

**MUSLIM RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP  
EDUCATION IN THE MINORITY CONTEXT:  
THE ROLE OF NALEEMIAH INSTITUTE OF  
ISLAMIC STUDIES**

**THAMEEM USHAMA**

International Islamic University, Malaysia.

Email: [thameem@iium.edu.my](mailto:thameem@iium.edu.my)

**MOHAMED FOUZ MOHAMED ZACKY**

International Islamic University, Malaysia.

Email: [zackyfouz@iium.edu.my](mailto:zackyfouz@iium.edu.my)

**MOHAMED RISHAD NAJMUDEEN**

Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies, Sri Lanka.

Email: [nm.rishad1985@gmail.com](mailto:nm.rishad1985@gmail.com)

**MOHAMED ASHATH**

International Islamic University, Malaysia.

Email: [msmaasath@gmail.com](mailto:msmaasath@gmail.com)

**SULAIMAN LEBBE MOHAMED HASSAN**

Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies, Sri Lanka.

Email: [hassan.jni@gmail.com](mailto:hassan.jni@gmail.com)

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**Abstract**

This paper studies the role of the Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies as a mediator in empowering Muslim religious leaders through proper Islamic education in Sri Lanka. Considerable criticism is directed towards traditional Islamic educational institutions for not exhibiting contemporary and contextually designed features regarding regional aspects such as the local social-cultural context. Thus, the paper attempts to elaborate on the role of NIIS in empowering Sri Lankan Muslim religious leadership by adopting proper educational philosophy and objectives. It explores its emerging context, development of its curriculum-

making process, academic strategy, and recent trajectories and discourses to realise the objectives. The qualitative methodology uses descriptive and analytical types. The paper's finding offers that contrary to the prevailing meta-narrative that Islamic religious institutions often resist changes, reform themselves, and evolve, the Institute's case has proven otherwise. However, it is suggested that the changing contexts and their challenges are an opportunity to broaden the institution's societal role, intellectual commitment, and religious leadership.

**Keywords:** *Leadership, Education, Minority, Islamic Studies, Re-orientation, Sri Lanka*

## 1. Introduction

A minority of Muslims live in Sri Lanka. The vast majority are Buddhists. They used to coexist peacefully without any disputes. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding developed, resulting in a conflict that required resolution. According to Muslims, they require proper education in Muslim religious leadership, including instruction in all disciplines of Islamic fundamentalism and the entirety of the Islamic tradition. They can produce accurate, correct, and uncontroversial interpretations of the holy texts suited for their status as a minority once they have gained a proper and moderate comprehension of Islam's worldview. It is required to provide minorities with the proper education to adhere to their religion and doctrines while prioritizing social harmony, lasting peace, communal cohabitation, tolerance, and cooperation.

In order to prepare Muslims for a proper understanding of religion and to use their knowledge to provide religious leadership that can lead them to promote sustainable, peaceful social and religious coexistence, one of the goals of holistic and comprehensive religious education is to understand contemporary realities. This type of education for Muslim leaders is currently required in Sri Lanka and other nations, where there are unprecedented challenges with radical interpretations of religious scriptures that promote excess, immoderation, and bigotry. The Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies has reassessed its curriculum to address the Muslim religious leadership education gap in contemporary Sri Lanka. The following discourse explains the Institute's methodology and approaches to Muslim religious leadership education, which others may consider.

Islam demands its adherents to learn theoretical and practical knowledge of the religion and disseminate it among their community members.<sup>1</sup> Given this reality, Islamic religious education centers began to facilitate this missionary goal by producing scholars and experts of religion who have the ability and necessary knowledge to perform such a duty. In turn, those scholars would play a vital role in

shaping the individual and social life of the Muslim community. However, some critics have blamed these institutions for different reasons in recent history. Primarily, critiques of Islamic education institutions call it an “illiberal”, “backward”, “burden on Muslim society” and a “stumbling block in the progress of the community” (Steiner, 2011<sup>2</sup>, Geaves, 2012<sup>3</sup>, Sidat, 2018).<sup>4</sup> For them, Islamic colleges essentially provide their students with a type of knowledge that was generated many centuries before. To put it more explicitly, those institutions cannot equip their students with new modern knowledge.<sup>5</sup> That said, the critiques argue that it would not be a misinformed hypothesis if one assigns the lion’s share of responsibility to those colleagues for the underdevelopment of the community. Adding insult to injury is the recent discourse of “*global Islamic terrorism*,”. The Islamic religious colleges were broadly labelled as ideological backers of global crime.<sup>6</sup> Despite this growing negative image of Islamic educational institutions, Reetz observes that Islamic religious institutions have been rapidly undergoing substantial changes and adopting new strategies to cope with changing socio-political realities of the world. Similarly, he observes that their different socio-political environments significantly decide these institutions’ internal culture, discourse, and performance. Reetz further argues:

The diversity within these networks may also be growing. The approach of Deobandi madrasas in various regions shows some differentiation in ideological rigidity and social background. In addition, the approach of Islamic universities is not the same in every country. The nature of the political environment also seems to influence their orientation. In countries where the democratic culture is stronger such as India, Indonesia and South Africa, diversity is more easily upheld, reducing sectarian, dogmatic and militant pressures.<sup>7</sup>

This paper studies the formation, development and current trajectories of the Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies (Henceforth, NIIS), a religious institution in Sri Lanka. The emergence of NIIS is seen as one of the turning points in the history of religious education in the twentieth century. It introduced new discourse of Islamic religious education and a new working model in the Sri Lankan context. Since its inception in 1973, the institution has undergone substantial transformations in presenting its message, articulating its academic strategy, and defining its role in Sri Lankan society. The paper also argues that although NIIS has made substantial changes in its initial outlook in its four decades of the academic journey, it does not see those shifts as a compromise. However, the institution views it as a necessary sophistication process or refinement of its message and societal role.

This paper contributes to existing debates on the nature and development of Islamic religious education in the modern world by analysing the historical evolution of NIIS in Sri Lanka. This attitude of NIIS goes against the existing meta-narrative on Islamic religious colleges, arguing that most institutions see the reform ideas as the source of external pressure to deconstruct its ideological basis.

The paper is divided into five sections. The forthcoming Section two presents a short introductory note on NIIS, while section three briefly surveys contemporary debates around Islamic religious education. Section four discusses the institution's education philosophy by tracing its curriculum's historical developments. The paper ends with an analytical conclusion.

## **2. Jamiah Naleemiah: A Brief Introduction**

The Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies was established in 1973 by Al-Haj Naleem, a well-known Gem merchant in Beruwala, Sri Lanka. The institution's mission states that it aims *"to produce intellectually sound, professionally competent, morally enriched, balanced and integrated personalities committed to generating and disseminating knowledge through innovative teaching, training, learning and research while contributing to society, nation and humanity as a whole."*<sup>8</sup> Al-Haj Naleem initiated this brand-new project with other businessmen, academics and close friends from his hometown, China Fort, Beruwala. It aimed to produce a new generation of scholars and thinkers who would be multi-skilled, economically independent and knowledgeable enough to respond to myriad challenges of the rapidly changing world. Its prominent scholar cum director was M.A.M. Shukri, who passed away recently.

The NIIS is divided into two central departments, the Center for Foundation Studies (CFS), where students gain preliminary knowledge in Arabic and Islamic studies while preparing for the governmental Advanced Level examination. Additionally, they are taught languages and moral subjects at this stage. Besides, the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FIS) offers advanced courses in Islamic studies and select secular subjects. Meanwhile, FIS students can enroll with any state university to gain a recognised degree as external candidates. The NIIS operates an independent unit called "Unit for Extra-Curricular Activities" that organises competitions, student forums, and academic programs. Students are trained to develop writing, speaking, and other required skills. Academic conferences create an environment of critical thinking and intellectual culture. The rich library of NIIS includes more than 45,000 books in various languages, mainly English, Arabic, Sinhala, and Tamil.

Furthermore, NIIS engages in expanding its academic activities to a broader audience. Accordingly, it established Academy

for Development, Research and Training (ADRT) in 2006. ADRT continuously holds training programs for different categories like media personnel, lectures of Arabic colleges and community leaders. Naleemiah Virtual Learning Center (NVLC) is another wing of NIIS initiated in 2020, and it offers numerous online courses, such as Qur'anic Interpretation and Translation, to the public. The Research and Publication Unit is pivotal in organising various discourses on Islamic thought through research and publications. The Unit also publishes a quarterly research journal called "*Islamiya Sinthanai*", or Islamic Thought<sup>9</sup> in Tamil. In addition, NIIS administers a separate Arabic language training centre. The centre works to empower the Arabic language skills of students of NIIS.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Islamic Education: A Survey on Contemporary Discourse

Contemporary scholarship provides numerous reasons/factors for the emergence of modern Islamic religious institutions. These can be classified into two broader categories; external and internal. In that sense, western modernity and British colonialism played a pivotal role in reshaping the socio-cultural structure of the Muslim community.

With the increasing domination of colonial powers, the Muslim community had to struggle for survival and identity.<sup>11</sup> The colonial power developed a new education system for colonized countries leading Muslim communities around the globe to believe that Islam had no place in that new system. Promoting secular thinking and abstract rationalism against religious norms created severe resistance within the Muslim community, and they thought of developing an alternative educational system to preserve Islamic identity.<sup>12</sup>

Geaves supports this point, explicitly arguing that the primary purpose of the emergence of the *madrasah* mode of Islamic educational centres was to "*protect Muslim culture*" against "*Westernisation*".<sup>13</sup> In addition, the right-wing political discourses against Muslims and majoritarian ethnic nationalism also created an atmosphere where Muslim religious leaders felt a dire need to initiate religious colleges to defend Islam and Muslims.<sup>14</sup> Regarding internal factors, Neyazi argues that Islamic educational colleges emerged "*to produce prayer leaders, writers, preachers, and teachers who could disseminate the knowledge.*"<sup>15</sup> Third, the interpretative pluralism of religious texts has contributed to forming various Islamic religious colleges. Each school of thought establishes its religious college to promote interpretation methodology.

The current academic works disclose that Islamic religious seminaries face multiple issues and challenges in the contemporary global setting. Welland primarily criticises most religious seminaries'

curricula as “*theoretically heavy and irrelevant*.”<sup>16</sup> This rigidity and lack of adaptability are by-products of the fear of imitating the West regarding its educational philosophy, language, and structure. This attitude has pushed the institutions to a point where they face formidable problems getting their courses recognised within the national higher education system. This is another problem Islamic religious education institutions face today. Interestingly, the same issue is more complex in Muslim minority contexts. Muslim minority communities defend their Islamic religious education centers and consider it a non-negotiable part of their social makeup based on cultural rights narratives.

Nevertheless, the state has its own educational vision formulated to meet the socioeconomic and political needs of the citizens. Often, these two dimensions come into conflict with each other and negotiate how to move forward.<sup>17</sup> The question of state recognition for Islamic religious seminaries has also become an area of discussion on the issue of Islamic religious education. As a natural outcome of these developments, a serious discussion on reforming Islamic religious education centres has emerged among the stakeholders who engage with the topic. Hence, the institutions were advised to incorporate new theories of textual interpretations and secular subjects into their curriculum and provide students with tools to contextualize Islamic teachings.

Besides these debates, the formation of Islamic universities in the South and South-East Asian context in the 1970s and 80s has gotten much attention from contemporary scholarship on Islamic religious education. The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) and the International Islamic University of Islamabad (IIUI) are prominent examples. These institutions discuss advanced epistemological issues of modernity, Islam and contemporary social sciences, religion and the state development concern, culture protectionism, and pluralism. Abaza mentions that the proponents of these projects are searching for a “third” way into modernity or an “Islamic middle path.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, these universities aim to empower students who learn in traditional Islamic religious seminaries by providing them with sophisticated courses and religious and leadership training. Sometimes, they allow the graduates of those seminaries to study in those universities and integrate themselves into the mainstream educational system of their respective countries.<sup>19</sup>

#### **4. Research Design**

This research is qualitative as it involves studying an educational institution's narratives, perspectives, and worldviews. The data were collected from reliable primary and secondary sources. Direct interviews and official documents played a significant part in

primary sources. The authors interviewed six lecturers of NIIS. They were selected based on seniority, knowledge, experience and contributions and involvement in the strategic decision-making process of the institution. The interviews were updated in light of the informal discussions with other lecturers and graduates of NIIS who hold respectable positions in governmental and non-governmental institutions/organisations. Secondly, official documents were used to obtain relevant data to enrich the discourse. The research also benefited from books, journals, and magazine articles on Islamic leadership and religious education.

The study applies the content analysis method in terms of data analysis. It offers a researcher the appropriate analytical space to consider and investigate several angles on the information in interviews and papers. Hence, firstly, the authors read the contents of the data and classified it into three major themes: the emergence of NIIS, curriculum making and academic strategy and recent developments and debates. As this is an exploratory study on NIIS, data were organised to cover a broader terrain of themes. Afterward, the authors critically analysed and interpreted the data sets in light of a central research question of how the education philosophy of NIIS emerged and developed in religious leadership education and what significant milestones shaped its academic outlook in the last four decades.

## **5. NIIS: Emergence and Formative Narratives**

Teaching and learning Islam is a historical phenomenon in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan Muslim society utilised many ways to disseminate Islamic knowledge throughout history. In the modern context, Muslim society saw the formation of Islamic Arabic collages as a newly organised institution from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Numan, 2007, p.168). Those colleges prepare a separate community of religious clergies. From the perspective of gradual transformations and developments, it is apparent that the formation of NIIS was interpreted as a turning point in the history of Sri Lankan Islamic religious education in the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Primarily, one can understand NIIS and its historical significance if one place its formation against the changing socio, political and religious narratives of the Sri Lankan Muslim community and the Muslim leaders since the later 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> The socio-religious leaders stressed that Islamic religious education should be upgraded. Hence, to produce well equipped Muslim community, especially in the 1950s and 60s, civil and political leaders thought that Muslims should excel in education if they wanted to establish themselves as a productive minority community.<sup>22</sup>

One of the proponents of this discourse was AMA Azeez, a leading Muslim thinker in post-colonial Sri Lanka. He was also a

Muslim intellectual who turned out to be one of the founding members of NIIS. Generally, Azeez went beyond just arguing that Sri Lankan Muslims should prioritise education. Instead, he wanted to change the whole fabric of the Muslim community's thinking. Thus, Azeez strongly stressed that Muslims must find a new mode of thinking based on a unified vision of knowledge by merging secular and religious knowledge into a coherent framework. Hence, Azeez suggested in a special note that there is a need to establish an educational institution that can produce scholars and experts who reflect this broader worldview. This strand of reformist thinking within the broader education empowerment movement in the 1960s laid the foundational seeds of the formation of NIIS.<sup>23</sup> According to the existing historical records, Azeez endorsed this idea firmly in the initial discussion session organised to articulate the vision and mission of the NIIS.<sup>24</sup>

The second factor that influenced the emergence of NIIS was so-called global Islamic revivalist thoughts in the latter half of the twentieth century. The Islamic revivalist spirit had influenced some of the founder members of the institution. As such, they thought the current leadership of the Muslim community had failed to understand the contemporary challenges of the Muslim community. Those leaders did not lead the community in the proper direction and solution.<sup>25</sup> Hence, they argued that the Muslim community must produce a new generation of scholar-leaders. Those leaders must be able to articulate their ideas in light of clear Islamic thought and vision. Only then the Muslim community can face the challenge of increasing the infiltration of new Western ideologies and concepts such as secularism. Therefore, some are reminded that the Indian Islamic scholar Abu Hasan Ali Nadwi's *Challenges of Age and Responsibilities of the Muslim Community* indirectly impacted the formation of the NIIS.<sup>26</sup> In that work, Nadwi elaborates that Muslims face an imminent threat of creeping foreign ideologies that could shake the foundation of the Islamic faith in the long run. Shukri aptly mentions that some participants in the first meeting justified the need for such an institution by highlighting Nadwi's work and its main arguments.<sup>27</sup>

Thirdly, there was an increasing understanding among Muslim community activists that the prevailing mode of the Islamic religious education system, the *madrasah*, at the time, did not focus much on the broader challenges of modernity. Thus, the Madrasa institution was not up to meeting the challenges and demands of the community in a new, emerging, complex world.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, they felt that a Muslim religious clergy's responsibility is not confined to their traditional role of teaching the Islamic fundamentals to the community. Instead, they should upgrade themselves into a community of Islamic intellectuals. To realize this objective, it is not



enough for those religious leaders to get the experience of Islamic religious education, they should also be involved in the system of modern education. In short, for those community leaders at the time, the Muslim community needed a religious scholar with a good grounding in modern education. In this context, Al-Haj Naleem, the founding father of the Institute and his spiritual mentor Masood, a founder member of NIIS and a traditional scholar with a reformist spirit, vaguely articulated their expectations about the newly emerging NIIS in the early 70s and 80s, respectively.

In the inaugural speech, Naleem highlighted that worldly knowledge and religious knowledge are like two eyes of a person and that being said, a person with one functioning eye cannot see the world.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, NIIS has been established to produce Islamic religious scholars who can direct society with a clear vision and mission. Likewise, in the early 80s, Masood repeatedly endorsed that NIIS must produce Islamic personalities who are university graduates, yet they will deliver Friday sermons.<sup>30</sup> Masood's vision shows a general reality of that era when the religious platform was reserved only for the religious clergy community with no basic training in modern education.

Masood thinks that reality must change in this context, and NIIS is up to performing such a transformative task. It means that graduates of NIIS would become “*Ulama*”, yet they would simultaneously be well-versed in modern education. Masood firmly believed that NIIS would reshape the country’s traditional perception and role of Islamic religious leaders, which would result in the Muslim community perceiving their religious leaders as potential graduates of modern university education capable of dealing with their issues.

## **6. Early Struggle: Translating Formative Narratives into a Coherent Curriculum**

The founding members of NIIS firmly believed that the new institution should possess a unique curriculum to achieve its suggested formative narratives of merging secular and religious education and producing Islamic scholars who have a good grounding in modern education. However, they could not initially find an appropriate model curriculum.<sup>31</sup> Adding insult to injury, lecturers involved in the institution’s teaching activities did not clearly understand how to actualize such a grand idea. As a result, initially, they thought that the NIIS curriculum should follow the syllabus of the traditional Islamic schools and textbooks for Islamic subjects, and alongside, it should include some courses from the state school curriculum to prepare students for state examinations (Arafath 2019

and Mansoor, 2019).<sup>32</sup> In the early stages, the curriculum makers included Agriculture, thinking it was a productive worldly subject regarding employability. More importantly, historical records show that NIIS lecturers used traditional Madrasa syllabus textbooks to teach foundational courses such as Islamic jurisprudence and Islamic theology. As per Arafath, these textbooks reflect the traditional orientation of NIIS's curriculum in the early 70s.<sup>33</sup>

From 1978 onwards, some religious scholars who had joined NIIS as lecturers introduced texts books considering their changing worldviews.<sup>34</sup> Commenting on these unstable, unclear, and fluctuating developments of early phases, Mansoor and Ayoob Ali argue that the institution's curriculum-making process and other strategic decisions were handled by traditionally trained '*Ulama*' of different theological backgrounds at the time.<sup>35</sup> That was because the educated founder members of the institution, such as Azeez, passed away soon after its formation. Thus, the institution and its curriculum development were left to the remaining '*Ulama*' and some enthusiastic founder members. Those members and lecturers did not have the required potential to navigate the early challenges of a unique project such as NIIS.

This trend changed once the first batch of graduates of NIIS joined as lecturers in 1982. Those new lectures emphasized that the curriculum of NIIS and its textbooks must reflect scholars of Islamic reformism and their contemporary approaches to Islam. For example, they suggested references that promote the idea of comparative Islamic jurisprudence or *Fiqhi Muqaran*, along with textbooks that reflect the ideas of a particular school of Islamic jurisprudence. Gradually, graduates of NIIS came to dominate the academic decision-making, and they reshaped the curriculum content that mostly mirrored the reformist and revivalist spirit of modern Islam. Notwithstanding all these changes, NIIS could not transform its worldview and formative narratives into a full-fledged curriculum of a high education institution until 1995.

## 7. The Standardisation of Formative Narratives

Hussian Hamid al-Hassan, an Egyptian Islamic scholar, famous economist, and chancellor of the International Islamic University of Islamabad (IIUI), visited NIIS in 1996. His visit was a crucial turning point in the history of the academic thinking of NIIS. He offered a chance to get post-graduate opportunities for NIIS graduates under the condition that the institution would change its existing curriculum according to the demands of IIUI. The NIIS revisited its overall curriculum and academic strategy, following that new development, several structural changes were made afterward. This change brought some new elements into the curriculum and the academic planning of NIIS.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to note that since its inception, NIIS has divided its academic strategy into two separate stages the foundation period and the advanced studies period. Firstly, NIIS introduced the Faculty of *Uṣūl al-Dīn*. Nevertheless, new developments upgraded the advanced studies period into a Faculty of *Uṣūl al-Dīn*. Originally, IIUI contained two departments: the Qur'an and Sunnah studies and Islamic scholastic theology under the *Uṣūl al-Dīn* faculty. Interestingly, NIIS altered the established system of IIUI and incorporated selected subjects from both departments into its overarching *Uṣūl al-Dīn* faculty. The second significant change was NIIS adopting a sophisticated university credit hours system. Afterward, the evaluation methods and ranking system of NIIS developed along with new credit hours methods. The third significant development was the introduction of subjects related to social sciences, such as introduction to Sociology, Logic, Sufism, Scholastic Theology, Philosophy and Comparative Religions, into the curriculum of NIIS.<sup>37</sup>

According to the existing data, NIIS's overall outlook, furnished in 1996, remained unchanged until 2010. Equally, the contents and reference textbooks of the foundational subjects of Islamic studies, such as Islamic jurisprudence, Islamic theology, and *Tafsīr* and *Hadīth* studies, were updated, expanded, and systematised. All these changes provide critical insight into how IIUI's overall thinking resonated with the constructive ideas of NIIS, which is that the institution stands for providing Islamically-oriented solutions to the modern challenges of Muslim societies. Hence, the institution might have understood these changes as a much-needed sophistication process instead of being a radical change in the ideological direction of the institution per se.

## 8. NIIS and Post-2010 Context

Arafath, a senior lecturer of NIIS, who has played a vital role in reforming the educational philosophy and curriculum of NIIS for the last ten years, argues that NIIS underwent “*substantial changes*” in the last decade.<sup>38</sup> Analysing his reading on what has been happening for ten years, one can classify the changes into three major categories. First, NIIS's curriculum was upgraded by adding more Islamic studies courses. For example, the new curriculum includes Islamic Jurisprudence of Priorities, Islamic Jurisprudence of Minorities, and Higher Objectives of *Shari'ah*. Secondly, in non-Islamic sciences, the NIIS curriculum incorporated subjects like peace and inter-communal reconciliation studies, interfaith dialogue, peacebuilding, conflict resolution, etc. Thirdly, Arafath mentions that the curriculum review committee has shown a deep interest in reformulating the entire curriculum and academic planning system, considering the Sri Lankan high education standards and policies and

the emerging new socio-political-political-political developments in the country.

Furthermore, he interestingly mentioned that he thinks this is a crucial period in the history of NIIS. It moves clearly, towards its objectives upon which it was established in 1973.<sup>39</sup> Arafat's observations are authenticated in the preface of the course outline book of NIIS.

The Faculty of Islamic Studies curriculum has been reviewed based on the suggestions and the advice of internal auditors in the Faculty Board. The revision process especially contemplated the policies and the criterion of Sri Lankan higher education. The Academic Council of NIIS considered the job market demand during the revision.<sup>40</sup>

An overall reading of the existing curriculum of NIIS, which was finalised in 2020, reveals that it contains an expanded list of courses related to Islamic studies, clearly mentioning evaluation methods, teaching methods, course objectives and learning outcomes. The Islamic studies section offers courses in seven major areas: Qur'ān studies, Prophetic Traditions, Islamic Jurisprudence, Islamic theology, Islamic history, general studies, and languages. Under the title of general studies, NIIS offers courses on Human Rights, Peace Studies, Trends of Contemporary Islamic Thought, Philosophy, Logic, Introduction to Sri Lankan Law, major Religions in Sri Lanka, History of Sri Lanka, Research Methodology, etc. Another important section in the curriculum is allocated to information technology. Subjects like communication and web designing, document preparation system, database application, information communication and technology are offered.<sup>41</sup>

## **9. Faculty of Islamic Studies**

The Faculty of Islamic Studies was established in 1996. It offers two bachelor's degree-granting programmes. They are the Bachelor of Arts (general degree) and the Arabic Language and Islamic Studies specialisations of the Bachelor of Arts. The three-year bachelor of arts degree has been created to meet the needs of students interested in completing their education quickly. To earn this degree, a student needs to finish 94 credits. A student may specialise in the four-year Bachelor of Arts Honours Degree with a solid commitment to a particular discipline, enabling the student to pursue an in-depth study. To earn this degree, a student needs to complete 124 credits. A comprehensive Bachelor of Arts degree syllabus with honours in Arabic and Islamic studies is provided below.

## 10. Syllabus of Bachelor of Arts in Arabic Language and Islamic Studies

This Bachelor's Degree programme has 124 credit hours spreading over four Levels with eight semesters. The syllabus for Level One has 31 credit hours. Level One, Semester One Courses are Advanced Arabic Language, Professional Arabic Language, Foundation of Islamic Culture & Civilization, Analytical Studies of Al-Qur'ān – I or Thematic Studies of Al-Qur'ān, Elementary English, Islamic Sociology or Basic Sinhala. Courses for Level One, Semester Two are Arabic Literature, Rhetoric Science, Quranic Sciences, Analytical Studies of Al-Qur'ān II or Methodology of Quranic Interpreters, Effective Communication – English II, Research Methodology or Effective Communication – Sinhala and Peace and Social Harmony as an Auxiliary course, totalling 31 credits.<sup>42</sup>

Courses for Level 2, Semester One are Introduction to Theoretical and applied linguistics, Prophetic Traditions, Islamic Theology – I, History of Prophet Muhammad (*Ṣal Allāh-u- 'alaihe wa sallam*) or Methodology of D'awa, Effective Communication – English II, Basic Mathematics or Introductory Microeconomics. Courses for Level 2, Semester 2 are Introduction to Translation Studies, Hadith Sciences, Islamic Banking and Finance or Islamic Law of Financial Transactions, Maxims of Islamic Law, History of Islamic Law, Advanced Reading and Writing, Ijtihad in Islamic Law or Contemporary Thoughts as an auxiliary course, totalling 31 credits.<sup>43</sup>

Courses for Level 3, Semester One are General Translation, Islamic Family Law, Law of Inheritance, Islamic Theology – II, Sources of Islamic Jurisprudence, Introduction to Information Technology, Objectives of Islamic Law or Comparative Study of Religions. Courses for Level 3, Semester 2 are Journalistic Translation, Islamic Criminal Law – I, Approaching the Prophetic Traditions – I, *Ilm al-Takhrīj*, Document Preparation System, Spreadsheet & Presentation, Advanced Sinhala or Introduction to Logic and Introduction to Philosophy as an auxiliary course totalling 31 credits.<sup>44</sup>

Courses for Level 4, Semester One are Legal Translation, Approaching the Prophetic Traditions – II, Islamic Beliefs and Conceptions, Islamic Criminal Law – II, Muslim Minorities, Human Resource Management or Communication and Web Development. Level 4, Semester 2 courses are Religious and Translation, Islamic History, Judicial System in Islam, Research Project, Database Applications with MS Access and cloud commuting, or Introduction to Sufism and Methodology of Muhaddisin as an auxiliary course totalling 31 credits.<sup>45</sup>

## **11. Discourse on the Need for Re-orientation**

After more than four decades of the academic journey, NIIS has not fully settled in its position. It still is confronted with questions about reframing its ideological orientation and future directions. One of those haunting issues is the problem of “*re-orientation*”. In that sense, NIIS seeks to redirect, with an extreme focus, its overall academic strategy to the needs and requirements of the Sri Lankan higher education standards and the socio-political developments of the Sri Lankan Muslim community. The institution has long argued that its ideological outlook is to reform the Muslim community and prepare to face the modern world’s secular and Western ideological challenges. As the context changes, NIIS tries to reframe its discourse by addressing the issues of pluralism, communal coexistence, and multi-culturalism, rethinking Islamic social life in a Muslim minority context and reconciling Islam with modern socio-political concepts. Some of its flagship academic events, such as annual academic camps, highlighted these changing narratives. For example, in the last ten years, NIIS’s academic events have tried to socialise intra-community and inter-community unity ideas in a volatile post-war environment.

In addition, the critical argument that NIIS had circulated through these endeavours is that the Muslim studentship and the professionals should join with progressive forces of the country to contribute to the ongoing debate about building an intra-community inter-religious coexistence in the country. Moreover, another critical theme NIIS debated is urging the citizens to be responsible for their civic duties and reclaiming civil society’s role in directing the country. It has been a much-debated topic in the post-war context in Sri Lanka. NIIS arranged a comprehensive forum on September 19-21, 2017, to discuss the meaning, contents, ethics, and objectives of citizenship and how to build a good citizen who contributes positively to nation-building amid various challenges in the country. Interestingly, the creative contribution of the event was an argument that the idea of responsible citizenship is as spiritual as it is political and social in the Islamic worldview. Such themes show that now the institution presents itself as an intellectual hotspot that can cater to and reconcile Islam with the emerging socio-political themes of communal harmony, pluralism, and intercultural coexistence in the post-war context of Sri Lanka.

This case for the institution’s re-orientation might be well-argued considering recent changes in the newly adopted NIIS curriculum. As it carries relatively new courses that correspond to understanding Sri Lankan socio-political milieus, such as understanding Sri Lankan law, major religions in Sri Lanka, history of Sri Lanka, introduction to peace and conflict studies, interfaith dialogue, human rights and equality, it includes courses to reorient

the religious thought addressing new developments such as Islamic jurisprudence of minorities and objectives of Islamic *Sharī'ah*.<sup>46</sup> Mansoor, senior Islamic scholar, graduate, and lecturer of NIIS, argues that the current changes are insufficient. He thinks we live as a minority Muslim community in the country. In that background, we need to insert more subjects regarding presenting Islam and building conversations with Buddhist, Christian, and Tamil people. Even though we have a course focusing on such themes and contents, we need a more vagarious program. Moreover, *"it is paramount to reformulate the contents of Islamic studies subjects such as Tafseer, Hadeeth and Islamic jurisprudence in light of minority context."*<sup>47</sup>

## 12. Conclusion

Finally, some critical points can be made regarding the journey of NIIS as an Islamic religious institution. Firstly, the long history and recent developments highlight that NIIS has never resisted addressing suggested reform proposals in teaching core-Islamic sciences and incorporating new secular subjects. The institution argued that its educational philosophy merges religious education with secular knowledge. Hence, the institution did not consider those reform packages, including new secular subjects, new methodologies, and demands of national education policies, as a challenge to its religious identity or essential mission. Instead, NIIS perceives such opportunities as potential ways to upgrade its academic program. Moreover, NIIS's stakeholders believe that their understanding of Islamic religious education and overall reformist approach to modern educational philosophy would give them enough latitude in reformulating its new role in the changing context. It can be seen that NIIS's struggle for international and national recognition and other challenges did have an impact on its outlook very close to modern educational institutions proper, while it did not alter much of its ideological essence but broadened it.

Secondly, the institution's optimism against the demands of the changing context can be explained by another critical factor apart from the institution's reformist approach to understanding modern education. The institution believes that the moral components of the traditional Islamic learning structure that NIIS still maintains would help them circumvent the challenges posed by the demands of the highest market-oriented modern education system and its culture. For example, even after so many changes in its curriculum, academic strategy, and overall message in the last two decades, NIIS still firmly follows the structure of the residential campus. Furthermore, it thinks that the residential campus format helps keep the students from being exposed to a distractive open culture that prevails outside the campus.

In addition, the institution somewhat strictly monitors the moral side of the students. It motivates them to partake in spiritual training sessions conducted by moral and character-building committees. Like traditional Islamic seminaries, NIIS avoids promoting student union activities and independent mobilisation activities favouring certain ideological schools among students. Instead, it promotes the concept of brotherhood and the importance of collective life. The institution believes that those components could give them an edge to strike a balance between divergent notions, such as market-oriented and economically driven demands of modern education and the moral side of the education philosophy of NIIS. In this background, NIIS provides a third way to face the market demands while preserving the moral grounding of Islamic education.

Thirdly, NIIS's academic journey equally highlights the role of the socio-political context in shaping the perspective of Islamic religious and educational institutions. It further supports the core argument that those religious institutions are not static; instead, they chose different strategies to survive the challenges of different socio-political upheavals. In the case of the NIIS, for example, post-colonial Muslim leaders' concerns for the educational empowerment of the Muslim community somewhat contributed to the formation of the NIIS. The leaders demanded a new model of religious institutions and scholars equally equipped with religious and modern education. They thought this institution would empower the minority community and help achieve their interest against other ethnic communities in the country. After that, in the late 80s and 90s, global Islamic revivalism and reformists' thoughts also contributed to its gradual development. Again, in the post-war context, the growing local Islamophobic context pushed the institution to rethink its role and academic strategy considering the new developments. Consequently, the institution has rearranged its resources to rebrand its outlook as that of a centre that can mediate the inter-community and intra-community relationships and provide a new form of religious thinking in positioning the Muslim minority of Sri Lanka against the demands of social changes in post-war Sri Lanka. Therefore, while Islamic religious education institutions derive the societies in light of their ideological vision, they are also partly products of the socio-political context. This dynamic nature of the Islamic religious institutions is well reflected in the case of NIIS in Sri Lanka.

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