

## Relevance of Shibli's educational philosophy\*

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**Abstract:** Shibli Nu'mani, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century scholar, advocated a balanced educational philosophy for the Muslims in India. While most of his contemporaries wanted to teach traditional education to make Muslims retain their religious identity in the changed political situation, others stressed on modern science and learning to face the challenges of modernity. Traditional Islamic education aimed at the attainment of virtues while pursuing knowledge as an obligation and produced scientists and philosophers but these promoters of traditional education were ignorant of the demands of their time, whereas the modernist group considered traditional education unnecessary. Shibli used history and *kalām* to teach Muslims the unique characteristics of Islamic education and stressed that both groups need to make the Qur'ān their main guide and urged the '*ulamā*' to take the lead.

**Keywords:** educational philosophy, modernity, '*ulamā*', curriculum, tradition, reformation

**Abstrak:** Shibli Nu'mani, seorang cendekiawan abad lewat ke-19, menganjurkan keseimbangan dalam pendidikan falsafah untuk orang Islam di India. Walaupun kebanyakan daripada cendekiawan sezamanya mahu mengajar pendidikan tradisional untuk orang Islam bagi mengekalkan indentiti agama mereka dalam situasi politik yang berubah, yang lain menekankan sains moden dan pembelajaran untuk menghadapi cabaran-cabaran kemodenan. Pendidikan Islam tradisional bertujuan untuk mencapai kemuliaan disamping menuntun ilmu sebagai tanggungjawab dan menghasilkan ahli-ahli sains dan falsafah, tetapi pendokong-pendokong pendidikan tradisional tidak menyedari akan tuntutan masa mereka, manakala golongan moden menganggap pendidikan tradisional tidak diperlukan. Shibli menggunakan sejarah dan *kalām* untuk mengajar orang Islam keunikan ciri-ciri pendidikan Islam dan menegaskan

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bahawa kedua-dua golongan perlu menggunakan Qur'ān sebagai sumber utama dan menyarankan 'ulamā' untuk menerajunya.

**Kata kunci:** falsafah pendidikan, pemodenan, kurikulum, tradisi, reformasi

The 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed many efforts by Muslim philosophers and scholars to redefine and readjust to the growing challenges of Western civilization. Education was viewed as the key area of reform in this process. Traditionally, Muslims had derived their inspiration from the teachings of the Qur'ān and *Sunnah* - acquiring knowledge was viewed not only as an act of worship but also as a means of understanding God and His creation. However, European material progress and the need for Muslims to catch up with the changing times led some Muslim scholars and community leaders to adopt a European methodology. However, this would not have been possible without developing a clear relationship with traditional Muslim education. It is in this context that Shibli Nu'mani (1857-1914) becomes important in modern Islamic thought. Shibli was a philosopher, historian, theologian, poet and an educationist. He helped in the establishment of the Nadwah as a *madrasah* with a new curriculum to develop a working relationship between the Islamic and Western civilizations. In a way, his was an effort of Islamization of knowledge in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century India. Comparing Sayyid Ahmad (1817-1898) and Shibli, Smith (1956, p. 41) writes:

Sayyid Ahmad approached Islam from the values of the modern West; Shibli approached Western values from the viewpoint of Islam.

It is because of this approach that Shibli is better accepted among mainstream Muslims than Sayyid Ahmad. This article examines Shibli's educational philosophy and its relevance at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **History of education**

As a student of history, Shibli identified those factors which promoted learning and education in a civilization (Shibli Nu'mani, 1932). The main reason why education spread so fast in Islamic

history was because it had become part of religion. The Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, which are the foundations of the Islamic religion, are linked with Arabic, therefore the sciences (such as grammar, *asmā' al-rijāl*, and *'ilm al-kalām*) which sprang from it were also considered religious knowledge. Second, education was not limited to mosques or *'ulamā'* but people of every profession were acquiring knowledge, no matter how humble their job. In fact, these professions became respectable because of the upholders of these jobs, as exemplified by al-Ghazālī (1055-1111), 'Umar Khayyām (1048-1131) and Farīd al-Dīn 'Aṭṭār (1145-1221). Also, Islam produced philosophers and scholars like Ibn Sīnā (980-1037) and Ṭūsī (1201-1274), who were ministers, and Ibn al-Mu'taz 'Abbāsī (847-869) who was both a great poet and a ruler. Third, there were no boundaries in acquiring education and there was no fixed curriculum. Whoever wanted to learn anything had the freedom to do so, and the expert in one science was the student in another. Fourth, the rich and nobles who were the guardians of students were themselves educated and had a love of knowledge. The amounts spent by Muslim rulers and the rich in founding libraries and institutions of learning also finds no comparison anywhere in the world (Shibli Nu'mani, 1971).

However, the decay in knowledge began after the establishment of *madāris* when the adherence to one particular jurisdiction (*madhhab*) began and the emphasis shifted to less important subjects and unnecessary books (1971, p. 282). Shibli refers to the scholars of *mā warā' 'an-nahr* ("the other side of the river," meaning Transoxiana) lamenting the founders of *Madrasah Nizāmiyyah* who were sad for sensing that now *'ilm* (knowledge) would not be acquired for *'ilm*'s sake but because of its boundaries and salaries (1932, p. 42). From the 4<sup>th</sup> century *hijrah* the imitation (*taqlīd*) of one particular jurist was strengthened, which hindered the growth of scientific progress. By the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century, *taqlīd* became a necessary part of the religious institutions and in the third stage, what stained education was the importance given to auxiliary subjects (*maqṣūd bi-al-dhāt*) such as *naḥw*, *ṣarf* and logic, and thus the acquisition of core subjects (*maqṣūd aṣlī*) suffered. Another factor was the introduction of too many books into the curriculum and the method of teaching to the book rather than the subject, which could not produce any experts (1971, p. 283).

The reasons for the inclination of Muslims towards learning in the past, as sometimes given by Europeans, were their interest in knowing the unknown. However, Shibli argued that “when Muslims were Muslims they did not have any *ta‘aṣṣub* (prejudice) against other nations and other languages” (1971, p. 148). Even Prophet Muhammad (SAW) admired many things of other nations and asked people to learn other languages. The same attitude continued in the period of the rightly-guided Caliphs and other rulers. They respected learned people and urged Muslims to acquire the sciences and languages of other nations. Muslim rulers were also open-minded in employing non-Muslims in administrative and teaching positions. Shibli challenged Gibbon’s view that Muslims did not participate in the translation works during the early period of Islam out of their arrogance (Gibbon, 2003, pp. 237-238, 300). This is not wholly true as Shahrastāni (1968) refers to many Muslim translators. Also, Shibli did not accept arrogance as a reason for not translating because there were more significant (administrative) issues which did not allow Muslims to learn foreign languages (1932, pp. 17-20). They were more interested in the subject matter than indulging in issues like translation. Had the Arabs indeed been arrogant towards other languages, it would have stopped them from learning their sciences also.

### **Shibli’s analysis of contemporary situation**

Shibli’s reform movement in education started after his travels to Turkey and Egypt, which exposed him to the shortcomings of the standard *madrāsah* curriculum in Muslim countries, particularly in India. He was amazed how the Nizami curriculum (*Dars-i Nizami*) continued so long in India without any change, although in the past the curricula of Fārābī, Ibn Sīnā and Ya‘qūb al-Kindī had changed, depending on the needs of the times. This curriculum is named after Nizamuddin Sehlaṭi (1689-1748), who belonged to the famous religious seminary Firangi Mahal (Lucknow, India). Nizamuddin was a contemporary of Shah Wali Allah (1703-1762), who had also designed a curriculum stressing on the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth*. However, it is interesting that instead of Shah Wali Allah, Nizamuddin’s curriculum, which stressed on logic and philosophy, had been adopted and continued for almost two centuries.

Drawing conclusions from the *madrasah* curriculum, Shibli wrote why the *madāris* of Muslim countries, particularly Jāmi‘at al-Azhar, could not produce scholars capable of leading the community (1923, pp. 16-18). He found two main reasons: one was to remove the books of Greek philosophy and replace them with modern philosophy, and the other was to include English language training, so that the ‘*ulamā*’ could reform modern educated Muslims, preach in Europe and respond to the criticisms against Islam. Nadvi (1993, p. 20) writes that in response to his question, Shibli once said:

Greek sciences are not our religious sciences, and understanding of our religion is not based on them. Al-Ghazālī included them in the curriculum of ‘*ulamā*’ to respond to the effect of atheism (*ilhād*) in his time... Now, its place has been taken by the new sciences and philosophy, therefore there is a need to acquire them.

And for the ‘*ulamā*’ to learn English, he said:

New education is spreading very fast and Arabic education is declining within the Muslim nobility. Now the modern educated learn about Islam from the books of the English and English translations of Islamic books... Isn’t this the job of our ‘*ulamā*’? (Nadvi, p. 20).

Shibli highlighted that earlier Muslims were well-informed about the knowledge of their time and traveled to faraway places to gain knowledge, following the Qur’ān and *ḥadīth* stressing on reason and knowledge. Some Muslims were afraid of consequences not suitable to their faith in teaching English and modern sciences, but they were not so disruptive for those strong in faith, Shibli argued.

The ‘*ulamā*’ of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, though experts in their fields, were ignorant of contemporary issues which was part of their religious duty. Their role was significant in transforming the minds of Muslims, yet they had become ineffective, especially when educating Muslims. Shibli referred to al-Ghazālī who wrote:

Masses became destitute of good qualities because kings (*Salātīn*) were spoiled and kings were spoiled because ‘*ulamā*’ were spoiled and the reason for their corruption was their love of dignity and rank (n.d. p. 210).

In the past, the '*ulamā*' were responsible for all the activities of Muslims, both religious and worldly, but now they believed that the government had taken this right from them, which was not true. He said:

The '*ulamā*' still have great authority over the nation, (although) they may not need this (authority) but the nation needs them badly. This is because, if they do not take the control of the thinking, morality, culture and civilization of the nation, it would not progress (1971, p. 93).

Shibli was convinced that the key to Muslim progress was in following both religious and modern education, and teaching modern sciences with an Islamic perspective. The problem was that modern education was free from religion, and traditional education was apparently not useful in worldly matters. This was the main reason why the efforts of each group were not making any progress. Therefore, he urged Muslims to learn from their past (under Islamic rule in India) when there were two kinds of education prevalent in India, worldly (*dunyawī*) and spiritual (*dīnī*). The worldly education comprised of Persian books and Qur'ān reading as part of the curriculum, and its graduates were employed in the government and businesses. However, the students were strong in faith and one could not even imagine them morally weak, as the key to their commitment was their training done in an Islamic manner. This was due to their teachers who instilled Islamic values, making their faith strong even if they were not pursuing religious studies (1990, p. 59).

In Islamic history, spiritual education has been the protector of religion and produced those '*ulamā*' and scholars who established religious influence in the country. This group was responsible for the mosques, *khuṭbāt*, and legal matters regarding which Shibli believed:

If this group becomes extinct, the effects of Islam will be annihilated and will not be compensated by thousands and millions of schools and colleges. But the way the curriculum and method of education has been changing from the beginning of Islam, it is necessary that (the present religious curriculum) be changed now to make the *madāris* more influential (1990, p. 60).

Shibli suggested good religious training for the students of modern institutions by keeping them in boarding schools to be trained through lectures, in an environment easy to follow Islamic teachings. Three types of books were suggested in this regard - *fiqh*, *'aqā'id* and history - and he said: "we do not need religious services from these English-speaking people, like leadership (*imāmah*), preaching (*wa'z*) and decree (*fatwā*). But the purpose is to get them familiar with the necessary issues of Islam and Islamic history" (1932, pp. 141-142). Besides, religious scholars should be paid a good salary, and college staff must be present at the time of *wa'z*. Scholars were asked to free themselves from any parochialism because the intellectual parochialism (*'ilmī ta'assub*) was stopping most Muslims from acquiring the sciences of other nations. They should learn from their predecessors like al-Bīrūnī, who studied Sanskrit in India in such a manner that Hindus would purify the floor where he was sitting. But, as a result of his contribution they have enormous admiration for al-Bīrūnī. Also, Muslims gave the same respect to Aristotle and Plato as they gave to al-Ghazālī and Rāzī, some even showing more respect to them. This was to make the *'ulamā'* realize that they were wrong in not acquiring modern science and English, and for not allowing others to learn it. He believed that Muslims should learn modern sciences and "make them their own," just as al-Ghazālī and others had done in the past (1990, pp. 56, 89-90). In order to improve the standard of education in religious schools, Shibli tried to explain the philosophy and purpose of education which shall be studied below.

### **Definition and theory of education**

Shibli's philosophy of education can be derived from the following passage indicating that it was the duty of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) like all other Prophets to not only educate but also to train individuals in attaining good virtues.

The most sacred duty and the most sacred service of this universe is to reform and complete the morals and character training (*tarbiyah*) of human souls (*nufūs insānī*)...Their practical education (*ta'līm*) should then be established in the world (1991, p. 19).

Education according to Shibli was to produce ideal human beings who practiced virtues in the society. His insistence on practically establishing these virtues and morals (*tarbiyah*) makes it the most sacred duty of all Muslims to practically train students because mere theoretical education (*ta'lim*) was not enough as seen in the model of the Prophet (SAW) who was a practical manifestation of the Qur'ānic teachings (33: 21). He emphasized on individuals (*nufūs*) and not organizations or societies, stressing the responsibility of each individual to become a perfect human being leading towards a healthy society. This "individual-centred position" in education is opposed to the "society-centered position" in the West, writes Wan Daud (1998, pp. 121-167). The traditional Islamic education was individual-centred and aimed at achieving not only 'the success and happiness in this world' but also in the hereafter. In that sense, it can be distinguished from the Western concept of the individual-centred position whose only aim is success in this world. One of the first treatises in Islamic education, *al-Risālah al-Mufaṣṣilah li Aḥwāl al-Mu'allimīn wa-al-Muta'allimīn* written by Muhammad b. Khalaf al-Qabisi in the 11<sup>th</sup> century stressed on enabling the pupil to develop into a good Muslim. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Burhanuddin al-Zarnuji wrote *Ta'lim al-Muta'allim Ṭarīq al-Ta'allum*, emphasizing the education of the whole being rather than mere academic attainment (Baloch, 1989, pp. 23-27).

Shibli had a holistic approach to education, and was in this sense close to the Greek concept that stressed the teaching of virtue as a primary aim (Carr, 1991, pp. 23-60). Many Western educators like Hirst (1974, pp. 173-189) and White (1998, pp. 103-119) have also stressed the moral aspect of education. Islam and knowledge are interrelated, Shibli believed, as the Qur'ān (34: 46; 2: 219; 30: 8; 3: 191; 16: 125) invokes thinking and analytical reasoning (*ijtihād*) even in matters of '*aqā'id*' rather than following blindly (*taqlīd*) (1990, p. 17). The intrinsic proof of this matter is that throughout history, '*ilm*' (knowledge) always came together with Islam. Anywhere Islam reached, it changed the lives of its people. The Arab tribes, Seljuks, Tatars, Turks and Afghans who had been devoid of learning from time immemorial produced philosophers, poets, writers, and '*ḥukamā'*'. It was the glory of Islam which produced people like Imām Shāfi'ī, al-Kindī, al-Fārābī, Ibn Rushd and Imām Mālik in places which had no science and learning before Islam (1990, pp. 16-17).



There was a need to emphasize this holistic approach to learning because Islam is against *ta'lim*, which is required for the purpose of getting jobs only. This was perhaps in direct contradiction with the aims and objectives of modern education. Sayyid Ahmad, whose aim was only national progress, held a different view from Shibli and believed that Muslims would not be able to make progress by sticking to traditional languages and education. He argued, “*ilm* in our time is that which is practically used and experienced and is beneficial for human beings” (Nizami, 1985, p. 31).

However, Shibli stressed on excelling both materially and spiritually because in his time, upholders of traditional Islamic education considered it against religion to use knowledge and education for material happiness. This attitude might have developed due to the modernists' goal to make education only as a means for securing jobs. Though Shibli wanted to put the love of knowledge in the hearts of his people, he did not consider it against religion to use knowledge for material purposes. In fact, he wanted Muslims, especially students, to live a respectable life, which would create the virtues of dignity and nobility in them (1990, pp. 87-88). Reflecting on the administration of Jami'ah al-Azhar during his travels, Shibli refers to students' meals, which were provided free to all students, or rather distributed in a very humiliating manner. The administration perhaps believed that this would inculcate the value of humbleness in the students but Shibli wanted to inculcate noble virtues like courage, magnanimity, enthusiasm, chivalry, etc. (1923, pp. 174-175).

Shibli's contemporary in the Arab world, Muhammad 'Abduh, also stressed that the meaning of education is “the perfection of good character” required according to the *hadith* (Malik, 1988, p. 438) while also stressing good living (Abduh, 1993, vol. 3, p. 30; Shafie, 1998). In fact, 'Abduh used the term *tarbiyah* to mean both physical and spiritual education (*tarbiyat al-nufūs wa tarbiyat al-'uqūl*). 'Abduh was against education devoid of spirituality (as in modern schools) and stressed the inculcation of values in students to help them acquire perfection in their professions (1993, p. 111). Besides gaining spiritual and material benefit, Shibli wanted his contemporaries to excel in their professions and emphasized on producing experts in every field,

whether it was *farḍ ‘ayn* (individual duty) or *farḍ kifāyah* (collective duty) and his recommendations in that context are considered below.

### The aim of education

Shibli was convinced that the progress of a nation, religious, moral and civilizational, depends on education. He wrote in *al-Ghazālī*, “Education is the gist of a nation, and the rise and fall of a nation is based on the progress and decline of education” (n.d., p. 200). Shibli believed that this was only possible by producing modern ‘*ulamā*’, full of religious zeal and virtue, who could be the torch bearers of Islam, as in early Islamic history (1990, p. 61). All this was only possible if religious scholars were aware of modern science and learning besides being well-versed in the traditional Islamic sciences. On the other hand, modernist Muslims were expected to have good foundations in their faith and history. However, the two groups were wasting their energies against each other instead of dealing with the real problem and educating Muslims. Shibli urged his fellow Muslims to work together despite their differences, as they had in the past, from the time of the Prophet (SAW). It was not that there were no differences between the Companions but that they lived with love and respect for each other despite these (1923, pp. 239-248). Therefore, educators must have a clear understanding of their objectives for producing experts, and he wrote (n.d., p. 200):

1. The objective in education is that *naḥs fann* (one particular art or subject) is acquired.
2. The best method to acquire any art or subject is to address its (various) issues one by one with steadfastness, so that it is covered at length. Otherwise, if more than one issue is acquired together, the understanding of even one issue will not be perfected.
3. It is necessary to understand which subject needs more time than others, and which comes first in order of preference. This means that subjects which are essential or primary (*maqṣūd bi-al-dhāt*) should be given more time, and auxiliary or supplementary subjects (*maqṣūd bi-al-‘arḍ*) should be given just enough time to learn them.
4. The primary need in acquiring any ‘*ilm* should be to learn that subjects’ ultimate aim (Ansari, 1975, p. 129-131).

Acquiring a 'particular art' was important because in existing curricula, most books were arguments of words rather than dealing with the main issues. However, it was not like this in the period of the earlier Muslims, when there were no commentaries or margins. This only began from the time of Ibn Sīnā, but even then the debate was usually confined to main issues and their explication rather than resulting in a 'war of words.' But later, it shifted from the main issues to the expression, construction and the significance of words. When this started, the period of decay in knowledge of Muslim education began.

Regarding the second point, Shibli says that the main problem with existing curricula is that they have many books where more than one subject is blended. Those topics are important but being philosophical, they should be discussed in philosophy and not logic.

The issue of the priority of subjects is also an important factor, as the skills or '*ulūm*' that are only the means for acquiring the core subjects have become important in them, and demand more time than the main subjects. Shibli quotes al-Ghazālī (pp. 68-69) here:

These supplementary subjects are only the means for other objectives and are not the primary objectives. And anything which is acquired for something else shouldn't forget its primary objective and prolong the means.

For example, *mantiq* is helpful in understanding philosophy but *mantiq* books were double in number than those on philosophy. Similarly, the period for teaching *adab* (literature) was shorter than the period for teaching grammar, though an understanding of literature was necessary to appreciate the Qur'ān (Ansari, 1975, p. 132). In the existing *madrāsah* curriculum, the Qur'ān and philosophy had become secondary, since supplementary subjects took more time. Thus, the main subjects required more time while the supplementary subjects which serve as the medium should be given just enough time to understand the Qur'ān and philosophy.

In order to implement the above mentioned changes, it was necessary to bring reform in the teaching methodology and Shibli's suggestions in that regard shall next be discussed.

### Reforms in teaching methodology

Teaching has several goals; the acquisition of art (*tehsīl-i fann*), the acquisition of depth of meaning (*am'ān-i nazar*) and the power of studying (*quwwat-i mutāla'ah*). However, the last goal was attained through the existing method and not the art which should be the aim (1990, p. 20). Therefore, the students do not gain knowledge of a subject although they may gain other benefits. For example, prescribed books of grammar and logic were not effective in giving the students a good understanding of the subjects as they only stressed composition and phraseology, their occurrence, meaning and implications. This only led to lengthy criticisms and the defences, which could otherwise have been avoided if expressed in a different way. This method takes the students away from the subject and makes them experts in a particular book but not the subject. That is why if students of philosophy and logic are asked to explain an *āyah* of the Qur'ān or any other issue following logical principles and rhetoric, they are not able to do so. Such was the case not only in the traditional institutions but in modern institutions also, students were not innovative. Shibli, therefore, stressed analytical thinking, as urged by the Qur'ān, in all traditional and modern subjects. It was this lack of thinking and analysis which was believed to be the cause of rigidity among religious scholars. Students were generally bound to the words of their text rather than its spirit and strictly followed their teachers' comments (1938, pp. 104-105).

### The Qur'ān: Source of all sciences

Although the Holy Qur'ān is the book of guidance for Muslims, it does not occupy that central place in their education, whether religious or secular. Shibli expressed shock at the lack of importance given to the Qur'ān in his time and says, "Although the heart and soul of Islam is the Qur'ān, the Muslim attitude towards it is unlike any other thing (1932, p. 25)." He was not happy at all with the way the Qur'ān was taught in the *madāris*. There were only two commentaries taught in the Nizami curriculum, Bayḍāwī (1226-1286) and *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, of which Bayḍāwī only covered two and a half *juz'* (parts) of the Qur'ān, while *Jalālayn* was so short that it was approximately the size of the Qur'ān. Shibli insisted on comprehensive teaching of the Qur'ān, and making a book

compulsory familiarizing different subjects of the Qur'ān, particularly morals, *fiqh*, 'aqā'id and stories of the Prophets and some idea of its *faṣāḥah* (eloquence) and *balāghah* (rhetoric) (1990, p. 23).

It was extremely important, he believed, to include the direct study of the Qur'ān, with some commentaries which would form the basis for thinking of all students. The Qur'ān promoted science and philosophy through contemplation over the verses of the Qur'ān by directing its readers to look for the signs of God. But, ever since Muslims have stopped contemplating in the verses of the Qur'ān and just read commentaries to understand it, they have ceased producing dynamic scholars. The Qur'ān is no longer the book of guidance but it is the book that can support their arguments received from other sources. The students of traditional schools considered it wrong to think beyond the opinions of the commentator. Though Muslim scholars like Shah Wali Allah and others stressed the direct and intellectual contact with the Qur'ān influencing people like Shibli, yet generally the Qur'ān remains a reference book. Fazlur Rahman (1982) says that it has not been followed by Muslims even in the institutions which claim to be based on Shah Wali Allah's thoughts. Shibli, therefore, insisted on making the Qur'ān a book of guidance and interpreting all issues in the light of its teachings. He tried to demonstrate how it was possible to write in the light of the Qur'ān, be it on religious, philosophical, scientific or historical topics. He was a good teacher of the Qur'ān and his lessons at the Aligarh hostel show how the Qur'ān could be used as an interesting and basic text (Hashim, 1985, p. 98). However, at the organizational level, even at the platform of Dārul 'Ulūm Nadwah, he could not succeed in implementing it due to the opposition of the '*ulamā'*'.

### **Shibli's concept of 'Islamizing' or making the modern sciences 'Muslim'**

Shibli was perhaps the first person in modern times to talk about 'reforming' the modern sciences 'in the light of the Qur'ān,' but did not use the term 'Islamization' which is popular today. Keeping earlier Muslims in mind, Shibli talked about making the sciences 'as your own' or 'making them Muslim' and identifying Islamic and un-Islamic elements in them. The term common in his time to express Islamic feelings and activities was 'nationality' (*qawmiyyah*)

which Shibli himself used many times. Nevertheless, he was aware that it was not the correct term and thus could not bring about any change in the lives of Muslims. He told Muslim scholars that they would not be successful in their appeal to Muslims if they used the term ‘*qawmiyyah*,’ as it was not directly related to their religion and instead used ‘Islam’ “because our religion is our *qawmiyyah*” (1990, p. 94).

Shibli urged Muslims to learn modern sciences with a religious foundation and for this purpose, he used the Nadwah institution to teach the best of both. He urged the ‘*ulamā*’ to study these modern sciences, besides learning *fiqh* and *ḥadīth*:

In the present times the ‘*ulamā*’ must learn Western sciences besides also learning Arabic sciences and try to bring compatibility (*muṭābiqah*) between the religious issues and the modern scientific issues. And it is incumbent upon them that they make these sciences their own (1990, pp. 89-90).

He reminded religious scholars that “it is their responsibility to widen the scope of Islamic sciences” (1990, pp. 98-101). To do so, the ‘*ulamā*’ must develop virtues like aspiration and courage to acquire more learning similar to earlier Muslims who traveled from Spain to India. However, in his time, there were no examples of this aspiration among Muslims.

Shibli’s question to the ‘*ulamā*’ was: why should they believe that modern sciences are against their faith? He knew that when they acquired the modern sciences (like al-Ghazālī) they would identify the issues against religion, which they would then be able to either condemn or accept. Thus, they would be able to protect the modern-educated group from doubt and conjecture while promoting the sciences among Muslims. He was convinced that if the ‘*ulamā*’ did not acquire these sciences, they would not be able to respond to the criticisms of atheists. Seeing the existing condition of Muslims, he wrote, “It is difficult to imagine that Muslims have ever benefited from foreign languages and sciences” (1971, p. 287). Indeed, Muslims had transferred all the educational wealth of other nations into Arabic in the Middle Ages. Moreover, “if Muslims had not come to the world, then the treasures of Greece, Egypt, Hind and Persia would have been lost today” (1971, pp. 147-148).

'Islamization of knowledge' is a popular term among Muslim academia these days. However, though in the past Muslim scholars and philosophers invented and went on explorations while contemplating the universe for the signs of its Creator, they did not necessarily use terms like 'Islamization' and 'Islamic.' It is sometimes felt that by using the term 'Islamization' Muslims are separating themselves from the rest of the world. In contrast, it is called 'Islamization' even though the subject matter may go against Qur'ānic teachings.

### **Building institutions**

Shibli designed a *madrasah* for the Nadwah (it was an association of '*ulamā*' in the beginning) to educate students in both modern and traditional fields. At the founding of the Nadwah in 1909 he said:

Dārul 'Ulūm Nadwah is established so that it will impart education for the religious sciences and worldly sciences together, and will produce broad minded '*ulamā*', bridging the gap between the two groups, and whose Islamic world view would accept both religion and world...which would produce students well-versed in both religious and worldly sciences (1990, p. 91).

The founders stated that the students of *madāris* were not only ignorant of the ways of the world and dependent on others after their completion but were also ignorant of the religious knowledge essential for modern times. This organization, therefore, wanted to form a system whereby students may be educated along proper lines. Further, the organization aimed to bring all '*ulamā*' together, as the differences between them served no useful purpose and humiliated Islam in the eyes of its foes (1993, pp. 307-309).

A detailed outline of the *Msavvada* (constitution) was prepared by Shibli (al-Hasani, 1964, p. 146). It advocates a new '*ilm al-Kalām*' to establish the truth while being perceptive of the modern world (Ansari, 1975, p. 42). Shibli also emphasized the need for physical exercise such as archery, swimming and horse-riding, and the competence in public speaking and the Arabic language, and his efforts in this regard are remarkable. He wanted to build it on the pattern of Dār al-'Ulūm in Cairo, the institution he had liked most

during his travels, which combined the two types of education (1923, p. 160).

In comparison to Dars-i Nizami, the Nadwah curriculum was different in the sense that the former had more emphasis on logic and philosophy but Nadwah gave less emphasis to it, and philosophy was taught with the help of new books. Dars-i Nizami allocated less time to the study of the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, whereas Nadwah gave more emphasis to the study of the text of the Qur'ān, and more *ḥadīth* books were added. Besides, modern Arabic was given more emphasis and subjects like history, geography, general science, general knowledge, mathematics, and later Hindi and English, were added. Also, Nadwah tried to avoid controversial topics and the course was designed to create an understanding of the Islamic teachings with the changing times through the production of its own books.

In fact, Shibli had the dream of creating an institution like Gurukul, which was established to train and prepare a group of Hindu devotees dedicated to the propagation of Hinduism (1990, pp. 108-111). He actually expected educational reform to come from religious scholars because he knew they were sincere in their pursuit of knowledge. He was not optimistic at all for change to originate from among the promoters of modern education since he believed their knowledge was very superficial (nd, p. 51). However, he did not receive full co-operation from the religious group in this mission.

The Nadwah was the first seat of modern Islamic theology and modern Arabic to be established in India. Scholars like Douglas acknowledge Shibli's contribution to the Nadwah movement, and it has produced great scholars:

Under Shibli's direction, the school (Nadwah) earned a reputation for sound scholarship, published a journal, *al-Nadwah* (with which Azad was associated briefly), and collected an impressive library (1988, pp. 19-20).

### **Modern science and philosophy**

Shibli believed that modern sciences were not a threat to religion and urged Muslims to make them an essential part of the educational curriculum. Referring to the claim in his *'ilm al-kalām*, he wrote



that ancient philosophy was founded on conjectures and presumptions. Thus, it could not eradicate religion. But modern sciences and philosophy are based on observations and experiments and therefore religion cannot confront them (nd, pp. 311-363). Shibli attempted to establish how much ambiguity had entered here as the issues which are certain and conclusive are only the problems of science and there is no disagreement among the scholars about it (Attas, 1989; Naqvi, 1973; Qadir, 1988; Saud, 1986). The problem starts when people make irrational assertions:

The short-sighted understand from non-existent knowledge ('*adam* 'ilm), knowledge non-existent ('ilm '*adam*). Scientists say 'we have no knowledge of these things' but the short-sighted say 'we have the knowledge of their non-existence.' (nd, p. 184)

Elaborating his point that things which are refuted or verified by science have nothing to do with religion, Shibli asserts:

The reality is, the limits (*hudūd*) of religion and science are separate, religion has nothing to do with the subject of science and things which are debated in religion are not the concern of science. However, philosophy does come into confrontation with religion at times, but it is not considered as certain and final (like science), and it has various schools with sharp differences, some of whom deny God while others affirm God (nd, p. 186).

The problem actually starts when either one of them crosses its limits and interferes in the domain of the other. It was due to this misunderstanding that atheists developed anti-religious feelings. It is significant to note that so many sects were formed in Islam denouncing (*takfīr*) for little things, yet no one ever was denounced for scientific discoveries and investigations. In fact, ancient *mufasssirūn* used to see such investigations in the light of Qur'ānic verses and never considered science against religion.

Philosophy was more problematic than science in Islamic history but Shibli argues it "came into Islam through government rule" (1938, p. 2). The religious group and the common people had nothing to do with it in the beginning but it was only after al-Ghazālī that it was widely accepted and considered a religious obligation

(1990, p. 89). And this is practiced until now so faithfully that there is no *‘ālim* who has not studied Greek logic and philosophy in the *madrāsah* along with *tafsīr* and *ḥadīth*.

Shibli’s interest in philosophy was both as a science and as an instrument to protect Muslims from committing error. The problem was mainly because the religious people were not aware of the modern studies on the subject and the curriculum they were following did not allow them to use reason and rationality. Second, because of the denigration of philosophy by religious groups, modern Muslims were moving away from religion; therefore, Shibli tried to make religious scholars rational in their thinking and practice. He assured that it was ‘reason’ which strengthens faith and gives reason to the commandments of *Sharī‘ah*. Referring to Ibn Rushd (1126-1198) who said both philosophy and *Sharī‘ah* were like the two pillars of a building, Shibli could not undermine either. Ibn Rushd (1976) demonstrated through the Qur’ān that philosophy is not only allowed in Islam, but it is desirable (*mustahabb*) (1976). Shibli, therefore, urged scholars to include books on modern philosophy in education and apply philosophy in their life.

### **Traditional sciences: *Kalām* and history as models**

*Ilm al-Kalām* was the science invented by Muslims in response to the attacks on Islamic *‘aqā‘id* in the Abbāsīd period after the Greek and Persian sources were translated into Arabic. Shibli stressed on new *kalām* to discuss the issues which had not been discussed earlier and said that a new *‘ilm al-kalām* should be based on new principles, as the nature of criticism on Islam had changed (n.d., p. 17). He wrote:

In the traditional *‘ilm al-kalām* only the *‘aqā‘id* have been debated because the opponents’ criticisms were on *‘aqā‘id* at that time. But today, religion is judged from every angle, historical, moral and civilizational. To Europe the *‘aqā‘id* of a religion are not so objectionable as are its legal and moral issues (Ibid. pp. 181-182).

One problem with the earlier writings was that, “they were full of complex premises, logical terms and subtle concepts which would intimidate the opponent but would not convince his heart” (n.d., p. 95). He believed that “the proof and arguments should be presented

in a simple and concise manner so that they are understood easily” (n.d., p. 182). Shibli's objective in *kalām* was to show the use of intellect and its importance in the Qur'ān and Islamic history. He said (n.d., p. 199) that:

...most religions begin with the assertion that rational thinking cannot be applied to religion and those religions keep away any discoveries in science and philosophy. This was the reason that such a great philosopher like Socrates requested at the time of his death to fulfill his vow at a certain idol. It is due to this reason that a religion may create great philosophers and wise people but they will not be thinking about any absurd belief of their religion and as a result the disparity between reason and religion keeps expanding and at times covers the rational beliefs of the religion.

This was to teach '*ulamā'* to follow the Qur'ān faithfully and come out of the chains of *taqlīd* following the path of rationality.

History is a science that is meant “to find out the past events (*wāqi'ah*) and organize them in such a manner that would explain the outcome of a present event from the previous event,” writes Shibli in *Al-Fārūq* (n.d., p. 34). It appealed to him as a subject which teaches human beings lessons to work out the strategies for the future. His description of every single event of history was meant to teach his contemporaries about the activities of earlier Muslims and their outcome. For example, he shows in his writings the amount spent by rulers on education and teachers; flexibility in the curriculum and an unprejudiced love for learning by both the ruling class and the masses. This resulted in the expansion of Islam, and he demonstrated that every past event (even if it was considered miraculous) was meant to show that if the same principles are applied they will produce similar results. It is for this reason that the Qur'ān narrates earlier histories to get lessons from them (Qur'ān, 3:137; 6:11; 16:36; 27:69; 29:20; 30:42) in contrast to the Hebrew narratives of historical development (Siddiqi, 1993, p. 52).

Shibli believed that history is neither (natural) science nor literature, but a narrative science with rational principles (Siddiqi, 1957, p. 71). He turned to history giving it a philosophical approach

of cause and effect (*'illat wa-ma'lūl*) in order to get lessons from it. He wanted to instill a new spirit in Muslims by reminding them how illiterate desert Arabs developed a glorious civilization. The job of a historian was to find out the factors which brought particular results by establishing a continuity between *'illat wa-ma'lūl*; so that whenever similar incidents take place, it could be forecasted that such would be the outcome (1934, pp. 23-25). He writes in *Al-Ma'mūn*:

Every event of universal history is bound by a chain of different events. To investigate these fibres and study them philosophically to extract their historical results is the soul and spirit of history (nd, pp. 15-16).

To Shibli all those events were part of continuous causes (*silsila-i asbāb*) even if they were provided with Divine help in certain battles like 'Uhud, Hunain or Yarmūk. He argued that whenever the same sincerity and courage are applied, it would bring the same results as part of the natural cause and effect, thus urging his contemporaries to follow in the footsteps of earlier Muslims.

### Conclusion

The 19<sup>th</sup> century India produced many intellectuals, such as Sayyid Ahmad, Ameer Ali, 'Ubaidullah Sindhi, Mohsinul Mulk and many others, but they were known because of their achievements in only one or two fields. Shibli is unique in the sense that his achievements can be traced in various fields, both in theory and practice, in India and abroad. His Arabic and Persian writings were well known to the Muslim world of his time. His *Shi'r al-'Ajam*, a masterpiece on the history of poetry, is still popular among Persian readers and he gave a new approach to history and *sīrah* by writing *Al-Fārūq*, *al-Mā'mūn* and *Sīratun Nabī*.

He is the most comprehensive, most colourful and most dynamic personality of his time who created a depth of knowledge in his writings (Hashim, 1985, p. 93). This is reflected in the diversity of students he groomed, such as the historian and an academician Suleyman Nadvi (1884-1953); champions of Indian nationalism such as Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958); the champion of *khilāfah* or Muslim unity Muhammad Ali (1878-1931) and commentators

of the Qur'ān such as Hamiduddin Farahi (1863-1930). Iqbal (1877-1938) and Mawdūdi (1903-1979), who, though not directly his students were influenced by his teachings and the result is seen in the creation of Pakistan. Without Shibli, Azad's *tafsīr*, the *falsafa-i khudī* of Iqbal would not have existed. Iqbal synthesized religiosity (*madhhabīyyah*) and modernity (*jadīdiyāh*) mainly because he was influenced by Shibli (al-Islam, p. 92; Hashim, p. 101). Shibli and Arnold were good friends and influenced each other. Acknowledging Shibli's impact, Arnold (1986, p. ix) writes:

I desire also to acknowledge my obligations to...my learned friend and colleague, Shamsul 'Ulamā' Mawlavi Muhammad Shibli Nu'mani, who has assisted me most generously out of the abundance of his knowledge of early Muhammedan history.

Nadwah was the main platform through which Shibli tried to achieve the unity of Muslims by bringing together different groups of '*ulamā'*' and the modern educated. Though Shibli was not its main founder, he is generally recognized as its main architect and yet he was not successful in achieving his goal of making it a mother organization producing Muslim scientists. Also, his desire to give the control of both the worldly and religious affairs of Muslims to the '*ulamā'*' under one voice for Muslims of India could not be achieved due to the intolerance of the '*ulamā'*' for each other (n.d., pp. 120-122). But, Dār al-Musannifīn, a library founded by Shibli to facilitate the research on Islam became the leading literary centre of Muslim India, and *Ma'ārif*, its mouth-piece, became the most influential scholarly journal of the community.

There has been much criticism over his life and ideas which made it difficult for him to achieve his goals in his life (Ikram, 1992). However, it has not affected thoughtful and balanced minds and he is becoming more and more of an influence as new research and studies expose this dynamic personality. Shibli succeeded to a great extent in enlightening the religious group of his time and his influence is seen equally on the modern-educated group. A big problem was that because his books were in Urdu, those who were modern-educated could not benefit much from his writings, though they were more receptive than the religious group which was generally less accommodative of new ideas.

Shibli did not succeed with the Nadwah but he has been successful in producing several judicious students whose efforts are seen now through the founding of Islamic universities and the process of Islamization throughout the world. But, there is a need for both religious and modern scholars to move forward under the guidance of his teachings, particularly for the graduates of the Nadwah, to accomplish his mission and reform the curriculum according to modern needs. It is also the responsibility of Dār al-Muṣannifin which, though it has achieved a lot on the national and international plane, has to convey Shibli's message by translating his writings into English, and also provide books of modern learning for researchers at the centre.

These ideas are still relevant after almost 100 years after Shibli's death as the situation has not changed much from the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this age of science and technology, Muslims are far behind their contemporaries in education as the Qur'ān has still not occupied that central position in their lives and curriculum. Although in the modern Islamic universities there is an attempt to take the guidance from the Qur'ān, instead of deriving the ideas from the Qur'ān, these students look for the verses of the Qur'ān which are suitable for their argument and support their hypothesis.

Instead of becoming a book of guidance, the Qur'ān remains a book of reference in Islamic universities, while in the *madāris*, the same Nizami curriculum is followed without much change. It is very strange that even in the *madāris* emerging in Western countries like U.S. and Canada, this curriculum is followed strictly and a new generation of '*ulamā*' is emerging who are just like their earlier counterparts. Integration of traditional and modern knowledge has hardly taken shape in contemporary Muslim society.

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## Notes

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