

# The Dilemma of Islamic Rationalism: A Critical Study of Bassam Tibi's Thought in Modernity

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## Abstract:

This study critically examines Bassam Tibi's concept of Islamic rationalism within the context of modernity. It aims to explore how Tibi distinguishes between Islam as a universal ethical system and Islamism as a political ideology that often rejects rationality and pluralism. Employing a qualitative, library-based approach with content analysis and critical hermeneutics, the study analyzes Tibi's major works—especially *Islamism and Islam*—and related scholarly debates on the relationship between Islam, rationality, and modernity. The findings reveal that Tibi proposes a revival of Islamic rationalism as a response to the epistemological crisis in the Muslim world, yet his framework remains influenced by Eurocentric notions of modernity. Conversely, Muslim thinkers such as Harun Nasution, Nurcholish Madjid, and al-Attas advocate for a reconstruction of Islamic rationality grounded in *tawhid* and spirituality. The study's main limitation lies in its reliance on textual analysis without empirical validation of how Tibi's ideas operate in non-Western Muslim societies. Practically, it recommends educational reform that integrates religious and modern sciences, promotes rational literacy, and fosters critical dialogue between Islamic tradition and global modernity. This research contributes to Islamic philosophy by emphasizing the synthesis between rationality and spirituality. Practically, it offers a conceptual framework for Islamic education and intellectual reform to engage constructively with modernity while maintaining ethical and theological integrity.

**Keywords:** Bassam Tibi; ethics; Islam; Islamism; modernity; orthodoxy; rationalism; spirituality.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between Islam and rationalism is a major theme in Islamic intellectual history, one that continues to spark debate to this day. Since the early centuries of Islamic civilization, the question of how to place reason (*'aql*) and revelation (*wahy*) within the epistemological framework of Islam has been a tug-of-war between two major tendencies: those who emphasize the supremacy of rationality as the path to universal truth, and those who prioritize the authority of revelation as the absolute source of religious knowledge (Akyol, 2021). Throughout this long journey, various attempts have emerged to find a balance between the two, but in the context of modernity, the debate has taken on a new, more complex form. Modernity presents epistemological, social, and theological challenges that require Islam not only to maintain its intellectual tradition but also to adapt to the scientific and secular rationality that underpins the modern world (Gabsi, 2024).

One of the most vocal contemporary thinkers in addressing this issue is Bassam Tibi, a Syrian-German intellectual known for his landmark work, *Islamism and Islam* (2012). In this book, Tibi attempts to clearly

distinguish between Islam as a universal, rational religion and Islamism as a political movement, which he believes tends to be anti-rational and reactionary to modernity. He believes that many modern Islamist movements fail to grasp the essence of classical Islamic rationalism and instead become trapped in a conservatism that rejects the principles of modern rationality. In his view, true Islam is rational, cosmopolitan, and open to knowledge, while Islamism is a form of religious ideologization that rejects rational and pluralistic values (Tibi, 2012).

This distinction is important because it reopens a long-standing debate about the place of reason within the Islamic tradition. In Islamic intellectual history, the discourse of rationalism has deep roots. The Mu'tazilites, for example, in the 8th to 9th centuries CE asserted that reason plays a fundamental role in understanding truth and interpreting religious texts. They believed that God's justice can be known through reason, and therefore humans are morally responsible for their actions. This view was later challenged by orthodox groups such as the Ash'arites, who held revelation as the sole source of absolute truth (Fakhry, 2004). The tension between these two epistemological traditions—philosophical rationalism and orthodox theology—became a crucial point in Islamic intellectual history and shaped the way Muslims thought for centuries to come.

According to Tibi, the intellectual stagnation of the modern Islamic world is largely rooted in the dominance of orthodoxy that rejects rationality as a means of developing knowledge and culture. He believes that after the golden age of Islamic philosophy during the Abbasid era, especially after the weakening of the philosophical tradition due to resistance from orthodox scholars, Islamic rationalism experienced a sharp decline. The scientific tradition that once thrived in an open environment, such as during the time of Ibn Sina, Al-Farabi, and Ibn Rushd, was gradually replaced by a rigid and apologetic textual style of thinking (F. Rahman, 2017). For Tibi, this is the root of the crisis of modernity in the Islamic world: the failure to integrate universal rational values into religious and social life (Azra, 2013).

However, Tibi's analysis does not stop at the theological dimension alone. He also highlights the institutional factors that have shaped the direction of Islamic intellectual development. In his view, the traditional Islamic education system, particularly the madrasah, plays a crucial role in reinforcing epistemological conservatism. The madrasah's primary focus on religious sciences—such as fiqh and tafsir—to the exclusion of the "rational sciences" (*'ulum 'aqliyyah*) has created a chasm between religion and modern science (M. A. Bakar, 2017). This educational structure, he argues, does not encourage critical and rational attitudes but instead fosters a dogmatic mindset that resists reform. Thus, a revival of Islamic rationalism is impossible without fundamental reform of the educational system and religious epistemology itself (Fouz Mohamed Zacky & Moniruzzaman, 2024).

In a global context, Tibi also warns of the dangers of what he calls "Islamist semi-modernity"—a phenomenon in which some Muslim societies attempt to adopt technological aspects of modernity without accepting the rational and philosophical foundations that underpin modern civilization (Gabsi, 2024). He argues that many Muslim countries are trapped in a pseudo-modernization: they adopt Western technology but reject the critical rationality and pluralistic values that underpin scientific progress. As a result, modernity in the Islamic world often stops at the material level without producing profound intellectual transformation (Jung, 2023).

For Tibi, rationalism is not merely a method of thinking, but also a value related to intellectual ethics, openness to differences, and a commitment to objective truth. He believes that an authentic Islamic revival must stem from this awareness. A rational Islam is one capable of dialogue with science, philosophy, and modernity, without losing its spiritual identity (Tibi, 2001a). This view places Tibi in an interesting position: on the one hand, he strongly criticizes Islamic fundamentalism; on the other, he also rejects extreme secularism that eliminates the role of religion from the public sphere. He proposes a universal form of Islamic rationalism, in which religion and rationality support each other in building a modern civilization (Bhat & Bisati, 2025).

However, Tibi's ideas have not escaped criticism. Many Muslim scholars believe his approach is too influenced by the Eurocentric paradigm of Western modernity. For example, Nurcholish Madjid emphasized that modernization in Islam must be rooted in the internal values of Islam itself, rather than simply adopting Western rationality. He proposed the concept of the "Islamization of rationality," which positions reason as a divine gift that must be used within the ethical framework of monotheism (Khoirudin & Aulassyahied, 2023). Abdurrahman Wahid even rejected Tibi's sharp dichotomy between Islam and

modernity, arguing that the Islamic tradition has long possessed rational potential that is cosmopolitan and open to change (Nolte, 2023).

Meanwhile, Harun Nasution believes that Islamic rationalism needs to be returned to its original theological spirit, namely the effort to understand religious teachings through logical reasoning that does not negate revelation. In other words, reason and revelation are not two opposing entities, but rather two complementary sources of knowledge (Aljunied, 2021). This perspective aligns with Fazlur Rahman's view, which proposes the concept of "Islamic neo-modernism," in which rational reading of religious texts must be accompanied by an awareness of historical and social context. These critiques demonstrate that the project of Islamic rationalism cannot be built solely on secular foundations but needs to consider the spiritual and ethical dynamics of Islam itself (F. Rahman, 2017).

Tibi also links the rise of Islamic rationalism to contemporary geopolitical and social conditions. He sees globalization as a new arena where Muslims are tested to demonstrate the compatibility between religious identity and modern rationality (Tibi, 2012). In an increasingly digitally and intellectually connected world, the epistemological backwardness of the Islamic world is becoming increasingly apparent. Therefore, he calls for the emergence of a new generation of Muslim intellectuals capable of bridging Islamic values with the principles of modern science.

In the Indonesian context, this debate takes on deeper significance. As the world's largest Muslim-majority country, Indonesia has become a crucial laboratory for reconciliation efforts between Islam, rationality, and modernity. Since the early days of independence, the discourse on Islamic renewal in Indonesia has involved figures such as Haji Agus Salim, Mohammad Natsir, and Nurcholish Madjid, who attempted to articulate a harmonious relationship between faith and reason within the framework of nationalism and democracy (Sebastian & Othman Alkaff, 2024). Intellectual movements such as the rational Islam movement introduced by Harun Nasution at the State Islamic University of Jakarta have become a significant milestone in reviving the spirit of Islamic rationality in the archipelago (Rosidi, 2023).

Meanwhile, the Indonesian social context also demonstrates how Islamic rationality can serve as an ethical foundation for pluralism and democracy. Robert W. Hefner, through his concept of Civil Islam, demonstrates that Indonesian Islamic tradition has a remarkable capacity to accommodate modern values without losing its spirituality (Hefner, 2019). This is evident in the role of Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) and Islamic organizations such as Muhammadiyah and Nahdlatul Ulama, which strive to balance religious orthodoxy and intellectual openness. Within this framework, Tibi's critique of Islamic conservatism finds its applicability in Indonesia, although his approach needs to be adapted to local socio-cultural conditions (Tibi, 2001b).

The key question is: to what extent does Tibi's framework of Islamic rationalism capture the complexity of the Islamic intellectual tradition and its potential for transformation in a non-Western Muslim society like Indonesia? While Tibi's analysis sharply highlights the dangers of anti-rationalism and the politicization of religion, his approach sometimes overlooks more contextual local dynamics. In the *pesantren* tradition, for example, the integration of religious knowledge, philosophy, and spiritual experience often gives rise to a distinctive form of rationality that does not fully align with Western rational models, yet still produces reflective and critical thinking (Bruinessen, 2015).

Thus, studying Bassam Tibi's thought is not only relevant for understanding the dynamics of global Islam but also crucial for internal reflection within the Islamic world itself. It compels us to re-ask the question: must true Islamic rationalism be rooted in the values of the European Enlightenment, or can it emerge from the original and contextual treasures of Islamic intellectualism? This question leads us to a broader reflection on the future of Islam as a civilization. Will Islam remain on the fringes of modernity, or will it become an active participant in building a more inclusive and spiritual global rationality?

This study attempts to address this question by critically examining Tibi's arguments about Islamic rationalism and their relevance for the Muslim world, particularly Indonesia. Through an interdisciplinary approach that combines intellectual history, the sociology of knowledge, and contemporary religious studies, this research aims to present a more balanced reading of the relationship between Islam, reason, and modernity. In a global context marked by epistemological crisis and ideological polarization, rebuilding the foundations of Islamic rationalism is not merely an intellectual project but also a moral endeavor to reaffirm Islam's role as a civilizational religion—one that encourages humankind to think, dialogue, and innovate for the sake of shared progress (Sabic-El-Rayess, 2020).

## METHOD

This research methodology uses a qualitative approach, combining content analysis and critical hermeneutics, to examine Bassam Tibi's thoughts on Islamic rationalism in the context of modernity. A qualitative approach was chosen because it can uncover the implicit meanings of the text and explore the social, political, and historical contexts that shape a figure's thoughts. As explained by Pandis, literature-based qualitative research aims to understand the structure and meaning of a thought through a systematic and reflective examination of the text (Pandis, 2025). In this study, this approach is used to read and interpret Tibi's ideas in depth, both in terms of ideology and the rationality he constructs amidst the tension between Islamism and Western modernity.

This type of research is descriptive-analytical library research, with a primary focus on analyzing texts that represent Bassam Tibi's thoughts (Pandis, 2025). This approach is considered most appropriate because it allows researchers to not only describe Tibi's views but also analyze how his arguments are structured and how his ideas interact with the broader discourse of Islamic rationalism. In line with Assyaukanie's view, library research in Islamic studies must bridge theory and reality, as well as philosophical reflection and social practice (Assyaukanie, 2013). Thus, this research not only presents Tibi's thoughts descriptively but also critiques and interprets his epistemological position within the discourse of contemporary Islamic modernity.

The data sources in this study are divided into two categories: primary and secondary. Primary data comes from Bassam Tibi's own works, particularly his book "Islamism and Islam," as well as various articles and essays discussing Islam, rationalism, and modernity. These works serve as the primary source for exploring key concepts such as "Islamism," "Islamic rationalism," and "civilizational identity." Through these texts, the researcher attempts to capture how Tibi positions Islam within the global conversation about modernity without losing sight of its universal values. Meanwhile, secondary data are drawn from academic works that critically examine Tibi's thought, including literature on the relationship between Islam and rationality, theories of modernity in Islam, and contemporary studies of Islamic thought.

Data collection techniques were carried out through two main stages: documentation and categorization. The documentation stage involved systematically searching various written sources, including books, scientific articles, and relevant academic publications. Data collection was conducted through library catalogs, academic databases, and credible digital archives, such as JSTOR and Taylor & Francis. In accordance with the principles of philosophical research proposed by Bakker and Zubair, the documentation stage in qualitative research must be accompanied by source verification and validation so that the resulting interpretation has a strong academic basis (D. Bakar et al., 2019). After the documentation process, the next step was categorization, namely grouping data based on the main themes in Bassam Tibi's thought. The identified themes included the concept of Islamic rationalism, the relationship between Islam and modernity, criticism of Islamism, and the idea of the universalism of civilization. Through this categorization process, Tibi's argumentation patterns and framework of thought can be systematically analyzed to see how he constructs the dialectical relationship between religious values and the principles of modern rationality.

Data analysis in this study was conducted through three approaches: content analysis, critical hermeneutics, and a comparative approach. Content analysis is used to systematically interpret texts by identifying key concepts and exploring the relationships between ideas. According to Krippendorff, content analysis is a method that aims to objectively and deeply understand the meaning contained in a text, taking into account the socio-cultural context behind it (Krippendorff, 2018). In the context of this study, content analysis is used to analyze Tibi's ideas about the relationship between Islam and modernity, as well as to understand how he defines Islamic rationalism as an effort to avoid fundamentalism on the one hand and extreme secularism on the other.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Rationalism and Orthodoxy in Tibi's Thought

The discussion of the relationship between rationalism and orthodoxy in Bassam Tibi's thought is at the heart of critical reflection on the dilemma of Islamic modernity. Tibi argues that an epistemological chasm separates two major approaches to Islam: rationalism, rooted in the traditions of philosophy and science, and orthodoxy, which emphasizes adherence to Islamic texts and law. In his works, such as "Islamism and

Islam\* and numerous academic writings, Tibi asserts that the crisis of Islamic modernity is rooted in the decline of rationalism and the rise of religious dogmatism that limits freedom of thought. According to him, rational Islam, which developed during the classical period—especially during the Abbasid era—was the pinnacle of Muslim intellectual glory because at that time revelation and reason were placed in a mutually reinforcing relationship (Tibi, 2012). However, since the Middle Ages, the dominance of orthodoxy and the rejection of philosophical approaches have led to intellectual stagnation that remains to this day.

Tibi's view, despite its strong critical power, contains a problematic dichotomy. It seems to position rationalism and orthodoxy as two mutually exclusive entities. In this perspective, orthodoxy is seen as an obstacle to intellectual progress, while rationalism is seen as the only path to Islamic renewal (Albayrak, 2022). This view actually reflects the bias of secular modernity, which views Western rationality as a universal model for all forms of knowledge. Kamali critiques this dichotomous way of thinking for simplifying the complexity of Islamic intellectual history. According to him, Islamic history actually demonstrates a creative dialectic between reason and revelation, not an absolute opposition (Kamali, 2019a). The classical Islamic tradition has given rise to various forms of synthesis that reconcile the rational and spiritual dimensions, from Mu'tazilite to Peripatetic philosophy, and from Ash'arite kalam to reflective Sufism.

One weakness of Tibi's analysis is its tendency to ignore the interactive nature of Islamic intellectual development. He views rationalism and orthodoxy as being at two irreconcilable extremes. However, the history of Islamic thought demonstrates a dynamic relationship between the two. Like Al-Attas, Islamic thought cannot be understood within the framework of Western rationalism, which rejects revelation, because in Islamic epistemology, reason serves as a means to a deeper understanding of revelation, not a substitute for it (Huringiin & Azfathir, 2018). In this regard, al-Ghazali serves as a key example. He did criticize philosophers like Ibn Sina and al-Farabi, but his criticism was not a rejection of rationality itself, but rather of its use as inconsistent with Islamic theological principles. In *Tahafut al-Falasifah*, al-Ghazali rejected several Greek metaphysical doctrines, but in *al-Mustasfa*, he actually built a rational framework for the science of *usul fiqh*, showing that Islamic orthodoxy is not against rationality, but rather controls it within an ethical and theological framework (Inglis, 2005).

Another limitation of Tibi's thinking is his tendency to view the decline of Islamic rationalism solely as a result of theological factors. However, ample historical evidence suggests that social, political, and institutional factors played equally significant roles. Tibi appears to ignore the fact that changes in Islamic intellectual direction were often influenced by the context of power and educational structures (Witte, 2021). As Kamali points out, the madrasah system during the classical period was not merely a religious institution but also a political instrument serving to maintain the legitimacy of the rulers (Kamali, 2019b). When rational sciences were sidelined from the madrasah curriculum, this decision was not merely the result of a theological shift but part of a political strategy to control scholarly authority.

In this regard, institutional factors are key to understanding the dynamics of the relationship between rationalism and orthodoxy. Tibi does address the decline of Islamic educational institutions, but he tends to interpret this normatively, as if Islamic rationality can be restored simply by adopting the Western model of the modern university (Tibi, 2009b). This approach fails to consider the social and cultural context of Muslim societies. As Hallaq (2018) explains, the transformation of the Islamic education system is inextricably linked to the process of epistemic colonization, in which modern knowledge structures replace traditional forms of knowledge (Lumbard, 2025). Therefore, the revitalization of Islamic rationalism cannot be achieved simply by adopting Western methodologies but must also involve the reconstruction of Islamic epistemology rooted in the values of monotheism and the justice of knowledge.

In addition to institutional factors, power dynamics also play a significant role in determining the direction of Islamic rationality. Historically, the relationship between scholars and rulers has often influenced the space for freedom of thought. Tibi argues that political authority in the Islamic world tends to hinder the development of rational thought. However, this approach seems too generalistic. In many cases, political support has been the catalyst for the emergence of the Islamic rational tradition (Tibi, 2012). For example, during the reign of al-Ma'mun, the Abbasid caliph established the House of Wisdom and encouraged the translation of Greek philosophical works into Arabic, which later became the foundation for the development of Islamic science and philosophy (Hamid, 2025). Conversely, during periods when power became repressive towards intellectual differences, the rational tradition indeed declined. Therefore, understanding the relationship between rationalism and power requires a more contextual approach, rather than simply a normative categorization as Tibi offers.

On the other hand, Tibi's critique of Islamic orthodoxy also needs to be placed within a broader social and historical framework. He views orthodoxy as an obstacle to modernization, yet orthodoxy itself is not a static entity (Moghimi & Alzoubi, 2025). In many historical periods, orthodoxy has actually been a pillar of intellectual and moral stability in Islamic societies. For example, the Ash'ariyah school, often considered a representative of orthodoxy, played a crucial role in balancing the extreme rationalism of the Mu'tazilites and the literalism of the Hanbalis (Zeha & Sutono, 2022). Thus, what is referred to as orthodoxy is actually the result of a long intellectual negotiation between reason, revelation, and the historical experience of Muslims. According to Nasr, in Islam, rationality is not opposed to faith, but rather a dimension of faith itself (Nasr, 1992). Therefore, contrasting the two, as Tibi does, means separating two aspects that are essentially complementary.

Furthermore, criticism of Tibi's dichotomy must also be linked to the global context in which he thought. As a diasporic intellectual living in Europe, Tibi was heavily influenced by the paradigm of Western rationalism and the legacy of the Enlightenment. This is evident in his efforts to emphasize the need for a "civil Islam" compatible with liberal democratic values. However, this view harbors epistemological ambiguity (Jong & Ali, 2023). On the one hand, he seeks to reject fundamentalism and emphasize the importance of universal reason. On the other hand, he indirectly positions Western modernity as the benchmark for Islamic progress. As criticized by Al-Jabiri, this type of thinking risks perpetuating the intellectual dependence of Muslims on epistemic frameworks alien to their own traditions (Al-Jabiri, 2014). Therefore, the renewal of Islamic thought must be carried out by exploring the richness of internal rationality already present within the Islamic treasury, rather than simply importing external rationality that may not be fully aligned with Islamic spiritual values.

In this context, it is important to distinguish between secular rationalism and Islamic rationalism. Secular rationalism, as derived from the modern Western tradition, is rooted in the autonomy of reason, separate from revelation and transcendent values (Maleki Sadeghi & Fallahi Saifuddin, 2022). Meanwhile, Islamic rationalism is rooted in the principle of monotheism, which views reason as an instrument for understanding God's signs in nature and society (Zarepour, 2022). As explained by Al-Attas and Nasr, this distinction is not merely theological but also epistemological. Islamic rationalism rejects the dualism between faith and knowledge and places ethics as an integral part of rationality (Harvey, 2023). In this sense, Tibi's envisioned project of Islamic rationalism still needs to be refined to better align with Islam's own epistemic paradigm.

Another weakness of Tibi's approach lies in his tendency to assess Islamic intellectual history linearly, as if the progress of rationality could be measured solely by the extent to which Muslims adopted Western methods. However, history shows that Islamic rationality has its own dynamics. The Sufi tradition, for example, is often considered irrational by some Orientalists, yet it possesses profound reflective and epistemic dimensions (Lipton & Zarrabi-Zadeh, 2023). Ibn Arabi and Suhrawardi demonstrated that spiritual intuition can be a higher form of rationality, as it seeks to understand reality holistically, not merely through formal logic (A. Junaidi et al., 2024). In this regard, Tibi appears to leave little room for the diverse forms of rationality in Islam that are not identical to Western empirical rationality.

Nevertheless, Tibi's contribution remains significant in reopening the debate on rationality in Islam. He challenges the anti-intellectual tendencies growing within some contemporary Islamic movements and reminds us of the importance of establishing rational ethics in public life. As Hefner argues, Tibi's project of "civil Islam" can provide an important foundation for reconciling religion and modernity, particularly in Muslim societies grappling with the problems of authoritarianism and fundamentalism (Hefner, 2018). However, to be effective, this project needs to be balanced with an appreciation for the epistemological plurality of Islam and an awareness that modernity itself is not a single entity, but rather a historical construct that is always open to reinterpretation (Rehman, 2023).

Thus, this discussion demonstrates that rationalism in Islam cannot be understood solely in terms of the dichotomy between orthodoxy and modernity, as Tibi proposed. Rather, the relationship between the two is dialogical and historical, in which reason and revelation interpret and complement one another. The challenge for contemporary Islamic thinkers is not to choose between rationalism and orthodoxy, but rather to find a balance in which both can interact productively in confronting the modern world. In this context, Tibi's thought remains relevant as a catalyst for discussion, but it is insufficient as a sole framework for understanding the complexity of Islamic rationality, which is rooted in a long tradition of intellectual and spiritual reflection among Muslims (Bhat & Bisati, 2025).

## Modernity and Contemporary Challenges

Bassam Tibi's thinking on modernity and Islam constitutes one of the most challenging discourses in contemporary Islamic studies. Tibi seeks to highlight the profound paradox facing the Islamic world in its encounter with modernity: on the one hand, Muslims recognize the urgency of intellectual and technological renewal; yet, on the other, there remains strong resistance to the epistemological foundations and values that underpin Western modernity. In Tibi's view, the Islamic world is trapped in a situation he calls semi-modernity—a condition in which Muslim societies embrace the technological aspects of modernity but reject its underlying rational structure and philosophical values (Castien Maestro, 2024).

For Tibi, this semi-modernity represents an ambiguity that hinders the progress of Islam in the global era. He believes that contemporary Islamist movements often adopt a selective approach to modernity. They utilize modern technological instruments such as social media, the global economic system, and administrative bureaucracy, but reject values such as rationalism, pluralism, and secularism, which they deem contrary to Islamic principles (Tibi, 2012). Tibi's critique is certainly thought-provoking, as it stems from the belief that modernity cannot be separated from its technological and rational aspects. In his view, modernity is a historical package encompassing changes in ways of thinking, social structures, and value systems that are rational and open to criticism (Steinert, 2023).

However, a number of Muslim thinkers believe that Tibi's approach oversimplifies reality. Modernity, for them, is not a single, universal entity with only one form or direction of development. Saiful Muzani (2020) states that modernity can be understood contextually, where Muslim societies have the opportunity to create an alternative modernity—one that adopts Western rational and scientific values without abandoning the moral and spiritual foundations of Islam (Lee, 2018). In other words, modernity can be Islamized to the extent that it is directed toward serving the welfare of humanity (*maslahah al-'ammah*) and not merely pursuing material efficiency (Hamidah & Dewantara, 2023).

This view challenges Tibi's thesis, which tends to treat modernity as a singular, undivided phenomenon. In this context, modernity does not necessarily mean Westernization. Islamic modernity can emerge as a form of social renewal based on Qur'anic values such as justice ('adl), humanity (*insaniyyah*), and social responsibility (*amanah*) (J. Junaidi et al., 2023). Barton adds that many Muslim societies, particularly in Indonesia, are striving to integrate modern values such as rationality and science with a strong religious spirit (Barton et al., 2021). This phenomenon is evident in the emergence of modern Islamic educational institutions, Islamic boarding school-based universities, and Muslim intellectual movements that emphasize the importance of knowledge as part of faith.

Tibi's critique of Islamist semi-modernity can also be understood within an epistemological framework. For Tibi, the root of the problems in the Islamic world lies in an epistemological crisis, namely the inability to develop a knowledge paradigm compatible with modernity (Al Haidary & Zamzami, 2022). He highlighted the Islamist tendency to limit sources of knowledge to religious texts, without allowing space for empirical rationality and modern scientific methods. This, he argued, has led to intellectual stagnation and the backwardness of Muslims in the fields of science and technology.

However, this criticism has also drawn serious responses from Muslim scholars. According to Osman Bakar, the Islamic intellectual tradition has actually possessed a complex and inclusive epistemological system since the Middle Ages. Philosophers such as Ibn Sina, al-Farabi, and al-Ghazali developed a synthesis between revelation and reason, in which rationality is placed within a framework of divine values (O. Bakar, 2019). This means that Islam has never rejected rationality; what it rejects is secular rationalism that detaches knowledge from its moral and transcendental dimensions. Thus, the epistemological problem of the contemporary Islamic world is not a rejection of reason, but rather an institutional stagnation in reactualizing this intellectual heritage amidst the currents of global modernity (Kamali, 2019a).

This epistemological challenge is closely related to the issue of knowledge integration. Tibi highlighted that the Islamic world has failed to develop an educational system capable of bridging religious and modern knowledge. He believes that Islamic educational institutions are still trapped in a dichotomy between 'ulum al-din (religious knowledge) and 'ulum al-dunya (worldly knowledge), which ultimately creates a gap between scholars and scientists (Azra, 2004). This view is not entirely wrong. Many Islamic boarding schools and universities still orient themselves towards classical curricula without accommodating developments in the social sciences and modern sciences. As a result, the Muslim generation tends to struggle to compete in contemporary technology and research.

However, Tibi appears to ignore several Islamic education reform initiatives underway in various countries. In Indonesia, for example, many Islamic boarding schools (*pesantren*) have implemented curriculum updates by integrating religious and general knowledge. Muhammad Zuhdi explains that the transformation of Islamic education is now directed towards an integrated curriculum model, in which students are encouraged to understand modern science within the framework of monotheistic values (Zuhdi & Sarwenda, 2020). This concept not only rejects the dichotomy of knowledge but also strengthens the moral basis for mastering knowledge. Therefore, Tibi's claim that the Islamic world has completely failed to confront modernity is not entirely accurate (Tibi, 1986).

Another issue highlighted by Tibi is the institutional dilemma facing Islamic educational institutions. He believes that many of these institutions lack the structural capacity and resources to meet the demands of modernity (Tibi, 2012). A lack of research support, limited literature, and minimal international collaboration make it difficult for Islamic education to transform into a hub of innovation. However, this analysis needs to be complemented by historical and political understanding. In the context of the post-colonial Muslim world, the weakness of educational institutions is not only the result of internal failures but also the result of the hegemony of Western knowledge that marginalizes Islamic epistemology (Milligan, 2020).

On the other hand, Tibi proposed reforming Islamic epistemology on the basis of universal rationalism. He proposed that the Islamic world adopt the principles of modern rationality and science without losing its religious identity. This view is appealing, but it raises a dilemma: how can rationality derived from Western secular traditions be absorbed without undermining Islam's theological foundations? Al-Attas argues that the solution is not to adopt Western rationality in its entirety, but rather to Islamize knowledge—the process of reconstructing modern science to align with the Islamic worldview (*ru'yat al-Islam li al-wujud*). In this way, modernity is not rejected but Islamized through the filtering of its epistemological values (Huringiin & Azfathir, 2018).

Furthermore, Tibi believes that the contemporary Islamist resurgence is a symptom of the Muslim world's failure to internalize modern rationality. In his view, the Islamist movement represents an emotional reaction to the identity crisis caused by colonialism and globalization (Lieber & Weisberg, 2002). However, the Islamist approach, which rejects pluralism and freedom of thought, actually deepens the alienation of Muslims from the modern world (Cesari, 2025). In this regard, Tibi calls on Muslims to reconstruct a religious rationality that is open to universal human values.

Criticism of Tibi's position came from thinkers such as Syed Naquib al-Attas and Ziauddin Sardar. They argued that Tibi relied too heavily on a secular Western definition of modernity and ignored the spiritual dimension of civilizational progress (Bouزيد, 1996). Ali asserted that Western modernity is not neutral; it contains a colonial agenda that seeks to hegemonize non-Western ways of thinking. Therefore, Tibi's proposed rationalization project could potentially erode the cultural identity of Muslims (Ali, 2016). In this view, Islam does not need to be modern in the Western sense, but rather needs to uphold an Islamic modernity rooted in the principles of *ijtihad*, *ijtima'iyyah* (social solidarity), and *akhlaqiyyah* (ethics).

This kind of Islamic modernity is beginning to take shape in various regions of the Muslim world. In Indonesia, Malaysia, and Turkey, intellectual movements are emerging that seek to combine democracy, social justice, and Islamic spirituality within a single practical framework. They do not reject science and technology, but rather reject secularism, which separates morality from knowledge. In this context, modernity becomes a moral project, not just a technological one (Peters et al., 2022).

Thus, the debate between Tibi and other Muslim thinkers opens up an important space for reflection: how to build a modern Islamic civilization while remaining rooted in the values of monotheism? Tibi offers rationality as the key to renewal, while his critics emphasize the importance of spirituality as the moral foundation of rationality itself (Addi, 2021). These two views are not necessarily in conflict. The greatest challenge facing the Islamic world today is finding a balance between reason and faith, between science and values, and between modernity and tradition.

In the context of education, this balance can be achieved through epistemological integration based on the principle of the unity of knowledge. This concept asserts that all knowledge, both religious and scientific, is fundamentally derived from God and aims to foster human well-being (Zuhdi & Sarwenda, 2020). With this paradigm, the Islamic world is no longer an object of modernization, but an active subject contributing to global civilization.

Tibi's analysis of semi-modernity and the crisis of Islamic rationality is incisive and provocative, but it falls short of comprehensively explaining the diverse experiences of modernity in the Muslim world (LAWSON,

2003). He successfully highlights the real epistemological challenges and institutional weaknesses, but fails to address the dynamics of ongoing renewal in many Muslim countries. Nevertheless, his thinking remains relevant as a catalyst for intellectual reflection on how Islam can engage critically with modernity without losing its spiritual identity. Tibi's idealized modernity should not be interpreted as Western-style standardization, but rather as an opportunity for the Muslim world to reaffirm a religious rationality that favors humanity, justice, and ethical knowledge (Alaoui, 2022).

### Future Prospects

Bassam Tibi's discourse on Islamic rationalism in the context of modernity paves the way for in-depth reflection on the future of Islamic thought. Tibi stems from the epistemological anxiety that the Islamic world, in its efforts to face the challenges of globalization, is often caught in an ambivalent position between the desire for modernity and the fear of losing its religious identity (Mohammed & Jureidini, 2022). In such a situation, Tibi calls for intellectual renewal that goes beyond formal institutional reform and addresses the heart of the problem: the way of thinking and epistemological framework of Muslims (Shahin, 2003). According to Tibi, an Islamic revival is only possible if rationality is re-established as a vital element in the interpretation of religious teachings and social development.

In this context, Tibi emphasizes that intellectual renewal does not mean secularization, but rather the revitalization of rationality within the Islamic tradition. He argues that the Islamic world must be able to develop a paradigm of knowledge that combines the classical heritage of Islam with the critical spirit of modernity (Brahimi & Ben Lazreg, 2021). The Islamic intellectual tradition, as reflected in the works of al-Farabi, Ibn Rushd, and al-Ghazali, according to Tibi, is historical evidence that Islam was once the center of world rationality. However, since the Middle Ages, there has been a tendency to close itself off from rational thought and limit sources of knowledge to literal interpretations of sacred texts. As a result, the Islamic world has lost the epistemological dynamics that once made it a superior civilization. Within this framework, the intellectual renewal offered by Tibi is not simply an invitation to imitate the West, but a call to revive rationality rooted in the spirit of Islamic scholarship itself (Sahin, 2024).

Such reforms demand a fundamental transformation in Islamic education. Echoing Tibi's thinking, Bhat & Bisati emphasize the importance of integrating science and religion within the Islamic education system. They argue that the separation of religious and general knowledge has created an epistemological divide that is detrimental to the Islamic world (Bhat & Bisati, 2025). While religious knowledge is viewed as sacred but irrelevant to the challenges of modernity, general knowledge is considered practically useful but devoid of moral value. Therefore, the future of Islam depends on the ability of educational institutions to bridge these two poles and produce a generation capable of critical thinking without being uprooted from their spiritual roots (Edis, 2023).

Tibi aligns with this idea when he emphasizes the need for constructive dialogue between Islam and modernity. For Tibi, Islamic civilization will not be able to contribute to the global world if it remains defensive toward modernity. He rejects both the total rejection of modernity, as practiced by some Islamist groups, and its uncritical acceptance, which could actually erode Islamic identity (Tibi, 2023). Modernity, in Tibi's view, must be understood as a reflective process that opens up space for rational values, social ethics, and freedom of thought in line with the principles of monotheism and justice (Tibi, 2001b). This constructive dialogue means positioning Islam not as a victim of modernity, but as a critical partner capable of making a moral contribution to the direction of modernity's development.

Tibi's ideas align with the views of a number of progressive Muslim thinkers, such as M. Amin Abdullah, who emphasize the importance of scholarly interconnections in Islamic studies. Abdullah believes that the major challenge for the Islamic world today is not merely economic poverty or political decline, but rather an epistemological crisis (Abdullah, 2020). He said the Islamic world needs a new, non-dichotomous scientific paradigm capable of integrating normative and empirical, rational and spiritual, local and global dimensions. While Tibi spoke of the need to rationalize Islam to engage in dialogue with modernity, Abdullah emphasized that this rationalization must be accompanied by ethics and spirituality to avoid losing its moral compass.

Furthermore, Tibi's vision for the future of Islamic rationalism also depends heavily on the ability of Islamic educational institutions to undertake structural reform. Azyumardi Azra explained that reforming Islamic education is key to the birth of a modern and moderate generation of Muslims. According to him, the greatest challenge for Islamic education in the global era is not simply adapting to technology but

transforming the paradigm of thought. The Islamic education curriculum, Azra continued, must be designed to emphasize not only memorization and doctrine, but also to develop critical thinking skills, creativity, and the ability to adapt to social change (Azra, 2020). In this regard, Tibi is correct when he asserts that without epistemological reform, institutional renewal will be merely cosmetic and fail to address the root of the problem (Tibi, 2023).

The ideal modern Islamic education curriculum, according to Muchammad Mahmud, must integrate three main elements: classical Islamic scholarly tradition, modern knowledge, and universal human values. The synergy between these three will shape the profile of graduates who are not only devout and pious, but also critical and innovative. Mahmud calls this approach integrative-transformative education—education that not only teaches what is true but also how to think about truth reflectively and contextually (Mahmud, 2019). without losing its spiritual direction.

However, realizing such a vision requires serious institutional strengthening. Abdurrahman Liao highlighted that many Islamic educational institutions remain weak institutionally—both in terms of management, funding, and scientific networks. He argued that the development of future Islamic educational institutions must be supported by professional governance and openness to global collaboration (Liao et al., 2018). It is here where the relevance of Tibi's thinking reappears: Islamic rationalism can only thrive in a healthy institutional space, where scientific traditions can flourish without ideological pressure.

However, the future of Islamic rationalism does not depend solely on formal institutions but also on Muslims' ability to develop a culture of critical thinking at the social level. In line with Nurcholish Madjid's ideas, Islamic renewal must begin with a mental revolution—a change in the community's perspective on knowledge and religion. Madjid, in Lahaji, asserts that Islam is truly a rational religion and open to change, as the first revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was the command to read (*iqra'*). Therefore, developing a culture of literacy, research, and intellectual dialogue must be an integral part of the religious life of Muslims (Lahaji & Faisal, 2023).

Within this framework, Tibi's vision of the future of Islamic rationalism requires a synthesis of three elements: rationality, spirituality, and social praxis. Rationality without spirituality will lose its moral direction, while spirituality without rationality will give rise to fanaticism and anti-intellectualism. Conversely, social praxis not grounded in these two aspects will become pragmatic and lose its idealism. Therefore, the future of Islam depends on the ability to creatively balance these three (Al-karasneh & Saleh, 2010).

Tibi emphasized that the renewal of Islamic rationality must also encompass the global realm. The Islamic world does not exist in isolation, but is part of an interconnected global system. Therefore, the dialogue between Islam and modernity must be transnational and interdisciplinary. This dialogue concerns not only theological issues but also encompasses economics, politics, science, and global ethics (Tibi, 2012). Hidayat added that the relationship between Islam and modernity should no longer be positioned as a clash of civilizations, but rather as a creative collaboration to build a just and civilized human civilization (Huntington, 2020).

In his analytical conclusion, Tibi observed that the future of Islamic rationalism depends heavily on two key factors: first, the willingness of Muslims to critically reflect on their own religious traditions; and second, their ability to adapt to the dynamics of modernity without losing their theological identity. He emphasized that Islam has great potential to play a role in building a more humane global civilization, as long as it is able to integrate the values of rationality and spirituality in a balanced manner (M. M. Rahman, 2019).

Kuntowijoyo asserts that Islam possesses a strong vision of civilization because it combines the ethics of revelation with the dynamics of history (Tiliouine et al., 2016). This means that Islam can be a source of inspiration for the birth of a new, more just modernity. This vision can only be realized if Muslims abandon the old dichotomy between tradition and modernity and replace it with an integrative-holistic paradigm that views science, religion, and culture as a whole. Within this framework, Tibi's thinking can be seen as a trigger for a new awareness of the need for a more contextual and transformative reformulation of Islamic rationality (Tibi, 2001b).

From these debates and reflections, several important recommendations emerge that warrant underscoring. First, from a theoretical perspective, a more nuanced analytical framework is needed to understand the relationship between Islam and rationalism. Tibi's model of Western modernization has heuristic value, but it is insufficient to explain the dynamics of pluralistic and multicultural Muslim societies (Tibi, 2009a). Therefore, future Islamic studies need to consider local and regional contexts and integrate

historical, sociological, and theological perspectives within a coherent theoretical framework (Lukens-Bull, 2016).

Second, from a practical perspective, renewal of thought must be accompanied by institutional reform, particularly in education. The Islamic education system needs to be designed to foster critical thinking, openness to science, and the ability to reflect on religious values (Azra, 2020). Strengthening the capacity of Islamic educational institutions is also crucial so they can serve as centers of dialogue between tradition and modernity (Sahin, 2018). Furthermore, intellectual dialogue among Islamic traditions—including Sunni, Shia, and progressive Islamic thought—must continue to be developed to enrich the treasury of Islamic rationalism.

Thus, the future prospects of Islamic rationalism, as conceived by Bassam Tibi, lie not only in its critique of the past, but primarily in its ability to spark a sustainable intellectual transformation agenda. The future of Islam will depend largely on the extent to which its followers dare to think rationally without losing their spirituality, and are able to engage in dialogue with modernity without succumbing to the hegemony of foreign values. As Nurcholish Madjid emphasized, Islam has the potential to become a global moral and intellectual force if it can restore the spirit of *iqra'* as the core of civilization (Atmaja, 2020). In this context, Tibi's thoughts serve as a relevant and inspiring reflection for efforts to build a civilized, rational, and humane future for Islam.

## CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the dilemma of Islamic rationalism as examined through the thoughts of Bassam Tibi reflects the complexity of the relationship between religion, reason, and modernity in the contemporary Islamic world. Analysis of Tibi's works shows that rationality, for Tibi, is not merely an intellectual instrument, but rather the moral and epistemological foundation for an Islamic revival compatible with modernity. He sharply distinguishes between Islam as a rational, universal ethical system and Islamism as a political ideology that often rejects pluralism, freedom of thought, and openness to modern values. However, this study finds that Tibi's rationalist framework remains trapped within the paradigm of Western modernity, which tends to place secular rationality as a universal standard, potentially ignoring the epistemological richness of Islam rooted in monotheism, spirituality, and the balance between reason and revelation.

Theoretically, this research contributes to enriching Islamic philosophical discourse by demonstrating that Islamic rationalism cannot be reduced to mere adoption of Western rationality but must be understood as an integral system of knowledge that situates reason within the horizon of ethics and transcendence. Thus, the project of authentic Islamic rationalism is one that does not negate the spiritual dimension, but rather makes it the foundation for the formation of a civilized, reflective, and humanistic civilization. Practically, this research opens space for Islamic educational reform oriented towards integrating religious knowledge and modern science, fostering a culture of critical thinking, and strengthening Islamic scientific institutions as spaces for dialogue between tradition and modernity.

The limitations of this research lie in its approach, which focuses on textual analysis and has not yet empirically examined how the idea of Islamic rationalism is articulated in the social, political, and educational contexts of the Muslim world, particularly in Indonesia. Therefore, further research is recommended to incorporate multidisciplinary approaches, such as ethnographic and sociological studies, to explore the practice of Islamic rationality at the institutional and societal levels. Future research should also broaden the analytical horizon by incorporating postcolonial discourse and non-Western epistemologies so that discussions of Islamic rationality are not trapped in the dichotomy of modernity versus tradition, but rather aim to formulate a contextual, inclusive, and transformative paradigm of Islamic knowledge.

Ultimately, the findings of this study confirm that the future of Islamic civilization depends heavily on the ability of the Muslim community to reconcile rationality with spirituality and to build a system of knowledge that favors humanity. Islamic rationalism is not the antithesis of faith, but rather an intellectual expression of faith itself. By reviving the spirit of the *iqra'*—as a symbol of the integration of reason, revelation, and ethics—Islam has the opportunity to become a relevant moral and intellectual force for the modern world, which is seeking a balance between knowledge and values.

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