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Irwan Suwandi¹
Kholili Hasib²
Muhammad
Ardiansyah³

SECULARISM IN SCIENCE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PAUL KURTZ AND THE CRITICISM OF SYED MUHAMMAD NAQUIB AL-ATTAS

Abstrak

Sekularisme dalam ilmu pengetahuan modern berangkat dari pengalaman dan cara pandang Barat yang memisahkan antara sains dan agama, serta melahirkan pengosongan dimensi transendensi, relativisme nilai dan eksploitasi manusia. Salah satu tokoh humanisme sekuler Paul Kurtz memposisikan rasionalitas, sains dan etika serta otonomi manusia tanpa melibatkan pandangan atau terdapat rujukan yang bersumber pada Tuhan yang menjadi dasar tatanan moral dan peradaban maju. Pandangan inilah yang selama ini sejalan dengan narasi global sekularisasi yang beranggapan bahwa sains sebagai pendorong utama yang melemahkan otoritas keagamaan. Dalam hal ini Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas mengkritik keras pandangan-pandangan barat yaitu sekularisme ilmu pengetahuan tersebut yang mana sangat jelas bahwa sekularisme mengabaikan alam dari makna spiritual (disenchantment of nature), membuang total dimensi religius dari ranah politik dan keilmuan (desacralization), serta menghapuskan nilai-nilai kemanusiaan (deconsecration of values). Menurut Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, sekularisasi ilmu memiliki proses yang cenderung pembentukan dehumanisasi, kehampaan batin, alienasi dari alam serta merusak hubungan manusia dari Tuhannya. Dengan demikian, ia berpandangan bahwa Islamisasi ilmu pengetahuan dan Islamic worldview yang merupakan konsep atau gagasannya dalam mengoreksi paradigma sekuler yang mana menegaskan kesatuan ontologis antara wahyu, akal serta pengalaman empiris didalam tradisi keilmuan islam. Artikel ini akan membahas sekularisme dalam pandangan Paul Kurtz dengan kritik dari Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas khususnya hubungan antara sains dan agama.

Kata Kunci: Sekularisme, Paul Kurtz, Ilmu Pengetahuan, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Sains Dan Agama

Abstract

Secularism in modern science departs from Western experience and perspective that separates science and religion, giving birth to the emptying of transcendence dimension, value relativism, and human exploitation. One of the figures of secular humanism, Paul Kurtz, positions rationality, science, and ethics as well as human autonomy without involving views or references sourced from God, which becomes the basis of moral order and advanced civilization. This view is in line with the global narrative of secularization which assumes that science is the main driver that weakens religious authority. In this regard, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas strongly criticizes Western views, namely the secularism of science, which clearly ignores the nature of spiritual meaning (disenchantment of nature), totally discards the religious dimension from the realm of politics and science (desacralization), and eliminates human values (deconsecration of values). According to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, the secularization of science has a process that tends to form dehumanization, spiritual emptiness, alienation from nature, and damage the relationship between humans and their God. Thus, he views that the Islamization of science and Islamic worldview is a concept or idea in correcting the secular paradigm which affirms the ontological unity between revelation, reason, and empirical experience in the Islamic

^{1,2,3} Program Studi Pendidikan Agama Islam, Fakultas Tarbiyah, Universitas Islam Internasional Darullughah Wadda'wah
 email: irwan.nawo.suwandi@live.co.uk , kholili.hasib@gmail.com, mardiansyahdalwa@gmail.com

scientific tradition. This article will discuss secularism in Paul Kurtz's view with criticism from Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, especially the relationship between science and religion

Keywords: Secularism, Paul Kurtz, Science, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, Science And Religion

INTRODUCTION

We recognize that modern Western science is in fact part of the process of secularization, namely a shift that involves the transfer of authority or worldview from religion to human reason and its institutions. This shift gives rise to the assumption that science ought to be value-neutral and free from religious claims (Gunagraha & Muttaqin, 2025; Simons, 2022; Harrison, 2017). There exists a classical narrative asserting that “science causes secularization,” which assumes that the more advanced science becomes, the more diminished the role of religion is in explaining reality and guiding human life (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2021; Kampaourakis, 2024).

In this context, the thought of Paul Kurtz as an influential figure in secular humanism is significant, as he positions science as the primary foundation or source of knowledge for constructing ethics and human life, while disregarding sources such as revelation, miracles, or transcendent religious authority (Yalcinkaya, 2020). He also integrates practical atheism, scientific naturalism, and secular humanism, resulting in a view of knowledge as a matter of individual rights or human freedom to understand both nature and social life rationally (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2021; Catto, 2020).

On the other hand, there are strong critiques from Muslim thinkers toward the secularization of science, which is considered to eliminate metaphysical values and revelatory values from the framework and foundations of knowledge and civilization. One such critique is developed by the Malay Muslim thinker Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas (Al-Attas, 2017). Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas argues that secularism is not merely the separation of religion from social life, nor only the institutional separation of religion from the state, but rather a worldview that completely removes any role of sacred meaning derived from revelation (metaphysics). This worldview shifts the orientation of life to be solely worldly in nature and leads to value relativism as a logical consequence (Sahidin, 2022; Fadillah et al., 2023).

In several of his works, such as *Islam and Secularism*, *Islam and the Philosophy of Science*, and *The Concept of Education in Islam*, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas emphasizes that the epistemological crisis of modern science is rooted in the loss of the tawhidic worldview that integrates reason, revelation, and experience. Various contemporary studies indicate that the epistemology of science is never truly neutral but is always closely intertwined with particular worldviews, including secularism, positivism, and materialism, which are dominant or influential in modern science (Arroisi et al., 2023; Ihsan et al., 2022).

Several writings examined by Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas demonstrate that the concepts of the “Islamization of knowledge” and the “Islamic worldview” constitute direct responses to secularist thought and movements within education, the social sciences and humanities, as well as the natural sciences (Sahidin, 2022; Gunagraha & Muttaqin, 2025). Based on this background, this paper aims to present the view of the secularization of science through the thought of Paul Kurtz as a representation of secular humanism, and then to confront it with the critique of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, who offers a scientific paradigm grounded in tawhid.

METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with a library research method, which is to examine written sources relevant to the themes of secularism in science, the thoughts of Paul Kurtz, and the criticism of Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. Several studies have clearly shown that scientific secularism results in a crisis of values, subject alienation, and a dichotomy between science and religion, which, according to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, can only be overcome through the reconstruction of worldview and the Islamization of the epistemology of science. The study of secularization and the relationship between science and religion in Western perspectives is used to map the position of secular science, which forms the basis of Paul Kurtz's secular humanism.

The data collection technique was carried out by reading, critiquing, and organizing literature relevant to the discussion by the author. The data was then classified into themes such as the concepts of secularism, secular humanism, modern scientific epistemology, Islamic criticism of secularism, and the Islamization of science (Mujiburrohman & Susri, n.d.; Suwandi et al., 2025). Data analysis was carried out using a descriptive and content analysis approach, namely examining the structure of concepts, arguments, and implications of thought, as well as comparing the secular epistemological framework with the Islamic epistemological framework according to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas. This approach allows for an argumentative reconstruction of how scientific secularism is understood, as well as how Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' criticism proposes an alternative paradigm rooted in tawhid (Fadillah et al., 2023; Gunagraha & Muttaqin, 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1) Paul Kurtz and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas

His full name is Paul Winter Kurtz, an American philosopher, educator, publisher, and writer known for his secular humanism in the 20th century (Hayon, 2023; Kurtz et al., 2018). He was born on December 21, 1925, in Newark, New Jersey, to a Jewish family as the son of Sar Lasser and Martin Kurtz. He earned his bachelor's degree in 1948 at New York University, then continued his studies in philosophy at Columbia University in 1949 for his master's degree and became a doctor of philosophy in 1952 with a dissertation on value theory (Hayon, 2023). He was firmly committed to rationality in a scientific context and was a staunch defender of science and reason against forms of superstition and mythology that did not prioritize reason as the primary instrument of thought. There is nothing wrong with Paul Kurtz's statement, in Elaine Woo's writing, which states that, "You can call me a skeptic, a non-theist, an atheist, an agnostic, a skeptical, agnostic atheist, but the best term," Kurtz, a champion of science and debunker of religions and the supernatural, told the Associated Press years ago, "is secular humanist. I have a philosophy, a point of view, and I express it" (Woo, 2012). As for Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas He is a prominent contemporary Muslim intellectual of Malay descent, known for his famous work formulating the idea of Islamization of Science and the concept of Islamic education based on ta'dib (adab) (Hasim et al., 2025). He was born in Bogor, West Java, on September 5, 1931, to a family of Ba'alawi Hadramaut religious nobility and holds the title of sayyid (Ahadiyah, 2024). Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas pursued higher education at the University of Malaya, McGill University (Canada), and the School of Oriental and African Studies-University of London, earning his MA and PhD degrees, with expertise in theology, philosophy, Sufism, history, and Malay-Islamic culture. In his academic career, he actively established and led various higher education institutions in Malaysia and reached the peak of his contribution when he founded ISTAC (International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization) in Kuala Lumpur, which became an important center for the study of civilization and the Islamization of science. With more than twenty-five monumental works, such as *Islam and Secularism*, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam*, and *The Concept of Education in Islam*, al-Attas systematically formulated the Islamic worldview, the concept of adab, and the project of reconstructing Islamic education that rejects secularism and the dichotomy of knowledge. In his *Treatise for Muslims*, he said ... and it is an attitude, action, assertion with consideration which has a similar relation with only physical, societal, and political problems; and which is subject to change. (...and it is an attitude, action, assertion, and consideration that is similar to physical, societal, and political issues only, and which is subject to change.) (Hidayatullah & Arif, 2022). He is recognized as one of the most original Muslim thinkers in the field of Islamic educational philosophy, who has influenced the discourse on Islamic epistemology, education, and the development of contemporary Islamic civilization in a broad sense (Gunagraha & Muttaqin, 2025; Jamil & Fadilah, 2025).

2) Secularism in Science and Secular Humanism

History tells us that secularism in science developed from a lengthy process in which there was a shift from religious authority to reason and empirical observation, particularly since the Age of Enlightenment and the Scientific Revolution in Europe. A grand narrative of modernity describes science as an emancipatory force, liberating humans from all forms of oppression, inequality, and limitations, whether social, political, economic, or intellectual, in

order to achieve justice and independence. Religious dogma is something that must be freed in order to achieve independence, which paves the way for rational explanations of natural and human events. In this framework, scientific secularism places scientific facts as the result of autonomous empirical and rational methods, so that theological statements or acknowledgments are not part of valid science (Catto, 2020; Harrison, 2017). Paul Kurtz, the father of contemporary secular humanism, states that secularism, practical atheism, and scientific naturalism are a spirit or the result of intellectual efforts that emphasize that humans must construct the meaning of life, ethics, and social order based on scientific knowledge, taking into account rationality without relying on transcendent authority (metaphysics) (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2021). Paul Kurtz's secular humanism firmly rejects the influence of metaphysical beliefs in the public sphere, including education and social policy. From this perspective, science is viewed as the primary tool for understanding how the world works and solving all kinds of human problems, while religion is reduced to a private sphere that should not determine scientific or public policy (Harrison, 2017). In line with Harrison's view, which explains that the existence of science is the cause of secularization, where scientific progress is considered to erode the credibility of religious metaphysics while opening space for a secular worldview. Although some contemporary secularization theories attempt to criticize the direct conflict between science and religion, the fact is that various studies still explain that scientific groups, especially in Western environments, are indeed more inclined towards secular values in their professional activities. In this case, Paul Kurtz can be understood as a philosophical articulation of this social and intellectual situation, in which the autonomy of science and reason has become a symbol of modern maturity, while references to revelation and the divine, which constitute metaphysics, are perceived as a form of heteronomy with laws, obedience, and rules, which must be left out of the public sphere.

3) Al-Attas' Criticism of Secularism and the Westernization of Science

Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas sees secularism not merely as a process of separating humans, religion, and the state, but as a way of viewing reality that results in the emptying of sacred meaning from nature, history, and human life (Fadillah et al., 2023). In his analysis, secularism produces three forms: disenchantment of nature (the emptying of nature of religious and spiritual meaning), desacralization of politics (the removal of the sacred and ethical dimensions in the political and social spheres), and deconsecration of values (the relativization of human values to the point where there is no longer any absolute truth or goodness). These three processes are closely related in modern science, which is built on a Western worldview that ignores revelation as a source and instead relies on cultural traditions and secular philosophical speculation (Sahidin, 2022).

According to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, the Westernization of science occurs when basic concepts such as humanity, freedom, progress, and happiness, which are accepted from Western civilization along with its secular philosophical thinking, are then used as the basis for the development of science and education in the Muslim world without a process of epistemological criticism and filtering (Gunagraha & Muttaqin, 2025), resulting in science in the Muslim context being detached from the orientation of tawhid, revelation (metaphysics), which leads to a crisis of meaning, a moral crisis, and a dichotomy between general science and religion. According to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas in several contemporary studies, modern science is not neutral because it is already attached to a certain metaphysics of reality, particularly the rejection of the hierarchy of being, the denial of the unseen dimension, and the reduction of humans to merely rational-material beings (Ihsan et al., 2022).

In his perspective, the epistemology of modern secular science has separated knowledge from the highest purpose of human life, which is knowledge of God and moral perfection. Meanwhile, the Islamic view of knowledge is centered and rooted in the integrative relationship between revelation, reason, and the senses, where revelation serves as the benchmark of truth or the highest source of truth, guiding the workings of reason and empirical observation (Gunagraha & Muttaqin, 2025). Therefore, secularism in science is part of a process in which humans lose meaning and morality and fall into skepticism, relativism, nihilism, and other secular ideologies (Arroisi et al., 2023; Gunagraha & Muttaqin, 2025).

4) Contrasting Views between Paul Kurtz and Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas

When compared conceptually, there is a fundamental difference between Paul Kurtz's secular view and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas' view of the Islamization of science. Paul Kurtz's thinking states that science must be carried out in an order that is independent, natural to human beings themselves, and free from the influence or claims of revelation, so that ethics and public policy can be built on rational and scientific considerations about human beings and society itself (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2021). Within this framework of secular humanism, religion is not used as a primary normative source in determining truth or policy, but is instead placed in the private sphere, where it does not bind society at large. This has implications for the position of science as the primary authority in explaining the world and setting the direction for progress, while religious metaphysical concepts are viewed as irrelevant to scientific discourse (Vinner, 2018). Conversely, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas rejects the claim of secular epistemological neutrality and emphasizes that every scientific system originates from and is rooted in a particular worldview, making it impossible to completely separate scientific facts from metaphysical values. For Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, modern science, which was born from European historical experience, carries traces of internal conflict between the Church and science, which then gave rise to skepticism towards the authority of revelation and took reason and sensory experience as the only sources that could be used as truth (Gunagraha & Muttaqin, 2025; Fadillah et al., 2023). In Islam, on the other hand, revelation is not placed as a rival to reason, but as a source of enlightenment that guides the proper use of reason and the senses, placing them in proportion so that the integration of general science and religion is part of the structure of civilization. From this, it appears that the difference between the two is not merely in the content of the doctrine, but in the metaphysical foundations that govern the relationship between God, humans, nature, and science.

CONCLUSION

The secularism of science, which can also be called part of Paul Kurtz's secular humanism, places science as a form of human independence, both in terms of its function and its decisions, which are free and wholehearted in understanding reality and forming ethics that ignore revelation and religious authority, so that empirical rationality becomes the main source of truth and public policy. Paul Kurtz's framework of thinking is very clear in reducing the role of religion, metaphysics, and religious authority in human life from a social, cultural, political, and other perspectives. Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas argues that secularism and the secularization of science are part of a process that empties nature of religious values, relativizes moral truth, and ignores the human subject itself from its God, giving rise to an epistemological, ethical, and civilizational crisis. In response to this criticism, Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas offers the concept of Islamization of knowledge with the aim of freeing knowledge from Western secular assumptions, restoring the Islamic worldview based on tawhid, and integrating revelation, reason, and experience into a single epistemological structure oriented towards the recognition of Allah and the formation of civilized human beings. A comparison of the thoughts of Paul Kurtz and Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas thus reveals a fundamental clash between the secular paradigm, which focuses on only in human freedom and independence and the Islamic paradigm that affirms humanity's attachment to the divine order, and opens space for the development of alternative epistemologies that combine modern science with the foundational aspects of metaphysics and revelatory ethics.

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