

Integration of Knowledge Discourse in Sri Lanka: Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies and Its Quest for Islamic Religious Education Reform

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Abstract

The establishment of the Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies (1973) is seen as a crucial moment in the history of religious education for Muslims in Sri Lanka. The institution is committed to improving Islamic religious education by graduating students who are knowledgeable in both Islamic sciences and humanities. Given this background, this paper seeks to assess the institution's impact and effectiveness in promoting the integration of knowledge discourse in Sri Lanka. The findings suggest that the institution has succeeded in mainstreaming the basic idea of integration of knowledge and creating awareness about the importance of synthesizing Islamic studies, social sciences, and humanities into a unified framework over the five decades of its academic journey. However, this study finds that the institution has not yet systematized or conceptualized its integration model considering the contemporary debates about Islam and modern knowledge. As a result, this study recommends that NIIS refine its academic outlook and be involved in some intensive intellectual conversations about enhancing its academic commitment to the integration of knowledge framework and finding new modalities. Finally, this is a qualitative study that drew its data from both primary and secondary sources.

Keywords

Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies, Sri Lankan muslims, integration of knowledge

Introduction

During the era of European colonialism, the Sri Lankan Muslim community, like other parts of the world, experienced significant impacts. The colonial period brought about changes in the legal system, education philosophy, economic regulations, and political organization in the country. Towards the later part of this period, the Muslims encountered a conflict between tradition and modernity. This conflict was particularly evident in the field of education and the knowledge system. The emerging developments compelled Muslims to embrace modern secular education, knowledge, sciences, and the English language in order to thrive within the colonial system. The new secular education system aimed to redefine the traditional role of religion, the significance of religious knowledge, and learning in public life in accordance with its educational philosophy (Samaraweera, 1986, p.p- 369-372). Consequently, the issue of secular knowledge and the concept of social progress prompted the Muslim community to reassess their traditional beliefs in preparation for the future.

The prominent Muslim thinker who sought to offer a fresh perspective in response to the intellectual and socio-political challenges in colonial Ceylon was M.C. Siddi Lebbe (1838-1898). He stressed that Sri Lankan Muslims to embrace modern developments and pursue modern education. He suggested that the Muslim community did not need to compromise their religious principles and ethical values while engaging with modern knowledge. Instead, they could embrace modernity while upholding Islamic religious ideals. He criticised the traditional Islamic learning methods and structure stating that it did not respond to the developing question of the modernity (Anas, 2007, p. 349 & Numan, 2007, p. 165). The next phase of Islamic education and reform in Sri Lanka is primarily examined through the ideas of AMA Azeez (d.1973). His thoughts were developed in response to the emergence of an independent Sri Lankan state. Azeez aimed to promote educational empowerment while safeguarding Islamic culture. Anas (2007) emphasizes Azeez's mission by noting, 'Azeez, one of the prominent Muslim scholars of his time, sought to instil optimism about modern education within the Muslim community. His central message was that ignoring modern knowledge would hinder progress. In this process, Azeez emphasized the importance of rationalism in both secular and religious discussions. He believed that rationalism forms the basis of knowledge in Islam' (p.358). These discussions led to a broader agreement among Muslim leaders on two crucial issues in 1960s. Firstly, the Muslim community must adopt modern education in order to thrive and be empowered. Secondly, there is a need to reform Muslim religious education to address present challenges. Specifically, it should aim to produce Islamic studies graduates who have a deep understanding of both the religion and contemporary society and its challenges. Against this background, the Naleemiah Institution of Islamic Studies (NIIS) was established in 1973 with the vision of creating an Islamic religious education institution that integrates Islamic knowledge with modern sciences. This marked an important turning point in the history of Islamic religious education reform in Sri Lanka (Numan, 2007, P. 170).

This paper aims to study the intellectual origins of NIIS, its evolution, and current dynamics, particularly focusing on its efforts to promote the integration of knowledge discourse in Sri Lanka. The main argument of this paper is that NIIS has significantly contributed to mainstreaming the integration of knowledge discourse through its Islamic studies program. Nevertheless, the institution has had limited success in terms of projecting its efforts through

clear conceptualization and modality. In elaborating this argument, the remaining of paper is divided into four sections: section two gives an overview of the contemporary debate on the interplay between Islam and modern knowledge, section three provides an overview of the Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies and its institutional structure, and the fourth section analyses the intellectual origins of NIIS, the evolution of its curriculum, and its implications in light of the integration of knowledge discourse. The paper concludes with an analytical conclusion and recommendations. This qualitative study is based on data from both primary and secondary sources, and thematic content analysis is used for data analysis.

The Integration of Knowledge: Genesis, Evolution and Contemporary Developments

The impact of colonialism significantly transformed the knowledge production landscape of the Muslim world. Colonialism introduced a new knowledge structure while marginalizing traditional sources of knowledge. Empirical science and rationality became the dominant criteria for evaluating classical sources such as revelation, spirituality, and tradition, leading to an epistemological dichotomy between rational and traditional knowledge in the Muslim world (Masood, 2007 & Tabrizi, 1996). In response to these changes, early modern scholars like Afghani, Abdu, and Sayyed Ahamed Khan argued against adopting a binary view of modern science versus Islamic tradition. They believed that modern knowledge and empirical sciences are not un-Islamic but are integral to Islamic tradition. They advocated for Muslims to embrace modern knowledge and incorporate it within their epistemological framework. Furthermore, they asserted that modern science and empiricism are universally valuable and can be adopted and utilized by all communities for their progress. They aimed to present Islam as a science-friendly religion and argued that the lack of readiness among Muslims to acknowledge the value-neutrality of science and to perceive it as a primary source of social development was a fundamental reason for the decline of Muslims (Tabrizi, 1996 & Furlow, 1996). They even proposed that embracing modern science was the solution to the problem of colonialism. This viewpoint was institutionalized by Sayyed Ahamed Khan, who established Aligarh Muslim University, and by Abdu, who reformed the academic structure of Al-Azhar to actualize their ideas.

Islamic revivalists such as Maududi were also deeply interested in reforming modern education. However, they held the perception that modern universities were essentially undermining Islamic identity. They believed that these institutions sought to instil a secular vision of knowledge and science within the Muslim community. They further advocated for the need to reform education based on an Islamic world view. In doing so, specially, Maududi critiqued the Islamic modernist paradigm, which sought to reconcile Islamic and Western knowledge, by arguing that these two worldviews are fundamentally different and cannot be easily synthesized as envisioned by the Islamic modernists (Maududi, 1993, pp.24-41).

These initial ideas were further developed by the Islamization of Knowledge (IOK) movement, which emerged in the 1970s and led to a paradigm shift in the discourse on Islam and modern knowledge. It noted that the revival of the Muslim community requires a re-evaluation of educational objectives and the knowledge production process in the Muslim world. Educational institutions in the Muslim world should reform their existing curricula, which are currently

focused on Western-centric social and natural sciences, to consider the Islamic worldview and to Islamize them. Within this broader discourse, the larger Islamization movement generated various ways of conceptualizing the idea and the process.

Naqib Al-Attas's vision of Islamization aimed to incorporate Sufi visions of human perfection into knowledge production activities. He argued that the core of Islamization is to integrate spiritual elements into educational philosophy and redefine the objective of knowledge to achieve spiritual goals and connect with God (Iqbal, 2016, p.336). On the other hand, Al-Faruqi proposed actionable concrete steps and frameworks for Islamizing knowledge. He suggested that Muslims should master Islamic and modern sciences as well as Islamic legacy to Islamize modern knowledge. To accomplish this, he recommended that the Muslim world invest in building Islamic universities, institutions, and new teaching materials that promote the Islamic perspective of knowledge (Moten, 2023, pp. 92-110). Another variant of Islamization of knowledge was proposed by Abdul Hamid Abu Sulaiman, who aimed to reform traditional principles of Islamic methodology. He believed that the Muslim world needs a new Islamic methodology to address both Islamic and modern socio-political challenges (Moten, 2023, p. 110-127). Similarly, Taha Jabir Alawani proposed an epistemological scheme that considers both reason and revelation as two ways of interpreting God's signs. He argued that the Islamic vision of knowledge must combine both to produce new knowledge, as neither revelation nor reason can independently operate within the epistemic hierarchy (al-Alawani. 1995).

Since 2000, scholars working on the Islamization of knowledge have embraced a new concept called the 'integration of knowledge'. There has been a heated debate about whether Islamization and integration of knowledge convey similar ideas. Some argue that Islamization of knowledge involves completely reorganizing modern knowledge based on Islamic principles, while integration aims to combine Islamic and Western perspectives in social and human sciences into a unified framework. In his famous work 'Radical Reform', Tariq Ramadan (2009) proposed a new framework for approaching modern knowledge from an Islamic perspective. He (2009) argued that both revelation and reason are independent sources of knowledge, as both the sacred texts and the universe are creations of God. According to Ramadan, the texts provide a detailed ethical map, while modern sciences advance humanity's knowledge about the universe in which they live. He also emphasized the need for both textual scholars (Islamic scholars) and contextual scholars (natural and human sciences) to consider each other's work and develop new knowledge that respects both religious ethics and the principles of modern knowledge.

The debate on integration of knowledge discourse highlights that Islamic scholars have conceptualized the idea in diverse ways. Sayyed Ahmad Khan and Abdu proposed a structure that motivates students to learn modern sciences alongside basic training in Islamic ethics. In contrast, Al-Faruqi believed that modern sciences need to be Islamized first, and then Islamic Universities should be developed to implement reformed curricula. Al-Attas envisioned an educational institution that produces Islamic scholars and experts in other sciences but with deep knowledge of Islamic spirituality and metaphysics. Alawani aimed to produce Islamic studies experts with broader knowledge of human sciences, who would further develop the Islamic framework to work in other sciences using their expertise in Islamic primary sources. Tariq Ramadan's model was to have Islamic scholars collaborate with experts in modern sciences to produce new knowledge. Different models for Islamic education have been implemented in

various institutions. For example, the International Islamic University requires students majoring in Islamic studies to also minor in human sciences, and vice versa. In the UK, the Cambridge Muslim College trains students to approach modern disciplines from the perspective of classical Islamic scholarship. Additionally, in Qatar, the Hamad bin Khalifah University runs an Islamic ethics project that trains students to apply Islamic ethics to contemporary issues using a multidisciplinary approach. This project allows students from diverse backgrounds to study Islamic ethics and apply it to the issues within their respective disciplines.

Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies: Founder, Vision, Mission and Institutional and Academic Structure

The Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies (NIIS) was established in 1973. It was founded by MIM Naleem. MIM Naleem's contributions provide a classic case study on the impact of philanthropy on educational empowerment in Sri Lanka. Philanthropy involves providing financial support to address the root cause of a social problem, while charity is known for offering occasional assistance (Terway, A. & Ridge N. Y, 2019, p. 06). As a renowned gem merchant and a front-line community activist, he initiated, supported, and backed several projects aimed at addressing fundamental issues related to the educational development of the Muslim community. His projects became a benchmark for Muslim philanthropic activities in the country. One of the notable initiatives was the NIIS, which MIM Naleem established to introduce a new approach to religious education in the country. He initiated this project with academics, and intimate friends from his hometown, China Fort, Beruwala (Shukri, 1993).

The institution's mission 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. The goal was to produce a new generation of scholars and thinkers who would be multi-skilled, economically independent, and knowledgeable enough to respond to myriad challenges emanating from a rapidly changing world. The NIIS is divided into two central departments: the Centre for Foundation Studies (CFS) and the Faculty of Islamic Studies (FIS). The CFS provides students with preliminary knowledge in Arabic and Islamic studies while preparing them for the governmental Advanced Level examination. It also teaches languages and moral subjects at this stage. The FIS offers advanced courses in Islamic studies as well as selected secular subjects. FIS students are allowed to enrol with state universities to gain a recognized degree as external candidates. The NIIS operates an independent unit called the 'Unit for Extra-Curricular Activities', which is formed with the purpose of improving the skills of students. 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 the Academy for Development, Research, and Training (ADRT) in 2006. ADRT continuously holds training programs for different categories such as media personnel, lecturers at Arabic colleges, and community leaders. The Naleemiah Virtual Learning

Centre (NVLC), initiated in 2020, offers numerous online courses, such as Qur'anic Interpretation and Translation, to the general public. The Research and Publication Unit plays a pivotal role in promoting research and publications. The Unit also publishes a quarterly research journal called *Islamiya Sinthanai* or Islamic Thought in Tamil Language. In addition, the Institute of Arabic Language offers courses to empower the Arabic language skills of students. Finally, the Salam Centre for Peace and Dialogue aims to promote social harmony through inter-religious interactive programs and publications.

Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies: Intellectual Origins, Curriculum and Impacts

Intellectual Origins

Many scholars and academics with diverse academic backgrounds contributed to shaping the intellectual foundation of the NIIS in the 1970s. However, it can be argued that the educational ideas of AMA Azeez, a prominent Sri Lankan Muslim educationist and one of the institute's founders, played a crucial role in its ideational formation when looking from a broader historical perspective. In the 1960s, Azeez wrote a series of essays on Muslim education reform, emphasizing the underperformance of Sri Lankan Muslims in education and its potential impact on the community in a diverse nation. He pointed out that one of the main reasons for the educational backwardness of Sri Lankan Muslims was their focus on and obsession with otherworldly dimensions of religion. Thus, for him, the Muslim community should formulate a new philosophy of Islamic education that embraces both Islamic and human knowledge within a coherent worldview. In order to operationalize this philosophy, Azeez proposed that Muslim leaders should prioritize the education of Islamic religious scholars who are proficient in both Islamic and modern sciences and are able to connect religious teaching with the socio-political affairs of the community. He also believed that the existing traditional religious educational system was inadequate and advocated for an alternative Islamic education system (Azeez, 1963, pp.131-36). In the early 1970s, he wrote an important essay titled '*We Want an Islamic University*' outlining his vision. Although the essay and its insights did not directly lead to the formation of NIIS, it is believed that the essay implicitly paved the way for subsequent debates on forming an alternative Islamic religious education system. In that essay Azeez (1963) writes:

We cannot overcome our significant challenges without cultivating Islamic scholars who are equally proficient in both Islamic and modern knowledge. In our current situation, we have struggled to find Islamic scholars who possess such a diverse range of expertise. As a community, we must strive to produce religious scholars who have a deep understanding of both Islamic and modern knowledge. Additionally, it is crucial to recognize that our traditional religious educational system requires substantial reform (p.117).

AMA Azeez was a Muslim thinker whose ideas were mainly shaped by Allamah Iqbal's perspectives on Islamic reform. He mentioned that his essays on the socio-political and educational reform of Muslims in Sri Lanka were primarily written to provide solutions considering Iqbal's philosophy (Azeez, 1963, p.iv). Certain aspects of Iqbal's philosophy

particularly attracted Azeez's attention. Firstly, Azeez believed Iqbal offered a dynamic path to navigate the scientific world with an Islamic spirit. Secondly, he was deeply convinced of Iqbal's discourse that merging the rationalism of the West with the spirituality of the East is the possible solution to the problems of Humanity. Thirdly, Iqbal provided an idea of spiritualism that moves human beings towards actions and productivity. Azeez suggested that the Sri Lankan Muslim community should adopt this Iqbal's vision as the only way for them to progress in the country (Azeez, 1963, pp.218-22).

Azeez also believed that in addition to combining rationalism and spiritualism, the Muslim community should find a balance between traditionalism and modernism. He criticizes both modernists and traditionalists for being too extreme, which he saw could weaken the Muslim community. Beyond that he invites the Sri Lankan Muslim community to connect itself with and get inspiration from larger Islamic civilizational heritage in shaping their socio-political future (Azeez, 1963, pp. 130-43). As an educator, Azeez suggests that the key to achieving these changes lies in adopting a comprehensive approach to education based on the Islamic worldview and specifically establishing religious educational institutions that will produce a new generation of Islamic scholars with knowledge of religion and human societies. In a separate essay recalling his visit to Egypt, Azeez mentioned that he met prominent Islamic scholars of Al-Azhar, including Mustafa Abdul Razak, who supported his idea that Islamic scholars should be knowledgeable in both Islamic and modern sciences. He also stated that some of the reformist leaders of Al-Azhar attempted to revise the curriculum to align with this vision (Azeez, 1963, pp. 99-110). As an implication of these evolving ideas of Azeez, he was involved in the Naleemiah project thinking it embodied his reformist vision. Encapsulating this dynamic relationship between Azeez and the formation of the education philosophy of NIIS, Shukri, Azeez's student and a founder member and later became the director of the institute, writes (2020) as follows:

The genesis of the idea of Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies owes its origin to the interaction of two trends of thought in the field of education all over the Muslim world, consequent primarily, to the impact of European activities in Afro-Asian countries. The learned (*Ulama*) among the traditionalist, resisted all modern influence from Europe and contemplated a return to the Islamic past; while some of the modernists among Muslim educationists opted for an uncritical emulation of the West. This bifurcation in the Muslim educational thought impaired the progress of the Muslim community. In any case the Muslim educationists could not remain in a state of ambivalence for long. Azeez arrived at a harmonious blend of these two trends. Jamiah Naleemiah which he helped to set in motion is a reflection of this blend in our educational outlook. Here we are trying to bring about a balanced integration of the rich cultural heritage of Islam with the modern disciplines and methodologies in education. The progress this Institution has made justifies the speculations and anticipations of Azeez.

Along with Azeez, several other scholars also contributed to the refinement of the idea of NIIS in its early stages. Among those, Tahism Nadvi, a prominent Islamic scholar who graduated in Al-Azhar University and afterward became the first principal of the Institute in 1973, was a crucial figure. In explaining the objective of the NIIS project, Tasim Nadvi stressed the fact that traditional Islamic religious education institutions contributed to protecting the religiosity of the

Muslims of Sri Lanka in their limited capacity. However, the modern challenges of a complex world cannot be tackled by those traditional Islamic religious knowledge centers. Instead, there is a need for a new mode of religious education and scholars (Arafath, 2023, p. 64). Another prominent scholar-activist, ALM Ibrahim, a scholar-activist, who also contributed to the early development of NIIS, shared a similar concern that the traditionalist Islamic education method did not have the necessary intellectual foundations to face the modern challenges of Muslim society (Arafath, 2023, p. 64). These scholars supported the Naleemiah project anticipating that it would liberate the religious education from the dominance of traditionalist religious authorities and their religious discourse that lacks substances to induce Islamic activism in their analysis.

The education philosophy of NIIS was shaped not only by local Muslim thinkers and Islamic scholars like Azeez, Tahsim Nadvi, MAM Shukri, Movlavi Masood, and ALM Ibrahim in its early stages but also by the ideas of prominent international Islamic scholars. According to Shukri, some of the critical works of Islamic scholars such as Sayyed Abul Hasan Ali Nadvi on the impact of secularism and materialism on the Muslim mind were translated into the local language. These works were widely read by Muslim community leaders in the 60s and 70s. As a result, these writings and ideas inspired Muslim community leaders to recognize the need for a new generation of Islamic thinkers who could better understand modern philosophies and their harmful effects on the Muslim mind. It was agreed that traditional religious education systems could not produce Islamic scholars of that kind, and a new religious education and learning mode must be developed. Shukri also notes that community activists who internalized the ideas of Nadvi and other Islamic revivalist thinkers joined the Naleemiah project on their own grounds (Shukri, 1993, p. 53 & Shukri, 1969). Therefore, he views that the emergence of NIIS can also be seen as a local response to the global rise of secularization and westernization (Shukri, 1993, p. 53).

Personal interviews with founder members who are still alive revealed two important sources that guided the founder members to develop the idea of NIIS further. Firstly, founder members were influenced by the educational reform ideas of Egyptian thinker Mohamed Abdhu and Indian scholar Mohamed Ali. Both Abdu and Ali argued that Muslim religious education institutions needed to be reformed but presented modernist solutions to the problem (MHM Hibatullah, personal communication, June 12, 2023, & ARM Sulaiman, personal communication, June 30, 2023). They emphasized that Muslim religious education should incorporate natural and human sciences alongside religious education. It is safe to say that the founding members were not modernists, but Abdu's reformist ideas might further embolden their conviction that they share the same vision of leading Islamic authorities in the Muslim world. In addition, the founding members of the NIIS were directly inspired by the Aleemiyyah Institute of Islamic Studies in Pakistan and its founder, Fazlur Rahman Ansari. The founder members highlight that although they determined to form a new institution that would offer a curriculum combining Islamic science and human sciences, they couldn't find a model to emulate in Sri Lanka. As a result, they travelled to Pakistan to explore potential integration models. During their trip, they met with various university rectors and Islamic thinkers, including Maududi, who all suggested that the integration model the Sri Lankan community leaders were seeking did not exist in the Muslim world and that they would need to build their own model. Nonetheless, they identified the Aleemiyyah Institute of Islamic Studies in Pakistan as a potential model that could be replicated in Sri Lanka (Arafath, 2023, p. 64-65).

This institute, active in the 1960s and 70s, aimed to educate Islamic scholars with expertise in both Islamic studies and human sciences. Surviving founder members say that the structural design of the Alimiyyah institution gave them a clear framework for a Islamic religious education project that combining both religious science education and modern education. More than that, they highlight that the ideas of its director, Fazlur Rahman Ansari, greatly influenced their thoughts and perspectives of philosophical outlook and helped them to conceptualize the Naleemiah project. It is important to mention that Fazlur Rahman Ansari extensively wrote (2012) about the philosophy of unity and the negative impacts of the division of knowledge in modern universities on Muslim communities. He explained that Islam rejects the classification of knowledge into religious and secular categories. Instead, he stressed that all knowledge comes from one source: God. Moreover, he coined the term ‘integralistic civilization of Islam,’ arguing that Islam is an exemplary model for future human civilization because it integrates both empirical and rational sources of knowledge and revelation into a single worldview. Ansari believes that the Islamic philosophy of unity is the basis of ‘*integralistic Islamic civilization*’. He writes about this in his famous work, *The Quranic Foundations and the Structure of the Muslim Society*:

Because of its comprehensive and integralistic approach—which is the demand of its unique Philosophy of Unity, the Holy Quran reconciles the elements of value in Rationalism and Empiricism, affirms the reality of both the rational and the empirical -of course, in accordance with the status of each, demands belief in the Unseen as well as in the Seen, in the supra-sensible as well as in the sensible, and synthesises the Ideational and the Sensate, projecting thereby a perfect and sound Integralistic or Idealistic Culture (p.217).

These ideas of Fazlur Rahman Ansari greatly influenced the vision of the founder members. Further evidence of Ansari’s impact on the founder members was that they invited him to Sri Lanka again for more discussions. While he was there, Ansari delivered a special lecture on the Islamic worldview in their presence (MHM Hibatullah, personal communication, June 12, 2023).

This analysis shows that the early proponents of the Naleemiah project believed that the lack of a comprehensive education philosophy integrating both Islamic and modern sciences was the main cause of issues in Muslim societies. This led them to envision the Naleemiah project as a mean to produce graduates who could embrace a broader perspective of Islamic education inspired by the Islamic worldview and civilizational heritage. It is obvious that they did not use the term ‘*integration of knowledge*’ to introduce the vision of Naleemiah in the early 1970s but an exploration of their discourses reveals that they intended such an ambition. Moreover, their focus was primarily on producing Islamic religious scholars rather than experts in other sciences, as they believed that religious scholars played a key role in leading the community and setting a new societal direction. To put it in the contemporary language, the founders of the Naleemiah project aimed to attract students interested in majoring in Islamic sciences and equip them with knowledge in human sciences. Therefore, their conception of the integration of knowledge revolved around Shariah-based scholars. Interestingly, Rashid Moten notes that Taha Jabir Alawani, the former head of the International Institute of Islamic Thought, had promoted such a

conception of integration of knowledge in early 2000 arguing that Islamic scholars need to take the leadership of the project (Moten, 2023, p. 139).

Evolution of Curriculum of NIIS from An Integration of Knowledge Perspective

The curriculum of the NIIS has evolved through four stages: 1973-1984, 1984-1996, 1996-2011, and 2011 to the present. During the first decade of its formation, the founder members drew inspiration from a variety of local and international scholars while facing two critical challenges in implementing the project. Firstly, they struggled to develop a proper curriculum for Naleemiah as they could not find a sophisticated model elsewhere. Secondly, finding lecturers who had good knowledge about the new vision of the institution also became a tough challenge (Shukri, 1993). As a result, the initial draft of the curriculum did not reflect a radical departure from the past but hinted at the intention to move in a new direction. Reviewing the institution's curriculum in the early and mid-1970s shows that their strategy was to teach some subjects from the national education plan along with traditional Islamic religious subjects. The early founders and proponents believed that this arrangement would provide students with basic knowledge about Islamic and modern sciences to a limited extent (MAM Mansoor, personal communication, September 5, 2019). The initial draft of the curriculum consisted of two kinds of subjects falling under Islamic and modern education. The curriculum encompassed traditional Islamic studies such as Islamic theology and basic jurisprudence, taught using textbooks already employed by traditional religious seminaries. However, it also included a few subjects like agriculture, gemmology, electronics, etc., with the intention of increasing graduates' employability and providing them with a better understanding of modern sciences. On the overall performance of the NIIS, Ayoob Ali, an early graduate of NIIS and then became a lecturer, observed that during the early stages, the institution's curriculum and strategic decisions were primarily managed by traditionally trained Ulama from various theological backgrounds (Ayoob Ali, Personal Communication, September 25, 2019). This was due to the fact that the educated founder members, like Azeez, passed away shortly after the institution was formed. As a result, the responsibility for the institution's development fell upon the remaining traditional *Ulama*' and some dedicated founder members. However, these individuals and lecturers did not possess the necessary skills to effectively address the initial challenges faced by a unique project like NIIS. During the second stage (1983-1996), there was a change in the curriculum when the institution started hiring its graduates as lecturers in 1983. This had an impact on reforming the Islamic studies aspects of the curriculum. The new lecturers introduced books that contained the ideas of more reformist Islamic thinkers and contemporary approaches to Islam, such as comparative jurisprudence. This reflected the changing direction of the institution (MAM Mansoor, Personal Communication, September 5, 2019).

However, NIIS transformed its curriculum into a standard direction in 1996 when it established academic collaboration with the International University of Islamabad, Pakistan. In 1996, Hussian Hamid al-Hassan, an Egyptian Islamic scholar, renowned economist, and chancellor of the International Islamic University of Islamabad (IIUI), visited NIIS. His visit marked a significant turning point in the academic thinking of NIIS. He offered post-graduate opportunities for NIIS graduates on the condition that the institution would adjust its existing curriculum to meet the requirements of IIUI. In response to this offer, NIIS reevaluated its overall curriculum and academic strategy, leading to several structural changes. As a result, new

elements were incorporated into the curriculum and academic planning of NIIS (Ushama & Fouz, 2023). NIIS updated its academic strategy in three main areas: program structure, curriculum, and operational system. In terms of curriculum, in addition to organizing Islamic studies subjects based on IIUI's standards, it included specific humanities subjects such as sociology, philosophy, and comparative religions. According to the available data, NIIS's overall academic framework, established in 1996, remained unchanged until 2010 (Ushama & Fouz, 2023).

During the fourth phase of NIIS's curriculum review process (2012 onward), there were significant improvements made to the quality and sophistication of the curriculum. Global and local socio-economic and political developments during this phase influenced NIIS to update its content in alignment with national higher education and job market requirements. National education policies specifically required higher education institutions to adjust their course outlines to reflect national economic and employment policies. The impact of national policy is evident in the latest NIIS course outline book. It starts with a statement that:

The Faculty of Islamic Studies curriculum has been reviewed based on the suggestions and the advice of internal auditors in the Faculty Board. The Academic Council of NIIS considered the job market demand during the revision. The revision process especially contemplated the policies and the criterion of Sri Lankan higher education (NIIS curriculum, 2020)

It's important to note that NIIS does not view the changing dynamics as a threat to its existence. Instead, they saw it as an opportunity to further develop its original education philosophy, which combines Islamic studies with modern sciences in light of comprehensive framework. For those purposes, NIIS looked for international models that they can get inspiration from. As a result, the influence of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) was significant in the recent curriculum review process. The entire process was primarily designed in consideration of Islamic revealed knowledge courses at the Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences, IIUM (Haris, Personal Communication, September 20, 2019). It's worth mentioning that Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies established a memorandum of understanding with International Islamic University Malaysia in 2012 and also entered into a similar agreement with Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) in 2024—a Malaysian university that promotes the Integration of knowledge from an Islamic perspective. (Usim, 2024) Interestingly, a majority of the institution's academic staff who have attained their doctoral degrees are alumni of IIUM (naleemiah, 2024). These developments indicate how NIIS is striving to maintain a balance between its strong commitment to its original education philosophy and the evolving dynamics of the national and international education systems.

A close examination of the updated course plan helps us to better understand the Institute's direction. For instance, the most recent NIIS handbook (2020) outlines the institute's vision to be internationally recognized as a leading center of excellence in higher education for *Islamic Studies, Human Sciences, and Technology* (p.05). The current rector, Agar Mohamed, emphasized the importance of integrating knowledge in his foreword to the handbook, expressing the institute's goal to produce scholars well-versed in *Islamic Studies and modern disciplines*. NIIS aims to educate a generation of scholars with broad knowledge in both Islamic

sciences and contemporary fields (NIIS handbook, 2020, p.08). Moreover, the stated learning outcomes of NIIS's degree programme, according to the handbook, also strongly stress the importance of integration of Islamic sciences with human sciences (NIIS handbook, 2020, p.33). In the field of Islamic studies, which is a fundamental part of NIIS, the handbook outlines that students will gain extensive knowledge of the core texts of Islam. They will also be able to demonstrate a broad understanding and utilize appropriate methods to critically analyze the foundational texts of Islam in their original Arabic form, including Quranic exegesis, prophetic traditions, as well as key areas of theology, law, and mysticism (NIIS handbook, 2020). In addition to the specific Islamic studies-related learning outcomes, the handbook also states that students will develop the ability to address real-world problems, gain knowledge in the field of political science, and acquire an overall understanding of sociology, social anthropology, and cultural analysis (NIIS handbook, 2020). The course structure provides deeper insights into the integration of different areas of knowledge. The updated version now includes more advanced subjects in Islamic studies and traditional Islamic sciences, such as the objectives of Islamic Shariah, Islamic Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities, and Islamic Banking and Finance, among others (NIIS handbook, 2020). It also covers human sciences subjects like human resource management, social psychology, education, peace and social harmony, contemporary politics, and the study of Sri Lankan society (NIIS handbook, 2020).

This historical evolution of the curriculum at NIIS shows the institution's commitment to integrating knowledge discourse. Since the mid-1990s, NIIS has taken assertive steps to incorporate human science subjects into the Islamic studies specialization program. Recently, NIIS has seriously considered local education policies while collaborating with IIUI, IIUM, and USIM in terms of broadening its education outlook. Despite the institution has made efforts to integrate Islamic studies and human sciences, there is a need for more sophisticated conceptualization in this integration process. The institution should assertively engage in more sophisticated academic efforts to highlight its approach to integration. To facilitate this, the institution can introduce a new course on the Integration of knowledge, organize expert seminars on Islamic discourses on modern knowledge, and hold idea-sharing sessions on the Integration of knowledge and Islamic Studies. Additionally, they can consider restructuring their programs to offer a major in Islamic studies and a minor in human sciences. These initiatives can help the institution engage in a more committed debate on the integration of knowledge and enhance its educational vision locally and internationally.

NIIS and Integration of Knowledge: Impact and Implications

This section aims to analyze NIIS' efforts to promote the integration of knowledge discourse in the local context. For that matter, this study explores selected themes of the flagship journal of NIIS. Secondly, it also explores the perception and experience of the graduates of NIIS with regard to their efforts of integrating Islamic worldview in their respective fields. As the graduates of NIIS are the main agents who embody the institutions' vision, their experience, and involvement have to be recognized in any analysis of the institutions' overall commitment to the integration of knowledge discourse.

Major Themes of Islamic Thought Journal.

Islamic Thought is the flagship journal of NIIS. Since the mid-1970s, the journal has acted as a key instrument to carry the message of NIIS to the wider society. Although the journal policy claims that the institution is not responsible for articles published in the journal, its authors and titles are very much reflective of the NIIS educational philosophy. The authors were either graduates of the institution or academics and activists closely associated with the institution. A brief survey of the themes of the articles reveals that the journal has shown a series of interest in publishing two kinds of articles. Primarily, it has published hundreds of articles on themes related to Islamic primary sources, Islamic legal thought Islamic scholars, etc. Secondly, the journal published continuously numerous articles on conceptualizing different fields of studies in natural and social sciences from an Islamic worldview. For that matter, the journal has addressed many themes such as Islamic education philosophy, Islamic philosophy of history, Islamic civilizational heritage, Islamic economic thought, Islamic political philosophy, Islamic perspective of art and literature, Islamic concept of architecture, and Islamic theory of environmentalism and Islamic ethics of research and innovation. In addition, the journal has widely addressed the theme of Islamic epistemology extensively for the last four decades. It addressed the idea of Islamic epistemology either directly or through exploring the epistemological ideas of Al-Ghazali, Iqbal, Ibn Rushd and themes related to Islamic civilization (Journal of Islamic Thought Catalogue, 2021).

The objectives of these articles were to contrast and compare the Islamic and Western perspectives of the issue. Those journal articles clearly outline that the Islamic conception of those different fields of studies is clearly different from the Western conception. Furthermore, they call for separate theorization of those fields of studies from an Islamic worldview. Besides, it did not reject the Western perspective but rather to attempted to add an Islamic perspective to the discussion. An overall review of the articles published in the Journal of Islamic Thought of NIIS reveals that NIIS has initiated and contributed to a wider discussion on the Integration of knowledge discourse in the local context. In terms of publications of the graduates of NIIS, the existing data says that they have made substantial contributions to the development of Islamic perspectives of contemporary social sciences and humanities. Obviously, the greater numbers of their publications are related to Islamic reformist discourses. However, they have published on Islamic education, Islamic psychology, global affairs, Islamization of knowledge, Islamic ethics of communication and media, Islam and political theory and organizational Management, Islam and Human Rights discourses, and economics (Graduates Books Catalogue, 2021).

Graduates of NIIS on Integration of Knowledge Discourse.

The graduates of NIIS embody the vision and mission of the institution. This study conducted interviews with five selected graduates who have obtained or are pursuing post-graduate degrees in Islamic studies and other human sciences within the country and outside. The interviews mainly focused on how the educational philosophy of NIIS and its existing curricula contribute to their understanding of integrating knowledge in their respective fields and how it can be further improved.

In response to the first question, all interviewees unanimously agreed that the NIIS curriculum and its educational structure have helped them understand that contemporary issues cannot be addressed by a single field of study but from a multidisciplinary knowledge production process. Some respondents said that the NIIS curriculum gave them a solid introduction to central debates and themes of social sciences, helping expose them to various disciplines along with Islamic studies (Respondent 02, Personal Communication, July 14, 2024). Another respondent noted that the existing education structure of NIIS reflects the integration of knowledge framework, which was the main reason for many NIIS graduates seeking opportunities to pursue their post-graduate studies in universities that embody such a vision like IIUM (Respondent 03, personal communication, July 25, 2024). Another respondent noted that the NIIS education philosophy and curricula shaped his perspective that knowledge cannot be divided, and it also helped them to be involved in debates in rethinking modern social science and humanities from an Islamic perspective (Respondent 04, personal communication, July 26, 2024). Many interviewees have stressed that Islamic studies subjects at NIIS are being taught with a focus on major contemporary issues. Understanding those issues requires a general comprehension of modern societies and social change. For that purpose, students discuss the basics of modern humanities and social sciences during Islamic studies courses. As a result, students are encouraged to integrate knowledge, even through the Islamic studies courses at NIIS (Respondent 01, personal communication, July 16, 2024).

The interviewees acknowledged that their education at NIIS enhanced their ability to engage with Islamic studies and human sciences. However, they also highlighted the limitations of NIIS in this area, stating that the institute thus far failed to put its integration model into a proper perspective. Elaborating on this point, one respondent commented:

We studied human sciences courses along with Islamic studies at NIIS. However, we learned those subjects without a proper conceptual background. We were not clearly informed of why we studied those human sciences along with Islamic courses. I heard that very recently NIIS has taken some serious steps in developing a conceptual outlook for their courses by introducing subjects like Islamic world view (Respondent 01, personal communication, July 16, 2024).

Another respondent shared a similar concern as follows:

In my experience, the lack of a clear integration model for NIIS has led some students to believe that human sciences subjects are included in the curriculum solely to increase job opportunities for graduates. They feel that these subjects have no academic merit. Furthermore, this belief is reinforced by the fact that human sciences subjects are not given proper weight compared to Islamic studies courses in NIIS's education structure. While Naleemiah is dedicated to promoting Islamic studies graduates, it emphasizes its uniqueness in integrating both Islamic studies and human sciences. Therefore, NIIS needs to take this aspect into account (Respondent 05, personal communication, July 223, 2024).

The third respondent raised a critical point in the interview:

NIIS merely introduces some social sciences subjects, but doesn't effectively work towards integrating Islamic and social sciences. Although we study social sciences, we are not trained to evaluate how what we learn in these subjects impacts our understanding of Islamic themes. If we learn human science along with Islamic studies, we should be given a clear idea about how it helps us to understand our core subjects. There is not any substantial discussion about it. In that sense, NIIS lags far behind in attempts to truly [involve in] integration of knowledge debates. I believe NIIS needs to have a thorough conversation on this aspect (Respondent 02, personal communication, July 14, 2024).

In a similar vein, the graduates have shared some suggestions to improve the current states of the curriculum and academic structure with regard to integrating Islamic studies with human sciences. One respondent suggested:

The curriculum of NIIS needs to be updated every five years and should include the latest global debates concerning Islamic studies and human sciences. It is important for NIIS to incorporate fundamental social sciences and humanities subjects and give them slightly higher credit hours in its academic structure to increase their importance. In addition, it is crucial to bring in experts in these fields to conduct seminars and workshops for students. Our Islamic studies lecturers cannot fully handle those subjects. In addition, it is imperative to make effective collaboration with some other universities that try to integrate Islamic studies with Human sciences. The purpose of the collaboration should be to exchange the experiences and modalities of this concept. In addition, NIIS should organize seminars to train students to understand social issues from a multidisciplinary perspective (Respondent 01, personal communication, July 16, 2024).

The second respondent said:

The lecturers, especially, need to be trained in this concept because they are the ones who bring this vision to the students. Therefore, NIIS's academic strategy should focus on equipping both students and staff with this framework. The human sciences courses need to be taught by experts, and NIIS must establish a collaborative network with these experts and plan how to integrate these subjects within the context of Islamic studies (Respondent 05, personal communication, July 223, 2024)

The third respondent highlighted that:

It is important to teach students that the integration of knowledge was the heartbeat of our intellectual tradition. Nearly all our Islamic thinkers of the past were polymaths. I am not asking anyone to try to make graduates of such caliber, but we should be mindful that our tradition is an integrative one, and we cannot have abstract Islamic studies courses without interacting with other sciences. We

need to develop an environment that constantly exposes students to such an idea (Respondent 02, personal communication, July 14, 2024).

The insights shared by NIIS graduates in the interview reveal several important points for analyzing NIIS performance in terms of the internalization of the integration of knowledge framework within the institution. This analysis can be approached from two aspects: contributions and limitations.

In terms of contributions, NIIS can be recognized for promoting discourse and popularizing it in the Sri Lankan context. According to some graduates, this was one of the reasons why many NIIS graduates have pursued post-graduate studies in human sciences alongside Islamic studies. This resulted from the institution's broader integrated perspective of knowledge and the way it instilled this perspective in its students. As a private university college in the country with limited resources, this achievement should be highlighted. In other words, it can be argued that NIIS provided foundational training for students to pursue future expertise in the integration of knowledge paradigms. Additionally, it's important to note that NIIS has achieved this primarily through its Islamic studies program. NIIS does not offer human sciences courses per se, as it is dedicated to the Islamic studies project. Nevertheless, the interviews with graduates indicate that NIIS's curriculum embodies the spirit of Islamic reformism, and therefore, Islamic subjects are discussed within the context of contemporary socio-political and economic dynamics and change. Despite issues of systemization, this reformist spirit naturally led the institution to integrate ideas from other social sciences within its educational structure.

In terms of limitations, the interviews reveal that NIIS has thus far achieved limited success in conceptualizing its integration model and its philosophy. This has led to three notable issues affecting the institution's performance in promoting the integration of knowledge discourse. First, the lack of clear conceptualization has created confusion among students about whether the purpose of including human science subjects in the curricula is to meet the job market demands or to develop a systematic academic discourse. Second, graduates feel they did not receive adequate training on how human sciences subjects can help them understand the core subjects of their course. Third, they perceive that human sciences subjects are not treated as being as important as Islamic studies subjects, and that teachers are not properly trained to address this issue. They also highlight that the institution has to review its structure and include more human sciences subjects that would help students engage in a meaningful debate between Islam and modern knowledge. As an overall note, the insights from the interview collectively point out that that NIIS must systematically position human sciences subjects within the Islamic studies paradigm and conceptualize their modality in light of the ongoing larger debate on Islam and modern knowledge.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper is motivated by desire to explore the experience of the Naleemiah Institute of Islamic Studies (NIIS) in promoting the integration of knowledge discourse in Sri Lanka. The study found that NIIS originated from local and global debates on reforming Islamic education, with the goal of producing graduates who could present Islamic solutions in light of modern

challenges. It was also noted that many thinkers and scholars played a vital role in shaping the institute's educational philosophy, with both AMA Azeez and Fazlur Rahman Ansari making substantial contributions by sharing global experiences and emerging ideas about the integration of knowledge debates with the institute's founding members. The study argues that, although the initial drafts of NIIS did not explicitly define their mission as promoting the integration of knowledge, the essence of the idea was very much present in their minds.

The historical evolution of the curriculum at the institute reveals that NIIS has consistently focused on structuring its programs to align with its mission. Over four stages of development, the curriculum has increasingly encompassed human sciences subjects along with Islamic courses to provide graduates with a broad perspective on contemporary issues and exposure to a multidisciplinary approach. Collaborations with IIUM and University Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) underscore further the institute's commitment to the integration of knowledge. However, the graduates feel that while NIIS's curriculum reflects the essence of this framework, it lacks a systematic representation of a specific vision for the ongoing integration of knowledge debates. They argue that NIIS should take current debates about Islam and modern knowledge more seriously and reflect this in its academic structure. Taking all these considerations into account, the study suggests that NIIS has to reframe its current academic program considering contemporary modalities of integration of knowledge by restructuring existing courses and increasing current academic commitments to enhance its involvement in the evolving debate. Considering all these observations, this paper suggests three key recommendations to enhance NIIS's academic commitment to the Integration of knowledge discourse:

- 1) NIIS can further increase its collaboration with international universities such as IIUM and USIM to explore models of integration of knowledge.
- 2) NIIS should arrange student and staff-level academic sessions to critically reflect on its education philosophy, its functioning process, and its modality.
- 3) NIIS should develop a systematic mechanism to evaluate its education philosophy's impact within the institution and community level.

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