
Education and Civilisational Worldviews: A Comparative Study of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and John Dewey

Pendidikan dan Worldview peradaban: Suatu Studi Komparatif atas Pemikiran Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas dan John Dewey

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Abstract

This paper offers a comparative analysis of educational philosophies as articulated by Syed Muhammad Naqib Al-Attas and John Dewey, representing the Islamic and Western intellectual traditions respectively. Al-Attas conceives education as ta'dib—the cultivation of ethical character and spiritual discipline—anchored in Islamic metaphysics. He views education as a holistic process aimed at the recognition of divine order, the refinement of the soul, and the realisation of man's purpose in the cosmos. Conversely, John Dewey, a leading figure of Western progressivism, promotes a pragmatic, experience-based model centred on the learner. Dewey's framework is secular, focusing on adaptation, problem-solving, and the development of democratic citizens, detached from any transcendental aim. By juxtaposing these two paradigms, the essay underscores the ontological and epistemological divergences between Islamic and Western views of education. While limited to these two thinkers, it calls for further research into broader educational traditions to affirm the enduring relevance of Islamic educational philosophy.

Keywords

Islamic Education, Civilisational Worldview, Syed Naquib al-Attas, John Dewey

Abstract

Makalah ini menyajikan analisis komparatif terhadap filsafat pendidikan sebagaimana dirumuskan oleh Syed Muhammad Naqib Al-Attas dan John Dewey, yang merepresentasikan tradisi intelektual Islam dan Barat. Al-Attas memandang pendidikan sebagai ta'dib—yakni pembentukan akhlak dan disiplin spiritual—yang berakar pada metafisika Islam. Baginya, pendidikan merupakan proses holistik yang bertujuan mengenal tatanan ilahi, menyucikan jiwa, dan menyadari tujuan hidup manusia dalam kosmos. Sebaliknya, John Dewey, tokoh utama progresivisme pendidikan Barat, mengusung model pragmatis yang berpusat pada pengalaman dan peserta didik. Kerangka berpikir Dewey bersifat sekuler, menekankan adaptasi, pemecahan masalah, serta pengembangan warga negara demokratis tanpa tujuan transendental. Dengan membandingkan dua paradigma ini, makalah ini menyoroti perbedaan ontologis dan epistemologis antara pandangan Islam dan Barat tentang pendidikan. Meskipun terbatas pada dua tokoh tersebut, tulisan ini menyerukan penelitian lanjutan atas tradisi pendidikan yang lebih luas demi menegaskan relevansi dan keunggulan konsep pendidikan Islam.

Keywords

Pendidikan Islam, Worldview Peradaban, Syed Naquib al-Attas, John Dewey

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Introduction

Education, within the Islamic worldview, is neither an accidental enterprise nor a mere utilitarian mechanism. It is a sacred vocation, ordained by divine wisdom and deeply rooted in metaphysical purpose. The Qur'an declares, *"Allah will raise those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge in degrees"* (Qur'an, Al-Mujādilah: 11). This verse affirms that knowledge (*'ilm*) is more than informational; it is transformational—elevating the soul, refining conduct, and anchoring the human being in truth (*ḥaqq*).¹

Despite this exalted conception, the contemporary Muslim world—particularly nations like Indonesia—grapples with a persistent crisis in education. The dysfunction is systemic, manifesting across input (foundational readiness), process (pedagogical coherence), and output (graduate competence). These symptoms reflect not merely administrative failure but a deeper civilisational confusion—a disintegration between form and meaning in the learning process.²

At the heart of this educational malaise lies an epistemological disorientation. Modern secular paradigms tend to reduce education to a technocratic process aimed at economic functionality, detached from ethical substance and spiritual telos. Knowledge is stripped of its moral compass, resulting in learners who are cognitively equipped but existentially dislocated. As Fazlur Rahman warns, such models produce "morally incoherent individuals" who lack a unifying vision of life.³

To address this crisis, this paper explores two contrasting educational worldviews: the Islamic model articulated by Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and the pragmatist philosophy of education developed by John Dewey. While Dewey's emphasis on experience, growth, and democratic education offers valuable pedagogical insights, it often lacks ontological anchoring. By contrast, al-Attas posits that education is *ta'dīb*—the instilling of discipline, justice, and metaphysical awareness—thus aligning the soul with its proper place in the cosmos.⁴

¹ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1991). *The Concept of Education in Islam*. ISTAC, pp. 1–3.

² Hashim, R. (2004). *Educational Dualism in Malaysia*. The Other Press, pp. 33–36.

³ Rahman, F. (1982). *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. University of Chicago Press, p. 4.

⁴ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1991). *The Concept of Education in Islam*, p. 17; Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*, pp. 27–30.

Ultimately, this comparative study aims to reveal that education is not merely the transmission of skills or facts, but the formation of the self (*takwīn al-nafs*). The Islamic educational vision, grounded in *tawhīd*, ethics, and *adab*, offers a civilisational framework in which learning becomes a path to both individual and collective flourishing.⁵

This study does not merely aim to recount historical legacies, but to revive and reinterpret them in light of contemporary educational challenges. The intellectual heritage of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas offers a robust framework to critique modernist assumptions and re-anchor education within an Islamic metaphysical paradigm. However, to remain relevant, this legacy must be translated into research innovations that engage current epistemic realities without surrendering to secular epistemologies. This requires a creative synthesis between tradition (*turāth*) and modernity (*‘aṣr*), whereby foundational principles are preserved, yet dynamically applied.⁶

One such innovation lies in the redefinition of *curriculum* itself—not as a neutral sequence of subjects, but as a moral and spiritual architecture designed to cultivate *adab* and facilitate the recognition of divine order in all branches of knowledge. Islamic education, when reimaged through this lens, no longer remains a parallel or supplementary system to secular schooling, but becomes an integrative worldview project. Each subject—whether natural sciences, humanities, or social studies—must be re-examined through the epistemological lens of *tawhīd*, ensuring that learners do not absorb fragmented, value-neutral knowledge, but instead recognise the unity of creation and the purpose of human existence.⁷

This research also proposes methodological innovation by introducing *Islamic hermeneutics*—particularly the ethical reading of texts (*al-qirā’ah al-akhlaqiyyah*) as advocated by Taha Abdurrahman—as a framework for analysing educational paradigms. Rather than approaching educational models solely through sociological or empirical methods, this approach prioritises moral intentionality and spiritual orientation. In this sense, research becomes not merely an academic exercise, but a form of *taḥqīq* (spiritual verification), concerned with aligning the self and society with divine justice⁸.

Furthermore, innovation can also be seen in the development of *integrative assessment frameworks* that evaluate not just cognitive skills but ethical transformation. Current educational systems often measure success through test scores and productivity metrics. An Islamically-oriented innovation would integrate qualitative indicators such as sincerity (*ikhhlās*),

⁵ Wan Daud, W. M. N. (1998). *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*. ISTAC, pp. 45–48.

⁶ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1995). *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*. ISTAC, pp. 11–12.

⁷ Hashim, R. (2004), pp. 39–43; Wan Daud, W. M. N. (1998), pp. 85–87.

⁸ Abdurrahman, T. (2006). *Al-Ḥaqq al-‘Arabī fī al-Fikr al-Falsafī*. Al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, pp. 34–36.

humility (*tawāḍuʿ*), responsibility (*amānah*), and justice (*ʿadl*) as essential outcomes of learning. Such an approach resonates with al-Ghazālī's idea that knowledge without action is a form of madness, and action without knowledge is void.⁹

This paper, therefore, not only compares two educational worldviews, but also seeks to innovate in the domain of educational research by offering a constructive model grounded in Islamic metaphysics, ethics, and civilisational consciousness. The aim is to contribute to the development of a transformative pedagogy that shapes not merely professionals, but moral agents and spiritual wayfarers—*al-insān al-mutaʿaddib*—capable of navigating the modern world with integrity and purpose.¹⁰

Research Methodology

This study adopts a library-based research method (*al-baḥṭh al-maktabī*) as its principal approach—a method firmly embedded in the Islamic intellectual tradition, particularly in the disciplines of philosophy (*falsafah*), theology (*ʿilm al-kalām*), and jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Classical Muslim scholars such as al-Ghazālī and Ibn Rushd employed this method to examine foundational questions concerning ethics, metaphysics, and knowledge.¹¹ In the present context, this approach enables a comprehensive and critical engagement with primary and secondary sources related to the educational philosophies of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and John Dewey.¹²

The first stage of the methodology involved the collection of textual sources—including classical treatises, philosophical works, journal articles, and institutional reports. These sources were selected based on relevance, authority, and their contribution to the theoretical development of each thinker's educational vision. Works such as *The Concept of Education in Islam* and *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* by al-Attas, alongside Dewey's *Democracy and Education* and *Experience and Education*, formed the primary textual corpus.¹³

Once the literature was assembled, the researcher conducted a close textual and conceptual analysis. This entailed identifying the philosophical presuppositions underpinning each thinker's view on the aims, content, and process of education. For al-Attas, education is the process of *taʿdīb*—instilling adab and placing knowledge within its rightful hierarchy in the cosmos—while Dewey views education as the reconstruction of experience aimed at social

⁹ Al-Ghazālī (2005). *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1, p. 37.

¹⁰ Wan Daud, W. M. N. (1998), pp. 91–94.

¹¹ Al-Ghazālī (2005); Wan Daud, W. M. N. (1998).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1991); Dewey, J. (1916); Dewey, J. (1938).

efficiency and democratic citizenship.¹⁴ This stage of the analysis paid close attention to the ontological and epistemological foundations that differentiate the Islamic from the pragmatist framework.

The subsequent phase involved a comparative philosophical analysis, in which convergences and divergences were critically examined. While both al-Attas and Dewey are concerned with the formation of the human subject, their respective visions differ in relation to final ends (*ghāyah*), the nature of truth, and the role of metaphysics in education. Al-Attas insists on *tawhīd* (divine unity) as the ultimate organising principle of knowledge, while Dewey's pragmatism rejects metaphysical absolutism in favour of instrumental rationality.¹⁵ The study thus seeks to reveal how each educational model is a product of a larger civilisational worldview (*ru'yat al-ālam*)—Islamic and secular-modern, respectively.

Finally, through this hermeneutical-epistemological framework, the research aspires not only to describe but to evaluate these educational paradigms in terms of their coherence, ethical implications, and civilisational consequences. This involves situating both models within the moral and spiritual crises of the modern age, and proposing how the Islamic educational vision, as articulated by al-Attas, offers a viable alternative to secular paradigms that often disconnect knowledge from wisdom, and education from ethical responsibility.¹⁶

In sum, this methodological approach allows for a deep, critical, and reflective engagement with competing educational philosophies, grounded in their respective metaphysical worldviews. It provides a robust theoretical foundation for comparative educational inquiry and seeks to contribute meaningfully to the renewal of Islamic educational thought in the contemporary world.

Finding and Discussion

A. The Essence of Education According to Islam (Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas)

1. Portrait of the Thinker: Life and Legacy

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (b. 1931) is widely regarded as one of the most influential Muslim philosophers of the contemporary era. His intellectual formation reflects a unique synthesis of Malay, Arab, Islamic, and Western influences. Born in Bogor, Java, into the noble Ba 'Alawi lineage—tracing back to the Prophet Muhammad through Imam al-Ḥusayn—al-Attas also descended from the Sundanese royal house and Ottoman aristocracy. This cross-cultural heritage, as Wan Mohd

¹⁴ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1991), pp. 17–20; Dewey, J. (1938), pp. 5–9.

¹⁵ Hashim, R. (2004), pp. 33–35; Rorty, R. (1989).

¹⁶ Abdurrahman, T. (2006), pp. 34–37; Rahman, F. (1982), pp. 6–8.

Nor Wan Daud notes, enabled al-Attas to move comfortably between Islamic metaphysics and modern Western academic frameworks.¹⁷

Al-Attas's higher education at institutions such as the University of Malaya, McGill University, and the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London further sharpened his philosophical vision. His major works—including *Islam and Secularism* (1978), *The Concept of Education in Islam* (1991), and *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam* (1995)—stand as a critique of secular epistemology and a call to reassert the Islamic worldview in intellectual and educational structures. Like René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, al-Attas lamented the desacralisation of knowledge in the modern West, advocating instead a metaphysically grounded understanding of reality.¹⁸

2. The Concept of Ta'dīb: Reinstating the Lost Centre

At the core of al-Attas's philosophy of education lies the concept of ta'dīb—the inculcation of adab, or right conduct rooted in metaphysical awareness. Unlike the more common terms ta'līm (instruction) or tarbiyah (nurturing), ta'dīb connotes an integrative approach that unites ethical, intellectual, and spiritual development.¹⁹ As he writes, “education is not merely the acquisition of skills or information but the recognition and putting of everything in its proper place, leading to justice”.²⁰

This resonates with classical Islamic thought, particularly the ethical vision of Al-Ghazālī who asserted that “knowledge without action is madness, and action without knowledge is void”.²¹ Likewise, Ibn Khaldūn maintained that proper education must lead to the tahdhīb al-nafs—the refinement of the soul—forming the basis of individual and societal virtue.²² In contrast to John Dewey's pragmatism—which views education as the reconstruction of experience²³—al-Attas sees it as the soul's realignment with the divine

¹⁷ Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, 1998, pp. 15–20.

¹⁸ Guénon, *Crisis of the Modern World*, 2001, p. 18; Schuon, *The Essential Schuon*, 2006, p. 45.

¹⁹ Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 1991, p. 17.

²⁰ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 1995, p. 147.

²¹ Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 2005, vol. 1, p. 37.

²² Ibn Khaldūn, *Muqaddimah*, 2004, p. 239.

²³ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 1916, p. 76.

order, a return to the human fiṭrah (primordial nature). Dewey's emphasis on democracy and social participation is sociological; al-Attas's focus on adab is ontological.

3. Curriculum and Ontological Hierarchy of Knowledge

Al-Attas introduces a metaphysical stratification of knowledge rooted in the Islamic worldview. He differentiates between fard 'ayn (individually obligatory knowledge) and fard kifāyah (collective obligation). This echoes Ibn Sīnā's educational vision, where theology, metaphysics, and ethics are necessary for salvation, while sciences such as medicine and mathematics serve communal welfare.²⁴

Such ontological hierarchy is not merely structural but aims to preserve the soul's integrity. Al-Attas warns that modern secular sciences, if consumed without epistemic integration, will fragment the soul and reduce knowledge to data.²⁵ This critique aligns with that of Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who describes modern science as "knowledge without wisdom".²⁶ Rosnani Hashim (2004) argues that dualism in Islamic education—separating religious and secular disciplines—undermines intellectual and moral unity. She supports al-Attas's vision of a unified curriculum that realigns all branches of knowledge under the principle of tawḥīd (divine unity).²⁷

4. Contribution to Civilisational Renewal

Beyond institutional reform, al-Attas envisioned education as the engine of civilisational renewal (tajdīd ḥaḍārī). He argued that the root of Muslim decline lies in an epistemological confusion: the loss of adab and the displacement of knowledge from its metaphysical foundations.²⁸ This diagnosis mirrors that of Malek Bennabi, who identified the problem as colonisabilité—a spiritual and intellectual receptivity to colonisation due to inner decay.²⁹

Al-Attas's project complements but also deepens the Islamisation of knowledge movement spearheaded by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi. While al-Faruqi focused on integrating Islamic values into existing disciplines, al-Attas insisted on redefining the very concept of

²⁴ Ibn Sīnā, *Kitāb al-Najāt*, 1952, p. 89.

²⁵ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 1995, p. 12.

²⁶ Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 1981, p. 68.

²⁷ Rosnani Hashim, *Educational Dualism in Malaysia*, 2004.

²⁸ Al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, 1995, p. 2.

²⁹ Bennabi, *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World*, 1984, p. 30.

knowledge. For him, “knowledge is the recognition of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to justice”³⁰. His ideal of *Insān Kāmil* (The Perfected Man)—which draws from Sufi, philosophical, and educational traditions—mirrors the goals of thinkers such as Al-Fārābī, who taught that happiness (*sa‘ādah*) results from the perfection of the rational soul,³¹ and Ibn Miskawayh, whose *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* emphasized character formation as the pinnacle of human development.

B. John Dewey and the Modern Philosophy of Education

1. Biography and the Intellectual Legacy of John Dewey

John Dewey (1859–1952) stands as one of the foremost figures in American educational philosophy and the central architect of Progressive Education. Born in Burlington, Vermont, Dewey’s early exposure to New England Protestant values, combined with the dynamic cultural changes of post-Civil War America, shaped his lifelong concern for democracy, social reform, and the role of education in personal and societal transformation.³²

After completing his PhD at Johns Hopkins University in 1884 under the influence of G. Stanley Hall and George Sylvester Morris, Dewey embarked on a prolific academic career that included tenures at the University of Michigan, the University of Chicago, and Columbia University. His intellectual evolution was deeply influenced by Hegelian idealism in his early years but later transitioned into Pragmatism, drawing from the philosophies of William James and Charles Sanders Peirce.³³

Perhaps his most enduring legacy is the founding of the University of Chicago Laboratory School in 1896, where he implemented and tested his progressive pedagogical ideas. This school became the locus for his groundbreaking works such as *The School and Society* (1900) and *Democracy and Education* (1916), both of which sought to reimagine education as a participatory, child-centred, and socially embedded process.

³⁰ Al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam*, 1991, p. 22.

³¹ Al-Fārābī, *Tahṣīl al-Sa‘ādah*, 1981, p. 42.

³² Westbrook, R. B. (1991). *John Dewey and American Democracy*, p. 5.

³³ Ryan, A. (1995). *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism*, pp. 12–16.

Dewey's intellectual corpus—consisting of over 40 books and 700 articles—firmly established him as a philosopher of democracy, not merely in governance but as a way of life. His belief that “education is not preparation for life; education is life itself”³⁴ encapsulates his view of learning as a lived, dynamic, and experiential process.

2. John Dewey's Conception of Child-Centred Education

Central to Dewey's educational philosophy is experiential learning—the idea that knowledge emerges through interaction with the environment. Drawing on Pragmatism, Dewey viewed truth not as static or absolute but as evolving through practical engagement. Thus, education becomes an ongoing reconstruction of experience.³⁵ This process, he argued, should be grounded in the real interests and contexts of learners, making education necessarily *child-centred*.

Dewey's pedagogy rests on four interrelated tenets:

- a) Continuity and Growth: Education must be a continuous process that links past experiences to future learning.³⁶
- b) Learner-Centredness: The curriculum should begin with the child's psychological needs, capacities, and social context—not with abstract subject matter.³⁷
- c) Active Inquiry: Knowledge is best acquired through *doing*, not passive reception. Students must engage with real problems in real-world contexts.³⁸
- d) Democratic Participation: Schools should function as microcosms of democratic society. through participatory learning and cooperation, children develop civic habits.³⁹

This radically reoriented the classroom away from the authoritarian, didactic models dominant in the 19th century. Instead, Dewey's educational space resembled a laboratory for living—a concept later adopted by Paulo Freire, who saw education as a means of human liberation.⁴⁰

³⁴ Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*, p. 239

³⁵ Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*, p. 87.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁷ Dewey, J. (1902). *The Child and the Curriculum*.

³⁸ Glassman, M. (2001). "Dewey and Vygotsky: Society, Experience, and Inquiry in Educational Practice," *Educational Researcher*.

³⁹ Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*, pp. 83–86.

⁴⁰ Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Dewey's vision contrasts sharply with Islamic models such as that of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, for whom education (*ta'dīb*) is anchored not in the child's interest alone, but in the metaphysical structure of reality grounded in *tawhīd*. While Dewey promotes an epistemology of experience, al-Attas emphasises an epistemology of *ḥaqq* (truth), prioritising spiritual order and ethical responsibility over individualistic inquiry. Yet, Dewey's framework remains deeply influential in modern educational theory. Scholars such as Nel Noddings and Elliot Eisner have built upon Deweyan ideas to advocate for pedagogies of care, creativity, and meaning-making—calling for a return to holistic, integrated learning in an increasingly fragmented educational landscape.⁴¹

C. A Comparative Analysis between the Educational Concepts of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and John Dewey

1. Foundational Epistemology: Revelation vs Experience

The chasm between Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and John Dewey begins at the epistemological level. For al-Attas, knowledge (*ilm*) is sacred, hierarchical, and grounded in divine revelation (*wahy*). He defines education as *ta'dīb*—the inculcation of justice through *adab*, which is itself the recognition of proper place, meaning, and purpose within the divine order.⁴² From this perspective, miseducation is not the absence of knowledge but the failure to apprehend it rightly. He argues that modern Muslims suffer from a loss of *adab*, which signals not ignorance but the corruption of epistemic orientation.⁴³

In contrast, Dewey—deeply influenced by Pragmatism and evolutionary naturalism—views knowledge as constructed through experience, not revealed from above.⁴⁴ He rejects immutable truths, advocating instead for “warranted assertibility,” a concept in which truth is continuously revised through empirical inquiry.⁴⁵ Dewey's theory of learning is rooted in instrumentalism, where ideas are tools for navigating reality rather than eternal realities to be discovered.

⁴¹ Noddings, N. (2005). *The Challenge to Care in Schools*; Eisner, E. (2002). *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*.

⁴² Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1991). *The Concept of Education in Islam*, p. 13.

⁴³ Wan Daud, W. M. N. (1998). *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*, p. 120.

⁴⁴ Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and Education*, p. 25.

⁴⁵ Dewey, J. (1939). "Theory of Valuation".

This tension reflects broader civilisational paradigms: Al-Attas is grounded in a sacred cosmology, where ontology precedes epistemology, while Dewey operates within a secular humanist framework, where meaning is contingent upon human experience. As Ziauddin Sardar notes, Western education often divorces knowledge from values, whereas Islamic education integrates knowledge (*‘ilm*) with wisdom (*ḥikmah*) and ethics (*akhlāq*).⁴⁶

2. Teleological Aims: The Righteous Man vs the Democratic Citizen

The telos of education in both frameworks is markedly divergent. Al-Attas aims to produce al-insān al-‘ādil—the just and integrated human being who recognises his ontological place and duties before God. The true goal of education is the realisation of *tawḥīd* through personal purification and social harmony.⁴⁷ Education prepares man not for the market, but for vicegerency (*khilāfah*), with moral and spiritual excellence as its foundation. Dewey, by contrast, views education as a means to form active participants in a democratic society. As he writes in *Democracy and Education*, "the ideal of democracy is itself an educational ideal".⁴⁸ He envisions the child not as a future saint, but as a citizen-in-formation—someone who must develop habits of inquiry, cooperation, and civic responsibility. Dewey’s education is future-oriented and pluralistic, responding to the evolving needs of society. While Dewey’s **civic** pragmatism seeks adaptability, Al-Attas’s metaphysical realism insists on fidelity to timeless truths. Dewey’s learner must adapt to society; Al-Attas’s learner must transform society through the embodiment of divine justice.

3. The Role of Spirituality: Ontological Holism vs Empirical Reduction

Al-Attas asserts that the human being is composed of rūḥ (spirit), nafs (soul), and jasad (body), each requiring cultivation through balanced education. Ignoring any of these leads to a fractured self.⁴⁹ His educational model is ontologically holistic, echoing al-Ghazālī’s notion that “knowledge must purify the soul and bring it closer to God”.⁵⁰ Dewey, on the other hand, remains largely agnostic toward metaphysical claims. Though he speaks of the “religious,” it is

⁴⁶ Sardar, Z. (1989). *Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come*.

⁴⁷ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1991). *The Concept of Education in Islam*, p. 20.

⁴⁸ Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and Education*, p. 87.

⁴⁹ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1995). *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, pp. 17–18.

⁵⁰ Al-Ghazālī. (2005). *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, vol. 1, p. 43.

stripped of traditional content and recast as an emotional or ethical experience.⁵¹ For Dewey, spirituality becomes a function of psychological integration, not divine connection. This is a fundamental rupture for thinkers like Tariq Ramadan (2004), who critique Dewey’s humanism for lacking transcendental grounding.⁵²

4. On the Nature of Truth

The divergence becomes clearest in their respective conceptions of truth. **For** al-Attas, truth (*ḥaqq*) is immutable and anchored in revelation. As he states, “Real knowledge is the recognition of the proper place of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to justice”.⁵³ Dewey, conversely, defines truth as that which works—a provisional hypothesis subjected to testing. He replaces absolutes with functional truths, contingent upon context and consequence.⁵⁴ This pragmatist relativism is, for al-Attas, intellectually and spiritually corrosive, as it severs education from any higher ontological referent.

5. Philosophical Consequences and Educational Outcomes

The consequences of these foundations are profound:

Theme	Al-Attas	Dewey
Purpose of Education	Realisation of <i>tawḥīd</i> , adab, and justice	Social adaptation and democratic participation
Ontology of the Human	Body–soul–spirit unity (<i>insān kāmil</i>)	Empirical self, shaped by environment
Nature of Knowledge	Sacred, purposeful, divinely revealed	Constructed, experimental, contingent
Role of Teacher	Moral exemplar and transmitter of <i>‘ilm</i>	Co-inquirer and facilitator
Educational Telos	Salvation and virtue	Problem-solving and civic utility

Dewey’s pedagogy culminates in instrumental citizens: empirical, rational, and responsive to societal shifts. Al-Attas’s pedagogy cultivates servants of the Truth, who measure reality against the metaphysical order, not social consensus. This philosophical divergence echoes broader debates in contemporary education. As

⁵¹ Dewey, J. (1934). *A Common Faith*.

⁵² Ramadan, T. (2004). *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*.

⁵³ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1991). *The Concept of Education in Islam*, p. 22.

⁵⁴ Dewey, J. (1929). *The Quest for Certainty*.

Nasr (1993) warns, a secularised education system may produce competent individuals, but not necessarily wise or ethical ones.⁵⁵ By contrast, Hashim and Langgulung (2008) argue that Islamic education, when grounded in metaphysics, fosters integration between faith, reason, and action.⁵⁶

The comparative inquiry between Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas and John Dewey underscores a fundamental civilisational divergence—one that reveals not merely two differing pedagogical strategies, but two opposing ontologies of man, truth, and knowledge. This divergence carries profound implications for the project of Islamisation of the educational system, particularly in Muslim-majority societies grappling with the epistemological residue of colonial modernity. Al-Attas's diagnosis of the Muslim intellectual malaise as a "loss of adab" is not merely a cultural lamentation, but an epistemic critique aimed at the secular fragmentation of knowledge perpetuated by Western models such as Dewey's. Dewey's instrumentalism, while effective in fostering civic engagement and social pragmatism, falls short of addressing the metaphysical telos of human existence. For Al-Attas, true reform in Muslim education must begin with the decolonisation of the intellect and the re-integration of the sacred into the structure of knowledge.⁵⁷

This vision aligns with the broader intellectual movement initiated by scholars such as Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, who called for the Islamisation of Knowledge, advocating not just for curriculum reform but for a fundamental reorientation of epistemology to harmonise scientific inquiry with tawhīdic consciousness.⁵⁸ While al-Faruqi emphasised disciplinary integration, al-Attas provided a more ontologically grounded response, insisting on redefining the nature of knowledge itself—its purpose, hierarchy, and relation to man's soul. This ontological foundation distinguishes Al-Attas's approach from mere educational policy reform, situating it instead within a civilisational project aimed at restoring harmony between revelation (*wahy*) and reason (*‘aql*), between intellect (*‘ilm*) and virtue (*akhlāq*).

⁵⁵ Nasr, S. H. (1993). *A Young Muslim's Guide to the Modern World*.

⁵⁶ Hashim, R., & Langgulung, H. (2008). "The Concept of Islamic Education," *Journal of Islamic Education*, 13(2).

⁵⁷ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1991). *The Concept of Education in Islam*, p. 3.

⁵⁸ Al-Faruqi, I. R. (1982). *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Workplan*.

The Islamisation of education, then, is not a cosmetic modification of Western systems but a paradigm shift that seeks to reconfigure the intellectual architecture of the Muslim mind. It entails a critical reassessment of inherited models—like Dewey’s pragmatism—and their unspoken assumptions about human nature, truth, and progress. Such reassessment does not negate all value in modern pedagogy but insists on subjecting it to the authority of *tawḥīd*, thereby preventing epistemological relativism from undermining moral and metaphysical clarity. As Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud (1998) has shown, the Islamisation of education demands a return to traditional Islamic intellectual disciplines—not in isolation, but as foundational lenses through which all contemporary knowledge must be filtered, assessed, and internalised.⁵⁹ In this light, the project of educational reform becomes not merely technical, but deeply spiritual: a means of restoring human beings to their rightful place in the cosmos, guided by the luminous certainty of revelation.

Conclusion

In light of these epistemological tensions, the contemporary educational crisis cannot be fully understood apart from its civilisational roots. As Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas profoundly asserted, “The confusion and error in knowledge today is caused by the insertion of secular philosophies and languages that are alien to the worldview of Islam”.⁶⁰ It is not merely a technical failure, but a metaphysical disorder—a rupture in how reality, knowledge, and human purpose are conceived. This rupture manifests in systems of education that treat knowledge as value-neutral and instrumental, rather than as a means of cultivating virtue (*akhlāq*), realising justice (*‘adl*), and attaining proximity to the Divine.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr similarly laments that modern education, even in the Muslim world, has become “divorced from wisdom and sacred knowledge,” and thus produces individuals who are “technically proficient but spiritually impoverished”.⁶¹ In many Muslim societies, Western secular models of education have been adopted wholesale, often without critical adaptation to the Islamic worldview (*ru’yat al-wujūd al-Islāmiyyah*), leading to a deep fragmentation between religious and worldly sciences, and between knowledge and ethical formation.

⁵⁹ Wan Daud, W. M. N. (1998). *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas*.

⁶⁰ Al-Attas, S. M. N. (1978), *Islam and Secularism*, p. 3.

⁶¹ Nasr, S. H. (1981), *Knowledge and the Sacred*, p. 4.

In response to this crisis, figures such as Ismail Raji al-Faruqi have called for a radical *Islamisation of knowledge*, defined as “the recasting of knowledge as a whole from the standpoint of Islam”.⁶² However, al-Attas’s contribution is even more foundational. He contends that the solution lies not merely in integrating Islamic content into modern disciplines, but in redefining the very nature and purpose of knowledge. True education, for him, must begin with the cultivation of *adab*, which entails recognising the proper place of things in the order of creation, thereby restoring harmony between the intellect (*‘aql*), the soul (*rūḥ*), and revelation (*wahy*).

Thus, this study emerges from a growing scholarly urgency to compare al-Attas’s Islamic educational philosophy, rooted in sacred ontology, with that of John Dewey, who represents a dominant stream of modern secular thought. This comparative investigation will critically examine how each thinker conceives of knowledge, the learner, the role of the teacher, and the teleology of education—ultimately arguing that while Dewey offers pragmatic tools for engagement with the modern world, only the Islamic paradigm, as exemplified by al-Attas, provides a holistic vision that integrates epistemology, ethics, and metaphysics.

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⁶² Al-Faruqi, I. R. (1982), *Islamization of Knowledge*, p. 14.

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