



## **Traditional Islam and Modern Atheism According To Mustafa Sabri's Thought**

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### **Abstract**

Mustafa Sabri (1869-1954) was the last Islamic sheikh of the Ottoman Caliphate who adhered to the traditional madhhab, as depicted in his work entitled *Mauqif al-'Aql wa al-'Ilm wa al-'Aalam min Rabb al-'Alamin wa Ibadihi al-Mursalin*. The central issue in Sabri's work revolves around countering the secularization of the Islamic world, particularly the efforts led by Mustafa Kemal Pasha. This research adopts a library research approach, focusing exclusively on analyzing Sabri's *Mauqif al-'Aql wa al-'Ilm wa al-'Aalam min Rabb al-'Alamin wa Ibadihi al-Mursalin* as the primary source. The findings of this research reveal that, according to Sabri, religion is the most fundamental principle, one that is unchangeable by anyone. Sabri clearly distinguishes between faith and deeds, emphasizing that Islam is primarily a religion of faith rather than merely one of deeds. This is because, in Sabri's view, a person's faith determines whether their deeds are accepted in religion.

**Keywords:** Traditional Islam, Modern Atheism, Mustafa Sabri

## Introduction

Humans today are increasingly aware that the current natural crisis is not only caused by material factors but also by a lack of transcendental awareness—specifically, the human perspective on nature. This awareness initially does not stem from spiritual insight but from materialistic concerns triggered by environmental crises, including fuel shortages, food insecurity, and health threats. One of the tangible manifestations of the environmental crisis is the extensive damage to the natural environment caused by humanity's domineering attitude toward nature, such as illegal logging and the overexploitation of natural resources (Akhwanudin, 2019).

In addition, a so-called digital society has emerged. This digital society was born from the development of information technology, which has created a new world or community that exists between the real world and the virtual (cyber) world. This phenomenon illustrates the shift in the role of spiritual teachers, who have now been replaced by virtual figures, giving rise to the term "cyber religion"—knowledge about religion disseminated through online media or cyberspace. The aim of this book is to explore the impact of communication technology on the world's major religions, with a focus on the roles of the internet, television, computers, and smartphones. The role of religious leaders, particularly in guiding the development and social interactions of adolescents in Islam, needs to be strengthened to address issues like teenage promiscuity (Saefulloh, 2022).

All religions on this earth desire that their followers remain steadfast in their religious traditions. However, this does not imply that religious teachings should be interpreted as barriers to human innovation and progress (Kurzman, 2002). Every religion certainly wants its adherents to advance and fully realize their potential, but without being disconnected from the sacred values laid out in their religious teachings. Modern Western civilization, while materially successful, has brought humanity to a level of material progress and achievement (Aisyah, 2016).

Traditional Islam is offered as an alternative to modernity, which is often criticized for its inability to perceive the reality of life in its entirety. The vision of traditional Islam is more holistic, as it views reality within a larger framework connected to divinity. The true teachings of Islam are filled with noble principles that promote peace, gentleness, and compassion. However, these teachings have sometimes been misrepresented, showing Islam with a rigid, frightening, and even terrifying face to the world (Kulsum, 2019). The modern age is often considered the pinnacle of scientific progress because

modern science has been able to present and manipulate aspects of nature and humanity. Technological innovations have made human life more practical and efficient. With sophisticated tools, humans can move faster, explore natural resources more easily, and address various medical challenges (Hamka, 2019). Modernization, therefore, is the process of overhauling old, irrational ways of thinking and working, and replacing them with new, rational patterns of thought and procedures. Its goal is to achieve maximum utility and efficiency, using the latest discoveries in science. Modernization is a form of social change, typically directed and based on planned progress (Lenawati, 2019).

All forms of knowledge ultimately originate from Allah SWT, as the purpose of such knowledge is to discern the truth, and all truth comes from Allah SWT. This includes the truths found in scientific realities. The Qur'an and Sunnah are the foundations of the sciences that exist on this earth, although some argue that not all contemporary sciences are based on these sources. Regardless of the origins of this knowledge, a significant challenge facing Islamic education today is the separation of religious knowledge from general science (Ritonga, 2019).

The method used is library research, with Mustafa Sabri's work serving as the primary source. This includes his work *Mauqif al-'Aql wa al-'Ilm wa al-'Aalam min Rabb al-'Alamin wa 'Ibadihi al-Mursalin*. Researchers also utilize secondary sources; such as studies that examine Mustafa Sabri. To fully capture Sabri's thoughts, the discussion begins with a biography of Sabri, as is customary in character studies, and includes an exploration of the social context during his career as a traditional Islamic thinker. Finally, Sabri's ideas are mapped into Mehmet Karabela's schema, which outlines the profile of his life and thoughts, including his views on faith, charity, Sufism, and the role of reason.

### **Mustafa Sabri's Profile**

Mustafa Sabri Effendi was the last Sheikh al-Islam of the Ottoman Empire, known for his strong opposition to the Turkish nationalist movement led by Kemal Ataturk. Due to his resistance to Ataturk, he spent half of his life in exile across various countries and eventually died in Egypt. His father, Ahmed Efendi, raised him in Tokat, where Sabri was born in 1869. He began his education in his hometown, quickly memorizing the Qur'an. He continued his studies in Kayseri and Constantinople (now Istanbul), where he learned under Ahmed Asim Efendi and received his certificate of proficiency, known as an *icazet* (Terzic, 2009). Sabri married Ulviye Hanim, the daughter of his teacher,

Asim Efendi, and they had two daughters, Sabiha and Nezahet, and a son named Ibrahim. After passing the *Ruus-ı Tedris* (teaching qualification exam), he became a teacher (*muderris*) at the Fatih Mosque (Zilfi, 1988).

From 1898 to 1914, Sabri attended the *Huzoor* lessons, a series of lectures and discussions given by scholars before the Sultan. Between 1900 and 1904, he served as the librarian (*hafiz-i pole*) for Sultan Abdul Hamid II (who reigned from 1876-1909). In addition to his studies in logic, Sabri also delved into various theories and literary criticism. After his time in Kayseri, Sabri migrated to Istanbul to further his education. Under the guidance of Seyf Atif Bey and Ahmad Asim Efendi, he studied *aqidah* and *ushul fiqh*. The intellectual environment in Istanbul allowed Sabri to interact with various Islamic scholars of the time. In 1904, Sabri was reappointed as a teacher at Jami' Sultan al-Fatih, where he later received an Ottoman medal. In 1905, Sabri was elected as a member of the committee of scholars and researchers of Islamic studies (*Tadqiqat wa Ta'lifat Islamiyyah hayati Ilmiyyasi*) (Karabela, 2003). There, he engaged in debates and studies with modern Islamic scholars and was appointed to teach Qur'anic interpretation at *Madrasat al-Wa'izin* and *Dar al-Funun* (Terzic, 2009).

Sheikh Mustafa Sabri's presence in Istanbul attracted the attention of the *Ulama* due to his sharp intellect, wisdom, and strong memorization skills. Among the scholars who influenced Sabri was Sheikh Ahmed Asim Efendi, who also granted him his diploma, or *tauliah*. At just 12 years old, Sabri was appointed as part of the teaching staff at the Sultan Muhammad al-Fatih Mosque, a highly respected "university" within the Ottoman Empire's scientific institutions at that time (Zilfi, 1988). This was a significant achievement, usually attained only after a long and difficult period of study (Karabela, 2003).

After the reformation of the Constitution in July 1908, Sabri entered Parliament as a representative of Tokat, thus becoming the people's representative for Bandar Tokat in the *Meclis-i Mebusan*, the Ottoman Parliament (Sabri, 1981). This position followed his vocal advocacy at the *Majlis* in his hometown of Tokat. In 1919, Sabri was appointed Sheikh al-Islam, the highest religious authority of the Ottoman Empire. A memorizer of the Qur'an since childhood, he completed his education in Istanbul (Ormsby, 1984).

From 1908 to 1912, Sabri was the editor-in-chief of the journal *Bayan-ul-Haq* (The Fair of Truth), an intellectual publication by *Cemiyet-i Ilmiye* (Association of Religious Scholars). Although he initially praised the CUP (Committee on Unity and Progress) and the army for ending the Hamidian regime in an article in the first issue of *Bayan-ul-Haq*, he soon joined the

opposition to the party. He became a founding member of the Ahali (People's) party in 1910 and the *Hürriyet ve İtilaf* (Liberal Entente) party in 1911. In 1912, he participated in the founding of another political organization, *Cemiyet-i İttihad-i İslamiye* (Islamic Association of Unions).

In January 1913, following the Bab I Ali coup, Sabri fled to Egypt and then to Romania, where he earned a living teaching Turkish. After the Ottoman forces occupied Romania during the First World War, he was captured and sent to Turkey, where he was imprisoned in Bilecik and temporarily exiled to Bursa. After the war, he returned to politics and joined *Dar-ul Hikmet-islamiyya* (Islamic University). Although he was reappointed as Sheikh al-Islam in 1919 in Damad Ferid Pasha's cabinet, Sabri eventually resigned from this position. He also served as acting Grand Vizier during Damad Ferid Pasha's absence when he attended the Paris Peace Conference and was nominated to the Senate after the fall of Ferid Pasha's cabinet. Sabri became the first president of the *Cemiyet-i Muderrisin* (Society of Islamic Scholars), which later became the *Teali-i Islam Cemiyeti* (Society for Islamic Highness) (Kocer, 1972).

In 1920, Sabri was reappointed as Sheikh al-Islam in Damad Ferid's second cabinet. In 1922, he fled Turkey once again to avoid capture by nationalists when his name appeared on a list of 150 political dissidents. He went to Romania for the second time, where he published the journal *Yarın* (Tomorrow). Sabri then moved to Greece, where he published an anti-Kemalist newspaper, vehemently criticizing the new Turkish regime and its founder, Kemal Ataturk (1881-1938). Following the transition of power from the Ottoman Empire to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, Turkey experienced significant turmoil, prompting Sabri to leave the country in search of safety for his family. From 1922 to 1932, Sabri lived in various countries, including Egypt, Hijaz, Lebanon, Romania, and Greece. During this time, Sabri was one of the 150 prominent figures closely monitored by the Turkish government until 1924. In 1932, Sabri returned to Cairo, where he remained in exile despite receiving an apology from Mustafa Kemal in 1938. Sabri rejected the apology, stating, "He has forgiven me, but I will never forgive him." Sabri continued to live in exile in Cairo until his death on March 12, 1954 (Terzic, 2009).

Mustafa Sabri produced many books in both Turkish and Arabic. However, his most famous work is *Mauqif al-'Aql wa al-'Ilm wa al-'Aalam min Rabb al-'Alamin wa Ibadihi al-Mursalin* (The Position of Reason, Knowledge, and Nature concerning the Lord of the Worlds and His Apostles), published in Cairo in 1950 (Hazrizal, 2014). In addition to the book *Mauqif al-'Aql wa al-'Ilm*

wa al-Aalam min Rabb al-Alamin wa Ibadihi al-Mursalin, among his other books are: (1) *Islam' and Munaqasyah hedef Olan Meseller* (Issues of Controversy in Islam), Istanbul, 1908-1912, 208 pages. This work is a compilation of a series of articles that appeared in *Beyanul-Hak* from 1908 to 1911. The articles were edited and published in book form in 1987. In this collection, Sabri discusses matters such as the origins of Islamic classical sciences, polygamy, photography, divorce, labor and capital in Islam, inheritance, almsgiving (zakat), the role of music in Islam, insurance, gambling, veiling, and alms given in lieu of ritual fasting (fidya); (2) *Yeni İslam Müctehidlerinin Kıymet-i İlmiyesi* (Contemporary Reformed Muslim Intellectual Ideas), Istanbul, 1919, 164 pages. In this work, Sabri criticizes the reformist approach of Musa Cârullah Bigiyef (1875-1942) concerning the eternity of Hell. The views of classical Muslim scholars, particularly Ibn al-'Arabi and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziya, on the eternity of Hell, punishment (*mas'alah al-khulud*), and God's universal mercy are examined; (3) *Dini Mucedditler, Yahud, Turkiye İcin Necat ve İtila Yollarında Bir Rehbeh* (Religious Reformers, A Guide to Turkey's Salvation and Progress), Istanbul, 1922, 365 pages. This is a critique of Hasim Nahid's (1880-1962) book, *Turkiye İcin Necat İ'tila Yollari*. It contains Sabri's views on the genesis of the Ottoman-Turk government and the causes and consequences of its failures. In this context, Sabri discusses issues such as continuity and change in Islamic law, the gate of *ijtihad*, the doctrine of *maqasid al-shariah* (the goals or objectives of law), the perception of dignity in Islamic ethics, the notion of conservatism, the origins of idleness in the Muslim world, the Islamic world's intellectual capacity in understanding Western civilization, the concept of individualism and family life in Muslim societies, equality of men and women, and the fine distinctions between love and fear of God in Islamic theology. This book also includes a critical essay on nationalism; (4) *Qauli fi al-Mar'ah wa Muqaranatuhu bi-Aqwal Muqallib al-Gharb* (My Opinion on Women and Comparison with Those Influenced by the West), Cairo, 1935, 92 pages. In this book, Sabri criticizes the views of Egyptian scholar Ali Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966) on the caliphate and the structure of government in Islam. Sabri discusses the origins of the caliphate and government in Islam, the separation of religion (*din*) from the state (*dawlah*), the interior and international policies of the CUP, as well as British policies towards the Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey; (5) *Al-Qawl al-Fasl Baina alladina Yu'minun bi'l-Ghayb wa alladina La Yu'minun* (The Decisive Word between Those who Believe in the Unseen and Those Who Do Not), Cairo, 1942, 244 pages (Karabela, 2003). his book critiques the views of 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, Farid Wajdi, Zaki Mubarak, and Muhammad Husayn Haykal on miracles,

prophecy, and resurrection (*ba'th*). Sabri also evaluates Mahmud Shaltūt's position on the crucifixion (*rafisa*), the second coming of Jesus, the existence of Satan, and Muhammad Husayin Haykal's work *Hayat Muhammad*; (6) *Mas'alah Tarjamat al-Qur'an* (The Question of Translating the Qur'an), Cairo, 1932, 146 pages. This book analyzes the positions of various Islamic theological and jurisprudential schools on translating the Qur'an and reciting the translated version in ritual prayers. The opinions of several earlier and contemporary scholars, such as Abu Hanifa, al-Kasani, Farid Wajdi, and Shaykh al-Maraghi, are critiqued from legal, sociological, and political perspectives.

### **Mustafa Sabri's Realm of Thought**

Mustafa Sabri Effendi was a scholar known as the last Sheikh al-Islam of the Ottoman Empire. Until the end of his life, he remained steadfast in opposing the currents of secularism. In the intellectual struggle (*ghazwul fikri*) against Turkish secularists, Mustafa Sabri Effendi presented numerous arguments. For instance, in one of his books, *Mas'alah al-Tarjamat al-Qur'an*, he responded to the proposal by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's government to change the language of prayer from Arabic to Modern Turkish. With compelling arguments, Sabri Effendi rejected this secular proposal, emphasizing that Islamic teachings do not permit altering the religious practices as exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad SAW. According to Sabri, the secular rulers were intimidating Muslims (Pena, 2012).

The relationship between religion and the world, particularly concerning science, cannot be neglected by the educated in any country, just as the state cannot disregard its scholars. This connection between religion and the world ensures that worldly people do not abandon religion. The philosophy of post-naturalism, which Sabri held in high regard—despite being undervalued by Western philosophers and those who sought to separate it from science—demonstrates that knowledge rooted in religion is superior to materialistic knowledge. Sabri argued that the rational soul, which is the center of knowledge, is more than just inanimate physical matter, something incomprehensible to naturalists. The rational soul, as a "metaphysical animal," possesses qualities that distinguish it from all other animals, underscoring the close relationship between religion and science. As Allah says, He is the Most Mighty, the Greatest, and He bestows knowledge upon His servants (Sabri, 1981).

Science serves as an intermediary between religion and the world, connecting them so that both need it. Knowledge is pursued not only for its own sake but also for the pleasure it brings to the soul and its utility in other areas. While the purpose of knowledge is manifold, its true benefits are often underappreciated. Sabri expressed hope that his writings would be useful to others, particularly to those who seek knowledge for religious purposes, even if they are a small group (Sabri, 1981). Regarding the issue of religion, Sheikh Mustafa Sabri emphasized that religion is fundamental and has established principles that cannot be altered by anyone. He clearly distinguished between faith and deeds, explaining that Islam places greater emphasis on faith than on deeds alone. This is because it is one's faith that determines whether or not their deeds are accepted in religion.

Sabri further argued that Muslims should be grateful that their religion is the strongest in fostering a bond between reason and belief, as well as in forming strong ties among its adherents. Islam promotes both piety and resistance to sin, contrasting sharply with the narrow nationalist and hypocritical principles of communism. He noted that Russia, with its adherence to Bolshevism, drew immense power from the world's poor in every country that embraced it. In contrast, Muslims, through their adherence to Islam, would find even greater strength (Sabri, 1981). Among the key ideas championed by Sheikh Mustafa Sabri, are: Awareness of Muslims of the Dangers of Secularism and Western Culture; Adherence to the Understanding of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jama'ah; Khilafah Islamiyah as a Solution to the Problems of Muslims.

In ancient times, those who believed in God had faith in the unseen, i.e., they believed without witnessing it with any of their physical senses but were as convinced of its existence as if they had seen it, especially the scholars among the believers. Sabri states: This is achieved by what the professor dislikes in some of his writings, that Almighty God always reminds them of what they need for success. Over time, it became clear to the professor and his colleagues who were connected with modern Western science that evidence from antiquity was no longer considered worthy of belief. However, the professor found something better to compensate for what he had missed: insights from Western scientists in their psychological research, which he now believes and considers convincing scientific evidence. Although many other scholars disagree, stating that it is merely the delusion of those who are deceived (Sabri, 1981). Assuming it is convincing evidence, it is essential to point out that what Western researchers have discovered through empirical scientific methods is not the essence of God or His existence, but rather the existence of the soul. According

to Western scientists, the truth needs to be proven empirically. Besides empirical evidence, Western scientists also rely on logical, rational evidence. They approach this as they search for the soul, believing that between these two times, there is matter (Sabri, 1981).

It is accepted that perfection cannot be understood without the existence of a perfect being. The perfect being can only be understood in the mind, in conjunction with its existence, including its existence outside the mind. In other words, it can be understood as an external concept because the combination allows for both existing and non-existent things to be considered together. However, the appearance of a perfect thing in the mind, along with its external existence, does not imply that it exists outside. Logicians argue that there are no limits to concepts in the human mind. The human mind may feel compelled to add the concept of external existence to the concept of perfection because God is conceived as a perfect being. Thus, saying that perfect beings exist externally does not require that the combined existence in the mind has any impact on reality. It means: There is no limit to human imagination, whether true or real; Descriptive statements are considered to explain things as existing or non-existent concepts that have no limits in the human mind, even if they resemble affirmative propositions.

The extensive scholarly scope of the last Sheikh al-Islam of the Ottoman Empire made him a figure who was not overly concerned with unfounded public opinions. Instead, he focused on educating the intellectual life of Muslims, especially in his critique of secular perspectives in the modern age. This can be interpreted as a warning to Muslims to be aware of materialistic modernity so that they do not neglect to affirm their own religious beliefs (Pena, 2012). Indeed, all knowledge comes from God, and the purpose of all knowledge is to know the truth and draw closer to God. The central source of truth comes from God, including the truth of scientific realities. While the basis for scientific truth stems from the Qur'an and Sunnah, these are the foundations of all sciences on this earth, although not everyone agrees on this. This disagreement has sparked long debates between religious groups and scientists, which is where the epistemology of science emerges. The significant impact of this dynamic is the dichotomy of science, namely the separation between religious and general sciences. This dichotomy in Islamic education leads to more serious problems and contributes to setbacks in the Islamic tradition. The Islamic community has become more involved in religious sciences than in general sciences, which has caused the community to fall behind, become

outdated, and lose touch with the teachings of their religion. Furthermore, in this contemporary era, the Islamic community has become a second-class society, often following Western culture and products (Ritonga, 2019).

Apart from religious issues, Mustafa Sabri also highlighted Sufism and Islamic philosophy. According to Sabri, there are three sources of knowledge: the five senses, *Khabar al-Sadiq* (such as the Qur'an and hadith), and reason. Mustafa Sabri does not agree that inspiration should be considered a source of knowledge, as it does not belong to the realm of science. Inspiration, in his view, is an intersection in the mind that then interacts with experience and analysis, making reason the true source of truth in the thinking process (Karabela, 2003). Sabri's review provides valuable insight, especially considering that he was also a logician and debater.

Sabri was a highly accomplished and prolific critic, known for his critiques of several prominent Muslim figures of his time, including M. Abduh, M. Husain Haikal, Farid Wajdi, and Rashid Rida. These debates illustrate Sabri's role as a significant Muslim intellectual of his era (Boullata, 1990). Importantly, Sabri's criticisms were not driven by personal animosity; instead, they were part of intellectual debates aimed at enriching the discourse within the Islamic community. Through his critiques, Sabri demonstrated that Islamic thought is dynamic, diverse, and continually evolving (Rosyidi, 2014). Mustafa Sabri was a well-respected Islamic thinker, and his ideas continue to be studied. As a fervent advocate against secularism, Sabri produced numerous works. However, many of his writings are challenging to understand due to his complex style, which blends various disciplines such as philosophy, logic, Islamic studies, law, and Arabic literature (Frank, 1989).

## Conclusion

Sheikh Mustafa Sabri was born in Tokat (Turkey) in 1869. He memorized the Quran as a child and completed his education in Istanbul. In 1908, he was elected to the Ottoman Parliament and was later appointed Sheikh al-Islam (the highest religious authority of the Ottoman Empire) in 1919. He passed away in Egypt in 1954. Mustafa Sabri was an influential Islamic intellectual who made a significant impact in his time. In addition to being an Islamic thinker, Sabri was also a technocrat and politician during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. Among his many works, one of the most famous is *Mauqif al-'Aql wa al-'Ilm wa al-'Aalam min Rabb al-'Alamin wa Ibadhi al-Mursalin* (The Position of Reason, Science, and Nature in Relationship with Rabbul Alamin and the Apostles).

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