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Contextualized Idealism: Mohammed Abusalih Mohammed Mansoor's Quest for Islamic Reform in Contemporary Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Mohammed Abusalih Mohammed Mansoor, commonly known as "Ustādh Mansoor" or "MAM Mansoor" by his followers and the general public, has emerged as a prominent advocate for Islamic reform in Sri Lanka over the last three decades. As a dedicated scholar of the modern evolution of Islam, Mansoor is a key figure within the reformist Islamic intellectual circles in the country. His ideas reflect the complexities and dynamics of Islamic reform within Sri Lanka's religious landscape, which has often been overlooked compared to the broader context of Islam in the subcontinent. Relying on primary and secondary sources and employing thematic content analysis, this paper aims to address this oversight by exploring Mansoor's reformist discourses and their implications for shaping the concept of contextualized idealism. Mansoor defines this concept as the process of adapting global developments in Islamic thought to local contexts. The paper argues that while Mansoor's reformist ideas may not significantly contribute to the global discourse on Islamic reform in terms of originality, his uniqueness lies in his ability to relate global ideas to the local sociopolitical realities of the country. Finally, it concludes that Mansoor's project has effectively positioned him as an alternative religious authority, challenging traditional theological and legal institutions in the country.

Keywords

Islam, reform, Sri Lanka, Muslims, minorities, Mohammed Mansoor.

Introduction

The roots of Islamic reformist thought in Sri Lanka can be traced back to colonialism. European colonialism significantly impacted the Sri Lankan

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Muslim community, much like in other regions of the world. It introduced a new legal system, educational philosophy, economic regulations, and political organization to the country. During the later stages of colonial rule, Muslims were forced to confront the dichotomy between tradition and modernity that was constructed by the colonial powers. This perceived binary primarily emerged in the realms of education and knowledge systems.[1] The new developments demanded Muslims adopt modern secular education, along with knowledge of the sciences and the English language, to thrive within the colonial framework. This new secular educational system aimed to redefine the traditional role of religion, as well as the significance of religious knowledge and learning in public life, in accordance with its educational philosophy.[2] Consequently, the issues surrounding secular knowledge and the notion of social progress prompted the Muslim community's leaders to reevaluate their traditional religious thought to adapt to the future.

Initially, M.C. Siddi Lebbe (d. 1898), a prominent Muslim thinker and social activist in colonial Ceylon, sought to address the intellectual and sociopolitical challenges of his time. He argued that Sri Lankan Muslims should embrace modern education while adapting their religious beliefs to contemporary demands. He maintained that Muslims' engaging with modern knowledge does not require compromising their faith; instead, they can integrate Islamic values into their approach to modernity.[3] In the post-colonial Sri Lanka, Islamic reformist discourse was significantly shaped by the contributions of A.M.A. Azeez (d. 1973). His ideas emerged in response to the formation of an independent Sri Lankan state. Azeez aimed to promote educational empowerment while safeguarding Muslim culture. Anas emphasizes the essence of Azeez's mission by stating,

> Azeez, one of the leading Muslim scholars of his time, aimed to strengthen the Muslim community's optimism regarding modern education. His core message was that the community could not progress if it neglected modern knowledge. In this context, Azeez championed the significance of

[1] Ingram explains how the policies of British India contributed to the rationalization of the divide between tradition and modernity by dichotomizing religious and secular education. He further notes that the Deoband seminary is, in part, a product of this colonial ideational construction. See Brannon D. Ingram, *Revival from Below: The Deoband Movement and Global Islam* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), 33-35.

[2] 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.

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

rationalism in both secular and religious discussions, believing that the foundation of knowledge in Islam is rooted in rationalism.[4]

In the 1980s, Mohamed Shukri (d. 2020) emerged as a notable Muslim intellectual and a student of Azeez. He gained recognition for representing a reformist vision of Islam that integrated Sufism, Islamic modernism, and revivalist discourses aimed at establishing an Islamic social order within a cohesive framework.[5]

Within this evolving landscape of Islamic reformist thought, Mohammed Mansoor emerged as a prominent scholar who significantly influenced a generation of students and activists engaged in modern Muslim reformist thought and social movements during the 1990s and 2000s. For that matter, he is affectionately known as "Ustādh" or "the Teacher" among his followers. Mansoor played a crucial role in bridging global developments in Islamic reformist thought with local interpretations of Islam. A keen reader of modern Islamic reformist thought literature, he sought to integrate these ideas within the local context, providing a contextualized vision of Islamic reform for the Sri Lankan Muslim community. In recent years, Mansoor has become a leading voice for Islamic reformism, positioning himself as an alternative religious authority in Sri Lanka and challenging the traditional Ulema councils. Unlike his predecessors among Islamic reformist leaders, he is well-trained in Islamic studies, which has enabled him to engage deeply with the Islamic intellectual legacy and modern literature in various sources. Mansoor is recognized as a leading scholar in the discussion on the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities (*fiqh al-aqalliyyāt*), the objective of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*), and Islamic ethics within the context of contemporary Sri Lanka.

Against this background, this paper aims to explore the Islamic reformist discourses of Mansoor and their impact on the country's religious dynamics. It is essential to highlight that this study does not seek to provide an exhaustive account of all aspects of Mansoor's intellectual project. Rather than engaging in detailed analyses of his writings on the Qur'ān, Islamic law, or Islamic intellectual history, this paper aims to identify the overarching themes and reformist thrust of his work. The study primarily draws on his key socio-religious writings and recent publications to outline the main contours and implications. A thorough examination of the finer theological, hermeneutical, and legal

[4] M. S. M. Anas, *Tharkala Islamiya Cinthanai* (Colombo: Kumaran Book House, 2007), 358.

[5] Mohamed Zacky, Md. Moniruzzaman, and Mohamed Hassan, "Mohamed Shukri's Contribution to Islamic Thought in Sri Lanka: A Critical Study," *Islamic Studies* 61, no. 3 (2022): 273-91, https://doi.org/10.52541/isiri.v61i3.2380.

dimensions of Mansoor's discourse is beyond the scope of this paper and is left for future researchers to explore. In addition, scholars often note that Islam in Sri Lanka has been understudied in relation to South Asian Islam. As Islamic thought in India has received far more scholarly attention,[6] this paper addresses this gap while also contributing to scholarship on Islamic reform in South Asia more broadly.

The paper puts forward a central argument regarding Mansoor's contribution to Islamic reformism in Sri Lanka. It argues that while Mansoor may not be considered an original thinker who introduced groundbreaking ideas in the realm of Islamic reformism, his originality lies in his ability to integrate global reformist traditions with local contexts and needs. He envisioned a Sri Lankan Islam that is grounded in a global Islamic reformist framework.

Reformist Islam: Origins, Themes, and Trends

The notions of revival (*tajdīd*) and reform (*iṣlāḥ*) are crucial to the intellectual and cultural legacy of Islam, embodying endeavours to rejuvenate and restore Islamic thought while responding to the changing demands of society. While renewal implies revitalization and innovation, reform signifies repair and improvement, particularly in the social, political, and legal realms. Both are interlinked with the broader Islamic objective of ensuring that Islamic principles continue to resonate in every era while maintaining their essence. Throughout history, numerous thinkers have influenced these notions in Islam, each presenting their own distinct viewpoint. Islamic reform groups have evolved in reaction to important sociopolitical developments over time, like the decline of Muslim political power, colonial domination, and the pressures of modernity.[7] As these shifts unfolded, intellectuals and reformers began to confront the challenge of how to preserve the core teachings of Islam while addressing the rapidly changing conditions of the world. Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897), Muḥammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), and Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) stand out as pivotal figures in the modern reform movement, each contributing significantly to the discourse of reform in Islam.[8]

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[6] Merin Shobhana Xavier, "Sacred Spaces and the Making of Sufism in Sri Lanka," in *Routledge Handbook on Islam in Asia*, ed. Chiara Formichi (London: Routledge, 2021), 225.

[7] See Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age (1798-1939)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[8] 'Iṣām al-Bashīr, "Al-Tajdīd fī 'l-Fikr al-Islāmī," in *Tajdīd al-Fikr al-Islāmī*, ed. Maḥmūd Ḥamdī Zaqzūq (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Islāmiyyah, 1980), 111-12.

During the last two hundred years of its long history, Islamic reformism has covered extensive themes and issues. Firstly, it urges a return to the Qur'ān and *sunnah*, the two main sources of Islam. This is a key paradigm for reforming the Muslim communities. Reformists support *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) as a means of reviving Islamic thought. This approach frequently criticizes imitation (*taqlīd*) of traditional juristic schools and advocates for a fresh emphasis on Islam's original teachings to meet present societal demands. Harmonizing Islamic teachings with modernity and reason is another important shift in Islamic reformism. Reformist intellectuals promoted the notion that Islam was inherently consistent with reason, advancement, and scientific findings. They maintained that by embracing intellectual inquiry, education, and technological advancement while upholding Islamic principles, Muslim societies can restore their lost prominence. Reconciling Islamic beliefs with multiculturalism and contemporary political theory has also been a major contention. The compatibility of Islamic values with modern secular political values such as democracy, human rights, and social justice has been a serious subject of debate among reformers. They advocate for Islam's respect for pluralism and its capacity to foster coexistence and dialogue in an increasingly pluralistic and globalized world. Parallel to political reform, social and economic reforms remain vital concerns. On this backdrop, gender equality and women's rights are also important areas of attention for Muslim reformists. Reformists aim to rethink traditional Islamic teachings on gender roles, questioning patriarchal interpretations of Islamic law and urging for women's education, leadership, and participation in the public sphere. Islamic reformism continues to be a vibrant and diverse movement that aims to strike a balance between tradition and modernity while being anchored in the moral and spiritual ideals of Islam by tackling the changing issues that Muslim societies encounter.[9]

Hashim Kamali notes that the twentieth-century Muslim reformists can be grouped roughly into four main approaches, each with notable scholars associated with it:

1. Precedent-Oriented *Tajdīd*: This method relies heavily on prior precedents, such as scripture, historical Islamic schools, and significant personalities, to answer modern issues. The method allowed for *ijtihād*, but prioritized conventional interpretations. Scholars such as Sa'īd Ramaḍān al-Būṭī (d. 2013) supported this viewpoint.
2. Support for Open *Ijtihād*: This school of thought combined scripture with reason to advocate for a more dynamic and open interpretation

[9] See Carool Kersten, *Contemporary Thought in the Muslim World: Trends, Themes and Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

of Islamic teachings. The goal was to promote the liberation of Islamic thinking while balancing Islamic precepts with contemporary circumstances. This opinion was backed by Islamic scholars like Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī (d. 2022).

3. Integration of Knowledge: In response to a perceived crisis in civilization, this movement advocated for a new approach to both religious and secular knowledge, with a focus on reforming knowledge methodologies. At the heart of this movement is the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT), which was established in 1981. IIIT promotes changes to methods and ways of thinking. Taha Jabir Al alwani (d. 2016), AbdulHamid AbuSulayman (d. 2021), and ʻImād al-Dīn Khalīl (b. 1941) are important figures.
4. *Tajdīd* and Globalization: This approach expands on the concept of *tajdīd* to solve global concerns. It emphasizes the need for Islamic reform to answer current civilizational challenges, rather than being limited by conventional frameworks. Scholars such as Muhammad Abid al-Jabiri (d. 2010) criticized previous *tajdīd* movements for failing to adapt to modernity by focusing on heritage and religious lenses. They advocated for a more comprehensive and context-specific approach.[10]

These four primary currents of *tajdīd* vary in their approaches: one maintains ties to tradition; another advocates for a more expansive and flexible interpretation; a third concentrates on epistemological reform; and the last one aims for a globalized comprehension of Islamic revitalization in response to contemporary issues.

Mohammed Mansoor: Life and Works

Born on July 1, 1958,—Mansoor's educational journey began at Pangollamada Maha Vidyalaya, where he studied until grade five. He then continued his schooling at Azhar Central College, Akurana, a city in the central region of Sri Lanka, completing up to grade 11. His formative years were marked by a passion for reading and learning, which led him to enrol at Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies (NIIS), where he began his formal Islamic education. This early engagement with both secular and Islamic education laid the foundation for his future academic and intellectual contributions. Soon after graduating from NIIS, he was appointed as a lecturer and served in various capacities for over three decades at the institution.[11]

His enthusiasm for education was not confined to the classroom; he also organized educational activities for individuals dedicated to Islamic

[10] Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Tajdīd, Iṣlāḥ, and Civilizational Renewal in Islam* (Kuala Lumpur: IAIS and IIIT, 2018).

[11] M. A. M. Mansoor, interviewed by the author, September 9, 2024.

teachings within society. These efforts culminated in the formation of a structured Islamic movement that spread across Sri Lanka, aiming to promote a deeper and moderate understanding of Islam. Recognizing the limitations of operating solely within the framework of Islamic movements in a Muslim minority context, Mansoor shifted his focus towards institutional approaches to Islamic education. This strategic pivot led to the establishment of Al-Quran Open College in 2012, a platform for structured Islamic education for the general public. In 2017, he founded the Mishkath Research Institute, further solidifying his commitment to advancing Islamic scholarship in Sri Lanka. These institutions provided students with a formal, comprehensive understanding of Islamic thought and created a space for intellectual growth and reform.[12]

Mansoor's intellectual contributions are reflected in his extensive body of written and oral work, which spans multiple fields of Islamic studies, including Qur'ānic and *ḥadīth* commentaries, Islamic theology, Islamic jurisprudence, and *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*. His writings have been featured in journals, such as the *Islamiya Sindanai*, covering topics like Islamic history, Prophetic biography, and Islamic legal theory. A key contribution to Islamic scholarship is his Qur'ānic commentary in Tamil, titled *Quraaniya Sindanai*, in which he has written and published one-third of the Qur'ān. Mansoor has authored and translated over 50 books that cover a broad range of topics within Islamic studies. His books explore various subjects, including Islamic rituals—prayers, fasting, and *zakāh*—and their philosophical and social implications, Islamic theology, and issues affecting Muslim society as a minority. In addition, Mansoor was the founder and editor-in-chief of *Meelparvai*, a magazine that emerged within his broader Islamic movement setting. This magazine became a critical platform for discussions on Islamic reform, social justice, politics, and the role of Muslims in modern society in Sri Lanka. Later in his career, Mansoor expanded his intellectual work through his involvement with *Nagarvu*, another magazine that he edited and served as editor-in-chief when he transitioned to work in an institutionalized setting in Sri Lanka.[13] Recently, his YouTube channel, where he uploads his talks and interviews periodically, has become a preferred online source for studying Islamic reformist ideas in the local language in the Sri Lankan context.[14]

[12] Ibid.

[13] See his official website: https://www.usthazmansoor.com/.

[14] See his official YouTube channel: https://www.youtube.com/@usthadmansoor.

Islamic Reformist Discourses of Mohammed Mansoor: A Critical Examination

This section aims to examine Mansoor's reformist discourses in detail. It is organized into four separate sub-sections. The first sub-section explores the sociopolitical landscape that shaped Mansoor's reformist project and his quest for a Sri Lankan Islamic thought. The second sub-section analyses his perspectives on Islamic *sharīʿah* and its nature and role within the context of the Muslim minority. The third sub-section discusses how he applies these fundamental ideas about the *sharīʿah* in addressing key issues such as gender equality, extremism, violence and non-violence, and human rights—issues that are crucial in contexts where Muslims live as minorities. Finally, the fourth sub-section evaluates the originality of his ideas and their implications for Sri Lankan society and politics.

Mansoor's Quest for Sri Lankan Islam

Mansoor's reformist project has been influenced by two major historical and sociopolitical developments in Sri Lanka: 1) the civil war and the consolidation of nationalist and secular Muslim community leadership, and 2) the rise of Islamophobia in post-war Sri Lanka. From the 1980s to 2000, Sri Lanka experienced a devastating civil war between the Sri Lankan state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.[15] This conflict significantly impacted Muslim society and politics, leading to the rise of Muslim nationalism and the dominance of secular sociopolitical leadership and intelligentsia.[16] Mansoor aimed to challenge this historical trajectory by connecting Islam to the everyday realities and struggles of the Sri Lankan Muslim minority community.[17] His message was straightforward: Muslims in Sri Lanka can address their sociopolitical challenges using the Islamic intellectual tradition itself, without the need for nationalism or secular thinking.[18] He frequently critiqued the impact of secular paradigms of Muslim civil and professional leadership, educational systems, and sociocultural institutions in the country. In his critique, the influence of prominent

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[15] Jayadewa Uyangoda, "Ethnic Conflict and Civil War in Sri Lanka," in *Routledge Handbook of South Asian Politics: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Nepal*, ed. Paul. R. Brass (New York: Routledge, 2010), 291-302.

[16] Zarin Ahmad, "Contours of Muslim Nationalism in Sri Lanka," *South Asian History and Culture* 3 (2012): 269-87.

[17] M. A. M. Mansoor, *Ethnic Crisis: An Islamic Perspective* (Colombo: Meelparvai Publishers, 1999), 40.

[18] Abu Nada, "Sirupanmai Nadum, Islamiya Valvolungu Murayum," *Meelparvai*, March 2, 1996.

intellectual figures in global Islam and Islamic revivalism, such as ʻAbduh, Sayyid Quṭub (d. 1966), Sayyid Abū ʾl-Aʻlā Mawdūdī (d. 1979), and al-Qaraḍāwī, is evident. These figures opposed colonialism, Westernization, and secularism, and their ideas influenced Mansoor's thinking. However, he did not advocate for exclusion in the name of criticizing secularism. As he consistently mentioned in his writings, one of the core objectives of his reformist project is to develop a form of Islamic thought that is deeply rooted in the Islamic worldview while also taking into account national sociopolitical realities. Since the 1990s, he has written extensively for public outlets, highlighting the necessity of developing a grounded Islamic thought project, considering the context of the Sri Lankan Muslim minority.[19] To achieve this, he has engaged in discussions and debates on key theoretical developments within modern Islamic intellectual thought, particularly focusing on the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities.[20] Writing in late 1990s, Mansoor says,

> Sri Lanka is our motherland, and we love this land. We must strive to empower and develop our nation, and we should not shy away from this responsibility. However, we as Muslims need to understand our position and contributions to this country and its future through our own worldview and framework. For instance, capitalists and communists in Sri Lanka have their own perspectives and theoretical paradigms for addressing the country's challenges and defining its future interests. In light of this reality, we as Muslims should also shape our future engagement in the country based on Islamic thought and principles. Muslims value ethics, spirituality, equality, and justice. By using our worldview to create a framework for our actions, we can undoubtedly contribute to the betterment of our community and our country as a whole.[21]

In another instance, Mansoor further reflects on this point as follows:

> Islam is more than just a religion that focuses on individual piety; it shapes both the personal and public lives of the Muslim community. As a Muslim minority community, we often feel that practising a holistic understanding of Islam is something that only applies in Muslim-majority countries. Consequently, we may limit our focus to rituals. However, is it truly acceptable to restrict our religious consciousness to just these limited aspects of our personal lives, while neglecting how Islam can inform our social lives as well? Why shouldn't we engage with the broader

[19] Abu Nada, "Islamiyya Arasiyal Poratta Olunguhal," *Meelparvai*, June 20, 1999.

[20] Mansoor published a series of articles on the concept of Islamic jurisprudence for Muslim minorities, exploring its sociopolitical relevance in *Meelparvai* magazine in 1999.

[21] Abu Nada, "Sirupanmai Nadum."

> issues affecting our country and community, all while recognizing the significance of Islamic thought in guiding us in those areas?[22]

Mansoor emphasized the need for a critical engagement with global Islamic reformist thought, particularly in relation to local dynamics. He highlighted the importance of developing an indigenous reformist Islamic discourse that can address issues relevant to Sri Lankan Muslims. To elaborate on this concept, he wrote an essay titled "Contextualized Idealism," which was published in 2002. This essay includes the following:

> We should not overly rely on the global Islamic reformist thought literature to develop our understanding of Islam for this country. By doing so, we may overlook the unique aspects and everyday realities of our context. Ultimately, the version of Islam that we develop could become rootless and disconnected from local sensibilities. We must remember the legal maxim that legal judgments can differ according to the context and situation. This principle is not only applicable to legal rulings; it can also inform our vision of Islam, ensuring that it reflects the sociopolitical landscape of Sri Lanka.[23]

To rethink Islamic thought in light of local sociopolitical dynamics, Mansoor identifies three key aspects that require deep theoretical reflection. Firstly, he emphasizes the importance of connecting fundamental Islamic ethical commitments to national sociopolitical struggles. This approach ensures that Muslims do not feel alienated from their broader context and lived realities in the name of Islam. Instead, their Islamic consciousness should inspire them to engage more deeply with their daily experiences and national issues. Secondly, he advocates for the promotion of an Islamic politico-legal discourse that captures its dynamic and flexible nature. He encourages Muslim intellectuals to explore how the belief in the sovereignty of God can be reinterpreted and understood within the context of Muslim minorities.[24] Finally, he emphasizes balancing global Muslim sensibilities with local social solidarity.[25] According to him, these three areas represent significant challenges that Muslim intellectuals must address in developing a distinct Sri Lankan Islamic thought.

It is important to note that from the 1990s to the late 2000s, Mansoor advocated for the development of a contextualized Islamic reformist thought, primarily focusing on the theory of jurisprudence for

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[22] Abu Nada, "Iraithozar Kanda Samoha Valvum, Emazu Kadamaipadum," *Meelparvai*, March 15, 2001.

[23] Abu Nada, "Ilachywazam Emazu Mannilirundu Pirakkatum," *Meelparvai*, August 15, 2002.

[24] Abu Nada, "Sirupanmaiyinarukkāna saṭṭa oḻungu," *Meelparvai*, April 15, 1999.

[25] Mansoor, *Ethnic Crisis*, 13-14.

Muslim minorities as a framework for analysis. His goal was to extend this theory beyond its jurisprudential core into the sociopolitical sphere. In the context of rising anti-Muslim sentiments in post-war Sri Lanka, scholars such as Imtiyas, Hoole, Saleem, and Ameerdeen argued that the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities could be used to uphold the idea that Muslims should balance their theological obligations with local culture. This approach was seen as a practical way to mitigate anti-Muslim tendencies in the country.[26] Interestingly, Mansoor had been exploring this theory in his writings long before anti-Muslim groups began mobilizing against Muslims in the past fifteen years. However, his ideas did not fully develop into a comprehensive discourse during that time. A review of his social writings from that period reveals that he raised many important questions but often failed to provide reflective answers. Additionally, there was inherent tension and contradictory ideas present in his writing. For example, on one hand, he talks about an Islamic reformist discourse capable of addressing the sociopolitical realities of Muslims. On the other hand, his strong reliance on the theory of jurisprudence for Muslim minorities led him to perceive the situation of Sri Lankan Muslims as a compromised condition. He often reminded readers that Sri Lanka is not a Muslim-majority country, which means they need to moderate their ideal sociopolitical aspirations. This contradiction seems to stem from his uncritical adaptation of the jurisprudential theory designed for emerging immigrant minority communities in Europe. Mansoor never questioned whether such a framework would apply to the Sri Lankan context, where Muslims have been living for more than a thousand years. In the post-war context of Sri Lanka, nevertheless, Mansoor was able to overcome such incoherence and found the evolving idea of ethical Islam as a fresh paradigm that can provide new pathways for his search for a locally embedded Islam.

From the Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities to Ethical Islam

Since the end of the civil war in 2009, majoritarian forces in Sri Lanka have started to view the Muslim minority as a new internal enemy, accusing them of exclusivism and extremism.[27] These developments have reinforced Mansoor's belief that a culturally embedded reformist Islam can only help navigate the emerging challenges in post-war Sri Lanka. Consequently, he has authored several books and delivered

[26] A. R. M. Imtiyaz, et al., "Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka: An Opportunity Lost for Conflict Transformation," *Journal of Arts and Humanities* 4, no. 7 (2015): 79-90.

[27] For a detailed exploration of the post-war ethnic violence against Muslims, see John Clifford Holt, ed., *Buddhist Extremists and Muslim Minorities: Religious Conflict in Contemporary Sri Lanka* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

numerous talks exploring the principles of reformist Islam and its application within the Sri Lankan context. A critical examination of his writings during this period shows a shifting nature in Mansoor's discourse, where he utilizes concepts such as *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, Islamic ethics, and pluralism. Using those concepts, he aims to develop a framework that allows Sri Lankan Muslims to envision a role for Islam that is more authentic and equally embracing the multicultural fabric of the country. During this period, Mansoor has extensively written about and lectured on the nature of Islamic *sharīʿah*. By examining these ideas, we can identify several key underlying themes he has developed regarding the *sharīʿah*, which contribute to the evolution of his Islamic reformist project in post-war Sri Lanka.

Unlike his previous conviction, Mansoor has now started to argue that there is no singular or ideal model of Islamic life or application of the *sharīʿah*. Instead, the Islamic way of life and the practice of Islamic *sharīʿah* can take many forms and dimensions, depending on different contexts.[28] Therefore, the Islamic way of life is a dynamic phenomenon, and the implementation of Islamic *sharīʿah* reflects this variability. Mansoor points out that many Muslims are fixated on the idea that Islam can only be fully practised in Muslim-majority contexts. This belief suggests that authentic Islamic life can only be achieved in the Muslim world while minorities exist on the fringes.[29] He emphasizes that such a perspective has significant implications for Muslim minority communities. For instance, it may discourage Muslims from actively engaging with national issues, leading them to believe that Islam requires them to focus solely on specific teachings related to personal piety.[30] Furthermore, this mindset could cause Muslims to link the application of the *sharīʿah* to political power. Mansoor argues that these views contradict the essence of Islam and Islamic *sharīʿah*, which are flexible and responsive to changing contexts and societal demands. [31] He asserts that Muslim minorities can create their own models of Islamic life, and that Islamic *sharīʿah* is open to such adaptations.[32]

To actualize the dynamic nature of Islamic life, Mansoor stresses that Muslims need to conceptualize the *sharīʿah* as ethics and values. He believes that interpreting the *sharīʿah* as a framework of values will

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[28] M. A. M. Mansoor, *Islamiya Sharia: Yerdarthamum Pirayogamum* (Colombo: Mishkath Research Institute, 2024), 2-3.

[29] Ibid., 4.

[30] Ibid., 5.

[31] Ibid., 23-24.

[32] Ibid., 4.

enable Muslim minorities to develop flexible *sharīʿah* perspectives.[33] It is important to compare and contrast his earlier narratives about the *sharīʿah* with his latest one. Although he has advocated for the idea that the *sharīʿah* is dynamic and adaptable to minority contexts since the 1990s, he framed these arguments within the theoretical framework of the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities. In this context, he utilized the theory and discourse of the *sharīʿah*'s flexibility to encourage Muslim leadership to develop a political and social empowerment strategy that ensures the community's survival.[34] However, the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities plays a limited role in his recent writings. Instead, he emphasizes more sophisticated themes, such as the theory of the objectives of Islamic *sharīʿah* and Islamic ethics. Moreover, Mansoor characterizes the *sharīʿah* as an ethical system encompassing laws, values, and objectives, rejecting the common perception of the *sharīʿah* as merely a legal framework.[35] To illustrate this point further, he insists that the Qur'ān is not only a book of law but also a book of ethics and values. Therefore, Muslims should also focus on extracting the ethical principles of Islam from its primary sources and applying them within their specific contexts. Mansoor concludes that the Islamic ethical system can be relevant in all situations where Muslims reside, regardless of their status as a minority or majority, or whether they are powerful or powerless.[36] He maintains that the essence of the Islamic revolution is ethical and spiritual.[37] The initial verses of the Qur'ān revealed in Mecca emphasize that the true victory of Islam can be achieved through the God-consciousness of an ethical Muslim community rather than through political power.[38] Thus, Muslim minorities should view Islam and its ethical framework as guiding principles to engage actively in national sociopolitical matters. Mansoor believes that the ethnicization of Islam can genuinely empower the Muslim community to become active citizens within their countries.[39] Despite this shift in focus, Mansoor does not entirely disregard the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities. He contends that it still holds significance when addressing legal judgments concerning issues faced by Muslim minorities. However, for more substantial matters, such as the evolution of sociopolitical thought for

[33] Ibid.

[34] Abu Nada, "Sirupanmaiyinarukkāna saṭṭa oḻungu," *Meelparvai*, March 15, 1999.

[35] Mansoor, *Islamiya Sharia*, 14-21.

[36] Ibid., 7-13.

[37] Ibid., 23.

[38] M. A. M. Mansoor, *Qur'aniya Sindanai* (Akurana: Al-Quran Open College, 2023), 61.

[39] Mansoor, *Islamiya Sharia*, 26.

Muslim minorities, he argues that the ethnicization of the *sharīʿah* discourse must be taken seriously.[40]

In addition, Mansoor brings the idea of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* into his conversation on ethical Islam. He writes that the idea of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*, which refers to the objectives of the *sharīʿah*, could play a crucial role in fostering collaboration between Muslims and other communities.[41] This concept is inherently humanistic and motivates the Muslim community to engage with the larger sociopolitical landscape of the countries they inhabit. Methodologically, Mansoor advocates that Islamic primary sources and texts should be interpreted in light of the objectives of Islamic *sharīʿah*.[42] Moreover, he positions himself among Islamic reformist scholars who advocate for the expansion of the traditional classification of *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah*. For that purpose, he suggests that justice should be recognized as one of the core values and objectives of the *sharīʿah*. Protecting human dignity, freedom, unity, and economic cooperation should also be included in the set of objectives that the *sharīʿah* aims to achieve through its principles and systems.[43] Ethics should be integrated into the objectives of the *sharīʿah*. According to Mansoor, these ethical objectives of the *sharīʿah* would enable Muslims to think of Islam as a shared framework for nation-building in a pluralistic society. Apart from these *sharīʿah*-related discourses, Mansoor emphasizes that Muslim minorities should develop a clear vision about their country. Previously, he suggested that Muslim minorities could define their countries as *dār al-daʿwah* (the abode of invitation), stressing that inviting others to Islam is a fundamental responsibility of the community. However, he has now become critical of this perspective and adopted the concept of *dār al-shahādah* (the abode of witness). This concept demands Muslims to uphold and exemplify Islamic values in a pluralistic society. He believes such a broader vision would allow Muslims to experience an authentic Islamic life without feeling compromised.[44]

A comparative reflection on the two stages of Mansoor's intellectual project reveals an overarching perspective on his engagement with Islamic thought. Firstly, he is an Islamic scholar unafraid to rethink his own convictions and theoretical framework. He has consistently sought

[40] Mansoor, interview.

[41] Mansoor, *Islamiya Sharia*, 53-54.

[42] Mansoor, interview.

[43] Mansoor, *Islamiya Sharia*, 55-56.

[44] Mansoor, interview.

fresh perspectives that could assist him in realizing his vision of a culturally embedded reformist Islam. However, his ideas are not without contradictions. For example, he previously worked with the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities, demonstrating that it could provide valuable insights for the sociopolitical activism of Muslim minorities. Now, he has shifted the discourse to *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* and ethical Islam. The claims he makes regarding the sociopolitical relevance of the latter are largely similar to those of the former, albeit with minor adjustments. Perhaps, he may view these paradigms as not mutually exclusive but rather capable of coexisting simultaneously—a nuance that he has not addressed in his writings in detail.

Gender Equality, Religious Freedom, and Religious Violence

Mansoor has made significant theoretical contributions to important questions related to Islam in Sri Lanka over the past decade, in addition to his conceptual work on the nature of Islamic *sharīʿah*. Rather than simply defending traditional views, he employs reformist Islamic frameworks to address these questions, aiming to align religious understanding with the multicultural fabric of Sri Lankan society. This section explores three key areas where Mansoor has been particularly active: gender equality, religious freedom and pluralism, and religious violence.

Gender Equality

The debate over reforming Muslim personal law in Sri Lanka has been ongoing for a long time.[45] The issue remains unresolved due to conflicting interests among the various stakeholders involved. A significant impetus for reform comes from the belief that existing laws support misogyny and disempower Muslim women.[46] Conservative theologians have sought to reform the current laws without challenging the status quo, while Islamic reformists and modernists advocate for radical change. Within this context, Mansoor, as a reformist, supports the reform of Muslim personal law. He attempts to frame his arguments in a way that considers both jurisprudential concerns and the norms of gender equality. It is important to note that Mansoor's advocacy for reform is deeply rooted in his broader views on gender equality. He asserts that contemporary society often oppresses women, denying

[45] For a more detailed analysis of the historical and current dynamics of Muslim personal law debates in Sri Lanka, see Sarmila Dawood, "Islamic Law and Gender Equality: Challenges and Reforms in Sri Lanka's Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act," *Journal of Islamic Law* 5, no. 2 (2024): 288-305, https://doi.org/10.24260/jil.v5i2.2833.

[46] Ameer Faiz, "Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act: The Struggle for Reform," in *Muslims in the Post-War Sri Lanka: Repression, Resistance and Reform*, ed. Shreen Abdul Saroor (Colombo: Alliance for Muslim Minorities, 2021), 136-51.

them the dignity and freedom they deserve in their family and professional lives. [47] Women's choices and aspirations must be respected for society to become just and progressive. Mansoor contends that many view gender equality as a Western concept; however, he argues that it is a principle deeply embedded in the Qur'ānic discourse on women. He emphasizes that the Qur'ān illustrates men and women as equals in spirituality, social life, and roles.[48] According to Mansoor, the Qur'ān affirms that women possess a distinct identity and the will to shape their own destinies.[49] Nevertheless, Mansoor does not entirely reject the traditional understanding of women's roles in Muslim culture. He acknowledges that although women have the freedom to participate actively in the public sphere, they must also remain mindful of instrumentalizing their public engagement and the experience and knowledge they gain in fulfilling their role as exemplary mothers in raising their children.[50] Furthermore, he explains that while Islam recognizes the distinct identity of womanhood, it also acknowledges biological and psychological differences between men and women. As a result, Islam prescribes different responsibilities for each gender.[51] All in all, it seems that Mansoor carefully tailored his ideas to appeal to both modernist and conservative currents of Islamic thought in Sri Lanka.

Religious Freedom

The post-war Sri Lanka saw a pervasive Islamophobic campaign that claimed Islam rejected religious freedom and sought to dominate the public sphere. In responding to these allegations, Mansoor strongly argues that the primary sources of Islam actually endorse religious freedom and pluralism.[52] That being said, he criticizes the traditional position of the death sentence for the religious conversion as contextual and medieval jurisprudential reasoning, which does not have any textual support at all. During the early history of Islam, changing the religion was used as a tool by the enemies of Islam to attack religion.[53] As a result, classical Islamic jurisprudence introduced the death sentence for religious conversion. Nevertheless, Islamic primary sources declare

[47] M. A. M. Mansoor, *Pengal: Samooha Vahzvum, Udayum* (Colombo: Mishkath Research Institute, 2014), 6-7.

[48] Ibid., 11-12.

[49] Ibid., 23-24.

[50] Ibid., 31-32.

[51] Ibid., 28.

[52] M. A. M. Mansoor, *Madhathhaith Thuraththalum Madha Nindhanaiyum: Oruparva* (Colombo: Mishkath Research Institute, 2022), 2.

[53] Ibid., 5.

punishment for the conversion of religion in the hereafter or the day of judgment rather than in this world.[54] Moreover, Mansoor argues that respecting sociocultural and religious pluralism has to be considered as one of the objectives of the Qur'ān.[55] For him, the Qur'ān highlights it as a sign of God and asks the people of different cultural and religious backgrounds to compete with each other in promoting goodness and virtues.[56] Muslims should practise theological humility in approaching other religious and philosophical traditions.[57] God has sent thousands of messengers throughout history to various communities. As a result, other religious traditions also might carry some prophetic insights, and hence, Muslims should not be arrogant that the truth only belongs to them and that other religious traditions are filled with falsehood.[58] Moreover, even if other religious traditions do not carry any prophetic insights, Muslims need to respect the ethical and philosophical teachings of other religious leaders as a source of wisdom that needs to be acknowledged, believing that it is God who decides who will be saved on the day of judgment.[59]

Religious Violence

Islamophobic forces have consolidated their appeal after nine religious extremist fanatics blew themselves up in large hotels and churches, killing more than 250 innocent civilians. These developing dynamics have led those forces to further securitize the Islamic religious expression and activities and to connect Qur'ānic teachings to violence.[60] Within this context, Mansoor's major intervention is to argue that the Qur'ān never promoted violence or extremism. Rather, it is a message of peace and coexistence. He argues that the Qur'ān carries verses that urge Muslims to prepare for war, but those verses need to be understood within the broader Qur'ānic discourse of human dignity and peace.[61] He writes that the Qur'ānic discourse on any particular issue has to be approached through the thematic content analysis method. He argues that Qur'ān is not an ordinary book and that it was revealed over

[54] Ibid., 6-7.

[55] Ibid., 19.

[56] Ibid., 18.

[57] Ibid., 28.

[58] Ibid., 30.

[59] Ibid., 29.

[60] Mohamed Fouz Mohamed Zacky, "Unraveling the Nexus: Politics, National Security, and the Securitisation of Islam in the Aftermath of Easter Sunday Attacks," *Intellectual Discourse* 33, no. 1 (2025): 2140, https://doi.org/10.31436/id.v33i1.2140.

[61] M. A. M. Mansoor, *Does Al-Quran Encourage Violence?* (Colombo: Mishkath Research Institute, 2019), 10.

twenty-three years.[62] Hence, first, a reader must be able to collect all the verses scattered throughout the entire Qur'ān regarding a subject matter. Secondly, he must have the ability to understand those verses against the context in which they were revealed. These two foundational principles are fundamental to understanding the Qur'ānic discourse. Applying the same methodological foundations, Mansoor says that protecting human dignity is one of the principles of the Qur'ān, and hundreds of verses support such a position. Moreover, the war verses were revealed within a particular context of early Islamic history.[63] Hence, those verses cannot be used as eternal guidance for the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.[64]

Locating Mansoor's Reformist Thought in the Changing Religious Landscape in Sri Lanka

Mansoor's reformist project has significantly impacted the socioreligious landscape in contemporary Sri Lanka. In particular, over the last fifteen years, he has emerged as a powerful voice for Islamic reformist discourse in the country. In this context, his contributions to Islamic reformism can be examined through three key dimensions.

Consolidating Reformist Islam

Mansoor can be seen as a continuation of the evolving dynamics of modern Islamic reformist thought within the Sri Lankan context, which began with Sidde Lebbe during the colonial period. In particular, over the last three to four decades, he has been a key source through which Sri Lankan Muslims have been introduced to modern Islamic reformist ideas and theoretical developments. These include comparative jurisprudence, the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities, and the Islamic concepts of citizenship and nation-building.[65] He has also translated many critical works by global Islamic reformist thinkers into the local language, thus bridging the gap between global Islamic reformist ideas and local Tamil Muslim intellectualism.[66] Earlier intellectual leaders in the Muslim community, such as Sidde Lebbe, AMA Azeez, and MAM

[62] Ibid., 2.

[63] Ibid., 20.

[64] Ibid., 21.

[65] See Said Fares Hassan, *Fiqh al-Aqalliyyat: History, Development and Progress* (New York: Springer Nature, 2013) and Tariq Ramadan, *To be a European Muslim* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2015).

[66] Akram Abdul Samad, interviewed by the author, November 23, 2024.

Shukri, were not essentially trained in Islamic studies.[67] In contrast, Mansoor possesses the linguistic ability to access primary Islamic texts and navigate complex debates surrounding Islamic reformism, including Islamic legal theory, Qur'ānic studies, intellectual history, and social thought. Most importantly, he has given Islamic reformist discourses an intellectual focus.[68] If someone were to question the originality of Mansoor's ideas or his discussions regarding Muslim minorities, it could be argued that he is not a particularly original thinker. He himself has acknowledged in many of his books that he primarily draws on global Islamic reformist literature to develop his reformist interpretations of Islam in the modern age. He often states that the foundation of his key concepts and ideas is drawn from prominent Muslim reformist scholars such as Mohammed al-Ghazali (d. 1996), Alawani, AbuSulayman, al-Qaraḍāwī, Ahmed Al-Raysuni (b. 1953), and Tariq Ramadan (b. 1962), among others. This exclusive reliance on existing global reformist works/scholars is also one reason why his writings tend to be less critical of many leading reformist viewpoints. Nevertheless, his uniqueness, or we may call it even originality, lies in his ability to synthesize the various theoretical ideas of those reformist scholars and connect them to the changing realities of the local environment. Considering these aspects, one can convincingly argue that Mansoor's writings, talks, and periodic theoretical interventions have actually consolidated reformist Islam in Sri Lanka.

Building an Alternative Religious Authority

Besides his impact on consolidating reformist Islam in Sri Lanka, Mansoor positioned himself as an alternative religious authority against the conservative religious establishment in Sri Lanka. His stance on various Islamic legal debates, gender equality, and issues related to Muslim personal law challenged the mainstream views of the conservative theologians. For instance, while conservative religious scholars insisted that Muslim women should cover their faces with a veil, Mansoor opposed this opinion, providing evidence that it is not a

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[67] For details on the socio-religious history of Islamic reformism in modern Sri Lanka, see M. A. Numan, *Sri Lankan Muslims: Ethnic Identity within Cultural Diversity* (Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies, 2007); Alexander McKinley and Merin Shobhana Xavier, "The Mysteries of the Universe: The Tamil Muslim Intellectualism of M. C. Siddi Lebbe," *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 41, no. 1 (2017): 51-68, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2018.1397083; Mohamed Arkam Mohamed Razzak and Fatmir Shehu, "Exploring the History of Islamic Revivalism in Modern Sri Lanka," *Journal of Islam in Asia* 21, no. 1 (2024): 206-29, https://doi.org/10.31436/jia.v21i1.1212; and Zacky, Moniruzzaman, and Hassan, "Mohamed Shukri's Contribution to Islamic Thought in Sri Lanka."

[68] Abdul Samad, interview.

suitable jurisprudential position in a Muslim-minority context. Similarly, the reform of Muslim personal law has been an ongoing debate for decades, involving many stakeholders, including Muslim political leadership, conservative religious figures, and feminist activists. One of the key issues in this debate has been the appointment of women as *qāḍī*s (judges) and the requirement for a bride's official approval for marriage. Mansoor has taken a reformist position, arguing that appointing women as *qāḍī*s is permissible within Islamic jurisprudence.[69] Mansoor's position mainly appealed to the reformists and modernists who wanted to reform the Muslim personal law in ways that seriously address the concerns of Muslim women. In a broader context, Mansoor presents a strong critique of the established jurisprudential paradigm upheld by the conservative religious establishment, particularly represented by the All Ceylon Jamiyyathul Ulama (ACJU). The ACJU is the leading body of Muslim theologians advocating that *fatwā*s and religious guidance should be formulated according to the Shāfiʿī legal school. They argue that the Muslim community in Sri Lanka has traditionally adhered to the Shāfiʿī legal school, which is considered a fundamental aspect of their religious identity. In contrast, Mansoor contends that strictly following a specific Islamic legal school does not effectively support the reform of Islamic thought, especially in the context of the Muslim minority.[70] He proposes a comparative legal methodology that enables Muslim theologians and jurists to draw upon Islamic legal judgments and religious guidance from various schools of Islamic legal thought, focusing on the community's interests.[71] Such disagreements between conservative theologians and Islamic reformists are not new in the broader global Muslim community. However, in the Sri Lankan context, particularly over the past two decades, Mansoor has emerged as a key reformist scholar, sparking significant discussions, contestations, and debates with conservative theologians over religious identity, legal methodology, and the future of Islam in Sri Lanka.

Combating Islamophobia

His writings have also played a significant role in addressing Islamophobic narratives in post-war Sri Lanka, particularly in the wake of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks. These attacks intensified anti-Muslim sentiment, with right-wing majoritarian forces advancing the claim that

[69] M. A. M. Mansoor, *Muslim Taniyar Sattam: Sila Awazanagal* (Colombo: Mishkath Research Institute, 2017).

[70] Mansoor, interview.

[71] Ibid.

Islam is inherently violent. In response, Mansoor produced a timely and impactful work on the Qur'ānic perspective of violence. This publication, which has been translated into several languages, provides a methodical and contextual reading of the relevant verses, aiming to counter the widespread misinterpretations that fuel Islamophobia. Beyond the issue of violence, Mansoor has addressed other key theological and jurisprudential topics that have become flashpoints in public debates about Islam. His writings confront misconceptions surrounding women's rights, religious coercion, and intolerance—issues frequently cited by Islamophobic groups to portray Islam as incompatible with modern values. By critically engaging with these themes through a reformist and scholarly lens, Mansoor seeks to empower Sri Lankan Muslims to respond with intellectual clarity and confidence. His writings indicate that he firmly believes that internal reform and a better understanding of Islam and Muslims by the majority community could help mitigate the intensity of right-wing Islamophobic sentiments. He consistently emphasizes the importance of fostering communal coexistence and strategizing Muslim political engagement in a way that respects the sensitivities of the majority Buddhist community, which he sees as vital for the survival and future of Muslims.[72] It's important to note, however, that one could argue that Mansoor's approach to addressing Islamophobia is not particularly radical, as his writings largely overlook the structural issues related to Islamophobia in the country.

Conclusion

This paper is motivated by the desire to understand the reformist discourses of Mohamed Mansoor in Sri Lanka. The research found that Mansoor's primary concern was to craft a contextualized Islamic vision for the Muslim minority community in the country. Since the 1990s, he has consistently written about his quest for Islamic reform in Sri Lanka. He has engaged with numerous Muslim idealist reformist visions from scholars both in the Muslim world and beyond. However, he believes that such idealism is not suitable for a Muslim community living as a minority. Instead, he aims to formulate a "contextualized idealism." This research found that Mansoor mainly engaged with global developments in Islamic reformist thought, including the theoretical evolution of the jurisprudence of Muslim minorities, the ethnicization of the *sharīʿah*, and the *maqāṣid al-sharīʿah* discourse. He has attempted to integrate these ideas into the Sri Lankan context. The impact of his project on Islam in Sri Lanka and Muslim societies is multifaceted. Primarily, his efforts

[72] Abu Nada, "Pira Samohangaludan Nadandu Kollum Murayum Mozali Tawithalum," *Meelparvai*, December 15, 2002.

have expanded and provided an intellectual edge to reformist currents in the region. In fact, he was one of the key mediators between global Islamic reformist thought and Islam in Sri Lanka. Additionally, the consolidation of reformist Islam has allowed Mansoor to position himself as an alternative religious authority, challenging established theological bodies in the country. In this role, he has emerged as the voice of Islamic reform on various issues, including debates about Muslim personal law. Mansoor's project also effectively responded to prevailing Islamophobic narratives in Sri Lanka. All in all, while Mansoor's ideas are grounded in the broader corpus of contemporary reformist scholarship, his significant contribution lies in introducing these discourses to Sri Lankan Muslim audiences and thoughtfully synthesizing them into a framework tailored to the local context of Islamic reform. Given that Sri Lanka does not possess a well-established tradition of Islamic intellectual production comparable to contexts like India, this effort itself can be seen as a significant intervention in shaping local reformist thought.

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