

Islamic Reformism in a Comparative Perspective: A Study of The Thought of Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh and Their Relevance to Contemporary Muslim Society

Irfan Padlian Syah^{a,1}, Sholahuddin Al Ayubi^{b,2}, Andi Rosa^{c,3}

abc **Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin State Islamic University Banten**

1252706101.irfanpadlian@uinbanten.ac.id; 2sholahuddin.alayubi@uinbanten.ac.id; 3andi.rosa@uinbanten.ac.id

*Correspondent Author; 252706101.irfanpadlian@uinbanten.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received:

12-10-2025

Revised:

20-10-2025

Accepted:

20-01-2026

Keywords

Islamic reformism,
epistemology,
pan-Islamism,
Indonesian Islam

ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative study of the Islamic reformist thought of Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh as responses to European colonialism and the epistemological crisis facing the Muslim world in the nineteenth century. Although both figures are often treated as representatives of a homogeneous intellectual tradition, this study reveals fundamental divergences in their epistemological foundations, reform agendas, and methods of change. Employing a qualitative library research approach with historical, analytical, and comparative methods, this study finds that al-Afghani constructed a politically militant epistemology that positioned reason as an instrument of resistance against colonial hegemony, while Abduh developed a more systematic theological rationalism emphasizing the harmonization of reason and revelation. Regarding their reform agendas, both agreed that Islamic revival does not entail Westernization, yet differed in their priorities: al-Afghani privileged top-down political transformation, whereas Abduh prioritized bottom-up educational and institutional reform. The study concludes that these two approaches are complementary rather than contradictory, and that both remain highly relevant for contemporary Muslim societies, particularly Indonesia, in addressing the challenges of radicalism, intolerance, and modernization

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Introduction

The 19th century was a turbulent period for Islamic civilization (Gumelar et al., 2023). The systematic expansion of European colonialism not only deprived the Muslim territories of the physical, but also gave birth to a profound epistemological crisis: how should Islam position itself in the face of the dominance of Western civilization that seemed superior in the fields of science, technology, and state governance? This question became the trigger for the birth of the Islamic reformism movement (*Islah*) which seeks to answer the challenges of the times without sacrificing Islamic identity.

Among the most influential thinkers in this current of reforms, two names stand out significantly: Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Al-Afghani, with his militant political character and ambitious vision of pan-Islamism, traveled from Afghanistan to Egypt, Iran, Ottoman Turkey, and Europe to build the collective consciousness of Muslims (Balkhi, 2022). Abduh, his student as well as intellectual partner, then developed the legacy of thought in a more methodological direction and oriented towards educational transformation and renewal of religious interpretation (Zuhri et al., 2023).

The study of these two figures is not merely a historical journey into the past, but has practical urgency for today's Muslim society. The era of globalization, technological disruption, value pluralism, and the rise of various forms of religious extremism present challenges that are structurally not much different from the problems faced by al-Afghani and Abduh (Mohammadi, 2022). How to maintain the relevance of Islam without falling into rigid exclusivism, and how to absorb the progress of the times without losing its theological roots.

Although the literature on al-Afghani and Abduh is abundant in the Islamic academic tradition, there are some research gaps that have not been adequately addressed. First, most existing studies tend to treat the two monolithically as if they form one homogeneous school of thought without carefully dissecting the fundamental points of divergence that exist between them. Nikki R. Keddie in her seminal study of al-Afghani has indeed opened a discussion of the complexity of this figure's background, but systematic comparisons with Abduh are still limited (Kemper, 2024).

Second, the existing studies are generally purely descriptive-historical, without serious efforts to actualize the thoughts of the two figures in the context of 21st-century Muslim society. In fact, the relevance of a thought is not only measured by its historical depth, but also by its ability to respond to actual problems.

Third, in the context of Indonesia as a country with the largest Muslim population in the world, it is still rare to find studies that explicitly link the ideas of reformism of al-Afghani and Abduh with the dynamics of contemporary Indonesian Islam, such as debates about the relationship between religion and the state, radicalism, and the challenges of modernization.

Based on this gap, this article is here as an effort to fill that gap with a more analytical, comparative, and actuality-oriented approach.

Specifically, this study aims to: 1. Analyze comparatively the epistemological foundations, reform agendas, and methods of change offered by Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh; 2. Identify the fundamental similarities and differences between the two thinkers in responding to the challenges of modernity and colonialism; 3. Evaluate the relevance of the second reformist idea for contemporary Muslim society, especially in the Indonesian context.

Method

This research is classified as qualitative research based on library *research* using the history of *ideas approach*. Data collection was carried out through a documentary study of primary sources in the form of original works of al-Afghani and Abduh, such as *Al-Radd 'ala al-Dahriyyin*, *Risalat al-Tawhid*, *Tafsir al-Manar*, and the journal *Al-'Urwah al-Wuthqa*. In addition, this study also utilizes secondary sources in the form of relevant academic literature, including the studies of Keddie, Hourani, and Kerr.

Data analysis is carried out in an integrated manner through three main approaches. First, *historical methods* are used to reconstruct the social and intellectual background that influenced the birth of the two figures' thoughts. Second, *an analytical method* is applied to systematically examine the thought structure of each figure based on aspects of the epistemological foundation, reform agenda, and change strategy. Third, *the comparative method* is used to find similarities and differences in thinking between the two thematically.

The validity of the data is maintained through triangulation of sources and *close reading* of various texts, so that each interpretation remains based on clear textual evidence. The results of the analysis were then synthesized to assess the relevance of the ideas of reformism al-Afghani and Abduh in the life of today's Muslim community, especially in Indonesia.

Results and Discussion

1. The Epistemological Foundations of Al-Afghani and Abduh

a. Al-Afghani's Epistemology: Reason as an Instrument of Resistance

Jamaluddin al-Afghani built his epistemological foundation based on the view that the

decline of Muslims does not stem from the teachings of Islam itself, but from rigid interpretations and attitudes of full dependence on the authority of traditional scholars (taqlid) (Kusumawati, 2023). In *Al-Radd 'ala al-Dahriyyin*, al-Afghani asserts that religion and ratio are not in essence contradictory. According to him, Islam is actually the most rational religion and in harmony with the development of science. He strongly opposed Western atheistic materialism which was considered to have eliminated the moral foundations of society, but on the other hand he still recognized the superiority of science and technology as an essential tool of civilization that Muslims must master (Putra et al., 2022).

The uniqueness of al-Afghani's epistemology lies not only in the defense of Islam, but also in the strength of the accompanying political dimension. He views that the intellectual crisis experienced by Muslims is closely related to the political crisis (Judge, 2024). Colonialism, in his view, was not merely a form of physical colonialism, but also an epistemic domination that made the Western mindset the only recognized standard of truth. Therefore, intellectual awakening must go hand in hand with political struggle. Within the framework of al-Afghani's thought, reason served not only as a means of finding the truth, but also as an instrument of resistance to colonial hegemony (Kusumawati, 2023).

This view shows that al-Afghani understood colonialism as a system that works in two dimensions at once (Al-Saadi, 2024). First, the physical dimension that appears through territorial control and resource exploitation. Second, the more hidden but equally dangerous epistemic dimension is the weakening of Muslims' confidence in their own intellectual heritage. When the ummah began to believe that science only had legitimacy if it came from the West, then colonization actually succeeded, even before the military forces entered the Islamic world (Nurzana & Dahlan, 2024).

Departing from this awareness, al-Afghani built his intellectual project not as an attempt to return to theological purity, but as a form of direct resistance to the domination structures that underpin the superiority of the West. He saw that philosophical and kalam debates would not be adequate without a strong political consciousness. According to him, colonialism did not only suppress resistance through physical force, but also through a more subtle strategy: instilling confidence in colonized nations that they deserved to be controlled because they were considered to have a backward mindset (Mohammadi, 2022).

Therefore, al-Afghani's idea of revival included total liberation. The intellect of the people must be freed from the sense of inferiority inherited by colonialism, while freedom of thought must go hand in hand with political struggle. In his view, Muslims who have an independent mind are the greatest threat to the colonial project, because it is from intellectual consciousness that collective solidarity is born that is able to give birth to an orderly, conscious, and dignified resistance.

b. Abduh's Epistemology: Methodological Theological Rationalism

Muhammad Abduh inherited the spirit of rationalism from his teacher, but developed it in a more systematic and theological form (Adam, 2023). In *Risalat al-Tawhid*, Abduh emphasized that authentic faith must be based on rational understanding, not just dogmatic acceptance without critical thinking. He distinguishes between religious teachings that are permanent and aspects that can be adapted to the development of the times. This distinction is the basis of its updated methodology, namely the need to reopen the door of ijtihad while still being based on a systematic and responsible framework.

In contrast to al-Afghani, who was more polemic, Abduh built a more academic and methodological epistemology (Adnan, 2025). He not only echoed the idea of renewal, but also implemented it directly through *Tafsir al-Manar*, which interprets the Qur'an with a contextual and scientific approach. In his view, reason and revelation have a harmonious and complementary relationship. Revelation serves to provide universal moral principles, while reason is in charge of applying these principles in a historical reality that continues to change (Weller, 2021).

The thought pioneered by Abduh was then continued by his most loyal and productive

student, Muhammad Rasyid Ridha. If Abduh played a role in formulating the epistemological foundations of Islamic reform, then Ridha developed the framework in a more systematic and organized manner (Irfan et al., 2024). Through the magazine *al-Manar* which he had managed since 1898, Ridha not only spread the ideas of his teachers, but also developed them, sharpened his arguments, and even in some respects directed them closer to the Salafi style of thought (Amir, 2021).

Ridha continues the project *Tafsir al-Manar* which was previously initiated by Abduh, but the completion shows a subtle but important change in orientation (Musleh & Khalaf, 2020). If Abduh tends to give a wide space for the role of reason in understanding religious texts, Ridha seems to be more careful in setting the boundaries of *ijtihad*, especially related to the issue of faith. This difference reflects a fundamental dilemma in Islamic modernism: the extent to which ratio can be given authority without diminishing the authority of revelation as an independent and absolute source of truth.

However, these tensions do not merely show internal weaknesses, but rather become the driving force of intellectual dynamics that give birth to various responses and new schools of thought. Abduh Ridha's intellectual heritage on the one hand inspired reformist movements in various regions of the Islamic world, starting from the *Islah* in Egypt to Islamic reform organizations in Southeast Asia such as Muhammadiyah. On the other hand, groups that considered modernism to be too compromising then developed a more conservative approach, which further shaped the face of Islamic intellectuals in the 20th century (Ngizudin et al., 2025).

Thus, the methodology formulated by Abduh in the form of efforts to harmonize reason and revelation, distinguish between aspects of teaching that are fixed and contextual, and open up the space for *ijtihad* responsibly does not stop as a frozen intellectual legacy. Rather, the idea continues to be alive, debated, and undergoing development in the discourse of contemporary Islamic thought, making it one of the most influential contributions in the intellectual history of modern Islam.

2. Reform Agenda: Shared Vision, Difference in Priorities

a. Rallying Point: The Rise of Islam through Renewal

In the midst of these differences, al-Afghani and Abduh met on one big agenda: to liberate Muslims from backwardness (*inhitat*) and lead them to revival (*nahda*) (Irfan et al., 2024). Both agreed that the decline of Muslims stemmed from two main factors: first, intellectual freeze due to the dominance of *taqlid*; and second, internal divisions that weaken the solidarity of the people. The journal *Al-'Urwah al-Wuthqa*, which they co-published in 1884, became the clearest manifesto of this common agenda: a strong call to Muslims around the world to rise, unite, and resist European domination. (Fatmal et al., 2025).

Both also agreed that Islamic reform does not mean westernization. Islam must absorb elements of progress from the West, especially science and rationalism, without sacrificing its identity and theological values. In this perspective, both can be categorized as moderate reformists who reject two extreme poles: a conservatism that rejects modernity altogether on the one hand, and a secularism that separates religion from public life on the other (Zehani, 2024).

The common agenda formulated by al-Afghani and Abduh did not stop at their generation alone. The idea then flowed into various Islamic reform movements throughout the 20th century, although they appeared in various and sometimes contradictory forms (Mohammadi, 2022). Their successors not only inherited ideas of renewal, but also inherited various conceptual tensions that have not yet been fully resolved: between modernity and the authenticity of tradition, between the ideals of the unity of the people and the reality of social diversity, as well as between resistance to the West and the selective acceptance of its achievements.

In the Arab world, this inherited influence developed into two major currents that seemed to be opposite, but actually departed from the same root of thought. The first wave was Islamic liberalism, represented by figures such as Ali Abd al-Raziq and Taha Husain, which encouraged a clearer separation between religious authority and political power. Meanwhile, the second wave emerged in the form of organizational Islamism that was evident through the founding of the Muslim Brotherhood by Hasan al-Banna in 1928. Interestingly, al-Banna himself acknowledged the intellectual influence of Abduh and Ridha on his thought, although he shifted the focus from theological reform to a more organized socio-political movement. This change in orientation suggests that a single heritage of thought can give birth to different forms of ideological derivatives according to the historical context and the needs of the movement that developed it.

Outside the Arab region, the echoes of al-Afghani and Abduh's thought actually developed in a more grounded and adaptive way. In South Asia, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and later Muhammad Iqbal developed similar projects in an attempt to bring Islam together with modernity, albeit with a distinctive emphasis. Iqbal, for example, deepens the philosophical dimension of renewal through the concept of *khudi* or self-reliance, as well as his ideas about the reconstruction of Islamic thought outlined in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*. In Southeast Asia, the idea of renewal interacted with the different realities of colonialism and gave birth to movements such as the Youth in Malaya and Muhammadiyah in Indonesia. Both of these movements brought an anti-taqlid spirit and modernization of Islamic education that can be intellectually traced to the debate on Islamic reformism in Cairo at the end of the 19th century.

The most important thing to note is that the joint agenda of al-Afghani and Abduh contains a methodological principle that transcends the boundaries of space and time, namely that Islamic reform is an ongoing project and never really finished. Renewal is not a standard formula that can be applied uniformly in every situation, but rather an intellectual orientation that continues to demand a reinterpretation of traditions, social realities, and the ever-changing challenges of the times. It is within this framework that al-Afghani and Abduh are not merely seen as historical figures, but as intellectual reference points that remain alive in every Muslim effort to bring together the heritage of tradition with the demands of modernity.

b. Divergence Point: Politics versus Education

This is where the most fundamental difference between the two comes to the fore. Al-Afghani is of the view that reform must start with political change. He did not believe that a slow and gradual educational or cultural transformation could face the aggressive pace of colonialism. So he chose the path of political activism: building a cross-border pan-Islamic network, lobbying Muslim leaders, and even engaging in controversial political conspiracies. For al-Afghani, political power is a prerequisite for any reform (Kusumawati, 2023).

Abduh, on the other hand, was very skeptical of revolutionary political change. His experience of being involved in the 1882 Urabi Revolution in Egypt which ended in his defeat and exile reinforced his belief that a political revolution without a solid foundation of education would only breed chaos. Abduh then fully turned to the path of educational and religious reform: updating the Al-Azhar curriculum, formulating fatwas that were responsive to the modern context, and producing a commentary that gave Muslims a new framework of thinking. For Abduh, true change is only possible if it starts from the transformation of the mind and character of the Muslim individual (Sayuti & Manshur, 2020).

These differences reflect two different traditions of reformist thought: al-Afghani represents the tradition of revolutionary-political reformism, while Abduh represents the tradition of cultural-educational reformism. The two are not incompatible; Instead, the two complement each other as two paths that lead to the same goal.

3. Change Methods: Strategies and Tactics

Al-Afghani used a top-down and elitist method of change: he targeted political leaders, sultans, and influential intellectuals in the hope that change from above would flow downwards (Fu & Kahambing, 2025). This method is effective in raising collective consciousness in a short period of time, but it is susceptible to instability because it does not have deep roots in society. When his political patrons changed or power changed, al-Afghani's influence dimmed.

Abduh, on the other hand, applies a bottom-up and institutional method of change. He chose to work in and through the existing institutions of Al-Azhar, the sharia courts, the country's education system to make changes from within gradually. This method is slower, but results in more lasting changes because it is embedded in the institutional structure of the Society (Bahri & Qomariyah, 2023).

The difference in method between al-Afghani and Abduh cannot be understood simply as differences in character or personal style, but rather as a reflection of two different views of how social change should take place (Fu & Kahambing, 2025). Both depart from an awareness of the decline of the Islamic world, but they offer different solutions because they have different beliefs about the root of the problems of the ummah.

For al-Afghani, the core of the Islamic crisis lies in the question of leadership. He believed that change would occur if the rulers and intellectual elites succeeded in awakening their consciousness. In his view, society moves from top to bottom; Big change requires big figures as the driving force. Therefore, influencing a king or sultan is considered more strategic than speaking at length to the common people (Mohammadi, 2022). This way of thinking is not born from an elitist attitude, but from the historical belief that the direction of civilization is often determined by figures who are at the center of power.

However, this approach has a fundamental disadvantage because it is too dependent on a specific individual. Movements supported by political patrons easily lose their footing when their supporting figures fall or are eliminated. Al-Afghani's experience shows this: when he was expelled from Egypt and his influence in Istanbul weakened, his ideas did not have a strong enough institution to continue his struggle. There is no educational base or community movement that is able to keep its legacy alive in a sustainable manner. All that is left behind are big ideas without a solid social platform (Judge, 2024).

Abduh seems to catch this weakness. He chose a calmer, gradual, and long-term path of change. If al-Afghani spoke to the rulers, then Abduh spoke to the educational system. If al-Afghani encouraged revolution, then Abduh updated the curriculum. Through the revamping of Al-Azhar, he seeks to give birth to a new generation of scholars with a more open and rational mindset (Fatmal et al., 2025). This kind of change did not produce the great turmoil that was immediately recorded in history, but its influence permeated slowly into people's lives and was more difficult to erase by momentary political changes.

This is where an interesting paradox emerges: precisely because Abduh's steps are not dramatic and slow to progress, his legacy becomes more enduring. Institutions have a memory that transcends the age of the individual. An updated curriculum can continue to shape generations even after the reformed figure dies (Shabir & Susilo, 2018). Likewise, the idea of *ijtihad* that he encouraged through fatwas and his thoughts continued to be inherited and read through the ages.

If al-Afghani can be likened to lightning that shines in the sky with a strong but brief light, then Abduh resembles an ember that burns slowly but is able to provide warmth for a long time. Both roles are equally important. Lightning flashes are necessary to awaken consciousness, while embers are needed to keep change alive and sustainable.

In the context of today's Islamic reforms, the debate over this method is still relevant. Should the movement be built around charismatic figures who are able to move the masses quickly, or through institutions that are strong and able to survive beyond the generation of its

founders? The experiences of al-Afghani and Abduh show that both have their own functions. The renewal movement may require the shock of charismatic leadership as well as long-term resilience that can only be maintained through established institutions.

4. Relevance for Contemporary Muslim Society, Especially Indonesia

a. The Relevance of al-Afghani's Ideas

The spirit of pan-Islamism al-Afghani in its updated version is still very relevant in the context of the global solidarity of Muslims in the face of various forms of international injustice. Moreover, his critique of blind taqlid and the call to reopen ijihad became an important foundation for moderate Islamic movements that sought to respond creatively to contemporary challenges (Judge, 2024). In Indonesia, this spirit is reflected in the intellectual tradition of organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama that consistently strive to develop Islamic thought that is responsive to the local context (Hambali & Samosir, 2022).

b. The Relevance of Abduh's Idea

Abduh's most relevant contribution to contemporary Indonesia is his hermeneutic methodology that distinguishes between the universal-permanent aspects of religion and the contextual-temporal aspects. This methodology provides the intellectual framework that is needed in actual debates, such as the relationship between religion and the state, the position of women in Islam, and Islamic attitudes towards pluralism. Abduh's emphasis on education and institutional reform is also very relevant in Indonesia's efforts to confront religious radicalism which is essentially a product of intellectual poverty and educational failure.

c. Synthesis: Lessons for Indonesia

Reading al-Afghani and Abduh comparatively reveals that the difference in approach between the two is not weakness, but wealth. Indonesia, as the largest Muslim country in the world and the third largest democracy, needs both paths of reform at once: political-institutional reforms that guarantee justice and freedom of religion (the spirit of al-Afghani), as well as educational and intellectual reforms that give birth to a generation of Muslims who are critical, open, and characterful (Abduh's legacy). The dichotomy between "political Islam" and "cultural Islam" that often colors the discourse of Indonesian Islam can actually be bridged by the synthesis of the thoughts of these two figures.

Furthermore, in the context of rising radicalism and intolerance, the epistemological legacy of al-Afghani and Abduh offers a solid antithesis: that authentic Islam is a rational, inclusive, and progress-oriented non-Islamic Islam that is defensive, exclusive, and oriented towards pseudo-purity.

Conclusion

This research shows that Jamaluddin al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh had the same goal, which was to awaken Muslims from regression to progress without abandoning the basic values of Islam. However, the two took different paths. Al-Afghani emphasized the importance of political resistance to colonialism and the awakening of the consciousness of the people, while Abduh emphasized more on educational reform, renewal of thought, and harmonization between reason and revelation.

These differences are not opposites, but two complementary approaches. Al-Afghani aroused the spirit of change, while Abduh built a more systematic and sustainable intellectual foundation. Both thoughts remain relevant for contemporary Muslim society, including in Indonesia, especially in the face of the problems of radicalism, intolerance, and the challenges of modernity.

In the end, the greatest legacy of al-Afghani and Abduh is the belief that true Islam is an Islam that is rational, open, and capable of dialogue with the times without losing its identity.

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