



The Concept of Islamic Reform in Muhammad Abduh's Thought

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Abstract

Egypt, is a country that gave birth to the Islamic renewal movement that began to develop in the 19th century AD, Muslims realized their condition which was far behind the European nations, so that one of the prominent figures at that time appeared, he was Muhammad Abduh, who was known as a reformer of Islamic thought and intellectuals in the modernization of Islam in Egypt. This study aims to describe the thought of Islamic renewal in Muhammad Abduh's perspective in depth as a contribution in enriching the scientific treasury and shaping the face of modern Islam. This research uses a qualitative method by reviewing various relevant literature to understand Muhammad Abduh's thoughts on Islamic renewal. The findings show that Muhammad Abduh brought renewal ideas such as the rejection of taklid, rationality in understanding revelation, and the idea of modern education. His thoughts played a major role in paving the way for the modernization of Islam in the Muslim world, including Indonesia. Therefore, Muhammad Abduh's thoughts remain relevant and can be used as a reference in facing Islamic challenges in today's global era.

INTRODUCTION

History records that the Islamic world experienced destruction in the early 19th century AD, which was caused by the colonization of western nations (Anggela, 2021; Azhari & Ayu Nafisah, 2021; Ma'rifatunnisa' et al., 2022; Rahmat Ramadani, 2023; Saihu, 2020; Suwahyu, 2022; Wicaksono, 2020). The colonization was not only physical, but also had a major influence in the fields of culture, education, and civilization. It is inevitable that Muslims are far behind the culture of western nations, so that western nations more easily control Islamic territories that are considered weak (Pranata & , Yudhi Setiawan2, 2024; Ruslan & Mawardi, 2019). This condition raises the awareness of Muslims to rise from backwardness and decline, especially in the aspects of education, politics, economics, religion, and socio-culture. This awareness of backwardness gave birth to a number of reformers who put forward ideas and ideas of renewal (Rahmad et al., 2023). Their critical thoughts were expressed in various forms of writing and concrete actions as solutions to modern challenges.

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The colonialism of the 19th century not only shook the political and economic order of Muslims, but also encouraged the birth of a revival movement or

often referred to as *nahdah* and Islamic modernism. Scholars and ulemas began to realize that Muslims had regressed in critical thinking and scientific development, they copied a lot without understanding, so that knowledge and innovation were increasingly left behind (Jaelani, 2023; Mubaroq et al., 2020; Nazar, 2021; Wibisono et al., 2023).

One of the prominent figures in the Islamic renewal movement is Muhammad Abduh, who is a figure who has a philosophy that humans are given reason to think critically, reason is everything, so use reason or ratio to think or change perspective for the better. One of his famous works is *risalat al-tawhid* which emphasizes that reason and revelation are two pillars that complement each other in understanding religion (Ningsih, 2021; Usman & Umar, 2021).

Entering the era of modern colonialism, Muhammad Abduh's ideas began to stand out as a real effort to redefine the position of Islam in a rapidly changing world. He believed that it was not enough for the Ummah to imitate the West superficially, but it was necessary to understand the nature of Western progress and interact it with Islamic values (Abitolkha & Muvid, 2021; Anshori, 2021). With the spirit of *ijtihad*, he called for Muslims to return to reason and the original sources of Islam, while still opening space for criticism of frozen dogma. This approach is a fundamental strategy so that Islam is not left behind, and even has the potential to become the motor of civilization in the global era.

One of the real contributions of Muhammad Abduh is educational reform. At Al-Azhar University he introduced a curriculum that combined religious knowledge with science, mathematics, philosophy, and history. Abduh rejected the memorization system that merely formed passive humans and emphasized that education must allow the birth of a critical generation and be able to think independently. These reforms expanded the space for people to understand modern challenges and respond constructively.

Muhammad abduh revived the concept of *tawhid* in a contemporary context. In his work *risalah al-tauhid*, he said that human reason is a gift from God to understand God and the world of his creation rationally. According to him, mature faith is one that synergizes with reason, not pliers tethered to blind *taklid*. Thus, Muslims must not only believe in God, but also be able to prove the truth of religion through critical thinking, logic and rational arguments (Kusnadi et al., 2025). In the socio-political realm, Abduh advocated a law-based, participatory, and democratic government. He rejected absolutism and encouraged constitutionalism, realizing that a just government must not be aspirational of the people. According to him, if the government is wrong, the people have the right to warn in an orderly manner, but if it is just, the people must obey. He also argues that Islamic law must be relevant to contemporary needs through *ijtihad*, so that *maslahat* takes precedence over frozen doctrine.

Muhammad Abduh's legacy was evident until the end of his life and even afterward. His guidance formed the foundation for the modernist movement in various countries, including Indonesia, seen in organizations such as the Sumatran Thawalib which prioritizes modern education and the value of the Qur'an hadith. The spirit of *tajdid ala abduh* is imprinted as the foundation of the lamp of contemporary Islamic thought that is globally competitive (Harahap et al., 2024; Rohman, 2016).

In addition, this research also discusses the influence of Abduh's thought on the global flow of Islamic renewal. These findings aim to describe and examine Muhammad Abduh's ideas of Islamic renewal systematically, as well as to see the extent of the relevance of his thoughts in responding to the challenges of modern

times. Through this study, it is hoped that a new contribution of thought will emerge that enriches the discourse of Islamic renewal and provides inspiration for modern Islamic education.

METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach, discussing a systematic approach to examine various literatures related to Islamic development thought, especially the ideas of Muhammad Abduh (Engkizar et al., 2024; Guspita et al., 2025; Istiqamah et al., 2024; Mahira et al., 2024). Data were collected through books, articles and journals, as a basis for in-depth theoretical understanding. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for studying the ideas, ideas and thoughts of theoretical figures. The first step involves identifying the focus of the research and formulating keywords such as “muhammad abduh” which facilitates the search for relevant literature. then an extensive search is carried out through libraries, academic databases, then selecting sources based on relevance, credibility and scientific quality. After that, the analysis stage was carried out by reading critically each literature to understand the theories, arguments, and strengths and weaknesses of each idea. Researchers then synthesize the results of the analysis, identifying similarities, differences, and gaps in previous research to be assembled in a systematic narrative (Burhanuddin et al., 2023; Engkizar et al., 2023; Fitriani et al., 2025). The final result is a flowing and structured discussion narrative, including theoretical reviews, discussions to conclusions forming a comprehensive framework for understanding Muhammad Abduh's thought.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Idea of Renewal

The idea of renewal usually emerges along with the development of science and technology that affects people's perspectives. Renewal or modernization can be understood as a form of effort to improve a condition, both in terms of ways of thinking, concepts, and methods, to fit the demands of the times and towards a better state (Khaeroni, 2017). The term renewal is often associated with words such as modern, modernization, or modernism. In the context of Western society, modernization is understood as a form of thought and movement that aims to change old patterns, including traditions, habits, and social systems, to be in line with the times triggered by advances in science and technology. If associated with the world of Islamic education, the idea of renewal can be interpreted as an effort to update the education system, including curriculum content, learning methods, and teaching approaches. The aim is to change Islamic education from the old pattern that tends to be traditional to a more rational and professional direction, in order to fit the times and the needs of society (Engkizar, Guspita, et al., 2025).

Biography of Sheikh Muhammad Abduh

Sheikh Muhammad Abduh was one of the great Islamic reformers, theologians, and thinkers from Egypt who lived in the late 19th century to the early 20th century. His date and place of birth are not recorded with certainty, because his parents came from simple circles who did not pay much attention to recording birth dates. However, most sources mention that he was born around 1849 AD/1265 H in the Mahallat Nasr area, Lower Egypt. His father, Abduh Hasan Khairullah, is believed to be of Turkish descent who had long settled in Egypt, while his mother was an Arab woman whose lineage goes back to the tribe of Umar bin Khattab.

Since childhood, Muhammad Abduh was directed to learn to write and read, then proceeded to memorize the Qur'an. Within two years, he had memorized the entire Qur'an. After that, in 1862, he continued his religious education at the Sheikh Ahmad Mosque in the city of Tanta. However, the teaching methods that only

emphasized memorization made him feel undeveloped. Feeling that he was not getting any benefits, he stopped studying and returned to his hometown with the intention of becoming a farmer (Kurdi, 2015). At the age of 16, he got married, but after only 40 days, he was forced to return to his studies. Instead of going to Tanta, he hid in the house of his uncle, Sheikh Darwisy Khadr, who later became an important figure in guiding him. Through a wise approach, Sheikh Darwisy persuaded Abduh to read books together, which eventually revived his enthusiasm for learning. He returned to Tanta to continue his education (Engkizar et al., 2025).

After completing his studies at Tanta, Abduh continued his education at Al-Azhar University from 1869-1877. There he earned the title “alim” and became known as a scholar. It was also during this time that he met Jamaluddin al-Afghani, who greatly influenced his way of thinking. Together with al-Afghani, he studied various fields of science such as logic, philosophy, theology and Sufism. This meeting became an important point in shaping the direction of Abduh's thinking as a reformer. The condition of Muslims, which at that time was deteriorating due to Western colonization, made Abduh and his teacher actively voice the renewal. However, their approaches were different: al-Afghani focused more on the political aspect, while Abduh focused more on education and thought formation.

In 1879, he was exiled from Cairo for his alleged involvement in a movement against the rule of Khadowi Taufik. A year later he was allowed to return and was appointed editor of a government newspaper. However, at the end of 1882, he was again exiled, this time abroad, for his alleged involvement in Urabi Pasha's rebellion. He then lived in Beirut, and from there, at the invitation of al-Afghani, he traveled to Paris to co-found the “Al-Urwah al-Wusqa” movement, a movement aimed at galvanizing Muslims against Western colonialism. There they published a magazine of the same name. The ideas came from al-Afghani, while the main writing was handled by Abduh. The magazine was only published for eight months with a total of 16 issues, then stopped due to political pressure. After parting ways with his teacher, Abduh returned to Beirut in 1885 and focused on education. He taught at the Sultaniah Madrasah and also opened a recitation at home. From the subject matter he taught, his important work “Risalah al-Tauhid” was born (Engkizar et al., 2025).

At the end of 1888, he returned to Egypt and restarted his career. He was appointed a judge, then served as an advisor at the High Court. In between his duties, he attempted to reform Al-Azhar by incorporating modern sciences into the curriculum. However, his efforts faced resistance from conservative scholars and were ultimately unsuccessful. In 1899, Abduh was appointed Mufti of Egypt and a member of the majlis shura. This made him an important figure in formulating fatwas on sharia law throughout Egypt.

Until the end of his life, he never had the chance to perform the Hajj due to various political obstacles. He died on July 11, 1905 due to liver cancer, at the age of about 56. After his death, he left behind many works, mostly in the form of articles spread across various media. Among his famous works are Risalah al-Tauhid, Durus min al-Qur'an, al-Islam wa al-Nasraniyah, and the interpretation of the Qur'an with his student Rasyid Ridha known as Tafsir al-Manar (Nurlaelah Abbas, 2014).

Background of muhammad abduh's thought and ijtiha

Muhammad Abduh's thinking and ijtiha were not just born, but formed from various backgrounds and life experiences that influenced his perspective on Islam and the reality of the people (Wahyudi & Zaenab, 2023). Some of the main factors that shaped the direction of his thinking were first, the influence of his family and teachers, especially the figures of Sheikh Darwisy Khadr and Sayyid Jamaluddin al-Afghani. Both played a major role in shaping Abduh's critical mindset and spirit of

renewal from a young age. Second, the educational background and scientific insights he gained, both through formal education channels such as at Al-Azhar and from non-formal environments. Extensive knowledge in various fields, such as philosophy, logic, and theology, provided an intellectual basis for his progressive views. Third, the political conditions at that time also had a major influence. Since childhood, Abduh had witnessed firsthand how weak Muslim power was due to Western intervention and colonization, especially by Europeans who had undermined Islamic territories, including Egypt. This experience fostered political awareness and a spirit of liberation in Abduh. Fourth, the social situation of Islamic society at that time was also very concerning. Abduh witnessed the decline of Muslim thought characterized by the dominance of blind taqlid to the opinions of previous scholars and the disappearance of the spirit of ijtihad. This dullness of thought, according to Abduh, was one of the main causes of the intellectual stagnation of the ummah (Engkizar, Kaputra, et al., 2022).

In addition, external pressures, such as European political and cultural domination, are also external factors that aggravate the condition of Muslims. While from within, the ummah itself was trapped in a rigid mindset, rejected renewal, and was not open to modern science. All these conditions encouraged Muhammad Abduh to formulate thoughts that sought to revive the spirit of ijtihad and renewal (tajdid) in various fields, especially in the fields of theology, sharia, education, and socio-politics. He tried to revive Muslims' awareness that religion must be understood rationally and contextually. Through his thoughts, Abduh wanted to refute the view that the door to ijtihad had been closed, and invited people to get out of the shackles of taqlid towards a dynamic understanding of Islam that was relevant to the times (Engkizar et al., 2021).

The Idea of Muhammad Abduh

As seen in his biography, Muhammad Abduh is known in the Islamic world as a mujadid. He tried to reform by inviting back to the teachings of Islam, studying it clearly and reinterpreting the understanding of religion critically, so that the teachings of Islam are truly able to be actualized in the ever-changing times, so he is considered the father of the modern school in Islam.

Regarding his reform ideas, scholars have differed in the way they have been typologized. These ideas are summarized by H.A.R. Gibb into four main activities. First, the cleansing of Islam from heresy and khurafat. Second, the renewal of Al-Azhar education. Third, the reformulation of true Islamic teachings with modern thought. Fourth, the defense of Islam against European influences and Christian attacks. All of these activities according to H.A.R. Gibb have a clear connection. According to M. Yusran Asmuni, Muhammad Abduh's renewal ideas can be classified into four aspects which include; first, national aspects; second, societal aspects; third, religious aspects; and fourth, educational aspects

Meanwhile, Harun Nasution revealed six reform ideas put forward by Muhammad Abduh. First, the dismantling of the dullness of the tradition of thought which in turn calls for the second idea, namely ijtihad as an eraser of blind taqlid. The effort to carry out ijtihad requires a third idea, namely the power of reason. Reasoning in turn gave birth to the fourth idea, namely modern science in its operation does not conflict with religion, therefore, fifth, education needs to be improved. While the last idea is his thoughts on politics. In other words, Abduh's ideas of reform are interrelated with one another. For more details, some of his ideas will be presented below, among others:

Dismantling the Stagnation

The term "stagnation" refers to a condition of stagnation, lack of change, and closed space for renewal of thought. For Muhammad Abduh, Muslims must be freed from this condition in order to have the spirit to change and be able to criticize the traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. He strongly opposed the attitude of *jumud* and considered that the stagnation of Muslims was one of the factors that caused the decline. Abduh emphasized that the Qur'an encourages people to be dynamic, not trapped in rigidity of thought (Engkizar et al., 2022).

One form of ignorance that Abduh strongly highlighted was the practice of "taqlid", which is following the opinions of scholars without understanding the basis. According to him, *taqlid* has weakened the thinking power and spirit of Muslims. Therefore, he initiated the importance of renewal by reopening the space for *ijtihad*. He rejects the view that the door to *ijtihad* has been closed since the 4th century AH, because according to him, society always experiences developments that require adjustments to the law according to the context of the times.

Even so, Abduh did not interpret the opening of *ijtihad* as absolute freedom. He emphasized that only those who have the capacity and fulfill the scientific requirements may perform *ijtihad*. For those who have not reached that level, it is still allowed to follow the opinions of the *mujtahids* who are believed. In Abduh's view, *ijtihad* must be based on the Qur'an and *hadith*, not just following the views of previous scholars rigidly. He rejected the notion that the *ijma'* of the early scholars was absolute and could not be criticized.

Abduh distinguished between the scope of *ijtihad*. According to him, the area of *ijtihad* is more open to issues of *muamalah* (social and community interaction), not to matters of worship which are firm and standardized. Because the texts in *muamalah* matters are generally general, it is necessary to interpret them according to the times through the process of *ijtihad*. Thus, *fiqh* renewal can continue to be carried out so that it remains contextual and relevant, rather than becoming a rigid and stagnant law.

Rationality (Use of Reason)

Reason has a very important role in the process of *ijtihad*. In Muhammad Abduh's view, reason should not be allowed to fall asleep, but must be awakened and used actively. The function of reason is as a means given by Allah SWT to humans to understand science and take lessons from various events that occurred in the past and present. According to Abduh, Islam is a religion that places reason in a high position. The Qur'an itself, in many of its verses, shows that reason has a very central position. The first revelation, according to Abduh, not only speaks to the heart, but also to the human mind. Therefore, the use of reason is one of the basic principles in Islam. A person's faith, in his view, cannot be said to be complete if it is not accompanied by rational understanding.

For Abduh, it is impossible for revelation to contradict reason. If it appears that a verse is not in accordance with logic or rational thought, then the verse needs to be understood more deeply through an interpretation that is in harmony with reason. This is where Abduh shows a critical attitude towards *Asy'ariyah* theology, which is considered too demeaning to the role of reason. He is more inclined to *Mu'tazilah*-style rational thinking, which emphasizes the importance of reason in understanding religious teachings. This rational understanding is evident in his works such as *Risalah al-Tauhid* and *Hasyiyah 'Ala Syarh al-'Aqaid al-Adudiyah*, where Abduh openly showed his interest in *Mu'tazilah* principles. He proposed that Muslims return to the teachings of the Qur'an and *hadith* in responding to the

challenges of the times, and abandon the habit of taqlid to the opinions of classical scholars.

Furthermore, Abduh also embraced the view that humans have freedom of action (free act) and will (free will), as the Qadariyah view. This means that humans have the ability to determine their own actions, although they remain under the power of the higher God. This view aims to foster a dynamic attitude and optimism among Muslims, so that they do not passively accept their fate, but actively try to change their circumstances. Muhammad Abduh also emphasized that the understanding of Qadha and Qadar actually contains elements of dynamism, the fatalism that exists among Muslims needs to be changed with an understanding of human freedom of will and action.

In addition to emphasizing the role of reason, Abduh also encouraged the importance of reviving the study of philosophy in the Islamic world. He regretted that the study of philosophy had almost disappeared from the Sunni Islamic world since the time of Ibn Rushd. Through his renewal movement, Abduh succeeded in reviving the spirit of philosophy among Muslims.

Education Renewal in the View of Muhammad Abduh

The idea of educational reform initiated by Muhammad Abduh was born from his desire to bring Muslims into the modern era, especially in the mastery of science. Abduh realized that the existing education system in his time was still far behind, especially when compared to the Western education system. He himself felt the lack of lessons and the narrow way of thinking when studying, both in Egypt and when he was in Tanta. On the other hand, he was not the type of figure who wanted rapid and radical change. Instead, Abduh preferred a gradual path of change through a cultural process, which would require time and patience.

The first step he took to realize this change was to improve the highest educational institution in Egypt, Al-Azhar University, which is also his alma mater. According to Abduh, Al-Azhar is the center of Islamic knowledge and has a great influence on Muslims in various countries, because its students come from all over the world. While studying there, Abduh did not find lessons related to modern science. So, he had to look for it himself outside Al-Azhar. Abduh's visit to Europe also strongly influenced his views on the importance of educational reform.

As a member of Al-Azhar's governing council, Abduh had a strategic role to play in promoting change. He proposed several improvements in the teaching system and also in administration. In the aspect of learning, Abduh started by simplifying the curriculum to make it more focused. He also introduced an annual examination system and provided scholarships for graduating students. In addition, he selected textbooks so that only those that were truly useful were used. He also extended the learning time for the main courses and added lessons related to modern science. Another reform agenda was education. Education was reformed by opening modern schools where both modern sciences and religious knowledge were taught. Muhammad Abduh who tried to reform education at al-Azhar. According to him, al-Azhar needs to contain modern science subjects, so that the scholars of al-Azhar output can understand modern culture so that they can solve various problems that arise in the modern era.

In the field of administration, Abduh sought that the scholars and teachers at Al-Azhar receive decent salaries. He also paid attention to supporting facilities such as dormitories, libraries, and health services for students. The results of these efforts can be felt in the number of students taking exams. Before the reforms, only about six students were tested each year, but after the reforms, the number jumped to more than ninety, and a third of them passed. One important breakthrough championed by Abduh was the inclusion of philosophy courses in the curriculum. The aim was

not only to broaden students' horizons, but also to revive the spirit of critical and rational thinking among Muslims. According to Abduh, philosophy could be a bridge to liberate the ummah from the dullness of thinking.

Apart from improving Al-Azhar, Abduh also encouraged the government to establish vocational schools that could produce professionals in the fields of administration, military, health, industry and education. However, he still emphasized the importance of including religious studies and the history of Islamic culture in these schools. This was due to Abduh's concern that the education system was divided: one side produced scholars who did not understand modern science, and the other side produced professionals who were blind to religion. For Abduh, the unification of religious and general sciences in the education system was an important step to avoid a sharp gap between the two groups.

Although not all of his reform ideas were well received - even met with resistance from conservative scholars as well as from rulers such as Khadewi Abbas - Abduh's ideas were still highly influential. His modern and progressive ideas continued to spread and shape new ways of thinking among Muslim students, especially as he opened the door for Western thought and modern science to enter the world of Islamic education, albeit not directly in madrasas.

The Influence of Muhammad Abduh's Thought on Reform

Muhammad Abduh's efforts to reform could not go according to his wishes. This is because Abduh was often challenged by scholars who insisted on adhering to old traditions. Even Abduh himself was once labeled an infidel and accused of not believing in God. The accusations of infidelity made by the scholars who were handed over to him, made many people even more interested in knowing Abduh's true thoughts. To prove their allegations, they attended Abduh's various scientific activities and lectures. From their observations and listening, it turned out that what was accused of him was not proven to be true.

After they found out the truth, they became loyal followers of Muhammad Abduh. The challenges faced by Muhammad Abduh did not make him recede to continue to explain his renewal thoughts. One of the reform efforts he has made is reform in the field of education at Al-Azhar. Although his efforts arguably failed, Abduh had succeeded in incorporating some general knowledge into the Al-Azhar curriculum, such as earth science, measurement science, mathematics and Algebra. Therefore, Muhammad Abduh's thoughts had a great influence on the youth, even though Abduh had passed away the influence he left on later generations moved Al-Azhar to reorganize its teaching methods and curriculum.

Muhammad Abduh's ideas and thoughts in Egypt gave birth to many modern scholars, such as Mustafa Al-Maraghi, Mustafa Abdul Raziq, Tatawi Jauhari, and Rashid Ridha. Abduh's thoughts also influenced prolific writers such as Muhammad Husain Haikal, Farid Wajdi, Ahmad Amin and Qasim. Apart from being influential in his home country, Abduh's thought also had a wide influence outside Egypt, especially in Arab countries. This influence was obtained through the writings of Abduh and his followers who spread his ideas of renewal. Like what Rashid Ridha did in Al-Manar magazine and his efforts in bookkeeping had his teacher's thoughts in the field of tafsir, such as tafsir Al-Manar, had a very wide influence among Middle Eastern students or students, apart from those who studied at Al-Azhar University, Egypt. It was through them that Abduh's thoughts were well socialized, until they were known to many people and used as reference material for Islamic renewal efforts in the country of origin of each student, including students from Indonesia.

CONCLUSION

The backwardness of the Muslim nation compared to European civilizations has more or less aroused the awareness of Muslim nations to always carry out reforms. Muhammad Abduh, as one of the reformers in Egypt, has more or less provided an in-depth analysis of the causes of the decline of Muslim nations. In his view, the problem of ignorance and blind taqlid are the main factors causing the backwardness of Muslims. At least there are several points of Muhammad Abduh's thought that become solutions to the crucial problem of the backwardness of the Muslim nations, namely the need to free Muslim thoughts from the shackles of taqlid so that reason is not subject to any authority and renewal in the scope of Islamic education by trying to include modern sciences and offering learning methodologies that are not rigid and static. Muhammad abduh was a pioneer of Islam who emphasized four core ideas: upholding the creed, ijtihad, educational reform and socio-political activism. so that he returned Islam to its roots with a rational approach to be in tune with the times and the needs of modern people.

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