (Aljunied, 2019). While both thinkers reject the hegemony of secularism, they differ in the basis of their critiques and their proposed solutions: Taylor emphasizes recovering existential meaning within a pluralistic democratic space, whereas al-Attas calls for the restoration of revelation as the foundational basis of the socio-political system.

The fundamental distinction between Taylor and al-Attas lies in the epistemic and ontological foundations underlying their critiques of secularism. Taylor interrogates secularism from within the modern liberal system. He supports a reinterpretation of the public sphere to be more receptive to religious values within the framework of secular pluralism (Kamaruzzaman, 2015). He does not reject modern science or democracy but emphasizes the importance of recognizing spirituality within collective life. In contrast, al-Attas proposes a total reconstruction of modern modes of thought based on *tawhid*. He traces the roots of the West's epistemological crisis to the syncretism between Aristotelian philosophy and Hebrew theology in European Christianity, an entanglement he sees as giving rise to the confusion of the modern worldview (Shakir, 2023). In this sense, while Taylor advocates creating space for spirituality within the secular system, al-Attas rejects the secular foundation itself and proposes a reorientation grounded in revelation.

It is at this juncture that the paradigmatic divergence between Taylor and al-Attas becomes most evident. Taylor proposes a public sphere that accommodates spirituality and religious actors, but without grounding the socio-political order in any specific revelation or religious doctrine. Taylor believes that justice in modern

societies is achieved through mutual recognition and deliberation among citizens of differing beliefs. In contrast, al-Attas asserts that revelation must serve as a legitimate foundation for both knowledge and a just public order. Whereas Taylor emphasizes procedural pluralism, al-Attas demands a total epistemic and political repositioning, not merely opening space for religion, but dismantling the secular paradigm that alienates God from epistemic and political structures (Kamaruzzaman, 2015).

In *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, Charles Taylor emphasizes three core principles: freedom of belief, equality among citizens, and national solidarity. The state must not favor any particular belief system, but it must also not obstruct religious citizens from participating in public discourse. Rather than suppressing religion—as in the French model—Taylor supports an approach akin to the Canadian model, where every “spiritual family” has the right to voice its moral perspectives within society. The state, in this framework, does not impose a form of “religious silence” but instead guarantees space for a plurality of values, provided they remain within the bounds of equal rights and justice (MacLure et al., 2011).

In contrast to Taylor, al-Attas offers the concept of *Islamiyatul Ma'rifah*, his intellectual response to the negative impact of Western knowledge, which he argues stems from the problem of secularism. Through this concept, al-Attas advocates for the establishment of a *virtuous state*, a political order founded upon divine values and revelation (Muslem, 2019). He firmly rejects any dichotomy between religion and politics. In his view, the ideal state must place revelation at the core of ethics, law, and education.

The key element in this model is the concept of *adab*, the awareness of the proper place of everything. When *adab* is lost, crises of leadership emerge, knowledge becomes disoriented, and moral decay sets in (Daud W.M, 2003). Within this framework, revelation is not merely a source of moral inspiration but a legal and epistemological foundation for the state structure. This fundamental

difference marks the gap between Taylor’s procedural approach and al-Attas’s substantive–spiritual framework: the former relies on mutual tolerance among citizens, while the latter demands obedience to divine authority as the source of public justice.

Table 1. Comparison between Taylor and Al-Attas

No	Indicator	Charles Taylor	Syed Naquib Al-Attas
1	The Origins of Secularism (Ontological Status)	<p>a) Secularism emerged as a historical transformation within Western modernity, one that suppressed spirituality in the name of public neutrality. It was a response to religious conflicts that gave rise to the need for a neutral order in order to ensure freedom and justice among citizens.</p> <p>b) Secularism originated from the Protestant Reformation and Reformist Humanism, both of which share common roots in the attempt to “purify” spiritual life from magical elements.</p>	<p>a) Secularism was born out of internal deviations within Christian theology, particularly in the Western understanding of God, revelation, and the human being.</p> <p>b) Secularism is the result of the intrusion of Aristotelian philosophy into Christian theology.</p>
2.	Epistemological Foundations	<p>a) In grounding the legitimacy of truth, Taylor draws upon pluralism, existential experience, and cross-faith recognition. He accepts modern science but emphasizes that human beings require a horizon of spiritual meaning in order to lead a moral life.</p> <p>b) Taylor's critique of the “Subtraction Story”</p>	<p>a) Revelation is the primary source of knowledge and life orientation. Knowledge that does not refer to God is considered fragmented and deprived of <i>adab</i>.</p> <p>b) Al-Attas also employs the tawhidic method of knowledge to diagnose secularism.</p>

		challenges the narrative that secularism is the automatic result of the disappearance of metaphysics, which then gives rise to “free reason.”	
3.	The Relationship Between Religion and Politics	a) Taylor proposes an inclusive secularism: the state must remain neutral toward all religions, yet remain open to the religious expressions of citizens in the public sphere.	a) Al-Attas offers a response to secularism through the Islamization of knowledge (<i>Islamiyatul Ma'rifah</i>). b) A virtuous state (<i>negara beradab</i>): the state must be established upon the foundation of divine revelation, where adab and divine values serve as the basis for ethics, law, and the educational system.

CONCLUSION

This paper begins with the question: how do Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and Charles Taylor understand and articulate the concept of secularization? From the analysis presented, it can be concluded that both Taylor and al-Attas reject a form of secularism that marginalizes the role of religion, albeit from different philosophical frameworks. Taylor rejects “*subtraction stories*” and exclusive secularism, while al-Attas sees secularism as the result of Western epistemic confusion that separates human life from divine revelation.

The two thinkers also propose contrasting models of the state. Taylor advocates for a secular state that remains neutral yet inclusive of religious expression in the public sphere, oriented toward pluralism. In contrast, al-Attas emphasizes the necessity of a “civilized state,” one that places revelation at the core of ethics, knowledge, and socio-political order. In the Indonesian context, Taylor’s approach is relevant for ensuring equality among religious groups in a

pluralistic society, while al-Attas' ideas serve as an important reminder to preserve the nation's spiritual values and orientation amid the currents of secularization.

Further research is recommended to explore the practical applications of their ideas within the Indonesian context. Future studies may focus on public policy, education, or the formation of a religious public sphere. The analysis would be enriched by the inclusion of a third thinker from another tradition—whether from contemporary Islamic philosophy or modern Western political thought—to expand the scope of dialogue.

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