



# A Critique Of The Concept Of Growth In Secular Economics According To Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

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## Abstract

This research highlights the urgency of reformulating the concept of economic growth in secular economic thinking that contributes to the crisis of morality, justice and sustainability. This paradigm measures growth only quantitatively such as through GDP, but ignores the spiritual, ethical or moral, and social dimensions. This research aims to examine Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas' critique of the paradigm and offer an alternative framework based on the Islamic worldview. The method used in this research is qualitative literature with content analysis of al-Attas' main works and related academic literature. The results show that al-Attas sees the epistemological crisis of secular economics as stemming from the separation between science and revelation. He offers a solution in the form of economic Islamisation through the integration of the values of tawhid, adab, and *maqashid al-syari'ah*. The novelty of this research lies in the philosophical synthesis between al-Attas' metaphysical thinking and contemporary economic challenges, and encourages a shift in economic policy from material accumulation to an ethical and spiritual approach, especially in Muslim countries that want more holistic development.

*Penelitian ini menyoroti urgensi reformulasi terhadap konsep pertumbuhan ekonomi dalam pemikiran ekonomi sekular yang berkontribusi terhadap adanya krisis moralitas, keadilan, dan keberlanjutan. Paradigma ini mengukur pertumbuhan hanya secara kuantitatif seperti melalui PDB, namun mengabaikan dimensi spiritual, etika atau moral, dan sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji kritik Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas terhadap paradigma tersebut dan menawarkan kerangka alternatif berbasis pandangan dunia Islam. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah kualitatif kepustakaan dengan analisis isi terhadap karya-karya utama al-Attas dan literatur akademik yang memiliki keterkaitan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwasannya al-Attas melihat krisis epistemologis ekonomi sekular ini berasal dari pemisahan antara ilmu dan wahyu. Ia menawarkan solusi berupa Islamisasi ekonomi melalui integrasi antara nilai tauhid, adab, dan maqashid al-syari'ah. Kebaruan penelitian ini yaitu terletak pada sintesis filosofis antara pemikiran metafisik al-Attas dan tantangan ekonomi kontemporer, serta mendorong kedalam pergeseran kebijakan ekonomi dari akumulasi material menuju pendekatan yang etis dan spiritual, khususnya di negara-negara Muslim yang menginginkan pembangunan yang lebih holistik.*



## A. INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the global economy has experienced consistent growth in GDP and trade volume. However, this quantitative expansion has not been accompanied by improvements in social welfare or spiritual happiness. According to World Bank data (St Barbara Limited ACN, 2024), global GDP increased by more than 30% between 2014 and 2023, yet income inequality widened and environmental degradation worsened. The World Inequality Report (Chancel et al., 2022) notes that the richest 10% of the population controls more than 76% of global wealth, while the bottom 50% controls less than 2%. At the same time, rates of mental health disorders and social tensions have also increased significantly. This gap between material progress and human fulfilment reveals a fundamental problem in the way economic growth is defined and executed.

This modern economy is heavily influenced by the Western paradigm which is rooted in secular thinking. In the secular approach, human life is viewed separately from spiritual and transcendental values. This is evident in the global economic system that prioritises materialistic aspects and statistical figures as a measure of success (Sandimula & Syarifuddin, 2024). Economic growth, in this framework, is often measured by increases in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), investment figures, consumption, and exports, without regard to the balance of human values, social justice, or spirituality (Maria et al., 2025).

This paradigm places humans as mere economic entities (*homo economicus*), whose orientation is towards the fulfilment of physical needs and worldly desires. As a result, economic success is often not directly proportional to quality of life or true happiness. Phenomena such as rising stress levels, environmental degradation, social inequality and spiritual emptiness are evidence that quantitative economic indicators do not adequately reflect true progress in human life (Suhandi, M. Yasir Nasution, 2022). Therefore, there is a need to deeply criticise the assumptions underlying secular economics and re-evaluate the concept of growth that has been the orientation of development.

In this context, the thoughts of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas become very relevant. As one of the leading Muslim scholars in the field of Islamic thought and the Islamisation of science, al-Attas strongly criticised the Western perspective that is detached from divine values. According to him, secularism has created confusion in understanding the meaning of life and knowledge, including in the economic field. Al-

Attas argues that economic growth should not be separated from the purpose of human life as a servant of Allah and khalifah on earth. Growth is not just an increase in material numbers, but must lead to the achievement of adab, justice and taqwa.

The concept of true science in al-Attas' view is the science that connects knowledge with absolute truth, namely Allah. Therefore, economics as a product of knowledge must be framed in the Islamic worldview that prioritises the balance between material and spiritual, between the world and the hereafter. In al-Attas' view, ideal economic growth is growth that brings blessings, sustainability, and true happiness, not just the accumulation of wealth or increased consumption.

Several previous studies have addressed similar themes. Maros and Juniar (Maros & Juniar, 2021) examined al-Attas' critique of secular epistemology and its implications for science reform, but did not specifically highlight the economic aspect. Reza Kusuma (Reza Kusuma et al., 2023) examines al-Attas' critique of secular economic development, but is still limited to the description of thoughts. Meanwhile, Nafisa (Nafisa et al., 2025) discusses Islamic economics in the digital era but has not presented a deep metaphysical critique. This research expands the scope of the study by presenting a new synthesis between al-Attas' metaphysical thinking and contemporary economic problems, especially in the issue of growth. The novelty of this research lies in the construction of an alternative philosophical-economic framework based on tawhid, adab, and maqāṣid al-sharī'ah as a counterpoint to the secular economic paradigm.

Considering the breadth of al-Attas' thought, this study is limited to his critique of the concept of economic growth from the perspective of Islamic philosophy and ethics. This study does not cover his overall critique of science or education. The aim of this research is to develop a holistic understanding of economic growth that integrates the material and spiritual dimensions, and to offer a theoretical foundation for the formulation of economic development policies based on Islamic values, especially for Muslim societies that desire equitable and sustainable development.

## **B. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a descriptive qualitative design with an Islamic philosophy approach, which aims to examine in depth the thoughts of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas regarding criticism of the concept of growth in secular economics. The method used is library research, because the object of study is conceptual and philosophical.

Primary data is obtained from al-Attas' main works, especially *Islam and Secularism* and *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, while secondary data includes journal articles, books, and relevant scientific literature published in the last five years, with priority on sources from reputable databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar. The researcher acts as the main instrument in the process of data collection and interpretation, using a thematic framework based on core concepts such as *tawhid*, *adab*, and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* as the foundation for analysing al-Attas' thought.

Data collection was conducted through a systematic literature search, starting from identification, selection, and classification of documents based on the theme and relevance of the substance. The data was analysed using the content analysis method, which allows researchers to examine the structure of thought and philosophical meaning contained in the text, as well as tracing its relevance to the contemporary economic context. To ensure the credibility and validity of the data, a source triangulation technique was used, comparing various primary and secondary literatures to obtain a complete and contextualised understanding. This strategy is strengthened by in-depth and cross-perspective reading, so that the conclusions produced are argumentative, consistent and academically accountable.

## **C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **1. The Concept of Growth in Secular Economics**

In the modern secular economic paradigm, economic growth is understood predominantly through materialistic indicators, such as increases in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), household consumption, import-export, investment, and national production capacity. The main emphasis is on quantity and material accumulation, where economic success is measured by the extent to which these statistics increase (Delila Kumalasari, 2024). This reflects a worldview derived from the philosophy of materialism, which places material things at the centre of life orientation and the measure of success.

This conception of growth was not born in a vacuum, but came from a long historical process that took place in the Western world, especially since the Enlightenment era. During this period, rationalism and empiricism replaced the role of religion in social and intellectual life. The birth of modern capitalism and the Industrial Revolution also reinforced the view that the material world could be maximised for human prosperity. Within this framework, the economy became an instrument for

producing and distributing wealth for individual fulfilment. However, non-material aspects such as morality, purpose in life and spiritual happiness tend to be ignored or considered irrelevant personal matters in the formulation of macroeconomic policies.

This trend has had serious consequences in the life of mankind. Firstly, there is a moral crisis due to the glorification of consumption and hedonism. The secular economic system does not provide a clear ethical orientation, so economic behaviour often goes beyond the boundaries of humanity. Second, there is a sharpening of social inequality. Economic growth is not always accompanied by equitable distribution of wealth, thus creating a social gap between the rich and the poor (Abduh & Abduh, 2023). Thirdly, this system also contributes greatly to environmental degradation, as it pursues growth without regard to the sustainability of natural resources.

Thus, modern secular economics has moved away from the basic essence of economics as an attempt to fulfil human needs in a fair and balanced manner. The dominance of the materialistic approach causes growth to lose its deep meaning. The concept does not address essential human issues, such as the search for the meaning of life, inner peace, and a relationship with God. This is where Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas' profound critique finds its relevance.

## **2. Al-Attas' View on the Concept of Secular Economic Growth**

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas is a contemporary Muslim intellectual who is famous for his ideas on the Islamisation of science. One of his central ideas is that the crisis of modern human civilisation stems from a misunderstanding of the meaning of science (Maros & Juniar, 2021). In the context of economics, al-Attas offers a sharp critique of Western epistemology that is secular and reductionistic.

According to al-Attas, secular economics has become disorientated because it does not place humans in the correct position in Islamic cosmology. Humans are not just economic beings, but spiritual beings who are tasked as caliphs on earth and must account for their actions before God. Therefore, economic growth should not only be interpreted as a material increase, but should also include an increase in spirituality, morals, and social justice (Reza Kusuma et al., 2023).

Al-Attas emphasises that the world is not the ultimate goal, but rather a testing ground for humans to achieve Allah's pleasure. Economics, as part of human life, should not be separated from religious values. Economics must be built on an Islamic worldview that includes the dimensions of tawhid, adab, and social responsibility. True

economic growth, according to al-Attas, is growth that improves the human soul, establishes justice, and forms a civilised society (Al-Attas, 1995).

Al-Attas' main criticism of secular economics is that it liberates science from revelation, so that science loses its transcendental orientation. In secular economics, science is seen as neutral and value-free, whereas in Islam, every science must be directed towards the right goal (ḥaqīqah) (Al-Attas, 1993). By rejecting the existence of spiritual goals in economic growth, the secular economic system implicitly ignores the moral and existential responsibilities of humans as God's creatures.

Al-Attas also rejects the idea of progress being measured only through material improvement. He emphasised the importance of adab, a value system that shapes individual and societal behaviour in accordance with Islamic teachings. Without adab, economic growth will only produce people who are greedy, selfish, and irresponsible towards others and the environment (Dewi, Rifkah., Wibowo, Sigit., 2023). Therefore, al-Attas calls for the need to reformulate the concept of growth that is not only based on rational economic logic, but also based on Islamic values.

### **3. Islamic Solution to the Problem of Secular Economic Growth (Islamisation)**

In response to the epistemological crisis in modern economics, Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas proposed the grand project of Islamisation of science. Islamisation does not mean adopting Islamic symbols superficially, but rather a deep effort to return science to the roots of tawhid values. In the context of economics, this means building an economic system based on the principles of justice, balance, social responsibility and spiritual sustainability.

The Islamisation of economics must start by changing the paradigm of thinking about growth. Instead of pursuing growth based on numbers and material accumulation alone, the Islamic economic system assesses growth in terms of benefits, blessings and social impact (Nafisa et al., 2025). The measure of economic success is not only judged by GDP or business profits, but also by poverty reduction, collective welfare, fair distribution of wealth, and harmony between humans and nature.

The Islamic approach demands a balance between the life of this world and the hereafter. This can be seen in the principles of *maslahah* (public good), *maqashid sharia* (sharia objectives), and *tawazun* (balance). These principles demand that every economic policy and activity considers spiritual and ethical aspects (Intan Permata

Sari, Eka Sri Wahyuni, 2023). Within this framework, economic actors are not only responsible to fellow human beings, but also to God.

In addition, values such as tawhid, adab, amanah, and justice should be the foundation of economic policy planning and implementation. Tawhid provides the foundation that all economic activities must be intended to worship Allah (Aqbar & Iskandar, 2021). Adab ensures that economic behaviour reflects noble morals. Amanah encourages responsibility and integrity in the management of wealth. Justice demands fair distribution of resources and development outcomes.

Thus, the solution to the growth crisis in secular economics is not only technical, but paradigmatic and philosophical. It requires a fundamental change in the way of looking at humans, science, and the purpose of life. The thought of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas provides an important contribution in building an economic framework that is not separated from Islamic values. The Islamisation of economics is not anti-growth, but rather a redefinition of growth within the framework of rahmatan lil 'alamin - that is, growth that is comprehensive, just, and brings blessings to all creatures.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

The concept of growth in the secular economic paradigm has undergone a serious reduction in meaning. Growth is narrowly understood as an increase in quantitative indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), consumption and production, without considering spiritual, moral and social balance. This view is a product of secular epistemology that separates science from divine values, resulting in a multidimensional crisis: social inequality, environmental degradation, loss of life orientation, and ethical disintegration in economic practice.

Through an Islamic philosophy approach and a literature study of the works of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, this research asserts that the root of the problem is a deep epistemological crisis. Al-Attas views that science, including economics, should not be value-free, but should be bound to divine truth. Therefore, al-Attas offers the idea of Islamisation of science as a conceptual solution that is paradigmatic, not just technical. In the context of economics, he emphasised the importance of making the values of tawhid, adab, and maqāṣid al-sharī'ah the basis of development, so that growth is not only materially meaningful, but also spiritual, ethical, and social.

These findings have important implications for public policy formulation, especially in the context of Muslim-majority countries. The development paradigm needs to be reformulated so that it does not only rely on economic growth in the narrow sense, but also considers blessings (barakah), distribution justice, environmental sustainability, and the spiritual welfare of the community. Indicators of economic success need to be complemented with instruments capable of measuring holistic dimensions of well-being, such as the happiness index, the level of social justice, and the quality of manners in society. This requires the involvement of the state, academia and Islamic financial institutions to jointly develop a policy framework rooted in the Islamic worldview.

The limitation of this research lies in its conceptual and textual nature, so it has not touched the implementative aspects directly. Therefore, further research is recommended to examine the possibility of applying the idea of economic Islamisation in the context of real development policies, either through case studies on certain countries or institutions, or through a quantitative approach to the impact of Islamic value-based growth indicators. Further research can also contribute in developing alternative indicators that are able to represent an integral, fair, and balanced welfare between the world and the hereafter.

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