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REINTERPRETING THEOLOGY: ‘ABD AL-JABBAR AL-RIFĀ’Ī AND NEO-KALAM DISCOURSE

Mujaddid* and Syed Mohammad Hilmi bin Syed Abdul Rahman**

Abstract: In recent decades, the renewal of Islamic thought has attracted the attention of many Muslim intellectuals. This discourse emerged primarily in the 19th century and has continued to expand. The decline of the Muslim community has fostered awareness of the importance of theological renewal, neo-*kalam* has finally become one of the prevailing debates in modern Islamic discourse. ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā’ī is a prominent figure and deeply involved in neo-*kalam*, as seen by his numerous works and academic endeavours. However, efforts to reform the science of *kalam* have not yet reached clear formulations and concepts as a collective consensus. In this regard, this article examines the impact of neo-*kalam* al-Rifā’ī’s ideas on issues of contemporary Islamic thought. This study employs a qualitative approach. Data was collected through library research, which was analysed using historical, inductive, deductive and comparative methods. This study finds that the idea of neo-*kalam* introduced by al-Rifā’ī emerged as part of a paradigm shift. Al-Rifā’ī’s neo-*kalam* project seeks to deconstruct Islamic thought through the lens of a modern social science approach. This effort began by going through the framework of the formation of classical *kalam* in the aspects of its ontology, epistemology and axiology. However, his endeavours have generated critique and appreciation in the realm of current Islamic intellectual discourse.

Keywords: *tajdid*, *neo-kalam*, *paradigm shift*

INTRODUCTION

The term “neo-*kalam*” refers to a new discipline in matters of Islamic theology. The term originates from Arabic, which is known as *ilm al-kalām al-jadīd*. In the discourse of contemporary Islamic thought, neo-*kalam* or *ilm al-kalām al-jadīd* represents the essence of contemporary phenomena, which is inherently dynamic. According to several intellectuals, the term *ilm al-kalām al-jadīd* was coined by Shiblī al-Nu‘mānī (1857–1914). This Indian thinker

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used the term as the title of his book, which encompassed modern concepts that later became increasingly popular among contemporary intellectuals.

The need for novel concepts for comprehending Islamic theology, as acknowledged by most contemporary intellectuals, is undeniable, particularly when considering the science of *kalam* as a product of history. Based on the historical approach, discussion of *kalam* evolved following the issue of the Imamate (*al-imāmah*)¹ as the primary focus of study.² Various aspects of geo-politics, society and culture are considered to have had a major role in producing the knowledge of *kalam*. For example, the question of perpetrators of major sins appeared later as a reflection on the phenomenon of internal war in the Muslim community. Moreover, the expansion of Islamic territory and integration of many nations, including Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt and North Africa, influenced a new way of thinking in Islamic civilisation.³

Regarding the issue of neo-*kalam*, one of the contemporary intellectual figures who has given great attention to the renewal of Islamic theological understanding is ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā’ī. This is shown through various efforts presented by him in the magazine *Qadāyā Islāmiyya Mu’āsira* and the institute he founded – *Markaz Dirāsāt al-Falsafah al-Dīn* – with the focus of both on the neo-*kalam* project. This thinker of Iraqi origin considers that *kalam*, in terms of thought, themes, methodology and the object of debate, is in a stagnant situation. The historical entity of Islamic thought continues to develop until the modern era. However, the discourse of *kalam* always focuses on problems that have been studied by previous Islamic scholars. Most existing works are merely a form of lectures and commentary on classical subjects.⁴

This research employs a critical-descriptive and analytical-comparative methodology. The critic initially articulates and reevaluates the diverse concepts developed by al-Rifā’ī in his neo-*kalam* discourse. This is accomplished by examining the correlation between al-Rifā’ī’s perspectives and those of several other Liberal-Rationalist thinkers. Furthermore, it aggregates antitheses formed from the ideas of other philosophers. Subsequently, the critic contextualises al-Rifā’ī’s neo-*kalam* within the framework of Islam. It is an endeavour to quantify his impact on Islamic thought.

HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF *KALAM* DISCOURSE

The discipline referred to as the science of *kalam*, which addresses the discourse on Islamic theology, is also known by several other designations, including *uṣūl al-dīn*, *‘ilm al-’aqāid*,

¹ The topic of *al-imāmah* pertains to leadership following the passing of Prophet Muhammad. This topic is significant, particularly among the Shia sect, which asserts that the successor to the Prophet’s leadership on his death must originate from his family.

² ‘Abd al-Mu’thī al-Bayyūmī, “‘Nash’ah ‘Ilm al-Kalām wa Taṭawwuratuhu al-Raḥinah’, *Journal Qadāyā Islamiyya Muasira* 18 (2002), 62.

³ ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā’ī, *‘Ilm al-Kalām al-Jadīd: Madkhal li Dirāsah Lahūt Jadīd wa Jadāl al-’Ilm wa al-Dīn* [Neo-*kalam*: An Introduction to New Theology Studies and the Debate between Science and Religion] (Markaz Dirāsah Falsafah al-Dīn, 2016), 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 34.

‘ilm al-asmā’ wa al-ṣifāt and *al-fiqh al-akbar*.⁵ Although *uṣūl al-dīn* and the science of *kalam* are explicitly seen as the same discipline,⁶ in more detail, they have slightly different characteristics and roles, be it in historical aspects or general-specific relations. The term science of *kalam* became popular in the discourse of Islamic studies after the emergence of several diverse theological sects within the internal body of Muslims. Abū Hanīfah, a pioneer of the Ḥanafī school of law, even defined the science that addresses theology or belief as *fiqh al-akbar*,⁷ to distinguish it from another category of *fiqh* called “*fiqh al-aṣghar*,” referring to Islamic jurisprudence.

Furthermore, the science of *kalam* is more general than the science of theology. While the latter focuses more on the aspect of affirming religious beliefs that are *qath’i* and *tsawabit* (unchanging), the former more broadly encompasses the debate on how religious beliefs are defended, theological arguments are confirmed, and various doubts can be rejected and refuted.⁸ This is why the renowned Islamic philosopher al-Farābī provided a broader description during the fourth period of *hijrah* of what *uṣūl al-dīn* is from the sense of the term *kalam*. For him, the science of *kalam* is a rhetorical instrument enabling individuals to defend their perspectives and the constrained acts delineated by the deity of their faith, so allowing them to refute opposing viewpoints.⁹ Al-Farābī’s description of the science of *kalam* may be categorised into two dimensions: the first is positive and seeks to correlate the ideas and rules inherent in religion with various rational reasons. The second negative dimension seeks to dismantle the proof that opposes it. The diverse terminologies of the science of *kalam* that developed subsequently are inextricably linked to the influence of al-Farābī’s theory, particularly the focus on the apologetic dimension.

Regardless of when the term “*kalam*” was first coined, whether it was introduced by al-Mutakallimūn or the group that opposed it,¹⁰ the embryo of the science of *kalam* as a discourse was essentially born long before the two figures mentioned above appeared. It was the Jabariyyah, Qadariyyah and then Mu’tazilah who may be called the most influential pioneer sects in the early history of the development of the science of *kalam*. ‘Alī Sāmī al-Nashār considered that the existence of the Mu’tazilah sect, with Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā’ as its pioneer, was an extension of two previous sects that contradicted each other: the Jabariyyah (Determinism) spearheaded by Jahm b. Safwan and the Qadariyyah (Free Will) with Ma’bad al-Juhanī as its

⁵ Faysal Badīr ‘Awn, *‘Ilm al-Kalām wa Madārisuhū* [The Science of Kalām and Its Schools] (Dār al-Thaqāfah, n.d.), 53.

⁶ Muhammad Husain al-Dhawahiri, *Al-Tahqiq al-Tam fī ‘Ilm al-Kalām* [The Comprehensive Study of Science of Kalām] (Maktabah al-Nahdhah al-Misriyah, 1939), 2.

⁷ Ahmad al-Bayādī al-Hanafī, *Isyarat al-Marām min ‘Ibarāt al-Imām* [Signs of the Objective from the Imam’s Expressions] (Zamzam Publishers, 2004), 30.

⁸ Sa’īd ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Fūdah, *Buhūts fī ‘Ilm al-Kalam* [Studies in the Science of Kalām] (Dar al Razi, 2004), 17.

⁹ Abu Nasr al Farābī, *Ihsa’ al Ulūm* [Enumeration of the Sciences] (Maktabah al-Hilal, 1996), 86.

¹⁰ Aḥmad Maḥmūd Ṣubḥī, *fī ‘Ilm al-Kalām: Dirāsah Falsafīyah li-ārā’ al-Firaq al-Islāmiyyah fī Uṣūl al-Dīn* [In the Science of Kalam: A Philosophical Study of the Views of Islamic Sects on the Principles of Religion] (Dar al-Nahdah al-Arabiyyah, 2021), 12.

founder.¹¹ The existence of theological sects reflects the dynamics of an ongoing intellectual process. In other words, intellectual thought, as Husain Marwah stated, is not produced in a vacuum.¹² By referring to the Hegelian paradigm, Marwah tries to map the historical development of Islamic thought, including the science of *kalam* dialectically, thesis, antithesis and synthesis. According to him, the issue of *qadar* – “predestination” – is the starting point of the emergence of *kalam* discourse.¹³

Interestingly, some of the pioneers of one school of thought were disciples of another. This is shown, for instance, by the historical documentation of the relationship of Wāṣil ibn ‘Aṭā’, the pioneer of Mu’tazilah, with his teacher Hasan al-Basri and Abu Hasan al-Ash’ari, the founder of Sunni school of theology, with his teacher al-Jubbā’ī, the great Mu’tazilah figure. In addition, some of the main figures in a school of thought have diverse views, even contradicting each other. The two founders of the Ahl Sunnah wa al Jama’ah school of thought, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash‘arī and Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī, sometimes differed over a certain *kalam* issues. Their disagreement originated from different epistemological foundations, with the latter being more inclined towards a rational approach. In this context, the construction of Māturīdī’s *kalam* epistemology seems at first glance closer to the Mu’tazilah than to the Ash’ari.¹⁴

Ḥasan Maḥmūd al-Shāfi’ī elucidated there is a minimum of five stages in the genealogical history of *kalam* scientific development. The initial growth phase (1-2 H) is characterised by a predominance of practical application over theoretical concepts. Certain academics have also designated it as the period of political *kalam*, referred to as *kalam politic* or “*kalam al-siyāsī*.”¹⁵ The second phase is the codification and emergence of schools of thought marked by the development of specialised discourse regarding the science of *kalam* (*kalam al-’ilmy*). Third is the developmental phase and integration with philosophy. The impact was methodologically derived from the predominant *mutakallimūn* (theologians), who adhered to classical Greek reasoning. The fourth phase is apathy and stagnation. Between the ninth and twelfth centuries of the hijrah, the evolution of the science of *kalam* did not progress as in earlier eras. This phase was characterised by *hawāshī*’s¹⁶ writing style and comments on classical texts. This phase, as articulated by Muhammad Abduh in his work *Risālah al-Tawḥīd*, states, “There is nothing more for the observers in the preceding texts than mere engagement with words and symmetry

¹¹ ‘Alī Sāmī al-Nashār, *Nash’ah al-Fikr al-Falsafī fī al-Islām 1* [The Rise of Philosophical Thought in Islam 1] (Dār al-Ma’ārif, 1966), 313.

¹² Husain Marwah, *Al Naz’at al Maddiyah fī al Falsafah al ‘Arabiyah-al Islamiyah 1* [Materialist Trends in Arab-Islamic Philosophy 1] (Dar al Farabi, 2002), 9.

¹³ Husain Marwah, *Al Naz’at al Maddiyah fī al Falsafah al ‘Arabiyah-al Islamiyah 2* [Materialist Trends in Arab-Islamic Philosophy 2] (Dar al Farabi, 2002), 391.

¹⁴ Ulrich Rudolph, *Al-Māturīdī and the Development of Sunnī Theology in Samarqand*, trans. Rodrigo Adem, *Islamic History and Civilization* vol. 100 (Brill, 2015), 232, 265, 298.

¹⁵ Muḥammad Buhlāl, *Islām Al-Mutakallimīn* [The Islam of the Theologians] (Dār al-Tāli’ah, 2006), 29.

¹⁶ The *hawāshī* writing style in Islamic *turāth* (classical tradition) denotes margin annotations or supplementary remarks typically located in the page margins or as ancillary text accompanying the primary text (*matn*).

in methodologies.”¹⁷ Fifth is the late phase or neo-*kalam*. Modern thought, according to many intellectuals, began in the early 16th or 17th century CE.¹⁸

The existence of neo-*kalam* is a critique of the classical science of *kalam* theory. The discourse of neo-*kalam* has generated a novel theory that diverges from the established concept of the science of *kalam*. The advancement of the science of *kalam* in the contemporary day encompasses not only theological aspects but also issues pertaining to the nature, humanity, anthropology and the cosmos.¹⁹ Despite the varying definitions of the science of *kalam*, its shape and function as a service to religion is a consensus established by *mutakallimūn*. Sa’id Fūdāh asserts that fundamental certainties (*al-usul al-qat’iy*), including divinity, prophethood and the Day of Judgment, are universally acknowledged by scholars. Consequently, diversity of opinion on individual issues is acceptable, provided there is consensus on the fundamental principles.²⁰

The focus of the science of *kalam* on the apologetic dimension (*al-difā’iyyah*) is distinctly evident in the diverse definitions articulated by several experts in the field (*mutakallimūn*), including Sa’d al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī, ‘Id al-Dīn al-Ījī, Ibn Khaldūn, al-Bayḍāwī and al-Ghazālī, among others. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī, in his work *al-Munqiz* for instance, asserts that the purpose of the science of *kalam* is to safeguard the beliefs of *Ahl al-Sunnah* (Sunni Islam) against the challenges posed by *Ahl al-Bid’ah* (people of deviants).²¹ However, al-Ghazālī’s definition, following Ḥasan al-Shāfi’ī, has minimised the scope of the science of *kalam*, which is only limited to the *Ahl al-Sunnah* group, while in reality the discussion of the science of *kalam* includes various theological groups in Islam.²² Throughout the seventh to ninth periods of hijrah, some definitions emerged to highlight positive and negative facets. The first seeks to establish religious principles, while the second focuses on eliminating uncertainty on the matter. Furthermore, these definitions underscore that, in actuality, it encompasses all factions that identify with Islam or those that base their interpretations on personal perspectives of Islam, regardless of their authenticity. Numerous definitions of the science of *kalam* are available in the works of *mutakallimūn* figures, such as al-Bayḍāwī,²³ Ibn Khaldūn, ‘Id al-Dīn al-Ījī²⁴ and many others.

In contrast to modern perspectives, theories related to the study of theology or science of *kalam* are considered to require more comprehensive understanding. Neo-*kalam* should not

¹⁷ Muḥammad ‘Abduh, *Risālah Al-Tawḥid* (Dār Iḥyā’ al-’Ulūm, 1985), 52.

¹⁸ Ḥasan Maḥmūd al-Shāfi’ī, *Al-Madkhal Ila Dirāsah ‘Ilm al-Kalām* [Introduction to the Study of Islamic Theology], 2nd ed. (Idārah al-Qur’ān wa al-’Ulūm al-Islāmiyah, 2001), 116.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁰ Sa’id ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Fūdāh, “‘Bayna al-Fikr al-Falsafī wa al-Fikr al-Kalāmī; al-Imām Abū Ḥasan al-Ash’arī’” [Between Philosophy and Kalam: The Thought of Imām Abū Ḥasan al-Ash’arī’], in *Al-Imām Abu al-Ḥasan al-Ash’arī: Imām Ahl al-Sunnah Wa al-Jamā’ah* (Dār al-Quds al-’Arabī, 2014), 23.

²¹ Abū Hamid al-Ghazālī, *Al Mustasfā min Ilm Ushul Fiqh* [The Essentials of the Science of Islamic Legal Theory] (Syarikah al Madinah al Munawwarah, 2008).

²² Al-Shāfi’ī, *Al-Madkhal Ila Dirāsah ‘Ilm al-Kalām*, 14.

²³ Al-Bayḍāwī, *Al-Tawali’ bi Sharḥ al-Mir’ashī* [he Preludes to the Commentary of al-Mir’ashī] (Qāhirah, n.d.), 4.

²⁴ ‘Id al-Dīn al-Ījī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif al-Jurjānī* [Commentary on al-Jurjānī’s al-Mawāqif] (Dār al-Kutub al-’Ilmiyah, 1998), 40.

only focus on aspects that emphasise the Divine dimension (apologetic theocentric) but also discusses various social problems (apologetic anthropocentric). The shift in understanding of the role of the apologist (*al-difā'iyyah*) in the science of *kalam*, for instance in the formation of Ḥasan Ḥanafī's thought, is known as liberation theology. Ḥasan Ḥanafī wants to deconstruct the paradigm of science of *kalam* from the theocentric apologist to the anthropocentric apologist.²⁵

THE ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF NEO-KALAM

The genesis of neo-*kalam* in Islamic discourse can be traced to the 18th century. This phase commenced with intellectual critiques of Western culture alongside the spread of Western colonial powers, notably the French and British, into Islamic nations. Furthermore, Orientalists, through their negative allegations, actively contributed to cultivating this atmosphere. Neo-*kalam* is partly a response to the incisive critiques that Orientalists have directed on various aspects of Islamic theology, particularly the Prophetic Hadith. The cohort of Islamic intellectuals of that period emerged to confront the challenges posed by the realities of religious thought.²⁶

Records indicate that Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905) was one of the initial proponents of the movement to rejuvenate religion (*uṣūl al-dīn*) within the contemporary Islamic context. He is regarded as a symbol of the revitalisation of Islamic jurisprudence and the advocacy for a revival project (*al-nahḍah*) in the Islamic world through his work, *Risālah al-Tawḥīd*.²⁷ He sought to initiate the Islamic intellectual renewal movement after a meeting with his instructor, Jamaluddin al-Afghani, in 1897, during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Muhammad Abduh and Jamaluddin al-Afghani had a common goal of dismantling antiquated ideologies and civilisations by rejuvenating Muslim civilisation in accordance with contemporary exigencies.²⁸ Accordingly, some contemporary Muslim intellectuals such as Muhammad Mujtahid Shibstarī (1936–) asserts that neo-*kalam* will acquire significance when Muslims acknowledge the developments in Western philosophies and ideologies from the third or fourth quarter of the previous century. The discourse on neo-*kalam* will have concrete results when modern concepts are accepted and acknowledged as a comprehensive reality, maintaining the significance of the dialogue.²⁹

The designation neo-*kalam*, as noted by certain scholars, was initially employed as the title of a work by Shiblī al-Nu'mānī (1857–1914). The book addresses several contemporary

²⁵ Ḥasan Ḥanafī, *Min al-'Aqīdah Ila al-Thawrah* [From Creed to Revolution], vol. 3 (Dār al-Tanwīr, 1988).

²⁶ Haydar Ḥubb Allah, *‘Ilm al-Kalām al-Mu’āsir* [Contemporary Islamic Theology] (al Markaz al ‘Alami li al-Dirasat al Islamiyah, n.d.), 217.

²⁷ ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā’ī, *Muqaddimah Fi Al-Su’al al-Lahuti al-Jadid* [Introduction to the New Theological Question] (Markaz Dirasat Falsafah al-Dīn, 2005), 12-13

²⁸ ‘Imād al-Hilālī, *Muḥāwalah Al-Rifā’ī fī ‘Iḥyā’ ‘Ilm al-Kalām Wa Lahūfī Jadidaynī’* [Al-Rifā’ī’s Attempt in Reviving the New Science of Kalam and Theology], in *Mawsū’ah al-Mawṣem* (Kufa Academy, 2014), 529-547.

²⁹ Muhammad Mujtahid Shibstari, *Hermeneutik Kitab wa Sunnah* [Hermeneutics of the Qur’an and Sunnah] (Tarh Nu, 2010), 227-228.

themes, including religion and modern science, human rights, suicide, women's rights, inheritance and the rights of ordinary individuals. Subsequently, in Iran, Murtadha Muthahharī (1919–1979) advocated that the paramount duty of contemporary Muslims is to establish neo-*kalam* as a framework for addressing new issues, alongside a call to reassess the challenges of classical *kalam*, including revelation, inspiration, the proof of God's existence, the Imamate and others.³⁰

However, according to 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī, the intellectual foundation of neo-*kalam* was originally proposed by Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) in modern India during the late 19th century. Ahmad Khan has written multiple volumes; however, during the discourse, he did not restate the prevailing view of mainstream religious thought, but highlighted unique initiatives in interpretation of the Qur'ān.³¹ Furthermore, Khasrubanah (1926–) even observes that the term was pioneered by Syed Ahmad Khan in a scientific seminar in 1286 AH.³²

'ABD AL-JABBAR AL-RIFA'I: A MODERN ADVOCATE FOR NEO-KALAM

'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī was born in Ali Haus, a village in the Dhi Qar region of Iraq, on 1 July 1954.³³ The year of his birth, according to information from his parents, is known as *Mauhan Thani* (the second *mauhan*); which is a popular term used to indicate the situation when the Dajlah river overflows. Agriculture and animal husbandry are common professions and daily activities of the community in Ali Haus. Likewise, with al-Rifā'ī's family, he has lived since childhood in difficult conditions, despite the bitterness of the struggle faced by his father. It is still firmly in his memory how his father was willing to get up in the middle of the cold winter night to irrigate the paddy field for almost two or three hours, plus travel about three kilometres on foot.³⁴

Al-Rifā'ī grew up in an environment thick with religious values. He received his initial education at al-Mutanabbī school in 1959, which is not far from his village. On finishing his studies at an early age in his birthplace, al-Rifā'ī embarked on journeys to acquire knowledge across many towns and nations. In 1978, al-Rifā'ī moved to Najaf to pursue his Islamic studies at the Hawzah 'Ilmiyyah.

Al-Rifā'ī was a prolific thinker and writer. His various writings, magazines and efforts were oriented towards reforming the *ijtihād* method for various disciplines of Islamic studies, such as *kalam*, *usul fiqh*, *fiqh*, *fiqh al-ta'ayush* (living side by side) and emphasising the description of the principles of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*. He authored several works addressing the

³⁰ Ḥasan Yūsufyan, *Dirāsāt fī 'Ilm al-Kalām al-Jadīd* [Studies in the New Science of Kalam] (Markaz al-Ḥaḍarah li Tanmiyah al-Fikr al-Islāmī, 2016), 35.

³¹ Al-Rifā'ī, *'Ilm al-Kalām al-Jadīd*, 48.

³² 'Abd Husain Khasrubanah, *Al-Kalam al-Islāmī al-Mu'ashir* [Contemporary Islamic Theology] (Dar al-Kafil, 2016), 26.

³³ Mawlā Aḥmad Ṣābir, "'*Hiwār Ma'a Mufakkir al-'Iraqi 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī; al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Mu'asir Su'al al-Naz'ah al-Insaniyah*" [Dialogue with the Iraqi Thinker 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī: Contemporary Islamic Thought and the Question of Humanism], *Journal Yatafakkaroun 2* (2013), 98-107.

³⁴ 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Zama' al-Untulujiya* [Religion and the Ontological Thirst] (Markaz Dirasāt Falsafah al-Dīn, 2017), 40.

transformation and modernisation of religious thought. His works include *Ijtihad al-Kalāmī*, *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah wa Falsafah al-Hukm*, *Falsafah al-Dīn wa al-Kalām al-Jadīd*, *Manāhij al-Tajdid* (Principles of Islamic Philosophy, in two volumes), *Muhadharāt fī Usul al-Fiqh*, *al-Tasāmuh laisa Minnah au Hibah*, *Tahdīth al-Dars al-Kalāmī wa al-Falsafī fī al-Hauzah al-'Ilmiyah*, *Inqaz al-Naz'ah al-Insāniyah fī al-Dīn* and *al-Dīn wa al-Ightirāb al-Mitafiziqī*.³⁵

NEO-KALAM: FROM LIBERATION THEOLOGY TO THEOLOGY OF FREEDOM

In his neo-*kalam* discourse, al-Rifā'ī gave criticisms against the construction of classical *kalam*, which according to him has weaknesses especially in the aspects of ontology, epistemology and axiology. Classical *kalam* in al-Rifā'ī's view is still tied to the patterns of classical knowledge, making it rigid and undeveloped. In addition, classical *kalam* is considered incapable of contributing new values, especially in the context of social life. Therefore, neo-*kalam*, as envisioned by al-Rifā'ī, aims to transcend the limitations of classical *kalam*, which is often characterised by stagnation. Al-Rifā'ī aims to demonstrate that neo-*kalam* exemplifies the theology of freedom.

However, the development of al-Rifā'ī's intellectual philosophy possesses a notably intricate genealogy. Majīd Muradī asserts that the theology of freedom is the final step of the four stages developed by al-Rifā'ī in formulating his religious ideas. The identification of the four stages is predicated on Muradī's proximity and familiarity with al-Rifā'ī, enabling him to delineate the dynamics of the evolution of his ideas. Al-Rifā'ī's initial involvement was in the political movement, aligning himself with the *Da'wah al-Islamiyyah* party. Subsequently, he distanced himself from political activities by immersing himself in education at the *Hawzah* (Islamic Seminary).³⁶ Before moving to the final phase, as Muradī calls the theology of freedom, al-Rifā'ī was initially influenced by leftist Islamic thought put forward by Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Ali Shari'atī. Both these figures influenced al-Rifā'ī's paradigm of thought, especially with regard to the concept of liberation theology, although it was eventually criticised by al-Rifā'ī.³⁷

Liberation theology or in Arabic "*lahut al-tahrir*" is terminology that developed among researchers in the 1960s. The meaning is to coincide with various religions in different periods of time. Various religions tried to oppose the injustice, despotism, oppression and tyrannical power that occurred in the government system at that time. A group of religious and church leaders in Latin America expressed liberation theology in the 20th century after efforts to reveal

³⁵ Šābir, "Hīwār Ma'a Mufakkir al-'Iraqi 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī," 98.

³⁶ Marwah Aḥmad Ḥasan al-A'rajī, "al-Tajdid fī al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-Mu'āṣir Duktūr 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī (Anmuzajan)" [The Renewal of Contemporary Islamic Thought by 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī], *Journal Adab Al-Kufah* 2 (2017), 80.

³⁷ Majīd Muradī, *'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī; Min Lahut al Tahrir Ila Lahut al-Hurriyah* ['Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī; From Liberation Theology to Freedom Theology], vol. 105 (Mausū'ah al-Mawsem, 2014) 289-295.

the content of social revolution in religion. The position and role of theology was to oppose colonialism as a symbol of struggle and liberation.³⁸

During the 1970s, a cohort of intellectuals focused on developing profound understanding of the concept of resistance, beyond the tenets of jurisprudence. Prominent people from that group include Ḥasan Ḥanafī of Egypt, known for his project “*Min al-’Aqidah Ila al-Thawrah*,” and Ali Shari’atī of Iran, recognised for his work “*Binā’ al-Dhāt al-Thawriyyah*” (1977), which positions religion as the ideological foundation of the revolution. Al-Rifā’ī assessed that the liberation theology of Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Ali Shari’atī had narrowed the content of religion only in the form of ideology of struggle and revolution. Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Ali Shari’atī, regarding redefining religion as an ideology of resistance, draw on various sources, occasionally using contemporary social science or eclectic interpretations of *turāth* according on their preferences. In addition, it is supported by folklore or folk stories and various mythologies in the folds of history. Ideologicalising religion as done by Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Ali Shari’atī is considered to end in the secularisation of religion; meaning, by leaving the symbolic aspect in religious rituals and practices, religion will be empty of meaningful content.³⁹

According to him, the existence of theology (religion) serves to develop the dimensions of spiritual, moral and intellectual life. Realisation of this requires a “paradigm shift” from religion as ideology to ontology, from a theology of hatred to one of love, from a theology of war to peace, from a theology of liberation to one of freedom, from a theology of revolution to a theology of a morally enriched spiritual life, and from the saved sect “*al-Firqah al-Najiyah*” to a theology of pluralism “*Lāhūt al-Ta’addudiyah*.”

Open to Contemporary Social Science

Al-Rifā’ī asserts that a significant challenge in the development of Muslim thought, especially religious thought, is the sceptical stance towards contemporary knowledge and social sciences. This phenomenon is evidenced by the numerous narratives extensively developed to refute Western sciences. The dominant discourse among Islamic intellectuals extends to matters unrelated to science and knowledge. The call is intrinsically linked to the identification or classification of knowledge, religiously and geographically, shown by concepts such as *Islāmiyah al-ma’rifah*, *al-ta’šīl al-Islāmī li al-’ulūm*, *al-’ulūm al-insāniyah al-’Arabīyah* and others. For al-Rifā’ī, this circumstance arises from the inclination towards sectarianism in knowledge that emerged in the early 20th century.⁴⁰

In the realm of classical *kalam*, the main polemic is caused by its reliance on classical knowledge, which is regarded as ultimate truth. It diverges from contemporary science, as its purpose is to eliminate the predominant perspectives and hypotheses established by prior

³⁸ Al-Rifā’ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Zama’ al-Untulujiya*, 79.

³⁹ ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā’ī, *Inqāz al-Naz’ah al-Insāniyah fī al-Dīn* [The Salvation of Humanism in Religion] (Markaz Dirāsāt al-Falsafah al-Dīn, 2013), 90.

⁴⁰ Al-Rifā’ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Zama’ al-Untulujiya*, 204.

knowledge. Modern discoveries demonstrate that most of the previous hypotheses of knowledge and thought are mere assumptions.

In line with the statement, al-Rifā'ī views that the classical *mutakallimūn* has placed a special character in its epistemology. Aristotle's logic, or part of the legacy of Greek philosophy, is essential principles in *kalam* discourse. However, according to al-Rifā'ī, the formation began to collapse in parallel with the large-scale spread of modern Western philosophy that tore down the walls of Aristotle's logic. The classical understanding of reason is criticised starting from Francis Bacon and Descartes until reaching its peak to the Renaissance philosopher Immanuel Kant by creating diverse patterns after it through the philosophy of science and development of modern social sciences. The diversity of contemporary knowledge compels us to reassess the development and basis of classical *kalam*.⁴¹

The discipline of the science of *kalam* for Al-Rifā'ī does not have any significant development even with the current phenomenon of broad human scientific invention. The discourse of classical science of *kalam* is confined to specific themes that are consistently reiterated in identical contexts. The mode of thinking is thereby confined to its parameters, establishing a formidable barrier that is challenging to penetrate. *Mutakallimūn* have adopted a structure in its organisation, ensuring the pattern endures in the texts of *kalam*.⁴² He asserts that religious knowledge is one of the manifestations of human knowledge. There is no way to reform religious thought except by engaging in the struggle of human knowledge and knowing its source, aware of the existence of a dynamic and advanced philosophy. Whereas the effort cannot be achieved except by accepting criticism of *turāth*, using modern tools from human knowledge to analyse, and the reshaping of Islamic religious thought in accordance with the context of methodology, perspective, modern paradigms for the content of knowledge or epistemology.⁴³

Revive the Role of Reason

Al-Rifā'ī asserts that deficiency of reason in classical *kalam* is rooted in its methodological foundation. Although it operates similarly to philosophy in relation to intellectual function, classical *kalam* is methodologically deemed incompatible with the foundational phase of philosophical epistemology that follows the demonstrative approach (*burhāni*). This understanding of *kalam* relies on the dialectical approach, which begins with faith as a foundational premise and thereafter constructs arguments supported by reason. Conversely, philosophy, by adhering to its demonstrative methodology, is considered a foundation for accurately ascertaining truth.⁴⁴

The *kalam* discourse supported by the dialectical methodology is considered to have gradual implications for the decline of the role of reason and the spread of the tendency of Islamic

⁴¹ Al-Rifā'ī, *ʿIlm al-Kalām al-Jadīd*, 44.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 41.

⁴³ Al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Zama' al-Untulujiya*, 205.

⁴⁴ Al-Rifā'ī, *ʿIlm al-Kalām al-Jadīd*, 27.

theologians (*mutakallimūn*) to imitate a particular sect. The situation according to al-Rifā'ī is paradoxical with the concept that there is no imitation (*taqlīd*) in theology. He asserts that adherence to the views of al-Ash'āri in matters of theology, for example, has become a dominating phenomenon. The defences against a certain sect has been used as a symbol of the defence of religion; thinking outside the framework is considered thinking outside religion.⁴⁵

In fact, al-Rifā'ī's criticism of the inferiority of the existence of reason is no longer in the context of classical discourse around the relationship between reason and revelation as the basis of epistemology in Islam. Al-Rifā'ī profoundly repudiates the idolatry associated with specific typologies of reason. According to al-Rifā'ī, reason is not ahistorical; each period possesses distinct knowledge and scientific discipline.⁴⁶ The decline of the role of reason in the construction of the epistemology of Islamic thought, such as the science of *kalam*, as it has been trapped in the framework of classical Greek logic. The formation of the science of *kalam* based on Aristotle's concept of logic is considered to have caused *kalam* to lose its path because it is trapped and dissolved in its methodology. The science of *kalam* is finally in the space of theoretical abstraction, separated far from the realm of reality, its effects and problems.⁴⁷

Therefore, the attitude that hinders intellectual creativity and deprives Islamic thought of the various mechanisms of reasoning (*ijtihād*) as a factor that drives the wheels of history and civilisation, ultimately results in the decline of Muslims. The lower movement of knowledge will be followed by bitter setbacks in various sectors. Anyone who does not know the origins and sources of the contemporary problems in which they live is as if they did not witness the conditions of their time.

For al-Rifā'ī, the burial of rational activity within Islamic thought occurred gradually, influenced by multiple stresses and distinct influences. At times, it manifested as the influence exerted by jurists concerned with the action of independent perspectives. At other times, it manifests as meddling by governmental officials aiming to promote a vision to preserve societal and state peace, or out of fear of being undermined by the authority of Islamic jurists (*fuqahā'*). The climate of freedom that ensured rights and embraced intellectual pluralism, which facilitated the establishment of several *kalam* schools, began to diminish with the proliferation of excommunicationist ideology among the Islamic law scholars of the royal court. Mutawakkil al-Abbasi (d. 247 AH/861 CE) aided jurists in enforcing a form of *kalam* that was Sharia compliant, thereby jeopardising dissenting perspectives.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī, *Muqaddimah fī 'Ilm al-Kalām al-Jadīd* [Introduction to the New Science of Kalam] (Markaz Dirāsah Falsafah al-Dīn, 2023), 54.

⁴⁶ 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Karāmah al-Insānīyah* [Religion and Human Dignity] (Markaz Dirasat Falsafah al-Dīn, 2022), 194.

⁴⁷ 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī, *Tahdīth al-Dars al-Kalāmī wa al-Falsafī fī al-Hawzah al-'Ilmiyyah* [Renewing the Teaching of Kalam and Philosophy in the Seminary] (Dar al-Mada, 2010), 50.

⁴⁸ 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Ijtihād al-Kalāmī, Manāḥij wa Ru'yah fī al-Kalām al-Jadīd* [Theological Ijtihad: Methodologies and Perspectives in the New Kalam] (Dār al-Hādī, 2002), 7.

Neo-Kalam as Inclusive Theology

In al-Rifā'ī's perspective, the classical *kalam* feature embodies a distinctly exclusive disposition. It has established a distinctive perspective on nature, a conception of the Divine and a normative human relationship with God. Furthermore, the idea of worship is cultivated through the framework of Islamic jurisprudence and *fatwa*. Simultaneously, the method of worship and promulgation of laws in the formulation of Islamic jurisprudence aligns with the theological perspective. Ultimately, several streams, particularly Salafists, see *fatwas* related to worship as an issue of religious innovation (*bid'ah*).

In fact, in all religions, an exclusive theology instils in a person the feeling that God's mercy lies with them and their followers. This attitude, according to al-Rifā'ī, often generates the belief that one can monopolise God's mercy as one's personal property. One immediately believes that they can confine Divine mercy to the followers of their religion, to the extent that they can exclude all those who fall outside this belief thanks to God's mercy.⁴⁹ Within the framework of exclusive theology, there exists a vertical stratification of society, akin to the hierarchical perspective in theology. Proponents of official doctrines are elevated to a superior status, whereas other ideologies are relegated to an inferior classification, failing to attain a comparable level of recognition. Consequently, the discussion of freedoms, rights and obligations for each individual within society has been established not according to citizenship or state affiliation, but based on their commitment to faith.⁵⁰

According to al-Rifā'ī, this phenomenon was reflected in the Umayyad dynasty's system of government, when the spread of legislation relating to non-Muslims (*ahl zimmah*) in the power of the caliphate state. The application is as illustrated in the historical experience of Islamic society throughout the ages, with its discriminatory attitude towards belief, society and politics. Al-Rifā'ī criticises the attitude of Islamists who talk about democracy, freedom and human rights overlappingly. On the one hand, he calls for a modern civil state; sometimes he calls for an institution for the state, which can assume general equality and equality for citizenship, so freedom of religion and belief can be accommodated. On the other hand, this group builds narratives that are characterised by theology-cum-Islamic law (*kalāmī-fiqhī*) by centring on a single orthodoxy, without paying attention to the clear juxtaposition between the institutional principles of the modern state and what is contained in exclusive theological narratives.⁵¹

Consequently, in his neo-*kalam* discourse, al-Rifā'ī critiques dogmatic reasoning and exclusive orthodoxy. He endeavoured to emphasise the significance of variation and plurality in interpretation. His focuses on the philosophy of interpretation (*falsafah al-ta'wīl*)⁵² as an endeavour to establish the foundation of pluralist thought. The existence of *falsafah al-ta'wīl*, according to him, undermines the understanding of a singular meaning to affect the truth. The

⁴⁹ 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Iḡhtirāb al-Mitafiziqī* [Religion and Metaphysical Alienation] (Markaz Dirasāt Falsafah al-Dīn, 2018), 67.

⁵⁰ Al-Rifā'ī, *ʿIlm al-Kalām al-Jadīd*, 34.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁵² *Falsafah al-ta'wīl* in the various narratives used by 'Abd al-Jabbār al-Rifā'ī refers to the science of hermeneutics that has emerged in recent periods introduced by modern Western philosophy scholars.

connotation of *ijtihād*, according to al-Rifā'ī, is as Muhammad Iqbal said: it is a symbol of the principle of movement in Islam. When *ijtihād* is applied in *fiqh*, the schools of *fiqh* will become diverse and numerous. Similarly, in the scope of theology or science of *kalam*, the role of *ijtihād* gave rise to schools such as the Mu'tazilah, Shi'ah, Ash'ariyah and Māturidiyah, all of which have vast treasures of intellectual traditions.

CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF AL-RIFĀ'Ī'S NEO-KALAM DISCOURSE

Al-Rifā'ī has established several essential components for the formulation of neo-*kalam*. This involves reinterpreting the role of reason and employing several contemporary Western philosophical and social scientific approaches. The theories proposed by al-Rifā'ī exhibit parallels with theories advanced by contemporary Islamic intellectuals who adopt a Liberal-Rationalist approach in their endeavours to rejuvenate Islamic thought.

Epistemological Polemic

Epistemology is simply translated as the theory of knowledge. As for the Arabic language, it is often used with terms such as “*nazariyyah al-‘ilm*” or “*nazariyyah al-ma‘rifah*.”⁵³ Epistemology is a branch of philosophy that examines the sources of knowledge and how humans obtain them. In the world of science, the position of epistemology plays an important role because the theories of knowledge are grounded in epistemology. Thus, the scientific problems can be traced from certain epistemological foundations.

Every civilisation has its own understanding of science. For Muslims, epistemology is not just a theory. Islamic epistemology also contains a theological dimension that has been discussed at length by previous scholars. In Islam, epistemology is based on the Islamic worldview. This is by placing the concept of God and revelation as the highest epistemological channel that is absolute. In his work *Konsep Ilmu dalam Islam*, Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud elucidates that the primary sources of the Islamic worldview and Islamic science are the Qur'ān and the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad.⁵⁴

Al-Rifā'ī's neo-*kalam* discourse is epistemologically polemical and problematic. First, al-Rifā'ī is excessive in positioning reason as the starting point for the renewal of the science of *kalam*. He asserts that the patterns of classical *kalam* restrict intellectual freedom, ignore the epistemology of demonstrative philosophy, and become trapped in dialectical disputes, resulting in a deficiency of reason and an excess of uncritical imitation (*taqlīd*).⁵⁵ In other words, al-Rifā'ī aims to establish reason as the foremost level within the epistemological hierarchy of *kalam*.

The interplay between reason and revelation in classical *kalam*, particularly examined by the Ash'arites school, renders al-Rifā'ī's perspective irrelevant. In this idea, reason is

⁵³ Munīr Ba'albakī, *Al-Mawrīd: A Modern English-Arabic Dictionary* (Dār al-'Ilm li al-Malayin, 2000), 317.

⁵⁴ Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *Konsep Ilmu Dalam Islam* [The Concept of Knowledge in Islam] (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1994), 6.

⁵⁵ Al-Rifā'ī, *‘Ilm al-Kalām al-Jadīd*, 27.

imprisoned because it is limited by revelation, making its function subjective and requiring proof for the truth of revelation. Consequently, al-Rifāʿī's later narratives primarily direct his criticism at the evolution of the Ashʿarites *kalam*, in addition to a more extensive critique of classical *kalam*. Al-Rifāʿī challenges the Ashʿarites methodology in formulating a formidable conception of God.⁵⁶

Al-Rifāʿī's endeavours to reform *kalam* by prioritising reason are undoubtedly inappropriate when examined from historical and ontological perspectives. Historically speaking, most Islamic thinkers, particularly theologians, concur that the relationship between reason and revelation in the science of *kalam* requires epistemological harmonisation. Reason is not functionalised radically in dissecting the “organs of revelation.” Rawaʾ Mahmud, for instance, in her book *Mushkilah al-Naṣ wa al-ʿAql fī al-Falsafah al-Islāmiyah*, asserts that the general tendency of *mutakallimūn* is to posit reason and revelation as necessarily inseparable. Even the school of *kalam* is not the same in determining the size of the relationship according to the flow pattern of the respective *kalam*.⁵⁷

As for ontology, *kalam* is a discipline where most of its studies are related to aspects of theology and metaphysics, about divinity, prophethood and the unseen (*al-ghaybiyyāt*). This indicates that the science of *kalam* cannot be solely analysed using reason in a radical manner. The scope of the science of *kalam* in principle cannot be equated with philosophy or philosophising it. Hasan al-Shāfiʿī, as stated in the previous debate, asserts that *kalam* is different from pure philosophy. Although *kalam* is driven by arguments of reason, the results of those arguments must be supported by religious arguments that support its truth. As articulated by *mutakallimūn*, “it depends on common sense as a support (*iʿtimādān*) and on religion (*sharaʿ*) as count taker (*iʿtidādān*).”⁵⁸

According to al-Rifāʿī, the reconfiguration of epistemology within the discipline of *kalam* is an essential prerequisite for change on other fronts. He asserts that knowledge and contemporary Western social sciences represent the most precise and primary alternative in the development of his new science of *kalam*. Diverse disciplines include anthropology, semiotics, psychology, hermeneutics, sociology and mythology, among others. One of the epistemological concepts employed by al-Rifāʿī in the study of Islam is hermeneutics. The hermeneutic function, as elucidated by al-Rifāʿī, elucidates the formation of a word within its genealogical context. As time progresses, each word acquires an additional meaning (*dilālah*) that stems from its original definition. Hermeneutics, like genealogists, reveal layers of contradictory interpretations that obstruct our comprehension of the genuine meaning.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Ibid., 29-32.

⁵⁷ Rawāʾ Mahmūd, *Mushkilah al-Naṣ wa al-ʿAql fī al-Falsafah al-Islāmiyah* [The Problem of Text and the Reason in Islamic Philosophy] (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyah, n.d.), 19-23.

⁵⁸ Al-Shāfiʿī, *Al-Madkhal Ila Dirāsah ʿIlm al-Kalām*, 18.

⁵⁹ Al-Rifāʿī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Ightirāb al-Mitafiziqī*, 114.

Humanizing the Science of Kalam

The classical *mutakallimūn* have classified the field of *kalam* into three main sections: *al-ilāhiyāt* (theology), *al-nubuwwāt* (prophethood) and *al-sam'iyāt* (revealed matters). However, modern discourse calls for a fourth division by adding a new section: *al-insaniyāt* (humanity). This latest classification in an Arabic intellectual's term known as "*ansanah 'ilm al-kalām*," i.e. a modern form of humanising the science of *kalam*. This is essentially inseparable from the influence of Western cognitive systems, when theology became a science studied under the social sciences.

Al-Rifā'ī aims to establish a novel discourse on the science of *kalam*, emphasising the human dimension or humanism. The reshaping of the science of *kalam* paradigm from a theocentric apologetic to an anthropocentric apologetic is seen to be deeply rooted in his various narratives, even the main entity of his thought project. For instance, his remarkable trilogy of books (*al-Dīn wa al-Naz'ah al-Insāniyah*, *al-Dīn wa al-Dama' al-Untulujiyā* and *al-Dīn wa al-Ightirāb al-Mitafiziqī*) is a manifestation of his humanist ideas in reconstructing the science of *kalam*.⁶⁰

In this context, al-Rifā'ī deconstructs the discipline of the science of *kalam* as formulated by earlier Islamic scholars. The theocentric apologetic aspect is the primary objective of the science of *kalam*, as indicated by the definitions proposed by its pioneers. This is included in the definitions provided by Abū Ḥanīfah, al-Farābī, al-Ghazālī, al-Baydāwī, Ibn Khaldūn, 'Id al-Dīn al-Ijī and others. Al-Ghazālī elucidates that the science of *kalam* serves to protect the doctrine of Ahl al-Sunnah (Sunni sect) from the dubious assaults of *Ahlu Bid'ah* (people of deviant).⁶¹ Id al-Dīn al-Ijī provides a broader definition in his work *al-Mawāqif*. He asserts that the science of *kalam* is a discipline capable of substantiating views by evidence and dispelling doubts.⁶²

Sa'īd Fūdah states the main things that are certain (*al-usul al-qat'ī*), such as divinity, prophethood and the last day, are without dispute among scholars. That is why it is not problematic if there is diversity of opinion in matters as long as there is always agreement in matters of principle. Although the definitions that the science of *kalam* put forward are relatively different, its form and role as a form of service to religion is a consensus that has been built by *mutakallimūn*.⁶³

The *kalam* humanism inherent in al-Rifā'ī's vision closely aligns with the discourse articulated by other liberal-rationalist intellectuals, such as Ḥasan Ḥanafī, Ali Shari'atī, Muhammad Arkoun and 'Abd al-Karīm Soroush. The perspectives of these liberal-rationalist

⁶⁰ See Al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Ightirāb al-Mitafiziqī*; Al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Zama' al-Untulujiyā*; Al-Rifā'ī, *Inqāz Al-Naz'ah al-Insāniyah fī al-Dīn*.

⁶¹ Abū Ḥamid al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-Ḍalāl* [Deliverance from Error] (Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1988), 132-137

⁶² Al-Ijī, *Sharḥ al-Mawāqif al-Jurjānī*, 14-15.

⁶³ Sa'īd 'Abd al-Laṭīf Fūdah, "Ta'ammulāt al-Fikr al-Falsafī 'inda al-Imām al-Ash'arī" [Reflection on Philosophical Thought in al-Imām al-Ash'arī], in *Al Imam Abu Hasan al Asy'ari: Imam Ahl Sunnah wa al Jama'ah*, vol. 2 (Al Azhar Center for Authoring, Translation and Publishing, 2014), 12.

intellectuals exhibit notable variations in the development of their *kalam* humanism initiatives. Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Ali Shari'atī were criticised by al-Rifā'ī over the notion of theological revolution (*lahūt al-tahrīr*). He regarded both personalities as confining religion to its ideological dimension.⁶⁴ In their renewal initiative, Ḥasan Ḥanafī and Ali Shari'atī aimed to transition from theocentric theology to anthropocentric theology.⁶⁵

Al-Rifā'ī's neo-*kalam* initiative seeks to restore religion to its humanist theological core as a means of countering efforts to ideologise religion (*adlijah al-dīn*). It also aims to depart from what he refers to as the oblivion of the human being (*nisyān al-insān*).⁶⁶ Al-Rifā'ī states that forgetting human existence is a phenomenon that not only disappears in the discussion of *kalam*, but also occurs in the majority of Islamic intellectual heritage (*turāth*) from what is produced by scholars of hadith, *tafsir*, *kalam*, *fiqh* and others.⁶⁷

Metaphysical alienation (*al-ightirāb al-mitaḥẓiqī*) is a concept introduced by al-Rifā'ī to describe how the theology of classical *kalam* has deprived human existence. The theological paradigm of classical *kalam* is apologetic theocentric. Numerous discussions in the metaphysical realm do not touch human aspects. This becomes a barrier between humans and their god, which is too abstract. This view seems to emphasise that human interests in the world are only limited in ensuring themselves to be devoted to religion as a whole.⁶⁸

Al-Rifā'ī's perspective on the classical *kalam* worldview is notably critical and incisive. His perspectives engendered profound animosity and scepticism towards the ideas of earlier thinkers. Some of al-Rifā'ī's attacks, accusations and criticisms of the worldview of the *tawhid-kalam* are essentially inaccurate and misleading.

The assertion that excessive abstraction fails to engage with the tangible realities, as criticised by al-Rifā'ī about classical *kalam*, is not totally accurate. Classical *kalam* has addressed several themes, including human acts "*af'āl al-'ibād*," the predestination "*qada' and qadar*," and the concepts of good and evil, which have significant consequences for society's daily social life. The matter of *qada' and qadar* and the *kasb* theory,⁶⁹ as articulated by Muṣṭafā Sabrī (1869–1954), represents the most compelling and suitable concept proposed by Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'arī. The Ash'arites school has effectively established distinction between the schools that advocate determinism and those that support free will.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Zama' al-Untulujiya*, 103; Al-Rifā'ī, *Inqāz al-Naz'ah al-Insāniyah fī al-Dīn*, 70.

⁶⁵ Hamid Fahmy Zarkashi, *Kritik Terhadap Model Pembacaan Kontemporer* [Critique of Contemporary Reading Approach] (Center for Islamic and Occidental Studies, 2015), 178.

⁶⁶ Al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Zama' al-Untulujiya*, 29.

⁶⁷ Al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Ightirāb al-Mitaḥẓiqī*, 95.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁶⁹ *Kasb* theory was popularised by the Ash'arite school as a theological paradigm to reconcile Divine omnipotence with human moral responsibility.

⁷⁰ Muṣṭafā Sabrī, *Mawqīf al-Bashar Taḥta Ṣulṭān al-Qadar* [Human Positions under the Authority of Destiny] (al-Maṭba'ah al-Salāfiyah, 1352), 6.

Deconstructing Islamic Thought

In the context of Islamic thought, it is not denied that change and development are phenomena that occur in its history from the time of the emergence of Islam. Even so, the historical aspect of Islamic thought in the Islamic worldview always adheres to the classification of constant (*thawābit*) with variables (*mutaghayyarāt*). Unlike Western historicism, developments in Islamic thought are not holistic, but only within a scope that is known as *mutaghayyarāt* (changeable) or *furu'iyah* (non-fundamental matters).

Aḥmad Idrīs al-Ṭa'ān, in his book *al-'Almaniyyūn wa al-Qur'an al-Karīm*, distinguishes between holistic historicism and that which is partial (*juz'iy*). The concept is derived from what 'Abd al-Wahhāb al-Masīrī (1938–2008) proposed regarding the classification of liberalism. Holistic historicism, according to al-Ṭa'ān, means that religion in general, revelation in its various forms and holy books including the Qur'an are manifestations of the development of human reason, or the phenomenon of the development of reason throughout history, experience and life. In this case, the view of Islamic or Qur'ānic historicism according to him falls into this category. While partial historicism (*juz'iy*) explains the nature of some Sharia laws that are no longer relevant to the current context, this is no longer in accordance with the developments witnessed by the human intellect.⁷¹

In contemporary discourse, the historicisation of Islamic thought has become a dominant debate, especially among liberal rationalist intellectuals. The concept of historicity proposed by several Islamic scholars, including al-Rifā'ī, actually aims to open space for the realisation of the relativity of truth. Al-Rifā'ī, in his book *al-Dīn wa al-Ightirāb al-Mitafiziqī*, states there is no such thing as a final understanding of a text. Every historical reading is born from the time of the reader, including the foundation of their epistemology and worldview.⁷²

The relativity of al-Rifā'ī's interpretation has a significant impact, especially on Muslim thought. If this interpretive relativism is applied to the study of Islam, it will certainly lead to a sceptical attitude towards Islam in general. Because the Qur'an as the main source of its teachings is doubted in its interpretation. All interpretations of the Qur'an are relative, so the interpretation of any one is justified. Relativism as the main value contained in post-modernism is essentially not appropriate to be applied in Islamic studies, let alone in the context of science of *kalam*, which is closely related to matters of principle (*thawābit*).

CONCLUSION

Throughout his discourse of neo-*kalam*, al-Rifā'ī offers a creative effort to reconstruct the concept of Islamic theology by shifting its paradigm from theocentric apologetic to anthropocentric apologetic. The project of "humanising *kalam*" that al-Rifā'ī wants to pursue leads him to attempt to deconstruct the classical epistemological foundation of *kalam* foremost.

⁷¹ Aḥmad Idrīs al-Ṭa'ān, *Al-'Almaniyyūn wa al-Qur'an al-Karīm* [The Secularists and the Holy al-Qur'an] (Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2007), 307.

⁷² Al-Rifā'ī, *Al-Dīn wa al-Ightirāb al-Mitafiziqī*, 121.

This is particularly evidenced by his emphasis on attacking classical “Islamic reason” and embracing a contemporary social science narrative. His critique of classical Islamic epistemology extends beyond traditional discussions of the interplay between reason and revelation; it fundamentally challenges the efficacy of the classical reasoning employed by *kalam* scholars and Islamic philosophers in light of contemporary advancements in social science.

While it is undeniable that reason significantly influences the evolution of Islamic thought, particularly in the science of *kalam*, al-Rifai’s framing of reason’s existence and the “humanisation of *kalam*” as a requisite suggests an “epistemic bifurcation” between “classical *kalam*” and “neo-*kalam*,” which is fundamentally not entirely needed. The project of “humanisation of *kalam*” can still be achieved without opposing classical *kalam* and neo-*kalam* by advocating the notion “broadening paradigm” instead of “shifting paradigm.” If the former suggests a continuity in neo-*kalam* discourse with the discussions of classical *mutakallimūn*, then the latter positions “neo-*kalam*” as the antithesis of classical *kalam*. In the context of the main discussions of classical *kalam*, such as *ilāhiyāt* (theology of God), *nubuwwāt* (doctrine of prophethood) and *sam’iyyāt* (revealed matters), a new discourse of *kalam* like *al-insaniyāt* (humanity) can still be explored and developed again through a number of classical issues such as human acts “*af’āl al-’ibād*,” the predestination “*qada’ and qadar*,” as well as the notions of goodness and badness.

Al-Rifā’ī’s neo-*kalam* incited controversy because of its potential to foster extreme scepticism towards classical *kalam*. In this perspective, neo-*kalam* is a counterpoint to classical *kalam*. Consequently, al-Rifā’ī’s endeavour to revive rationality fostered significant receptiveness to the diverse modern social sciences that developed in the West. Simultaneously, the application of different Western current social sciences is problematic, as they often embody ideas such as “relativism and truth nihilism,” which creates epistemic confusion in the scholarly tradition. This is evident in the formation of postmodern epistemology, which some scholars refer to as “neo-Sophism.” However, Al-Rifā’ī’s neo-*kalam* has broadened and enriched the discourse of Islamic theology in the contemporary world.

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