Sunna as Historical Ijtihād: Muhammad Shahrur and the Epistemological Reconfiguration of Islamic Authority

Moh. Nor Ichwan*

Universitas Islam Negeri Walisongo, Semarang, Indonesia

* Corresponding author: nor_ichwan@walisongo.ac.id

Abstract: This article analyzes the reconceptualization of the Prophet's sunnah in the thought of Muhammad Shahrur by placing it as *historical ijtihād* and examining its implications for the epistemological structure of classical Islamic authority. The unit of analysis of this research is Shahrur's conceptual construction of the sunnah as formulated in his primary works, especially *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān* and *Nahwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*. This study aims to explain how Shahrur limits the epistemic status of sunna through the distinction between *nubūwah* and *risālah*, and how this position challenges the claims of the classical tradition's transhistorical normativity. The method used is qualitative-conceptual analysis, with an epistemological approach, informed by a critical reading of primary texts and supporting academic literature. The main findings suggest that Shahrur positioned the sunnah as a historical practice of the Prophet, lacking independent normative authority. The novelty of this article lies in the reading of sunna as a question of epistemology of religious knowledge, not just a legal or hadith issue. The contribution of this research is to expand the discourse on Islamic thought reform by offering an alternative epistemological framework for restructuring contemporary Islamic religious authority.

Keywords: Muhammad Shahrur; The Prophet historical ijtihād; Islamic Epistemology; Religious Authority

1. Introduction

In the dynamics of contemporary Islamic thought, the sunnah position of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) has become one of the main loci of intellectual debate, with direct implications for the formation of law, ethics, and religious authority in the global Muslim community. Historically, Sunnah has been positioned as the second normative source after the Qur'an and is understood to have universal validity across space and time. However, in the context of modernity—marked by social plurality, political transformation, and the development of a critical awareness of the history of knowledge—normative and transhistorical understandings of the sunnah are increasingly questioned. This tension arises especially when practices legitimized in the name of sunnah are seen as no longer in line with the demands of social justice, human rights, and modern public rationality (Brown, 2014). In the contemporary Muslim public sphere, the debate about sunnah is no longer

limited to philology or the hadith realm but extends to epistemology and the legitimacy of religious knowledge. Sunna becomes a field of contention between traditional authority and the demand for contextual reinterpretation. This phenomenon shows that the problem of sunnah is not only a matter of *what the Prophet did*, but *also of how knowledge about the Prophet's practices is produced, sanctified, and institutionalized as a normative authority*. Thus, the criticism of the sunnah reflects a broader social change: a shift from the traditional paradigm of obedience to a reflective, rational understanding of Islamic sources (Arkoun, 2003).

In classical Islamic literature, sunnah is systematically constructed as a normative source that binds through the framework *of uṣūl al-fiqh*. Al-Shāfi'ī plays a key role in affirming the status of sunna as *a second revelation*, which explains, limits, and even establishes laws not mentioned in the Qur'an (Hallaq, 1997). This view was later strengthened by the classical theological and juridical tradition, which held that sahih hadith served as the epistemic basis of Islamic legal and moral knowledge (Reinhart, 1983). Within this framework, criticism of the sunna is understood as a threat to epistemic stability and religious authority. Modern studies are beginning to challenge this construction. Fazlur Rahman (1982) introduced the concept *of sunna as a living tradition, while Arkoun (2003) and Abu Zayd (2006) highlighted the historical and political processes involved* in its sanctification. However, these studies still tend to place sunna in the framework of ethics or textual hermeneutics, rather than as a systematic epistemological problem of religious knowledge. Research on Muhammad Shahrur himself has developed, especially in the context of Qur'anic hermeneutics and Islamic law reform (Christmann, 2009; Duderija, 2011). However, there have not been many studies that explicitly position Shahrur's critique of sunnah as an epistemological challenge to the classical Islamic authority structure, leaving a significant theoretical gap.

Given the paucity of the literature, this article aims to systematically analyze how Muhammad Shahrur reconceptualized the Prophet's sunnah as historical ijtihād and the epistemological implications of that position for classical Islamic authority. The main focus of this study is not simply to describe Shahrur's view of the sunna, but to place it within the framework of the theory of religious knowledge, particularly as it relates to the relationship between revelation, rationality, and history. Thus, this study seeks to shift the sunna discourse from the normative-juridical area to the area of Islamic epistemology. The unit of analysis of this research is Shahrur's conceptual construction of the sunnah as formulated in his primary works, especially *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān* (1990) and *Nahwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiqh al-Islāmī* (2000), as well as his systematic formulation in *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason* (Shahrur & Christmann, 2009). Using a qualitative-conceptual approach, this article seeks to fill a research gap that has tended to portray Shahrur as a legal reformer or progressive interpreter, without exploring the epistemological implications of the claim that sunnah is not a normative revelation but a product of the Prophet's historical praxis.

The main argument of this article is that Muhammad Shahrur reconstructed the Prophet's sunnah not as a transhistorical source of normative revelation, but as the result of historical ijtihād tied to a particular social, political, and cultural context. The conceptual distinction between nubūwah and risālah serves as the main epistemological device for limiting revelation to the Qur'an, while the practice of the Prophet is placed in the realm of rational, contextual human action (Shahrur, 1990). Within this framework, the sunna loses its claim to normative universality and is positioned as a historical example of the translation of Qur'anic values, rather than as a source of independent legislation. The hypothesis of this study is that the reconceptualization of sunna as historical ijtihād

constitutes epistemological criticism of the classical Islamic authority structure that sanctifies the post-prophetic tradition. By moving the center of legitimacy from textual transmission to the critical rationality and value of the Qur'an, Shahrur offers a restructuring of Islamic epistemology that is more open to history and context. This article argues that the position is not simply a methodological difference in Islamic law, but an epistemological project that challenges basic assumptions about the source, validity, and authority of religious knowledge in Islam (Hallaq, 2009).

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sunna in the Classical Islamic Tradition

In the classical Islamic tradition, the Sunnah of the Prophet is considered the second normative source after the Qur'an and is often understood as a "second revelation" (al-waḥy al-thānī). This conceptual foundation is systematically formulated by al-Shāfi'ī, who affirms that the sunnah has binding authority because it explains, details, and even establishes laws not explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an. In this framework, sunnah is not seen as a product of history, but rather as an integral part of the divine will transmitted through the Prophet (Hallaq, 1997). Al-Ghazālī then reinforces this position by placing the sunna within the epistemological structure of Islamic law as a postulate of qaṭ'ī when derived from authentic hadith, thereby making it normatively equivalent to the text of written revelation. This approach forms a paradigm of Islamic law that emphasizes obedience to textual authority and the transmission of narration as a source of legal and moral legitimacy (Reinhart, 1983). Within the classical framework, criticism of the sunna is seen as a threat to epistemic stability and religious authority.

Ibn Ḥazm, of the Ẓāhirī tradition, took an even stricter position by rejecting qiyās and affirming the literal supremacy of the Qur'an and sunna as the only legitimate sources of law. For Ibn Ḥazm, the Prophet's sunnah is an expression of God's will that cannot be reduced to a product of human ijtihad, thus closing the space for contextual interpretation based on historical rationality (Hallaq, 2009). This paradigm shows that the authority of the sunna in the classical tradition is not only normative but also epistemological, as it determines what constitutes legitimate religious knowledge. Contemporary studies show that this construction has established a scientific hierarchy that places the scholars of hadith and fuqaha as the custodians of the final meaning of the sunna, while the historical and social dimensions of the Prophet's practice are often ignored (Brown, 2009). Thus, the sunnah in the classical tradition serves to stabilize law and authority, but it also limits the possibility of a critical reading of the Prophet's historical context.

2.2. Modern Criticism of Sunna Authority

Modern criticism of the authority of the Sunnah emerged alongside the development of historical and hermeneutic approaches in Islamic studies. Fazlur Rahman presents sunna as a living tradition, viewing it not as a static collection of normative texts but as the ethical practice of the Prophet, continually reinterpreted by the Muslim community in light of its historical context (Rahman, 1982). This approach shifts the focus from the literalism of the hadith to the moral principles underlying the Prophet's actions. In this context, sunnah is understood as a dynamic interpretive process rather than a closed source of law. Rahman's approach opens a space for criticism of the absolutization of hadith and provides a foundation for modern ijtihad responsive to

social change (Saeed, 2006). Nevertheless, Rahman's criticism maintains the normative dimension of sunna as a source of ethics, thereby avoiding a complete deconstruction of its epistemological authority.

A more radical approach was developed by Mohammed Arkoun and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. Arkoun criticizes what he calls *the dogmatic closure in classical Islamic reasoning, in which the sunnah serves as an instrument of ideological legitimacy, closing the space for* historical criticism (Arkoun, 2003). He emphasized the importance of reading the sunnah in the historical framework of knowledge production, not as an ahistorical truth. Meanwhile, Abu Zayd situated the sunna within the power relationship among the text, authority, and the interpreter. He argues that the sanctification of sunnah is the result of a historical and political process, not a theological inevitability (Abu Zayd, 2006). These criticisms marked an important shift from legal debate to the realm of epistemology and theory of religious knowledge, but they were still rarely systematically developed in the context of the thought of certain figures such as Muhammad Shahrur.

2.3. Muhammad Shahrur's Position in Discourse

Muhammad Shahrur occupies a unique position in the discourse of modern criticism of the Sunna, combining structural rationalism with systematic linguistic and epistemological analysis. Unlike Rahman or Abu Zayd, Shahrur expressly distinguishes between divine revelation and the historical practice of the Prophet, using the terms nubūwah and risālah. In this framework, Sunna does not have the status of revelation, but is the result of the Prophet's ijtihad in responding to the social realities of his time (Christmann, 2009). This approach reflects *an epistemological anti-taqlid* attitude, in which classical scientific authority is not accepted a priori, but is tested on the basis of rationality and epistemic coherence. Studies of Shahrur show that he consistently rejects the claims of the sacredness of hadith and returns full normative authority to the Qur'an (El Shamsy, 2013).

Although Shahrur's thought is often discussed in the context of Qur'anic hermeneutics, studies that specifically treat his criticism of the sunnah as an epistemological issue remain very limited. Most of the literature discusses Shahrur as a legal reformer or progressive interpreter without delving into the epistemological implications of the claim that Sunna is historical ijtihad (Duderija, 2011). As a result, the dimensions of Shahrur's challenge to classical Islamic authority structures have not been comprehensively analyzed. It is this emptiness that is the focus of this article, by placing sunna as a field of epistemic contestation between revelation, rationality, and history. With this approach, this article not only enriches the study of Shahrur but also contributes to the broader discourse on reforming contemporary Islamic epistemology.

3. Methods

3.1. Material Objects

The material object of this research is Muhammad Shahrur's idea of the sunna of the Prophet as formulated in his primary works, especially *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirāʾah Muʿāṣirah* (1990) and *Nahwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiqh al-Islāmī* (2000), as well as systematically reconstructed in *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason: The Sunna of the Prophet* (Shahrur & Christmann, 2009). The study focuses on the conceptualization of sunna as the historical ijtihād of the Prophet, the distinction

between nubūwah and risālah, and Shahrur's criticism of the sacredization of hadith and of claims of classical Islamic epistemic authority. Thus, Shahrur–Christmann's book is treated as an integrated conceptual representation of Shahrur's epistemological position, developed across his corpus of Arabic works.

3.2. Research Design

This research uses a qualitative design with a conceptual-analytical approach. This approach was chosen because the research was not intended to test empirical hypotheses but to conduct a systematic analysis of the conceptual constructions and epistemological assumptions in Muhammad Shahrur's thought, as stated in his primary works. This design allows researchers to examine the sunnah as a *religious knowledge category*, as well as examine its epistemic status shift from transhistorical normative sources to historical *ijtihād* products. Thus, a conceptual-analytical approach is used to situate Shahrur's ideas within the landscape of contemporary Islamic epistemological debates, without relying on empirical generalizations.

3.3. Data Source

The primary source of data for this research is the texts by Muhammad Shahrur, especially his discussion of the Sunnah of the Prophet in *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah Mu'āṣirah* (1990) and *Nahwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiqh al-Islāmī* (2000), as well as his conceptual representation in the chapter "The Sunna of the Prophet" in *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason* (Shahrur & Christmann, 2009). Secondary data sources include the classical literature *of uṣūl al-fiqh*, as well as contemporary studies on the sunnah, religious authority, and the epistemology of Islam, published in reputable international journals and reference academic books. This sorting allows for a balanced analysis between Shahrur's primary ideas and the theoretical context that surrounds them.

3.4. Data Collection Techniques

Data collection was carried out through *library research*, systematically examining primary texts by Muhammad Shahrur and relevant secondary literature. This process includes identifying the key concepts, argument structures, and epistemological terminology that Shahrur used in constructing his critique of the status of the Sunna. Data were collected through close *reading* and thematic recording of sections of the text directly related to the conceptualization of the sunna as historical ijtihād, the nubūwah-risālah distinction, and the criticism of the sacralization of hadith and the epistemic authority of classical Islam. This approach enables a consistent, controlled conceptual mapping of Shahrur's ideas.

3.5. Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using conceptual and epistemological analysis. The analysis examines the internal relationships among the concepts of sunna, revelation, *ijtihād*, and the authority of knowledge as formulated in the primary works of Muhammad Shahrur. The analysis stage includes mapping the structure of argumentation, identifying epistemological assumptions, and tracing the conceptual implications of treating sunnah as a historical practice of the Prophet. Furthermore, the epistemic construction is implicitly read comparatively alongside the classical Islamic epistemological paradigm, without making normative judgments. This approach allows for the

systematic disclosure of the theoretical implications of Shahrur's thought on the structure of Islamic religious authority, as represented in the conceptual reconstruction of Shahrur–Christmann (2009).

4. Result

4.1 Sunnah as a Product of the Prophet's Historical Ijtihād

An analysis of Muhammad Shahrur's primary works shows that he consistently defines the Prophet's sunnah as the result of the historical *ijtihād* performed by the Prophet Muhammad in certain social, political, and cultural contexts. In *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirāʾah Muʿāṣirah*, Shahrur affirms a strict separation between divine revelation (*al-waḥy al-ilāhī*), limited to the Qur'an, and the practice of the Prophet, which falls within the realm of human and rational action (Shahrur, 1990). The Sunna, in this sense, is not positioned as part of revelation, but rather as the Prophet's praxic response to the empirical reality of 7th-century Arab society. Textual data show that Shahrur rejects categorizing the sunna as a source of transhistorical knowledge, since the Prophet's every action is tied to the social conditions and needs of a particular community. This description presents sunna as a product of history, inseparable from the context of its formation.

A further reading of *Nahwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiqh al-Islāmī* shows that Shahrur explicitly uses the term *ijtihād* to emphasize the rational and contextual dimensions of the sunna. He described the Prophet as a social actor who makes rational judgments in addressing the problems of his society, including in law, politics, and social relations (Shahrur, 2000). In the text, Shahrur states that not all of the Prophet's actions are based on direct revelation, but rather on practical considerations that can change according to the situation and the needs of society. This data shows that the Prophet's practices are varied and situational, and may differ depending on the historical context. This description aligns with the findings of modern Islamic historiography, which record the diversity of the Prophet's practices in responding to the social conditions of early Medina (Hodgson, 1974).

In addition, the textual data of Shahrur's work also show a rejection of the use of sunna as a source of law that stands alone and is independent of the Qur'an. In *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān*, Shahrur asserts that normative universality is inherent only in Qur'anic values, while the sunnah serves as the application of these values in a specific historical context (Shahrur, 1990). Sunna, thus, is positioned as an applicative practice that has no claim to normative universality. This conceptual representation is then systematically reformulated in *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason*, which asserts that sunnah serves as a historical example of the translation of Qur'anic principles, rather than as a source of transhistorical legislation (Shahrur & Christmann, 2009). These findings are consistent with contemporary studies that clearly distinguish between normative values and historical practices in early Islam (Brown, 2014).

4.2 The Distinction of Nubūwah and Risālah as Epistemic Frameworks

The analysis of Muhammad Shahrur's primary works shows that the distinction between nubūwah and risālah is a fundamental conceptual framework for determining the epistemic status of the Prophet's sunnah. In *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirāʾah Muʿāṣirah*, Shahrur defines *nubūwah* as the function of receiving divine revelation, absolute and limited to the Qur'an, while risālah is understood as the process of conveying, applying, and actualizing the revelation in a specific social and historical

context (Shahrur, 1990). Textual data indicate that the entire content of revelation is found exclusively in the Qur'an, while the actions, decisions, and practices of the Prophet Muhammad are situated in the realm *of risālah,* which is human and contextual. With this separation, the sunna is not categorized as part of revelation, but rather as an expression of the Prophet's praxis in responding to the social realities of 7th-century Arab society. This description shows that Shahrur consistently rejects the union of the Prophet's actions with the status of normative revelation and asserts that prophetic practice always occurs within specific historical boundaries and empirical conditions.

A reading of *Al-Islām wa al-Īmān: Manẓūmah al-Qiyam* shows that the *distinction between nubūwah and risālah was* also used by Shahrur to systematically distinguish between the value dimension and the practice dimension in Islam. In this work, Shahrur explains that universal and transhistorical values are derived from the revelation of the Qur'an, while religious practices—including sunna—represent efforts to translate these values into specific social situations (Shahrur, 1996). Textual data show that sunna is not positioned as a source of value but rather as a form of value actualization, always tied to the context of space and time. Thus, the sunna does not have a stand-alone normative status, but is derivative of the principles of the Qur'an. This description confirms that, according to Shahrur, the universality of Islam does not lie in the form of the Prophet's practice but in the underlying values. This separation allows Shahrur to place the sunna within a distinct epistemological framework from revelation, without denying its historical role in the formation of early religious practices.

The textual data from *Nahwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiqh al-Islāmī* show that Shahrur used the nubūwah–risālah distinction as a conceptual tool to critique the classical Islamic epistemological construction that equates sunna with a second revelation. In the work, Shahrur notes that the equating between Qur'anic revelation and the practice of the Prophet has blurred the line between absolute divine messages and historical human actions (Shahrur, 2000). According to the textual data, this obscuration affects the transhistorical expansion of the normative authority of the Sunna and renders it a source of binding law outside its original context. The same conceptual representation is later reaffirmed in *The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason*, where the sunnah is described as part of the *realm of risālah*, which has no revelational status and makes no claim to normative universality (Shahrur & Christmann, 2009). These findings show that *the nubūwah–risālah* distinction serves as a systematic basis for limiting the epistemic status of sunna in Shahrur's thought.

4.3 Criticism of the Sanctification of Hadith and the Epistemic Authority of Classical Islam

The analysis of Muhammad Shahrur's primary works shows that there is a systematic critique of the process of sacralization of hadith in the classical Islamic tradition. In *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirāʾah Muʿāṣirah*, Shahrur asserts that hadith—as a verbal account of the Prophet's actions and sayings—is a product of human transmission that cannot be equated with Qur'anic revelation (Shahrur, 1990). Textual data show that Shahrur rejects the notion that hadith has an epistemic status equivalent to the Qur'an, both in terms of origin and degree of certainty. He noted that the process of codification of hadith took place long after the Prophet's death and was influenced by certain social, political, and ideological dynamics. This description situates the hadith within the history of knowledge rather than the realm of divine revelation. Thus, the sacredization of hadith is understood

as a post-prophetic epistemic construction that does not derive directly from the Prophet Muhammad's experience of revelation.

A reading of *Nahwa Uṣūl Jadīdah li al-Fiqh al-Islāmī* shows that Shahrur's criticism of the hadith is not directed at a total rejection of the prophetic tradition, but rather at its claim of absolute epistemic authority. In this work, Shahrur describes how *classical uṣūl al-fiqh* builds the structure of legal authority by making hadith the second normative source after the Qur'an (Shahrur, 2000). Textual data indicate that Shahrur viewed this construction as the result of classical scholars' methodological decisions, not as a decree of revelation. He notes that the elevation of the hadith to the position of second revelation has expanded the tradition's transhistorical normative authority. This description suggests that, in Shahrur's view, the hadith serves as a historical source of information about the Prophet's practices rather than as a universal, binding normative knowledge base.

A conceptual critique of the sacralization of hadith is also found in The Qur'an, Morality and Critical Reason, where Shahrur asserts that epistemic authority in Islam should be limited to the Qur'an as the sole source of absolute normative truth (Shahrur & Christmann, 2009). Textual data show that the sunnah and hadith are placed as products of human knowledge that are open to rational evaluation and historical criticism. In this framework, Shahrur describes the shift of authority from revelation to tradition as an epistemic phenomenon that occurred in post-Prophetic Islamic history. These findings show that Shahrur's criticism is directed not only at the hadith as a text, but also at the classical Islamic epistemological structure that institutionalizes religious authority based on traditional transmission. Thus, the study's results show that criticism of the sacredization of hadith is an integral part of Shahrur's attempt to limit the epistemic authority claims of the classical Islamic tradition.

5. Discussion

This paragraph summarizes the study's main findings. The results of the study show that Muhammad Shahrur consistently positioned the Sunna of the Prophet as a product *of historical ijtihād*, born of a particular social and cultural context, rather than a transhistorical normative revelation (Shahrur, 1990; Shahrur, 2000). The distinction between *nubūwah* and *risālah* serves as the main epistemological device for limiting the scope of revelation in the Qur'an, while the practice of the Prophet falls within the domain of historical application (Shahrur, 1996). In addition, the findings also show a systematic critique of the sacralization of hadith and the construction of classical Islamic epistemic authority that makes sunnah an independent source of law (Shahrur & Christmann, 2009). Overall, these results confirm that Shahrur's thought constructs an Islamic epistemological framework that consciously limits the normative claims of tradition and posits the Qur'an as the sole source of absolute authority.

Reflection on these findings reveals a fundamental shift in the orientation of Islamic epistemology from the paradigm of transmission to that of contextual rationality. By understanding the sunna as a historical practice, Shahrur does not reject the significance of the Prophet but criticizes the way post-prophetic traditions institutionalize the authority of absolute knowledge (Shahrur, 2000). This reflection shows that Shahrur's criticism is directed at epistemic structures, not at Islamic moral values themselves. In this context, the sunna remains understood as a historical and ethical reference, but loses its claim to normative universality. This position aligns with contemporary

criticism of the absolutization of tradition in the history of Islamic thought, particularly in the context of the relationship among text, authority, and power (Arkoun, 2003; Abu Zayd, 2006).

The theoretical interpretation of the research findings shows that the redefinition of sunnah as *historical ijtihād* directly affects the restructuring of religious knowledge sources in Islam. In Shahrur's framework, normative authority is not determined by traditional transmission, but rather by its rational coherence and conformity with Qur'anic principles (Shahrur, 1990). This interpretation shows that Shahrur's epistemology is hierarchical, with the Qur'an as the absolute source and the sunna and hadith as products of human knowledge open to historical and rational criticism (Shahrur & Christmann, 2009). Thus, the reformulation of the concept of sunnah is not just a matter of legal methodology, but part of a broader epistemological project to rearrange the relationship between revelation, reason, and history in modern Islamic thought.

In a comparative perspective, Shahrur's position stands out for its significant differences from other modern Muslim thinkers. Fazlur Rahman, for example, understands sunna as a *living tradition* that still has a normative dimension through moral generalization (Rahman, 1982). Shahrur goes further by rejecting the transhistorical normative claims of the Prophet's practice as a whole. Compared to Arkoun and Abu Zayd, Shahrur emphasizes historicity but differs in his systematic, normative, rational-structural approach (Arkoun, 2003; Abu Zayd, 2006). Thus, the study's findings place Shahrur in a unique position within the spectrum of contemporary Islamic thought as a formulator of an alternative epistemology that seeks to reconstruct the foundations of Islamic religious authority.

As a follow-up, the findings of this study open the door to further research into the implications of Shahrur's epistemology for contemporary Islamic legal practice. Further research can compare the application of Shahrur's epistemological framework and classical uṣūl al-fiqh to actual legal issues, such as family law, human rights, and public ethics. In addition, further studies can also explore the intellectual and institutional responses to Shahrur's ideas in various Muslim contexts (Hallaq, 2009). Thus, this discussion affirms that Shahrur's thought is relevant not only as a theoretical critique but also as an analytical framework for understanding the transformation of religious authority in modern Islam.

6. Conclusion

This research shows that Muhammad Shahrur reconstructed the Prophet's sunnah as *a historical ijtihād* rooted in a specific social and historical context, rather than a transhistorical normative revelation. Through the conceptual distinction between nubūwah and risālah, Shahrur consistently separates the realm of absolute divine revelation from the Prophet's human and contextual praxic actions. The main findings of this study confirm that, within Shahrur's epistemic framework, normative authority is fully vested in the Qur'an, while sunna is understood as the application of Qur'anic values in specific historical contexts. Thus, the sunnah is not treated as an independent source of law, but rather as a rational expression of the Prophet's response to the social realities of his time. These findings affirm that Shahrur's criticism of sunnah operates at the epistemological level of religious knowledge, not solely on differences of legal opinion.

The main contribution of this article lies in affirming the epistemological dimension in Muhammad Shahrur's criticism of the Prophet's sunnah. In contrast to previous studies that tend to

position Shahrur as a legal reformer or progressive interpreter of the Qur'an, this article shows that Shahrur's ideas fundamentally challenge the epistemic authority structure of classical Islam. By positioning sunna as historical ijtihad, this article expands the discourse of contemporary Islamic studies by presenting sunna as a matter of knowledge theory, not just a normative source or object of hadith study. This contribution also enriches the debate on the reform of Islamic thought by offering an analytical framework for distinguishing between revelation, prophetic praxis, and the construction of religious authority. Methodologically, this article shows the relevance of the conceptual-epistemological approach in rereading the Islamic tradition.

This research is limited because it focuses on a single thinker and a single corpus of texts, thereby not covering a range of views within the broader Islamic tradition. Therefore, further research is recommended to conduct a comparative study of Shahrur's thought with that of other modern Muslim thinkers, such as Fazlur Rahman and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, to deepen understanding of the shift in sunnah epistemology in contemporary Islam. In addition, further research can examine the practical implications of conceptualizing sunnah as historical ijtihad for modern Islamic law and ethics, such as human rights, gender, and pluralism. An empirical study of the acceptance and resistance to Shahrur's ideas among academics and the Muslim community can also be a productive research direction to test the relevance and limits of his approach

References

Abu Zayd, N. H. (2006). *Reformation of Islamic thought: A critical historical analysis*. Amsterdam University Press. https://doi.org/10.5117/9789053569983

Arkoun, M. (2003). *Rethinking Islam: Common questions, uncommon answers*. Westview Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429498066

Brown, J. A. C. (2009). How do we know early ḥadīth critics did matn criticism? *Journal of Islamic Studies, 20*(2), 143–184. https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/etp006

Brown, J. A. C. (2014). *Misquoting Muhammad: The challenge and choices of interpreting the Prophet's legacy*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674726561

Christmann, A. (2009). Introduction. In M. Shahrur & A. Christmann, *The Qur'an, morality and critical reason: The sunna of the prophet* (pp. 1–25). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004178742.i-260

Donner, F. M. (2010). *Muhammad and the believers: At the origins of Islam*. Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.4159/harvard.9780674050970

Duderija, A. (2011). *Constructing a religio-intellectual identity in contemporary Islamic thought: Neo-traditional Salafi and progressive Muslim approaches*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230118121

El Shamsy, A. (2013). The social construction of orthodoxy. *Journal of Islamic Studies, 24*(1), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1093/jis/ets064

Griffel, F. (2009). *Al-Ghazālī's philosophical theology*. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195331629.001.0001

Hallaq, W. B. (1997). Was the gate of ijtihad closed? *International Journal of Middle East Studies, 16*(1), 3–41. https://doi.org/10.2307/1595739

Hallaq, W. B. (2009). *The impossible state: Islam, politics, and modernity's moral predicament*. Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/hall14892

Hodgson, M. G. S. (1974). *The venture of Islam: Conscience and history in a world civilization* (Vol. 1). University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226346861.001.0001

Rahman, F. (1982). *Islam and modernity: Transformation of an intellectual tradition*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226702865.001.0001

Reinhart, K. (1983). Islamic law as Islamic ethics. *Journal of Religious Ethics, 11*(2), 186–203. https://doi.org/10.2307/40014949

Saeed, A. (2006). *Islamic thought: An introduction*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203088864

Shahrur, M. (1990). *Al-Kitāb wa al-Qur'ān: Qirā'ah muʿāṣirah*. Damascus: Al-Ahali.

Shahrur, M. (1996). *Al-Islām wa al-Īmān: Manẓūmah al-qiyam*. Damascus: Al-Ahali.

Shahrur, M. (2000). *Nahwa uṣūl jadīdah li al-fiqh al-islāmī*. Damascus: Al-Ahali.

Shahrur, M., & Christmann, A. (2009). *The Qur'an, morality and critical reason: The sunna of the prophet*. Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004178742.i-260