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**The Dynamics of Contemporary Islamic Thought: Between  
Traditionalism and Reform in the Context of Globalization**

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**Abstract**

Globalization has brought significant structural changes to the way Muslims understand, interpret, and articulate religious teachings in the contemporary public sphere. Contemporary Islamic thought is caught in a continuous tension between traditionalism, which emphasizes the continuity of classical scholarly authority, and reformism, which encourages contextual reinterpretation of normative Islamic texts. This article aims to analyze these dynamics by highlighting hermeneutic aspects, the transformation of religious authority, and responses to global issues such as democracy, human rights, and gender. This study uses a qualitative approach through a systematic literature review of the latest academic literature. The results show that the tension between traditionalism and reform has not produced a stable epistemological synthesis, thus requiring an integrative framework based on maqasid al-shariah and collective ijtihad to maintain the relevance of Islam in the global context without losing its traditional legitimacy.

**Keywords:** Contemporary; Islamic thought; traditionalism; globalization; Islamic hermeneutics.

## Introduction

Contemporary Islamic thought has developed in a global landscape characterized by the acceleration of information flows, intensified cross-cultural interactions, and the penetration of modern values into Muslim societies. Globalization has not only affected economic and political aspects, but has also reshaped the way religious knowledge is produced and distributed.<sup>1</sup>

In this context, Muslims face a dilemma between maintaining the authority of classical intellectual traditions and responding to the demands of global social change.<sup>2</sup> Traditionalism seeks to preserve the continuity of Islamic scientific methodology, while reformism emphasizes interpretive flexibility so that Islam remains relevant to the challenges of the times.<sup>3,4</sup>

The tension between these two approaches is not always antagonistic, but is often articulated in the form of discursive polarization that hinders constructive dialogue.<sup>5,6</sup> Globalization reinforces this tension by presenting new issues that are not explicitly discussed in classical literature, such as modern bioethics, digital rights, and global pluralism.<sup>7</sup>

## Contemporary Islamic Thought: Between Theory and Approach

Traditionalism in Islamic thought refers to an approach that places turath or classical intellectual heritage as the main reference in understanding religious teachings. This approach emphasizes the authority of scholars, the continuity of scientific sanad, and established *usul fiqh* and *tafsir* methodologies.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, Islamic reformism emphasizes the need to reinterpret religious texts by considering the socio-historical context and ethical

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<sup>1</sup> Dale F Eickelman, "Shatibi's Philosophy of Islamic Law" (JSTOR, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> T Ramadan, *Radical Reform*. Oxford University Press., 2009.

<sup>3</sup> F Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*. University of Chicago Press., 1982.

<sup>4</sup> Ramadan, *Radical Reform*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>5</sup> Islamic Civilization in the Age of Globalization: An Introduction, "Al-Irsyad. Retrieved from <https://Al-Irsyad.Uis.Edu.My/Index.Php/Alirsyad/Article/Download/513/159/4767> Al-Irsyad," n.d., <https://al-irsyad.uis.edu.my/index.php/alirsyad/article/download/513/159/4767>.

<sup>6</sup> Syamsul Ma'arif, "Reinventing Pesantren's Moderation Culture to Build a Democratic Society in the Post-Reform Republic of Indonesia," *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 27, no. 3 (2019): 1739–51.

<sup>7</sup> W B Hallaq, *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*. Cambridge University Press., 2009.

<sup>8</sup> E M Lindhardt et al., *Which Right Is Right? An Exploration of the Intersection between Religious Identity and the Human Right to Gender Equality in Two Different Teacher Education ...* (hvlopen.brage.unit.no, 2018), <https://hvlopen.brage.unit.no/hvlopen-xmlui/handle/11250/2584037>.

objectives of Islamic teachings. Thinkers such as Fazlur Rahman propose a double movement approach to bridge the text and the modern context. Globalization serves as a structural framework that brings these two tendencies together in an increasingly open and competitive public sphere. The theory of network society explains that religious authority is now distributed through digital networks, rather than solely through traditional hierarchical structures.<sup>9</sup>

Contemporary research on the dynamics of Islamic thought indicates a shift in focus from merely debating traditionalism versus reformism to more contextual studies related to the interaction of Islam with digital technology and globalization. For example, research on *digital Islam* shows that platforms such as Instagram and other social media are now important spaces for the expression of contemporary Islamic identity and practices (Exploring the intersection of Islam and digital technology, 2024). This indicates that traditionalism is no longer only tested by classical legal theory, but also by new practices involving digital social structures as part of the global context.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, research trends highlight the transformation of religious authority in the digital age as one of the most important issues. Studies on the digitization of fatwas and religious authority show that the authority of scholars is confronted with the phenomenon of online preaching, where the voices of non-scholars or digital actors are able to rival traditional legitimacy.<sup>11</sup> This research describes the biggest controversy in contemporary Islamic studies: between classical scholarly authority and new authority based on digital visibility, so that the study of traditionalism versus reformism needs to take into account the digital dimension as a force for epistemic transformation.

One area that is growing but still under-explored is the changing identity of Muslims in the context of globalization and social media. Studies on the impact of social media on 21st-century Muslim identity find that digitalization both strengthens community solidarity and poses challenges such as polarization and disinformation.<sup>12</sup>

However, quantitative empirical research that broadly maps this

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<sup>9</sup> M Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*. Wiley-Blackwell., 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Exploring the intersection of Islam and digital technology: A, "ScienceDirect. Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590291124002821> ScienceDirect," 2024, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2590291124002821>.

<sup>11</sup> Digitalization of Fatwas and Religious Authority: A Study, "IESR Journal. Retrieved from <https://iesrjournal.com/index.php/jomn/article/view/421> Iesrjournal.Com," 2025, <https://iesrjournal.com/index.php/jomn/article/view/421>.

<sup>12</sup> Enjang and D Supandi, "The Impact of Social Media on Muslim Religious Identity in the 21st Century Social and Cultural Perspective. Al-Afkar Journal for Islamic Studies. Retrieved from [https://al-afkar.com/index.php/Afkar\\_Journal/Article/View/1996](https://al-afkar.com/index.php/Afkar_Journal/Article/View/1996) Al-Afkar.Com," 2025, [https://al-afkar.com/index.php/Afkar\\_Journal/Article/View/1996](https://al-afkar.com/index.php/Afkar_Journal/Article/View/1996).

phenomenon is still limited, leaving room for research contributions that combine quantitative-qualitative analysis across global Muslim communities.<sup>13</sup> In addition, recent research trends have also begun to link contemporary Islamic thought with the phenomena of the digital market and the economics of da'wah, in which digital Islam has become not only a religious space but also a commercial one. These findings pose new methodological challenges because they place religious authority in relation to the logic of the digital economy market, which has not been widely discussed in studies of traditionalism versus reformism. This area opens up opportunities for critical studies that integrate economics, media, and Islamic thought in a more holistic manner.<sup>14</sup>

Another emerging but under-explored trend is the role of millennials in religious interpretation in the global and digital era.<sup>15</sup> Literature on millennials' perceptions of religious knowledge shows that this generation interprets Islamic teachings through a unique digital perspective, which sometimes transcends the boundaries of traditional interpretation.<sup>16</sup> This raises new research questions about how traditionalism and reformism are projected in the interpretive practices of the new generation, including their implications for epistemic legitimacy in modern Muslim communities.

Although the focus of research has shifted to the digital and global domains, theoretical studies on the adaptation of Islamic legal principles (such as *maqasid al-shariah*) to the challenges of globalization are still developing but have not been systematically integrated with new phenomena such as digital technology, the economics of da'wah, and global identity (The Role of Islamic Ethics in Preventing the Abuse of AI, 2025). Research that combines the principle of *maqasid* with contemporary digital studies can make a new contribution in uniting classical and reformist hermeneutic paradigms in an applicable way in the digital and global era.<sup>17</sup>

Based on these trends, my research will fill empirical and theoretical gaps by developing an integrative framework that combines digital dimensions, scientific authority, and *maqasid*. This approach not only

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<sup>13</sup> Muh David Balya Al, "Kemajuan Teknologi Dan Pola Hidup Manusia Dalam Perspektif Sosial Budaya," *TUTURAN: Jurnal Ilmu Komunikasi, Sosial Dan Humaniora* 1, no. 3 (2023): 26–53, <https://doi.org/10.47861/tuturan.v1i3.272>.

<sup>14</sup> Nibrosu Rohid et al., "Digital Activism in Contemporary Islamic Politics: A Critical Analysis of Social Media's Impact on Islamic Movements," *MILRev: Metro Islamic Law Review*, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.32332/milrev.v4i1.10159>.

<sup>15</sup> Sahar Khamis, "The Paradoxes of Modern Islamic Discourses and Socio-Religious Transformation in the Digital Age," *Religions*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020207>.

<sup>16</sup> John Esposito, "Islam and Secularism: Exploring the Place of Religion in Secular Society," *Religion and Secularism* 2 (2008): 4–10.

<sup>17</sup> J W Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*. Sage., 2014.

responds to controversies surrounding traditional versus digital authority but also offers an adaptive model of Islamic interpretation to the challenges of globalization. By combining cross-community digital empirical analysis and *maqasid al-shariah* studies, this research can provide a new perspective that resolves methodological and epistemological controversies in contemporary Islamic thought studies.

This research uses a qualitative approach with a systematic literature review method. Data sources include academic books, reputable journal articles, and scientific publications discussing contemporary Islamic thought, traditionalism, reform, and globalization. Data analysis is conducted through critical and comparative reading of selected literature to identify patterns of argumentation, points of tension, and opportunities for conceptual synthesis.

### **The Dynamics of Traditionalism, Reformism, and Globalization**

One of the most prominent aspects of the dynamics of contemporary Islamic thought is the difference in hermeneutic approaches between traditionalism and reformism. Traditionalism tends to prioritize a textual understanding of the Quran based on classical methodology, while reformism emphasizes contextualization and the ethical purpose of the text.<sup>18,19</sup> The transformation of religious authority in the digital age complicates these tensions. Social media allows non-traditional actors to produce and disseminate religious discourse widely, often challenging the authority of classical scholars. In responding to global issues such as democracy and human rights, contemporary Islamic thought shows a broad spectrum of views. The *maqasid al-shariah* approach is often used by reformist thinkers to bridge Islamic values with global norms.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Rahman, *Islam and Modernity*. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>19</sup> Sulaiman Ibrahim, "HERMENEUTIKA TEKS: SEBUAH WACANA DALAM METODE TAFSIR ALQURAN?," *HUNafa Jurnal Studia Islamika* 11, no. 1 (2014): 23–41.

<sup>20</sup> J Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law*. International Institute of Islamic Thought., 2008.

<sup>21</sup> Musriadi Musriadi and Andrez Jauhari, "MEMBANGUN SIKAP MODERASI BERAGAMA MELALUI PENANAMAN NILAI-NILAI KEARIFAN LOKAL YASISOPPENGI SEBAGAI MODEL DAKWAH BIL HIKMAH DALAM PERSPEKTIF AL-QUR'AN," *Al Karima : Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al Quran Dan Tafsir*; Vol 7 No 1 (2023): *Al Karima : Jurnal Studi Ilmu Al Qur'an Dan Tafsir*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.58438/js.v7i1.154>.

understanding based on classical methodology, while reformism emphasizes contextualization and the ethical purpose of the text. The transformation of religious authority in the digital age complicates these tensions. Social media allows non-traditional actors to produce and disseminate religious discourse widely, which often challenges the authority of classical scholars.

In the wave of globalization that has swept all aspects of life, the contemporary Islamic world is faced with complex and dynamic intellectual dynamics. On the one hand, there is a strong current that clings to traditional heritage (*turats*) as a bastion of identity. On the other hand, the wave of reform and renewal (*tajdid*) offers a contextual reading of religious texts to respond to the challenges of the times.<sup>22</sup> The tension between traditionalism and reform is not merely an academic debate, but touches on the legal, ethical, social, and political spheres of Muslims around the world, creating a colorful and dialectical map of thought.<sup>23</sup>

Traditionalist or revivalist thinkers argue that globalization often serves as a vehicle for Western secular and materialistic values that erode religious identity. For them, religious stability and authority stem from established scientific traditions, such as the fiqh school of thought, Asy'ari-Maturidi theology, and Sunni Sufism. This approach emphasizes continuity with the intellectual heritage of Islam's past as a source of authenticity and cultural resilience. Figures such as Sheikh Ramadhan al-Buthi or the salaf pesantren tradition in the archipelago represent this tendency, which views global modernity critically and selectively.<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to traditionalism, reformist or modernist-progressive movements seek to reconstruct religious understanding in ways that are considered more relevant to the current context. They encourage *ijtihad* in areas such as family law, gender relations, relations with non-Muslims, and biomedical ethics.<sup>25</sup> Thinkers such as Khaled Abou El Fadl, Amina Wadud, and Abdullahi an-Na'im, for example, challenge patriarchal and static readings of texts by using critical hermeneutics and emphasizing universal Islamic principles such as justice (*adl*) and benefit (*maslahah*).<sup>26,27</sup> This movement

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<sup>22</sup> Sulaiman Ibrahim and Khaerul Asfar, "The Position of Women in the Dynamics of Modern Tafsir: Study of Tafsir Al-Tahrir Wa Al-Tanwir by Muhammad Tahir Ibn' Ashur," *Jurnal Ilmiah AL-Jauhari: Jurnal Studi Islam Dan Interdisipliner* 8, no. 2 (2023): 259–72.

<sup>23</sup> John L Esposito, *The Future of Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

<sup>24</sup> Mun'im Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'an and Other Religions* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

<sup>25</sup> Abdullahi A An-Naim, "A New Islamic Politics: Faith and Human Rights in the Middle East" (JSTOR, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Ibrahim, "HERMENEUTIKA TEKS: SEBUAH WACANA DALAM METODE TAFSIR ALQURAN?"

<sup>27</sup> Abdul Muhaimin Zen et al., "Legalization Of Islamic Principles (An Analytical Study Of The Maqashidi Interpretation Approach In The Book At-Tahrir Wa At-Tanwir By

sees globalization as an opportunity for intercultural dialogue and full participation in the world's civilizational arena.<sup>28</sup>

The meeting of these two currents has given rise to spaces for dialogue, debate, and even productive conflict. Contemporary issues such as human rights, democracy, ecology, and global capitalism have become battlegrounds for discourse. Both traditionalists and reformists claim authority over the authentic Islamic narrative.<sup>29</sup> However, in practice, many Muslim communities find practical syntheses, adopting modern values in science and technology while maintaining traditional rituals and ethics. Countries with Muslim majorities also take varying positions, reflecting this dynamic tension in their public policies.<sup>30</sup>

The dynamic between traditionalism and reform in contemporary Islam ultimately demonstrates the vitality and elasticity of the religious tradition itself. This tension is not a sign of weakness, but rather a healthy process of adaptation in response to a rapidly changing world.<sup>31</sup> The future of Islamic thought is unlikely to be dominated by a single absolute winner, but will continue to be marked by the coexistence, competition, and hybridization of various ideas. Understanding this dialectic is essential to appreciating the internal diversity of the Islamic world and building bridges for constructive dialogue in the global era.

## Conclusion

The dynamics of contemporary Islamic thought between traditionalism and reform reflect the intellectual struggle of Muslims in the face of globalization. The tension that arises is not merely an ideological conflict, but an unfinished epistemological transformation process. An integrative framework is needed that can harmonize the authority of tradition with the contextual demands of modernity so that Islam remains relevant and legitimate in the global arena.

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Thahir Ibn 'Asyur," *Al Muhafidz: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Tafsir*, 2024, <https://api.semanticscholar.org/CorpusID:272135392>.

<sup>28</sup> G R Bunt, *Hashtag Islam: How Cyber-Islamic Environments Are Transforming Religious Authority*. University of North Carolina Press., 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Reza Aslan, *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*, ed. Updated Edition (Random House, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Asef Bayat, *Revolusi Tanpa Revolusi: Studi Tentang Perubahan Sosial Di Dunia Islam* (Mizan, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Aslan, *No God but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*.

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