

A Critique of Muḥammad Shahrūr's Views on the Qur'ān, the Ḥadīth Corpus, Sharī'ah, and Early Islamic Scholarship

Dr. Thameem Ushama

Professor

Department of Usul al-Din and Comparative Religion
International Islamic University Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This article describes the life, education, and thoughts of Muhammad Shahrūr, whose discourse on Islam generated confusion and much in the way of polemical debate. His controversial bias favoured modernity, influenced by modern Western epistemology, traditions, and secularism. The author applies qualitative content analysis to select writings. The analysis unveils his position (s) in light of mainstream Islam and focusses on Shahrūr's approach to Islamic religious thought via (1) theories of *Non-Synonymity* and *Limit*; (2) his view of the Ḥadīth and Sharī'ah; (3) the status of Muslim women with regard to polygamy, dress code and feminism; (4) the law of inheritance; (5) western culture and civilization; and (6) evolution; democracy, nationalism and pluralism, etc.

Keywords: Non-Synonymity, Theory of Limit, religious thought, modernity.

INTRODUCTION

Muslim academics, scholars, intellectuals, thinkers, and reformists attempt to provide solutions for crises, including social disorder and unforeseen political situations. They often integrate Islamic Revealed knowledge with hard and soft sciences to make classical Islamic thought relevant within the context of contemporary knowledge and experience, both secular and not. A few Muslim modernists claim knowledge of current issues join with an in-depth knowledge of religion. Results often cause controversial liberal explanations of the Qur'ān and Muḥammad's Sunnah.

As the Muslim world is reconsidering its conformance with authentic sources and scholars, numerous opinions, disagreements emerge and escalate tensions. This turmoil reflects incompatible propositions by modernists such as Muḥammad Arkon, Jamāl al-Bannā, Muḥammad Shahrūr (henceforth, *Shahrūr*), Muḥammad 'Abid al-Jābirī, Nasr Hāmid Abu Zayd, and others. Because Shahrūr's articulations prompted extraordinary controversy due to his departures from authentic perspectives, this study critically analyzes his religious thought. The author concludes that he misguided the entire Muslim community, especially the youth, with secular liberalism when dealing with classical Islamic interpretations of Scripture, Sunnah, religious injunctions, and principles of Islamic jurisprudence.

Shrouded, clouded, blinded and influenced by western secular pedagogy, Shahrūr subsumed then subverted the Qur'ān by using a broad spectrum of occidental disquisitions and methods. He did not base his contemplations on the undisputable religious exhortations offered by

righteous Muslim scholars, whose vast intellectual legacy shaped Islamic thought for the benefit of all humankind. Classical Muslim scholars believe the Qur'ān cannot be adequately understood if it is read solely in the light of secular epistemological development. Indeed, modernism and post-modernism are distant from the original purport and its meaning and intention for those who were Islam's first audience.

Shahrūr's discourse shows a profound ignorance of the classical Islamic worldview, which significantly remoulded society in conformity with Divine objectives. This is because he did not master the Islamic epistemology that had systematically developed over the last fourteen centuries. He examined Islam's heritage within a secular framework. He whole-heartedly believed that judgements and practices of Prophet Muḥammad (pbh), over twenty-three years of his prophetic life, were neither directed nor revealed by God. Furthermore, his projections were derived from personal reasoning without regard for early Islamic sources. Moreover, he opined that Prophet Muḥammad's approach served to mollify contemporary demands for a given time and place according to various social phenomena [1].

Consequently, Shahrūr proposes that the Prophet's *ijtihād* is merely indicative and cannot be considered as legally binding precedent (s) for Muslims [2]. He does not contend with the Prophet's *ijtihād* but blames and criticizes Muslim scholarship for being frustrating, messy, and repressive, often obstructing real progress. He says there is no need for contemporary scholars to refer to early or medieval Islamic discourses and sources and infers that early Islamic scholars thrust the Muslim *Ummah* into ignorance, intellectual stagnation, scholarly devastation, and civilizational and scientific backwardness.

It is regretful that Shahrūr drew many readers to the Prophet's Sunnah as the *force majeure* responsible for miserable decadence and deterioration in the Muslim world. This further implies that following the Prophet's Example has made the Ummah uncivilized. If this subversion of civilization continues, in Shahrūr's view, the Ummah will surely perish. He also established the groundwork for methodological developments, which he assumes will liberate Muslims from their divinely guided path by pushing them into deviation via service to Islam's antagonists.

Shahrūr argued that the 'ulamā' radically idolized early interpretations, so much so that early Muslims declared the Sunnah sacrosanct. Furthermore, by sacralizing the opinions of famous medieval scholars, he posited that the 'ulamā' and *fuqahā'* undermined the dialectical God-to-men relationship based on a sharp distinction between divine versus human immortal versus mortal, infallible versus fallible, and so forth. Moreover:

Their ignorance of the moral ideals of al-Islām and their preoccupation with the ritual elements of al-Imān represent the antidote to his rational, liberal, and ethical approach: he [Shahrūr] deems their approach backwards, primitive, and entangled in political corruption; thus breeding fanaticism, superstition, and sectarianism [3].

For these reasons, Shahrūr felt that

If the renewal of the Islamic religion is to succeed, society must categorically dispense with the *‘ulamā’s* interpretation of the Qur’ān (*tafsīr*) and, instead, rely on the views of non-clerical intellectuals who are untouched by traditional scholarship [4].

Shahrūr’s propositions cause scepticism among contemporary Muslim youth and move them towards secular and materialistic ideals that weaken religious faith and devotion.

Since Shahrūr’s emergence, he was subjected to unprecedented criticism and accused of apostasy. Opponents called him *satan*, *communist*, and *inventor of a new religion*. Thus, he stands as an unpardonable enemy of Islam, even a Western cum Zionist agent who distorted early Islamic thought. Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī said Shahrūr “*created a new religion*.” His books are banned in Saudi Arabia, Iran and other Gulf countries and considered far more dangerous than Salman Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* [5].

METHODOLOGY AND OBJECTIVE

Shahrūr claimed his methodology is different from all other modernist Muslim writers.

I am an engineer,” he said, “I interpret the Qur’ān in the manner of Isaac Newton. They read it like Shakespeare. They [traditionalists] make poetry. I discovered everything by eliminating the synonyms they artificially created [6].

This invites severe criticism from contemporary scholars, intellectuals, exegetes, and jurists. Consequently, the present writer joins in with a qualitative content analysis of his essential works, notably: *The Qur’ān, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrūr*, *al-Islām wa al-Imān*, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur’ān*; *Dirāsāt Islāmiyyah Mu‘āṣirah fī al-Dawlah wa al-Mujtama‘*; *Nahwa al-Usūl al-Jadīdah lī al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*; and *Tajfīf Manābī‘ al-Irhāb*; all of which are infested with western epistemology. The contagion contaminates and generates voluminous controversy. The present writer determines his position (s) in light of the mainstream Islamic perspective.

A BRIEF PROFILE AND EDUCATION

Shahrūr was born in 1938, the fifth son of a dyer, in the *Sālihiyyah* quarter of Damascus. His father sent him to secular primary and secondary state schools. He spent his childhood in a liberal household. Although his father adhered to ritual prayer, fasting and pilgrimage (he took his son to Mecca in 1946), religious observance was deemed less meretricious than Islamic ethics. Thus, his father taught him to manifest the goodness of religion through practical and moral praxis.

Consequently, spiritual efficacy never took root. In a 1996 interview [7], Shahrūr related what his father told him about the stove: “*If you want to warm yourself, do not recite the Qur’ān, but light a fire in the stove.*” His father thus prioritized science and logic.

Shahrūr is a child of Syria’s political turmoil after independence in 1947. During the dismantling of Stalinism by Khrushchev (1958–64), his religious beliefs were challenged by Marxism and institutional atheism. In 1955, the Soviet Union became Syria’s ally, and he was sent to Saratow in Russia to study civil engineering in 1959. Over there, He experienced politico-ideological

confusion. Fluent in Russian, he married a Russian who bore him a son and then returned to Syria after graduating from Moscow's Institute of Engineering (1964).

When Shahrūr returned to Syria, he became a civil engineering teacher at Damascus University. While studying in Russia, he learnt that for any doctrine to be successful, there should be an objective theory of knowledge: i.e., a theory that embraces human orientation of all things extant and openly acknowledged. On this foundation, he began to build his philosophical perspective. For example, he said the pan-Arab union failed to achieve its ideological objectives because there was no objective theory shared by Arab scholars that dealt with human perception. However, mathematics and analytical geometry proved more attractive than philosophy. So, in 1968, he was admitted to the University College in Dublin, where he obtained MS and PhD degrees in soil mechanics and foundation engineering (1969/1972), respectively. He returned to Damascus University as an assistant professor and later, professor in the Faculty of Engineering (1972–1998). He soon became a renowned author of several standard references (in Syrian) on soil mechanics and foundation engineering.

Besides teaching, he worked as a consultant engineer for more than two thousand building projects in Syria and other Gulf countries. As a natural scientist and engineer, his passion for logic, theology, and philosophy caused him to see Islam as a system offering a universal epistemology that encourages rationalism, liberty, and the appropriation of knowledge. His inspiration was not Islam's classical philosophical heritage or medieval exegetical tradition but intellectual work. A civil engineer by profession, and orator of liberalism and modernism, he overtly and passionately manifested these perspectives in his freelance, non-professional writing.

APPROACH TO ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

He began assessing socio-legal issues in Muslim communities through a Marxist lens coloured by western secular and liberal pedagogy. His religious thought shows profound deviation from all traditional approaches to the Sunnah. The problem begins with his advanced liberal thought, which he unilaterally supposed transcended traditional Islamic epistemology. He thus accused Muslim scholars of merely imitating Islam's heritage with particular references to revealed law. Believing traditional Islamic scholarship was infertile, any reforms were therefore impotent and bound to fail due to contemporary irrelevance. Accordingly, traditional Islamic scholarship was incompatible with modernity, an age that commanded plurality, tolerance, and progressive thought. Hence, achieving genuine religious renewal was impossible. Consequently, he advocated a new approach to understanding the Qur'ān that negated the Sunnah as a source for Islam's Shari'ah.

Shahrūr, a self-declared philosopher, then *re-invented* Islam by reinterpreting the Qur'ān. He did not rely on early Muslim methodology when attempting to understand the Divine Text's message or tendered solutions for humankind's problems. Divorced from classical exegetes and scholars, whom he believed were irrelevantly stuck in bygone eras, he approached the Qur'ān by segregating it from *Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah*. Some salient features of this approach are now highlighted and critically analyzed.

THEORY OF NON-SYNONYMITY

Shahrūr invented a theory he called “non-synonymity”, which he used, for example, to distinguish between *nabīyy* and *rasūl* [8]. He argued the Qur'ān admits non-synonymity, either in the form of individual words or whole idiomatic phrases. He claimed that every word particle had semantic import and no repetition, redundancy, or terseness in the Qur'ān. Thus, in his view, the sacred text did not obtain synonymity between words. He wrote:

We believe that for a truly modern understanding of the text, it is necessary to leave behind the era of *ʿulūm al-tafsīr*, which is based on the doctrine of synonymity...[9] We aim to reach for a more subtle and precise understanding of the divine text in which every word in the Book expresses a unique meaning. Where textual ambiguity or grammatical inconsistency happens to appear, a word's semantic note explains and determines a word's occurrence in the text whereby no style, rhyme, or other rhetorical considerations function [10].

He argued that removing or taking backwards or bringing forward even one word from its original place would seriously distort Allah's meaning. This sounds fantastic, and such a disposition regarding interpretation might even be tolerated or discussed. However, and regretfully so, his framework's projections severely sliced away integrated social legislation offered by the Qur'ān for all of humanity's benefit. We now provide some examples of his non-synonymity theory.

AL-ISLĀM AND AL-IMĀN

Shahrūr distinguished between *Islām* and *Imān* by offering a distorted picture of individuals ranging from Prophets Nūḥ to Muḥammad (pbh). This projection included everyone within Islam's purview, irrespective of whether an individual had absolute faith in Allah, coupled with the belief in a respective era's Prophet (s) [11]. Accordingly, men and women who sanction God by personal assent (*al-muslimūn* and *al-muslimāt*) are terminologically and conceptually separate from those who merely believe (*al-mu'minūn* and *al-mu'mināt*). Thus, Muslims are not necessarily followers of Prophet Muḥammad (pbh). On the contrary, *Jinns*, Abraham, Jacob, Israelites, Joseph, Pharaoh's magicians, the disciples of Jesus, Noah and Lot were/ actual Muslims. Hence, when Pharaoh saw the splitting of the sea, he became a Muslim. Historically, none of those cited were able to follow Prophet Muḥammad (pbh) but rather followed other contemporary messengers. For example, the disciples followed Jesus, and Pharaoh's magicians followed Moses.

Shahrūr also believed that if Muslims take the *shahādah* as the first pillar of Islam and ultimate criterion for adherence to Islam, they deny—because the *shahādah* demands one must follow Muḥammad (pbh), Messenger of God—not only that Pharaoh converted to Islam by following Moses, but also that the disciples of Jesus adhered to Islam by following Jesus. Thus, Muslims negate these and others' Islam because they did not follow Muhammad (pbh). Other pre-Islamic prophets, their families, and tribes, who could not have known Muḥammad (pbh) but whose strong adherence to Islam is attested in the Book, are thus also excluded from Islam.

However, Muslim scholars do not believe or teach that those cited were not Muslims because they never fasted during Ramadan or undertook the pilgrimage to Makkah [12]. Non-synonymity further suggests that the injunction to fast and pray is given only to Believers (*mu'minūn*), i.e., to Muḥammad's followers.

AL-KITAB AND AL-FURQAN

Another example of non-synonymity involves *al-kitāb* and *al-Furqān*. Characterizing these terms as segregated, he decided that legislative aspects of the Book had to be separated from the ethical ideals of *al-furqān* [13]. He said: “We have decided to separate the legislative aspects of the Book, where there is room for manoeuvring in order to be less restrictive, from the moral and ethical ideals, the ethical ideals of *al-furqān*.” By doing this, we can make social reality easier and more practically viable [14].

AL-AB AND AL-WALĪD

His textual explorations led him to think that *Ab* and *Walīd* are non-synonymous. For him, *Ab* meant *career father*, and *Walīd* meant *biological father*. This interpretation facilitated the legal concept of adoption in Islamic law, which had been prohibited in *Sūrat al-Aḥzāb*.

THE MEANING OF NISĀ'

According to Shahrūr, the term *Nisā'* is not always the plural form of *mar'ah*. He thought *nisa* derived from the root *nasā'*, meaning to *come later* [15] so that *nisa* referred to those who came/come later [16]. Thus, *nisā'* implies ‘latest technology’ such as electronic devices, mobile phones, televisions, BMW, Mercedes Benz, etc. Hence, in no way could *nisa* refer to ‘women’, which interpretation he deemed a fabrication by traditional ‘*ulamā'*’.

THEORY OF LIMIT

A strange Shahrūr discovery concerns the import of the Qur’ān’s legal provisions. He called this the ‘Theory of Limit’ [17]. Reading the Qur’ān through the lens of modern civil engineering, he explored an idea that allowed him to make *ḥudūd* punishments discretionary [18]. In doing so, he projected different limits of road compaction—ranging from one to five—onto Allah’s Book, with upper and lower limits. He further projected principles of *straightness* and *curvature* based on this theory. However, a problem occurs when he makes mismatched applications by disregarding the Prophet’s example. He changed the dress code for Muslim women, promulgated *pariah*-types on the institution of marriage, and also reformed Islamic inheritance law.

VIEW OF ḤADĪTH LITERATURE

Shahrūr agreed with postmodern Arab writers and so-called intellectuals who rejected the Sunnah of Muḥammad (pbh). This provoked much anger among traditional theologians and jurists. He wrote: “*Aḥādīth of the Prophet only have historical value, not a religious value.*” In other words, they carry nothing sacred, indicating that the Qur’ān is the premier and only source for all of Islam’s legal reasoning. In this regard, the words of the Prophet Muḥammad (pbh)) cannot be cited with authority. He condemned theologians who consider them a secondary legal source or basis for explaining the primary source.

SHARĪ‘AH AND ITS VALIDITY

Sharī‘ah is absolute legislation for Muslims in particular and the whole of humankind in general. It is an amalgam of the *Sunnah* taken with the Qur’ān, which contains comprehensive and holistic guidance. However, since Shahrūr denied any authoritative platform for the Sunnah, he completely invalidated Sharī‘ah. He refused to contemplate or accept reasoning based on the Sunnah and strongly advocated personal *ijtihād* based only on the sacred text and not the Prophetic example. Thus, he unilaterally invented a legal maxim wholly isolated from

fresh approaches to the Sunnah. He wrote: "*There is no ijtihād outside a naṣṣ (text of the Qur'ān)*" [19].

Shahrūr subscribed to the view that Allah did not direct Muḥammad's judgements and decisions. He, therefore, considered these discretionary choices and outcomes in accord with human/social circumstances in seventh-century Arabia. He also said Muḥammad's *ijtihāds* were fallible and subject to correction, review and revision. One can then deduce that this indirectly implies the Prophet's *ijtihāds* can be rejected and that they do not summarily constitute a continuum of Islamic legislation but rather reflect civil applications arising from contemporary circumstances. This is to say that Muḥammad's administration of state and society applied specific civil laws (*qānūn Madanī*) appropriate for his time. Thus, any historical contingency has no trans-historical validity—even if reports (*aḥādīth*) are accurate [20]. Hence, Shahrūr held that the Muḥammad's sayings have no contemporary relevance and that present-day Muslims are not required to follow his Traditions.

His speculative cum imaginative elucidations invalidate Sharī'ah and suggest incompatibility usage in today's more rational era due to irrelevance, primarily since every section of the present society is based on the modern episteme. This position is disseminated by Islam's enemies, who comprise western authors, Muslim secularists, liberals, and every postmodernist trained in Western institutions of higher learning — all of which have been influenced by predominantly Jewish secularists and neo-cons spawned by the Frankfurt School [21]. By disseminating such thoughts, he confuses and misleads readers, many of whom then reject significant applications of Sharī'ah in all Muslim societies. He argued that the Prophet's Primitive community was undoubtedly the first in Muslim history (Islam's first fruit), but indeed not a model for all societies and times [22].

He explicitly indicated, throughout his writings, that he did not consider the Prophet (pbh) a role model (*quduwah ḥasanah*), although the Qur'ān categorically declares this is so. Thus he sowed seeds of discord and scepticism by discouraging Muslims to treat Prophet's society in Madinah as a model. This deviation from Muslim scholarship counters the Qur'ān, which promulgates the Prophet as *raḥmatan li al-ʿAlamīn* (*mercy for the Universe and Humankind*).

Shahrūr believed that all *aḥādīth*—whether reliable, authentic or weak—had no binding authority because they did not derive from the divine source [23]. For him, the Sunnah was utterly human and contained decrees subject to change according to historical context and need their period of derivation being far more primitive than ours. He wrote:

We have made unimaginable scientific developments that help us think more dynamically. Arguably, social legislation is today more sophisticated and consolidated. Human civilization as a whole has immensely advanced, **so much so that we do not need more Prophets or further revelation as we can now trust our reason and matured experiences in this world.** Prophecies and prophethoods have been inherited by scientific institutions of modern times. Ancient messengers and their messenger-hoods have been inherited by new legislative assemblies and parliaments across the globe [24].

Thus, because the Sunnah, being core to Sharī'ah in seventh-century Arabia, has no justifiable reason for continued validity.

This perspective is not unique, as other Muslim secularists have propagated it throughout the modern period—Orientalists also. It is clear that Islam's enemies do not want Muslims to view Muḥammad (pbh) as a role model. Sadly, many contemporary Muslim thinkers believe that scientists and intellectuals can replace prophethood, which implies the rejection of Muḥammad's example. Therefore, we can safely assert that Shahrūr's discourse is little more than a parroting of the western worldview.

Shahrūr further noted that legal settings for Muḥammad's office as Allah's Messenger had limited scope [25] because he received verses harbouring legal injunctions only during the ten years he lived in Madinah. Indeed, the socio-political situation he faced there cannot possibly entail all that people face throughout history the world over. Moreover, as there will be no further revelation or messenger-hood until the Last Day, those ten years in *Yathrib* cannot possibly cover all phenomena the world will likely encounter in the future. Thus, that period is nothing but a small static component of obsolete human history and cannot possibly handle the emergence of different or novel situations per static Islamic law. Thus, he concluded that to apply analogical reasoning when dealing with ever dynamic problems by taking Muḥammad's Sunnah as the basis of Islamic jurisprudence was absurd.

COMPANIONS OF THE PROPHET

Shahrūr demonstrated overconfident religious thought. He believed we are presently more rational and knowledgeable than in the past. The assumption is that the Prophet's Companions were neither well informed nor intellectually (rationally) thorough. He also assumed that contemporary philosophers and jurists are more competent than people chosen by Allah to convey/protect the Qur'ān. He wrote:

Today, we are in a much better position to understand the legislative verses of the divine message because of the advances that human and natural sciences have achieved. And we can confidently say that we have surpassed the Prophet's companions in doing so, with the exception, of course, of the area of rituals.

Shahrur considered the Companions ordinary humans and treated them as uncivilized, unlettered nomads. He refused to acknowledge their contributions as relevant in any modern/contemporary context and abjectly rejected their interpretations and clarifications as praiseworthy or valid. He thus demeaned their cognitive and intellectual capacities as limited to their time's cultural and civilizational milieus. Consequently, he concluded that what they contributed in terms of knowledge and elucidation did not connect with or reflect prophetic doctrine. Such negative observations negate their extraordinary role in the preservation and conveyance of Islam's message and mission to successive generations.

STATUS OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Currently, women can access many aspects of life in secular-oriented societies, morally, culturally and individually. However, this is impossible in Muslim domains because they are not supposed to emulate western women. Ironically, however, Islam pioneered women's emancipation from oppression. Yet Shahrur opines that their status, although revolutionized during the Prophet's day, was hardly absolute but a mere beginning [26]. He said verses concerning the '*mother of the book*' had a dual capacity: 1) to absorb contemporary conditions during Muḥammad's time and 2) to encompass subsequent developments that obtain even

greater latitude. He thus recommended incorporating all ensuing contributions (including feminism) from the West and providing reforms for marriage, women's education, and inheritance.

POLYGAMY

Shahrūr thought Islam restrictedly allowed but strongly discouraged polygamy. He believed it an institution promoted by the ulamā's neo-patriarchal inclinations. He argued that only one Qur'ānic verse dealt with polygamy, adding that it had been continuously removed from its textual context and thus, mistakenly legislated in Islamic law in isolation from heavenly *ratio legis*. Nowhere else in the entire Qur'ān is polygamy otherwise mentioned. He saw this verse as an abolition of polygamy rather than an endorsement.

Shahrūr writes that polygamy solved a crisis for the nascent Islamic community. Makkah and Madinah were filled with widows and orphaned children who had lost husbands and fathers on battlefields. In those years, the verse authorizing polygyny proved an excellent panacea for a community that did not know how to deal with this dilemma. Shahrūr went further to opine that the verse is better called a verse of adoption instead of polygamy:

The polygyny verse should better be called the verse of adoption because it basically aims at regulating the process of adopting orphaned children into existing families. It does not deal with the marital issue of polygyny as such [27] ... it would be highly unreasonable to allow the practice of polygyny in a contemporary society in times of peace in which no numerical imbalance between men and women exists, where duly performing systems of adoption and care through orphanages avail [28].

He simply ignored Islamic legal principles developed over the centuries. Thus denying the divine dynamics of family law, he says:

Any state may put an end to the practice of polygyny by enacting laws. Hence, he declares that if any country rules that polygyny is forbidden and, being so, the practice of polygyny is a prosecutable offence, it does not violate, as the traditional ulama think, the Qur'ānic injunction [29].

However, according to Islamic jurisprudence, such a measure violates Qur'ānic legislation.

DRESS CODE

One of the most controversial items on offer is his notion of the Islamic dress code for women. He subscribed to the view that women are not required to cover their heads and faces. This historical convention/tradition has no justification in the contemporary context [30]. He noted that the dress code was/is closely connected to seventh-century Arabian culture [31] and that there is no need to follow a style given to the Prophet's wives. He reasonably argued that women might wear any clothing that suffices to cover their private parts according to prevailing customs and norms [32]. On another matter, for women to seek permission from their husbands before going out is tantamount to humiliation. He claimed that some Muslim scholars took Judeo-Christian misogynistic notions then incorporated them as *tafsīr* epistemology.

Judaism was the first religion that attached the stigma of original sin to the cunning nature of women. Christianity soon followed by basically accepting the account in the Old Testament. Centuries later, when Jews and Christians converted to the new religion of Muḥammad's mission, this story snuck into the collective consciousness of Qur'anic exegetes and remained for centuries, despite the fact that there is no textual evidence for any such misogynist rhetoric in the Book [33].

Shahrūr also gave women an unfettered right to enter politics. He argued that nowhere in the Qur'an is it prohibited. He further justified this position by saying the *ḥadīth* dealing with any prohibition of female involvement in state activities is a late creation and fabrication [34]. He also said that women mixing, moving and dealing with men in a deliberately relaxed mood is not blameworthy. They can participate in concerts, operas, theatres, and so forth. Participation in concerts, cinema, opera, and public performances is not prohibited in Allah's Book. He says: *"Most societies unreservedly accept female voices in public concerts, operas and the mass media—and we believe that it is not a sin to encourage women to take part in such activities"* [35]. He also believed that men and women are not prohibited from looking at each other. He says: *"We do not think for a minute that 'to lower your gaze' means that men should not look at women or that women while working in offices, shops, and restaurants, should not look at men"* [36].

FEMINISM

Shahrūr vigorously favoured feminism and the concept of women's empowerment. He did this with a different methodological reading of the Qur'ān (Limit Theory) and places women on the same level as men, whereby women are permitted unconditional public roles.

He considered Allah's book a dynamic tome encompassing all subsequent developments through a dialectical prism. He viewed Muḥammad's reforms as a small but not insignificant part of a much more comprehensive *women's liberation* scheme. Now that science has marvellously developed and jurisprudence has notably advanced our socio-legal conditions, men and women have an equal standard. Therefore, because *the Book* encompasses all subsequent developments, we can import all practices and perceptions of significance in order to expedite female emancipation.

THE LAW OF INHERITANCE

When dealing with financial issues, he held close to Marxist socialism and often cited dialectics concerning straightness, curvature, objective reality, and social justice on his sojourn to Islamic reform. On the law of inheritance, he gave priority to bequests rather than inheritance because the Qur'ān emphasizes bequests. Under Islamic law, both are mutually exclusive because they hold different purposes regarding the property. Denying their distinct orientations, he plunged ahead with rulings regarding inheritance in general with a view to reverse current practices and restore Allah's preference for bequests [37].

He argued that most individuals and institutions cited in a will do not legally qualify as members of a testator's family. Hence, bequests have greater importance (per the Qur'ān) than do inheritance laws. Because static rules do not determine a bequest, a testator has great flexibility and may distribute his wealth to whomever he wishes [38]. Hence, preference should always be given to a last will and testament. If one exists, it is incumbent on all to literally adhere to it. Hence, inheritance rules should be discarded as a specific bequest always overrules inheritance

law [39]. This is, however, contrary to mainstream Islamic rulings. In his view, inheritance rules come into play only when there is no will. In such cases, shares determined by the Book are to be distributed among legatees on behalf of the testator, Allah, Who made the bequest in the Qur'ān [40].

He questioned whether or not a male should get twice a female's share, arguing it should be in accord with a woman's contribution to financial matters in both family and society. Thus, if she contributes to the economy, this doctrine must accordingly change [41]. Concerning the distribution of inheritance, he calculates shares based on digital and non-digital quantities. Sometimes, he seeks aid from projective geometry to allocate shares. In doing so, he distances himself from traditional methods. Thus, he is not motivated always to offer a doubled share to male heirs. For him, this rule is a fabrication of a male-centred, seventh-century tribal society.

WESTERN CULTURE AND CIVILIZATION

Shahrūr was utterly obsessed with western thought [42] and viewed Islamic civilization and issues through the prism of western epistemology. His ignorance of Islam cannot be exaggerated, as it manifested in several foolhardy interpretations of the sacred text through empirical knowledge gained from engineering academies. He also appreciated democracy and strongly suggested importing its precepts to support revolutionary Islamic reforms.

As a confirmed student of Descartes (1596–1650), he revisited Islamic laws of inheritance via mathematical '*derivatives perfected by the thought of Isaac Newton*' (1642–1726)—for him, this would undoubtedly introduce a more dynamic but uniform structure of Islam's inheritance laws. Since Western technological developments affected him deeply, his importation of mathematical derivatives, geometry, and western intellects introduced a more vibrant legal system. Today, he says, "*we can use the insights gained from further developments in the geometrical sciences and benefit from Newton's and Descartes' theories*" [43].

EVOLUTION

Shahrūr staunchly advocated evolution. According to him, narratives in the Qur'ān reflect its process as an ever-progressive modality involving unceasing change:

Listen, people who lived at the time of Noah did not live in a society like ours. They lived in another era, and we gave a revelation related to their circumstances. Islamic revelations began with Noah and evolved straight through to the time of Muhammad [44].

Consequently, he believed humans existed before the advent of Adam and Eve on earth [45]. Accordingly, Homo-Erectus was present, and he believed that before Adam and Eve came to earth, there were human beings who were not civilized. Due to the absence of social legislation, they lived like animals [46]. After Adam and Eve, Homo-Erectus transformed into homo sapiens. Hence, he did not believe that Adam is the father of all human beings or hominids [47]:

After the explosion, the first material components (photons) turned into hydrogen; hydrogen then turned into helium; helium into non-organic beings; non-organic beings into organic beings; organic beings into living creatures, i.e., primitive, protoplasmic cells; primitive cells then into animals; and finally, animals into human beings. Such chains of transformations point

to a continuous process of 'becoming', which has, since then, become a constant feature of nature's two other dimensions: 'being' and 'progressing' [28].

DEMOCRACY

Shahrūr regarded democracy, although flawed, as the best form of governance ever. He believed the term *shūrā* was synonymous with democracy [49] and as fundamental to believers as is *Salāh* (prayer) [50]. Thus, for a Muslim to be perfect, the practice of democracy is inseparable from the **Din**. This apology rejects the Islamic *Shūrā* as applied by the Rightly Guided Caliphs. He said the Qur'ān introduces the notion of democracy and that Muḥammad (pbh) governed Madinah in light of democracy, arguing that Muhammad (pbh) consulted his Companions before making critical decisions. Thus, the Prophet (pbh) 'practised democracy' per tribal protocols.

Shahrūr proposed that Muslims should view and practice democracy in its contemporary context [51] as the most dynamic system of governance promoted by the sacred text. He thus sacralized democracy. Simultaneously he recommended the implementation of socio-economic conditions as follows:

You have to adapt the concept of democracy to social and economic conditions and the level of development. The Prophet applied democracy according to the social forms of his tribal period. The main Theory of democracy is in the Qur'ān, the same concept [52].

SHAHRŪR: A MODERNIST

Shahrūr claims, *"It would be an extreme regression if we tried to establish a modern society on the basis of premodern values and bygone norms"* [53]. This implies he did not advocate forming an Islamic society based on the Prophet's model. Nor did he favour Islamic reforms or revival in light of the early Islamic community. For him, Muslims must understand the Book of Allah in light of modern knowledge; only then will Muslim nations obtain meaningful and relevant reforms for the successful emergence of genuine Islamic thinking [54].

According to him, the contemporary Islamic discourse lacks any in-depth philosophical foundation. Thus, ignorance of modern philosophy is the root cause of the near primitive reactions by Muslim scholars who treat anyone blessed with the tiniest spark of creativity as a subversive renegade (enemy of Islam) [55]. Infused by modern and contemporary ideas, theories, and concepts drawn from secular western sources, Shahrur found no rational developments in Islam's academic domains. He stated:

The main intention of my work is to go beyond the epistemology of traditional Islamic scholarship. What is often hailed as either inimitable or unsurpassable holds us back when we attempt to reach new insight [56].

Since he believed traditional Islamic scholarship is filled with rubbish, he wanted to remove its bunkum, which he believes unduly burdens Islamic epistemology. He frequently referred to modern theories when assessing Islamic concepts and went beyond his Theory of Limit, as illustrated earlier. He applied this theory to almost every domain of Islamic socio-legal affairs and corrupted many legal tenets concerning traditional epistemology. His elucidations misled Muslims and encumbered them with dissension.

NATIONALISM

Shahrūr claimed nationalism was rooted in the Qur'ān and believed Muḥammad (pbh) was a nationalist — well, at least a *pseudo*-nationalist [57]. This view shows a profound lack of knowledge, misunderstanding, and pronounced arrogance. He attributed fanaticism to the Prophet with a slight modification that allowed laws to which Muḥammad was exempt. He also accused Caliph ʿUmar of Arab nationalism for determining a tax levy for the tribe of Taglib [58].

PLURALISM

As a postmodernist, Shahrūr deviated from all established norms by claiming Muḥammad (pbh) was a pluralistic statesman. He believed all sincere religious adherents, regardless of creed, were Muslims (submitted to God Almighty)—the so-called pluralist theory. In this proposition, his argument distinguished *Islām* from *Imān*. He argued that the word Islam should be used to mean the natural state of the human being as created by God, which implies surrender to God [59]. Hence, the term *Islām* neither identifies nor only applies to followers of Muḥammad (pbh). Preferentially speaking, *imān* refers to people of the religion brought by Muḥammad (pbh). Arguably, its adherents are *mu'minūn*. In his view, therefore, all humans on earth are *muslimūn* because they submit to God, one way or another.

Consequently, George Tamer argued that all religious beliefs, such as Islam, Judaism or Christianity, are versions of this religion. This perspective obtains the possibility of accepting all new religions and belief systems. We are, therefore, at liberty to accept or reject religions [60]. Thanks to the unique stupidity of the Theory of Non-Synonymity, we can now justify all religions and limit Muḥammad's prophethood.

IMPACT ON SOCIETY

Shahrūr, like other Muslim postmodernists and liberals, denied the authority of the *Sunnah*. He is deemed a pro-orientalist who revisited this notion with sophistication. Many mainstream Muslim scholars see him as an Islamic advocate who simply discarded revered sources and legacies developed over the centuries in Islam's socio-legal domains. He also suggested that people learn directly from nature and base one's thoughts on objective reasoning taken from mature human efforts due to contemporary scientific developments. The most significant controversy is his treating the *Sunnah* as a non-binding source of Islamic epistemology. This naïve distancing from the *Sunnah* of the Prophet (pbh) follows splendid pedagogical developments in the West and deviates from proper guidance.

Hence, Shahrūr's free-thinking interpretations of the sacred text are anything but free, as his epistemological framework was based on western paradigms. Hence, any attempt to explore a particular Qur'ānic verse is clouded by exegetic distortions. His media interviews falsely portrayed Islamic intellectual domains and appealed to a growing middle-class Muslim social strata. Unfortunately, a conspicuous portion of Muslim scholars has demonstrated a keen interest in Shahrūr's explorations of the sacred text and its semantics. His discourse produced many postmodernist Muslim liberals who reject Islam's rich intellectual heritage.

Some writers regard his approaches as neo-Judeo-Christian segregation or reduction of the integrated structure of Islam's epitome. As such, Muslim scholars and academics would do well to alert and admonish ordinary Muslim readers regarding his deceptions and digressions.

CONCLUSION

Shahrūr had no formal Islamic education or knowledge of established Muslim scholarship. His knowledge of engineering, modernity, secularism, and his residence in Communist Russia, strongly influenced outcomes that generated much controversy. His un-Islamic orientation caused much misunderstanding and polemics as he believed traditional Islamic scholarship was incompatible with modernity and prevented genuine spiritual renewal or reform. Moreover, his advocacy of new approaches to understanding the Qur'ān while rejecting the Sunnah reveals secular influences that oppose fundamental Islamic sources.

His invented theory of Non-Synonymity held that the Book of Allah admits non-synonymity in word or idiomatic phrases and that every single particle holds semantic import. Further, the Qur'ān admits no repetition, redundancy or terseness. He also invented the 'Limit Theory' based on civil engineering. His theories caused much debate in light of the Qur'ānic and Sunnah frameworks, as his propositions lead to friction and discord.

Shahrūr held that the Traditions of the Prophet were not sacred because Allah did not always direct Muḥammad's judgements and decisions. As such, the Hadith literature reflected many human discretions conditioned by circumstances. Thus, only the Qur'ān is a premier source for legal reference because the Prophet's *ijtihāds* cannot be considered infallible. Being thus subject to review, they may be summarily rejected by implication, as they hold no legal status.

Shahrūr's religious thought (s) is replete with confusion and disrespect for the Companions, whom he believed were neither well informed nor intellectually sound. He found a modern society far more rational and knowledgeable. By subscribing to this view, he undermined the integrity and role of the Companions, which allows us to conclude that his faith is fragile, at best.

He discouraged polygamy as an institution, saying it was merely promoted to benefit chauvinist '*ulamā'*' and jurists. He found only one Qur'ānic verse dealing with it and suggested it had been taken out of proper textual context and mistakenly legislated as Islamic law. Nowhere else in the entire Qur'ān is polygamy mentioned. He also believed this verse prohibited polygamy.

As for women's dress code, he opined they are not required to cover either head or face and that seventh-century Arab culture bore no relevance to contemporary lifeways. Hence, women may wear any clothing covering their private parts according to prevailing customs and norms. He also found it humiliating that women sought permission from husbands to leave the house and did not need his consent. His thoughts on Muslim women reflect feminism.

Shahrūr accorded priority to bequests rather than laws of inheritance, contrary to the mainstream Islamic view. According to him, the Qur'ān emphasizes bequests. He explained that rules concerning inheritance should be applied only when there is no bequest (will) because a specific bequest overrules general regulations of inheritance. When intestate, shares are to be determined by the Qur'ān and distributed to legatees on behalf of a testator, as if Allah Himself had made the bequest. This view opposes the majority opinion of Muslim jurists who argue that bequests have no validity because inheritance laws supersede an individual's will.

Shahrūr understood Islamic civilization through the prism of western epistemology. This worldview embraces democracy systems, which he regarded as the best system of governance ever instituted. He also believed the term *shūrā* was synonymous with *democracy*. He advocated the theory of evolution and argued that nationalism had roots in the Qur'ān—firmly believing that Muḥammad was a nationalist. He promoted religious pluralism and held that all adherents of different religions were Muslims.

Readers of Shahrūr need to be vigilant and critical. It is vital to see whether or not his interpretations confirm or conflict with Islam's fundamental values and principles to ensure he does not contradict the Qur'ān's message as assessed by conscientious scholars. Before advancing his theories and opinions, it is essential to compare both with early Muslim writers for continuity. Anyone who disregards soundly recognized contributions from Muslim scholars and thinkers should be examined according to a *tawḥīd* perspective. It is relevant to look at a writer's educational background and orientation before considering him/her a valid source. Whosoever is not systematically and methodologically trained in a particular discipline or field of knowledge should be considered a liability rather than an asset. In this regard, Shahrūr was utterly unschooled in Islamic revealed knowledge disciplines and thus ill-prepared. His understanding of Islam was also skewed by the western worldview and taught by communist atheists. Hence it is crucial to be objective before advocating his thoughts on Islam.

References

- [1]. Muḥammad Shahrūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'āṣirah* (The Book and the Qur'ān: A Contemporary Reading), (Damascus: Dār al-Ahli li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi', 1990), 183.
- [2]. Muhammad Shahrūr, *The Qur'ān, morality, and critical reason: the essential Muhammad Shahrur*, translated, edited, and with an introduction by Andreas Chrisman, Leiden: Koninklijke, Brill NV (2009), 183.
- [3]. Shahrur, *The Qur'ān, morality, and critical reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 33.
- [4]. Ibid.
- [5]. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/335174855_Critical_Study_on_The_Legal_Thinking_of_Muhammad_Shahrur
- [6]. <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Muhammad-Shahrur,-reformer-of-Islamic-thought-loathed-by-extremists,-has-died-48890.html>
- [7]. The interview took place in 1996 at Dār al-Istishārāt al-Handasiyyah, the engineering firm in which Shahrūr was a senior partner and where he did his writing (conducted by Dale F. Eickelman).
- [8]. Muḥammad Shahrūr, *al-Dawlah wa al-Mujtama'* (The State and the Society: A Contemporary Reading). Damascus: Dār al-Ahli li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi'; (1994): 30.
- [9]. Shahrūr, *The Qur'ān, Morality and Critical Reason: The Essential Muhammad Shahrur*, 9.
- [10]. Ibid., 225.
- [11]. Shahrūr Muḥammad, *al-Islām wa al-Imān*, (Damascus: Dār al-Ahli li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi'. (1996): 38.
- [12]. Shahrūr, *The Qur'ān, morality and critical reason*, 24.
- [13]. Shahrūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'āṣirah*, 66.
- [14]. Shahrūr, *The Qur'ān, morality, and critical reason*, 113.
- [15]. Ibid., 222-3
- [16]. Shahrūr, *al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'āṣirah*, 643.
- [17]. Muhammad. *The Qur'ān, morality, and critical reason*, xxii.

-
- [18]. Shahrūr, al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu^cāṣirah, 454-6.
- [19]. Shahrūr, The Qur'an, morality, and critical reason, 225.
- [20]. Ibid., 102.
- [21]. See Omar Zaid's Sexology for the Wise, Vol III, "The Lords of Misrule". (2021), USA: Al'Ginkgo
- [22]. Shahrūr, al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu^cāṣirah, 555.
- [23]. Ibid., 109.
- [24]. Ibid., 75.
- [25]. Ibid., 110.
- [26]. Shahrūr, al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu^cāṣirah, 595.
- [27]. Shahrūr, The Qur'an, morality, and critical reason, 264.
- [28]. Ibid.
- [29]. Shahrūr, al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu^cāṣirah, 617.
- [30]. Shahrūr, The Qur'an, morality, and critical reason, 303.
- [31]. Shahrūr, al-Dawlah wa al-Mujtama^c, 87.
- [32]. Shahrūr, The Qur'an, morality, and critical reason, 314
- [33]. Ibid., 265.
- [34]. Shahrūr, al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu^cāṣirah, 624.
- [35]. Shahrūr, The Qur'an, morality, and critical reason, 325.
- [36]. Ibid., 306.
- [37]. Ibid., 228.
- [38]. Ibid., 229.
- [39]. Ibid., 254.
- [40]. Ibid., 234.
- [41]. Shahrūr, al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu^cāṣirah, 602.
- [42]. Shahrūr, al-Dawlah wa al-Mujtama^c, 174-176.
- [43]. Shahrūr, The Qur'an, morality, and critical reason: the essential Muhammad Shahrūr, 226.
- [44]. Ibid., 518.
- [45]. Shahrūr, al-Dawlah wa al-Mujtama^c, 67, 71.
- [46]. Ibid., 47-8.
- [47]. Ibid., 65.
- [48]. Ibid., 13.
- [49]. Ibid., 142.
- [50]. Ibid., 150.
- [51]. Ibid., 48.
- [52]. Shahrūr, The Qur'an, morality, and critical reason, 519.
- [53]. Ibid., 2.
- [54]. Ibid.
-

[55]. Ibid., 72.

[56]. Ibid.

[57]. Shahrūr, *al-Dawlah wa al-Mujtama'*, 86-7.

[58]. Ibid., 67.

[59]. Shahrūr, *The Qur'an, morality, and critical reason*, 21-3.

[60]. Burlin Forum for Progressive Muslims, *Political Thought in Islam: State, Religion and Government* in Dr. Johannes Kandel (ed). Bonn: Brandt GmbH Druckerei und Verlag; Retrieved from www.fes.de/BerlinerAkademiegespraeche (2009), 14.