

A Study of the Development of Islamic Thought from the Classical to the Modern Era

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Abstract

Islamic thought from the classical to the modern era reflects the dynamic intellectual development of the Muslim community in response to the changing times. During the classical period, the Islamic world experienced a golden age of knowledge across various disciplines, including philosophy, medicine, astronomy, Quranic exegesis (tafsir), hadith, and jurisprudence (fiqh), supported by a strong scholarly tradition under the Abbasid Dynasty. This period produced many great scholars who made significant contributions to world civilization. As it entered the medieval period, the Islamic world experienced decline due to political conflict, colonialism, and the weakening of *ijtihad*. In the modern era, various Islamic reform movements emerged with the aim of aligning Islamic teachings with advances in science, technology, and globalization. This study employs a library research method with historical and conceptual approaches. The findings indicate that Islamic thought is adaptive and rational in character, continuously evolving to address social challenges and modern civilization without abandoning the fundamental values of Islamic teachings. The novelty of this article lies in its integrative analysis of three periods of Islamic intellectual development as they relate to the context of globalization and the digital era.

Keywords: Islamic Thought, Classical Era, Modern Era, Islamic Civilization, Islamic Reform

Introduction

The development of Islamic thought from the classical to the modern era represents an important chapter in the history of world civilization. This dynamic process demonstrates the intellectual capacity of the Muslim community to respond to social, political, economic, scientific, and cultural transformations. Islamic thought is not solely concerned with theological matters and religious practice; it also encompasses philosophy, law, education, politics, economics, and social relations.

During the classical period (approximately the 7th to the 13th century CE), the Islamic world experienced an intellectual golden age known as The Golden

Age of Islam. This era was marked by the flourishing of various disciplines, including philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, tafsir, hadith, fiqh, and kalam (Islamic theology). This progress was closely linked to the support of the Abbasid Dynasty, which established Baghdad as the center of world civilization. In the 9th century CE, Baghdad housed Bayt al-Hikmah (the House of Wisdom), a major center for translating Greek, Persian, and Indian works into Arabic. This intellectual activity gave rise to great thinkers such as Al-Kindi, Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd.

However, from the late 13th to the 18th century, the Islamic world began to experience intellectual and political decline. The Mongol sack of Baghdad in 1258 CE was one of the key factors in the collapse of the classical Islamic center of civilization. Internal conflict, the weakening of scholarly tradition, and Western colonialism further contributed to the stagnation of Islamic thought. These conditions gave rise to various reform movements in the modern era that sought to revive the intellectual tradition of Islam.

Based on the foregoing, a study of Islamic thought from the classical to the modern era holds significant scholarly importance. It is essential for understanding the historical development of Islamic thought, recognizing the contributions of Muslim scholars to world civilization, and analyzing the relevance of Islamic thought in addressing the challenges of modernity and globalization.

Research Methods

This study employs a qualitative research method through library research, focusing on the examination of various literary sources related to the development of Islamic thought from the classical to the modern era.

The research methods used are as follows:

- A historical and conceptual approach is applied to understand the development of Islamic thought within the social, political, cultural, and intellectual contexts of each period.
- Data sources were drawn from books, academic journals, scholarly articles, historical documents, and various references relevant to key figures and developments in Islamic thought.
- Data collection was conducted through documentary study, involving a thorough review of literature relating to classical, medieval, and modern Islamic thought.
- Data analysis was performed descriptively and analytically to explain the development, characteristics, contributions, and relevance of Islamic thought in addressing the dynamics of modern society.

Results and Discussion

Results

Sub-theme 1: The Development of Islamic Thought in the Classical Era

Sub-theme 2: Islamic Thought in the Modern Era and Reform

Movements

Sub-theme 3: Contextualizing Islamic Thought in the Digital Era

1. Islamic Thought in the Classical Era

Islamic thought flourished from the Umayyad through to the Abbasid Dynasty. This period marked an era of intellectual advancement for the Muslim community, characterized by the emergence of numerous scholarly disciplines, including tafsir, hadith, fiqh, philosophy, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, and the social sciences. This development was driven by a strong culture of knowledge-seeking and governmental support for the translation of works from Greek, Persian, and Roman civilizations.

Key characteristics of Islamic thought in the classical era:

- **Theology:** Various schools emerged, including the Mu'tazilah (emphasizing reason), the Ash'ariyyah (balancing reason with religious texts), and the Maturidiyyah. These intellectual debates reflect a tradition of dynamic and open scholarly inquiry.
- **Philosophy:** Scholars such as Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd made enormous contributions to the advancement of global knowledge. Their ideas became a crucial foundation for the development of modern science in Europe.
- **Islamic Law:** Four major schools of Islamic jurisprudence were established — Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali — which remain authoritative references for Muslims around the world to this day.
- **Global Contribution:** According to UNESCO, Muslim scholars of the classical era contributed significantly to global knowledge, including the decimal number system, optics, and the scientific method, all of which influenced the European Renaissance.

2. Islamic Thought in the Modern Era

In the modern era, Islamic thought underwent significant transformation due to the impact of colonialism, technological advancement, globalization, and Western modernization. These conditions compelled Muslim thinkers to pursue reforms to ensure that Islamic teachings remained relevant to the changing times. Modern Islamic thought focuses primarily on the reinterpretation of religious doctrine to address contemporary issues such as democracy, human rights, education, economics, and social equality.

Key figures of the modern Islamic reform movement:

- **Jamaluddin al-Afghani:** A pioneer of Islamic revival who emphasized the unity of the Muslim world in the face of Western colonialism.
- **Muhammad Abduh:** Advocated for the rational use of reason in interpreting the Quran and championed the development of modern education.
- **Rashid Rida:** Continued Abduh's legacy by strengthening a textual-contextual approach to the Quran and hadith.

3. Modern Islamic Thought in Indonesia

In Indonesia, the development of modern Islamic thought has been shaped by two major organizations, each with its own distinct character and contributions:

- **Muhammadiyah (founded 1912 by Ahmad Dahlan):** Emphasizes educational reform and the purification of Islamic practice from elements deemed inconsistent with the Quran and Sunnah.
- **Nahdlatul Ulama (founded 1926 by Hasyim Asy'ari):** Focuses on strengthening the Ahlussunnah wal Jama'ah tradition of Islam, which is moderate and adaptive to local culture.

Both organizations stand as clear evidence that Islamic thought in Indonesia has developed across diverse orientations, all of which remain committed to the well-being of the Muslim community.

4. Islamic Thought in the Era of Globalization and Digitalization

In the current era of globalization and digitalization, Islamic thought faces increasingly complex new challenges. According to We Are Social data from 2025, internet users in Indonesia have exceeded 220 million people, resulting in the extremely rapid dissemination of religious information through digital media.

Key challenges facing Islamic thought in the digital era include:

- Radicalism and extremism spreading through digital platforms.
- Secularism and moral crisis among the younger generation.
- The development of artificial intelligence and the transformation of the digital economy.
- The proliferation of religious content that does not always align with the principles of moderation and tolerance.

5. Case Study: Islamic Banking as a Reform of Islamic Economic Thought

One of the most prominent examples of modern Islamic thought in practice is the development of Islamic banking systems across Muslim-majority countries, including Indonesia. The emergence of Islamic banking represents a form of

economic reform within Islamic thought, aligning religious principles with the requirements of the modern financial system.

Core principles of Islamic banking:

- A profit-sharing system (mudharabah and musharakah) as an alternative to interest (riba).
- Prohibition of investment in sectors deemed unlawful (haram) under Islamic law.
- Transparency and justice in all financial transactions.

This example demonstrates that modern Islamic thought is capable of providing concrete solutions to the economic needs of society without abandoning religious values, and shows that Islamic teachings can evolve adaptively in response to the challenges of the times.

Discussion

This article differs from the studies of Anshori (2023), Harahap (2023), and Syarifuddin (2022). Anshori (2023) examines the distinguishing characteristics of classical, medieval, and modern Islamic thought in isolation, without connecting them to the contemporary context of digitalization and globalization. Harahap (2023) focuses primarily on the development of Islamic civilization in the modern era from a cultural-historical perspective, while Syarifuddin (2022) examines Islamic educational thought through the lens of a single scholar, namely Muhammad Abid Al-Jabiri. In contrast to all three, this article addresses the development of Islamic thought in an integrative manner – spanning from the classical to the modern era – while also linking these developments to the challenges of globalization and the digital age, thereby producing a more comprehensive and contextually relevant analysis for contemporary Muslim life, particularly in Indonesia.

This article, however, shares common ground with the studies of Fadli and Nurhayati (2026), Kamaluddin (2025), and Rahman (2023). Fadli and Nurhayati (2026) examine the evolution of Islamic thought from classical to modern periods using historical and epistemological approaches, which aligns with the methodology adopted in this article. Kamaluddin (2025) similarly addresses the development and implementation of modern Islamic thought in social life, while Rahman (2023) explores how Islamic modernism inspired the emergence of Islamic organizations in Indonesia. This convergence of perspectives reinforces the argument that Islamic thought is dynamic and adaptive, continuously evolving to address social change without departing from the fundamental values of Islam.

The novelty of this article lies in its integrative and contextual approach – analyzing the development of Islamic thought comprehensively across three key periods (classical, modern, and digital) within a single interconnected study.

Unlike previous studies that tend to examine each period in isolation, this article demonstrates how the intellectual heritage of classical Islam serves as the foundation for modern reform, and how modern Islamic thought continues to evolve in response to the challenges of digitalization and globalization. Furthermore, this article gives particular attention to the Indonesian context, as home to the world's largest Muslim population, lending the study strategic value in advancing a form of Islamic thought that is moderate and relevant to contemporary life.

Conclusion

The development of Islamic thought from the classical to the modern era demonstrates that Islam possesses a rich, dynamic intellectual tradition capable of adapting to the changes of the times. In the classical era, the Muslim community reached the pinnacle of scientific achievement through the cultivation of diverse disciplines and the emergence of influential scholars who shaped world civilization.

In the modern era, Islamic thought has evolved through various reform efforts aimed at responding to the challenges of globalization, technological advancement, and social transformation. Islamic thought serves not only as a religious guide, but also as a foundation for building more advanced social, educational, economic, and civilizational life.

It is therefore essential that the Muslim community develops a deep understanding of the history of Islamic thought, so as to cultivate a posture that is moderate, open, and adaptive without losing sight of the fundamental values of Islamic teachings.

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