

Mohamed Shukri's Contribution to Islamic Thought in Sri Lanka: A Critical Study

MOHAMED ZACKY*

MD. MONIRUZZAMAN**

MOHAMED HASSAN***

Abstract

Mohamed Shukri (1940-2020) left a permanent mark on the trajectory of Islamic thought in contemporary Sri Lanka. This paper explores his contribution to Islamic thought in the local context. Following the thematic analysis method, this paper finds that Shukri attempted to develop a comprehensive critique of the philosophical foundations of modern scientism and enlightenment rationalism. For that purpose, Shukri instrumentalized Islamic spiritual thought or Sufism, arguing that the modernist onto-epistemological and ethical concepts do not permit a person to experience the unseen realities and the spiritual world. Shukri's perception of the implications of this philosophical reductionism in the domain of contemporary social sciences, humanities, and ethics is also considered. In addition, the paper notes that Shukri supported projects that foster the harmonious relationship between religious traditions by deploying shared philosophical perspectives. However, he stressed that the differences between those traditions also must be respected. Finally, this paper emphasizes that Shukri's scholarly discourses predominantly manifest a critical re-emergence of revisionist Islamic spiritual thought in post-colonial Sri Lanka, which stood as a check on the smooth penetration of modernist ideas within the local Muslim community.

Keywords

Mohamed Shukri, Sufism, Sri Lanka, Muslims, Islamic thought.

* Associate Member, Centre for Civilizational Dialogue, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

** Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, University of Sharjah, Sharjah, UAE.

*** Manager, Academy for Development, Research and Training (ADRT), Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies, Beruwala, Sri Lanka.

Introduction

The iconic Sri Lankan Islamic scholar Mohamed Shukri passed away on May 19, 2020. The Sri Lankan academic and intellectual community mourned his death and applauded him for his great contribution to Islamic thought in the Sri Lankan context.¹ After being trained as a doctoral student under William Montgomery Watt (d. 2006), the famous Scottish professor of history of Islamic theology and philosophy, at the University of Edinburgh in the early 1970s, Shukri dedicated his intellectual life to reconfiguring the Islamic intellectual developments of the local context, addressing the epistemological and ethical questions, posed by the modern world. Thus, he spoke to his community mainly through Tamil and used the journal *Islamiya Sindhanai* (Islamic thought)² as a convenient platform to articulate his ideas. Entangling with the essential questions of the modern Western philosophical paradigm, Shukri firmly held that Islam has its specific worldview and philosophical foundation even though it never remained blind to other cultural and civilizational alternatives in the process of historical interactions.³ Observing Shukri's works on Islamic philosophy, Anes, a Sri Lankan public intellectual, notes that "Shukri's knowledge of both the Islamic and Western philosophical paradigms, including both Greek and modern periods, could force me to identify him as an 'Islamic philosopher proper'."⁴ In the same vein, S. H. Hasbullah hailed Shukri as a scholar who "writes for all" cherishing his ability to articulate highly philosophical thoughts through careful use of the local language, appealing to the local scholarly community. He believes that "it is necessary to synthesize his thoughts expressed through his writings and other means and conceptualize them for future research and use."⁵

¹ See B. A. Hussianmiya, "Dr. Shukri's Demise Leaves a Huge Void in Islamic Learning," May 23, 2020, <http://drshukri.lk/?p=416>; Dheen Mohamed, "Dr. MAM Shukri: An Intellectual We Lost," *Times-online*, May 21, 2020, <https://www.timesonline.lk/news/dr-m-a-m-shukri-an-intellectual-we-lost/18-1120125>.

² *Islamiya Sindhanai* is the flagship journal of the Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies, Beruwala, Sri Lanka.

³ M. A. M. Shukri, "Islamiyya Panpadum, Nagarehamum," *Islamiya Sindhanai*, 3, no. 1 (1980): 52-53.

⁴ M. S. M. Anes, "Ilangayil Islamiyya Panpattu Sindanayku Kalanizy Shukriyin Ariwu Pangalippuhal," May 23, 2020, <http://drshukri.lk/?p=413>.

⁵ S. H. Hasbullah, "Dr. Shukri Writes for All: A Review of Selected Essays," May 19, 2020, <http://drshukri.lk/?p=379>.

This study is such an attempt as it aims to put his scattered ideas into perspective. It tries to locate him within the long trajectory of modern Islamic thought in Sri Lanka. Primarily, it focuses only on Islamic philosophical expositions of Shukri as long as they help us capture the essence of his worldview. As for the existing academic works on him, they aimed only to broadly outline his socio-religious and scholarly life.⁶ They did not intend to make a systematic study of Shukri's ideas.

Against this background, this study explores how Shukri formulated an Islamic critique of modern Western philosophy's ontological, epistemological, and ethical foundations. Then it advances an argument that Shukri developed his philosophical assumptions through deploying the Islamic spiritual thought/Sufism. Thus, his intellectual expositions should be seen as the re-emergence of the *taṣawwuf* paradigm in the Islamic intellectual debate of Sri Lanka. However, Shukri instrumentalizes this paradigm as a critique of modernity rather than reconciling with it. His ideas played a crucial role in providing an intellectual milieu to a discourse that aimed to challenge the unchecked penetration of modernist ideas within the Sri Lankan Muslim community. This argument of the paper is outlined in the following ways. Section two provides a biographical note on Shukri. Section three briefly elaborates on the major strands of Islamic religious discourses in Sri Lanka. Section four elaborates on how Shukri responded to the ontological, epistemological, and ethical questions of modernity. Section five elaborates on how he deployed those philosophical understandings in approaching contemporary social sciences and humanities. Sections six and seven discuss Shukri's ethical thought and his perception of inter-faith dialogue. The article ends with a conclusion.

Mohamed Shukri: Life and Works

Mohamed Shukri was born in 1940. He got his primary education at St. Thomas College, Matara, and then attended the prestigious Zahira College in Colombo for his advanced-level studies. At Zahira College, he was trained under prominent educationists such as A. M. A. Azeez (d. 1973), the principal of the College.⁷ During this period, Shukri was introduced to

⁶ For example, see S. M. M. Mazahir, A. R. Aroos, and M. M. A. Abdullah, "Shukri's Contribution for Arabic and Islamic Studies in Higher Education in Sri Lanka: An Evaluative Study," in *Arabic and Islamic Studies in Sri Lankan Higher Education*, ed. S. M. M. Mazahir, R. A. Sarjoon, and M. C. S. Shathifa (Oluvil: Faculty of Islamic Studies and Arabic Language, 2021), 175-226.

⁷ Agar Mohamed, "Dr. Shukri: A Multidimensional Personality," n.d., http://drshukri.lk/?page_id=8.

various Islamic philosophical debates. Azeez was a fervent supporter of the Pakistani poet-cum-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal's (d. 1938) philosophy and Islamic reformist discourses of the time. The enthusiasm of the principal for Islamic philosophical discourses significantly shaped Shukri's interest in Islamic thought in general.⁸ After finishing his secondary education, Shukri enrolled at the University of Peradeniya, where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Arabic. He first served as a lecturer of Arabic language and Islamic civilizational studies at the University of Colombo before returning to his alma mater, the University of Peradeniya, in 1973. Shukri was awarded the Doctor of Philosophy by the University of Edinburgh in 1976. In his doctoral thesis, he explored the spiritual doctrine of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d. 386/996), the fourth-century Islamic Sufi thinker, and his work *Qūt al-Qulūb* (Foods of the Heart). His thesis was supervised by Montgomery Watt. In 1981, Shukri left the senior lecturer post at the University of Peradeniya to become the director of an emerging Islamic academic institution "Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies" and held this position until his demise in 2020.⁹

Throughout his academic career, Shukri authored and edited many works such as *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity* (1986), *Religion and Science* (1994), *Iqbal's Poems and Philosophy* (2012), *Sufism: The Spiritual Dimension of Islam* (2022), *Malik Bin Nabi and His Reformist Thought* (2013), *Hadīth and Sunnah: Significance and History of Compilation* (1993), *The Qur'ānic Concept of Life* (1981), *Sufis in Defense of Faith* (1984), *Centres of Islamic Culture and Civilization in the Medieval Muslim World* (1997), and *The Concept of Human Rights in Islam* (1996).¹⁰ Apart from these books, he was the editor-in-chief of the above-mentioned journal *Islamiya Sindhanai* (Islamic Thought) and he published more than 100 research articles in it over the four decades.

Islamic Religious Discourses in Modern Sri Lanka: A Critical Reflection

European colonialism affected the Sri Lankan Muslim community like other parts of the world. It brought the country a new legal system, education philosophy, economic regulations, and political organization. In the later part of the colonial period, the Muslims were forced to face the tradition vs. modernity dichotomy. This dichotomy was mainly

⁸ M. A. M. Shukri, "AMA Azeez's Contribution to Education and Scholarship," June 1, 2020, http://drshukri.lk/?page_id=8.

⁹ Mohamed, "Dr. Shukri."

¹⁰ All these books were written in the Tamil language. The titles of the books have been translated into English by the authors.

manifested in education and the knowledge system. The new developments pushed Muslims to choose modern secular education philosophy, knowledge, sciences, and the English language if they wanted to survive in the colonial system. This new secular education system aimed to redefine the role of religion and the importance of religious knowledge and learning in public life in line with its educational philosophy.¹¹ Therefore, the question of secular knowledge and the idea of social progress pushed the Muslim community to rethink their traditional beliefs in facing the future.

A prominent Muslim thinker who attempted to present a new religious discourse against the backdrop of these new intellectual and socio-political challenges in the later colonial Ceylon was M. C. Siddi Lebbe (1838-1898). His religious discourse constituted several essential elements. Primarily, he argued that Sri Lankan Muslims should positively respond to modern developments and be open to modern education. They must change their religious ideas considering the demands of the time.¹² Moreover, he advised that the Muslim community does not need to compromise their religious consciousness and ethical system in engaging with modern knowledge. Instead, the Muslim community can enter modernity through Islamic religious values.¹³ However, Lebbe engaged with the existing challenges of modern knowledge by re-articulating the traditional Sufi ontological/spiritual foundations, which had been dominant in Sri Lanka for centuries. Otherwise stated, he neither discredited modern knowledge nor accepted it as superior. For him, the Sufi ontological assumptions were supreme. They had the potential to stand as a “shield” in approaching modern science, education, and its achievement without losing the Islamic identity/worldview.¹⁴

The subsequent phase of Islamic religious discourses in Sri Lanka is analysed chiefly through the lenses of the intellectual exposition of Azeez. His thoughts were formulated as a response to the emergence of an independent Sri Lankan state. Azeez also articulated his thoughts to promote educational empowerment while protecting Islamic culture.

¹¹ Samaraweera Vijaya, “Aspects of Muslim Revivalist Movements in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Muslims of Sri Lanka: Avenues to Antiquity*, ed. M. A. M. Shukri (Colombo: Naleemiah Institute, 1986), 369-72.

¹² M. S. M. Anes, *Tharkela Islamiya Sindhanai* (Colombo: Kumaran Book House, 2007), 349.

¹³ M. A. Numan, *Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2007), 165.

¹⁴ Alexander Mckinley and Merin Shobhana Xavier, “The Mysteries of the Universe: Tamil Muslim Intellectualism of M. C. Siddi Lebbe,” *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2018): 5-10.

Anes highlights the essence of Azeez's mission as follows: "Azeez, one of the leading Muslim scholars of his time, attempted to strengthen the Muslim community's optimism about modern education. His core message was that there would be no progress if the community ignored modern knowledge."¹⁵ In that process, Azeez endorsed the importance of rationalism both in secular and religious discourses. He believed that the foundation of knowledge in Islam is rationalism.¹⁶

During these historical moments, Sri Lankan Muslim leadership found Iqbal's thoughts and Indian reformist thinker Syed Ahmad Khan's (d. 1898) ideas as the guiding light to achieve these dual purposes. Mahroof argues that Khan provided a framework for Sri Lankan Muslims to reconcile their faith with modern knowledge, its institutions, and demands for social progress. Likewise, Iqbal's thinking helped them connect their socio-cultural life with the heritage of the Islamic world and its civilizational legacy. In addition, Sri Lankan Muslim leadership saw in Iqbal a motivation for the self-assertion of reason, which is perceived as foundational for any forward-thinking community by modern societies and sparks of God-consciousness simultaneously.¹⁷

The third dimension represents the religious discourses of Islamic religious-social movements in Sri Lanka. They played an influential role in shaping the Islamic discourses of the Muslim community in the later part of the twentieth century in Sri Lanka. These movements worked to marshal the community along the line of religious populist narratives like restoration of the idea of Islam as a complete way of life, reestablishment of Islamic social order, ideological confrontation against non-Islamic socio-cultural thoughts, and protection of religious piety and safeguarding the community from non-Islamic practices.¹⁸

Against this developing Islamic intellectual context of Sri Lanka, one should highlight two significant aspects of Shukri's intellectual life. First, he lived through both the periods of Azeez's intellectualism (1950s-1970s) and Islamic populist mass movements (1980s). Second, he underwent rigorous academic training in Islamic spiritual tradition/Sufism when the subject was not considered central to the social reform project by the Muslim intellectuals of his time. Thus, evaluating the impact of Shukri's

¹⁵ Anes, *Tharkela Islamiya Sindhanai*, 358.

¹⁶ Anes, *AMA Azeez* (Colombo: Kumaran Book House, 2009), 40.

¹⁷ M. M. M. Mahroof, "Sir Sayed Ahmad Khan and Allama Iqbal in Sri Lanka," *Iqbal Review* 34, no. 1 (1993): 9-11.

¹⁸ F. Mihlar, "Religious Change in a Minority Context: Transforming Islam in Sri Lanka," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 12 (2019): 6-7.

contribution to the existing Islamic intellectual development is highly important, a point to which the paper will return in its concluding section.

Multiple Realities and the Limits of Enlightenment Epistemology

Since the late 1960s, Shukri has represented a narrative through his writings that modernist ontological assumptions are problematic and require a radical critique. For him, revitalizing Islamic conceptions of reality and objective truths would assist in developing an original alternative ontology to the Western paradigm that only accepts the material causality of the natural and social world as the ultimate truth. Consequently, Shukri demanded that the Muslim intellectual community should be aware of these conceptual differences among various worldviews rooted in divergent ontological grounds. One can infer from Shukri's discourses three significant ways he used to deconstruct modernist ontological premises.

First, he emphasized the centrality of God and realizing of His presence as the essence of all knowledge in Islam. Talking about the objectives of knowledge, Shukri says,

We should not think that the concept of God in Islam limits the human mind's quest to discover universal laws of nature. Instead, numerous verses of Islamic primary sources demand humankind to unpack the hidden secrets of God's creations. However, the objective of seeking knowledge has to go beyond the immediate need of mere discovery of universal laws of nature. The endeavour should aim to reach God's wisdom. This objective of knowledge greatly differs from the Western ontological claims, which hold that the world's objective reality is material causality and that discovering it is the ultimate objective of knowledge. It never looks beyond the causal nexus of the material world or attempts to find God's presence and His reality. Only Research based on faith can lead an individual to see the unseen aspects of the material world, such as God's wisdom and plan.¹⁹

Secondly, Shukri adopted Sufi prepositions, believing that they could play a vital role in challenging Western philosophical premises. For example, in critiquing ontological foundations of evolutionary biology as early as in the 1960s, Shukri resorted to classical Sufi poet Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273 CE) to argue that the idea of evolution in its reality is an evolution of the human soul and its struggle to depart the material world and reach its real essence, which is God's essence. Hence, reality does not end with this material world; instead, it has a transcendent dimension. Evolutionary biology argues that the material world shapes the origin and development

¹⁹ M. A. M. Shukri, "Islamiya Araiwu Parampariyam," October 25, 2016, <http://drshukri.lk/?p=268>.

of human beings. In contrast, Shukri writes in the 1960s that the human soul is the centre of human personality and the reality of the world in the Islamic worldview. The soul's dynamics are shaped by its desire and struggle to reach the essence of its spirit, which dwells in the immaterial world.²⁰ Thus, one can make an educated guess that Shukri's choice of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's treatise *Qūt al-Qulūb* for his doctoral research is a logical development of his emerging view of *taṣawwuf*. For him, Sufi ontological assumptions have the potential to become the most authoritative and alternative voice against the modernist paradigm. In his doctoral thesis, he brings out the core idea of the ontological superstructure of Sufism as he writes, "The 'heart' does not signify the heart of the flesh, but it is a transcendental subtlety that is a non-material thing connected with the unseen world whereby the realities of all things are perceived as a mirror."²¹

Third, Shukri vehemently criticized the approaches that try to reinterpret the spiritual meanings of Islamic tradition through the lenses of modern scientific developments. In this regard, he predicts a few challenges that the scientific interpretation of the Qur'ān could pose to the spiritual objectives of the Qur'ān. He observed that if the scientific interpretation of the Qur'ān aims to prove that the Qur'ān is one of the most definitive scientific texts, the very endeavour could threaten, for sure, the fundamental worldview of the Qur'ān. Nevertheless, if the researcher instrumentalizes the method of scientific interpretation of the Qur'ān to prove that there is a reality beyond the reality of the material existence of the world, it can be seen as a helpful method of interpretation. The scholars of scientific understanding of the Qur'ān should be aware that the Qur'ān consists of eternal truths. Conversely, scientific knowledge is a product of the limited and ever-changing human mind.²² Commenting on the recent attempts of some scholars to prove the Prophet Muḥammad's (peace be on him) night journey or *mi'rāj* through deploying the latest developments of science, Shukri writes,

It is an objective truth that man cannot understand unseen realities/truths through his senses controlled by space and time constraints. The physical senses can only capture the material reality of the world. The attempts of Islamic scholars to interpret the night journey considering modern science

²⁰ Shukri, "Thoughts of Moulānā Rūmī," December 21, 2021, <http://drshukri.lk/?p=495%C3%89>.

²¹ Shukri, "The Mystical Doctrine of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī as It Found in His Book *Qūt al-Qulūb*" (PhD diss., The University of Edinburgh, UK, 1976), 148, <https://era.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/35373>.

²² Shukri, *Mazamum Ariwiyalum* (Beruwela: Al-Kalam Publishers, 1994), 33-35.

must be seen as an evident influence of the materialistic orientation of modern science on them. Modern science is trying to imprison spiritual realities and assign them the status of being merely a material reality. It is pathetic that the Muslim communities, who believe in unseen realities, have increasingly become victims of this developing trend.²³

Against this background, Shukri constructed his critique of enlightenment epistemology. In surveying his epistemological expositions, one can easily observe that most of Shukri's arguments revolve around a focal idea, which emphasizes that the modernist epistemological outlook is limited and that there is an ever-increasing demand for other sources of knowledge, notably revelation. Nevertheless, the dominance of empirical and rationalist methods of knowing is purely an outcome of the politics of eurocentrism and colonialism. Hence, Shukri invested an enormous intellectual effort to show how enlightenment scholars produced a reductionist epistemological scheme and, thus, artificially created a religion and science dichotomy. In his *Mazamum Ariwiyalum*, Shukri writes,

If someone thinks that the post-enlightenment scientific methods will guide him to discover the eternal truths about the objective of this universe and human life, it is an illogical/irrational expectation. What the scientific method does is explain the material structure of the universe. It merely attempts to capture reality through numbers and measurements. It does not go beyond the domain of statistical analysis. . . . Moreover, Sartre's existentialism, Freud's psychoanalysis, and Hawksley's humanism also sought to discover the secret of human existence. Nevertheless, they failed to realize the real essence of human life. The divine revelation can only produce knowledge based on certainty about the inner secrets of the most critical questions of our life, the universe, and the world.²⁴

Shukri's discourses did not disregard modern science and its subsequent achievements. They only attempted to highlight the boundaries of the enlightenment epistemology. Thus, he argued that scientific methods and rationalism are essential sources of knowledge and that they are two eyes God has gifted to human beings to see the martial world and shape it considering their needs. At the same time, only revelation can fulfil the spiritual needs of human beings. This perspective led Shukri to propound the "theory of the unity of knowledge." In his view, the source of all sound knowledge is God. God divided that knowledge into two dimensions: one

²³ Shukri, "Al-Israwum Al-Mirajum: Oru Kannottam," *Islamiya Sindhanai* 9, no. 2 (1987): 36.

²⁴ Shukri, *Mazamum Ariwiyalum*, 25.

aspect is to understand the material world and the other is to inform about eternal truths, objectives of human life, and the unseen world.²⁵

The most complicated question is: where did Shukri position Sufism's esoteric/mystical knowledge in his epistemological scheme? On that issue, his works contain conflicting ideas. In his *Sufism: The Spiritual Dimension of Islam*, Shukri accepts that mystical knowledge is fundamental to the spiritual journey. He explains that Sufism has two interconnected aspects. First, it provides guidelines for the realization of the spiritual essence of human beings. Second, it helps to adorn oneself with the light of wisdom and higher knowledge. After explaining both of those dimensions, he states, "This is the real character of followers of the companions of the Prophet."²⁶ Besides this, Shukri wrote extensively on al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) epistemology, which strongly advocated mystical knowledge. He dedicated a separate essay explaining how al-Ghazālī reached the specific state of higher knowledge through the mystical path. Moreover, Shukri discussed al-Makkī's theory of *al-ma'rifah*/mystical knowledge in a separate chapter in his doctoral dissertation without critically commenting on it.²⁷ While discussing Iqbal's philosophy, he examined how Iqbal's discourses aimed to merge modern scientific knowledge with the knowledge of the heart.²⁸ Shukri's works support that he accepted mystical wisdom as a source of knowledge. However, one may ask whether Shukri considered esoteric wisdom superior to the other sources. This question is critical that needs an answer. In this regard, his writings show that he did not promote such discourse implicitly and explicitly. Furthermore, in his few selected essays, Shukri seems uncritical and supportive of Ibn Taymiyyah's (d. 728/1328) arguments against some Sufis' attempts to raise the importance of mystical knowledge over knowledge gained from other sources.²⁹

One can infer from the above discussion that Shukri wanted to emphasize the importance of esoteric knowledge in the age of science, positivism, and enlightenment rationalism but he left the detailed discussion on the issue unaddressed.

²⁵ Shukri, "Islamiya Araiwu Parampariyam."

²⁶ Shukri, *Tasawwuf: Islathin Aathmeha Parimanam* (Beruwela: Naleemiah Bureau of Islamic Publications, 2022), 7.

²⁷ Shukri, "Mystical Doctrine of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī," 147-99.

²⁸ Shukri, "Punarnimanam Patriya Iqbalin Karuthukal: Sila Awazanagal," July 7, 2015, <http://drshukri.lk/?p=226>.

²⁹ Shukri, "Ibn Taimiyyawin Tasawwuf Kotpedu," *Islamiya Sindhanai* 9, no. 3 (1987): 19-27.

Extending the Critique to the Philosophical Foundations of Social Sciences and Humanities

Shukri made extensive contributions to exploring philosophical assumptions of the selected social sciences and humanities disciplines such as education, history, political science, art and literature, and psychology. An analysis of these works shows that Shukri had coherently extended his critique of the philosophy of science/rationalism to the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, Shukri followed three strategies in deconstructing the modernist paradigm of social sciences and humanities.

First, Shukri tried to challenge the universality of modern social sciences. In this regard, he aimed to highlight how modern European socio-political developments led to the emergence of philosophical assumptions of modern social sciences.³⁰ Shukri argued that despite the claims of Western theorists of social sciences that they developed objective and value-free knowledge about human beings and society, the knowledge they produced is not neutral; instead, it is grounded mainly on the secular worldview. Second, he says that the way European social sciences and humanities define the constituent elements of human nature is diametrically different and narrower compared to the perspectives of any other civilizational and cultural society.³¹ The modern sciences' empirical and rationalistic epistemological bias produced a more limited reading of human nature. Finally, Shukri strongly stressed that Islam provided a critique of the modern social sciences' approaches through two interconnected means, i.e., emphasizing the role of revelation in interpreting human and social life and incorporating the spiritual dimension of human beings within the discursive narratives of modern social sciences and humanities.³²

These three fundamental arguments permeate all the works of Shukri that critically analyse various themes of social sciences and humanities. For example, on modern theories of education, Shukri maintains that the objective of modern education is to shape the behaviour and mind of a student considering the materialistic demands of modern societies.³³ Hence, it did not pay the required attention to the spiritual needs of human beings. Shukri remarks,

³⁰ Shukri, "Islamiya Nokkil Aeywu," *Islamiya Sindhanai* 20, no. 4 (1998): 12.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

³² *Ibid.*, 15-16.

³³ Shukri, "Islamiya Kalvi Tathuwam," *Islamiya Sindhanai* 7, no. 3 (1985): 18.

Specifically, modern education has forgotten to incorporate the centre of knowledge and the core of human personality or “*qalb*” (heart) into the discursive orbit of its subject matter. This reductionist reading of human personality has led to confining aims and objectives of education into a narrower scope with positivistic inclinations. Modern theories have contributed to imprisoning human experience within the immediate martial world and diluted its true potential to realize the unseen spiritual world.³⁴

Here, Shukri contrasts the philosophy of modern education with the Islamic concept of education and highlights how Islamic educational thought responds to the multidimensional nature of human beings. In Islamic tradition, Shukri writes, mosques were used as learning centres to impart the message that education is rooted in spirituality. Mosques gave birth to famous Islamic universities in the Muslim world.³⁵ Teachers graded students through careful observation of the improvement of the holistic personality. Therefore, the Islamic tradition gave a discursive value to the personal relationship between a teacher and his student solely for spiritual and ethical cultivation.³⁶ In addition, Islamic education philosophy introduces a unique form of knowledge. It is “wisdom” given to a student directly by God as a gift for the former’s ethical and spiritual perfection. For Shukri, all these complex aspects of the Islamic philosophy of education stand apart from modern education philosophy.³⁷

In the same vein, on methods of modern psychology, Shukri highlights that contemporary psychological schools such as psychoanalysis and behaviourism define the human essence materialistically.³⁸ Contrarily, the Qur’ān projects an expanded version of human nature, which consists of two contradictory elements, i.e., desire for immaterial spiritual realities and obsession with the martial world/animalistic inclinations. The Qur’ān guides humans to overcome their animalistic and materialistic nature by empowering their spiritual potential.³⁹ For Shukri, this Qur’ānic reading of human psychology contradicts the psychological frameworks of both psychoanalysis of Freud, who argued that spirituality is an illusion, and the behaviourism of

³⁴ Ibid., 24.

³⁵ Ibid., 27.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 23.

³⁸ Shukri, “Metkatheya Ulawiyalum, Islamiya Ulawiyalum: Oru Oppedu,” *Islamiya Sindhanai* 25, no. 4 (2003): 13.

³⁹ Ibid., 17.

Skinner, who supported the idea that human actions are effects of some external material causes or free will.⁴⁰

Likewise, the perception of a philosopher about the nature of human beings, the cosmos, and God effectively controls his reading of human history. Thus, modern philosophers like Hegel and Marx attempted to discover the drivers of human history, relying on modern materialistic/rationalistic premises.⁴¹ Contrarily, the Qur'ān presents a different account of human history, explaining its spiritual and ethical drivers. About the Qur'ānic philosophy of history, Shukri says,

The Qur'ān reads the history of human society as an implication of its response to God's ethical and spiritual demands. The Qur'ānic theory of history describes how human societies' responses produced the ups and downs of humankind in history. According to that paradigm, God has imposed certain universal laws, ethical boundaries, and patterns on the cosmos, world, and human society. Those who strictly followed God's law and ethical demands flourished in history. Furthermore, those who transgressed it perished. Although modern historians try to interpret the historical evolution of human societies and the crisis they faced through political and economic root causes, ethical and spiritual judgements are the real factors that drive history. It is the essence.⁴²

Shukri's discussion of Islamic political philosophy also reflects the same pattern of arguments as his ideas on Islamic psychology, history, and education do. He took the hotly debated issue of Islam and democracy as the convenient door to enter the debate about liberalism and Islamic political theory. He emphatically states that it is illogical to assume that since Islam and democracy share some shared features, both branch out from the same ontological prepositions.⁴³ Even though both emphasize the importance of the political choices of individuals and value their collective voices in shaping their political destiny, Islamic ethical thought plays a vital role in legitimizing those political choices in Islamic political theory.⁴⁴ This moral obligation emerges from man's ontological status as being the trustee of God in this world. Shukri holds,

Unlike modern Western democracy, sovereignty in the Islamic state belongs to God, whereas, in Western democracy, sovereignty rests with the people. The term used to denote the state or the political power in Islam is *khilāfah*

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Shukri, "Islamiya Varalatu Tathuwam," *Islamiya Sindhanai* 1, no. 3 (1979): 23.

⁴² Ibid., 26-27.

⁴³ Shukri, "Islamiya Arasiyal Kotpadu: Oru Pozu Nooku," *Islamiya Sindhanai* 13, no. 1 (1990): 45.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 46.

or vicegerency. Therefore, man is viewed as the vicegerent of God and not as absolute sovereign. He is a deputy exercising limited powers delegated to him. . . . Islamic teachings emphasize man's obligations. These obligations come before his rights. According to the modern Western concept of human rights, the individual has the right to demand his rights irrespective of his role in society.⁴⁵

In addition, Shukri attempts to connect Islamic political philosophy with Islamic social philosophy. Islamic social philosophy aims to imagine a Muslim community that reflects the moral edifice of the Islamic ethical worldview. In that process, the role of Islamic political philosophy is to assist its social philosophy. Here, the *sharīah* comes into the equation of Islamic political philosophy. The obvious point is that this political doctrine differs from other contemporary political thoughts that revolve around individual rights.⁴⁶ In Islamic political philosophy, Islamic ethical demands and the ethical integrity of the community are superior to individual interests. As a logical conclusion of this line of argument, Shukri's discourse finds the Islamic political project with the idea of positive freedom, effectively supporting constraining individual rights and choices to realize higher noble virtues.

Equally, on the issues of the Islamic philosophy of literature and arts, Shukri highlights that it is impossible to imagine a kind of objective or value-free art and literature. For him, each philosophical school has its worldview. They employ literature and arts to deliver their message. Thus, arts and literature play an instrumental role and render their service to various philosophical schools. Thinking along these lines, for Shukri, the core objective of Islamic literature is to reflect the Islamic metaphysical truths, the reality of God, and the concept of the afterlife. This perspective does not mean that Islamic literary works should only discuss metaphysical truths. Instead, they can reveal all that is in the expanding universe and various conditions of human life. However, the makers of literary works must be aware of and cannot ignore or downplay the Islamic metaphysical truths that drive such human and universal conditions.⁴⁷ In terms of developing an Islamic meaning of beauty, which is the defining feature of arts, Shukri argues that beauty is a quality of God. Hence, all humans should adopt that divine quality by empowering their spirituality. It is because God's quality resides in the human soul. Therefore, the essence of beauty is the beauty of the soul, and it is but a spiritual state. Moreover, only those who embrace such a divinely

⁴⁵ Shukri, *The Mind's Eye* (Beruwela: Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Research, 2012), 6.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁷ Shukri, "Ilakkiyam Patrya Islamiya Kotpedu," *Islamiya Sindhanai* 4, no. 2 (1982): 29-37.

inspired quality of beauty can turn an artistic work into one that ever manifests the source of the real beauty, the God, Shukri points out.⁴⁸

Islamic Ethical Thought, Conception of Islamic Law and the Call for New Research Methodology

Critiquing the foundations of modern Western ethical thought, Shukri reemphasizes the place of revelation instead of rationalism in deriving ethical judgements and vehemently denies moral relativism.⁴⁹ Furthermore, he stresses that “Islamic ethical thought is not a product of any socio-political developments in human history or abstract philosophical and rationalist arguments. Instead, the Islamic primary sources have produced Islamic ethical thought. It is universal and contains unchanging ethical guidelines.⁵⁰ Although Shukri’s discourse strongly projected that the divine source should get the privilege of shaping Islamic ethical guidelines, he did not belong to the literalist school of Islamic law. For Shukri, Islam permits human reason to play its role in developing ethical fundamentals. However, under any circumstances, ethical reasoning cannot overrule the basic framework set by Islamic primary sources. The framework is not relative but a set of eternal governing ideals. The Islamic primary sources allow a Muslim mind to critically apply its power of reason to derive independent Islamic ethical perspectives which are apposite to the changing world but operate within those eternal divine ideals. Thus, new ethical guidelines might be partially reason-driven, yet they are still under the radar of Islamic primary sources.⁵¹ Considering Hourani’s classification of Islamic ethics, Shukri’s discourse of Islamic ethics and law could fall under “theistic subjectivism.”⁵²

Moreover, the Islamic ethical framework emerged from a particular Islamic metaphysical orientation, Shukri highlights. Islamic metaphysics emphasizes that a human being is not the owner of the universe; instead, he is a representative of God. He sent the revelation as a handbook of ethical conduct to guide humans on how they should utilize the world for

⁴⁸ Shukri, “Islamiya Algiyalum, Metkatheya Alagiyalum oru oppedu,” *Islamiya Sindhanai* 22, no. 3 (2000): 14.

⁴⁹ Shukri, “Islamiya Olukkawiyal Kotpadu,” *Islamiya Sindhanai* 5, no. 4 (1983): 29-30.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵¹ Shukri, “Islamiya Sattathin Sirapiyalpuhal,” *Islamiya Sindhanai* 3, no. 2 (1981): 32-39.

⁵² George Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, n.d.), 24. Hourani defines the concept of theistic subjectivism as ethical value concepts understood in terms of God’s will or the right means approved and commanded by God.

the better. This metaphysical foundation of Islamic ethical thought streamlines the exploitative nature of human beings by activating their spiritual essence. Furthermore, ethics and spiritual impulses are the essence of human beings.⁵³

In contrast, modern Western ethical debates revolve around an assumption that human being is here to exploit the universe. Hence, his rationality has the sole authority to judge the correct action. This false assumption has led to disastrous ends where human greed pushed itself to justify exploiting environmental resources and deconstructing social structures and traditional norms.⁵⁴

Moreover, especially on the issue of ecological crisis, Shukri argued that the current discourse of environmental ethics is another human attempt to redress the past mistakes of the materialistic and capitalistic ego produced by human-centred ethical reasoning. The new discourse, however, does not address the moral aspect of the environmental crisis. Hence, such discourse cannot solve environmental problems unless modern scholarship incorporates the metaphysical basis of the universe into ecological ethics. It has the potential to insert a “spiritual dimension” to the relationship between man and the universe along with accountability and responsibility, Shukri further points out.⁵⁵

As a logical conclusion of these critiques of the modern Western philosophical paradigm and subsequent reconceptualization of Islamic response, Shukri calls for a new research methodology that can produce a holistic Islamic perspective of global issues. Here, Shukri emphasizes that “the current Western research methods ignored the multidimensional nature of the human being. These research methods only considered the observable facts of natural and human behaviours and forgot to include the spiritual power of human beings.”⁵⁶ For him, the cornerstone of Islamic research methodology is its pluralistic epistemology. It means that the Islamic research method would give due recognition to the Islamic conception of reality, pay serious attention to the multidimensional nature of human beings, and accept the expanded version of sources of knowledge.⁵⁷ As a result, the Islamic research methodology will take

⁵³ Shukri, “Islamiya Olukkawiyal Kotpadu,” 30-32.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁵ Shukri, “Islamiya Sulaliyalum,” *Islamiya Sindhanai* 17, no. 3 (1995): 10-18.

⁵⁶ Shukri, “Al-Quraniya Aaywu Murayum, Metkatheya Aaywu Murayum,” *Islamiya Sindhanai* 22, no. 1 (1999): 17.

⁵⁷ Shukri, “Islamiya Nokkil Aaywu,” 14-16.

spiritual realities into account along with socio-political and economic aspects in explaining social phenomena.

Islam in Conversation with other Religious Traditions

Shukri's ambitious intellectual project sought to reclaim the place of Islamic philosophy in the modern context. Given this reality, he elaborated on the relationship between Islam and other religious traditions in the contemporary world. Shukri's works show that he continuously supported inter-faith, inter-religious, or cross-cultural conversations and the empowerment of mutual trust among communities. He suggested two fundamental principles in envisioning a productive inter-faith/inter-religious conversation. First, such projects must recognize the philosophical differences between religions while focusing on shared norms through open dialogue. Second, interfaith initiatives should avoid projecting religious differences as mere socio-historical constructs and acknowledge that differences among religions emerged from differences in their philosophical outlooks. All interfaith initiatives must consider these principles if they want to seek unity in diversity in real terms, Shukri writes.⁵⁸

Shukri applied these two principles to put Islam in conversation with Buddhism and Hinduism, two major religious and cultural communities in Sri Lanka. In discussing Buddhist tradition, Shukri points out that Lord Buddha's emphasis on virtue ethics leads him to reflect on whether it was an outcome of his interaction with any divine revelation because the Buddhist ethical thought exactly matches the Islamic perspective of personal morality.⁵⁹ Regarding Hinduism, Shukri notes that there is a lack of in-depth studies that focus on how Hinduism and Islamic tradition interacted in various fields, such as medicine, astronomy, and art in history. Considering available few works, he believes that Islamic scholars of the past adopted the concept of atomism through their interaction with Indian philosophical traditions.⁶⁰ The idea of atomism is a theory used by pre-Islamic theologians to explain the functioning process of the universe.

In a nutshell, Shukri's discourses promoted a message that Islamic philosophy should reclaim its due place in the contemporary world. Yet,

⁵⁸ Shukri, "Dialogue between Muslims-Buddhists: A Reflection," July 9, 2015, <http://drshukri.lk/?paged=4>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Shukri, "Cultural Relationship between Islam and Hinduism," June 16, 2015, <http://drshukri.lk/?paged=6>.

as an authority in Islamic civilizational studies in Sri Lanka, he holds that no religious philosophy can ever exist in isolation and has to interact with other traditions. There is no pure religious tradition or philosophy as such. Despite that fact, the foundational ideas of each belief system must be respected and accepted.

Conclusion

This article aims to understand Mohamad Shukri's intellectual discourses and their impact on Islamic thought in Sri Lanka. As such, it presents three critical remarks concerning the nature of the intellectual project of Shukri and its impact.

First, Shukri's works continuously stress that Islamic philosophy is comprehensive because it pays closer attention to all modes of realities, from the sensory world to the unseen spiritual realm, and recognizes epistemological pluralism. Moreover, he built his paradigm upon re-articulating Islam's spiritual dimension. As a result, he sees that spirituality is the centre of human personality and reality. Thus, an Islamic philosophical enterprise should take root in that aspect of Islam. Thus, Shukri attempted to envision an Islamic theory of education, history, politics, psychology, aesthetics, and research methodology following this line of reasoning. Against this backdrop, he opines that modern Western philosophy offers a narrow and reductionist onto-epistemological scheme, which paved the way for the consequent deconstruction of traditional lifestyle and global ethical order.

Second, it is important to make a comparison of Shukri's intellectual discourses with those of his predecessors and colleagues. Initially, it is noteworthy that Shukri took the legacy of his mentor Azeez in promoting a sense of connectivity with the Islamic heritage and its civilizational contributions to a greater extent. In that process, Shukri introduced and discussed the thought of prominent theologians, philosophers, and thinkers of Islamic civilization, especially in the context of Tamil Islamic intellectualism of Sri Lanka. However, Shukri's intellectual expositions did not take modern education and its social conditioning for granted. He did not argue that modern education is the only way of salvation for Muslims in the modern age. From this angle, he slightly differs from his predecessors, who strongly advocated that promoting modern education should be the basis of social progress.

Third, Shukri's intellectual expositions are rooted in the spiritual dimension of Islam. In that sense, the ideas he promoted could symbolize the re-emergence or extension of Siddi Lebbe's reformulation of Islamic spirituality in the modern context. Siddi Lebbe aimed to incorporate

current scientific developments within the orbit of his Sufi metaphysical outlook. However, unlike the seemingly reconciliatory language of Siddi Lebbe, Shukri's discourse is critical of modern scientism and rationalism. Shukri admired Islamic socio-religious mass movements and their architects, such as the Qutb brothers of Egypt, Sayyid Abū 'l-A'lā Maudūdī (d. 1979) of Pakistan, and Abū 'l-Ḥasan 'Alī Nadvī (d. 1999) of India. Despite that, these religious movements did not look at Shukri as their theorist either. It is because Shukri's revisionist spiritualism and philosophical expressions did not neatly fit their demand for religious populist discourses. This comparative note reveals that he was neither a tailor-made Islamic reformist nor a conformist Sufi thinker nor a fitting Islamist scholar. One may argue that Shukri represented a new strand of Islamic intellectualism, which attempted to filter the smooth flow of modern ideas within the Muslim community in Sri Lanka.

Fourth, this article observes that Shukri's works have contributed to the re-emergence of Sufism as a critical intellectual discourse in post-colonial Sri Lanka. This argument can be validated by listing some of his publications addressing different aspects of Sufi practices, historical contributions of Sufism, and the development of Sufi orders. However, Shukri's contribution to Sufism cannot be confined to these contributions alone. He brought Sufism into critical conversation with philosophical foundations of modern knowledge in the local Tamil Islamic intellectual space. Otherwise stated, the essence of Sufi spirituality permeates all his works that aim to develop Islamic perspectives on modern natural and social sciences. Hence, Shukri's contribution to Sufism should be seen from a broader perspective.

* * *