

## The Concept of Nature According to Syed M Naquib Al-Attās: The Perspective of New Kalam

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### ABSTRACT

This article explains the views of Syed M Naquib al-Attas on the concept of nature from the perspective of the issue of *kalam jadid*. The study from the perspective of *kalam jadid* is important in this modern era because the issue of *kalam jadid* challenges religious thought to be able to answer actual issues around modernity with rational arguments. *Kalam jadid* is a kalam developed from classical issues based on the *dirasatul firaq*. Therefore, the study of *kalam jadid* is not limited to the problem of *firqah* thought (limited to the debate on the nature of qadm or hadith, but based on the development of modern science in the perspective of Islamic worldview). This article uses a descriptive method with a philosophical approach. Data were obtained by surveying the relevant literature and discussion. The data is then analyzed by means of discourse analysis which enables the researcher to uncover hidden intentions in the text. The results of this study concludes that al-Attās's thoughts on the concept of nature can be categorized as the issue of kalam jadd. The al-Attās method of describing the concept of nature based on the Islamic worldview can be a model in studying and developing the science of kalam in the modern era. This is the basis for the rise of new kalam (new kalam/Jadīd kalam). The study of kalam involves a variety of sciences: sufism, metaphysics, philosophy, and science. Thus, the science of kalam becomes a science that is more meaningful in various fields of science.

**Keywords:** Al-Attas; nature; kalam, modernity; science; jadid.

## INTRODUCTION

Based on Adi Setia's idea, the emergence of a new kalam philosophy was marked by the *Tāhafut al-Falasifah*, Imam al-Ghazālī's work (Setia, 2012), because *Tāhafut's* work reflects a new method of dealing with *falasifah* groups. *Tāhafut* presents very critical thinking on ideas that are not in accordance with Islamic teachings, and the use of proper and fair logic (Zarkasyi, 2018). Imam al-Ghazali did not accept all Greek logic absolutely, nor did he absolutely reject it. Thus, the important contribution was that after Imam al-Ghazālī, the science of logic naturally became a conceptual tool in theology and *fiqh*. Imam al-Ghazālī is an expert on theology who renews his methods and analysis, updating what had been achieved by Imam Abū Hasan al-Asy'ari. In other words, the issue of the science of kalam is dynamic. This knowledge requires an analysis of the ways and methods to follow the issues as done by Imam al-Ghazālī.

Along with the development of the dialectics of thought in the Islamic world, the issues of kalam in modern ages also encounter new challenges. Syibli an-Nu'māni al-Hindi is a Muslim scholar who is mentioned to be the first one to use the term of *kalam jadīd* (the new kalam) in his work. He is a scientist from India who supports the pan-Islamic movement. Writing various books, his intellectual contributions include establishing Shibli National College in 1883 and Darul Mussanifin. He once taught Arabic and Persian at Aligarh University, a major Islamic university in India founded by Sir Ahmad Khan. According to Syibli, the area of study of *kalam jadid* includes from science, issues of secularism, to matters of *fiqh*. So, according to Al-Hindi (2012) the object of study of the new kalam is quite broad, not limited to the issue of *i'tiqād*. According to Syibli, the challenge of *kalam jadid* is how to explain these religious issues in a rational and easy-to-understand way to answer the challenges of the modern West.

The issue of *kalam jadid* continues to be discussed and researched by several scholars. Among others, Hasan Yusufian in his book *Kalam Jadīd* explained that what is meant by *kalam jadid* is a new science of Kalam which responds to the actual condition of Muslims with all the problems they face, such as; stagnation of thought, backwardness in science and civilization, moral vulnerability, humanitarian crisis, atheism, naturalism, scientific materialism, scientism, secularism, and extremism (Yusufian, 2014).

This understanding is not much different from that explained by Syibli Nu'mani. The recent issue of Kalam is a response to new thoughts in modern times. Suteja (2009) explained that *kalam jadid* are issues related to the discourse of philosophical thought in modern ages. It is in line with Denny (1994). Even though Frederick did not use the terminology of *kalam jadid*, Frederick meant that in the new era of modern ages, Islamic theology faced challenges in the form of philosophical thought. From this research on *kalam jadid*, no one has examined the *kalam jadid* model which is related to issues of Islamic metaphysics. The novelty of this author's paper is to offer the *kalam jadid* model based on the metaphysical thoughts of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (hereinafter written Al-Attas). Al-

Attas is a contemporary Islamic philosopher. His works are especially always related to the notion of Islamic worldview and metaphysics.

Syibli's idea of *kalam jadid* can become a new movement for the study of kalam in the modern age. Several studies on the new ideas of kalam studies have been carried out by updating the study approach, for example using an interdisciplinary study approach. The methods of the social sciences and humanities are integrated with the science of kalam (Mukhlis, 2018). The use of this approach is part of a science integration project which since the early 2000s has become a study widely used in Islamic tertiary institutions. However, even though this approach is contemporary, it has not yet reached the metaphysical study. So, the study of al-Attās with the basic Islamic metaphysical theory makes it possible to direct the study of kalam to be more contributive to scientific issues. One of Al-Attas ideas is the idea of Islamization of science.

Based on the opinion above, the study of Al-Attās regarding the concept of nature in the context of issues of Islamic scientific ideas may become an issue of the revival of kalam in modern ages. In the past, the debate over the concept of nature by theologians included the issue of *qadim* and *hadīth*. But nowadays, it is more on how to understand nature as a scientific process to produce an Islamic natural science rationale and as an important element in the theory of the worldview of Islam. This article examines the concept of nature according to al-Attās and his contribution to the basis of Islamic science. Adi Setia's study of *Jadīd*'s verse forms the theoretical basis for this paper.

## METHOD

This study is literature research with a philosophical approach. The analysis was carried out by examining written sources by tracing the written sources of Prof. Al-Attas works. There are several methods used to conduct literature research studies, such as criticize, compare, summarize, and synthesize. The themes in this study are presented in a *washfiyyah-tahliliyyah* (descriptive-analytical) manner. This presentation is used to test all aspects of the proposed theory or concept.

The procedure for obtaining data are through library research, consultation and discussion with Al-Attas's students, Hamid Fahmy Zarkasyi and Ugi Suharto. Researchers use qualitative methods because this research procedures produce descriptive data. The data is then analyzed by means of discourse analysis which enables the researcher to reveal hidden intentions in the text of the character being studied (Parchiano, 2009).

The approach in this study is philosophical. One important aspect of this philosophical approach is the analysis of sources in the form of a character's thoughts. So, in this case the philosophical approach intends to find meaning, the nature of reality and the ideas of the characters (Spencer et al., 2014). Bakker & Zubair (1990) explains that philosophy is an explicit explanation of the nature of reality that exists in human life which includes the nature of man himself, the nature

of the universe, and even the nature of God, all from a structural and normative perspective. The philosophical approach is a scientific and serious attempt to explain from the nature of something that is behind the object fundamentally, to the root of the problem. So, this philosophical approach is to think scientifically to find the nature of something in depth, fundamentally and to its roots (Bakker & Zubair, 1990). Philosophy has the main characteristics of which are logically organized, using a special methodology and applying theory based on observation, analysis, synthesis and experience (experiment). So, the meaning of philosophy based on this view is the study of constructing, evaluating or discussing issues related to a system of thought with a structured, methodological and theoretical scientific approach. Therefore, understanding Islamic philosophy from an Islamic view of life means understanding it with a systemic approach. With this approach, as a system, Islamic philosophy can be used to understand other philosophical systems such as Western philosophy and can even be used to criticize and also adapt foreign concepts into the milieu of Islamic philosophy and thought.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### The Object of Kalam Jadīd

Syiblī an-Nu'mani explains that *Jadīd's* words can be understood from several aspects. In terms of substance, *kalam jadid* is none other than the material of *qadim's kalam*. The term *kalam qadim* here is actually *kalam haqiqi*, the science of kalam itself, the issues of the science of kalam which were discussed by the previous *mutakallim* scholars. According to Syibli an-Nu'mani, studying, researching and discussing *kalam jadid* must still rely on the opinions of the previous *mutakallim* because the issues discussed in *kalam qadim* are the most important ones. It means that in this view there should be no disconnection between the knowledge between the *Jadīd* and the *Qadim* because, *qadhiyah* is not much different. Only the issues and arguments are different and developing. *Kalam qadīm* is a basis for discussing issues of new kalam.

In addition, the new kalam must also continue to aim to maintain the faith of people in general. It had been done by Imam Al-Ghazālī in writing the book *Qawā'id al-'Aqā'id, al-Iqtisad fi al-'Itiqād, Tahāfut Falasifah* and other aims to protect the faith of the common people from interference heresy.

The difference between the science of *kalam qadim* and *kalam jadīd* is that *kalam qadim* discusses the beliefs of those who opposed the beliefs of that era because the problem at that time was the problem of a group of people (*firqah*) who deviated from the true creed. Meanwhile, according to Syibli, *Kalam jadid* science in the context of this era develops in aspects of history, civilization and religious morality. A challenge in *Kalam jadid* is the thinking of Westerners, for example: the issues of jihad, polygamy, gender and belief in God. This issue is part of *kalam jadid*.

The important work of *kalam jadid* is to answer issues like that with arguments, proofs and methods that are easily understood or easily accepted by today's society. In presenting the argument it is also necessary to mention the figures of the *kalam qadim* such as Abu Muslim al-Isfahani, al-Qaffal, Ibn Hazm, Imam Al-Ghazālī, Ibn Rushd, ar-Rāzi and others. In this case, Syibli said that the issue of modern Western science is part of the study of *kalam jadid*. In explaining the issue of the new *kalam*, it is necessary to emphasize a scientific, and rational approach in explaining religion to Westerners.

According to Syibli, Imam Al-Ghazālī's *kalam* is included in the category of *qadim*, whereas according to Adi Setia, Imam Al-Ghazālī started the new *kalam* marked by the work of *Tahāfut Falasifah*. The categorization by Syibli seems to emphasize more on the assumptions of issues in modern times. Of course, issues in the modern era are not the same as those in the past, so they require renewal while Adi Setia's study emphasizes more on methods and ways of arguing. *Kalam Al-Ghazālī* is seen as something new, in the sense that before Imam Al-Ghazālī there were no Sunni *mutakallim* presenting arguments like in *Tahāfut Falasifah's* work. Imam Al-Ghazālī who is called a *mujaddid* (reformer) is partly because of his contribution to renewing the way of dealing with Greek philosophy.

The novelty of Al-Ghazālī's *kalam*, among others, is the matter of accepting the science of logic (*mantiq*). Since the 5th century of Hijri, Al-Ghazālī used logic in the study of *kalam* and *usūl*. As said by Ibn Khaldun that Al-Ghazālī was the first scholar to write with a new theological approach, which was then followed by Fakhruddin ar-Rāzi and a number of other Islamic scholars (Ibnu Khaldun, 2004). So that the science of logic (especially Aristotle's logic) - previously rejected by the scholars - after Al-Ghazālī has been increasingly accepted as an important instrument for theology and other branches of knowledge.

### New Issues of the Concept of Nature

As explained above, the issue of *kalam jadid* is generally related to new issues in philosophical thought. In this article, I take the concept of nature as an object of study to find the model of *kalam jadid*. The current discussion by theologians about the concept of nature still revolves around the classical debate, for example, in the writings of Rahman et al. (2018). The metaphysical approach to the study of nature was carried out by M Abdel Halem. He uses the term the Early *Kalam* (Nasr & Leaman, 2013).

Theories about nature have long been the subject of discussion among philosophers and theologians of the past (Saliba, 1970). The debate between philosophers and theologians about the concept of nature revolves around the issue of whether nature is *qadim* (no beginning) or something new (*hadith*). Nature is *qadim* corrected by Imam Al-Ghazālī that nature is something that *hadith* and was created by God from "nothingness" (*'adam*) to "existence" (*wujūd*). This difference in the concept of nature departs from the difference in the concept of God.

In this modern era, the issue of nature (cosmos) can be directly related to the meaning of science. Because science is interpreted as true knowledge about nature (Ishaq,2014). The science of nature is called natural science or in terms of the Islamic scientific tradition *'ilm al-tābi'ah*. The problem that occurs is that secular Western scientists limit the understanding of nature in the sense of the physical world. This view was born from the worldview of empiricism. While Islam sees nature in two aspects, physical and metaphysical.

In al-Attas' perspective, seeing nature in an Islamic way is seeing it on a theological basis. The physical realm (*tābi'*) is described like the Qur'an. It (the physical world) is made up of symbols or verses. So *tabi'* nature - just like the Koran - consists of verses (ayat). Thus, *tabi'* nature is another form of revelation from Allah SWT. If the Qoran is called a written book and nature is called an unwritten book. The difference with the revelation of the Qur'an is that nature, which is called the Big Open Book, is something that was created (al--Attas, 2014).

Nature is a collection of "words" in the Great Book that speak to humans about their God. So, nature is also a verse (sign) of the existence of God, and His power to find out the true meaning of the symbols of nature by knowing their meaning and purpose (Al-Attas, 2012). How to find out the intent and meaning of the symbol is with interpretatio or *tafsir*.

According to al-Attas, as explained by Wan Mohd Nor, the rules of interpretation and ta'wil are the principles of a valid approach to science and scientific methodology in natural studies. He explained (Daud, 2005):

"The statement that the Holy Qur'an and the universe are considered the Open Books was inferred from the Qur'an and Muslim scholars who have authority in their fields. The Qur'an in various verses uses the same terms, namely verses and sentences (sayings), meaning the revealed verses themselves, natural and psychological phenomena, or events. In QS. Al-Baqarah: 99 it says: 'Verily We have revealed unto thee clear tokens, and only miscreants will disbelieve in them. And in QS. Al-Baqarah: 219 it says: They question thee about strong drink and games of chance. Say: In both is great sin, and (some) utility for men; but the sin of them is greater than their usefulness. And they ask thee what they ought to spend. Say: that which is superfluous. Thus, Allah maketh plain to you (His) revelations, that haply ye may reflect. In QS. Al-Baqarah: 164 it says the use of verses that refer to matters concerning nature and the soul is clear: "In the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the difference of night and day, and the ships which run upon the sea with that which is of use to men, and the water which Allah sendeth down from the sky, thereby reviving the earth after its death, and dispersing all kinds of beasts therein, and (in) the ordinance of the winds, and the clouds obedient between heaven and earth: are signs (of Allah's Sovereignty) for people who have sense."

The relevance of verses and sentences referring to nature has been affirmed by the Qur'an. Like Prof. Wan explained above, the verse also shows a meaning that refers to nature, as explained in the Qur'an. Similarly, the sentence is used to show the creation of Allah SWT. This is found in several verses of the Qur'an. Namely, QS. Kahf: 109, and QS. Luqman: 26-27. The terminology of the sentence is interpreted, among other things, by "the miracle of Allah SWT".

This description of nature as an unwritten book has its foundations from the Qur'an and the opinions of earlier scholars. Thus, the treatment of nature should also refer to the treatment of Muslims towards the Qur'an. That is, seeing, viewing, and researching nature – with all its contents and variants – must be based on theology. Researching is by means of epistemology and methodology. It means that the methodology of the natural sciences of *tabi'* and its epistemology stand on theology.

Such a framework does not exist in modern Western science. Nature is a free element, moving by itself. Researching *tabi'* nature is also not related to theology. *Alam tabi'* is one thing, and theology is another science. Because of this basis, modern Western science has never had anything to do with religion. Thus, science has its own meaning and value, while religion also has the others.

The framework that *alam tabi'* needs to be reasoned theologically has actually been built on the principles by Imam Al-Ghazālī in his work *al-Hikmah fī Makhluqātillah*. This book is the result of the author's *tadabbur* towards the natural aspects of *tabi'*, the wisdom behind it and the benefits that can be drawn. Imam Al-Ghazālī explained, that contemplation of the miracle of the creation of nature is a medium/path to *ma'rifatullah*, causing the belief in Allah swt. to be firmly established, and so on.

In this case al-Attās argues that in the 'book' nature contains wisdom and interpretation, just as the Qur'an contains the meaning of every word and sentence. So, there is an open space for modern science (science) as a 'tool' for interpreting the 'book' of nature. Even Imam Al-Ghazālī in the book *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* (jewels of the Qur'an) has explained that the understanding of the Qur'an and the mastery of science must unite. It is said that there are verses of the Qur'an whose meaning becomes clear and precise after an interpreter understands the sciences. QS example. As-Syu'ara: 80: "And when I sicken, then He healeth me". This verse can be understood correctly and confidently after having knowledge of medical science. Another example of QS. Ar-Rahman: 5 concerning the motion of the sun and moon, and the change of day and night. This verse cannot be understood in depth except after understanding astronomy.

Al-Attās' opinion that this universe is a 'sign' is based on the view that the purpose of seeking knowledge is to arrive at the meaning of the essence of the existence of the Creator (Al-Attas, 1981). The 'sign', explained by al-Attās, is not the ultimate goal or the real goal because 'signs' are media, tools or devices that are

useful for guiding to the real goal. He criticizes the class of modern scientists who only nature (signs) is the true nature that is sought (Abdullah, 2012).

Thus, the natural sciences that study nature, its ultimate goal is the introduction of the nature of the existence of Allah SWT. Thus, the concept of monotheism becomes the axis of natural science. As a pivot, natural science studies and research must refer to and stand on the basis of monotheism. Thus, monotheism or *aqidah* functions as the "mother" of science. The methodology of scientific inquiry refers to and ends with this "mother". Later, in the world of modern Western scientists, there has been a trend that seeks to involve theology as a basic assumption in science. United States (US) theologian expert, John Haught argues that there are several important philosophical assumptions that underlie science that are rooted in theology (Peters & Gaymon, 2006). However, this trend still revolves around the discussion of the integration of theology in science, not yet in the study of making theology the mother of science.

The basic theory of science in the Islamic tradition refers to what is called *i'tiqād* (as the mother of science) or the Islamic worldview. Basically, in this view, epistemology is related to theology, as the view of the following Islamic scholars. Sheikh Abdul Qohir al-Baghdadi said; "The first pillar (of the characteristics of the Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah creed) is establishing reality and knowledge. Misleading people like the *Sufastoiyyah* reject knowledge. Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attās said "Starting the creed (which was compiled by al-Nasafi) with a clear statement about science is very important, because Islam is a religion based on science. Denial of the possibility and objectivity of science will result in the destruction of the foundations which are not only the roots of religion, but of all kinds of science."

Erroneous understanding of the concept of God and other theological aspects has implications for epistemology. If God is believed to be only a transcendent aspect that has absolute nature, while God is not immanent, then nothing will result in Islamic science because God is believed to be no longer related to empirical reality in the world and social and empirical knowledge.

Axiologically, an understanding of the concept of God, revelation, religion and others is used as a source of value. Value systems are not drawn from human experience or social phenomena that are always changing. Values in Islam are fixed and must be manifested in every scientific work. Thus, the Islamic knowledge produced must have a vision of value. This value guides scientists from tyranny. He controls his scientific work from the basic goal of being knowledgeable is for the happiness of the world and the hereafter because theology implies epistemology, theology and its aspects influence the thinking process of a scientist. True theology will produce an appropriate epistemological system in accordance with Islamic values.

Al-Attās's thoughts that are relevant in this aspect are that understanding *alam tābi'* (verses of Allah in the universe) which is included in the study of science can be equated with the rules of interpretation or *ta'wil* which are applied to the

verses of the Qur'an. Just as the verses of the Qur'an are understood as a unified set of Qur'anic sentences, this understanding of *tabi'* nature should also show the essence of the same unity. That is one natural element which is closely related to another. The Qur'an here remains as a guide in the "penta'wilan" *tabi'* nature. Thus, the Qur'an serves as a measuring tool for all natural scientific discoveries.

Imam Al-Ghazālī explained that if one meditates on the universe, many secrets will be revealed, which he describes as a house building in which the necessary furniture is available. *Tafakkur* is nothing but doing research. Thus, it is revealed that a natural science researcher must be a person who has *adab* towards himself and his God, just like earlier commentators who were also *mujahidu al-nafs* (fighting lusts) through *tasfiyatul qalb* (purification of the heart). Because the worldview is critical in this case, what it needs is Islamisation proposed by Syed M Naquib al-Attas.

The process of interpretation of the *tabi'* book of nature must be passed through scientific principles that are comparable to the interpretation or *ta'wil* approach for verses of the Quran. Everything that exists in this universe, especially in this empirical world, must be seen as "words" that function as signs (verses) in a network of conceptual relations, where all of them show a unitary unit that describes the Qur'an al-Karim. Thus, the Qur'an becomes the highest authority that will determine rational research - empirical science of *salam*. It is not natural science that determines the truth of the Koran (Al-Attas, 1995).

This view leads to the understanding that rational and empirical nature is not something absolute, instead it is subject to the nature of the provisions and judgments of the Qur'an. However, people who have intellectuality and spiritual experience will be able to go beyond the world of phenomena (empirical rational) until he witnesses (*syuhūd*) or feels (*dzauq*) the secret behind the *tabi'* (empirical) nature.

Thus, a natural scientist is required to become a Sufi. Moreover, according to al-Attās the quality of knowledge of a Sufi is at the stage of *haqq al-yaqīn*. If a Sufi talks about truth (truth), then they refer to science whose truth has the quality of *haqq al-yaqīn* because it is achieved through direct experience. The experience, explained al-Attās, implies an awareness that goes beyond the empirical.

It is at this stage of knowledge that a Sufi scientist knows God correctly and at the same time knows this world correctly and fairly. Wan Suahimi Wan Abdullah explained that recognition at this degree ensures the most sacred level of monotheism, that is free from all forms of polytheism or pantheism. It is a knowledge of the absolute oneness and existence of Allah SWT. Precisely here, a Sufi place and recognizes the true and proper nature of the existence of Allah and His Creatures.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the explanation above, al-Attās' concept of the concept of nature stands on the theory of the worldview of Islam and basic Islamic metaphysics. Even his view of the concept of nature is an important part of the theory of the worldview of Islam, so that al-Attās defines the worldview of Islam as *ru'yatul Islam lil wujūd* (Islamic view of existence). Existence, is not limited to *hissi* (physical) form, but it also deals with *ghair hissi* (metaphysical) or spiritual form. It means the study of nature in al-Attās's thought is not in the context of *dirāsatuul firāq*, but the explanation is analyzed in the framework of science, philosophy and metaphysics. The method of studying this model can be developed into a study model of the *Kalam Jadid*. The study model of *kalam jadid* is discussed in the context of issues of modern thinking about nature.

Al-Attās' view of nature can be categorized as an Islamic natural science study. Islamic Science is a scientific study based on the theory of the worldview of Islam. Apart from that, the interesting thing is that the study of natural sciences should follow certain rules which in the Qur'an are called interpretations and *ta'wil*. So the study of science is an interpretation and *ta'wil* of the signs of Allah's verses. Nature is God's unwritten book which contains 'sentences' and 'verses' that must be known what is behind it. In al-Attās' view, nature is not the ultimate goal of scientific study, because it is only a sign. The ultimate goal is Allah SWT. On this basis, an expert in Islamic science should also be a *mutakallim - Sufi*. Because to arrive at the goal of the nature of existence, a scientist must understand the Qur'an, the sciences of Shari'a and most importantly practice the science of Sufism. Thus, al-Attās' theory and findings about the concept of nature are the basis for the revival of a new *kalam* (new *kalam/kalam jadīd*). That, in the modern or post-modern era, this *kalam* examines aspects of science as a response to the secularization of modern science in the West.

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