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Article

Contemporary Islamic Thought in the Context of Globalisation, Pluralism, and Secularism: Schools, Influences, and Challenges

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Abstract

This study analyses the dynamics of contemporary Islamic thought in response to globalisation, pluralism, and secularism. It adopts a qualitative approach using a systematic review, drawing on books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other academic sources that were identified, selected, thematically grouped, and interpretively analysed. The study addresses three questions: how contemporary Islamic thought is defined and distinguished; what its major schools are and how they differ; and what influence they exert and what challenges they face. The findings show that contextual reinterpretation of sacred texts and the application of social justice principles provide a foundation for renewing Islamic thought in ways relevant to contemporary issues. Five major schools i.e. *liberal, moderate, progressive, cultural*, and *radical Islam*, differ primarily in their approaches to individual freedom, religious interpretation, and the renewal of Islamic law. Their influence can be observed in social reform, women's empowerment, political discourse, economic thought, and education. The study concludes that, despite challenges including radicalisation and tensions between tradition and modernity, contemporary Islamic thought has significant potential to promote social justice, interfaith harmony, and global peace. Its continued development depends on balancing religious values with changing social realities while encouraging constructive dialogue, intellectual openness, and peaceful engagement across diverse communities.

Keywords: Contemporary Islam, Liberal, Pluralism, and Secularism, School of thought, Islamic Thought.

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Introduction

Islam possesses an intellectual and spiritual tradition that has developed over more than fourteen centuries. Within the dynamism of the modern era, that tradition has generated a plurality of schools, ideas, influences and challenges, each evolving in response to the social, political and cultural conditions of the modern world. Amid this diversity, Muslims have sought to maintain a balance between preserving the core values of the religion and adapting to the demands of the age, so that Islam remains relevant to contemporary life.

Morphologically, the Indonesian term *pemikiran* (thought) derives from *pikir*, which refers to the use of reason to reflect upon or attend to something; lexically, *kontemporer* (contemporary) denotes that which belongs to the same period or age (Ibrahim, 2016). Contemporary Islamic thought has developed rapidly over recent decades alongside the social, political and technological changes taking place across the world. Muslims face a range of challenges that compel them to re-examine and reinterpret Islamic teachings in a modern context. This process involves not only Muslim intellectuals but society as a whole, as communities seek workable answers to the problems they encounter.

Contemporary Islam presents a variety of currents that have emerged in answer to the challenges of the modern age, among them the need to address pluralism, secularism and radicalization (Dalimunthe, 2023). The currents visible today i.e. *traditionalist, modernist, progressive* and *fundamentalist* reflect markedly different approaches to understanding and practicing religious teaching. They range from those who seek to preserve inherited tradition to those who press for renewal and adaptation to the needs of the age. Despite these differences of outlook, each current seeks to preserve the essence of Islamic teaching while adapting to a continually changing social context, so that Islam remains meaningful to human life in the modern world.

The influence of contemporary Islamic thought on the way Muslims understand and practice their religion is considerable. In a social, political and cultural setting that continues to evolve, it plays an important part in answering the new challenges Muslims face in different regions of the world. Globalization, technological advance and issues such as religious pluralism, human rights and gender equality have together encouraged the emergence of currents of Islamic thought that are more flexible and more responsive to change. In the political domain in particular, contemporary Islamic thought shapes how Muslims view the relationship between religion and state, and the terms on which Islamic law (sharia) might operate within a modern and plural polity.

At the same time, contemporary Islam confronts substantial challenges bound up with social, political and cultural dynamics. Under the pressure of an ever-

stronger globalization, Muslims must navigate shifting values and rapid social change while holding to the foundational teachings of the faith. A central difficulty is how to reinterpret those teachings in a changing age, including in matters of human rights, gender equality and religious pluralism. Contemporary Islamic thought responds by offering more contextual readings of the Qur'an and the Hadith, but those readings have themselves generated internal debate between those who would preserve traditional understandings and those who favor renewal.

Much of the existing scholarship addresses these developments piecemeal. Individual studies examine a single thinker, a single school, or a single domain of influence such as education or law. What remains less well developed is an integrated account that sets the major schools alongside one another, traces their influence across social, political, economic and educational domains, and situates both within the challenges that constrain them. This article accordingly addresses three questions. First, how is contemporary Islamic thought defined, and what features distinguish it? Second, what are the major schools within contemporary Islamic thought, and how do they differ from one another? Third, what influence do these schools exert, and what challenges do they face? The objective is to provide a comprehensive and integrated understanding of the dynamics of contemporary Islam, and the contribution of the article lies in consolidating these three strands into a single conceptual model.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using a systematic review. The approach involves the collection, processing and analysis of data drawn from written sources, including books, scholarly journals, research articles and other academic references. It is appropriate to the aim of the study, which is to create a conceptual paper that are derived from theories and ideas rather than to measure variables, and it allows the social, cultural and political dynamics at the center of contemporary Islamic thought to be examined in depth.

Data were collected by searching the academic literature using keywords relevant to the research topic, among them i.e. *contemporary Islamic thought, liberal Islam, moderate Islam, progressive Islam, cultural Islam,* and *radical Islam*, together with their Indonesian (context and language) equivalents. Sources were retained on three criteria: direct thematic relevance to contemporary Islamic thought and its schools; publication in a peer-reviewed journal or by an academic press; and availability of the full text. The literature retained was then grouped according to its correspondence with the three research questions.

Analysis proceeded in three stages. In the first, the literature was identified, selected and grouped by theme. In the second, the grouped material was analyzed

interpretively, with the aim of drawing out the meaning and relevance of each source in relation to the problem under examination; this was done with reference to the theoretical framework established at the outset, so as to produce a structured and comprehensive understanding of the issues discussed. In the third, the findings were synthesized across sources into the thematic structure presented in the following section, and the recurring relations among definition, school, influence and challenge were consolidated into the conceptual model set out in Figure 1. As a study based entirely on written sources, the analysis reflects the positions represented in the published literature and does not incorporate field data on how these currents of thought are received or practiced within Muslim communities. The literature consulted is also predominantly Indonesian-language, which situates the findings most firmly in the Indonesian context, even though the schools discussed are transnational in scope.

Result and Discussion

Defining Contemporary Islamic Thought and Its Distinguishing Features

Etymologically, the word Islam derives from Arabic and carries the senses of safety, peace and well-being, reflecting an attitude of submission, security and peace. The term contemporary, as defined in the *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, refers to that which takes place in the present or at the same time, describing what is modern or of the moment as against what is ancient or obsolete. In the arts, for instance, contemporary art denotes work that develops in step with the age, is not bound by traditional rules and is shaped by modernisation (Fitri et al., 2024). Taken together, contemporary Islamic thought may be understood as a sustained effort to align religious teaching with the continually changing demands of the age, particularly in the social, political and cultural spheres.

The central concern of this body of thought is the adaptation of Islamic teaching to the challenges of the modern era across social, political, economic and cultural domains. At its core lie the twin commitments of renewal (*islah*) and ijtihad: the reinterpretation of sacred texts such as the Qur'an and the Hadith so that they speak to the present context, including on questions of human rights, democracy, gender equality and pluralism. Contemporary Muslim thinkers seek to demonstrate that the foundational principles of Islam remain relevant notwithstanding the rapid development of science, technology and systems of government. Religious pluralism and tolerance are prominent themes, with many thinkers stressing the need for interfaith dialogue and respect for diversity within society.

The plurality of contemporary Islamic thought is itself a product of specific conditions. According to Nurcholish Madjid, this diversity was prompted by the emergence of, and the questions raised about, a set of fundamental problems confronting the Muslim community (Kardi et al., 2022). Chief among them is how to

balance the preservation of authentic Islamic teaching against its relevance to modern development. Human rights and social justice have accordingly become focal concerns, as has the relationship between religion and state, where the search is for a form of government grounded in Islamic principles yet compatible with modern democratic systems. In the face of globalisation, contemporary Islamic thought seeks to maintain Islamic identity without forfeiting its relevance in a world that is increasingly interconnected and shaped by secular values.

An important dimension of this thought concerns the dynamics of law. From the spread of Islam after the death of the Prophet Muhammad to the present day, Islamic law, and the law of *fiqh* in particular, has occupied a dominant place in the life of the community. Thobieb Al-Asyhar observes that, in a number of contexts, the law produced by the interpretation of scholars in accordance with the conditions of their own time, and grounded in primary sources such as the Qur'an and the Hadith, has often come to be regarded as a representation of the religion itself (Musif, 2015). Distinguishing between revealed sources and their historically situated interpretation is therefore a precondition of renewal.

The distinguishing feature of contemporary Islamic thought is thus its contextual approach to the interpretation of religious texts, which allows Islamic teaching to remain relevant as circumstances change. This thought emphasises dynamic ijtihad, the integration of religion with the sciences, and support for democracy, social justice, pluralism and tolerance. Contemporary Muslim thinkers seek a harmonious relationship between religious tradition and contemporary reality, so that Islam is understood not merely as an inheritance from the past but as a guide offering solutions to global challenges such as radicalisation and globalisation, without sacrificing the essence of religious teaching.

The Major Schools of Contemporary Islamic Thought

The phenomenon also reflects the growth of digital skills in rural areas. Operating livestreams, responding to viewers and sustaining their attention require competences that residents acquired largely through practice, and the wider expansion of digital education has made such skills increasingly accessible (Wang et al., 2024). Dance on social media has become a field in which participants construct identities in relation to audiences and markets (Harrington, 2020), and in which collective forms of digital performance raise questions about what is held in common and what is sold (Bench, 2024).

The same dynamics expose participants to commodification. Yeo (2024) describes how performers in a market-driven dance industry are pressed to adapt their identities to audience demand, a condition she terms hyper-subjectivity, and draws on the notion of cruel optimism to describe attachments to opportunities that

also cause harm. A comparable pressure operates on the livestreams, where the income generated depends on continuous visibility and on performances calibrated to elicit gifts. The need to sustain attention over long broadcasts may produce fatigue and stress, and may push performers toward content that attracts gifts at the expense of dignity. It is at this point that the Islamic assessment becomes decisive.

Liberal Islam

The term *liberal Islam*, used of a group of progressive Muslim thinkers, was first introduced by Western writers such as Leonard Binder and Charles Kurzman. Liberal Islam positions itself in opposition to revivalist Islam, emphasising the use of past tradition in support of modernity. One of its principal features is a critique of tradition and of the revivalist outlook, which liberals regard as an obstacle to the Muslim world's attainment of modernity, including in economic progress, democracy and legal rights. In general terms, the word "liberal" carries the sense of freedom or liberation (Fitri et al., 2024).

Fundamentalist and orthodox groups ordinarily view liberalism as a doctrine that privileges unrestrained freedom and disregards the moral values of society. Liberals, by contrast, hold that freedom must remain within the bounds of law and respect the rights of the individual. They argue that religious teaching needs to be translated into a form of rational moral reasoning in which human rights serve as the governing principle. Liberal thinkers will therefore reject any religious interpretation that is inconsistent with the principle of freedom and with fundamental rights (Hakim & Omar, 2012).

Liberal Islamic thought is no longer bound to the views of the classical scholars; it seeks instead to align Islamic teaching with the modern context. Its proponents hold that the Islamic sciences i.e. *usul al-tafsir, usul al-fiqh, usul al-hadith* and *al-jarh wa al-ta'dil* have tended to be treated as rigid within the framework of Islamic scholarship. The school also stresses that the mujtahid is not immune from error or deficiency. It accordingly accords no special deference to these disciplines and is not bound by traditional readings, opening the way for individuals to advance interpretations of their own.

Moderate Islam is a school of Islamic thought that seeks a balance between tradition and modernity, emphasising the values of tolerance, peace and social justice. It opposes extremism and radicalisation and encourages Muslims to live their religion contextually and judiciously, avoiding rigid or literal interpretation. It stresses respect for pluralism and diversity in society, whether of religion, culture or outlook, and supports the principles of democracy and human rights as well as the integration of Islam with contemporary social and political development, without sacrificing the essence of religious teaching. Its aim is a society that is harmonious,

inclusive and tolerant, able to adapt to a changing age and to meet the challenges of globalisation with discernment.

Moderate Islam

Khaled Abou El Fadl describes the moderate Muslim as one who regards religion not as something static but as a living and dynamic framework of faith, which honours the achievements of the past while remaining relevant to the present (Djalal & Huda, 2020). He distinguishes the term moderate from modernist, progressive and reformist: modernist refers to those who attempt to confront modernity, while reformist and progressive describe only a small portion of the Muslim community. In the context of Islamic theology and law, the majority of Muslims are more accurately described as moderate, since they give priority to balance (Mun'im, 2018).

Moderate Islam rests on four principal values i.e. *tawasuth* (a moderate disposition), *tawazun* (balance), *tasamuh* (tolerance) and *i'tidal* (justice). These shape a cast of minds that avoids extremism, whether in the form of liberalism, secularism or radicalism. The school emphasises respect for diversity, the maintenance of a balance between spiritual and material concerns, and the upholding of justice across the domains of life. Within contemporary Islamic thought these principles serve as a guide for meeting modern challenges, countering radicalism, fostering social harmony and aligning Islamic teaching with the needs of a developing world. Moderate Islam thus offers an approach that is peaceful, inclusive and pertinent to societies that are diverse and complex (Zumrotus Sholikhah & Muvid, 2022).

Progressive Islam is a school of contemporary Islamic thought concerned with social, political and economic renewal, with the aim of securing social justice and the empowerment of the community, particularly in relation to the rights of women and marginalised groups. It stresses the importance of reinterpreting Islamic teaching so as to meet the challenges of the modern age, among them gender equality, religious pluralism, democracy and human rights. The school seeks to integrate Islamic principles with modern values in order to build a society that is just, inclusive and democratic. Progressive thinkers support the application of Islamic teaching in a more democratic setting that respects plurality, and reject authoritarianism and injustice in systems of government. Through this approach, progressive Islam addresses social problems such as poverty, inequality and economic injustice while encouraging positive change within Muslim societies.

Progressive Islam

Progressive Islam differs in this respect from liberal Islam, which rests at bottom on the proposition that human beings can grasp the nature of life and the universe through logic and reason alone, without reliance on revelation, dogmatic religious teaching or spiritual experience (Arif, 2020). Progressive Islam does not set aside class

analysis, though neither does it treat class as its sole point of reference. Its approach is driven also by openness of method and by moral inspiration. Militancy and partisanship nonetheless remain characteristic of its struggle. The two are not in contradiction, since these principles rest on inclusive democratic values and on the conviction that emancipation is a continuing process that is never complete.

Progressive Islam cannot in general be regarded as a group set apart from society, or as a middle class distinguished by intellectual privilege. It is better understood as a form of Islam grounded in social commitment, with a character that tends toward the radical. The term radical is for this reason more apt as a description of progressive Islam than of the Islamic right, which is more accurately termed extremist or religiously fascist (Mubarok, 2022).

Cultural Islam

The term "cultural" in the concept of Cultural Islam derives from the English word culture, carrying the senses of civility, culture and cultivation. Some accounts trace culture to the Latin *cultura*, meaning to tend, to manage or to cultivate. On these definitions, culture may be understood as every form of human creativity that draws on the capacities and potential a person possesses in order to create a more prosperous life (Fitri et al., 2024).

Cultural Islam is a school of contemporary Islamic thought that understands Islam as part of the culture and identity of Muslim societies. It views Islam as an element of social life that develops in accordance with the local cultural context without losing the essence of religious teaching. The school emphasises diversity in forms of worship, tradition and religious interpretation, which may vary according to the cultural and historical background of each region. The interaction between Islam and local culture has produced a cultural transformation giving rise to Islamic traditions that are still maintained by Muslim communities today. This process has operated in both directions: Islam has accommodated itself to local culture, and Islamic teaching has in turn shaped that culture (Hidayatullah, 2018).

Radical Islam is a school of Islamic thought that emphasises the literal and conservative application of Islamic teaching, frequently rejecting modernity and the forms of social change it regards as contrary to religious principle. It tends to press for drastic social or political change through a more forceful or revolutionary approach, and in some situations does not hesitate to use violence in pursuit of its ends. Radical Islam commonly gives priority to the full application of Islamic law in the life of the state and opposes secularism, democracy and the Western values it regards as corrupting the purity of Islamic teaching. Its thinkers and groups typically interpret religious texts with great strictness and seek to return Muslim society to

what they take to be a purer practice of Islam, consonant with the age of the Prophet Muhammad.

Radicalism derives from the Latin radix, meaning "root". The ideology presses for large-scale change and total reconstruction as the route to progress. In the social sciences, radicalism denotes an attitude or outlook that seeks drastic change to the status quo by destroying it and replacing it with a wholly new and different system. It ordinarily emerges as a response to existing conditions, whether by way of evaluation, rejection or outright opposition. What is opposed may include assumptions, ideologies, institutions or values held responsible for the persistence of an undesired state of affairs (Laisa, 2014).

Radicalism is often denoted by other terms of similar meaning, among them Neo-Khawarij, the Khawarij of the twentieth century, and fundamentalism. In Arabic it is known as at-tatharuf al-diny, meaning extremity or excess in religion. In broad terms, at-tatharuf al-diny refers to conduct that exceeds the proper limits in religious practice, standing opposed to the concept of wasath (the middle or moderate position), which is regarded as commendable. Radicalism, in other words, describes conduct that is excessive and far removed from a balanced middle path in religion.

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Table 1 sets the five schools alongside one another on four dimensions: their orientation toward the sacred text, their stance toward modernity, their central emphasis, and the principal concepts or figures associated with them.

Table 1. Comparative summary of the major schools of contemporary Islamic thought

School	Orientation toward the text	Stance toward modernity	Central emphasis
Liberal Islam	Not bound by classical readings; accords no special deference to the traditional Islamic sciences	Modernity embraced; revivalism treated as an obstacle to progress	Individual freedom, human rights, rational moral reasoning
Moderate Islam	Contextual and judicious; avoids rigid or literal readings	Balance sought between tradition and modernity	*Tawasuth, tawazun, tasamuh* and *i'tidal*; tolerance, peace, social harmony
Progressive Islam	Reinterpretation through a scientific and modern approach	Modern values integrated with Islamic principles	Social justice, empowerment of women and marginalised groups, democracy
Cultural Islam	Read through the local cultural context without loss of the essence of the teaching	Accommodation to local culture rather than confrontation	Diversity of worship, tradition and interpretation across regions
Radical Islam	Literal and strict; return to what is taken to be a purer practice	Modernity rejected as contrary to religious principle	Full application of Islamic law; opposition to secularism and democracy

The Influence of Contemporary Islamic Thought

Contemporary Islamic thought has had a significant effect across many aspects of Muslim life worldwide, playing an important part in meeting the challenges of the modern age such as globalisation, pluralism and technological advance. One of its principal effects lies in social reform and the empowerment of women, where many contemporary thinkers have sought to offer interpretations of Islamic teaching that

are more just and more inclusive, particularly in matters of human rights, education and gender equality.

Contemporary Islamic thought has also shaped Islamic politics, introducing a discourse on the relationship between religion and state and on the application of Islamic values within more democratic and inclusive systems of government. In the economic sphere, it has contributed to the development of a more equitable economic system grounded in Islamic principles such as social justice, the equitable distribution of wealth and the alleviation of poverty. Islamic thought and movements have accordingly developed under the influence of globalisation as well as of internal factors, including concern over *shirk* and *bid'ah*, which played a part in the Islamic revivalist movements that became prominent in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues that modern issues such as human rights, economics, politics, the condition of Muslim minorities and radicalisation are the principal factors behind the emergence of Islamic movements in the contemporary era (Riyadi et al., 2023).

Education is a further domain in which the influence of contemporary Islamic thought is marked (Khamsi & Asiah, 2021). Rapid development in education has made it an important instrument, and one that places a considerable responsibility on religious leaders and educators to transmit the religious sciences to students (Destrianjasari et al., 2022). Taken together, these effects indicate that contemporary Islamic thought operates not only at the level of scholarly debate but in the institutions through which religious understanding is formed and transmitted.

Challenges and Future Directions

Contemporary Islamic thought faces challenges of some complexity at the level of the individual, of society and of the state. One of the principal difficulties is the conflict between tradition and modernity. Many continue to hold a conservative understanding of Islamic teaching, while others press for its alignment with a continually changing age. This tension has given rise to debate over the extent to which Islamic teaching may be accommodated to modern social, political and cultural realities without sacrificing its foundational principles. The influence of globalisation presents a further challenge, particularly in confronting secular values regarded as contrary to those of Islam. Contemporary Islamic thought is often marked, in consequence, by a new awareness of the importance of tradition on the one hand and of modernity on the other, and of how the two are best understood and managed; the relationship between them has become a central issue in present-day discussion (Hikmah & Halimi, 2023).

A further challenge is radicalisation and extremism, which frequently claim to represent Islam. Movements of this kind manipulate religious teaching for political

ends in ways that run counter to authentic Islamic teaching, and they create internal and external tension while shaping global perceptions of Islam. It is therefore important that contemporary Islamic thought offer solutions that are moderate and inclusive, and that it emphasise the values of tolerance, pluralism and peace within Islam.

The future of contemporary Islamic thought will depend substantially on the capacity of Muslims to meet these challenges with discernment. It may be hoped that it will develop toward an understanding that is more inclusive and more pertinent, maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity. Progressive education and interfaith dialogue will be central to reducing social tension, and the use of technology and communications will play an important part in disseminating moderate Islamic thought and strengthening the integration of Muslims within an increasingly connected world.

In a world that is complex and beset by social challenges, contemporary Islamic thought has an important part to play in addressing humanitarian problems and advancing social welfare. It emphasises the preservation of human dignity and human rights, giving priority to the principles of justice, compassion and empathy toward others. The concept of humanity in Islam encompasses universal values that support peace, tolerance and benevolence (Alvizar Dayusman et al., 2023)

A Conceptual Model of Contemporary Islamic Thought

The three strands of the analysis, definition and distinguishing features, the major schools, and influence and challenges are mutually constitutive rather than separate. Figure 1 consolidates them into a single conceptual model, in which the definition of contemporary Islamic thought generates the schools, the schools in turn produce effects across social, political, economic and educational life, and the challenges that arise feed back into how the thought is defined and practised.

Contemporary Islamic thought offers a perspective that is pertinent to the challenges of modernity, emphasising the reinterpretation of Islamic teaching through a contextual approach and the use of dynamic ijtihad. In bringing together religious values and modern knowledge, it gives prominence to pluralism, tolerance and social justice. The existence of schools as varied as liberal, moderate, progressive, cultural and radical Islam demonstrates the diversity of approaches to modern issues and creates a space for dialogue in which increasingly complex social, political and cultural problems may be addressed.

The model set out in Figure 1 highlights the significant influence of contemporary Islamic thought on social reform, the empowerment of women and the relationship between religion and state. Challenges such as the conflict between tradition and modernity, radicalisation and the pressure of globalisation remain the

principal obstacles to be overcome. The contribution of this study lies in integrating theory and practice and in providing a conceptual foundation for the development of an Islam that is both pertinent and inclusive in the face of global realities.

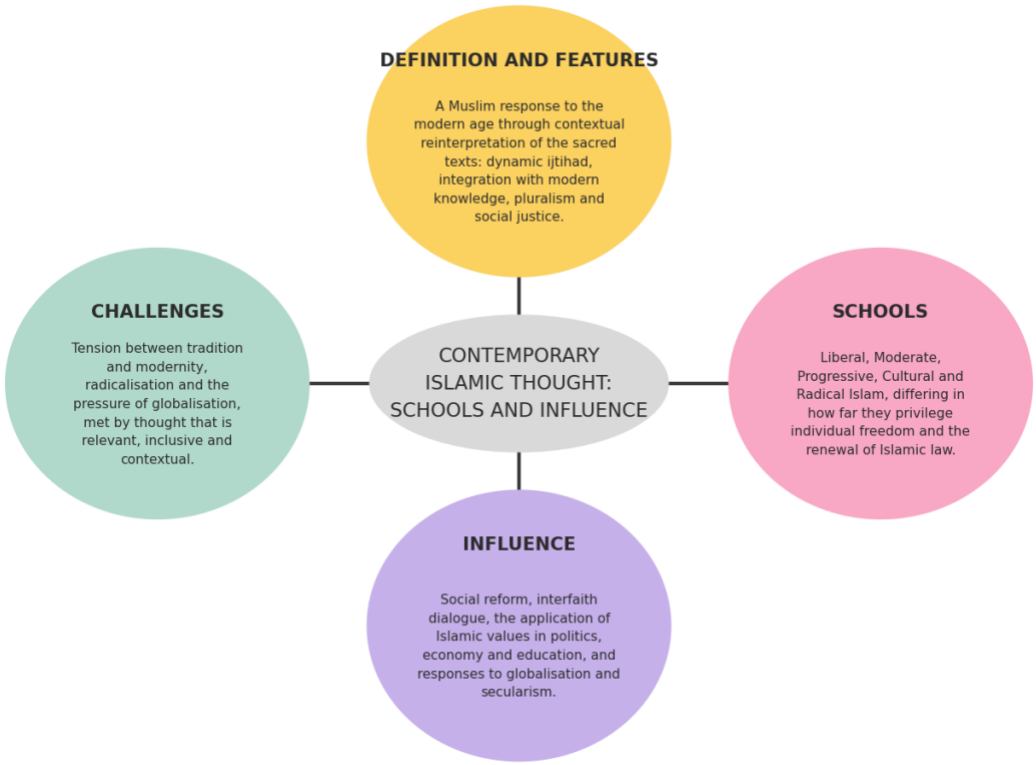


Figure 1. Conceptual model of contemporary Islamic thought: definition, schools, influence and challenges

Conclusion

Contemporary Islam is the product of an encounter between the classical scholarly tradition and modernity, directed at preserving the core values of the religion while aligning its teaching with the demands of the age. In answer to the first research question, contemporary Islamic thought is best defined by its contextual approach to the interpretation of religious texts, and is distinguished by dynamic ijtihad, the integration of religion with the sciences, and a commitment to pluralism, tolerance and social justice.

Five principal schools were identified, i.e. *Liberal, Moderate, Progressive, Cultural* and *Radical Islam* which differ chiefly in their orientation toward the sacred text and in how far they privilege individual freedom and the renewal of Islamic law, yet share the aim of preserving the relevance of Islamic teaching within modern society. In answer to the third, their influence is most evident in social reform, the

empowerment of women, interfaith dialogue, economic thought, education and the relationship between religion and state, while the challenges they face include the tension between tradition and modernity, radicalisation, and the secular values carried by globalisation.

The contribution of this study lies in consolidating these three strands into a single conceptual model rather than treating them in isolation. Its principal limitation is its reliance on written sources, predominantly Indonesian-language, which means that the findings describe the positions represented in that literature rather than the practices of Muslim communities themselves. Further research combining documentary analysis with field data, and drawing on a wider range of languages, would allow the model proposed here to be tested empirically. In the meantime, the development of contemporary Islamic thought along inclusive and pertinent lines will depend on the strengthening of education, on open interfaith dialogue, and on the use of modern technology to disseminate Islamic values that are moderate, peaceful and just.

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