

## **CIVILIZATIONAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL INCLUSIVISM AS THE BASIS OF COSMOPOLITAN ISLAMIC EDUCATION: A Progressive Muslim Perspective**

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**Abstract:** *The relationship between Islamic and Western civilizations has long been debated by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike. One dominant tendency in this debate is binary construction of Islamic and Western civilizations as essentially different and fundamentally irreconcilable. This paper aims to examine the views of progressive Muslim thinkers who challenge this binary construction of Islamic and Western civilizations, as well as their underlying epistemologies, that often shapes Muslim perspectives on the incompatibility of Islam and modern sciences as illustrated by the Islamization of knowledge discourse. Through theoretical investigation and thematic content analysis of works by several prominent progressive Muslim thinkers in the West and Southeast Asia, this paper explores how the idea of civilizational and epistemological inclusivism, as an alternative to the Islamization of knowledge discourse, provides a stronger foundation for reviving the cosmopolitan spirit of Islamic thought and education today. The paper argues that in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world today, civilizational and epistemological inclusivism as advocated by progressive Muslim thinkers is vital in enhancing Muslim participation and contribution in reshaping the world order to be more just, dialogical, and effective in tackling global humanitarian and ecological challenges.*

**Keywords:** *Progressive Islam; Civilizational and Epistemological Inclusivism; Cosmopolitan Islamic Education*

### **Introduction**

The relationship between Islamic and Western civilization and their underpinning epistemological framework is one of the most contested issues in modern Islamic thought. One dominant tendency in this debate is the essentialist and binary construction of Islamic and Western civilizations. In this kind of essentialist and binary narratives, Islamic and Western civilizations are defined and construed as essentially different and fundamentally irreconcilable. This tendency, however, is problematic in unitarily assuming Islamic and Western civilizations as mutually exclusive and negating to each other, dismissing historically more fluid encounter and leaving no room for future engagement and dialogue between the two. This paper aims to examine the views of progressive Muslim thinkers in debunking the binary construction of Islamic and Western civilizations, as well as their underlying epistemologies, that often underpin contemporary Muslim discourse on the reconstruction of Islamic education and knowledge. Combining theoretical investigation and thematic content analysis centered on the works of leading progressive Muslim thinkers, with special reference to several prominent figures in the West and Southeast Asia, the paper specifically seeks to examine how the idea of civilizational and epistemological inclusivism advocated by these progressive Muslim

thinkers provides a stronger foundation for revitalizing the cosmopolitan spirit within Islamic education today.

This paper argues that in the increasingly interconnected and globalized world today, civilizational and epistemological inclusivism advocated by progressive Muslim thinkers is critical in encouraging the participation and contribution of Muslims in reshaping the world order that is more just, dialogical, and capable of effectively tackling global humanitarian and ecological challenges. To develop this argument, the paper is organized into four sections. The first section briefly reviews the main epistemological orientation of Progressive Islamic thought that distinguishes it from other Islamic intellectual currents. The next section then revisits the Islamization of knowledge project as one of important discourses that is heavily influenced by a binary construction of Islamic and Western civilizations. Following this, it then examines some of the fundamental critiques of the Islamization of knowledge project put forward by several progressive Muslim thinkers. Finally, it elaborates how progressive Muslim discourse of civilization and epistemological inclusivism, as an alternative to the Islamization of knowledge discourse, provides a stronger basis for revitalizing cosmopolitan Islamic education in responding global challenges today.

## Method

This paper is a conceptual study focusing on the ideas, perspectives and arguments—the discourse—developed by progressive Muslim thinkers with special reference to their civilizational and epistemological discourse. In so doing, it combines theoretical investigation and thematic content analysis of the scholarly works of several leading progressive Muslim thinkers, such as Ebrahim Moosa, Omid Safi, Khaled Abou el-Fadl and Ahmet Karamustafa, whose contributions to the contemporary global progressive Muslim discourse have been widely acknowledged. An attempt was also made to include the views of Muslim thinkers with similar persuasion in Southeast Asia, such as Kuntowijoyo, Amin Abdullah and Azhar Ibrahim, whose critical writings on issues around Islam and modern sciences have also attracted a lot of attention in the region. Combining these progressive Muslim thinkers across different regions in a single study not only offers a more nuanced picture and richer spectrum of current progressive Islamic thought but is also attentive to dynamic intellectual debates taking places in some of the most intellectually vibrant contexts in the Muslim world.

## Progressive Islam and its epistemological orientation

Progressive Islam is an umbrella term that encompasses approaches to Islamic tradition and modernity that are ‘progressive’ or ‘critical’ in character.<sup>1</sup> In terms of its overall worldview, Progressive Islam is characterized primarily by its commitment to certain ideals, values, practices, and goals expressed in many ways and embodied in a

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<sup>1</sup>Adis Duderija, *The Imperatives of Progressive Islam* (London: Routledge, 2017); Syed Farid Alatas, ‘The Meaning and Objectives of Progressive Islam’ in Norshahril Saat and Azhar Ibrahim (eds). *Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2020)

number of different themes. These themes primarily concern issues pertaining to the critical attitude of progressive Muslims regarding: (1) the hegemonic economic, political, social, and cultural power of the countries of the *Global North*, (2) patriarchal, exclusive, and rigid interpretations of their own treasures: the Islamic tradition, and (3) the values underlying Enlightenment modernity and radical forms of postmodern thought. The critical attitudes of progressive Muslim thinkers simultaneously challenge these (neotraditional and puritanical Islamic hegemonic discourse on many issues (including debates about modernity, human rights, gender equality and justice, democracy, and the place and role of religion in society and politics) and Western-centric conceptualizations and interpretations deeply embedded in values, worldviews, and the assumptions that underpin the Enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

Progressive Muslim thinkers do not subscribe to commonly used dichotomies such as tradition vs. modernity, secularism vs. religion, or West vs. Islam.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they engage in a multiheaded approach based on simultaneous critiques of the many communities and discourses in which they belong. At the broadest level, a critical-progressive attitude means challenging, rejecting, and attempting to overthrow structures of injustice regardless of ideational and historical origins.<sup>4</sup> According to Safi, progressive Muslim thinkers offer a multiple critique approach in looking at various problems.<sup>5</sup> The basis of this criticism stems from the fundamental value that every Muslim and non-Muslim human being, male and female, rich and poor, and so on has the same value. In Safi's view, injustice may have occurred in the name of Islam, but on the other hand Western hegemony has also perpetuated injustice; both are parts that must be dismantled and repaired.<sup>6</sup>

Progressive Muslim thought thus avoids the essentialist and reductionist fallacies that stand out in apologetic and puritanical forms of the Muslim tradition. Instead, they seriously engage with the inherited Muslim tradition with a willingness to highlight it critically. In doing so, they challenge Orientalist and colonialist discourses that seek to justify Western domination over Muslim societies by portraying Islam as timeless, undemocratic, highly authoritarian, misogynistic, and incapable of internal critical thinking. At the same time, they also struggle with real problems in many Muslim countries historically, such as discriminatory interpretations of gender relations, lack of genuine legal and political reforms, and lack of basic religious freedom for all. This context demands that progressive Muslim thinkers defend the Muslim

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Adis Duderija, *Constructing a Religiously Ideal 'Believer' and 'Woman' in Islam: Neotraditional Salafi and Progressive Muslim Methods of Interpretation* (New York: Palgrave, 2011)

<sup>4</sup>Omid Safi, 'Introduction: The times they are a-changin'—a Muslim quest for justice, gender equality and pluralism' in Omid Safi (ed), *Progressive Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003)

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 2

<sup>6</sup>Ibid, 4

tradition from secular hegemonic discourse while maintaining an attitude of internal criticism to achieve the political goal of a more just, free, and egalitarian society.<sup>7</sup>

### **Islamization of knowledge and the binary construction of Islamic and Western civilizations**

In contemporary Islamic thought, particularly regarding the reformulation of the relationship between Islamic and modern (Western) civilizations, one notable discourse that has emerged in recent decades is the project of Islamization of knowledge. This initiative was initiated by several Muslim scholars in the late 1970s. The concept of Islamization of knowledge arose from criticisms made by these scholars regarding modern natural and social sciences, which they believe are laden with Western ideologies and values.<sup>8</sup> The idea of Islamization of knowledge was then offered by these scholars as a critical response to what they perceived as epistemological dissonance between Islamic and Western modern sciences.

During the first World Congress on Islamic Education held in Mecca in 1977, several Muslim intellectuals reached a consensus that a significant challenge facing the Islamic world is the dichotomy in education brought about by the strong influence of Western thought. They argued that the efforts of Islamic countries to adopt the Western education system in pursuit of intellectual and material progress are misguided because this education system is viewed as secular and, therefore, contrary to Islamic principles. For these intellectuals, the solution to this pressing issue is to establish a genuine Islamic education. They believe this process must begin by formulating Islamic concepts for all branches of science.<sup>9</sup>

Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas can be considered the most influential Muslim thinker in the development of the Islamization of knowledge discourse, especially through his two important works, *Islam and Secularism* (1978) and *The Concepts of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (1980). In these two works, al-Attas's ideas about the Islamization of knowledge were heavily influenced by his negative views on secularism and secularization. For al-Attas, all forms of secularism and secularization work within the same philosophical framework, which seeks to strip nature of any cosmic significance and sever its symbolic relationship with God, undermine man's respect for nature, and destroy the harmony between the two.<sup>10</sup>

The rejection of secularism and secularization thus forms the foundation of Al-Attas' concept of the Islamization of knowledge. Al-Attas argues that Western

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<sup>7</sup>Adis Duderija, *The Imperatives of Progressive Islam*

<sup>8</sup>Y. Mohamed, 'Islamization of Knowledge: A Comparative Analysis of Faruqi and Rahman' *Muslim Education Quarterly*, 11, 1 (1993b)

<sup>9</sup>Y. Mohamed. 'Islamization: A Revivalist Response to Modernity'. *Muslim Education Quarterly*, 10, 2 (1993a)

<sup>10</sup>Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *The Concept of Education in Islam: A Framework for an Islamic Philosophy of Education* (Kuala Lumpur: International Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization, 1991)

science, rooted in a secular framework, fundamentally differs from Islamic science in several ways: ontologically, epistemologically, and axiologically. From an ontological and epistemological perspective, the rational-empirical paradigm of modern science denies the value of revelation and intuition as sources of knowledge. This stands in stark contrast to the Islamic scientific paradigm, which emphasizes intuition and, especially, revelation as primary sources of knowledge. Axiologically, modern science is often perceived as value-free, which contradicts Islam's view of science and technology as instruments to serve spiritual and moral goals. In this context, Al-Attas' concept of Islamization of knowledge involves the dewesternization of knowledge, essentially liberating it from the constraints of secularism by reinstating the authority of revelation and intuition.<sup>11</sup>

The main proponent of the idea of Islamization of knowledge is the Palestinian American Muslim thinker, Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi. While al-Attas built his ideas from his rejection of secularism, al-Faruqi based his ideas on his strong view of the central role of monotheism (*tawhid*) as the foundation and basic principle for the various dimensions of Islam, including the scientific dimension. From here, al-Faruqi then initiated the Islamization of knowledge as an *ijtihad* to redefine and reformulate the boundaries of knowledge by looking at it from an Islamic perspective. More specifically, al-Faruqi conceives the Islamization of knowledge as an effort to understand and rebuild modern disciplines (humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences) by providing a new foundation that is in harmony with Islamic views on life and values. According to Al-Faruqi, each of these disciplines must be revised and rearranged to better reflect Islamic principles in terms of methodology, strategy, data, problems, goals, and aspirations.<sup>12</sup> Concretely, Al-Faruqi states that the Islamization of science involves the process of producing university textbooks for every modern discipline by eliminating, changing, and reinterpreting elements in it that are not in harmony with the Islamic outlook on life.<sup>13</sup>

The idea of the Islamization of knowledge put forward by al-Attas and al-Faruqi received a positive response and support from several circles. Institutionally, the project for the development and implementation of this idea is supported by two well-known institutions: the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) based in Washington, United States, of which al-Faruqi is one of the key figures, and the International Institute for Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC) based at the International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM) of which al-Attas is the leading figure. In addition, several other Muslim thinkers also made important contributions to this discourse such as Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Ziauddin Sardar, Jabir al-Alwani, and

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<sup>11</sup>Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, *The Educational Philosophy and Practice of Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas - An Exposition of the Original Concept of Islamization* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1998)

<sup>12</sup>Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, 'Islamization of Knowledge: Problems, Principles and Prospective' in *Islam: Source and Purpose of Knowledge* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1988)

<sup>13</sup>Ismail Raji Al-Faruqi, *Islamization of Knowledge: General Principles and Work Plan* (Herndon, VA: IIIT, 1982), 18

many others. These Muslim thinkers, in their own way, and not necessarily using the same line of reasoning, argue the need for Western science to be interrogated and injected with Islamic values and visions. Sardar, for example, emphasizes the importance of the Islamization of knowledge as a response to 'epistemological imperialism', i.e. "the attempt to export the secular epistemology and ethical paradigm from the Western world, where it first appeared, to the rest of the world".<sup>14</sup> In line with Sardar, al-Alwani also understands the Islamization of knowledge as a form of resistance to the universalization and hegemony of Western epistemology with the ultimate goal of reasserting the supremacy of the approach to knowledge that considers all nature as one (monotheism).<sup>15</sup>

### **Critiques of the Islamization of knowledge discourse**

The discourse of Islamization of knowledge and its dichotomous approach towards Islamic and Western civilization has come under scrutiny from several Muslim thinkers. One of the most vocal critics is Bassam Tibi, who argues that this concept is part of the cultural strategy of Islamic fundamentalism. Tibi views the project of Islamization of knowledge as a fundamentalist agenda aimed at resisting the West. This resistance is not only against Western domination, reminiscent of colonial times but also against Western norms and values. In essence, Tibi sees the Islamization of knowledge as an attempt to challenge 'local' knowledge with global knowledge and the civilization that underpins it.<sup>16</sup>

Sharp critiques of Islamization of knowledge also come from several progressive Muslim thinkers. Ibrahim Azhar, for example, argues that, despite its claims of being an intellectual project, the concept of Islamization of knowledge exhibits an anti-intellectual and anti-scientific bias. This stems from a puritanical inclination to eliminate any thinking that poses skeptical questions about what is regarded as absolute dogma in Islam. Rather than exploring and advancing scientific knowledge to help Muslim societies overcome their challenges, supporters of this idea prioritize demonstrating that the sciences developed in the West are theologically unacceptable and, thus, harmful to Muslims. Ultimately, there is a lack of genuine effort to create a coherent system of knowledge. Instead, the focus is on asserting that Islamic epistemology is superior, holistic, and authentic when compared to Western knowledge. In short, the push for the Islamization of knowledge results in mere rhetoric about the superiority of Islamic epistemology. Meanwhile, serious intellectual

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<sup>14</sup>Ziauddin Sardar, *Islamic Futures: The Shape of Ideas to Come* (London: Mansell, 1985), 85

<sup>15</sup>Jabir Al-Alwani, "The Islamization of Knowledge", *American Journal of the Islamic Social Sciences*, 12, No. 1, (1995), 84-85

<sup>16</sup>Bassam Tibi, "Culture and Knowledge: The Politics of Islamization of Knowledge as a Postmodern Project? The Fundamentalist Claim to De-westernization" *Theory, Culture & Society*, 12, 1 (1995), 2, 15, 18

engagement with the issues of intellectual dependence and academic imperialism that have long affected the Islamic world remains largely overlooked.<sup>17</sup>

These critiques of the Islamization of knowledge discourse have led several progressive Muslim thinkers to offer alternative perspectives regarding the relationship between Islam and modern science and civilization. In Indonesia, one prominent progressive Muslim thinker, Kuntowijoyo, offers a unique discourse on scientification of Islam, also known as ‘prophetic social sciences’ (*Ilmu Sosial Profetik*). He describes this discourse as a process of both demystification and objectification. Demystification refers to a thought process that moves from textual interpretations to understanding the social and ecological contexts of human life. In contrast, objectification seeks to prevent any single religious understanding from dominating by prioritizing the identification of ‘*kalimatun sawa*’ (common ground) on fundamental issues within a diverse society. Kuntowijoyo argues that ‘scientification’ of Islam offers a more proactive approach for Muslims than the Islamization of knowledge, which he perceives as more reactive or apologetic. In dealing with other scientific traditions and civilizations, Kuntowijoyo believes that reconstructing knowledge does not require rejecting the intellectual heritage derived from other civilizations, including the West. Instead, the scientific achievements of the West can be beneficial for Muslims through a careful process of objective selection and adaptation.<sup>18</sup>

Another alternative to the discourse of the Islamization of knowledge was also recently put forward by Amin Abdullah, another prominent Indonesian progressive Muslim thinker and philosopher. Departing from his concern regarding the development of dichotomous-atomistic Islamic sciences on the one hand and the development of positivist-secularistic modern sciences on the other, Abdullah develops the ‘integration-interconnection of sciences’ paradigm that views every scientific building of any kind, whether religious science, social science, humanities, or natural science, cannot stand alone. More specifically, this paradigm tries to make room for dialectics between *hadharat an-nash* (civilization of texts), *hadharat al-‘ilm* (civilization of knowledge), and *hadharat al-falsafah* (civilization of philosophy). Simultaneously, this paradigm requires a willingness to consider the content of religious texts (*hadharat an-nash*) as a form of religious commitment; readiness to be professional-objective-innovative in the field of science (*hadharat al-‘ilm*); and the willingness to associate knowledge and texts with moral and ethical responsibility in the praxis of real life in society (*hadharat al-falsafah*).<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Syed Farid Alatas, ‘The Meaning and Objectives of Progressive Islam’ in Norshahril Saat and Azhar Ibrahim (eds). *Alternative Voices in Muslim Southeast Asia* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2020), 23-45

<sup>18</sup>Kuntowijoyo, *Islam Sebagai Ilmu: Epistemology, Metodologi dan Etika* (Bandung: Teraju, Mizan Media Utama, 2006)

<sup>19</sup>M. Amin Abdullah, “Etika Tauhidik Sebagai Dasar Kesatuan Epistemologi Keilmuan Umum dan Agama: dari Paradigma Positivistik-Sekularistik ke Arah Teoantroposentrik-Integralistik” dalam M. Amin Abdullah, dkk., *Menyatukan kembali Ilmu-ilmu Agama dan Umum: Upaya Mempertemukan Epistemologi Islam dan Umum* (Yogyakarta: Suka Press, 2003).



More specifically, Amin Abdullah also assessed that there is a serious problem in the weak dialectical-critical orientation in the epistemology of classical Islamic science which relies on the epistemology of *bayânî*, *irfani*, and *burhani*. According to Abdullah, *bayânî* or textual epistemology is more dominant than the other two and hegemonically shapes the Islamic religious thought to be rigid and less concerned with contextual religious issues.<sup>20</sup> In addition, *bayânî* epistemology tends to be dogmatic, defensive, apologetic, and polemical when addressing religious texts from other communities, cultures, nations, or religious societies.<sup>21</sup> Amin Abdullah argues that this approach in Islamic thought, which is heavily reliant on textual dogma, is problematic due to its strong inclination to deny the role of human experience and judgment in the formation and development of Islamic thought since the early era of Islam. He asserts that the sources of Islamic thought, including *kalam* and *fiqh*, throughout history have not only stemmed from revelation but also from human experience. For instance, in interpreting the verses of the Qur'an, the role of tafsir books compiled by *mufasssirun* (Qur'anic commentators) is significant. Similarly, understanding prophetic traditions involves narration (*riwayah*), which includes *sanad* (chains of narration) and *isnad* (transmission principles), and requires human judgment from the outset. Therefore, Abdullah emphasizes the necessity of incorporating relevant ideas, thoughts, and research findings from other disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, psychology, communication, and science, into the reconstruction and revitalization of Islamic thought in everyday life, especially in a multicultural and multi-religious society like today's global era. In other words, efforts to establish a new paradigm and reconstruct the epistemology of Islamic science in the present day cannot afford to overlook a multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and even transdisciplinary approach.<sup>22</sup>

### Civilizational and epistemological inclusivism as an alternative

Cemil Aydin categorizes modern Muslim thinkers into three groups based on their views of Western thought and civilization. The first group adheres to the '*clash of civilizations*' thesis, which envisions a persistent conflict between Islamic civilization and Western civilization. The second group embraces 'Occidentalism,' portraying the West as a geographical and socio-cultural entity that differs significantly from Eastern societies and civilizations. The third group consists of those Aydin refers to as adherents of the 'global left' paradigm. This perspective highlights the humanistic and

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<sup>20</sup>M. Amin Abdullah, "Desain Pengembangan Akademik IAIN Menuju UIN Sunan Kalijaga: Dari Pendekatan Dikotomis-Atomistik ke Arah Integratif-Interkoneksi" dalam Fahrudin Faiz, (ed.). *Islamic Studies dalam Paradigma Integrasi-Interkoneksi* (Yogyakarta: SUKA Press, 2010)

<sup>21</sup>M. Amin Abdullah, *Islamic Studies di Perguruan Tinggi Pendekatan Integratif-Interkoneksi* (Yogyakarta: Pustaka Pelajar, 2010)

<sup>22</sup>M. Amin Abdullah, Bangunan Baru Epistemologi Keilmuan Studi hukum Islam dalam Merespon Globalisasi, *As-Syir'ah Jurnal Ilmu Syariah dan Hukum*, Vol. 46, 2 (2012); M. Amin Abdullah Multidisiplin, Interdisiplin, & Transdisiplin: Metode Studi Agama & Studi Islam Di Era Kontemporer (Yogyakarta: IB Pustaka, 2020)



progressive aspects of Muslim critiques of the West, aiming to foster constructive dialogue between Western intellectual circles and Muslims.<sup>23</sup>

Aydin's classification helps clarify the epistemological orientations of various types of Muslim discourse on Islam and modern sciences discussed in the previous section. Using Aydin's classification, the Islamization of knowledge discourse seems to align closely with the first two paradigms. Al-Attas' concept of the Islamization of knowledge mainly reflects the first paradigm, which underscores an enduring conflict between Islamic and Western civilizations. Variants of the Islamization discourse, such as those proposed by Al-Faruqi and Sardar, can be classified within the second paradigm. Although they do not entirely reject Western scientific and civilizational structures, the Islamization of science advocated by Al-Faruqi and the Islamic science framework suggested by Sardar emphasize the necessity of developing a distinctive Islamic scientific paradigm that serves as an alternative to the modern scientific structures of the West. Thus, it can be posited that the concept of the Islamization of knowledge and its foundational assumptions is imbued with narratives of a clash of civilizations, predating Samuel Huntington's articulation of this theory in the early 1990s.

Huntington provocatively proposed his thesis on the clash of civilizations. With this thesis, Huntington argues that democracy and its underlying cultural norms and values such as freedom, equality, and human rights constitute an achievement of Western civilization and therefore cannot be easily transferred to other civilizations or world religions, other than through the application of Western hegemony or through direct conversion to Western norms and culture.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Huntington's thesis has received a lot of criticism from various circles, especially because of his essentialist and ahistorical views on civilization, both Islamic civilization and Western civilization itself, which assumes that the civilizations and world religions that underlie them have a single and monolithic essence and cannot be changed.<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, the discourse of 'prophetic social sciences' and the 'integration-interconnection of sciences' can be considered to represent the third category. The most distinguishing feature between the discourse of Islamization of knowledge on the one hand and the discourse of prophetic sciences and integration-interconnection of sciences on the other is the level of readiness and willingness to dialogue with Western civilization and its scientific epistemological basis. The former closes the door to egalitarian and dialogical relations between Islam and the West while the latter two show the opposite tendency, opening the widest possible space for creative and critical dialogue with Western civilization and its epistemological bases. In

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<sup>23</sup>Cemil Aydin "Between Occidentalism and the Global Left: Islamist Critiques of the West in Turkey" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol 26, No. 3 (2006)

<sup>24</sup>Samuel Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996)

<sup>25</sup>Jose Casanova, Cosmopolitanism, the clash of civilizations and multiple modernities, *Current Sociology*, 59, 2 (2011)

other words, in understanding Islamic and Western civilization and epistemology, the former emphasizes a dichotomous-exclusive approach, while the latter puts forward a more integrative-inclusive view.

Kuntowijoyo, Amin Abdullah and Ibrahim Azhar share a more inclusive approach towards civilization and epistemology, aligning with other contemporary progressive Muslim thinkers. A key characteristic that sets progressive Muslim thought apart from other Muslim orientations is its understanding of Islamic civilization and its relationship with other civilizations, including Western civilization. For many progressive Muslim thinkers, Islam is, in Karamustafa's words, 'a civilizational project in progress'. This perspective sees Islam as dynamic, inclusive, and interactive with diverse cultures, nationalities, and ethnicities, all while honoring the historical legacy of the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>26</sup> This progressive and inclusive understanding of civilization fundamentally challenges essentialist civilizational binaries as tacitly projected in the Islamization of knowledge discourse.

A similar view is also expressed by Khaled Abou el-Fadl who asserts that in various stages and contexts of Islamic history, the doctrine of *shahada* provides a strong impetus for Muslims to explore and integrate so many traditions and cultures such as Greek, Persian, Roman, Indian, Chinese, Berber, Kurdish, Turkish, Habashi (Ethiopian), Tajik, Uzbek, Malay, Javanese and many more.<sup>27</sup> El-Fadl also reminded that great Muslim scholars in the history of Islamic civilization have made scholarly contributions that transcend narrow denominational contexts and greatly enrich the collective heritage of human civilization.<sup>28</sup>

With this view of Islam as an inclusive and dynamic civilization, several progressive Muslim thinkers have emphasized and promoted epistemological openness and inclusivism. Turkish Muslim scholar Recep Senturk views the importance of what he calls 'open ontology' and 'multiplex epistemology', which are more complex visions of the world that can accommodate different types of 'truths' including the truths of the modern physical, social and humanities sciences as well as the sciences of premodern metaphysical speculation.<sup>29</sup> Senturk further argues that contemporary identity should be approached with an inclusive and open worldview. He believes that such a perspective promotes dialogical understanding and egalitarian cultural engagement. From an epistemological standpoint, this worldview requires a broad and participatory process where different cultures can rediscover their own traditions while respecting each other's cultural values and motivations. By fostering

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<sup>26</sup> Ahmet Karamustafa, 'Islam: a civilizational project in progress' in Omid Safi (ed), *Progressive Muslims* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003)

<sup>27</sup> Khaled Abou El-Fadl, 'The epistemology of the truth in modern Islam', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. Vol. 41 (2015)

<sup>28</sup> Ibid

<sup>29</sup> Recep Senturk 'Toward an Open Science and Society: Multiplex Relations in Language, Religion, and Society' *Turkish Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 6 (2001)

an empathetic understanding of other cultural systems, individuals can begin to expand and reconstruct the cultural and intellectual foundations of their own identities.<sup>30</sup>

On the epistemological level, progressive Muslims thus embrace “the modern episteme in the realms of humanities and social sciences”, utilizing a non-apologetic and critical understanding of both Islam and modernity.<sup>31</sup> Progressive Muslims seek to resolve dichotomies existing between Islam and modernity, viewing “modernity and its byproducts a result of transcultural and transpolitical intercivilizational process, thus demonopolizing the claim that modernity is a pure, universal, and monopolar western civilizational product”.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the inclusive views of progressive Muslim thinkers on civilizations and epistemologies are consciously followed or balanced with a critical attitude. Although they actively explore or learn from Western and other traditions, at the same time they also reject imperialistic tendencies in the production of knowledge. In other words, progressive Muslim thinkers are consciously trying to find a balance in the continuum between tradition and modernity. They interact a lot with tradition and modernity, but at the same time are also critical of both. For them, Muslims must remain rooted in tradition intellectually and culturally and at the same time have the courage to dive into the modern world and benefit from the intellectual and cultural resources it offers. At the same time, Muslims must also remain vigilant and critical of what Omid Safi calls ‘the arrogance of modernity’, a view that regards the West and its culture as the inevitability of the end of history, or the final stage in which human beings reach the limit of their social, economic and cultural development.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, progressive Muslims’ argument about the need for epistemological and methodological openness in contemporary Muslim thought is not framed in terms of an unreflective, and unproblematic view of the episteme of modernity that favors only the present over the past. In contrast, their epistemological and methodological openness has a specific purpose of serving. For Moosa, this goal is ultimately to advance an emancipatory and humane discursive tradition, which is an intellectual heritage to which Muslims can make meaningful contributions.<sup>34</sup> Moosa further argues that while contemporary progressive Muslim thought owes a great debt of gratitude to the hard work of 19th- and 20th-century Muslim modernist thinkers such as Jamaluddin Al-Afghani, Sir Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida, there are important differences between these two generations are related to how each views

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<sup>30</sup>Ibid

<sup>31</sup>Adis Duderija, ‘Islamic Groups and Their Worldviews and Identities: Neo-Traditional Salafis and Progressive Muslims’ *Arab Law Quarterly*, 21 (2007), 356

<sup>32</sup>Ibid, 355

<sup>33</sup>Omid Safi, 4

<sup>34</sup>Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazali and Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 35

the nature of reason, truth, modernity, attitudes towards modern episteme, and their respective methodologies in the interpretation of normative texts and ideologies.<sup>35</sup>

On the nature of modernity, for example, Moosa sees that while Islamic modernist thought in the 19th and 20th centuries and its contemporary proponents are considered uncritical natural allies of modernity, progressive Muslim scholars are far more critical of it, in part because the last type of modernity inherited is very different from that encountered by the former. Another significant difference between modernist Islam and progressive Muslim thought can be found in their respective approaches to modern *epistemes*. In this context, Moosa considers critical tendencies in modern knowledge as developed in the humanities have not been applied by modernist Muslim thinkers in the attempt of interpretation of scripture, history and society, understanding of law, and theology. In other words, they refuse to subordinate the entire corpus of Islamic learning history to a critical view of the episteme-making process of modernity. Therefore, one important difference between progressive Muslim thought and Islamic modernism (and dogmatic traditionalism) is its readiness to critically and systematically incorporate insights from modern episteme and apply them in all aspects of Islamic religious tradition.<sup>36</sup>

### **Civilizational and epistemological inclusivism as the basis of cosmopolitan Islamic education**

The discourse of civilizational and epistemological inclusivism is closely linked to the concept of cosmopolitanism and its integration into educational thought and practice. This is a complex topic that warrants a thorough exploration. However, the idea of cosmopolitanism has gained attraction in recent years as a response to globalization, which has significantly increased human mobility and facilitated the crossing of national borders on unprecedented scales. At the same time, digital technology has enabled people from vast distances to remain connected, fostering communities that are essentially transnational. Within this context, education is seen by many as having a crucial role in preparing students for a world that is increasingly interconnected and interdependent. Nussbaum, for instance, advocates for an educational approach that not only expands students' awareness of societies 'in distant places' but also emphasizes global justice and human dignity as universal moral principles that transcend borders. For Nussbaum, education with a cosmopolitan perspective is grounded not only in a set of moral imperatives but also in a recognition of how the interests of communities worldwide are socially, economically, and politically interconnected.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup>Ebrahim Moosa, "The Debts and Burdens of Critical Islam" in Omid Safi (ed), *Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 117

<sup>36</sup>Adis Duderija, *Constructing a Religiously Ideal 'Believer' and 'Woman' in Islam: Neotraditional Salafi and Progressive Muslim Methods of Interpretation* (New York: Palgrave, 2011)

<sup>37</sup>Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Patriotism and cosmopolitanism' in M. Nussbaum & J. Cohen (Eds.), *For the love of country? Debating the limits of patriotism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 3–20

Cosmopolitanism is thus highly relevant for rethinking the role of Islamic education in today's highly globalized world. Cosmopolitanism, however, is a contested concept and defined in various ways by different scholars. It has also sparked significant controversy and criticism. Some thinkers, like Rorty and Barber, argue against cosmopolitanism, believing that it downplays the significance of nationalism and patriotism.<sup>38</sup> Cheah and Robbins warns that because cosmopolitanism is deeply rooted in the Western Enlightenment tradition, it can easily succumb to ethnocentrism and imperialist reasoning.<sup>39</sup> Despite the range of definitions and controversies surrounding cosmopolitanism, this paper will understand it primarily as the value of considering others' perspectives and situating oneself within a broader context—typically viewed as the world. This interpretation is based on the Greek term '*cosmopolitês*,' which means 'citizen of the world'. As a normative idea, Mehta describes cosmopolitanism as embodying "suspicion of the closed horizon... a willingness to engage with 'the Other'... [and] aesthetic and intellectual openness to various endeavors, cultures, and forms of reasoning".<sup>40</sup>

The concept of cosmopolitanism as defined above is closely related to the doctrines, traditions, and historical context of Islamic civilization. Roxanne Euben highlights the Islamic ethos of seeking knowledge (*tholab al-'ilm*), emphasizing the encouragement for Muslims to pursue wisdom wherever it can be found. This understanding serves as a rich counter-narrative to the developing notions of cosmopolitanism.<sup>41</sup> Islamic tradition is also rich with utterances emphasizing the importance of seeking knowledge beyond the Islamic realm. Historically, as early as in the classical Islam period, the intellectual contact of Muslim with the Near Eastern civilization saw the appropriation of Greek thought and ideas. A great many Muslim thinkers saw Greek thought as wisdom to be cherished.<sup>42</sup> The magnificent translation project carried out during the Abbasid period through Bayt al-Hikmah was one of the most illustrative examples of the strong cosmopolitan ethos in Islamic intellectual tradition and history.

Based on these rich doctrinal source and historical practices of Islamic cosmopolitanism, Azhar Ibrahim argues that the main orientation of Islamic education is to embrace and learn Western knowledge but remain vigilant to avoid imitative and uncritical attitudes.<sup>43</sup> In his view, Muslims are required to engage more creatively and critically with the West, always focusing on how and to what extent they should learn

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<sup>38</sup>Benjamin Barber, 'Constitutional faith' in M. Nussbaum & J. Cohen (Eds.), *For the love of country? Debating the limits of patriotism* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1996), 30–37

<sup>39</sup>P. Cheah & B. Robbins (eds). *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and feeling beyond the nation*. (Minneapolis, MN: Minnesota University Press, 1998)

<sup>40</sup>Roxanne L. Euben *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 300

<sup>41</sup>Ibid, 300

<sup>42</sup>Ibrahim, Azhar, (2017). 'Islam and the West: Clashes and Cooperation', in H. Daun, R. Arjmand (eds), *Handbook of Islamic Education*. Springer, 2017, 211

<sup>43</sup>Ibid, 219

from the West, and how Muslims can also contribute to humanity today as they have done before. Thus, the main challenge today for Muslims is no longer about choosing between Western and Islamic knowledge. Muslims, like all other believers, today need to ensure that education can build a strong critical and creative attitude, always at the forefront of combining endogenous knowledge and exogenous knowledge, in accordance with their contextual needs, while striving to contribute knowledge to the larger human society.<sup>44</sup> Ultimately, Muslims like other communities need to take inspiration from the advances in science and knowledge that are emerging from different parts of the world, not just from the West. Intellectual heritage and local and regional education should be considered along with the heritage of Western traditions, to reduce intellectual attachment and dependence.<sup>45</sup> As Alatas points out aptly, as students in Euro-America never disregard the ancient Greco-Roman thought, likewise Muslims should master and cherish their own intellectual legacies, alongside those from the world civilizations.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusion

Islamic civilization has historically exhibited a strong cosmopolitan character through its long-standing process of mutual absorption with other civilizations. However, as the Muslim world entered the modern era, a variety of complex factors led to the erosion of the spirit and vision of Islamic cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitan ethos in Islamic thought and education has been increasingly marginalized by dichotomous and conflict-driven views of science and civilization. This paper has examined how contemporary progressive Muslim thinkers challenge these binary approaches and tendencies, offering civilizational and epistemological inclusivism as a better alternative in embracing today's increasingly open and interconnected world. Closely looking at this idea of civilizational and epistemological inclusivism as developed by several leading progressive Muslim thinkers, the paper concludes that this idea provides a stronger basis for reviving the cosmopolitan vision of Islamic education in order to advance the role and contribution of Muslims in building a just, peaceful, and dialogical global order, fulfilling the great mission of Islam as *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (mercy for the whole universe).

At a more practical level, the findings of this paper might have important implications for how the curriculum design and pedagogical approaches of Islamic education should be reconstructed to revive its cosmopolitan vision in better responding to today's contexts and challenges. In this respect, cultivating civilizational and epistemological inclusivism should be conceived as one of the main educational objectives and orientations that must be reflected and translated in the curriculum design and pedagogical approaches of Islamic education.

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid, 22

<sup>45</sup>Ibid, 22

<sup>46</sup>S. H. Alatas, Intellectuals and nation building: An essay. *Cultures*, 1, 4 (1974), 46

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