

The Influence of Rationalism on the *Tafsir al-Manar*

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Abstrak

Kemunculan Rasionalisme sebagai aliran dalam ilmu filsafat bukan hanya berpengaruh ilmu pendidikan atau hukum dan politik, tetapi juga meluas mencakup keseluruhan aspek kehidupan manusia, termasuk juga dalam bidang agama. Implikasi adanya rasionalisme diantaranya berusaha menjadikan akal sebagai perangkat memperoleh kebenaran dan pengetahuan. Penulis mencoba mendeskripsikan dan menganalisis *Tafsir al-Manâr* yang menjadi salah satu karya monumental Muḥammad Abduh dan Rasyîd Ridhâ yang berusaha memahami agama dengan pendekatan rasionalisme. Tulisan ini memakai metode penelitian kepustakaan (*library research*) dengan pendekatan deskriptif analisis. Menggunakan *Tafsir al-Manâr* sebagai data primer dan menggunakan jurnal dan buku yang berkaitan pemikiran Muḥammad Abduh dan Rasyîd Ridhâ sebagai data pendukung. Hasil dari penelitian ini antara lain: 1) Muḥammad Abduh dan Rasyîd Ridhâ dalam memahami Al-Quran lebih mengedepankan akal karena dengannya dapat memperoleh suatu kebenaran; 2) menolak adanya praktek *taqlîd* karena dalam beragama harus berdasarkan pada hujjah atau dalil; 3) penjelasan mengenai ayat-ayat kauniah, harus dengan pendekatan ilmiah bukan dengan pendekatan mistik atau mitologis; 4) penetapan hukum harus bisa beradaptasi dengan perkembangan zaman dan *maqâshid syarî'ah*, dan 5) *Tafsir al-Manâr* memberikan arah baru dalam mereformulasi metodologi penafsiran dari tekstual menuju kontekstual dan rasional, dari pemahaman teks menuju penyelesaian problematika sosial.

Kata Kunci: *Rasionalisme, Tafsir al-Manâr, Muḥammad Abduh, Rasyîd Ridhâ*

Abstract

The rise of Rationalism as a philosophical school has exerted influence not only on the disciplines of education, law, and politics, but has also permeated broader aspects of human life, including the domain of religion. One of the central implications of Rationalism is its insistence on placing human reason as a primary instrument for attaining truth and knowledge. This study seeks to examine *Tafsir al-Manâr*, a seminal work of Muḥammad Abduh dan Rasyîd Ridhâ, who endeavored to interpret religion through a rationalist framework. Employing a library-based research design with a descriptive-analytical approach, this study utilizes *Tafsir al-Manâr* as the primary source, complemented by scholarly articles and books that discuss the intellectual contributions of Muḥammad Abduh dan Rasyîd Ridhâ. The findings indicate that: (1) both scholars privilege the role of reason in understanding the Qur'an, considering it an indispensable means for the attainment of truth; (2) they repudiate the practice of *taqlîd*, asserting that religious commitment must rest upon sound proofs and demonstrative evidence; (3) Qur'anic verses pertaining to natural phenomena (*âyat kauniyyah*) ought to be

interpreted through scientific inquiry rather than mystical or mythological explanations; (4) legal rulings must remain responsive to changing socio-historical contexts and must align with the objectives of Islamic law (*maqâshid syarî'ah*), and 5) The *Tafsir al-Manâr* marks a new direction in the reformulation of Qur'anic exegesis methodology, shifting from a predominantly textual approach to one that is contextual and rational, and from mere textual understanding toward actively addressing contemporary social issues.

Keywords: *Rationalism, Tafsir al-Manâr, Muhammad Abduh, Rasyîd Ridhâ*

INTRODUCTION

Rationalism is a philosophical school that emphasizes the role of reason as the primary source through which humans acquire knowledge and truth. Scientific knowledge emerges from the workings of the intellect in understanding reality. Reason possesses the capacity to arrive at truth independently, without necessarily relying on external sources. Even when such reliance exists, it serves merely as reinforcement rather than as the primary source of knowledge.¹

In its development, rationalism has had a significant impact on the advancement of science, particularly in the philosophy of science, which stresses that knowledge must be constructed on rational foundations and clear methodologies.² Rationalism and scientific knowledge are closely interconnected. In essence, all fields of knowledge have been addressed within rationalist philosophy, and some disciplines even originated from it by separating themselves from philosophy, such as mathematics, astronomy, and physics.³ This indicates that rationalism plays a crucial role in the emergence of various branches of knowledge.

In the history of Islam, rationalist philosophy was developed by thinkers such as Al-Farabi and Ibn Sina, who regarded logic and reason as essential tools for understanding religion and knowledge. Al-Farabi emphasized that humans must use their intellect to attain a deeper understanding of religious concepts. Meanwhile, Ibn Sina highlighted the integration of medicine, philosophy, and religion, viewing rationalism as an instrument for uncovering truth.⁴ This intellectual development also contributed to transforming how religious communities understand revealed texts. Literal approaches that reject contextual interpretation gradually gave way to rational approaches that seek to uncover deeper meanings behind the text. In modern Islam, this spirit is reflected in *Tafsir al-Manâr* by Muhammad Abduh and

¹ Ernita Dewi, *Pemikiran Filsafat Modern Aliran dan Perkembangannya dalam Konteks Kekinian* (Banda Aceh: Lembaga Studi Agama dan Masyarakat Aceh, 2023), 56.

² Isop Safe'i, *Filsafat Ilmu* (Bandung: Widina Media Utama, 2025), 177.

³ Meisakh Nur Anugrah dan Usman Radiana, "Filsafat Rasionalisme Sebagai Dasar Ilmu Pengetahuan", *Jurnal Filsafat Indonesia* 5, no. 3 (2022), 185.

⁴ Isop Safe'i, *Filsafat Ilmu*, 189.

Rashid Rida, which emphasizes the importance of logical reasoning in interpreting the Qur'an in accordance with contemporary challenges.

Muhammad Abduh, as a leading reformist thinker, viewed changes in social conditions and demands as necessitating renewal.⁵ The stagnation in religious education, which contributed to the decline of the Muslim world, became a major concern for him. This situation encouraged Abduh to promote new interpretations by reopening the door of *ijtihad*. He argued that earlier scholars' understandings of religious texts were shaped to address the challenges of their own time, and therefore could not necessarily be applied to later contexts with different social conditions.⁶

This perspective is evident in *Tafsir al-Manār*, which does not neglect the importance of building a dialogue between tradition and modernity. Instead, it opens opportunities for the emergence of contextual interpretations that seek to integrate Qur'anic teachings with the dynamics of modern life.⁷ Moreover, this tafsir does not focus solely on textual aspects, but also emphasizes moral, social, and rational dimensions, resulting in a more inclusive and applicable understanding capable of addressing modern issues such as social reform, education, and the revival of the Muslim community.⁸ This paper will examine the position of human reason in understanding revelation within *Tafsir al-Manār* and how rationalism influences its interpretive framework.

RESEARCH METHOD

Penelitian ini menggunakan metode penelitian kepustakaan (*library research*) yaitu melakukan serangkaian aktivitas pengumpulan data pustaka yang terkait dengan tema pembahasan, membaca dan mencatat serta mengolahnya,⁹ dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif yang memberikan fokus pada pemahaman yang mendalam pada makna yang diberikan individu terhadap pengalaman mereka yang mencakup berbagai aspek kehidupan sosial, budaya atau personal,¹⁰ dalam hal ini adalah terkait aliran rasionalisme serta berbagai pengaruhnya yang

⁵ Mursyid Fikri, "Rasionalisme Descartes dan Implikasinya Terhadap Pemikiran Pembaharuan Islam Muhammad Abduh", *Tarbawi* 3, no. 2 (2018), 137.

⁶ Iskandar Usman, "Muhammad Abduh dan Pemikiran Pembaharuannya," *Jurnal Pemikiran Islam* 2, no. 1 (2022), 76.

⁷ Rezwandi, et al., "Studi Analitis Atas Tafsir Al-Manar: Kontribusi Intelektual Muhammad Abduh dan M. Rasyid Ridha dalam Tradisi Tafsir Modern," *JUTEQ: Jurnal Teologi & Tafsir* 10, no. 2 (2025), 1507.

⁸ Kasis Darmawan, "Rasionalisme sebagai Cabang Filsafat dan Pengaruhnya pada Tafsir Al-Manar," *Profesi: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan dan Keguruan* 13, no. 2 (2024), 26.

⁹ Mestika Zed, *Metode Penelitian Kepustakaan* (Jakarta: Yayasan Pustaka Obor Indonesia, 2014), 3.

¹⁰ Mulyadi, et al, *Pendekatan Kualitatif, Kuantitatif dan Mixed Methods: Menyusun Metodologi Penelitian yang Komprehensif* (Indramayu: Adab Indonesia, 2025), 89.

tertuang dalam Tafsir al-Manâr karya Muhammad Abduh dan Rasyîd Ridhâ. Data diambil dari Tafsir al-Manâr, berbagai buku dan jurnal yang membahas tentang pemikiran Muhammad Abduh termasuk juga buku-buku yang membahas tentang Rasionalisme sebagai aliran dalam ilmu filsafat. Analisis dilakukan dengan mengaitkan rasionalisme sebagai cabang ilmu filsafat dengan berbagai pemikiran Muhammad Abduh sehingga menyimpulkan beberapa hal terkait bentuk pengaruh rasionalisme terhadap pemikiran Muhammad Abduh dan Rasyîd Ridhâ.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Rationalism as a Philosophical School

Etymologically, rationalism derives from the Latin word *ratio*, which means “reason” or “human intellect.” Rationalism is a belief system in thinking that prioritizes reason in such a way that it ultimately becomes the absolute judge of all matters.¹¹ Fahrudin Faiz defines rationalism as reliable knowledge, namely knowledge that originates from reason or intellect.¹² Heraclitus, as a pioneer of rationalist thought, believed that reason holds a higher position than the senses as a source of truth. Rationalism does not deny the role of sensory experience in acquiring knowledge; however, sensory experience functions merely as a stimulus for thought and provides material for the intellect to process.¹³ Thus, rationalism can be understood as a philosophical school that affirms reason as the primary source of knowledge and truth.

René Descartes, as one of the key figures of rationalism, taught that one should not accept things blindly, but must always question and seek solid evidence.¹⁴ This means that when a person encounters something, the first step should be to approach it with doubt. Such doubt does not imply the rejection of truth, but rather serves as a critical step toward attaining absolute certainty.

The culmination of continuous doubt, according to Descartes, is the realization: “I doubt, therefore I think.” For him, thinking is the most authentic proof of our existence, which is expressed in the doctrine *cogito, ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”).¹⁵ Thus, even if a person doubts everything, they cannot doubt that they are doubting. To doubt something, one must think, and if one thinks, one must exist. From this, it can be concluded that the existence of reason/intellect becomes

¹¹ A. Sudiarja, et al, *Karya Lengkap Driyarkara Esai-Esai Filsafat Pemikir yang Terlibat Penuh dalam Perjuangan Bangsa* (Jakarta: Gramedia Pustaka Utama, 2006), 19.

¹² Fahrudin Faiz, *Menghilang, Menemukan Diri Sejati* (Jakarta: Mizan Publika, 2022), 30.

¹³ Nur Faizi, “Metodologi Pemikiran Rene Descartes (Rasionalisme) dan David Hume (Empirisme) dalam Pendidikan Islam,” *Jurnal Risalah*, No. 3, (2023), 1009.

¹⁴ A. Usis Fadhlulloh et al, “Analisa Pemikiran Rene Descartes Mengenai Rasionalisme dan Sinergitasnya Terhadap Pendidikan Islam,” *Jurnal Pendidikan Muta'allimin*, no. 1 (2023), 46.

¹⁵ Waston, *Filsafat Ilmu dan Logika* (Surakarta: Muhammadiyah University Press, 2019), 112.

the most crucial factor in constructing a strong epistemology and affirming the existence of all things.

An Overview of *Tafsir al-Manār*

1. Biography of Muhammad Abduh

He is Muhammad ibn ‘Abduh ibn Hasan Khairullāh, born in Syanīrā in 1849/1266 H and raised in Mahallat Nashr, Buhairah, Cairo. He was one of the Muftis of Egypt and a prominent reformer in the Islamic world. He did not come from a wealthy or aristocratic family.¹⁶ At the time of his birth, Egypt was under the rule of Muhammad Ali, an absolute ruler who controlled agriculture and trade. He was known for his harsh and arbitrary policies, which led to widespread oppression and forced many people, including Abduh’s parents, to relocate.¹⁷

At the beginning of his education, he was instructed to learn reading and writing of the Qur’an, then proceeded to memorize it, completing it within two years. In 1862, he was sent to Thanthā to study religious sciences such as grammar (*nahwu*), morphology (*ṣarf*), and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) at the al-Ahmadī Mosque. However, after two years, he felt that he had not understood anything, as the teaching methods emphasized rote memorization of terms without grasping their meanings and purposes. This led him to reject such a method, prompting him to leave Thanthā and stay at his uncle’s house. After three months, he was instructed to return to Thanthā, but believing that such a method would not yield results, he instead returned to his hometown, Mahallat Nashr, intending to become a farmer. He married in 1865 at the age of sixteen.¹⁸

Forty days after his marriage, his father urged him to resume his studies in Thanthā. Instead, he stayed again at his uncle’s house, where he met Shaykh Darwīsh Khadr, a follower of the Shādhilī Sufi order, who had memorized *al-Muwatta’* and several hadith collections, as well as the Qur’an with its meanings.¹⁹ Through him, Abduh—who had previously disliked learning—became deeply interested in knowledge. As quoted by M. Quraish Shihab, Abduh once stated that within five days of meeting Shaykh Darwīsh, what he had previously loved, such as playfulness and pride, turned into something he disliked.²⁰ Eventually, he returned to Thanthā to continue his studies.

¹⁶ Alī Iyazī, *Al-Mufasssirūn Hayātuhum wa Manhajuhum* (t.tk: Wizarah al-Tsiqāfah wa al_Irsyād al-Islami, t.th), Jil. 3, 128.

¹⁷ Ris’an Rusli, *Pemikiran Teologi Islam Modern* (Depok: Kencana Media Group, 2018), 31.

¹⁸ Ris’an Rusli, *Pemikiran Teologi Islam Modern*, 32. Lihat juga, Thâhir al-Thânâhî, *Muzakirat Al-Imam Muhammad Abduh* (Kairo: Dar Al-Hilal, t.th), 29.

¹⁹ Thâhir al-Thânâhî, ed., *Muzakirat Al-Imam Muhammad Abduh*, 31.

²⁰ M. Quraish Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran* (Tangerang Selatan: Lentera Hati, 2006), 7.

From Thanthā, Abduh continued his intellectual journey to Al-Azhar University in 1866. However, the teaching model there did not fully satisfy him, as it mainly presented the opinions of earlier scholars without encouraging research, comparison, or critical evaluation. Nevertheless, at Al-Azhar he encountered influential teachers, including Shaykh Hasan al-Ṭawīl, who taught the philosophy of Ibn Sina and Aristotelian logic – subjects not formally included in the curriculum – and Shaykh Muhammad Basyuni, who emphasized literature and language through aesthetic sensitivity and practical application rather than formal grammar instruction.²¹

In 1871, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani settled in Egypt. Abduh attended his intellectual circles, an encounter that profoundly transformed his worldview by introducing him to Pan-Islamism and the importance of rationality in understanding Islam. Within two years of studying with al-Afghani, Abduh showed remarkable intellectual development. At the age of 26, he had already written extensively on philosophy, theology (*kalām*), Sufism, and critiques of prevailing ideas.

In 1877, Abduh graduated from Al-Azhar at the age of 28 with the title of ‘Ālim during the leadership of Shaykh Muhammad al-Mahdi al-‘Abbasi. He then devoted himself to teaching logic, theology, and ethics at Al-Azhar. At his home, he taught works such as *Tahdhīb al-Akhlāq* by Ibn Miskawayh, the *Muqaddimah* of Ibn Khaldun, and Guizot’s history of European civilization.²² In 1878, he was appointed as a history teacher at Dār al-‘Ulūm and Madrasah al-Idārah wa al-‘Alsun, but in 1879 he was dismissed and exiled to his hometown, Mahallat Nashr.²³

In 1880, Abduh was pardoned and appointed editor-in-chief of the official government newspaper *al-Waqā’i’ al-Miṣriyyah*, which he used – along with former students of al-Afghani – as a platform to criticize government abuses.²⁴ In 1882, he became involved in the Urabi Revolt, leading to his exile for three years. He chose Syria as his place of exile. A year later, he traveled to Paris to join al-Afghani, where they published the journal *al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqā* to promote Pan-Islamism and resist Western colonialism. In 1885, he moved to Beirut (Lebanon), where he taught and authored several works, including *Risālah fī Wahdat al-Wujūd*, *Tārīkh Ismā’īl*, *Falsafah al-Ijtimā’ wa al-Tārīkh*, *Hāsiyyah ‘alā al-‘Aqā’id Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawānī*, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah*, *al-Radd ‘alā al-Dahriyyīn*, *Sharḥ Maqāmāt Badī’ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī*, *Tafsīr Sūrah al-‘Aṣr*, and *Tafsīr Juz’ ‘Amma*.²⁵

²¹ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 8.

²² Marzuki Manurung, *Perbandingan Pemikiran Politik Antara Barat dan Islam* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2025) 83.

²³ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 9.

²⁴ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 10.

²⁵ ‘Umar Ridhā Kaḥālāh, *Mu’jam al-Muallifīn Tarājim Mushannifi al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah* (Beirut: Muassasah al-Risālah, 1993), jil. 3, 475.

In 1888, Abduh returned to Egypt and was appointed as a judge in the Banha Regional Court. In 1899, he was appointed as the Grand Mufti of Egypt and also served as a member of the Legislative Council. In 1905, he initiated the establishment of an Egyptian university, which later gained support from both the government and society through land provision. However, on July 11, 1905, he passed away before the realization of this vision, leaving a profound sense of loss among both Muslims and non-Muslims.²⁶

2. Biography of Rashid Rida

He is Sayyid Muhammad Rashīd Riḍā, born in Qalamūn (Lebanon) in 1865/1282 H. He came from a noble family with lineage tracing back to Sayyidina Husayn ibn ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalīb. He was raised in a religiously observant family well-versed in Islamic sciences.²⁷

He began his early education in a traditional *kuttāb*, where he learned to read, memorize the Qur’an, write, and study basic mathematics. A few years later, he continued his education at al-Rusydiyyah Elementary School in Tripoli, where he studied grammar (*nahwu*), morphology (*ṣarf*), theology (*tawhīd*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), geography, and mathematics. In 1299 H, he enrolled at al-Madrasah al-Waṭaniyyah al-Islāmiyyah, founded by Shaykh Husayn al-Jisr, a prominent Lebanese scholar influenced by the ideas of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. There, he studied religious sciences, Arabic language, and general subjects such as mathematics, logic, philosophy, as well as Turkish and French.²⁸ In 1314 H, he obtained a certificate in religious sciences, language, and philosophy.²⁹

Rashid Riḍā’s encounter with Muhammad Abduh began through the journal *al-‘Urwah al-Wuthqā*. The ideas presented by al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh in the journal deeply influenced him, to the extent that he intended to join al-Afghani in Istanbul, although this plan was not realized. Later, during Muhammad Abduh’s exile in Beirut, Riḍā had the opportunity to meet and engage in dialogue with him. The reformist ideas he had absorbed from Shaykh Husayn al-Jisr, further enriched by the thoughts of al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, profoundly shaped his intellectual outlook. He attempted to apply these ideas in Syria but faced resistance from the Ottoman authorities, prompting him in 1898 to move to Egypt to be closer to Muhammad Abduh.³⁰

²⁶ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 12.

²⁷ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 71.

²⁸ A. Athaillah, *Rasyid Ridha Konsep Teologi Rasional dalam Tafsir al-Manâr* (T.tp: Erlangga, 2006), 28.

²⁹ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 73.

³⁰ Ris’an Rusli, *Pemikiran Teologi Islam Modern*, 65.

Soon after, Rashid Riḍā founded the journal *Al-Manār*, which shared similar objectives with *al-'Urwah al-Wuthqā*, including promoting reform in religious, social, and economic fields; combating superstition and religious innovations (*bid'ah*); challenging fatalistic beliefs and misconceptions within Sufi orders; improving the quality of education; and defending the Muslim community against the political maneuvers of Western powers.³¹

Rashid Riḍā believed that a modern interpretation of the Qur'an was urgently needed, incorporating the reformist ideas of his teacher. Initially, he urged Muhammad Abduh to write a tafsir, but Abduh declined. Riḍā then encouraged him to deliver lectures on Qur'anic exegesis at Al-Azhar University. In 1899, Muhammad Abduh began these lectures, which were attended by Riḍā, who carefully recorded his teacher's explanations. After organizing these notes, he submitted them to Abduh for review, and they were subsequently published in the journal *Al-Manār*. This process continued until Abduh's death in 1905.³²

Toward the end of his life, while returning from the city of Suez after accompanying Prince Sa'ūd al-Faisal, Riḍā was involved in a car accident that caused a concussion. Unnoticed by those around him at the time, he passed away peacefully on August 22, 1935, with a serene expression and a smile on his face.³³

3. Characteristics of *Tafsir al-Manār*

Tafsir al-Manār, also known as *Tafsir al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm*, is one of the monumental works in the history of modern Qur'anic exegesis that seeks to integrate the spirit of rationalism with the moral principles of the Qur'an. This work was essentially shaped by Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh, and later continued by his student Rashid Rida. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani played a key role in introducing ideas of social reform, Muhammad Abduh developed and applied these ideas in interpreting Qur'anic verses, and Rashid Rida systematized and documented them in the form of summaries and explanations published serially in the journal *Al-Manār*.³⁴

According to Ali Iyazi, *Tafsir al-Manār* is not a comprehensive commentary covering the entire Qur'an as found in classical tafsir works, but is limited up to QS. Yūsuf [12]:53. From QS. al-Fātiḥah [1] to QS. al-Nisā' [4]:125, the structure of ideas primarily originates from Muhammad Abduh and was written down by Rashid Rida. The subsequent sections up to QS. Yūsuf [12]:53 are authored by Rashid Rida himself, though he consistently follows the interpretive method established by his

³¹ Ris'an Rusli, *Pemikiran Teologi Islam Modern*, 65.

³² Ris'an Rusli, *Pemikiran Teologi Islam Modern*, 66.

³³ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 80.

³⁴ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 84.

teacher.³⁵ Thus, while their general intellectual framework is similar, there are specific differences between the two.

Several aspects distinguish the thought of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida within *Tafsir al-Manār*. *First*, Rashid Rida provides more extensive discussions of hadith related to Qur'anic verses, partly due to his deeper expertise in hadith studies and his effort to compensate for what he perceived as limitations in his teacher's engagement with hadith—whether in narration, memorization, or the science of *al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*.³⁶ *Second*, Rashid Rida offers broader explanations in interpreting the Qur'an through the Qur'an (*tafsīr al-Qur'ān bi al-Qur'ān*), influenced by his admiration for Ibn Kathir, whose tafsir he greatly valued and sought to disseminate widely across the Arab and Islamic world.³⁷ *Third*, Rashid Rida incorporates extensive discussions on various contemporary issues relevant to society. As noted by Muhammad Husayn al-Dhahabi, this is partly due to his profession as a journalist, which brought him into direct contact with diverse social groups, ideologies, and beliefs.³⁸ *Fourth*, he elaborates in detail on lexical meanings (*mufradāt*), sentence structures, and scholarly opinions related to these aspects.³⁹

The approach employed in *Tafsir al-Manār* is analytical (*tahlīlī*) with an *adabī ijtīmā'ī* orientation, meaning that it explains Qur'anic verses by carefully examining their expressions while emphasizing the primary objectives of revelation and applying them to social realities.⁴⁰ Rashid Rida stressed the importance of linking Qur'anic interpretation with the socio-political conditions of the Muslim community as well as the moral purposes of revelation.⁴¹ This approach reflects a significant shift in tafsir studies—from classical models that prioritized linguistic and legal aspects toward a more contextual and rational approach. In this way, the Qur'an is positioned not merely as a text to be understood, but as a living guide to be implemented across different times and contexts.

The Influence of Rationalism in *Tafsir al-Manār*

The emergence of courage in Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida to employ reason (*'aql*) did not arise suddenly. Rather, it was rooted in their awareness that the

³⁵ Alī Iyazī, *Al-Mufasssīrūn Hayātuhum wa Manhajuhum*, jil. 3, hal. 138.

³⁶ Muḥammad Rasyīd Ridhā, *Tārīkh al-Ustādẓ al-Imām al-Syaikh Muḥammad 'Abduh* (Kairo: Dār al-Fadhīla, 2006), jil. 1, 5.

³⁷ 'Abdullāh Mahmud Syahatah, *Manhaj Imam Muḥammad 'Abduh fī Tafsīr Qur'an Karīm* (Kairo: Nasr Ar-Rasail Al-Jāmi'ah, 2003), 214 dan 217.

³⁸ Muhammad Husain al-Dzahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn* (Kairo: Maktabah Wahbah, t.th) jil. 2, 425.

³⁹ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 86.

⁴⁰ Muhammad Husain al-Dzahabī, *al-Tafsīr wa al-Mufasssīrūn*, jil. 2, 401.

⁴¹ Ahmad Amīn, *Zu'amā' al-Ishlāḥ fī al-'Aṣr al-Ḥadīth* (Kairo: Maktabah al-Nahdhah al-Mishriyyah, 1960), 123.

decline of the Muslim community was not caused by the teachings of the Qur'an, but by intellectual stagnation and the dominance of *taqlid*, which hindered the development of knowledge and rationality. Consequently, they sought to revive Qur'anic exegesis as a means of intellectual, moral, and social renewal.⁴² They also criticized earlier exegetes for neglecting the primary purpose of the Qur'an, as they tended to focus excessively on linguistic analysis, grammatical structures, juristic disagreements, and similar aspects, often diverting attention from the core objectives of revelation.⁴³ On this basis, it is not surprising that many explanations in *Tafsir al-Manār* exhibit a rationalist and reformist character, as reflected in the following aspects:

1. The Dominance of Reason in Understanding Revelation

Rationalism, as a philosophical school, holds that truth must be understood and accepted through reason. In the Islamic intellectual tradition, *Tafsir al-Manār* represents one of the clearest examples of applying rational principles in understanding revelation in the modern era. Muhammad Abduh emphasized that revelation must be interpreted logically and contextually in order to remain relevant to the changing conditions of society.⁴⁴ A purely textual understanding, in his view, would be insufficient to address the evolving challenges faced by humanity.

Rational understanding is achieved through the proper functioning of the intellect. In this regard, Muhammad Abduh positioned reason as the primary factor capable of transforming human conditions. In his interpretation of QS. al-Ra'd [13]:11, he asserted: "*Indeed, God will not change the condition of a people – whether in terms of honor, power, prosperity, security, or well-being – until they change what is within themselves, including the illumination of intellect, soundness of thought, expansion of insight, and the ability to learn from past communities...*"⁴⁵

Abduh's interpretation highlights that the verse embodies a principle of social causality: change within society depends on human rational awareness rather than mere supernatural intervention. This perspective bears methodological similarity to the thought of René Descartes, who emphasized reason as the foundation of certainty and affirmed the human role in determining one's own condition.⁴⁶

⁴² Rezwandi, et al, "Studi Analitis Atas Tafsir Al-Manar: Kontribusi Intelektual Muhammad Abduh dan M. Rasyid Ridha dalam Tradisi Tafsir Modern," *JUTEQ: Jurnal Teologi & Tafsir* 10 no. 2 (2025), 1503.

⁴³ Ida Zulfiya, "Rasionalisme sebagai Cabang Filsafat dan Pengaruhnya dalam Tafsir AL-Manar," *Ushuly, Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 4, no. 1 (2025), 52.

⁴⁴ Muhammad 'Imārah, *Risālah al-Tauhīd li Imām al-Syaikh Muhammad 'Abduh* (Beirut: Dār al-Syurūq, 1994), 102.

⁴⁵ Muhammad Rasyīd Ridhā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Hakīm* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, t.th.) jil. 10, 37.

⁴⁶ Biru Kira, *Menafsir Dunia: Sebuah Usaha Menyajikan Kembali Pemikiran George F. McLean dalam Rangka Merespon Zaman Global* (Sleman: Kanisius, 2012) 17.

However, despite this similarity in emphasizing rationality, there remains a fundamental epistemological difference, as Abduh still places revelation as the ultimate authority.

Furthermore, Muhammad Abduh argued that the Qur'an differs from previous scriptures in its method of conveying religious teachings. The Qur'an does not demand blind acceptance; rather, it presents arguments, offers evidence, and addresses opposing views by demonstrating their weaknesses.⁴⁷ This clearly indicates that, in Abduh's approach to Qur'anic interpretation, reason occupies a central role as the primary instrument for understanding revelation.

2. Critique of *Taqīd* and Textualist Thought

In Islamic history, the period of intellectual flourishing was marked by openness to *ijtihād*, rational inquiry, and scholarly dialogue. However, after the 13th century CE – when the “gate of *ijtihād*” was widely considered closed – the Muslim world entered a prolonged phase of intellectual stagnation. The tradition of *taqlīd* – that is, following the opinions of scholars without evidence or reasoning – became dominant.⁴⁸ As a result, Islamic thought experienced what may be termed a methodological “freezing,” in which scholars and laypeople alike tended to memorize classical opinions rather than critically re-examining their argumentative foundations. This culture of *taqlīd* fostered a textualist mode of thinking, characterized by a literalist reading of scriptural texts without adequate consideration of their social, historical, and rational contexts.

The 19th-century reformist movement, particularly through figures such as Muhammad Abduh, Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, and Rashid Rida, emerged as a critical response to this condition. They called for the revival of *ijtihād*, the reform of education, and the rejection of blind *taqlīd*. Muhammad Abduh firmly asserted that true Islam is inherently rational, in harmony with human reason, and grounded upon it. Rational thought, in his view, is the pathway to attaining genuine faith. Faith cannot be complete without being rooted in reason; it must be based on conviction rather than mere opinion, and only reason can serve as a firm foundation for belief in God.⁴⁹

In his exegetical writings, Muhammad Abduh explicitly rejected blind *taqlīd*. He emphasized that the Qur'an teaches individuals to seek evidence (*ḥujjah*) for every claim. The Qur'an guides humanity toward the straight path and establishes the legitimacy for believers to demand proof from others and to invite them to reasoned argumentation. This method, according to Abduh, was practiced by the

⁴⁷ Shihab, *Rasionalitas Al-Quran*, 22.

⁴⁸ Harun Nasution, *Islam Rasional: Gagasan dan Pemikiran* (Bandung: Mizan, 1995), 11.

⁴⁹ Mubaidi Sulaeman, *Teologi Islam* (Batu: Prabu Dua Satu, 2020), 252.

righteous scholars of earlier generations, who spoke with evidence, demanded evidence, and prohibited making judgments without it. However, later generations, whom he criticized, increasingly relied on *taqlīd*, even advocating it and discouraging the use of evidence, thereby deviating from the true spirit of Islam.⁵⁰

Furthermore, Muhammad Abduh stressed that a rational individual should not arrive at conclusions without prior investigation, critical examination, identification of errors, and differentiation between what is valid and what is not.⁵¹ This demonstrates his strong opposition to *taqlīd* in religious understanding and his effort to formulate a more appropriate and rigorous method for deriving rulings — one that is faithful to the guidance of the Qur'an while remaining responsive to the evolving conditions of society.

3. Scientific and Social Approach

In *Tafsir al-Manār*, Muhammad Abduh employs a scientific approach to explain Qur'anic verses related to nature, social laws, and morality. He rejects mystical and mythological interpretations that lack rational basis, and instead interprets scientific verses using empirical and logical language. For example, in interpreting QS. al-Anbiyā' [21]:30, Abduh explains that the heavens and the earth were originally a unified substance, interconnected through gaseous particles like smoke. Over time, a separation occurred among celestial bodies, leading to the differentiation of the earth from the sun, and the earth eventually became an independent entity, rotating and radiating.⁵²

This explanation resonates with what is known today as the Big Bang Theory, which posits that around 13.8 billion years ago, the universe began from a singularity — a very small, dense, and hot نقطة — followed by a massive expansion. This expansion caused matter and energy to disperse in all directions,⁵³ eventually forming the sun as the center of the solar system, along with planets and other celestial bodies.

As a thinker who emphasized the social function of religion, Muhammad Abduh viewed Islam not merely as a ritual system, but as a moral and social framework aimed at establishing justice and progress. In interpreting Qur'anic verses, both Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida paid close attention to the socio-political conditions of the Muslim community, which at the time was experiencing

⁵⁰ Ridhâ, *Tafsîr al-Qur'ân al-Hakîm*, jil. 1, 345.

⁵¹ Ridhâ, *Tafsîr al-Qur'ân al-Hakîm*, jil. 1, 349.

⁵² Ridhâ, *Tafsîr al-Qur'ân al-Hakîm*, jil. 2, 49.

⁵³ Kusmardi, et al., *Peristiwa Ilmiah Yang Telah Dijelaskan Dalam Al-Qur'an* (Yogyakarta: Karya Bakti Makmur, 2025), 33.

decline due to colonialism. Tafsir was thus utilized as a form of intellectual da'wah, intended to revive the spirit of justice, unity, and social responsibility.⁵⁴

Moreover, tafsir was positioned as a practical guide for the reform and development of modern Muslim society. For instance, in interpreting QS. al-Ra'd [13]:11, Abduh emphasized that social change can only occur when a community strives to reform itself.⁵⁵ In other words, transformation does not depend on fate alone, but on the extent to which people are able to align their behavior with the laws of God (*sunnatullāh*).⁵⁶

4. Rationalism in Law

In the modern period, legal rationalism was developed by reformist thinkers such as Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida through their exegetical work. They rejected rigid legal formalism and sought to revive the spirit of *ijtihād*. Muhammad Abduh, in particular, aimed to formulate Islamic law in a more flexible manner capable of responding to social change. He opposed rigid interpretations of Islamic law and emphasized orientation toward *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (the higher objectives of the law), arguing that Islamic law must be adaptable to the needs of the time so that the goal of public welfare (*maṣlahah*) can be realized in society.⁵⁷

One notable example appears in his interpretation of QS. al-Nisā' [4]:3. Muhammad Abduh explains that, in Islam, polygamy is permissible (*mubāḥ*) but subject to strict limitations. It is only allowed under two essential conditions: the ability to act justly and the capacity to ensure protection from harm or oppression. However, Abduh argues that such conditions are practically impossible to fulfill, as a household with multiple wives is unlikely to remain stable or to uphold rights and obligations properly. In reality, such arrangements may lead to conflict, beginning with tensions between wives and extending to their descendants. He further emphasizes that the harm caused by polygamy may escalate from the individual level to the family, and from the family to society at large.⁵⁸

Moreover, Muhammad Abduh stresses that the ultimate purpose of religion is to secure benefit and goodness for humanity, grounded in the principle of *lā ḍarar wa lā ḍirār* (no harm and no reciprocating harm). Therefore, when harm (*mafsadah*) is identified in a legal ruling – particularly under modern conditions not previously encountered – it becomes necessary to revise that ruling based on the legal maxim

⁵⁴ Rezwandi, et al, "Studi Analisis atas Tafsir al-Manar: Kontribusi Intelektual Muhammad Abduh," *Jurnal Teologi dan Tafsir*, (2025), No. 15., 1504

⁵⁵ Ridhā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Hakīm*, jil. 10, 37.

⁵⁶ Sakirman, "Konstruk Metodologi Tafsir Modern: Telaah terhadap Tafsir al-Manār, al-Marāgī, dan al-Mishbah," *Hermeneutik: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Quran dan Tafsir* 10 (2016), 285.

⁵⁷ Marzuki Manurung, *Perbandingan Pemikiran Politik antara Barat dan Islam* (Jakarta: Kencana, 2025), 85.

⁵⁸ Ridhā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Hakīm*, jil. 4, 284.

dar' al-mafāsīd muqaddam 'alā jalb al-maṣāliḥ (preventing harm takes precedence over attaining benefit). On this basis, Abduh concludes that polygamy becomes absolutely prohibited when there is fear of injustice.⁵⁹

From this discussion, it can be understood that *Tafsir al-Manār* offers a new direction in interpreting the Qur'an that had not been fully explored by earlier exegetes. In understanding the verses, reason (*'aql*) plays a central role in uncovering the objectives and purposes of revelation. Since the Qur'an is *ṣāliḥ li kulli zamān wa makān* (relevant for all times and places), reliance solely on earlier interpretations may not always provide adequate solutions for contemporary challenges.

Through its methodological innovations, *Tafsir al-Manār* contributes significantly to the development of modern-contemporary Qur'anic exegesis. First, it reformulates the methodology of tafsir from a purely textual approach toward a contextual one, enabling the Qur'an to address contemporary issues. Second, it integrates reason and revelation, positioning intellect as a key epistemological tool in interpretation. Third, it frames tafsir as a form of intellectual da'wah and social transformation, functioning not merely as an academic discourse but as an active agent of societal change.

CONCLUSION

The thought of Muhammad Abduh and Rashid Rida in interpreting the verses of the Qur'an is significantly influenced by rationalism. The arguments developed in their tafsir position the Qur'an as a book of guidance (*hidayah*) that is *ṣāliḥ li kulli zamān wa makān*—relevant to the needs of humanity in all times and places. Among the key influences of rationalism in *Tafsir al-Manār* are: *first*, reason serves as the central instrument in understanding Qur'anic verses; *second*, the rejection of *taqlīd*, as religious understanding must be grounded in evidence (*ḥujjah*) and proof; *third*, explanations of cosmological verses (*āyāt kauniyyah*) should employ a scientific approach rather than mystical or mythological interpretations that lack rational basis; and *fourth*, the application of Islamic law must remain relevant and adaptable to changing circumstances, in line with the objectives of the Sharī'ah (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*).

Tafsir al-Manār offers a fundamental contribution to the discourse of Qur'anic exegesis by reformulating its methodology from a purely textual approach to one that is contextual and rational. Through the integration of reason and revelation, along with its orientation toward social issues, this tafsir functions not only as an explanation of the text but also as an instrument of social transformation and intellectual reform in Islam. As a result, the Qur'an remains not merely a text to be

⁵⁹ Ridhā, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-Ḥakīm*, jil. 4, 285.

recited, but a living source of guidance capable of addressing the diverse challenges faced by the Muslim community in all aspects of life.

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